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A Sacred Consciousness: A Review

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A Sacred Consciousness: A Review

Abstract

This essay reviews Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*.

About the Author

Dr. Doug Anderson specializes in the history of the American West and American religious history. He earned a doctorate in the latter subject and spent a year studying at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.

He is co-author of *Pilgrim Progression: The Protestant Experience in California*, and his articles and book reviews have been published in *Western Historical Quarterly*, *Religion and American Culture*, and *Fides et Historia*, as well as in encyclopedias of the Great Plains and American West.

He has also teamed with other religion scholars on a comprehensive and comparative study of the impact regions have on religion's role in American public life, which resulted in eight geographically based books.

In 2014, Dr. Anderson co-authored a history of Orange City, Iowa, the town where Northwestern College is located. Part of the "Images of America" series by Arcadia Publishing, *Orange City* traces the development of the town from its founding in 1869 through the present.

A Sacred Consciousness: A Review

by Douglas Firth Anderson, Ph.D.

Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 376 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography.

Whether the United States is, ever has been, or should be a Christian nation is, at least in part, a historical question. Whether the United States is a religious or a secular society is, at least in part, a sociological question. In answer to the latter, however, it was religious historian Martin E. Marty who observed that in America, there was and still is a “symbiosis of religious all-pervasiveness and persistent secularity.”¹

Marty made his observation in the early 1980s. Back then, when I was working on my Ph.D., there was a sociology book that captured the attention of many Americans:

Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven M.

Tipton. Bellah and his co-authors interviewed over 200 middle-class Americans to plumb



Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Atlanta, GA. Image from dbking, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-2.0.

¹ Martin E. Marty, “Religion in America since Mid-Century,” in *Religion and America: Spirituality in a Secular Age*, eds. Mary Douglas and Steven M. Tipton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 276.

the depths of national mores—“habits of the heart,” in Alexis de Tocqueville’s phrasing—in relation to private and public life. Their concern was to understand American individualism, something Tocqueville himself identified in the 1830s as an American distinctive. To what extent does “private life” prepare “people to take part in the public world” or encourage them “to find meaning exclusively in the private sphere,” and to what degree does public life fulfill “our



Greenwood Memorial United Methodist Church in Boston, MA. Image from Jameslwoodward, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA-3.0.

private aspirations or [discourage] us so much that we withdraw from involvement in it” (vii-viii)? Individualism, they found, gets in the way of thinking past an American Dream “of being a star, the uniquely successful and admirable one” (285). Most famously amidst their evidence was their discussion of nurse Sheila Larson (a pseudonym) as a representative individual. “I believe in God,” she said. “I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s

Sheilaism. Just my own little voice” (221). Sheilaism and other forms of individualism, concluded the authors, undercut seriously working toward “a society that would really be worth living in” (285).

I was reminded of *Habits of the Heart* when I started reading Nancy Tatom Ammerman’s *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*. Both books are accessible sociological studies. Like Bellah et

al.’s book, Ammerman’s is based on in-depth interviews (95 individuals). Moreover, both books seek to plumb elusive things about contemporary American society.

Ammerman’s book is about everyday religion—the sacred and the spiritual. She writes, “[H]uman beings give order to their world through stories” (7). That rings true. (I say that because it resonates with what I have found as a professional historian and as a life-long Christ-follower. Ammerman, by the way, is a self-described Baptist who is faculty at a United Methodist university.) The book has plenty of statistics, but stories ground the statistics. Ammerman and her team wanted to test purported boundaries between sacred and secular and religious and spiritual. “Finding and understanding every day religion—a religion that includes spirituality—is the goal that drives this book” (4), she says.

To do this, Ammerman and her team sought interviewees in metropolitan Atlanta and Boston. Participants ranged from Roman Catholics to Southern Baptists, African-American Methodists to Jews, Mormons to Neopagans (Wicca), Episcopalians to nonaffiliates. In addition to the one-on-one interviews, the 95 participants were asked to record a daily oral diary for a week. They were also given a disposable camera and asked to photograph what places and settings they deemed important.

What did Ammerman learn from the participants? (To keep this review reader-friendly, I can only summarize some of the study’s results.) Religion and spirituality in everyday life are far from separate and neatly-boundaried things. Those within religious communities see religion (“belief and belonging”) as largely overlapping with traditions of their own “spiritual tribes.” Those who reject religious belief and belonging separate out spirituality as that which remains relevant to their daily lives. It would seem though, according to Ammerman, that being “spiritual

but not religious” is less a description of actual practice than it is “a boundary-maintaining device and source of legitimacy” (51) for those affiliated but no longer religiously engaged and also those “who are very pious and very active in their churches” (50). Self-describing as “spiritual,” in other words, is seen as better than being “religious.” In short, it is hard to find people who are in practice spiritual but not engaged in a religious community.

In “mapping the terrain” (25) of religion in everyday American life through the “sacred stories” of participants in the study, Ammerman and her team identified three overlapping cultural story patterns or discourses. First is the Theistic pattern. For those who employ this, their spiritual



St. Joseph's Day Altar in a home near New Orleans, LA.
Image from Christopher Scafidi, Wikimedia Commons.

landscape is within a religious community. They quite readily talk about God, about religious practices intended to develop spirituality, and about a miraculous dimension beyond the mundane (mystery). Second is the Extra-theistic discourse. For those relying on this approach, transcendent experience rather than God/god(s) is the focus. They are seekers of transcendence in connections to others, in engagement with nature and with beauty, in seeking truth within the self, and in all experiences that engender awe. Third is the Ethical pattern. This discursive

strategy is about living virtuously. Everyday religion, in other words, is about helping others—“Golden Rule religion” (2-3) that seeks to transcend selfishness.

Not surprisingly, the most exclusively Theistic-patterned stories among the participants were from conservative Protestants and Mormons. Other participants told Theistic stories “inflected with Extra-theistic notions of spirituality” (42). So did religiously indifferent participants. Extra-theistic stories were most “expansive” (41) among those who seldom or never attended religious services. Further, consistently woven throughout Theistic and Extra-theistic stories was a thread of Ethical discourse. “The one thing almost everyone agrees on,” Ammerman notes, “. . . is that real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one’s own selfish interests to seek what is right” (45). Yet, God talk was more prevalent among the participants “than sociologists might have thought.” Why? Because, Ammerman concludes, their study included “the whole religious range of the population” and allowed the participants themselves to tell their stories without predefined checklists or “one undifferentiated ‘spiritual’ category with which one could identify” (44).

Not surprisingly, the most consistently spiritually engaged are those who regularly participate in a religious community. Also unsurprising is that prayer and scripture reading are leading spiritual practices in everyday life. Spiritual practices do not end there, though. Wearing particular things, eating special foods, listening to or performing music, and engaging in charity and social action, among other things, were understood by many participants as part of engaged spirituality. Home and family are also important in people’s sacred stories. “Prayers are said as the dog is walked, the goodness of God is celebrated in the warmth of the dishwater, and God’s protection is invoked on the comings and goings of the household” (168). Also, places in the

home are often sacralized, from the house as a whole to a fireplace to a dining room. Religion in the work world, though, is more mixed. Some jobs, such as those focused on serving people, offer more room for “sacred meaning and spiritual action” (196). Others less so. “More often, the everyday experiences of spirituality [at work] are efforts at coping” (196). Yet, workplace relationships often “were shaped by spiritual sensibilities and religious dynamics” (197). Like the work world, the public realm is also a place where sacred stories are scarcer than at home.

Political action was, for the study’s participants, “rarely the subject of overtly religious or spiritual reflection” (249). By contrast, stories of health, illness, and mortality readily reflected religion and spirituality. Particularly



Mormon Temple, built in 1989, in Las Vegas, NV.
Image from the author.

striking for Ammerman was “the degree to which caring for each other ‘in sickness and in health’ is not only a matter of family responsibility but also a matter of religious virtue and community connection” (287). Indeed, those most active in a religious community are those most able to extend caring to others beyond their families.

There are weaknesses with this set of interviewees. Rural and small-town communities are not represented. Asians and Latinos barely appear. Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist

adherents were not included. Professionals and white- and pink-collar workers predominate; blue-collar workers are largely absent. Further, Ammerman and her team did not find a way to examine what role(s) electronic and digital media play in everyday religion.

Yet, Ammerman is aware of the limits of her study. Her take-aways from the stories are nuanced and supported. Everyday religion, she argues, is not about people’s “magical intent” nor about “a location outside everyday reality.” Instead, everyday religion is about “a sacred consciousness,” a “fundamental recognition of a ‘more than ordinary’ dimension in life” on the part of many Americans (292). Much of life is not “enchanted,” but that does not mean that



Trinity (Episcopal) Church Cemetery, New York City, NY. The church was established in 1698. Image from the author.

various aspects of everyday life are “devoid of spiritual meaning.” With her fellow sociologists particularly in mind, Ammerman pointedly notes that “our modern preoccupation with identifying a distinctly

‘religious’ domain has blinded us to the way the everyday world remains enchanted” (298). Further, while modern society makes for “ever-shifting tribes” (303), religious communities and traditions are still potent “spiritual tribes” shaping religion and spirituality “to the degree that they create spaces for and encourage opportunities to imagine and speak about everyday realities

through the lens of sacred consciousness” (302). Sacred consciousness, in turn, remains socially vital as individuals meet and engage each other outside religious institutions in “[h]ouseholds and health crises, charitable activities and serving professions,” places and situations “where the boundaries between sacred and secular seem to be most permeable” (302).

Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes is certainly not the last word on American religiosity. Also, it is not as strident as Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart*, which sought to prod Americans away from the self and toward the common good. Yet, like Bellah’s book, Ammerman’s is a study that takes readers into the life and thought of some of our neighbors—and being attentive to them, we might better understand them and even love them. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* deserves a wide reading, whatever your tribe may be.