



**Nancy Tatom Ammerman:** *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*. New York University Press, 2021, 257 pp.

Nancy Ammerman has contributed considerably to the development of theoretical and analytical categories for studying lived religion, not least by reviewing and characterizing the widespread diverse contributions to the field and calling for a focus on lived religion in interplay with both institutional contexts and multivoicedness (Ammerman 2016). The latter endeavour makes Ammerman's conceptualization of lived religion especially interesting in a Nordic context, where church adherence is in many ways intertwined with society, tradition, and cultural practice (e.g. Nielsen 2019).

#### *Building a lived religion analytical tool*

The book has three main parts. Part I, *The Big Picture*, presents a theoretical premise for a lived religion study, focusing on *practice* and *contexts*. Part II, *Zooming In*, unfolds seven interrelated dimensions of lived religious practice. The book's concluding chapter is not entitled Part III but works almost autonomously, presenting a lived religion methodology: a beginner's guide to empirical studies of lived religion, encompassing various references to key publications for further study.

*The Big Picture* consists of two theoretical preconditions for studying lived religion. The first chapter ascribes lived religion to the field of

theories of practice. Practice theory here leads the way for the argumentations in subsequent chapters: that practices are always social and contextually embedded (Chapter 2); and that they should be studied as multifaceted yet embedded in material and mental structures (Chapters 3–9).

Part I's second preconditional chapter presents a fivefold typology for the contextual embeddedness of religious practices. The argument is that a practice's recognition as religious demands cultural alignment. Ammerman seems to use this focus on cultural context to oppose a contemporary secularist and reductionist understanding of religion. She demonstrates that religious institutions still play a role in the development of seemingly secular societies and thus follows suit from her review article in 2016 (Ammerman 2016). Meanwhile, she also emphasizes that religious practice remains to be explored outside institutional religious contexts in line with the early focus of lived religion perspectives (Orsi 1985; McGuire 2008). Moreover, Ammerman presents a fifth option for recognizing the role religion plays, especially in colonized contexts.

In Part II Ammerman constructs an analytical apparatus with seven dimensions of lived religious practice on the foundation of practice theory she presents in the first chapter. Six of these dimensions can be characterized as general practice theoretical informed aspects of practice, which moves from material

dimensions into the mental realm: from embodiment and materiality through emotion and aesthetics to morality and narratives. Ammerman includes a seventh aspect as a prerequisite for the others: *the spiritual dimension*, which she argues distinguishes lived religious studies from other practice theoretically informed research methodologies. Part II's chapters build on this dimension step by step.

Chapters 3–9 are similarly composed, demonstrating how respective practice dimensions are social; what the respective practices do; how perspectives of boundaries and differences are inherent; and how the dimension in focus is related to these dimensions. While the clear structure and distinction of seven dimensions is a noteworthy attempt to construct an applicable operationalized tool, it also deliberately dismantles itself by describing and demonstrating the dimensions' entanglement. Ammerman thus recognizes that methodological clarity is one thing; the reality of lived, messy practices another.

#### *Further paths for development*

*Studying Lived Religion* contributes to its field by proposing a coherent framework of lived religion as a research strategy. Throughout the book Ammerman builds her argumentation on an interplay between theoretical concepts and exemplifications of lived religion from a rich corpus of cases from various geographical, religious, and

research contexts. This approach is powerfully explanatory, as she demonstrates the method in use by letting practice and data speak.

Much of the content will seem quite familiar to researchers already invested in lived religion research. However, *Studying Lived Religion* may function well as a textbook for novices in the field because of its introduction to the field and methodology, its overall tool character, and each chapter's extensive endnotes suggesting further readings and discussions in the study of lived religion. Our book review should be seen in this light.

*Studying Lived Religion's* breadth has considerable qualities, with an overarching concept of practice unfolded in various interrelated aspects and triangulation between the rich corpus of cases from different contexts – not least when the book is also viewed as a concrete research tool for novices. However, the quality in breadth is not fully matched in depth. The two new areas adhering to the subtitle of the book, *contexts and practices*, have research potential, but they also seem to need more work. The same accounts for the definition of *the spiritual dimension*.

While foregrounding practice theory from the outset, direct references to practice theoretical contributions are scarce. Yet there is no critical assessment of its possible consequences for the lived religion paradigm to conjoin it to the rather broad and ununified field of practice theories. For example, two unresolved questions remain: 1)

What distinguishes practice from any type of action? 2) Are lived religious actions necessarily practices intertwined with social bounding?

Ammerman's attempt to define the various contexts that may frame lived religious practices should be applauded. The contexts presented are naturally ideal types, but as such they may function to outline the setting in which we observe and analyse lived religion. However, it is difficult to distinguish some of the context types clearly from each other, and it would therefore have been very valuable if the types had been applied more consistently in Part II.

The fifth type – the post-colonial context – outlines a perspective departing from a Western-centric preoccupation of lived religion. This endeavour is demonstrated in Part II through the expansive incorporation of examples that represent a geographically and religiously broad layer of experiences, as well as a focus on issues of *difference* and *boundaries* as a refrain in all the part's seven chapters.

There are also specific mentions of lived religious heritage from feminist and postcolonial theory. A critique of this otherwise noble objective is that the definition of power is incomplete from a sociological perspective. In sociology it is common to understand power as a given in human relations. This book's inherently postcolonial criticism views power as only an evil to overcome. Accordingly, the role of power in social relations could be

more nuanced.

Ammerman's inclusion of a 'spiritual' dimension with the other six dimensions of practice is intriguing. Yet in Chapter 3 'spiritual' appears synonymous with 'religious' in a manner which presupposes transcendence. As spirituality remains a scholarly contested concept, it seems problematic that Ammerman does not define spirituality and religion more clearly. Given her sparse definition of practice, the consequence is that spirituality is posited as a foundational concept for subsequent features, while it is not itself clearly defined or discussed beforehand.

From a Nordic perspective questions might be asked about some of the categories' analytical strength: for example, which of the proposed context types more sufficiently explains the low attendances in the Danish folk church, entangled as it is with the Danish state and cultural heritage? What could a Nordic (protestant) stance on individual spirituality as something different from institutional religion add to the categories' interchangeable use? Do we recognize the Scandinavian example of replacing institutional religious experience with awe of nature (p. 107)? More importantly, if we do not, how should we consider the other examples, for an evaluation of which we lack the same contextually embedded access?

We hope the field of lived religion scholars will continue Ammerman's quest for a coherent lived religious framework to enhance 1) explorations of the intertwinement

between spiritual and general aspects of practice to investigate both these categories with more nuance and 2) discussions on the plausibility of defining possible contexts of religion in societies and cultures. This requires lived religion scholars to seek to include a wide range of methodological, geographical, and religiously oriented nuances in conversation with the perspectives it seeks to represent to take the step fully out of its North American situatedness.

**Laura Bjørg Serup Petersen**  
Aarhus University

**Anne Agersnap**  
Aarhus University

LAURA BJØRG SERUP PETERSEN is a PhD candidate in Practical Theology at the Department of Theology, Aarhus University, Denmark. Email: lbsp@cas.au.dk

ANNE AGERSNAP has a PhD in the Study of Religion and is currently a research assistant at the Center for Grundtvig Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. Email: anag@cas.au.dk

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