

**Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (eds):** *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2012, 404pp.

This edited volume of eighteen chapters contributes to the critical process of seeking and justifying new approaches to and conceptualisations of the more or less 'ordinary' religious behaviour, action, and experience which happen mostly outside religious institutions, but often also in complex and dynamic relationship with tradition. It offers a case-study based approach to the current lively discussion of how to distinguish the two traditional underlying categories of religious studies – 'world religion' and 'folk religion'. These categories have long been built into our discipline's teaching curricula and methodological approaches. The category of 'world religions' has been especially widely debated since Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (2005). In their introduction the editors, Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk, briefly note the complexities and controversies which various categories of religion, and notably 'folk' and 'official' religion, have brought into the history of research. One obvious problem with these categories is that 'folk religion' has often been regarded as 'only' a popular oral version of some 'official' 'world religion'.

Moreover, such categories as 'folk', 'popular', 'world', and 'official' religion have also taken on their own life outside academia as

powerful cultural and political tools in the hands of both the secular and religious authorities. The question of how to name the kind of religion we study is therefore far from innocent; nor is it simply a matter of taste. Although there may well be no single good solution to the problem of avoiding this minefield, serious attempts to correct it have been proposed. A valuable overview of this discussion can be read in Robert Orsi's preface to the third edition of his book *The Madonna of 115th Street* (2010).

Religious studies is an interdisciplinary field of research, not a discipline with strict boundaries, and we can identify slightly different solutions to the dilemma of how to approach what was previously called folk or popular religion, especially as it exists in contemporary societies. These approaches overlap in many ways, but they may also have some distinctive features. They often share an inductive and largely ethnographic approach to particular cases and instances falling within a scholar's expertise – which this volume does too. These studies often produce nuanced micro-level and almost emic descriptions of the different ways in which what was previously often called 'folk religion' still flourishes (with important continuities and changes) in various places in the globalising modern world. The level of theoretical clarity and elaboration naturally varies between different scholarly enterprises, and this is the case with this volume. Many scholars also differ in

how they connect their topics with wider cultural and social dynamics.

There are two influential conceptualisations which attempt to capture something important associated with this phenomenon today. They are 'lived religion' – stemming very much from the history and sociology of religion – and 'vernacular religion', the frame chosen by this book – which owes more to folklore studies. The book's editors do not explicitly discuss the relationships and overlaps between the two, but I provide this framing as a simple mapping device for students in our field. I also hope it can help position some of the features of *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life*.

For some years sociologists of religion have used the term 'lived religion' widely when their concern is to discern the contours of the religious action and expression occurring either outside or inside religious institutions, but which is not confined to the institutional and/or dogmatic setting. The emphasis is often on everyday religious or spiritual practices. The North American sociologists of religion Meredith McGuire and Nancy Ammerman and the historian and religious studies scholar Robert Orsi are the oft-cited key figures in this approach. Lived religion is very much motivated by interest in the ethnographic approach and the qualitative methods of the sociology of religion, because quantitative methods leave many gaps and intriguing micro-dynamics (of religious change) for future research.

The emphasis of lived religion often prioritises religious practice over belief: McGuire's background theory is Bourdieu's theory of praxis, for example. One aim of the lived religion approach is to critique the opposition between official/unofficial (or popular) religion which has often guided the sociology of religion, but which is now increasingly considered as value-laden and potentially misleading.

Penny Edgell, another North American sociologist of religion, describes lived religion in her 2012 article 'A Cultural Sociology of Religion' as 'a practical, everyday activity oriented toward interacting with superhuman others [...] drawing on sacred sources of power [...], generating experiences of transcendence and meaning [...], or some combination of these goals' (p. 253). She positions lived religion as one of three important *foci* within today's sociology of religion's attempt to understand religious diversity and change in the modern world. The others are the institutional fields shaping belief and practice and their religious cultural tools and symbolic boundaries. Edgell's division shows that 'lived religion' is a wide research area and approach rather than a theory, and this also applies to 'vernacular religion'.

The term 'vernacular religion' was coined by the North American folklore scholar Leonardo Primiano in 1995. He advises that we need to study any religious expression without value judgements or comparisons which suggest it is less

important than other religious forms or versions. Vernacular religion, he suggests, is religion as it is lived – as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practise it. This definition is the starting point of *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life*. The vernacular religion approach has been increasingly adopted and used in British religious studies today, for example, with Marion Bowman and Graham Harvey among its important proponents. Some scholars who take the material religion approach also favour vernacular religion as their overall guiding concept (e.g. Amy Whitehead).

The Finnish folklore scholar Anna-Leena Siikala has adopted ‘vernacular religion’ and translated it in her *Itämerensuomalaisten mytologia* (2012) (Mythology of the Baltic-Finns) as ‘*rahvaanuskonto*’. (‘Vernacular’ and ‘*rahvas*’ refer to the common language into which the Bible was translated from Latin after the Reformation.) Siikala considers the older category of ‘folk religion’ as, on the one hand, too connected to the Christian traditions of the European peasantry and, on the other, too broad a definition for today’s scholarship, because it does not do justice to social and class differences. ‘Popular religion’, in her opinion, refers mostly to popular versions of institutional religion. She identifies the background of ‘vernacular religion’ as sociolinguistics, which, she suggests, allows for multidisciplinary research. She agrees with Primiano that it is insufficient to approach religion only at the level

of the individual, and that the social background with its various institutions needs to be given serious consideration. Earlier, although perhaps more impressionistically, the professor of comparative religion Juha Pentikäinen proposed that we should distinguish between religion with a capital or small ‘r’. The latter, he suggested, was akin to one’s mother tongue, that is, the religion into which one was born. This echoes the distinction between ‘big’ and ‘small’ tradition. Vernacular religion is not, however, restricted only to such innate religion. In choosing this notion scholars emphasise that the ‘vernacular’ does not hide important but often neglected social, ethnic, or other differences, and thus takes seriously the issues of identity and representation. This is an important emphasis, and religious studies would do well to increase its sensitivity towards intersectionality.

The contributors to *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life* come from such disciplinary backgrounds as ethnology, ethnography, cultural anthropology, communication studies, literature, religious studies, and folklore studies – the latter representing the majority. This places special emphasis and sensitivity on narratives and other oral expressions in their communicative and performative contexts. Although the book acknowledges the importance of culture’s material aspects, the chapters give this somewhat less space. Instead of starting with, testing, or developing a set of theories of religion,

the editors present the volume's chapters as individual discussions of their respective scholarly cases. This serves to make the vernacular approach a very general conceptual umbrella for the chapters, which evince their own theoretical preferences and very diverse materials (archival texts, observations, media materials, etc.). The eighteen chapters and cases present a wide range of topics and materials: household work in pre-modern Russian Karelia (Marja-Liisa Keinänen); a Hungarian healer's identity construction (Judit Kis-Halas); Komi hunting narratives (Art Leepe and Vladimir Lipin); stories of Santiago pilgrims (Tiina Sepp); Hungarian dream narratives (Ágnes Hesz); angels in contemporary Norway confronting the church (Ingvild Gilhus); Argentinian narratives about haunted houses (María Inés Palleiro); acting and animate objects and artefacts and new animism (Graham Harvey) – to name just a few examples. In the last chapter Seppo Knuuttila discusses some epistemological issues in folklore studies, which he summarises as research that has taken as its task the production of different academic theorisations of vernacular theories.

In his epilogue Leonardo Primiano sketches a frame in which he discusses the importance of allowing folklore studies to fertilise religious studies. (In Finnish scholarship this is, of course, nothing new, although in recent years this collaboration has been less visible, and sociological approaches have gained in popularity.) Primiano emphasises that

vernacular religion 'highlights the power of the individual and communities of individuals to create and re-create their own religion' (p. 383) and that although individuals live their lives, they also theorise them. This emphasis on individual religious agency is important and frequently presented with various theoretical underpinnings. Primiano maintains that the most important context in vernacular religion and religious agency seems to be the system of communication and folklore genres. He welcomes performance theory and actor network theory as potentially fruitful ways of approaching the complexities and ambiguities traversing vernacular life and religion.

As many of the volume's authors are experts in language, oral expression, and communication, they are well placed to pay close and nuanced attention to the diversity of genres such as myth, legend, personal experience narrative, etc., as well as their varying communicative functions and contexts. This sophisticated level of distinction between communicative genres and their frequently specific functions is certainly not always found in the lived religion approach. It might, however, afford a valuable perspective to be applied and further developed in the more sociological study of lived religion in complex modern contexts. Nancy Ammerman has suggested that modern society, with its more or less 'private' and 'public' spheres and their increasing overlaps, is especially characterised less

by either/or, but by a frequently very complex co-existence of religion's absence and presence. This also means that religion can be present in many ways and degrees in different contexts of communication which, moreover, further multiply and increase in complexity with the increasing pluralisation of societies, worldviews, and ways of life. Given the modern (urban, multicultural, and media saturated) settings and situations, scholars of lived religion from a sociological perspective might profit by learning from their colleagues trained in folklore of the registers and modalities of communication. Yet sociologists of lived religion might perhaps teach folklore scholars to apply a greater emphasis to (macro-) social dynamics and structures. Alternatively, there might be grounds for an acknowledged division of labour.

In their introduction the editors emphasise that what the very different chapters and cases challenge above all is the idea that there is an homogeneity of belief, even in 'traditional' contexts. It is important that they draw attention to the notion of belief: they thus distance themselves from any simplistic suggestion that we should (or indeed can) research vernacular, or any, religion by focusing solely on either belief or practice. Instead, relevant and dynamic ways of framing and accommodating these two sides of the religious coin are needed. This is important, and it might have been elaborated further. The complex issue of belief, and how it should and can be understood and

approached in relation to practice and identity, has also been taken up again in the contemporary sociology of religion. Furthermore, this suggests interesting possibilities for increased mutual collaboration between scholars of vernacular and lived religion.

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