

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, we are tracing the patterns of presence and absence.

We are also interested in the *interaction between individual experience and religious organizations*, situating individual stories in their multiple institutional contexts, including the organizations 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 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.

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.

Publications from the Spiritual Narratives in Everyday Life Project

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2013.

This book documents the religious and spiritual narratives that weave in and out of daily lived experience. It is a phenomenological account of contemporary religion that goes well beyond "belief and belonging" without ignoring the impact of religious traditions and institutions. It examines the dynamics between sacred and secular without positing the dominance or inevitability of either. The book is based on the innovative array of methods used in the Spiritual Narratives project which evoked stories that allow a window on the presence and absence of religion and spirituality in ordinary lives and in ordinary physical and social spaces. These stories come from a diverse array of ninety-five contemporary Americans – both conservative and liberal Protestants, African American Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Wiccans, and people who claim no religious or spiritual proclivities -- across a range that stretches from committed religious believers to those who are spiritually neutral. The book includes the voices of the unaffiliated and disaffiliated, as well as moderately- and highly-active church and synagogue attenders. The participants were neither spiritual virtuosi nor metaphysical seekers (although there are a few of each), but simply a representative slice of the American religious (and non-religious) landscape. The book examines how these people talk about what spirituality is, how some seek and find experiences they deem spiritual, how everyday life is described by those who do not consider themselves either spiritual or religious, and whether and how religious traditions and institutions are part of spiritual lives. It documents both everyday practices and extraordinary ritual and spiritual experiences. The book identifies a taxonomy of definitions of spirituality, as they emerged in the stories themselves, and analyzes how those spiritual elements appear in stories about home, work, public life, experiences of health and illness, and encounters with nature. In the end, this account provides both a fuller picture of 21st-century American religion and important hints about how we might continue our sociological explorations in the future.

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" forthcoming in *Sociology of Religion*

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. (under review) "Spiritual but not Religious?: Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion"

Much theorizing about late modern religion posits a decline of traditional religious organizations, matched by a rise in individualized "spiritualities." This article uses in-depth ethnographic data from a broad-based U.S. sample to argue that assuming a zero-sum distinction (with its implied evolutionary movement) fails to capture the empirical reality of American religion. Understanding religion requires understanding spirituality. An inductive discursive analysis reveals three primary cultural meanings attached to understandings of spirituality -- a Theistic Package that ties spirituality to the divine, an Extra-Theistic Package that locates spirituality in various naturalistic forms of transcendence, and an Ethical Spirituality that focuses on everyday compassion. The relationship between each package of definitions and religious participation is explored, and these U.S. findings are placed in comparison to a recent Italian survey that found similar clusters of meaning. Spirituality is, then, neither a single social phenomenon nor entirely distinct from religion. Sociological analyses of religion - especially as they move beyond the U.S. and European world -- require a breadth of definition and measurement that encompasses that reality.