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Hannah Griese

Book Review

Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*

Contexts and Practices

New York: New York University Press, 2021, 257 pages, ISBN: 9781479804337

Religion can be found anywhere, according to the sociologist of religion Nancy Tatom Ammerman; in every street and at every corner one can encounter everyday religious practices. In her most recent book, *Studying Lived Religion. Contexts and Practices*, the author elaborates how we might identify and research these practices. This introduction to the field of “lived religion” provides the reader with theoretical insights, many examples from around the world and useful suggestions for further studies.

Building on critique of the secularization thesis and a rather narrow sociological understanding of religion, equating it with belief in God, the author claims that religion exists in the contemporary world in various forms and at manifold occasions, naming examples such as religious gatherings and organizations, humanitarian aid and civil protests. In the form of what she terms “spiritual practices”, religion *happens* in everyday life, on both private and public levels. “Lived religious practices” are considered dynamic and creative and turn the focus of research to “normal” people as well as “unofficial” places. Understood as an integral part of societal life, they shift the focus to women and children, poor people and people of color, and to material religion, and urge to re-evaluate the priority of mind over body. In Ammerman’s eyes, however, a one-sided avoidance of matters of belief, doctrine, organizations and elites can produce a drift towards an individualistic approach, which is equally undesirable.

Religious practices, according to Ammerman, are multidimensional, for they embrace spirituality, embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgement and narrative. Furthermore, practices must always be considered in context, as both personal and social at the same time.

The book is structured in two parts, comprising a total of nine chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. We turn now to the contents of these two parts.

Part I begins with an introduction to practice theory, employing authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Theodore Schatzki, Andreas Reckwitz, and Ann Swidler. In this chapter, Ammerman outlines practice as something in between structure and habitus, on the one hand, and in between agency and creativity, on the other hand, and thus concerned with both routine and improvisation.

The author then elaborates on her understanding of “religion”, defining “religious practices” as social practices with a “spiritual” dimension. By “spiritual” she means the inclusion of an alternative sphere, a reality “beyond the ordinary” (p. 20):

This reality is something distinctive but not separate. We can speak of it as “sacralized” or “transcendent” or even “otherworldly”, but it is important not to assume that those characteristics set religious realities utterly apart from everyday life. The consciousness we will be looking for is more both/and than either/or. Religious practice involves consciousness of and acting with multiple layers of reality at once, recognizing the “more than” while not necessarily losing touch with the ordinary. (p. 21)

With this broad definition, Ammerman seeks to enable research into subjects not considered “religion” from an emic perspective. In the end, however, she herself restricts this ambition, stating that she aims mostly at researching practices already understood as religion.

Part II is concerned with the seven key dimensions of lived religion, namely spirituality, embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, morality and narrative. I will discuss here the chapters on embodiment, morality and narrative as examples.

In chapter 4, on embodiment, Ammerman states the importance of the physical body and all its senses for (religious) practices. Understanding lived religion as “shared *embodied* know-how” (p.75), she advocates that while

not ignoring the mind, we should acknowledge that it cannot be separated from the body. At the same time, for her, the body is deeply social:

Bodies are the site where “nature” and culture meet. Biological systems and processes are at work, to be sure, but they are not just neutral receptors or stimuli from the environment. We actively sense and make sense simultaneously, and that happens in interaction with others, using the categories and filters our culture has provided us. (p. 78)

For Ammerman, bodily practices play an active part in the construction of societies. She then illustrates her argument with various examples of religious practices, showing how physical signs create religious identities. Her examples range from food through clothing, tattoos and acts of healing to matters of gender, race and sexuality.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to the dimension of morality, as every practice is considered to contain some kind of moral judgement, either consciously or unconsciously. According to Ammerman, our actions are guided by deeply internalized intuitions about good and evil, right or wrong. Thus, individuals and groups *understand* which ways to act are better than others or which aims are worthy of pursuit. Morality, then, is situated on various levels, as moral frameworks are being produced in our minds, bodies, emotions and cultures at the same time. The values are not external to practices but contained within them. On the one hand, the moral dimension of lived religion concerns the moral rules of religious communities, but on the other hand, that moral dimension is also more dynamic, for, as research can show, moral implications are performed and morality is lived.

Chapter 9, on narratives, is concerned with communication as an important part of religious practice. Ammerman uses the metaphor of “narrative” to consider this dimension, paying attention to both practices of storytelling and the inherent narrativity of all practices. For the author, practices are shaped by implicit stories. Narratives influence our actions by enabling or constraining them, in what is effectively a shared practical understanding. As little attention has been paid to matters of belief and meaning systems up to this point in the book, Ammerman focuses on this aspect in this chapter. She states,

As we look at the narrative dimension of lived religious practice, the role of beliefs and meanings will come more directly into view. We will see

that people use words and stories to construct the meanings that guide their actions. We will see that they talk about beliefs, and in doing so, they are saying something about who they are and where they belong. (p. 179)

In the conclusion, Ammerman provides methodological suggestions for how to start one's own research, roughly outlining possible methods such as participant observation and interviewing. Above all, the author stresses the importance of hermeneutical reflection, especially on the researcher's standpoint within a study and how it influences its results.

A minor point of criticism relates to the definition of religion and the choice of terminology. Although Ammerman explicitly embraces a wide definition that expands beyond institutional settings, she mostly focusses on such contexts, as her choice of examples throughout the book reflects. It would have been interesting to see her include religious motives, symbols or narratives from other areas of society, for example from politics, economics or the arts. Additionally, the term "spiritual" seems slightly problematic. As Ammerman points out herself, it is a popular emic category widely used, often to distinguish oneself from religion. It is not entirely clear from her explanations why she chose it instead of alternatives such as "transcendent" or "meta-empirical", which may have been less ambiguous. Also, the term "spiritual" implies a connection to the spirit and to belief – a link the author explicitly seeks to avoid.

Overall, *Studying Lived Religion* is a dense, rich and comprehensive introduction to the field of everyday religious practices. The theoretical explanations are accessible but not at the cost of differentiation or complexity, and the various examples make the book a vivid and enjoyable work that will stimulate the reader's own thinking. It will not only motivate researchers, but also facilitate them, above all through the valuable suggestions of further reading. Therefore, I commend the book in particular to students and newcomers to the field; established researchers in this subject area may already be acquainted with most of the theories explained.