

BOOK REVIEW

Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices

by Nancy Tatom Ammerman

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Throughout the twentieth century, the sociology of religion was grounded mostly in Weberian cultural theories before they were challenged briefly by Starkian rational choice theory at the turn of the century, the latter soon to be largely discredited and disregarded. Recently, a third perspective of “lived religion” has risen to prominence, and it shows great promise for understanding religion more usefully in what are now post-secular societies (Phillips 2020). Nancy Ammerman is perhaps the leading proponent of studying lived religion.

Professor Emerita of Sociology of Religion at Boston University, Ammerman is a self-described Baptist “preacher’s kid.” Her undergraduate degree was from Southwest Baptist University, and her subsequent early research as an accomplished scholar focused on congregations and how fundamentalism split the Southern Baptist Convention. At the time of her retirement in 2018, she was a member of both a Congregationalist and a Presbyterian congregation, and described her beliefs thusly: “I would not say that I’m a very good creedal believer. But I do believe in a big story, if you will, about there being a presence that has infused the world with life” (Barlow 2018).

Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices may prove to be the culmination of her work, built as it is upon her previous publications of *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (2006) and *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (2013). As the title suggests, *Studying Lived Religion* is not so much a theoretical perspective of “Lived Religion,” or even a summary of findings, as it is a methodological impetus and manual for “Studying” religion from this perspective in the future. Indeed, the subtitles of the final chapter detail and provide resources for the qualitative research she recommends: Who and Where?; Being Aware of Your Own Position; Into the Field: Participant Observation; Talking to People; Getting Closer to the Everyday; Visual Methods; Analyzing Texts; Analyzing Your Own Texts; Surveying Larger Populations; Exploring Mind and Body; and Putting Research to Work.

But Ammerman begins the book by going beyond conceptualizing religion as what people believe, or measuring religiosity by their rate of membership in religious organizations or attendance at religious gatherings, to defining religion as a set of everyday “practices.” Religion is not just what is in people’s heads, but in what they do, their “patterns of socially constructed actions” (18), “a cluster of actions that is socially recognizable” (15). Drawing on

the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michael de Certeau, she further describes how these “fields of interaction intersect ... [A]ction can be both religious and political at the same time” (17), even as these practices provide personal identity, a persistent theme throughout her analysis. Religion is just one kind of practice, distinct from others only in its spiritual dimension that “incorporates—either directly or indirectly—the presence of a reality beyond the ordinary” (20).

Lived religion, Ammerman argues, can only be identified, much less understood, within its “differing legal and cultural contexts” (27), which is precisely what makes religion a social reality and not merely an individual experience. She posits four ideal types of contexts: 1) Entangled Religious Fields involve “religious practices that are so highly interwoven with everyday practical affairs that it is impossible to think of them as distinct forms of social life” (32). 2) Established Religion is a traditional context in which “there is both an organized entity that claims jurisdiction over religious practice and an organized entity (a state) that legitimizes the authority of that group” (35). 3) Institutional Religion occurs when “it occupies a distinct field in social life” (39) characteristic of modern pluralistic societies. Finally, 4) Interstitial Religious Contexts are characterized by religious practices happening only in the cracks and crevices of society, if at all. “In the Global North, it is precisely this religious decline and individual improvisation that has most often been the backdrop of lived religion research” (42).

The main body of the book “zooms in” on seven key dimensions of lived religious practice, beginning with an elaboration of its foundational *spiritual* dimension that sets it apart from other practices. It includes alternative states of awareness, “ideas about mysterious happenings, about unspecified higher powers, as well as a sense of awe or mystical union with humanity or the natural world” (52). Though it is pursued through organized liturgy in contexts where religion is *established* or *institutionalized*, spirituality is also very capable of deinstitutionalizing religion, as evident in the frequent spiritual experience of nature in *interstitial* contexts. But regardless of the cultural context, spiritual learning “is more a matter of imitation than explicit teaching” (65).

Seemingly opposite of the *spiritual* dimension is the *embodiment* of religious practice. But “all social practices are embodied. We act with and through our bodies. We see, taste, touch, smell, hear, and move” (75). “Bodies are the site where nature and culture meet ... We actively *sense* and *make sense* simultaneously” (78). Among other aspects of embodied religion, Ammerman discusses food practices – “Whether feasting or fasting, food is an embodied experience of devotion” (82); clothing, jewelry, and hair – “outward expressions that reinforce religious identities” (83); tattoos – “are not just *signs* of devotion. Wearing them constitutes an *act* of devotion” (83); the religious experience of gender and sexuality – “couples having so carefully disciplined their bodies to be celibate [that] marital passion is sometimes elusive” (90),

including “transgender people [who] have created sustaining religious practices that redefine bodies, genders, and sexualities” (90).

But even beyond human embodiment, spirituality is ubiquitous in its *materiality*, the physical objects, the built spaces, the oldest spaces of nature, and the newest spaces of cyberspace. From mementos to cemeteries, from icons to memorials, from photos to cathedrals, from bouquets to forests, all can define a situation and be as spiritual as they are physical. As examples, Ammerman offers “the therapeutic and expressive ‘implicit spirituality’ of knitting” (104), the binding together through cyberspace of ethnic migrants in diaspora, and “the contrast between the Catholic liturgy before and after the Second Vatican Council, when parishes removed the communion rail separating laity from the space where the sacred elements were consecrated” (115).

Emotions are a fourth dimension of lived religion. “We know, without thinking, when it’s appropriate to laugh or cry ... to be excited or to be afraid” (123). Drawing on Arlie Russell Hochschild’s concepts of “feeling rules” and “emotion work,” Ammerman explores the emotional expectations of religious communities, and how feelings can prompt action, or how action can prompt feelings. Given emotion as the “point of connection and commitment ... We don’t just calculate the costs and benefits of belonging, we feel our relationship with people” (127). Of course, religious practices can also easily generate antipathy for others, the fear, exclusion, and hatred sacralized by religious authorities. Overall, “what people understand as a spiritual experience may be defined by its emotional content” (135), such as awe, joy, repentance, and love, or simply relying heavily on music to set the emotional tone of a worship service.

Spiritual emotion also intersects with the sensuous experience of *aesthetics* which conveys a sense of the sublime that transcends the senses. Once again, the beautiful and the ugly “register without us consciously thinking about why we do or don’t like something, why we are attracted or repulsed” ... [they are] intuitive, precognitive aspects of religion” (145). More than the visual or performing arts of culture, aesthetics extends to the sights and sounds and smells of nature which Peter Berger called “signals of transcendence.” Whether it be Black Gospel music dressed in “Sunday best,” the “white soul” of country music, or the classic elitism of the opera, aesthetic practices express both identity and difference.

More intuitively a part of religious practice, *morality* is “how our minds, our bodies, our emotions, and our cultures come together to produce the moral frameworks that guide our action ... [W]e are not necessarily engaging in reasoned deliberation” (159). For example, Ammerman had previously identified what she dubbed “Golden Rule Christians” because “their everyday ethics seemed to be more definitive of their religious identity than doctrine or religious observance” (164). And while religious moral practices typically reinforce the status

quo, they can also resist the status quo. “From abolition of slavery to civil rights to antipoverty crusades, social movements in the United States have harnessed religious practices for disruptive moral ends” (169).

The final practice of lived religion that Ammerman elucidates is *narratives*, not in the classic Christian metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, but rather in how individuals narrate their own lives. This storytelling chronicles both “who I am” as well as “who we are,” the contexts and institutions of everyday life. “Spiritual narratives create and sustain memories of events in one’s own life, linking them with the history of one’s community and one’s people” (186). And it is here that a “meaning system” or “sacred canopy” enters the picture to construct a “lived theology” that inevitably creates boundaries which both unite and divide. But for the individual, these narratives provide profound recurring self-realizations, ascertaining where one really belongs, and who one was always meant to be.

Ammerman concludes with an extended example of the practice of Qingming, the annual Chinese “tomb sweeping” rituals that exemplify all seven dimensions of lived religion. After noting how Qingming, like all practices, “is co-created by the social participants” (198), she details how its *spirituality* is deeply *embodied, material, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and narrative*. But throughout the volume, she also uses numerous shorter examples of research from the last two decades, each reported via, on average, two paragraphs written by the original researchers themselves in boxed inserts. Again, the purpose is not only to report their findings, but also to exemplify various methods used to study lived religion. Furthermore, each chapter is structured by similar sections, beginning with how the particular dimension is thoroughly social, then how it works and what it does, followed by how it creates social boundaries and differences, and finally how it is part of the whole.

Ammerman’s own research in this volume is exemplary in its breadth of reach. Though she is a sociologist and writes primarily from that academic disciplinary perspective, it is impressively inter- or multi-disciplinary, with repeated references to scholarship across the social sciences and humanities. It is also remarkably inter-religious, as the sociology of religion ought to be, citing studies and examples from all the major world religions almost equally. And third, it is richly international, with many examples of lived religion from all around the world.

Each reader will no doubt be reminded of other questions and analyses that Ammerman does not reference, and which could have enhanced hers. For example, she never distinguishes between the human spirit and a presumably transcendent, supra-human, divine spirit, much less how to differentiate between the two or how they might interact. Her focus on religion as practice could have benefited from Christian Smith’s (2017) definition of religion as “prescribed practices,” plus his definition of spirituality. Diana Butler Bass’s (2012) “great reversal” from the traditional order of religion as believing, behaving, and belonging to the contemporary order of

religion as belonging, behaving, and believing could also have enhanced Ammerman's analysis of practices. And the chapter on morality could have been augmented by a more thorough reference to moral foundations theory (Haidt 2012).

But all readers will be enlightened and enriched by Ammerman's compelling argument that, at the very least, a person's religion is so much more than their self-identification on a census form, or their rate of attendance at or participation in institutional/organizational religious services, or even their beliefs, those propositional truth claims to which they give mental assent. Clearly, religion is something lived, and sociology ought to study it as such.

References

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