

Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life

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This project was designed to elicit stories of everyday life in which we can look for the conditions under which spiritual frameworks and sensibilities do and do not infuse activity and relationships. In what ways do human beings experience and invoke transcendence and how does that occur distinctively in the many different social spheres of their lives? Do they, for instance, experience overt (or implicit) sanctions against religious action in some places but not in others? On the other hand, what kinds of situations call forth spiritual resources, and what effect do those spiritual resources have? By systematically exploring the stories individuals tell about their everyday lives, this project identifies the patterns of presence and absence.

The data also situate individual stories in relation to the organizations that are the primary religious homes for respondents. To what extent do those religious settings provide relationships, practices, and ways of thinking that show up in the stories our subjects tell us?

Working in the very different cultural contexts of Boston and Atlanta, we selected a quota sample of 95 participants, designed to include a distribution across key Christian and Jewish traditions, as well as people who are “seculars” and “seekers.” Our quotas also took account of gender, age, and degree of religious involvement. We began with an initial interview in which the basic contours of the subject’s religious life and history were explored. Included in this interview were the sorts of demographic questions that will help us to describe their social location. This interview also covered information about the subject’s other significant everyday activities and relationships. Subsequently, we asked each subject to photograph the “important places” in their lives, and we brought the developed photos to them for a session of story-telling about those places. Finally, we provided digital recorders with which subjects recorded oral diaries about the events, large and small, of their daily lives.

How and when do story elements from religious and spiritual worlds enter the world of everyday work and family life? And what difference does it make? In these everyday stories, we are moving past trend lines in survey data to offer a beginning for talking about what modern religious lives look like.

Publications from the Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life Project

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming August, 2013.

In this book, ordinary Americans tell the stories of their everyday lives -- from dinner table to office to shopping mall to doctor's office. They talk about the things that matter most to them and the routines that are just there, and they talk about the times and places where the everyday and ordinary meet what they name as a spiritual presence. Often they name that spiritual reality "God," but it is also experienced in the more impersonal forces of nature and individual life meaning. The book explores their stories to describe the common threads in those descriptions of spirituality and the significant way they are shaped by religious traditions and by people's conversations with the others they encounter as fellow members of a spiritual "tribe." The voices in this book come from all the corners of the Christian and Jewish traditions. Some are devout; most are typically modest in their

religious participation. And many of the voices come from the growing population of people who are unaffiliated. Some are truly secular in their outlook, but even these voices are sometimes tuned to a spiritual key. Where that happens and why is the question addressed here. If religion has not entirely disappeared from the modern world, where is it found and how is spiritual presence sustained? This book argues that understanding religion today must include both the organized communities that celebrate spiritual traditions and the everyday conversations in which non-ordinary realities are named and explored by people inside and outside those traditions.

Williams, Roman R. "Space for God: Lived Religion at Work, Home, and Play." *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2010): 257-79.

This study explored the intersection of religion and spirituality with the domains of home, work, and leisure. Photo elicitation interview materials generated by the Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life project were analyzed. Findings revealed that at first glance, photos of homes, bedrooms, offices, beaches, pets, and gardens did not appear to be enchanted. However, when the stories behind the photos are examined, it becomes evident that the meanings the narratives convey and the actions they evoke push back against the social structure as individuals leverage contextual features of daily life to make space for God.

Ammerman, Nancy T., and Roman R. Williams. "Speaking of Methods: Eliciting Religious Narratives through Interviews, Photos, and Oral Diaries." In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion: New Methods in Sociology of Religion*, edited by Luigi Berzano and Ole Riis. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

This article begins by suggesting that a narrative frame may be especially useful in understanding lived religion and continues by offering a set of three complementary methods of data gathering that are especially suited to exploring religion in its everyday manifestations.

Ronald, Emily K. (2012) "More than "Alone with the Bible": Reconceptualizing Religious Reading" *Sociology of Religion* 73(3):323-44.

The idea of a solitary reader of sacred texts distorts the importance of one form of religious reading and camouflages several equally important forms. Taking these other forms of reading into account not only gives us a better picture of how books are being used religiously, but also provides new avenues for studying the relationship between sacred texts and religious persons and reveals an arena where definitions of "religion" are being negotiated. Using data collected through the 2006-07 work of the Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life project, this article examines the role of reading as a spiritual practice, complicating this model in the process and suggesting new avenues for studying religious reading.

Ammerman, Nancy T. (forthcoming) "Spiritual but not Religious?: Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*

"Spirituality" has often been framed in social science research as an alternative to organized "religion," implicitly or explicitly extending theoretical arguments about the privatization of religion. This article uses in-depth qualitative data from a religiously-diverse U.S. sample to argue that this either-or distinction not only fails to capture the empirical reality of American religion, but it does not do justice to the complexity of spirituality itself. An inductive discursive analysis reveals four primary cultural "packages," that is, ways in which the meaning of spirituality is constructed in conversation -- a Theistic Package that ties spirituality to personal deities, an Extra-Theistic Package that locates spirituality in various naturalistic forms of transcendence, an Ethical Spirituality that focuses on everyday compassion, and a contested Belief and Belonging Spirituality tied to cultural notions of religiosity. Spirituality is, then, neither a diffuse individualized phenomenon nor a single cultural alternative to "religion." Analysis of the contested evaluations of Belief and Belonging Spirituality allows a window on the "moral boundary work" (Lamont 1992) being done by the cultural discourse of being "spiritual but not religious." The empirical boundary between spirituality and religion is far more porous than the moral and political one.