

Lived Religion

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Abstract

Research on “lived religion” focuses on the everyday practices of ordinary people, in contrast to the study of official texts, organizations, and experts. It includes attention to rituals and stories and spiritual experiences that may draw on official religious traditions, but may also extend beyond them. Lived religion is closely related to “popular religion”, but is a more encompassing category. As with the study of popular religion, the focus is on ordinary people and often includes festivals and shrines and healing practices that may happen without the approval of religious authorities. Lived religion research pays special attention to the lives of women, of populations of color, and of people in the Global South. Both approved traditional practices and new innovations may be “lived”.

Being “lived” points especially to the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life. The study of lived religion includes attention to how and what people eat, how they dress, how they deal with birth and death and sexuality and nature, even how they modify hair and body through tattoos or dreadlocks, for instance. The study of lived religion includes everyday sacralized spaces and the physical and artistic things people do together, such as singing, dancing, and other folk or community traditions that enact a spiritual sense of solidarity and transcendence.

The focus on lived religion has enriched and complicated the efforts of social scientists to understand the place and role of religion in society.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists studying religion have typically defined their object of study in terms of major religious traditions, beliefs, and organizations. What does Buddhism or Christianity teach, and what difference does that make in the world? Research questions have often been framed in terms of how beliefs affect behavior or how the membership of one group is different from the membership of another. Research on “lived religion” turns the focus from official organizations and membership to everyday practice and from the experts who decide on official theology and doctrine to the ordinary people whose everyday lives may include rituals and stories

and spiritual experiences that draw on those traditions, but may extend beyond them.

Lived religion is closely related to “popular religion”, which is usually taken to mean the religion of the ordinary people that happens beyond the bounds and often without the approval of religious authorities. Festivals and shrines, ritual healing practices and stories of miracles, for instance, may be very common in a society, but may only partially be endorsed by the religious organizations in that society. Similarly, lived religion happens on the margins between orthodox prescriptions and innovative experiences, but lived religion is a more encompassing category. Both approved traditional practices and new innovations may be “lived”.

Being “lived” points especially to the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life. The study of lived religion includes attention to how and what people eat, how they dress, how they deal with birth and death and sexuality and nature, even how they modify hair and body through tattoos or dreadlocks. Lived religion may include the spaces people inhabit, as well—the construction of shrines in homes or in public places, for instance. And it includes the physical and artistic things people do together, such as singing, dancing, and other folk or community traditions that enact a spiritual sense of solidarity and transcendence. Some of these rituals and traditions may be widely recognized as religious and named as such, but research on lived religion also includes activities that might not immediately be seen as spiritual or religious by outsiders. All of the expressions of connection to spiritual life are included in the study of lived religion.

This turn toward everyday and material expressions of religion also means that the study of lived religion often includes populations that are neglected in many other social science approaches to religion. The lives of women, of populations of color, and of people in the Global South are more often given attention when the research frame is lived religion. This work has enriched and complicated the efforts of social scientists to understand the place and role of religion in society.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The term “lived religion” began to gain widespread use in the 1990s, with the publication of a collection of essays by social historians and sociologists, edited by David Hall, a Harvard historian. While sociologist Meredith McGuire’s book, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, was not published until 2008, she and others in sociology had been contributing, since the 1980s, important research on healing rituals and devotions to saints, family life and gender, immigrant religion, and new religious movements. This research, as is typical for research on lived religion, relied on

qualitative methods of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, producing rich analytical descriptions of the ways in which religious practice was organized and experienced in everyday life. It is work that has spanned disciplines, with some of the most important contributions coming from religious studies and social historians.

Questions of how religion is lived were not, of course, alien to the concerns of early sociologists, although they were more likely to rely on the reports of historians and anthropologists than to gather data themselves. Max Weber's early twentieth century studies of the great world religions focused on the distinctive ideas of those religious systems, but he was also interested in their social psychology and ethos, that is, the patterns of life they engendered. The "Protestant Ethic" is not so much Calvinist beliefs about salvation as the everyday habits of discipline and humility those beliefs encouraged. Emile Durkheim's focus was on social solidarity, and he pointed in vivid detail to the lived experience of ritual participation—what he called "collective effervescence". Writing at about the same time, Charlotte Perkins Gilman drew a connection between gender and different forms of religion. The lived religion of women, she argued, was built on experiences of birth and growth, while the lived religion of men was built on experiences of struggle, conflict, and death. These early theorists saw religion as a central social reality and built their theories on what they understood about lived experiences.

For much of the twentieth century those lived religious realities largely disappeared from sociological view, often because sociologists assumed that they were realities more suited to a pre-modern or "primitive" world than to the modern, scientific, cosmopolitan world academics saw triumphing around them. Secularization theories predicted that religion would become a remote and forgotten abstraction. When religion made its way into social scientific research during this period, it was likely to be the sum total of a few survey measures. Being Protestant, Catholic, or Jew; how often one attended services; whether one believed in hell or the literal truth of the Bible—as these survey numbers went up and down, "religion" was said to be appearing and disappearing, gaining, and losing influence in society.

It was against that backdrop that a worldwide resurgence (or rediscovery) of religious vitality emerged in the 1960s and beyond. Beginning with the spate of new religious movements that accompanied the counterculture and continuing through the Islamic revolutions and the rise of the American Christian Right, religion again entered social scientific discourse. A more global and transnational society introduced new populations and new religious traditions into the questions being studied, and the vitality of religious

communities and practices challenged existing theories of religion and society. This was the setting into which research on lived religion began to make its place in the field, a setting that continues to challenge social scientists.

THE CUTTING EDGES OF RESEARCH

The theoretical frontiers of work on lived religion are largely located in the domain of cultural sociology. Students of lived religion are utilizing the tools of cultural studies to ask how religion is produced and used in the social world. That is, if people interact with each other and with the world in ways that include sacred language, objects, practices, and stories, how are those sacred cultural objects created? What places and organizations serve as arenas for the production and legitimation of different forms of lived religion? How are cultural objects labeled and recognized as religious? What do they allow people to do (or prevent them from doing)? If, for example, there is a cultural category called "gay evangelical", what ideological work by whom makes such a category possible? What circles of conversation and social spaces allow this category to take on a reality that gives people patterns to live with? What material objects, styles of clothing, or ways of moving and singing might give this particular lived religion its tangible form? What imaginations about the self and identity are therefore possible? And what are the forms of cultural power or suppression that may limit the expression of this lived religion?

That last question makes clear that explorations of lived religion often take up the issue of power and empowerment. Students of social movements have pointed to the power of shared religious symbols and rituals to mobilize collective action. At the individual level, religious practices of everyday life may provide comfort and escape, but they may also provide an alternative view of the world or assurance of supernatural power at one's disposal. Studies of conservative religions have noted the ability of women to transform ideologies of submission into everyday practices of household leadership. Women in many traditions express their power in various forms of life-giving. The religion that is lived may be one in which women wield considerable power to heal or to provide religious guidance, even if men retain the power of public leadership. The question of power in lived religion is one fraught with ambiguity.

The empirical frontiers of lived religion research are both geographic and institutional. It has been clear from the beginning that the study of lived religion would push social scientists to look beyond congregations and denominations, temples and shrines. Still shaped by modernization paradigms, however, much early work on lived religion stayed within the "private" domains of person and household. Lived religion was what

people did at home or in other private places in their lives. More recently, that structuralist dichotomy has been challenged. That is, the notion that the social world is organized into neatly separate functional compartments has become less tenable; and that signals a challenge to look for lived religion in workplaces and markets, hospitals and neighborhoods as much as in congregations and households.

The best of this work examines the complicated social action in such places. At the same time that ordinary work or consumption is happening, it may be intertwined with sacred meanings or rituals. People keep religious objects on their desk, pray with their coworkers, and sometimes chafe at the way they are made into an outsider by the common religious culture everyone else seems to share. That is, the public world of work and civic life is a place in which religion is lived. Religious goods themselves are bought and sold in the capitalist marketplace, and spiritual therapies may operate in conjunction with apparently secular medical environments. The religion people live everyday weaves in and out of conversations with friends and family, as well as with the language and symbols of public rituals.

Innovative work on lived religion is also taking the study of religion well outside the bounds of the North America and Europe. As the academic world has become more globally connected, social scientists from around the world are able to make their work accessible to each other, and the study of lived religion now has contributions from Venezuela to Ghana, from China to South Africa, and in borderlands and along migration routes on every continent. Indigenous practices and hybrid expressions abound, as does attention to lived expressions of the major world religions. Young Chinese finding new ways to be Buddhist and young gang members in Central America finding their way into evangelicalism are joined in the chronicles of lived religion by migrants building makeshift shrines along the borders they are crossing. Each society provides its own cultural building materials for religious expression, but global media increasingly make religious symbols and practices available to people far from the heartlands where those traditions may have originated. People looking for a new meditation technique or possible spiritual pilgrimage can google their way to new forms of lived religion.

The mixing and hybridity of lived religion as it crosses borders is also producing new angles of vision on the religions found in North America and Europe. Haitian Vodou is being practiced in New York, Muslim women are deciding to veil in European cities, secular youth are going on eco-pilgrimages that include Norwegian cathedrals on the route, and African Christians are sending missionaries to North America. Research on lived religion is encompassing a broad array of religious populations and traditions, and not just by traveling to the Global South.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The wide diversity of locations and traditions being studied is both an important step forward and a major challenge for the future. It would clearly be a mistake to move too quickly to any sort of general theorizing, but it would also be a mistake to proceed as if all the individual studies might not inform each other. In part, this is simply a matter of each researcher doing her or his homework in reading the existing literature, but with work scattered across traditions, continents, and disciplines it is all too easy to miss important contributions. Common keywords for lived religion and its components and dimensions would assist future researchers as they attempt to build a comprehensible body of knowledge.

The vast majority of lived religion research to date has employed ethnographic methods, now often enhanced by methods that allow analysis of visual and material culture. Shared methods have made possible bridges among the various disciplines that use them—social history, anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and even occasional psychologists. Each discipline brings slightly different analytical questions to the data, but each seeks to ground an understanding of the religious social world in observations of living persons and communities along with their texts and artifacts. As both the methods and the disciplines expand, the study of lived religion will be enriched, but this too poses challenges. Here, too, a common vocabulary that enables searching relevant literature will alert researchers to both the questions and the research methods that have informed this growing body of knowledge.

Among the social sciences, political science and economics have rarely been the home for students of lived religion, and that points to another of the critical challenges for the future. The lingering effects of secularization theories and structuralist understandings of society remain. Asking about the politics or economics of lived religion—or the lived religion of politics and economics—remains an uncommon proposition. Conceptualizing and studying the presence of religious practice in these domains of social life is a task barely begun, as are studies informed by political or economic perspectives on what people are doing as they live their everyday religious lives.

Because both political science and economics are so driven by survey data and quantitative analysis, bridges to research on lived religion may depend on the eventual development of quantifiable measures; and that, in turn, is likely to depend on systematic comparative work. As the body of knowledge grows, along with a body of common keywords and concepts, it may be possible to develop sensible ways to ask people across societies about how religion is a part of their everyday life. At this point, the study of

lived religion is probably still too much in its youth to venture that far. It is also inherently grounded in the detail and diversity only ethnographic work can fully apprehend. Still, as something that permeates and often structures social life, lived religion will need to take its place on the standardized surveys along with politics and consumption and household status. A great deal has been learned over the past three decades, but there is a great deal yet to do.

FURTHER READING

- Ammerman, N. T. (2013). *Sacred stories, spiritual tribes: Finding religion in everyday life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bender, C., Cadge, W., Levitt, P., & Smilde, D. A. (Eds.) (2012). *Religion on the edge: De-centering and re-centering the sociology of religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
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- McGuire, M. B. (2008). *Lived religion: Faith and practice in everyday life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Vasquez, M. A. (2010). *More than belief: A materialist theory of religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

LINKS

Rich web resources on religion that give ample attention to various aspects of lived religion (and include many articles by scholars) are

<http://www.patheos.com/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/religion>

<http://www.religiondispatches.org/>

<http://www.nycreligion.info/>

NANCY T. AMMERMAN SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Nancy T. Ammerman has been on the faculty at Boston University since 2003, having previously taught at Emory University and at Hartford Seminary. She has done extensive research on American congregations and on conservative religious movements, publishing award-winning books that examine each of those subjects. Her most recent research explores whether and how religious belief and action are present in the stories people tell about their everyday lives.

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