

STUDYING RELIGION AS LIVED RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

ESTUDANDO A RELIGIÃO COMO UMA PRÁTICA RELIGIOSA VIVIDA

EL ESTUDIO DE LA RELIGIÓN COMO PRÁCTICAS RELIGIOSAS VIVIDAS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the transcription of the conference *Studying Religion as a Lived Religious Practice*, delivered by Dr. Nancy T. Ammerman (Boston University) at the *XII Colóquio do Grupo de Pesquisa Religião e Cultura*, at PUC Minas. The session was moderated and translated into Portuguese by Prof. Dr. Brasil Fernandes de Barros. In her lecture, Ammerman proposes a paradigm shift in the sociology of religion. She criticizes the traditional metrics of secularization in the North Atlantic—based solely on affiliation with and attendance at religious services—and advocates for the study of lived religion as an everyday social practice. This approach requires observing what people actually do, analyzing the material, bodily, emotional, moral, and narrative dimensions of faith. Finally, the author points out that such practices are structurally shaped by legal, power, and sociocultural contexts. Thus, she emphasizes that research conducted outside the dominant global framework is indispensable for renewing the scientific understanding of religion in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Lived religion; Sociology of Religion; social practice; secularization.

RESUMO

O presente texto apresenta a transcrição da conferência *Estudando a religião como uma prática religiosa vivida*, proferida pela Dra. Nancy T. Ammerman (Boston University) no XII Colóquio do Grupo de Pesquisa Religião e Cultura da PUC Minas. A mesa foi mediada e traduzida para o português pelo Prof. Dr. Brasil Fernandes de Barros. Na palestra, Ammerman propõe uma mudança de paradigma na sociologia da religião. Ela critica as métricas tradicionais de secularização do Atlântico Norte — baseadas apenas em afiliação e frequência a cultos — e defende o estudo da religião vivida como uma prática social cotidiana. Essa abordagem exige observar o que as pessoas efetivamente fazem, analisando as dimensões material, corporal, emocional, moral e narrativa da fé. Por fim, a autora alerta que tais práticas são estruturalmente moldadas por contextos legais, de poder e socioculturais. Dessa forma, enfatiza que as pesquisas realizadas fora do eixo dominante global são indispensáveis para renovar a compreensão científica sobre a

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religião na contemporaneidade.

Palavras-chave: *Religião vivida; Sociologia da Religião; prática social; secularização.*

RESUMEN

El presente texto presenta la transcripción y traducción de la conferencia Estudiando la religión como una práctica religiosa vivida, impartida por la Dra. Nancy T. Ammerman (Universidad de Boston) en el Colóquio do Grupo de Pesquisa Religião e Cultura en PUC Minas. La sesión fue moderada y traducida al portugués por el Prof. Dr. Brasil Fernandes de Barros. En la conferencia, Ammerman propone un cambio de paradigma en la sociología de la religión. Critica los indicadores tradicionales de secularización del Atlántico Norte —basados únicamente en la afiliación y la asistencia a los cultos— y defiende el estudio de la religión vivida como una práctica social cotidiana. Este enfoque exige observar lo que las personas hacen efectivamente, analizando las dimensiones material, corporal, emocional, moral y narrativa de la fe. Por último, la autora advierte que dichas prácticas están moldeadas estructuralmente por contextos legales, de poder y socioculturales. De este modo, enfatiza que las investigaciones realizadas fuera del eje dominante global son indispensables para renovar la comprensión científica de la religión en la contemporaneidad.

Palabras clave: *Religión vivida; Sociología de la religión; práctica social; secularización.*

As some of you may know, I've been studying lived religion and advocating for a number of years that we should think about religion not just as a category on a survey but as something people do, that is, as a social practice. That is often referred to as *lived religion*. So, I'm really glad to be with you at this conference to continue that conversation.

What I want to suggest in this talk is something of why I think work like yours is especially important. What difference can this kind of change in research approach make? I think it makes a difference even beyond the academy, because no part of society is untouched by religious beliefs and practices. No social policy is untouched by religious identities. And how we understand what people are doing when they *do religion* has implications for everything from public policy to everyday relationships.

So, this talk is going to first outline the reasons we need new perspectives and go on to explain what I mean by studying religion as a social practice. Then I'll elaborate on the depth of understanding that is possible by assessing the multiple dimensions of the practices we observe. But I will also emphasize the importance of placing those practices in cultural context and in the contexts of structural power that surround and shape them.

Arguing for a change in perspective implies, of course, that existing perspectives are in some way flawed or incomplete – which is exactly what I think is true. At its core, the problem with many current perspectives is that everyone – scholars, religious leaders, and policymakers have taken *secularization* as a given. The evidence does after all seem overwhelming. Fewer people say they have a religious affiliation. Fewer say they believe in unpopular things like hell or abide by unpopular sexual rules. And fewer show up at weekly

services. Note, however, the cultural limits of those indicators.

Religious affiliation, for example, can be simply a measure of a sense of ethnic or national belonging, not an actual set of activities or beliefs. What we have learned over the last generation is that these identifications are often for the convenience of people who want to sort out populations into governable segments or categories on a survey. Colonial powers needed to name the differences so they could coopt religious authority. More recently, academics and policy makers use broad religious identities — boxes on a survey — as substitutes for understanding the complexities of the social worlds they are trying to understand.

Governmental and territorial sorting is somewhat less the case in my country, the US, since we don't even ask about religion on our federal census. But religious categories, including denominational labels, have long helped us with our own social sorting — Catholics into the cities, Pentecostals on the margins, Episcopalians in the best neighborhoods.

All of that is less the case today than it was in the past. Non-affiliation, that is dropping out if you will, does tell us *something* when we see that fewer people are willing to pick one of those labels for themselves. It's just not clear that it tells us that *religion* itself is disappearing.

What about attendance as a measure? It is an important one, since actual contact with religious communities is a really strong predictor of all sorts of other social and political effects. In fact, when you see a study that talks about *religion effects*, it is highly possible those effects stem from participation.

In the US, for example, people who attend services regularly are generally healthier and happier and better citizens of their communities, not because of what they believe or how faithfully they engage religious practices, but simply because they are part of a moral community.

Those communities — congregations, parishes, synagogues, mosques — are places where moral formation takes place through stories and messages and exemplars. It is also where people make connections that mobilize for activism and service.

But even this powerful measure of social participation assumes that the heart of religious attachment centers on weekly worship services. That is not a bad assessment in itself, but think of all that it misses — prayer groups, healing ceremonies, yoga meditation groups, not to mention YouTube and blogs.

In the past, worship attendance was usually the gateway to many, if not most, other religious activities, but it's not at all clear that is still the case. And the last three years have

really upended the meaning of *weekly service attendance*. When we had to be separated due to the COVID outbreak.

And what about belief? In his famous 1960s book *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger articulated what many scholars had been arguing for a couple of centuries – that modern *men* were more likely to believe that science could solve the mysteries of the universe than to think The Divine was intervening to make things happen.

That supposed incompatibility of science and religion has been widely debunked, but it still lives on among a segment of scientists and the public. What seems much more likely is that most modern people are nearly as likely as ever to believe in *something*, even if that something is no longer neatly defined by official religious dogma.

What all of these issues should make clear is that social scientists have too often drawn universal conclusions from a set of flawed measures that themselves only make sense within particular limited contexts.

Decline in service attendance only matters when that's the way people are expected to show their religiosity. Decline in dogma only matters if the culture in question has been characterized by widespread shared beliefs. Decline in affiliation only makes sense when the categories themselves have been significant in identifying groups in a population. Decline in membership only makes sense when joining an organized group is how people do religion.

In short, too much of what social scientists, policy makers, and religious leaders think they know about *religion* is limited by the context in which most of the research has been done.

Even the supposed counter story to *decline* – that is the rise of *spirituality* – is just as much a Global North story

That story, too, depends on context. It largely assumes that the people who inhabit this spiritual milieu are free to *shop* and to put together whatever practices they choose.

As I argue in *Studying Lived Religion*, then, both our way of seeing religion and our way of imagining its decline or transformation are shaped by the particular context in which we live and work. The secularization story and the *spirituality* story are both very much a story of the North Atlantic region. What I will suggest shortly are even further questions about how our understanding of contexts is critical to what we know about lived religious practice.

All of these are reasons why research like yours is so essential. Colleagues who live and work outside the dominant North Atlantic region have increasingly forced people like me to rethink how we understand religion, and that rethinking has born enormous fruit over

the last generation. The volume of exciting new scholarship emerging now is frankly overwhelming, and it is that new scholarship to which I've tried to contribute a new theoretical frame.

That frame is based on understanding *lived religion* as a *practice* – that is, as something people DO. When a sociologist says that religion is a practice, it means that a person is engaged in a pattern of activity that other people recognize – and that because there is this mutual recognition, people know how the script is supposed to go and what they are supposed to do in return.

That recognition comes from a kind of cognitive process that sorts thing out and allows us to respond without even stopping to think about it. We just know. And that knowledge is as much in our bones as in our heads, as much a product of habits as of critical reflection. Recognizing that something is religious and what that means for how we respond to it, then, is something that comes to us already prepackaged and therefore seemingly constrained.

That constraint is not totally the case. There is also room to improvise, that is, the social patterns that organize our thinking and create our responses have an effect on us, but they are not completely fixed. We still have freedom and agency to act in new ways.

One of the reasons that we recognize an action as a religious action is because it has some relationship to a spiritual or transcendent dimension of reality – either directly or indirectly, either immediately experienced or packaged by institutions and traditions.

Spiritual reality may or may not be personified as a deity. It often is, but we know that many of the world's religious traditions are oriented to spirits and spiritual realms that may not be named and personified. Likewise, a spiritual reality may or may not be seen as powerful or intervening in life or salvific. It mostly is; but asking for assistance from the divine is not the only reason people are in relationship with a spiritual reality.

It's also important to remember that these religious social practices happen along several dimensions of variation. They may or may not happen in organized religious settings or according to set religious rules. They may or may not mean having ecstatic otherworldly experiences. They may seem intensely personal or something much more nominal.

In other words, people participate in all sorts of activities that may be recognized by themselves (emic) or by analysts (etic) as religious. We can call those things religious even if they do not fit an official picture of proper religion.

We need to remember, then, that people may interact with *proper religion* in ways that vary tremendously – from habitual actions to exciting or prophetic new ideas, from

everyday rituals to the services organized by parishes and other religious organizations, from intense personal commitment to simple identification with a tradition. The first challenge in understanding the religious things people *do* is to think about the really broad range of things that encompasses.

Once having established a more capacious definition for our exploration of religion, we can begin to take seriously that religious practices, like all social practices, are multidimensional social actions that need to be studied as such. Digging deeper to understand what people are doing when they live their religion allows you to ask important new questions.

The dimensions I've been pointing to in my work encompass materiality, emotion, and embodiment. Also embedded in our actions are elements of moral judgment, aesthetic sensibilities, and a narrative arc that shapes the action.

As I briefly describe each of these dimensions, it should become clear just how important your work is to the necessary continuation of expanding of our horizons.

Attention to the materiality of religious practice is essential as we seek to understand everything that extends beyond the domain of belief and official doctrine. The physical spaces and objects of both everyday and formal practice are part and parcel of what we do. Lived religion involves the buildings and statues and vestments and prayer cards and sacred herbs or holy places that are present and employed in religious action.

You may or may not believe that any of those things are inherently spiritual or magical, but they are part of the experience of the people who use them. It matters that prayer happens in a particular place, for example. And political battles are often fought over religious symbols that are present in physical places. Just how should sacred places and objects be protected?

What about embodiment? It was feminist scholars who led the push to pay attention to the flesh and blood of experience and interaction, often pointing to physical expressions of power and powerlessness. What we see and hear and smell and touch – and how we move in space – is integral to religious experience.

Traditions, of course, vary in how much attention they pay to bodies and movement, but even the apparently most staid of the Presbyterians I worship with, even when they are on zoom, are still embodied persons engaged in ritual religious action. How bodies are present in the world – enacts relationships to the community and the tradition. And throughout the world, those bodily presentations (especially by women) are matters for public debate and legal challenges.

Emotion is often less visible in religious action, but it is no less a part of what we need to be observing. What feelings do we expect to see expressed, and which ones surprise us? How do religious actions evoke and mediate feelings? When is there dancing in the street, and when are there cries of mourning? And how does religious tradition evoke and channel the emotions of everyday life?

Perhaps even less noted – even it is far from invisible – are the moral and aesthetic dimensions of practice. Whether they can talk about it or not, the things people choose to do are attractive to them, aesthetically pleasing. And their sense of religious beauty is shaped by the culture in which they live. Likewise, the things they avoid are, at least in part, things they experienced as ugly or repulsive or just dull.

In fact, creating things of beauty is often an act of religious devotion, and it pays to notice what people do to surround themselves with sights and sounds they experience as spiritually uplifting. And how do communities construct buildings and objects they hope will be part of and contribute to the culture around them?

It is certainly not novel or revolutionary to note that religious action is intertwined with morality. It carries moral messages about how people should live. There are *explicit* teachings contained in sacred texts and sermons. And, often, there is a claim that all moral guidelines are matters of divine command, and that sometimes creates complications for public policy.

But there are also *implicit* messages in religious communities about how to live – messages in the things celebrated or mourned or condemned. Those messages are powerful in reinforcing good behavior, as well.

Religious action often does all of this by way of the stories it tells. Actions themselves tell a story – about who we are and who the Divine is and how we think about Divine action in the world. Acts of mercy and compassion tell unspoken stories both about us and about Divine presence.

But sometimes the religious action IS a story. Whether formalized storytelling – such as the Christian ritual of the Eucharist – or everyday storytelling by elders and wise ones. The characters and actions of the story shape the ideals and actions of those who listen. People come to see and understand the world through the stories they tell.

Summing up, then: Approaching the study of religion as a lived everyday practice invites all of us to think deeply about multiple dimensions of religious action. Rather than imagining religion as doomed to extinction in the face of modernization, we can ask about the diverse ways in which religious practice is present – or absent – in different kinds of

settings. By moving beyond the notions of belief and membership that characterize *modern* religion in the Global North, we can learn from the practices present around the world.

To do that requires not just close attention to the action we observe, but also to awareness of the legal, cultural, and social situation in which that action takes place. The context sets the stage for what we see and what we don't see, for the opportunities available and expected and the constraints within which religious action occurs.

I have suggested that those contexts can be grouped broadly into religious patterns I label entangled, established, institutional, interstitial, and postcolonial.

In much of the world, religious practice is *entangled* not with the state but with everyday life. There is no neat institutional separation that establishes an organized place for religious practice and then says that the rest of life is secular. The health of one's body or of one's livelihood is as much a matter of religious concern as it is a matter for doctors and economists.

Nor are these entangled contexts simply *traditional* or *primitive*. In the midst of very modern cities all over the world, people are utterly adept at living simultaneously in religious and everyday realities.

The North Atlantic region that has dominated the social science study of religion and shaped much of our expectations about where religion belongs has largely been shaped by an establishment context. Here there are legal entanglements between religious authorities and the state. There are taxes that support religious life, official calendars of religious holidays, legal protection of religious sites, and religious registries of births and deaths.

At their strongest, those legal entanglements can involve significant constraints. Some religious practices are simply forbidden, and others required. Some people can build and maintain sacred sites; others can't. Some ways of dressing are required; some are prohibited. To imagine that people are freely choosing how to be religious in those kinds of context is a cruel misperception.

In institutional contexts, as in the US and in many places where establishments have been modified – there are separate, organized structures, recognized professionals, accepted legal regulations, and generally *modern* ways of doing things.

Even when the religious sentiments of the population are quite weak, many of the old entanglements remain embedded in the culture, though, shaping everyday life and defining the range of religious options that are considered normal. Individuals may understand themselves as *secular* but embrace a variety of traditions that link them with the religious history and practice of their community.

Where religious establishments and institutions have loosened their grip, they create *interstitial* spaces – that is places in the cracks of old structures. There are new forms sometimes growing there. Some of those cracks, though, are also places of spiritual experimentation and these are places where seekers experiment with a broad range of new ways of being religious and may label themselves *spiritual but not religious*.

But some of those liminal spaces result from the displacement that happens when imported customs are adapted to new contexts. Whenever human populations are on the move, they take with them the religious practices of home, but encounter new religious options in the places where they land. Whether they establish religious enclaves, leave religious practice aside entirely, or create new hybrid ways, their presence and history becomes a part of the religious landscape. Any nation of immigrants is constantly renegotiating where in that landscape the newcomers will fit.

Nor should we forget the very particular mixture that is created in postcolonial contexts. Here, societies that were once dominated by an imposed colonial establishment are now creating their own versions of those colonial traditions, as well as bringing long-held precolonial practices into new settings.

These are *ideal types* that describe some of the typical contexts we may find in the world, but wherever we are, there are questions of context to be asked about the opportunities and constraints surrounding religious practices. What is permitted and what is forbidden? Where are religious traditions taught? Where are religious traditions recognized and celebrated? In what times and places are they expected? And where do they seem out of place?

And in all of those contexts, there will be internal constraints based on gender, ethnicity, and social class. What women can do and choose to do is simply not the same as the patterns of religious practice we see in men. The practices of people at the bottom of the status hierarchy will almost surely differ from those at the top. There may or may not be room for non-binary people. And people always bring their ethnic and cultural selves to whatever religious practice in which they engage.

So, any notion that the study of *lived religion* is a matter of studying *individual* religion needs to be modified by all these sociological cautions. To assume an individualist perspective is to accept a kind of neoliberal presumption that religion – like everything else – is merely a choice of spiritual commodities on offer. It is to obscure the critical legal, cultural, and social structures that shape the choices that are possible and expected.

Truly paying attention to all of this – to how contexts and social position vary, as well

as to the multiple dimensions of lived religious practice – is no easy task. But it is an enterprise well worth the effort. In the process, we may discover new questions to ask about the constraints and opportunities in different social contexts. We may also discover new dimensions of practice to add to the list or new ways those dimensions intersect with variations in the contexts of the practitioners.

It is work like yours that has inspired my own attempts to offer this new analytical perspective. And it is work like yours that will continue to enlarge our understanding of what it means to do religion.

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