

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 159: APRIL 10, 2019



NANCY AMMERMAN is professor of sociology of religion in the sociology department of the College of Arts and Sciences and in the School of Theology at Boston University. She spoke with Boisi Center graduate research assistant Mary Elliot, Boisi Center interim assistant to the director Jack Nuelle, and Boisi Center director Mark Massa, S.J., following her April 10, 2019 luncheon colloquium. The resulting interview touches on “lived religion” as an academic field, the benefits and dangers of a “cafeteria” approach to religious practice, and the perennial “spiritual, not religious” designation. The following conversation has been edited for clarity, content, and length.

MASSA: Would you say that lived religion, which, 25 years ago, was a new field, has its appropriate place now in the study of religion in America? Is lived religion now mainstream in the methodology?

AMMERMAN: I think certainly, in history and religious studies, lived religion has really established itself. In the social sciences – anthropology, in some sense, always did lived religion. In sociology, it’s less central, but it certainly has a well-established place in the discipline.

We’ve been doing the study of lived religion for about a generation now. Mostly, it originally surfaced as a way of thinking about religion which argued that we should pay attention not just to what people believe but what they do; and, that we should pay attention to ordinary people and not just to the elites. For historians, this means one should read diaries and not just the encyclicals. It set up dichotomies and oppositions. It basically said lived religion is about studying ordinary people in everyday life and what they do. It’s not about organized religion and elites and beliefs and so forth.

What I’m trying to do at this point is to offer a broader theoretical foundation on which to think about lived religion, building out of the study of social practice. Yes, it is about what people do. What they do includes how they talk about what they do – the beliefs side of things.



But it is also about not only what they do on Monday morning but also what they do on Sunday – that lived religious practice is something that can be a kind of theoretical lens for understanding a whole variety of the spectrum of religious phenomena.

MASSA: So lived religion is not opposed to institutional religion?

AMMERMAN: No.

MASSA: It can be an integrated part?

AMMERMAN: Absolutely. We can still talk about institutions as institutions. Institutions have their own dynamics. Similarly, culture has its own set of dynamics. But if we’re talking about the collective practice of people, then that has its own dynamics too.

ELLIOT: I was particularly struck by your outline of religious experience as very attentive to these different sorts of patterns of experience: the aesthetic, the ethical, the transcendent. It’s very nu-

anced. I would like you to explain a little bit more about how, within the discipline, that gets passed down to researchers. Are researchers who are doing this work very attentive to that complexity?

AMMERMAN: That’s my next book. I’m actually working on two prongs about passing this down to researchers. One is a theoretical article that I’m hoping will hit a publication like the *American Journal of Sociology* or one of the major disciplinary journals, because I’m not just concerned about the specialists in the sociology of religion, but about the larger field. I want to say: there’s religious practice out there that you ought to be paying attention to that isn’t just in the purview of people who study religion. So take somebody who’s studying, for instance, nationalism and looking at the way religious symbols get drawn into nationalist rituals. You can think about gathering around a flag and singing songs and telling stories – that can be studied as a lived religious practice.

A sociologist who looks at it that way is going to see things they wouldn't see if they were just looking at the ideas and the historical lineage of those ideas and the power of the leader. So I want people at that level to be paying attention.

The second prong is going to be a book that's really oriented to students and to practitioners, to think about how one pays attention to the religious world around them. What are the many things that one should be looking at when one looks at the religious world around them?

NUELLE: In your presentation, you mentioned how you are wary of folks who claim to adhere to some sort of spiritual practice but don't, in actuality, have any sort of spiritual content to that practice. Is there a better kind of lived religion than other kinds? Is that too normative a question?

AMMERMAN: I think there is a lot that comes under the banner of spirituality in America, and even western culture at this point, that has some serious ethical limitations. It has ethical limitations in part because it doesn't have a community foundation, so there's nobody to say, wait a minute, you know, what are the implications of doing what you're doing?

But I think one of the most profound critiques of this kind of individual "I'm-developing-myself" spirituality is how it flows from and reinforces a basic neoliberal culture – that everything is about choice and consumption. I can choose however I want to be spiritual. If I can afford it, I'll go off to a retreat center. I can buy the latest yoga wear. I'll go buy the latest book. It's what I can afford and what I can choose. And it has absolutely no implications for my moral formation, my commitments, my obligations to other people in the community.

NUELLE: I've been trying to find a way to articulate that sentiment for a long time – that this phenomenon of amorphous spirituality follows the trends of the market in a really scary way. As a follow-up, do you think that the same kind of thing is at play for folks who pick and choose elements from various traditions? That seems to track with a certain, if fragmented, institutional alignment?

AMMERMAN: I think people can do the so-called "bricolage" or "cafeteria" approach in more and less responsible ways. There is, for many people, a sort of dilettante phenomenon of "I'll try a

“Religion isn't just emotion. Religion is something that employs the whole range of emotions.”

little of this and a little of that—whatever makes me feel good.” But there are also other people who are really seriously trying to pursue a way of being a good person in the world, both for their own sake and for the sake of the world. They are looking for the practices that will help sustain them in that pursuit. Even if those practices come from a meditation tradition on the one hand and a eucharistic adoration tradition on the other hand, they also may have some kind of grounding in a larger vision and a commitment to something beyond the self.

MASSA: So what you're proposing then is something that's diametrically opposed to Finke and Stark's idea of low tension and high tension religions – that the more that institutional religion is open to bricolage the more it is a good thing. As opposed to offering a high-tension bar to culture – or am I misunderstanding?

AMMERMAN: I don't subscribe to the Finke and Stark notion that you need to have a high degree of doctrinal or ideological conformity.

MASSA: Right. It depends on how you define high tension.

AMMERMAN: I think tension can be a good thing if it calls one's choices and self into question from time to time. If it gives some sort of way in which one can say, “no, I can't just do whatever I want to do,” or, “no, you can't just be a consumer,” or, “no, you can't just pay people terrible wages.” That's tension too, just as much as it is to say, “no, you can't drink or smoke.”

ELLIOT: I wanted to ask about the affective or the emotional aspect of some practices. Take megachurches, for instance, and how they might induce excitement, while other worship practices might induce more of an orientation towards social justice and others might induce peace or emphasize a sort of self-quiet. So, how does that play into this? And again, going back to Jack's question, is there any kind of normative evaluation as to how some affective practice might set up a community for a later, unintended, political role.

AMMERMAN: I think that's a really interesting question. I'm not sure I have an answer to how to think about what the typical connections between emotions and kinds of responses to that emotion. This is partly because people haven't paid attention to the emotional dimension of religious practice. We don't have much research to go on.

What I've simply done at this point is to say, look, there's this large range of kinds of emotion. There's one book on the sociology of religious emotion that I know of, by Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

MASSA: And there's Amanda Porterfield's book on Puritan emotion, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

AMMERMAN: Right. I think the most important point that Riis and Woodhead talk about is that there's no such thing as one religious emotion. Religion isn't just emotion. Religion is something that employs the whole range of emotions. There can be religious anger and religious fear and religious awe and the whole range. As I said, I don't think we have the research to be able to say that people who are swept up in a certain kind of excitement are more likely to do X, Y, or Z. One can think about the excitement at a political rally that may channel people in a whole variety of directions. I think different narratives about what God does in the world carry with them different emotional content. So narratives that say God is a transactional god who sent Jesus

to sacrifice in our place, to pay the price for our sins, presumes a set of emotions around guilt and gratitude. Either side of the spectrum— the side of guilt or the side of gratitude – could evoke different kinds of responses.

ELLIOT: You have worked in two disciplines, sociology and religious studies, across your career. I'm sure that's been its own adventure. How have you reconciled tensions between those fields, and also have they worked well together? How do you see the sociology of religion relating to psychology? A lot of psychologists want to measure emotions – they want to isolate variables and call an emotional reaction something like gratitude or awe. What could sociology or religious studies say to the importance of content?

AMMERMAN: Well, content and context. In some sense, religious studies tends to focus on the content – what are the beliefs, what are the rituals, the symbols, etc. It tends to see those things as, in effect, having their own agency – symbols can be related to each other as symbols and can act on each other as symbols.

As a sociologist, I always want to say, “yes, but, where are the people?” I tend not to grant agency to symbols, as a sociologist. While I've operated across disciplines and into theology as well, my fundamental understanding of myself is as a sociologist. I'm always looking for the context and the way in which people are collectively creating and defining and acting within social structures and cultural assumptions.

But I'm really interested in what the psychologists – and particularly cognitive science researchers – are telling us about how our brains work and how those patterns, those images in our brains, act as triggering mechanisms for how we interact with the world, and vice versa – how the situations we're in help to form the patterns in our brains that then act back on us in subsequent situations.

[END]



The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860
fax 617-552-1863
boisi.center@bc.edu

Visit bc.edu/boisi-resources for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

boisicenter

@boisi_center

boisi_center

boisicenter