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Source: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Jun., 2003), pp. 169-174

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of Society for the Scientific Study of Religion

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387834>

Accessed: 27/05/2009 16:07

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# Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002

ROBERT A. ORSI

The question that frames (or haunts) this evening's discussion is whether the work of those of us who study religious practice or "lived religion" is irrelevant for understanding religion in broader social and political contexts than the intimate, local, and closely-grained ones that generally occupy us—or to put this even more harshly: Is it irrelevant for understanding and responding to urgent global, political situations of great consequence?

This issue was raised for me with special force in a conversation earlier this year with an old friend and colleague about the escalating violence in Israel. The situation there was declining into horror. The paper that morning was filled with images of a young Palestinian suicide bomber and the incongruity between her fresh and smiling face and the terrible violence of her action shocked and saddened us. My friend is a distinguished political scientist with a deep personal and professional concern for the politics and history of the Middle East; both of us hoped for a just peace in Israel. The immediate question was how to understand what led a young woman to become a martyr (as some said) or a murderer (according to others). How do we—"we" here being scholars of culture generally, religion in particular, in North American universities—talk about such a thing? The terrible events of September 11, 2001, had given particular urgency to the questions.

References to something called "Islam," I said to my friend, explained nothing, and the political violence in the region (however one interpreted it) was a necessary but not sufficient cause of suicide bombings. It seemed to me simply from reading accounts in the papers that what immediately mattered in the lives of suicide bombers was not commitment to an unspecific "Islam" but the circles of friends and kin among whom they lived, the memories they held (their own or those they borrowed or inherited from others), their sense of their place in their immediate world (meaning work and school, friends and clubs), the stories they were told by relatives they loved, bonds of commitment and loyalty to particular friends and kin. "Islam" mattered too, of course, not as a set of authoritative texts or doctrines, but rather as it was discussed and practiced, inflected and constituted within these bonds of friendship, family, and memory, within the worlds of work and school—"Islam" as it was imagined and reimagined in relation to all the other things that people imagine, a thoroughly local Islam, immersed in and responsive to local condition and circumstances.

My friend replied that while he understood why I would say this, he wanted to know—and here he startled me—what the "cash value" of my ideas was; given the exigencies of the global situation and the pressing need for response, what good was my approach to religion? Would it help U.S. policymakers? Would it contribute to peace initiatives? Would it assist the nation to take steps to prevent another 9/11? Obviously, my friend thought the answer to these questions was *no*. My way of thinking about religion did *not* contribute to these imperatives: too grounded in

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the local, too focused on intimate contexts, it did not lead to knowledge that could be generalized. My approach to the world of the suicide bomber might provide information about a handful of people and their fears, their idiosyncratic versions of Islam, their hopes for heaven, but nothing of broader usefulness. Better to understand the meaning and appeal of martyrdom, or the doctrine of heaven, or the new theologies emerging in seminaries and refugee camps around the Middle East than to talk about connections among families, friends, memories, and religious practice.

I was being told that the way of thinking about religion that I found most empirically and critically sound disenabled me from contributing to vital public conversations or to the welfare of the nation. The last year has been a time when various aspects of American culture have been painted into corners by the exigencies of unexpected political, social, and economic events, nationally and internationally, and when my friend was done with his challenge it looked as if I had painted myself (or been painted) into one too. So this is where I start.

The political corner my friend's comment had painted me into—What is the cash value or real-world payoff of this way of thinking about religion?—is a familiar one. The discipline of religious studies has long struggled with the question of its social relevance. Proponents of the academic study of religion claimed a place in the new environment of American higher education at the turn of the 20th century by asserting that the study of "religion"—meaning a denominationally neutral version of Christianity recast as an ethical system—was good and even necessary for American democracy. Outside the walls of the academy, the winds of religious "madness" howled (in the view of those inside)—fire-baptized people, ghost dancers, frenzied preachers and gullible masses, Mormons and Roman Catholics. "Religion" as it took shape in the academy was explicitly imagined in relation to these others and as a prophylactic against them.

Fear was central to the academic installation of religious studies. Religious difference, moreover, overlapped with ethnic and racial otherness and this combination produced the pervasive and characteristically American idea that dangers to the republic were germinating in the religious practices of dark-skinned or alien peoples congregated in areas beyond the oversight of the middle class, an apprehension that clearly still troubles the Attorney General. Religious paranoia has been as deep in the American grain as political paranoia, deeper even because it came first, and religious paranoia always shadows times of political fear. Early American scholars of religion, searching diligently for scientific laws of religious behavior, explicitly committed themselves to the project of social order. "I have undertaken not simply to discriminate spurious and genuine revivals," sociologist of religion Frederick Davenport told his readers in 1905, "but to show that in genuine revivals there are primitive traits which need elimination or modification in the interest of religious and social progress." "Primitive" is an important word here: one way that Davenport and other scholars of religion contributed to social order was by constructing and authorizing normative hierarchies of religious practice and imagination going from "primitive" to modern and mandating movement up the developmental scale as a prerequisite for modern life. (Such culturally obtuse schemas attained substantial psychological authority later in the century in models of religious faith development.) Practitioners of the emerging discipline of religious studies were among the most assiduous guardians of the boundary between the modern and the premodern. This normatizing religious language had dreadful social consequences when it converged with broader racist discourse. It contributed to destructive federal policies toward Native Americans, for example, and northerners who wanted to temporize about the grim realities of lynching used African-American popular religious culture—defined by them in racist terms—as a mitigating explanation.

On the international level the emerging academic discourses about religion were implicated in the politics of colonialism. Historian David Chidester has described how ideas about "religion" were mobilized in the conquest of South Africa: tribes in possession of coveted lands and resources were said to be without "religion," which meant without culture or morals, thus marking them as not fully human, which not only legitimized but virtually mandated domination. Then under British rule these peoples were nostalgically said to have possessed a primitive religiosity that

was interpreted and preserved by Westerners. The reconstructed religions of dominated peoples became objects of Western desire. At the World Parliament of Religions, an authoritative and hypostasized “Christianity”—identified by its superior moral teachings—was compared with other essentialized religious entities—“Islam,” “Buddhism,” and so on—both to create a class of world religions identified by enlightenment characteristics and to set Christianity up as the highest realization of global religious culture. The Columbian Exposition performed this distinction spatially by putting the world religions into massive buildings and the others on the midway and while representatives of the former traded pieties, a carnival atmosphere took hold of the latter space, where religions marked as *other* were depicted in mock demonstrations of cannibalism and human sacrifice. Until very recently, and perhaps even now, those of us who study practice or lived religion were seen as working the midway.

My response to my friend’s challenge necessarily begins in this history. Fear helped determine the contours of early religious scholarship and to define its social position and so as scholars of religion we have to be extraordinarily careful when fear summons us again into the public square, especially so when we are invited to stand in the juncture of fear and power, and even when we do not share the fears or condone the exercise of power. Fear was motivating my friend’s question: fear of terrorists, fear of Islam, fear of religious imaginings erupting on that closely watched border between modernity and premodernity, fear of chaos and violence. I don’t mean to suggest here that there are not things to fear, either now or in the past. I share Davenport’s concern that certain habits of mind and heart inimical to democratic life may be nurtured in religious settings. I agree with him that religious idioms may be dangerous and destructive to persons and to societies. I share my friend’s anxieties about global terrorism. It may seem obvious to say this after September 11, 2001, but then again religious violence was not very much at the center of our thinking before then, nor am I sure how deep our understanding of religious violence now will reach. The notion that other people’s religions are dangerous is not new to religious studies. I also fully acknowledge—my friend asked me this in the course of our conversation—that I want to live in a tolerant and open society. But I do not want to mistake my fears or my desires for my scholarship.

Once again an *other*, defined in both religious and political terms, has taken shape as a threat on the borders of our world and once again scholars of religion are called on to delineate the contours of the danger and to help identify the prerequisites of safety. There was tremendous pressure after 9/11 to define a normative “Islam” in contradistinction from whatever it was that motivated the men who flew their planes into the towers who, we were told (by the President of the United States among others), did not represent “real” Islam. I acknowledge that this insistence was motivated by the most admirable and necessary concern not to vilify an entire religious world and to protect Muslim fellow-citizens. But let it also be said that this was an extraordinary act of religious and political hubris. In talk of “real Islam” I heard the voice of the Parliament of Religions resonating within contemporary American global power assuring us that real Islam conformed to the dictates of Western modernity. There was a good Islam—which we recognized as like ourselves—and a bad distorted something else that existed in Middle Eastern lands but had nothing to do with Islam and was our enemy, and once so designated, we lost any interest in this other thing except to bring it within the range of our weapons. It was said that the Qu’ran did not endorse violence; later others insisted that the Qu’ran indeed endorsed violence—in either case, however, the assumption was that the text itself, apart from experience and interpretation, could tell us something. All this talk about “Islam” proceeding at such remove from history and practice served only to obscure (and so also to protect Americans from) a clear view of lived experience in Islamic countries, from the complexity of political and religious realities there, and most of all from any understanding of the role of the United States (or, more broadly, the Cold War) in that region. It is precisely against this that a lived religion approach sets itself.

Practice approaches must always be informed by a clear and critical understanding of the political, social, and intellectual history of the discipline of religious studies so that those of us who

do this kind of work can understand what we are setting ourselves against, what we are contending with in the nomenclature and theoretical apparatuses of the discipline, and what projects we are resisting. We are just now beginning to develop this historical sensibility. Until very recently the past of religious studies appeared weirdly inchoate and confused. The familiar insistence that religious studies was not a discipline obviated the need for any historical discussion. We are finally developing a historical self-consciousness, and it is with this history that we have to begin thinking about questions of relevance—it is on this critical ground that we have to approach the question of who we are in relation to the current global situation.

Within this historical frame I can answer my friend more directly. The study of lived religion situates all religious creativity within culture and approaches all religion as lived experience, theology no less than lighting a candle for a troubled loved one, spirituality as well as other, less culturally sanctioned forms of religious expression. Rethinking religion as a form of cultural work, the study of lived religion directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas—all as media of making and unmaking worlds. The key questions concern what people *do* with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds. There is no religion apart from this, no religion that people have not taken up in their hands. Religion approached this way is situated amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world, and on those occasions when the religious imagination (which itself is constituted both by culture and by personal experience and inheritance) takes hold of the world (as the world is said to be) in prayer, ritual, and theology, it is also itself taken hold of by the world. The meanings of a single religious sign or practice may be multiple and inconsistent, and may change as a particular sign is used to work on the world and the self. A particular practice in fact may be caught in the tension between conscious and unconscious motivations and desire, or between now and then, here and there, hopes and memories. Religion is always religion-in-action, religion-in-relationships between people, between the ways the world is and the way people imagine or want it to be. The interpretive challenge of the study of lived religion is to develop the practice of disciplined attention to people's signs and practices as they describe, understand, and use them, in the circumstances of their experiences, and to the structures and conditions within which these signs and practices emerge. It includes the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many and varied stories they tell of themselves. The study of lived religion is not about practice rather than ideas, but about ideas, gestures, imaginings, all as media of engagement with the world. Lived religion cannot be separated from other practices of everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things, or from other cultural structures and discourses (legal, political, medical, and so on). Nor can sacred spaces be understood in isolation from the places where these things are done—workplaces, hospitals, law courts, homes, and streets—from the media used to do them, or from the relationships constructed around them.

Power is fundamental to the very meaning of practice generally and of religious practices in particular, not only the power of some over others, but also the power that circulates through as it sustains and vivifies cultural forms—aesthetics, for example, ethics, kinesics, and architecture. These are the taken-for-granted aspects of a culture, given the sanction of the natural, the inherently good, the commonsensical, or of the sacred. It is this power that makes us know in our bodies that certain ways of being are the only appropriate ones for the world, as we are taught the world is. Religion is one of the more effective media by which social power is realized in bodies, just as religion shapes, orients, and limits the imagination, and it is pointless to study religion without reference to power (to both kinds of power), pointless and irresponsible.

Is this way of looking at religion relevant to the world we live in? A lived religion approach identifies what is urgent and pressing in a religious culture—what doctrines, rituals, or signs

have taken on special and pointed immediacy—and it knows this because these are the doctrines, rituals, or signs that men and women have picked up in their hands and are using to engage their immediate world, taking us well beyond empty claims about what a religious culture “means” or what “religious” men and women “believe” or have been taught. The religious person is the one acting on his or her world in the inherited, improvised, found, constructed idioms of his or her religious culture. The study of lived religion focuses most intensely on places where people are wounded or broken, amid disruptions in relationships, because it is in these broken places that religious media become most exigent. It is in such hot cultural moments—at the edges of life, in times of social upheaval, confusion, or transition, when old orders give way and what is ahead remains unclear—that we see what matters most in a religious world.

Brokenness is not meant here as a psychological or intimate reality imagined apart from social, political, geopolitical, geographical circumstances. Implicit in my friend’s criticism or challenge was the idea that real-world significance is public and political whereas lived religion is preoccupied with the intimate (and therefore politically irrelevant) domains of family, relationships, imagination, and so on. This familiar way of mapping the social world—the sharp division between public/private, political/domestic—was fundamental to the emergence of modern scholarship; the map is gendered, moreover—on this grid, the experience of women and children is isolated from the public and accorded less significance. (Maybe this is why young or female religious actors in the public sphere are most confounding; the normative theoretical apparatus of the discipline *really* does not know what to make of them.) The study of lived religion undermines this well-maintained boundary between private/public: it is at the intersection of domains once neatly segregated by modern scholarship that religious idioms take on their urgency and as they do the boundaries dissolve. This liberates us to develop more complex theories of people’s motivations and cultural innovations that draw simultaneously on social, psychological, and religious sources. It makes us cognizant not only of the realities of contradiction and unpredictability in people’s understandings and actions, but of the deep well-springs of such contradictions and uncertainties. The study of lived religion disabuses us of any lingering commitment to order or coherence and instead attunes us to tragedy, sorrow, and grief. It tracks the explosive consequences for people, families, and political worlds at the juncture of intimate experience with political and social realities.

Prayer is a good example of a religious practice that is misidentified as private and so therefore assumed not to have a history or a politics. But people at prayer are intimately engaged and implicated in their social worlds—prayer is a switching point between the social world and the imagination. In circumstances of great urgency, distress, anxiety, and pain, the taken-for-granted quality of reality is dissolved and humans encounter the fictive nature of what they call real, in the sense that they apprehend the radical contingency of their worlds. This provokes in turn new uses of religious ritual, story, and metaphor, and new configurations of the real. Prayer is often the language spoken in these ruptures and to these ruptures.

Fundamental to the study of lived religion is the idea that all cultural idioms are intersubjective, including and especially religious ones. Men, women, and children—children too, although children are generally left out of religious studies except in relation to adult religiosity—*together* make religious worlds, in relationship to sacred beings and with each other. Intersubjectivity is not only a local or intimate matter either: such relational ties structure religious practice and experience in a global context too. Immigrants and migrants establish connections between heaven and earth that stretch as well between one environment and others and among friends, families, teachers, and others around the globe, in their new environments and in the ones they left. At Voodoo rituals in Brooklyn, as Karen McCarthy Brown has described them, the past and the present, Haiti and New York, absent and present kin, and the spirits are all in play, all engaged with each other.

The study of lived religion is preoccupied with intersubjectivity in two ways or on two levels. First, it recognizes the intersubjective nature of individual, social, cultural, and religious identities

and indeed of reality itself—hence the importance of understanding the bonds of love and hate within which religious actors, including those drawn to violence, live. Second, it emphasizes the intersubjective nature of research on religion. Our lives and stories are not simply implicated in our work; they are among the media through which we encounter and engage the religious worlds of others. Research is a relationship, to paraphrase Sartre. This is no less so for historians of lived religion than for ethnographers. As Richard Fox says in his book on the late 19th-century Beecher-Tilton scandal, “we historians have not done enough to let our subjects speak in their own voices,” in response to which he proposes a historiography of attentive “listening” in the archive “to hear what the tellers are saying about their selves, their relationships, their culture.” The result is a hermeneutical paradox: others (in the past or in different cultures) become at once both closer and more distinct in their separateness.

The challenge of a lived religion approach is to balance carefully and self-reflectively on the border between familiarity and difference, strangeness and recognizability, whether in relation to people in the past or in another cultural world.

This way of approaching religious worlds eliminates the comfort of academic distance and undermines the confidence and authority of the claims “we are not them” and “they are not us.” We may not condone or celebrate the religious practices of others but we cannot dismiss them as inhuman, so alien from us that they cannot be understood or approached, only contained or obliterated (which is what the language of good/bad religion—good Islam/bad Islam—accomplishes, the obliteration of the other by desire, fear, or need). The study of lived religion, on the other hand, brings the other into fuller focus, within the circumstances of her or his history, relationships, experiences—this is the existential and the moral grounds of its hermeneutics. (I have been pleased to note recently the tension in the iconic representations of alleged Muslim terrorists on the one hand—the strangely indistinguishable close-ups of bearded young men staring fixedly into the camera—on the other hand, the pictures of their wives, parents, neighbors, and children crowding into courthouses to support and defend them. The latter images offset the alien quality of the former.)

It is chastening and liberating to stand in an attitude of disciplined openness and attentiveness before a religious practice or idea of another era or culture on which we do not impose our wishes, dreams, desires, or fears. This is the discipline of radical empiricism. Among other things, the discipline of the study of lived religion holds the possibility of disentangling us from our normative agendas and defamiliarizing us in relation to our own cultures. The lived religion or radical empirical approach is both a way of studying religion and a critique of the discipline of religious studies at the same time. Practice approaches surface embedded norms in the discipline, unacknowledged boundaries, deeply encoded fears and values—political, religious, social—and challenge them, and they force us to confront in a direct way the implications of the discipline’s history for its contemporary work.

So the issue of the relevance or irrelevance of the study of lived religion is complicated. I hope I have made it clear that radical empirical studies of religion are quite relevant to today’s world although perhaps not in ways that are wanted right now. The message of the discipline’s history, with which I began my response to my friend, is that we need to beware of such calls to the public sphere in any case. The purpose of the study of religion is not to contribute to projects of surveillance or to reassure our fellow citizens; it certainly is to contribute to the work of educating the public about religion, but our engagements with the media and with government agencies are much more complicated than this benign and admirable description suggests and I think we need to be more cautious of them than we sometimes are, especially in times of political panic. The contribution of lived religion is to confound certainties, to unearth hidden agendas, to qualify judgments, to call attention to the desires and fears we bring to other religions, and, above all, to encounter and engage religious practice and imagination within the circumstances of other people’s lives and within the contexts of our own, at all the places where these lives meet, in the archives, in the field, in political crisis, and in contemporary distress.