

Living The Faiths: An Agenda (Or Wish List) For A Future Book

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2023

What follows is somewhere between a think-piece and a scholarly agenda. It represents a set of ideas in which I have a great interest, and which I would like to work on, although presently, I am not too sure how, where or when. Through my research and writings through the years, I just keep coming back to this set of ideas, regardless of the specific topic or era I am exploring at any time, and it would be wonderful to develop this overarching theme. A book, almost certainly, but I am not yet sure of the exact direction.

The core theme is that of “lived religion,” which for a quarter century has been a hot area of scholarship in Religious Studies, the Sociology of Religion, and Anthropology. The fundamental idea grows out of the ethnographic studies of particular congregations from the 1970s onward, best represented by books such as Nancy T. Ammerman’s *Bible Believers* (1988) or R. Stephen Warner’s *New Wine in Old Wineskins* (also 1988). Such observations drew attention to the many and diverse aspects of behaviors, practices, and beliefs, that people included in the broad range of “religion,” which often fitted poorly with officially approved definitions and orthodoxies. What mattered was not how far ordinary believers accepted official or institutional doctrines, but what they did in their actual lives: what, in fact, is lived religion. Robert Orsi writes that

The study of lived religion is shaped by and shapes the way family life is organized, for instance; how the dead are buried, children disciplined, the past and present imagined, moral boundaries established and challenged, home constructed, maintained and destroyed, the gods and spirits worshiped and importuned and so on.

We should never privilege theological and doctrinal beliefs over practices.

I really cannot improve on the discussion offered by Ancient Historian Peter Thonemann in a [*Wall Street Journal*](#) review of a major book on lived Roman religion:

How would you go about writing a history of religion in the modern United States? The obvious starting point would be the various religions that people identify with: Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, Scientology and Prefer Not To Say. You could quantify Roman Catholics and Protestants, or regular and irregular churchgoers, with some nice clear pie charts. You could talk about the quiddities of the religious groups, each with its own forms of communal worship, dietary laws, marriage rituals and ethical teachings, more or less rigorously observed. The accent would lie on organizations—“churches”—and the communities that they create around them; collective rituals would tend to have a single, clear meaning (“giving thanks for the blessing of the harvest”).

Or, instead, you could choose to start from the rich, chaotic mishmash of practices and rituals that make up most people's day-to-day religious experiences. My religious life might include formal daily prayer; but it might also include reading newspaper horoscopes, yoga, charitable giving, putting flowers on relatives' graves, erecting a fir-tree totem pole in my living room in mid-December, knocking on wood, dressing as a witch for Halloween, or making a wish while blowing out candles on my birthday cake. My own reasons for attending synagogue might be profoundly meaningful to me—loyalty to my wife, dealing with personal grief, an instruction in a dream—while bearing no relation whatsoever to the ritual's official “meaning.”

The new scholarship rejected such dismissive labels as “vernacular” or “popular” religion, which was supposed to be inferior to official faith, and which as such scarcely merited scholarly attention. Equally scorned are ideas of high and low religion, as formulated by many traditional academics. Usually deriving from mainline Protestant backgrounds, they held that “real” religion is scriptural, literate, and cerebral, and that ritual or ceremonial religion is at best secondary, at worst a contamination of true faith. In that elite or top-down vision, “high” religion implies solid, informed faith, based on the institution and its approved practice and scriptures, and grounded in serious theology. The “low,” in contrast, involves vernacular practices, mere folk religion, which are not grounded in serious or educated thought.

In reality, both versions should properly be seen as components of lived religion. The legendary Duke Ellington famously observed that all music is in fact folk music, as he had never heard any music made by horses. By the same token, we must challenge the concept of “folk religion,” which falls on the larger spectrum of lived human religion, of what folk do. The high/low distinction becomes thoroughly suspect when traced through history. A number of recent historical accounts argue powerfully that the whole concept of “religion” as we generally understand it is a Western and predominantly Christian concept, which had been imposed on other societies during the great age of European empires.

A Flourishing Field

The topic of “lived religion” has been widely addressed in subsequent scholarship, with significant contributions by such scholars as David D. Hall, Meredith McGuire, Robert Orsi, and (again) Nancy Ammerman, notably in her recent and very wide-ranging *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (2021). Ammerman, by the way, is just as comfortable with the term “everyday religion”. I draw attention to the numerous titles in the working bibliography I have compiled, while freely admitting that this makes no claims to being comprehensive. As we see, the lived religion theme often surfaces in historical writings, on the ancient and Early Modern worlds.

This lived religion idea commonly applied to understanding the lived realities of various faith traditions, and often of Islam. We now have books on such topics as *Everyday Lived Islam in Europe*, or of *Lived Islam: Colloquial Religion in a Cosmopolitan Tradition*. That “colloquial” terminology should be stressed, as it is widely applicable across faiths, including (very much!) Christianity. In the words of the author, Kevin Reinhart,

On the pattern of language use, ‘lived’ is understood as ‘colloquial’. Like a living language, Islam has ‘elements unique to localities, to scholars, and elements shared among diverse

Muslim groups together mak[ing] up the "lived Islam" of a given community' ... Three aspects of lived Islam patterned on language use are as follows: 'the dialect (features unique to particular place, whether geographical, temporal, or otherwise locative), the *koine* (a form of the language shared among different kinds of speakers), and the Cosmopolitan or Standard (the equivalent of the English of grammar books). Each can be found within a given colloquial Islam, but all three are always present and in ways more significant than scholars have usually recognized'

Understanding such realities is essential for approaching the interactions of religious communities as they coexist in particular regions or societies. Whatever we think of the "clash of civilizations" idea, it is very hard to pin down a monolithic Islam or a monolithic Christianity. There are particular Muslims in particular societies, living their own ways, and differing – often substantially – in what constitutes religious activity or belief. Often, something that one society defines as fundamental to the given faith tradition will be rejected by credentialed experts elsewhere as irrelevant or even abhorrent to the faith properly defined.

Crudely, any number of studies can tell us that (say) Nigeria has X million Muslims, while Indonesia has Y million, yet those statements tell us next to nothing about what the people of those countries actually believe or do. As a hypothesis, I suggest that we will often find that the Muslims of Nigeria differ substantially from the Muslims of Indonesia; and in fact, they are much closer in many ways to the Christians of Nigeria in critical beliefs and tenets. In terms of shaping lived or everyday religion, local conditions and circumstances matter immensely. I offer a parallel based on personal experience. As an American Christian, I likely share far more common religious assumptions and approaches with an American Jew of my generation and social profile than with a West African Christian. Or do I?

Dare we even say that there is no such thing as "Islam" or "Christianity," or at least that such reified terms are meaningless without the particular and immediate social context?

Teaching Religion and Religions(s)

These issues are very familiar to anyone who ever taught Religious Studies courses exploring world faiths. [I actually blogged about this a few years back:](#)

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2017/08/a-year-in-the-life/>

Conventionally, many teachers and textbooks still describe "A Religion" (any religion) in terms of scriptures, doctrines, and historical evolution, which may have little or nothing to do with the realities of what ordinary people do day by day.

Most survey texts suffer from what I call the Curse of Scripture. They tell you a great deal about religion X through its holy writings, which are usually presented as if they have the same authoritative role as the Bible in Protestant Christianity. That reflects the Protestant origins of earlier scholars in this field, who assumed that "real" religion is scriptural, literate, and cerebral, and that ritual or ceremonial religion is at best secondary, at worst a contamination of true faith. The problem is that even a thorough understanding of scriptures prepares you very badly to comprehend the lived

realities of any faith. To some extent you can compensate for that by teaching the history of a faith tradition, but that still falls short of current realities.

Read the Vedas and Upanishads all you like, and they are towering works of genius and inspiration, but they tell you very little about what ordinary Hindu people really do from day to day, or what it actually means to be a Hindu. Worse, the scriptural obsession forces you to give very short shrift to religions where texts and writings just do not play that significant a role in religious life, especially in East Asian faiths.

A far superior way to study any faith is through a detailed ethnographic study of a particular community over time, which offers a holistic view. At their best, such books trace the long arc of the ritual and liturgical life, the fasts, feasts and holy days, the cycles of the year. Above all, they told us what people actually do and did at any particular moment. What are places of worship really like, in terms of how we experience them through the various senses? Also, how much of religious life actually goes on outside the formal building, in the setting of the home or family? That is an obvious question, for instance, when dealing with Judaism, but to varying degrees it is true of all faith-traditions. Within the congregation, what do people fight about? What are the hot button issues right now?

For many years, for example, I used in my own teaching John K. Nelson's *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* (1996), which tells us far more about the lived reality of that faith than any number of learned commentaries on its scriptures.

Religion is what people do, not what they read.

A Way Forward

We would need to make these arguments in general terms, and then apply them very specifically to particular nations, compared point by point. Now, we would have to supplement this survey material with a deep dive into the available literature in lived religious practice in those respective societies, much of which would be ethnographic. This kind of ground-truthing would be so valuable because it would show the virtues and limitations of the different methodologies.

While I am talking a lot about Muslims, the same points emerge about intra-Christian differences, or parallels between Christian and other communities in various societies, such as Hindus, Jews, or Buddhists.

Unless I am missing something, this kind of comparison has not been done exhaustively, at least in terms of everyday practice and belief, of lived religion. (I will say more about that topic shortly). Just as a crude exercise, if we Google a phrase like "Comparing Christian and Muslim practice," we get taken to several popular sites, some of which are quite polemical. There is also a great deal about Christian-Muslim conversations and interfaith discussions. But for everyday practice, for lived religion, I find little. The same is true for any and all other religions from the same comparative perspective. The Dutch sociologist Daan Beekers has some suggestive comments that are aimed "Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Muslim and Christian Lived Religion," with an excellent survey of the literature as it stands. But a very great deal remains to be said!

And those are the ideas currently buzzing around my brain.