INTRODUCTION

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THE ESSAYS brought together in *Lived Religion in America* advance a way of doing American religious history. The name for this approach is “lived religion,” a shorthand phrase that has long been current in the French tradition of the sociology of religion (*la religion vécue*) but is relatively novel in the American context. As we use it in this volume, the phrase is rooted less in sociology than in cultural and ethnographical approaches to the study of religion and American religious history that have come to the fore in recent years. Some of the case studies in *Lived Religion in America* are explicitly ethnographic. Others, however, approach their subjects through sociology, history, and the close reading of texts. In the two essays that open the book, the historian Robert Orsi and the sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger reflect on broader aspects of lived religion, Orsi in the course of responding to the case studies and Hervieu-Léger in reviewing how modes of inquiry have evolved within the French tradition since the Second World War. Her report, which concludes with a case study of the charismatic movement within French Catholicism, is in keeping with a central aim of this volume and the project out of which it grew: to expand our ways of thinking about American religious history by enlisting perspectives—in this instance, a tradition of inquiry largely unknown to historians of religion in America—from outside the field.

The project that lies behind *Lived Religion in America* has encompassed both an experimental course on lived religion and a conference at Harvard Divinity School in September 1994 at which these essays were initially presented. These activities were made possible by the generosity of the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment, which in a “workplan” prepared a few years ago for Protestantism and American Culture affirmed that the Division intended to promote the study of “daily life,” especially among Protestant laity. Although not explicitly articulated in the workplan, another goal was to encourage reflection on “practice” as the center or focus of the Christian life.

In their own way, historians of religion in America have begun to call for attention to the same matters, usually in the context of observing that, while we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women.

The purpose of the lived religion project was to gain some ground on both of these matters, though in the event our agenda began to evolve. Each of the case studies that follow is about the laity, some as members of churches or groups (like Hervieu-Léger's Catholic charismatics), with close ties to the institutional church, others in a space of their own devising, in two instances—the cremationists described by Stephen Prothero and the “back to nature” homesteaders Rebecca Gould has studied—deliberately turning away from orthodox and organized religion. Despite the importance of the laity in these essays, their creativity and participation are only a small part of the answer, and possibly a problematic one at that, to the question, what is lived religion—or better, what has been the history of lived religion in America? For these essays are really about a wider reorientation rooted in a rethinking of what constitutes religion.

This rethinking is due, in part, to the inquiries that lie behind the term “popular religion.” Much in use among historians of the Reformation, the concept of popular religion emerged as these historians began to ask how the theology of the Protestant Reformers was translated into behavior in local parishes. How were Luther and Calvin understood, and how did the educational and disciplining dimensions of the Reformation fare in these settings? Though historians do not agree on the answers to these questions, most have realized that the Luther of everyday, popular religion was sometimes a strangely magical figure and that campaigns of social discipline were only intermittently effective. Popular religion has therefore come to signify the space that emerged between official or learned Christianity and profane (or “pagan”) culture. In this space lay men and women enjoyed a certain measure of autonomy; here they became actors in their own right, fashioning (or refashioning) religious practices in accordance with local circumstances. Another aspect of this space is that religion encompassed a range of possibilities, some with the sanction of official religion and others not, or perhaps ambiguously so. The concept of popular religion has thus made it possible for historians to expand the scope of belief and practice beyond what was authorized by the institutional church. To say this differently, historians of the Reformation (and also of the Middle Ages) have underscored the politics of religious practice: on the one hand a politics of regulation from the center, often with some measure of success; on the other an extraordinary array of practices arising out of custom, improvisation, and resistance.

This way of doing religious history has entered into the concept of lived religion as we use it in the case studies that follow. To this older and still vital mode of inquiry we owe a questioning of boundaries, a sympathy for the extra-ecclesial, and a recognition of the laity as actors in their own right. So too, these case studies embody a kindred effort to reclaim and

establish the importance of texts and activities that all too readily are ignored or trivialized—for example, Mrs. Cowman's *Streams in the Desert* and the healings undertaken by Women's Aglow.

Where lived religion goes its own way is in breaking with the distinction between high and low that seems inevitably to recur in studies of popular religion. That is, these case studies are not built around a structure of opposition. Nor do they displace the institutional or normative perspectives on practice, as historians of popular religion so commonly do. The essay on church membership in early New England that Anne S. Brown and I have written comes close to having such a structure, for we acknowledge that the clergy were sometimes angered by the patterns of behavior we describe. Yet our purpose is also to demonstrate that the clergy were complicitous in the ways of thinking and doing that we map, complicitous because they, too, were caught up in the same dilemmas and because they realized that the looser meanings of baptism and saint that came to prevail were advantageous in allowing their congregations to grow. Working in the very different historiographical context of Native American religious history—in his case study, Ojibwa who were converted to Christianity by Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century, and who have sustained into our own times a tradition of hymn-singing—Michael McNally is concerned to avoid another characteristic set of oppositions, in this instance the alternatives of missionary imperialism and a naturalized rendering of “native” religion. The close analyses of “meaning” and the attention to ambivalence and contradiction that recur in these essays also sidestep the divisions of high and low, elite and popular.

Lived religion as we pursue it in these case studies builds on other lines of inquiry. One of these is the sociological tradition of the community study, which for Nancy T. Ammerman becomes the study of congregations.¹ Another is ritual studies, which casts a long, influential shadow over several of the essays. A third is the cultural or symbolic anthropology that in America we associate with Clifford Geertz. That in some of these essays so much attention is paid to the play of meaning may seem to contradict the implications of *lived* religion, as though this term were confined to what people do. But in keeping with the trajectory of practical and theoretical work in recent decades—here, Hervieu-Léger's review of the French tradition is pertinent—the case studies that follow are premised on the assumption that behavior cannot be understood apart from meaning, or what sometimes is loosely designated as “culture.” In this respect these case studies descend not only from Geertz but, more immediately, from the work of certain students of American religious history who, in the 1980s, were turning to the language and analytical framework of ritual theory (relying as much, perhaps, on Victor Turner as on

Geertz). The long, central chapter of Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* in which he elaborates on "The Meanings of the Devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street" remains perhaps the single most important example of this way of doing history—that is, of explicating the multiple, overlapping, even contradictory meanings embodied in a symbolic figure.

Several of our case studies employ a kindred mode of analysis. Leigh Eric Schmidt's essay on the gift in nineteenth-century Protestantism is about a complex of meanings that infused the burgeoning of gift-giving practices within everyday religious culture. Anne S. Brown and I reflect on ambiguities in the symbolism of "covenant," ambiguities that were played out in how people made decisions about participating in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the course of describing hymn-singing and "back-to-nature" homesteading, McNally and Rebecca Kneale Gould unfold the extraordinary freight of meaning conveyed by each of these modes of practice. As described by Stephen Prothero, the details of the cremation carried out in Washington, Pennsylvania, reveal a sense of ritualization among those who planned the event, which they cloaked in a repertory of symbols conveying (as do some of the actions of Gould's homesteaders) expectations of immortality.

This attention to meaning and ritualization is complemented in two of the case studies by a focus on narrative. The close reading that Cheryl Forbes undertakes of Mrs. Cowman's *Streams in the Desert* reveals an unexpected story, a narrative pattern of difficulty and darkness never fully to be overcome in this world. In light of this narrative pattern, the devotional practice of daily reading takes on a new significance. The stories recounted in the meetings and publications of Women's Aglow are even more fully charged with the difficulties of what goes wrong in marriages and parenting. Here too, however, the narrative form subsumes these difficulties into a larger structure of healing.²

This quick sketch of the lines of thinking that converge in these essays should make it clear that the study of lived religion does not depend on any single method or discipline. As useful and rewarding as participant-observation is for Gould, Griffith, McNally, Hervieu-Léger, and (in a slightly different way) Ammerman, the rest of us have had to depend on recovering our evidence from the past. One imperative for any student of lived religion—an old-fashioned imperative, to be sure, but doubly pertinent in this context—is to acknowledge as fully as possible the play of meaning. It is tempting to abridge, even to censure, the messiness that leaks into everyday life—to insist that the Puritans cannot be authentically religious if they depart from one particular understanding of covenant, that Ammerman's liberals are not really Christians, or that the members of Women's Aglow are hopelessly regressive because they tolerate cer-

tain forms of patriarchy. No doubt the contributors to this collection have their own ways of being censorious, but I think it fair to say that each of us has struggled against this instinct in the course of representing our subjects as they live with and work through multiple realms of meaning.

Though it is surely the case that no single key unlocks the door to lived religion, one term—"practice"—does have particular importance. The complicated history of this term within Western philosophy and social theory is not resolved or for that matter explicitly addressed in the essays that follow. Where they may be said to enter this long conversation is at the point many others reached in the 1980s, an interest in "culture in action."³ As most of us use the term, it encompasses the tensions, the ongoing struggle of definition, which are constituted within every religious tradition and that are always present in how people choose to act. Practice thus suggests that any synthesis is provisional. Moreover, practice always bears the marks of both regulation and what, for want of a better word, we may term resistance. It is not wholly one or the other.⁴ It is in practice, so construed, that the Christian Ojibwa sustain their faith and a sense of being native; that the colonists in New England enact both the purity of the sacraments and a family strategy of inheritance and incorporation; and that participants in Women's Aglow transform, even while accepting, the obligations of sacrifice and submission.

Lived religion as an approach to the past and to the present opens up a rich array of possibilities for historians. For one, it brings into the foreground the age-old question of change. Speaking of the postwar generation of researchers in France, Hervieu-Léger remarks that they shared the "observation of the measurable collapse of the world of observances within which the lived religion of the French had organized itself for centuries." Other historical moments may not have this magnitude or be as readily apparent until we develop a more comprehensive map of practices. Among the steps in this direction is Leigh Eric Schmidt's narrative of the rise and fall of sacramental feasts in the Church of Scotland; he has also described the reshaping of the Protestant (or American) calendar that began to unfold in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁵ It may also be that certain paradigms of change deserve to be rethought, as Anne S. Brown and I attempt with "declension" in early New England in light of the practices we describe. Not only is there much work to do on these times of transition; we also need to translate the great "isms" of church history into modalities of practice—say, the practices that distinguish or were central to Protestant liberalism as it arose in the late nineteenth century, as distinct from practices that were characteristic of other movements in that period. The time-bound shape of practice surely looks

different if we view it from the standpoint of women's participation, as several of the essays that follow suggest. It may also look different if we inquire into regulation (to borrow a term from Hervieu-Léger) or take seriously the perspective of the theologian.

Let me close by returning to the Lilly workplan. It should be clear that lived religion as I have described it is an imperfect tool for getting at the "person in the pew," for the fullness of any person's religious practice cannot be summed up by what happens in a single location. Meredith McGuire's remark in *Ritual Healing in Suburban America* that, on any given day, a suburban housewife in the Northeast United States employs five different theologies of healing is an apt reminder of the compounding of possibilities in modern times.⁶ Because lived religion is (as Hervieu-Léger suggests) "fluid, mobile, and incompletely structured," the essays in *Lived Religion in America* do more, or possibly less, than was entertained by the authors of the Lilly workplan. Nonetheless, these essays all acknowledge the imperative of charting the practices of the laity. As Orsi warns us, this imperative can evolve into an overemphasis on agency. Yet these essays surely reveal that regulation is ongoing within the most fluid of movements. To cite but one example, regulation inheres in the structure of certain master narratives, as happens among the women who gather to share stories of misfortune and healing and, we may also imagine, among the readers of Mrs. Cowman's *Streams in the Desert* and the participants in homesteading. Let me acknowledge, however, that it remains a challenging task to think historically about the normative and regulating dimensions of lived religion.

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NOTES

1. A genre to which Ammerman has contributed an excellent case study, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987). In the course that I taught at Harvard Divinity School on lived religion, we also came to appreciate an anthropologically oriented town study by Carol J. Greenhouse, *Praying for Justice: Faith, Order, and Community in an American Town* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986). Perhaps the most informative exercise in the course has been to analyze an entire year's worth of a parish weekly newsletter, in this instance the (UCC) Church of the Apostles, Lancaster, Pa.

2. Narrative is also at the center of James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989).

3. See Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 126–66 (a reference I owe to Tim Morehouse); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

4. I owe some of this language to John McGreevy.

5. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); idem, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

6. Meredith B. McGuire, *Ritual Healing in Suburban America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988).