

2018-07-20

From canopies to conversations: the continuing significance of "plausibility structures"

Ammerman, N. (2018). From Canopies to Conversations: The Continuing Significance of 'Plausibility Structures'. In T. Hjelm (Authors), Peter L. Berger and the Sociology of Religion: 50 Years after The Sacred Canopy (pp. 27–42). New York: Bloomsbury Academic. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/978135006191>
<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/31901>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

From Canopies to Conversations: The Continuing Significance of “Plausibility Structures”

Nancy T. Ammerman

In Peter L. Berger and the Sociology of Religion: 50 Years after the Sacred Canopy

Edited by Titus Hjelm (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018)

Abstract:

Among the most generative – but oft-misunderstood – ideas found in Peter Berger’s magisterial work is the idea that religions depend on plausibility structures. This assertion points toward the *social worlds* in which religious ideas and practices take on meaning. The most powerful situation for a religious system is one in which the entire taken-for-granted world falls under a sacred canopy. The fracturing of that canopy was at the heart of the theory of secularization Berger put forward. This chapter argues that no such comprehensive canopy is necessary for sustaining religious systems. We should instead examine the social interaction at the base of the plausibility structures, namely the conversations in which a sacred view of the world is sustained. Likewise, we must situate those conversations in the practical, embodied, and material experiences described as “lived religion.”

When Peter Berger published his foundational text in 1967, it was a logical theoretical extension of the work he had done with Thomas Luckmann in the preceding years (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*, now recognized as among the most influential books of the twentieth century, had laid out a phenomenology of consciousness that placed the innermost realms of knowledge and identity squarely in a social matrix of micro-interaction and macro-structures. It built on classical social theory, but also on European critical theories and especially the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz. How is it, they asked, that we come to act in the world as we do? In short, we engage in a process of externalizing our experience through language, internalizing the responses of others to us, and coming to accept the resulting social product as objective reality. As Berger then argued in *The Sacred Canopy*, the same social processes that produce the rest of reality also produce religion. Throughout, he brilliantly combines Schutz's phenomenology with Marx's dialectical materialism and Mead's symbolic interactionism.

The picture of a dynamic social process that structures religious ideas and experience was a powerful one. The theory took as its "normal" state of affairs a situation where the responses of others were more or less congruent; the resulting taken-for-granted reality was more or less the same for the people interacting with and in it. That interactive context is what Berger termed a "plausibility structure." In one of his late works, he mused, "I am very fond of this concept. I coined it" (2014: 31). In *The Sacred Canopy*, he defines it thus: "[E]ach world requires a social 'base' for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. The 'base' may be called its plausibility structure" (p. 44). These are the relationships and social structures within which we go about our lives in an "of course" kind of way.¹ Berger illustrates this with a stinging and poignant account of the way Spanish conquest destroyed the activities and social relationships on which Inca civilization was built – its plausibility structure – transforming the Inca world into "first, unspeakable anomy, then

a more or less nomized existence on the fringes of the Spaniard's world – that other world, alien and vastly powerful, which imposed itself as reality-defining facticity upon the numbed consciousness of the conquered” (p. 46). No postcolonial thinker in subsequent decades could have said it better. But the larger point, for our purposes, is that religious ways of life rest on the social structures in which they exist.

This basic insight, and the concept he used to describe it, are among his most troublesome – and most useful – contributions. The concept is troublesome for a number of reasons. First, it is so often misunderstood. Using the term “plausibility” has deceived more than one first-time reader into thinking this is about logic and reason. Religious ideas, they think, have to be reasonable and logical to maintain their “plausibility.” The decline of religion in the modern world is therefore a matter of the logical implausibility of superstition. Not at all. Only if the “reason” and “logic” in question is understood in the phenomenological sense of Berger's argument. The logic we impute to our world is a logic based on our taken-for-granted assumptions about how things work. That, in turn, is built on a structure of social relations; and it is that social setting that constitutes the plausibility structure, not the ideas themselves.

The notion that religious ideas rest on a structure of social relations was also troublesome in a way that Berger recognized in his own text. It seems to imply that religion is the “dependent variable” in every case. He, however, emphatically rejected the Marxian notion that religion is a mere reflection of the social structure, opting for a more Weberian tack. Not unlike Weber's notion of “elective affinity,” with its skirting of causal arguments, Berger's understanding of religion's relationship to the social structure decidedly allows for influence in both directions. Social arrangements can make religious ideas and practices more and less possible; religious ideas (and he mostly addresses ideas, not practices) can drive changes in social arrangements.

The other conceptual problem that Berger addressed in *The Sacred Canopy* is the fact that plausibility structures are never fully internalized. They are subject to manifold shocks. Children will arrive and ask “why?” Dreams and prophecies will interrupt the world as it is. Exile can remove all the familiar props. As a human construction, the plausibility structure is subject to the dynamics of human interaction and change. Berger’s chapters on religious legitimation and theodicy gave his answer to the social mechanisms that are necessary for maintaining the worlds we live in – in spite of the fragility of social (and biological) life. In the face of the threats, we still strive to establish a social world in which we can return to “normal.”

Less clearly resolved in Berger’s formulation is the “normal” he assumes. He noted the fragile and changing nature of social structures, but he assumed that there would be an equilibrium, a “nomos” that would replace the “anomy.” True enough. What we have learned since about cognitive psychology would support that view of human cognition (DiMaggio 1997). But more problematic is his imagination of that all-encompassing religious plausibility structure – the “sacred canopy.”² While he did note the difference between a “religious monopoly” and the “sectarian” situation of living in a sub-world (having a “sacred tent” perhaps), the sectarian world he described is no less encompassing than the monopoly one – just smaller. He spoke of the different “social engineering” necessary in the two situations, but the picture is still one where a religious view of the world is maintained by a single religious plausibility structure.

That sectarian social engineering task was, in fact, the theoretical question that informed my own earliest research, examining the plausibility structure for a “fundamentalist” view of the world (Ammerman, 1987). That world was a religious “normal” that fit Berger’s theory. Where a religious monopoly exists or where a religious subworld attempts to maintain very tight boundaries, the picture Berger paints is a theoretically useful

one. The religious person is sustained in a religious view of the world by being surrounded in all her most significant relationships by others whose actions and assumptions reinforce the taken-for-granted nature of that world.

The reality of modern pluralism and competition, however, is less well-explained by the theory Berger offers us in *The Sacred Canopy*. This is the site of some of the most troublesome conclusions in the book, some of which he later attempted to resolve.³ In the final chapters, as he developed his theory of secularization, he assumed that being surrounded by social worlds in which multiple religious and secular ideas compete would make religious ideas less sustainable, with secular explanations crowding out the religious ones. Living in a world whose structures are technological and market driven, the habits and beliefs of religious traditions would be sustainable only in individual consciousness and as consumable commodities. In contrast to the situation of religious monopoly, all religious traditions in pluralist contexts must be marketed, he said. “[They] must be ‘sold’ to a clientele that is no longer constrained to ‘buy.’ The pluralistic situation is, above all a *market situation*” (137; italics in original). Religion becomes, in this view, socially insignificant. Having lost its coherent social supports, it is too fragmented and privatized to have any effect on individual or collective life.

In spite of this unfortunate detour in Berger’s theorizing, I want to suggest that we need not discard the notion that religions rest on social plausibility structures. What we must do, however, is alter both our understanding of what religion is and our understanding of how a plausibility structure works. For the former we have to go beyond what Berger gave us in *The Sacred Canopy*. For the latter, however, we can return to the foundational theoretical work he gives us in the early part of the book. I turn first to those strands in Berger’s own theory.

The Power of Conversation

In Berger's recapping of the argument he and Luckmann made in *The Social Construction of Reality*, language and conversation play critical roles. He points out that we appropriate our view of the world in conversation with others, and the language we use provides us with the categories that order that world. "On the foundation of language, and by means of it, is built up the cognitive and normative edifice that passes for 'knowledge' in a society" (p. 20). Building on Mead and the symbolic interactionists, Berger points to this very human activity of using language to navigate the world. Arranged into stories and admonitions and descriptions, our words become conversations, exchanges between people, in which the meaning of the words is expressed, modified, and internalized. This is the micro-foundation of what Berger means by a plausibility structure. There are also macro-structures that cannot be ignored, but it is everyday conversation that maintains the taken-for-grantedness of the world. As Berger points out, "The world begins to shake in the very instant that its sustaining conversation begins to falter" (p. 21). This is a way in which the concept of a plausibility structure can continue to serve us well.

In my 2013 book *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, I examined that micro-foundation, looking at the social world as framed in narratives and expressed in conversations. Following Somers (1994), I have conceptualized religious identity as an individual autobiographical narrative (what Somers labels "ontological") by which persons orient their actions so that they are in continuity with who they have perceived themselves to be, but which (like any script) allows improvisation and revision. That individual story, of course, is always in dialogue with the many "public narratives" of the institutions that constitute our shared lives. Whether as a family or a corporation, a team or a congregation, we share a story about who we are; and that story, too, is constantly being

revised and improvised. Finally, we live inside a few master stories, or metanarratives (like Schutz's world-taken-for-granted) with such hegemonic power that we often do not see their authorial hand.

What I suggested in a 2003 essay is that religious identity is like all other identities, residing in just this sort of multi-layered narrative (Ammerman, 2003). Out of early socialization and deep existential experiences, there is an autobiographical narrative that may include any of a wide range of spiritual orientations. A more or less pro-secular hegemonic metanarrative in the culture may limit expectations about what sorts of spiritual presence and action one might expect. But both those internal narratives and the metanarratives are constantly staged in particular institutionalized social settings with their own expectations about the kinds of stories that can be told and enacted there.

All three layers are always present; each can shape the others; and none is by definition beyond the reach of enchantment. The presence or absence of spiritual characters and actions in those narratives is one way to look for the socially-constructed reality of religion in the world. The variation in spiritual narration reflects both differences between individuals and differences in the cultural and institutional contexts being narrated. Some locations and situations call forth religious realities, while others present themselves as wholly secular. And some people are far more spiritually-attuned than others and can find the spiritual strands in the most secular of contexts.

But beyond the individual and institutional differences, our research found differences that were traceable to the presence or absence of religiously-relevant *relationships and conversations*.⁴ Not surprisingly, spiritual stories about everyday life were most common among those who attend religious services most frequently – no matter which tradition they were in. Congregations and other organized spiritual groups are still important sites of religious culture production (contra Bender, et al. 2011). Most telling, however, it was not

just being there that mattered most. It was participating in activities beyond weekly worship in which informal conversation was a typical mode of interaction. Whether choir practice or committee meeting, women's spirituality group or weekly Torah study, participation with a community mattered.

These conversational sites of interaction are the smaller, portable, flexible, and permeable plausibility structures of complex modern societies. This is where spiritual discourse can be a primary lingua franca, but where everyday life is also very present, where elements of spirituality can naturally intersect with accounts of who people are and what they do with themselves. They learn and use spiritual language, and it shapes their way of being in the world. The more deeply embedded our subjects were in organized sites of spiritually-infused conversation, the more likely they were to carry strands of that conversation with them. As participants in a religious community, people develop a way of talking about life that carries within it expectations about the presence of divine actors, about mysteries beyond human comprehension, and about the normative goodness of living by the Golden Rule. As people chat over a potluck dinner or pray during a meeting of a women's group, the everyday stories they tell are likely to foreground spiritual interpretations. They come to think of sacred and secular as intertwined. What happens in these religious gatherings is not just a matter of otherworldly ritual and doctrinal teaching. What happens is the creation of a particular kind of conversational space.

In some sense this is what Berger (1967) meant when he described modern religion as existing in "sheltering enclaves." But it is more. These are not enclaves with high walls, where the sacred world is kept pure and well-defended. Their ability to be powerful producers of sacred consciousness does not depend on keeping all other realities at bay. It depends on their ability to evoke sacred reality in powerful ritual events and proffer coherent explanations of the cosmos. But mostly, their power as sacred culture producers is in the

degree to which they allow sacred and profane to combine. The conversations in these spaces are inevitably full of the stuff of everyday life, with mundane and sacred realities intermingling.

Indeed, the two may become part of one multi-vocal reality. As Ziad Munson (2006) wrote about the pro-life activists he was observing, the funerals held for aborted fetuses are both religious and political at the same time. Activists use religious symbols, rituals, and consciousness to express “something beyond” at the same time that they send a political message about how our common life ought to be arranged. One need not look to something so ritually potent to see this intermingling, however. Wherever we see everyday concerns expressed in religious language and company, the symbols of each will shape the other. Congregations gain their potency as producers of sacred consciousness not through their exclusivity or high boundaries, but as they create spaces for and encourage opportunities to imagine and speak about everyday realities among spiritual compatriots.

When people step beyond their religious communities, of course, they encounter an enormously plural and functionally complex modern world. People move through life with a shifting cast of characters in a shifting array of institutional settings. The primary mode of discourse and interaction in much of that world is likely to be very this-worldly and non-spiritual. The task is to get the airplane built or get the politician elected or measure out the right doses of medicine. Berger is right that the dominant reality mode is a pragmatic secular one that we assume others share and that allows us to proceed on common reality grounds.

That dominance, however, does not mean monopoly, nor does it mean inevitability. While the balance of sacred and secular assumptions may shift over time and place, most social scientists have joined Berger himself in asserting that the balance is by no means one that must always shift in a secular direction. Nor, as Mary Douglas observed in the 1980s, should we assume that earlier generations were living in an utterly enchanted world (Douglas,

1983). What we have increasingly recognized is that we moderns are living in a world that is not nearly so disenchanted as Weber and most of sociology once imagined (Weber, 1958). To observe mundane empirical explanations emerging in science or medicine, “as if God does not exist,” does not predetermine where or whether other parts of life may be infused with spiritual presence (or even that the scientists see their work as without religious significance).

It is nevertheless the case that religious presence is sometimes constrained (and sometimes encouraged) by the particular social settings in question. There was evidence in our research of the modern “differentiation” of social functions, but it was by no means a complete segregation. Sacred consciousness was part of the story more often when the story was about family and home, for instance, than when it was about working as a business person. Working as an artist or scientist, in contrast, was more often interwoven with a spiritual sensibility. Most people recounted their efforts to eat right and stay healthy as guided by secular science and education. Their response to serious illness and death, on the other hand, was often heavily laden with prayer and spiritual presence. The multiple layers of reality and multiple narratives are perhaps nowhere better seen than in the person who prays for God to guide the doctor’s hand.

The presence of multiple realities, each perhaps primarily institutionalized in a particular sector of society, creates the possibility for conflict, doubt, and power struggles. There can be boundary disputes when a way of framing a situation is deemed inappropriate for the context. There can be doubts when sacred consciousness is called into question by secular expertise. As the neo-institutionalists have argued, there are dominant logics at work in each organizational “field” (Friedland and Alford, 1991). What has become increasingly clear in other studies of organizations, however, is that these logics are never air-tight. The “cultural capital” (as Bourdieu [1991] would describe it) from one field might or might not be permitted and useful in another. Decades ago feminists began arguing that “the personal is

political” and that inflexible boundaries between home and work were not good for people. They were pointing to the ways institutional boundaries were and should be more permeable than theorists (and some managers) have assumed them to be.

Berger (2014) describes the presence of multiple secular and sacred realities as “code switching.” That is certainly apt, but I suspect it may still draw too clear a distinction between codes and the fields they belong to. Sometimes people are aware of moving back and forth, but just as often they seem to occupy a single location that is both secular and sacred at the same time. It is not that our intrinsic foundational reality is secular, while our extrinsic world of choice can be religious if we wish. Rather, I am convinced that the mix of sacred and secular is more like “Spanglish” than like being bilingual. Words from both languages appear in the same sentence, sometimes modified in ways not native to either language. A person eats a kosher vegetarian diet both to express religious devotion and to stay healthy. A scientist reads his journals with a prayerful attitude that opens his mind to the solution he has been puzzling over.

In neither of these cases is this a matter of utterly individual invention and choice, although it is that. These are modern actors, after all. They have developed their spiritual ways of seeing and acting in the modern world through socially constructed and institutionalized arenas of conversation. Spiritual presence is a social reality. Religion is expressed and reproduced in actions and conversations. There are forms of social interaction that function as religious plausibility structures in the midst of the multiple layers of structure and constraint that may also be present. The characters with whom we share the stage at any given moment are not neatly compartmentalized by the stage we are on, and narratives from different parts of life are drawn on and refashioned across domains. Wherever there are social spaces in which religious and spiritual assumptions can enter the conversation, there is a

religious plausibility structure. One spiritually-inclined person discovers another such person, and they start to talk.

People of faith seem, in fact, to have a knack for finding each other. We may not be surprised to find that roughly three-quarters of household partners share a common religious affiliation, but it is surprising that two-thirds of the work-based friendships we documented were described to us as religiously homogeneous—not necessarily people sharing exactly the same religious tradition, but people who think of each other as religiously similar. And in those religiously-similar work friendships, people were more likely to report that they talk about religion. What I am suggesting here is that religious identities are part of the package of cultural cues that constitute the ever-shifting “tribes” of modern society (Maffesoli, 1995), the signals by which we recognize each other. We establish relationships, across multiple institutional domains that either constrain or enable the production of religious realities.

Plausibility structures are, then, as relevant as an analytical tool as they ever were. The key is recognizing that they need not be totalizing structures. While there are societies where something like a religious (or atheist) monopoly exists, that is not the only way a plausibility structure works. Nor must a religious plausibility structure be sustained by a tightly-bounded sectarian institution. By recognizing the fluid character of the social networks of modern social life, we can also recognize the fluid and shifting relationships in which religious conversations constitute the religious plausibility structures of everyday life.

Religion beyond Consciousness

Equally important, a contemporary understanding of religion has to go beyond Berger’s emphasis on consciousness and worldview. Even his later writing often assumes that whatever spiritual reality finds its way into the secular world is carried inside the individual

mind. His remains a mid-century Protestant understanding of religion that focuses on individual belief, and as the sociological study of religion slowly expands to encompass empirical encounters around the world, such definitions have rightly been called into question (Bender et al. 2011).

The inadequacy of belief- and membership-based understandings has been highlighted by many recent writers, among them Talal Asad (1993). Like other postcolonial thinkers, Asad points to the historically-situated nature of the very category “religious” itself. What counts as religious in any time and place is not a matter of some universal essence, but a product of the powers and authoritative disciplines at work in that place. Our preoccupation with worldviews, Asad argues, is a very modern one. He critiques Geertz’s (1973) classic ‘cultural’ definition of religion for its attempt to put everything into a cosmic framework, essentially making theology the defining practice of religion. "It is a modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge" (1993: 36). Asad could as easily have been talking about Berger.

In some circles, Asad’s critique nearly brought the study of “religion” to its knees, but that need not be so. The turn of which his thinking was a part was a turn to a broader definition of religion. It travels under many banners – religious practices, material religion, folk religion – but one useful rubric is “lived religion,” most prominently developed by McGuire (2008), Hall (1997), and Orsi (2003). This growing body of work has provided new ways to think about how modern people manage to be both religious and secular at the same time and how religion is expressed in more than words.

The study of lived religion has been useful, but it has sometimes been limited by its own preoccupations with what it is *not*.⁵ Research often set up artificial binaries between institutional religion and lived religion or between elite religion and the lived religion of ordinary lay people. While that emphasis on moving beyond institutional membership and

official dogma has been necessary, the most fruitful work in this field has placed religion in a field of practice, practice that is fully material and can happen anywhere and among any population. In introducing the concept, David Hall (1997) says that “one term – “practice” – does have particular importance” (p. xi). As Aune (2015) demonstrates in her study of feminists in the UK, practice is central to their sense of what it means to be religious or spiritual. They, like the subjects of much lived religion research, freely adopt practices both from their own religious traditional origins and from others, but it is rituals and ways of living that matter. These rituals and ways of living are “everyday,” but they are not always - or even mostly - disconnected from religious institutions and traditions. The European “folk” or “majority” churches, for example, may have relatively empty pews on Sunday morning, but their yearly holidays, rituals, music, and service to the community have not disappeared from the everyday world (Davie, 2000). Theirs is neither a sacred canopy nor a sheltering enclave nor a privatized worldview. Lived religion is found in shared religious practices, some traditional and some not.

The focus on practice also means a focus on embodiment. McGuire (2007) turns our attention to gardening, healing, and dancing as spiritual practices, while others venture into more exotic practices such as mixed martial arts (Greve, 2014). We have learned about rituals of birth (Klassen, 2001) and death (Laderman, 1995) that take the unavoidably physical aspects of those human experiences seriously. Rather than confining religion’s domain to the “beliefs about” experience, we have asked how bodies enter into and express connections with spirituality. Bodily sensations of touch, smell, and movement are vehicles for religious creativity (e.g., Løvland and Repstad, 2014). The conversational plausibility structures we inhabit are made up of more than just words. There are bodies and physical sensations in those spaces as well.

Nor can one live religion without feelings (see Johnson in this volume). Attention to emotion has been one important product of attention to gender. The turn to the experience of women – and to men as men, not just as the default universal – has been an important aspect of the first generation of studies of lived religion. The emotional dimensions of human life are highly complex, of course, and sociologists will need to draw on the work of psychologists and cognitive scientists to bring this fully to bear. Riis and Woodhead (2010), however, have laid out a very helpful framework for the sociological study of religious emotion. It is a starting point for understanding the individual and social patterns that shape intense human experiences and mark those experiences as religious.

The study of lived religion has distinctly turned our attention to the way bodies, emotions and extraordinary experiences are critical to any analysis of how religion is situated in social life, both as expressed in institutionalized activity and as encountered beyond organized religion. We can be equally interested in the embodied experience of Eucharist or Friday prayers and in the embodied experience of a home birth. When we examine the human dimensions through which sacred things are being produced, encountered, and shared—wherever they happen and whoever the actors are – we are studying plausibility structures for modern spiritual life. It is not just belief or institutional location that gives something religious meaning. One does not have to be a “believer” to be moved by the ritual acts of kneeling or candle lighting or communal eating (Sack, 2000). Singing together has spiritual power, even when not everyone shares a common view of the world (Heider and Warner, 2010).

In addition to adding bodies to the religious mix, lived religion research has also incorporated the emphasis on material culture that has long been present in our sister disciplines of Anthropology and Religious Studies (McDannell, 1995; Vasquez, 2010). The cultural turn in Sociology has followed with its own turn to the material (Edgell, 2012; Neitz,

2011), a turn reflected in the study of religion. We have learned about food ways (Diamond, 2002; Koeppling, 2008) that are situated in religious ways of being in the world. And with the increasing presence of Muslim veils on European and American streets, we have noticed how clothing and jewelry of all sorts can express religious identity (Arthur, 1999; Furseth, 2011). Wherever that veiled Muslim goes, in fact, she introduces the reality that not everything is governed by modern reason, secular efficiency, and pluralist neutrality. When she wears her hijab under a hard hat or laboratory goggles or graduation cap, she stands as a visible reminder that sacred and secular exist side by side.

Methodologically, attention to material culture has meant new attention to visual evidence (Williams, 2015), along with the textual. In her study of hospital chaplains, for example, Cadge (2013) analyzes chapel spaces as well as bedside routines. Omar McRoberts (2003) makes urban streets a factor in the religious lives he studied. My own research has demonstrated that spiritual experience can be embedded in everything from clothing and jewelry to mementos on a desk and a favorite chair by a window (Ammerman, 2013). Places and things are a critical dimension of lived religion, ways that people literally touch transcendence. The people we interviewed needed no grand theory to explain what was important about an object or place, although there was almost always a story. This thing or this place, the story said, participated in producing, encountering, and often sharing something sacred about life.

The material and spatial dimensions of religious cultural life are important to understanding religious life both outside religious institutions and inside. If we shed the Protestant preoccupation with sermons, and pay attention to all the ways in which institutional religion is itself material, we learn a great deal. I have long advocated that students of congregational life ask their informants to take them on a walking tour of the space the congregation occupies (Ammerman, 1998). The artifacts unearthed on such a tour

may bear little resemblance to the official guide to the congregation's building. They represent instead the way the people in the congregation live in its space. They are using that material environment as part of their production of and encounter with the sacred they share, and their different appropriations of the space may reflect the different cultures they bring in (Hoover, 2014), as well as what they have collectively created.

Across the world, institutional religious spaces play constantly evolving roles in the cultures they inhabit (Vasquez and Marquardt, 2003). Otherwise non-religious spaces can be collectively marked as sacred, as well, while individual sacred spaces abound, often marked by physical symbols of their meaning and function. Often sacred spaces are transient, as when memorials mark the public spaces where someone has tragically died. Sidewalks, candles, teddy bears, and ribbons are very mundane secular objects that are sacralized by the collective actions of a community (Grider, 2006). And in the midst of televisions and dining tables and all the other mundane stuff of everyday living, home altars are reminders of sacred presence and sites of religious ritual (Konieczny, 2009). Again, attention to religion as practiced enlarges the scope of inquiry and points away from assumptions that religion is diminished by its presence in mundane form.

Paying attention to what people do and how they inhabit the material world does not mean we ignore what they say. As Robert Wuthnow (2011) has admonished, we should "take talk seriously." In addition to the texts people produce and the way they answer questions, lived religion suggests attention to words found in musical lyrics, internet interactions, and popular culture as ways people create everyday transcendence. My own work (2013) has focused on how people tell stories about their everyday lives. This attention to discourses is an attempt to listen for how ordinary people make meaning – not grand coherent theories of life, but small stories that weave together pieces of a life and connect them to something bigger. When Robert Orsi wrote *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985), he called these attempts

to talk about divine presence in ordinary life “theologies of the street,” and theologians themselves have begun to take up the task of working from grassroots experience.⁶

Here the emphasis is not so much on establishing the meanings and belief structures reflected in words as in examining the practices that use words. Like other practices, religious discursive work is portable, occurring across the social contexts in which people live their lives. Some practices are deeply embedded in religious tradition, while others engage sacred realities with words and forms that borrow widely.

The study of lived religion has, then, reinforced the importance of understanding religion itself as more than cognitive, more than a worldview. It is still the case that conversations are the plausibility structures that sustain religious life, but we must situate those conversations in material and embodied practices. The plausibility structures that sustain religious life are social settings as well as social relationships, embodied actions as well as modes of discourse.

Conclusion

In *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger set out a theory of religion that has endured. He drew together foundational social theories from the century before him, providing an account of how human beings create and live in worlds that are ordered and meaningful. He showed us how religious consciousness and religious action are socially produced and maintained, and he gave us the theoretical tools to go beyond his own account. Religion, it turns out, is as multi-dimensional as the social world itself. It is neither confined to individual minds nor to self-contained religious institutions; but it is still social, still emergent in interactions where the people and the place and the words all conspire to make religious practice possible and even taken-for-granted. The notion that religion requires a plausibility structure is no less true

and is as theoretically useful as ever. It simply needs a broader understanding of the structures in question and a deeper understanding of how plausibility is constituted. Those structures are as broad as the places where religiously-inflected conversation can happen, and as deep as the gestures, objects, and experiences that are as real as the words and ideas that were more central to Berger's work. Our current and future study of religion both builds on his theorizing and must go beyond it.

References

- Ammerman, N. T. (1987), *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Ammerman, N. T. (1998), "Culture and Identity in the Congregation," in N. T. Ammerman, J. Carroll, C. Dudley, and W. McKinney (eds.), *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, 78-104, Nashville: Abingdon.
- Ammerman, N. T. (2003), "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in M. Dillon (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, 207-224, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ammerman, N. T. (2013), *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ammerman, N. T. (2014), "Modern Altars in Everyday Life," in P. L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity*, 94-110, Boston: Walter deGruyter.
- Ammerman, N. T. (2016), "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 29 (2): 83-99.
- Arthur, L. B., ed, (1999), *Religion, Dress and the Body*, New York: Berg Publishers.
- Asad, T. (1993), *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Aune, K. (2015), "Feminist Spirituality as Lived Religion: How UK Feminists Forge Religio-spiritual Lives," *Gender and Society*, 29 (1): 122-145.
- Bender, C., Cadge, W., Levitt, P., and Smilde, D. A., eds (2011), *Religion on the Edge: De-Centering and Re-Centering the Sociology of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berger, P. L. (1967), *The Sacred Canopy*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Doubleday.
- Berger, P. L. (2014), *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, Boston: DeGruyter.
- Berger, P. L., and Luckmann, T. (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990), *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991), *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cadge, W. (2013), *Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Davie, G. (2000), *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diamond, E. (2002), "Beyond Borscht: The Kosher Lifestyle and the Religious Consumerism of Suburban Orthodox Jews," in J. M. Giggie and D. Winston (eds.), *Faith in the Market: Religion and the Rise of Urban Commercial Culture*, 227-245, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- DiMaggio, P. (1997), "Culture and Cognition," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 263-287.
- Douglas, M. (1983), "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," in M. Douglas and S. M. Tipton (eds.), *Religion and America*, 25-43, Boston: Beacon.

- Edgell, P. (2012), "A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38: 247-265.
- Friedland, R., and Alford, R. R. (1991), "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions," in W. Powell and P. DiMaggio (eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, 232-263, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Furseth, I. (2011), "The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiations among Immigrant Muslim Women in the Los Angeles Area," *Review of Religious Research*, 52 (4): 365-385.
- Geertz, C. (1973), "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 87-125, New York: Basic Books.
- Greve, J. (2014), "Jesus Didn't Tap: Masculinity, Theology, and Ideology in Christian Mixed Martial Arts," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 24 (2): 141-185.
- Grider, S. (2006), "Spontaneous Shrines and Public Memorialization," in K. Garces-Foley (ed.), *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, 246-264, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Hall, D., ed (1997), *Lived Religion in America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Heider, A., and Warner, R. S. (2010), "Bodies in Sync: Interaction Ritual Theory Applied to Sacred Harp Singing," *Sociology of Religion*, 71 (1): 76-97.
- Hoover, B. C. (2014), *Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism*, New York: New York University Press.
- Klassen, P. E. (2001), *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Koepping, E. (2008), *Food, Friends and Funerals: On Lived Religion*, Berlin: LIT Verlag.

- Konieczny, M. E. (2009), "Sacred Places, Domestic Spaces: Material Culture, Church, and Home at Our Lady of the Assumption and St. Brigitta," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48 (3): 419-442.
- Laderman, G. (1995), "Locating the Dead: A Cultural History of Death in the Antebellum, Anglo-Protestant Communities of the Northeast," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 58 (1): 27-52.
- Lovland, A., and Repstad, P. (2014), "Playing the Sensual Card in Churches: Studying the Aestheticization of Religion," in A. McKinnon and M. Trzebiatowska (eds.), *Sociological theory and the question of religion*, 179-198, Farnham: Ashgate.
- Maffesoli, M. (1995), *The Time of Tribes*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- McDannell, C. (1995), *Material Christianity*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- McGuire, M. B. (2007), "Embodied Practices: Negotiation and Resistance," in N. T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, 187-200, New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGuire, M. B. (2008), *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- McRoberts, O. M. (2003), *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Munson, Z. (2006), "When A Funeral Isn't Just a Funeral: The Layered Meaning of Everyday Action," in N. T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, 121-136, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Neitz, M. J. (2011), "Lived Religion: Signposts of Where We Have Been and Where We Can Go from Here," in G. Giordan and W. H. Swatos Jr. (eds.), *Religion, Spirituality and Everyday Practice*, 45-55, New York: Springer.

- Orsi, R. A. (1985), *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Orsi, R. A. (2003), "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42 (2): 169-174.
- Riis, O., and Woodhead, L. (2010), *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sack, D. (2000), *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Somers, M. R. (1994), "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society*, 23: 605-649.
- Vasquez, M. A. (2010), *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vasquez, M. A., and Marquardt, M. F. (2003), *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Weber, M. (1958), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons, New York: Scribner.
- Williams, R. R. ed, (2015), *Seeing Religion: Toward a Visual Sociology of Religion*, London: Routledge.
- Wuthnow, R. (2011), "Taking Talk Seriously: Religious Discourse as Social Practice," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 50 (1): 1-21.

Endnotes

¹ It is perhaps worth noting how congruent this notion is to Bourdieu's concept of the "field" (1990). Bourdieu more explicitly took institutions and power into account, but within a field of interaction, certain kinds

of relationships and actions become habitually ingrained. Both theories take account of the way actual social interaction is cognitively reproduced in ways that normalize it.

² Ironically, he notes this very issue in Durkheim's theory. Berger (1967, fn 21, chapter 2) acknowledged that Durkheim's notions of ritual and social cohesion are hard to translate past the smallest societies.

³ In his 2014 book on pluralism, for instance, he writes that we should not "over-estimate the coherence of human consciousness. In the experience of most individuals, secularity and religion are not mutually contradictory" (p. 53). The research I will draw on below certainly supports that statement, although Berger never cites it.

⁴ For a fuller exploration of these findings, see the concluding chapters of *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* (Ammerman, 2013). In my simultaneously-published response (Ammerman, 2014) to Berger's 2014 book, I drew on these findings to elaborate my assessment of what he had still not fully comprehended about pluralism.

⁵ My own exposition of the current state of the field can be found in Ammerman (2016).

⁶ See, for example scholarship emerging from the University of Virginia's Project on Lived Theology (<http://www.livedtheology.org/>).