

Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life

funded by the Templeton Foundation

*Sponsored by the Institute on Culture Religion & World Affairs, Boston University
and the Center on Myth & Ritual in American Life, Emory University*

Nancy Ammerman, Principal Investigator

Boston researchers – Amy Moff Hudec and Roman Williams

Atlanta researchers – Melissa Scardaville and Prof. Tracy Scott

A variety of new developments in the social sciences make this an opportune moment to re-think the relationship between religion and modern society. Research over the last decade has already begun to undermine many of the old assumptions about the secularizing processes that were thought to erode religion's power, and a "new paradigm" has suggested that we de-center the European experience that dominated our thinking.

Three key shifts in social science have prepared the way for this study. First, we have recognized that all institutional boundaries are porous. While it is certainly the case that modern societies are complex, with relatively specialized and distinct spheres of activity, individuals carry frameworks and expectations from one part of life to another. Even the notion of "public" as distinct from "private" life has been widely challenged. No less than other kinds of activity, religious action is not confined to a tightly-bounded religious sphere.

Second, what people carry with them across those boundaries are practices and narratives. The beliefs embodied in those narratives are not tightly argued philosophical systems, but expectations about how spiritual realities intersect with life. Ideas about the nature of God and of the world are most often carried in stories and rituals. By looking for religion in practices and narratives rather than solely in official ideas and institutions, we can gain new perspectives.

Third, renewed attention to religion has made clear just how diverse human spiritual life is, precipitating expanded definitions of what counts as "religious" in the first place. People have, in fact, probably always been religious in many ways that would have made their official religious leaders uncomfortable. Belief and belonging are still very important, but they do not fit a neat list of official doctrines or survey questions.

This project, then, is 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, we hope to begin to trace the patterns of presence and absence.

We are also interested in the *interaction between individual experience and religious organizations*. We want to situate individual stories in their multiple institutional contexts, but we are paying direct attention to the organizational contexts that are the primary religious homes for our 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?

We are also paying attention to the larger culture in which everyday narratives are shaped. While we cannot take in every possible variation in culture, we will gain some purchase on the relative role of the surrounding context by looking at stories produced by people in both Boston and Atlanta.

Within each site, we selected a quota sample 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. In order to best assess the interaction between individual stories and the public narratives of religious communities, we identified 18 research sites, within each selecting five individuals for our project. The remaining 10 subjects were recruited from those who respond to our advertisements for people who consider themselves “not religious and not spiritual.”

After securing permission from subjects, we begin 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.

Interviews and oral diaries have been transcribed, and field notes from the religious sites entered. Using “MaxQDA” we are looking for the patterns in the stories. 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 more nuanced and complicated pictures, we hope to move past trend lines in survey data to offer a beginning for talking about what modern religious lives look like.