Book Review


In his classic study on religious behavior, The Varieties of Religious Experience, William James describes a conversion experience as the process of unifying a divided self. Challenging psychoanalytic and other socio-political positions that portrayed religious experience as pathological or destructive, James affirms, through quantitative and qualitative assessment, that a life of faith can provide meaning and contribute stability to the mental health of individuals. Although she does not trace her origins to James, Inger Furseth, author of From Quest for Truth to Being Oneself: Religious Change in Life Stories attempts to extend the insights of James as they apply to the postmodern world. Furseth correctly observes that today our religious life is as likely to be implicit as it is explicit. She also highlights the often fragmentary and complex nature of contemporary religious experience. But rather than dismiss these traits as an indication that individuals have trivialized or abandoned religious life, Furseth demonstrates—through quantitative research and analysis and by way of qualitative personal narratives—that the motives and goals once satisfied by traditional religious experience continue to be relevant; what has changed is how that religious meaning is sought, discovered, experienced, described, interpreted, and sustained.

The site of Furseth’s ethnography is Norway, a country one typically does not associate with religious identification. Nonetheless she is able to arrive at and support through data three features of the changing religious landscape: individuals have moved teleological outcomes of religious faith from ‘finding truth’ to ‘being oneself’; claims for authenticity and totality characterize the goals of religious investigation; and fragmentation and pluralization of meaning systems co-exist. All these traits affect not only individual behavior but also social and cultural behavior, leading to adapted concepts of community. The core features of all the examples she provides are an overwhelming individualism and subjectivism wherein the ordering of religious ideas and experiences provides personal enhancement and extensions of personal ‘selves’. The author adds deeper complexity to her observations when she supports a gendered reading of the data.
In addition to the conclusions that the author reaches about contemporary religious belief, a distinguishing feature of the text is the combination of survey data and life story interviews. The approaches complement and supplement each other, and suggest perhaps a principle of sociological work as applied to religious studies: that quantitative or qualitative assessments alone are inadequate to describe and understand religious life. Her data also support the notion that ‘the measurement of individual religious identity is more valid for the extreme categories than for the categories in the middle’.

Despite the strengths of the study, and the contributions the author makes to our understanding of religious behavior, the reader is left wondering why this work was published as a book. It is an exemplary dissertation, inasmuch as it provides an adequate historical literature review, a defined thesis, appropriately accumulated data and interpretation of that data. It is a competent exercise in research that provides an original contribution to knowledge. But all these merits would have been better displayed in a solid journal article. There is simply not enough compelling information to sustain a book length study or enough stylistic felicity to support engaged attention. The research parameters are very limited, as the example drawn from Norway does not lend itself to a broader application or support the kind of extended reflection on a topic that would characterize a solid monograph. Although the author does recognize gender as a factor, the aforementioned weakness is especially problematic in our complex and multicultural world, where the ethnic homogeneity and economic affluence of a country like Norway offers little by way of comparison.

The author is aware of some of her limitations, but not all. Her sources are predictable (Bellah, Berger, Weber, Ricoeur, Roof, Marty) but dated and incomplete (for example, William James is absent, as are contemporary theologians of narrative like Hauerwas, Scott, and Barbour). Furthermore, absent entirely is any discussion of autobiographical theory or literary critical interpretation of personal and/or spiritual narratives, a substantial oversight in a text that prides itself on recognizing the significance of narrative discourse. There is a vast array of hermeneutical tools which one can apply to autobiography and narrative, even oral history, that would enhance and strengthen the analysis of the interviews. Finally, many of the insights the author sets forth are obvious, well-accepted precepts, such as ‘life stories can provide rich data about religious identity, meanings, and discourse’, that do little to advance our knowledge or provide nuance to our understanding of the topic.

Perhaps it is not surprising that a work that identifies tensions between spirit and institution, self and society, and other dualisms characteristic of modern religious life should be challenged to negotiate the structural tension between a scientific and a literary approach to interpreting the religious landscape. As a sociological study of religious behavior the work is successful though limited; as a cultural study of spiritual narrative the work is not so successful. The
reader has no doubt about the absolute sincerity of the author in her motive and effort, but there just isn't enough interesting material to sustain a book. And there are qualities to the research that, in America at least, would mark it as woefully out of step. Having been the editor of a book series for Oxford University Press for the last six years, I see this book as an example of an ongoing problem in academic publishing. The author would have been more judiciously served by her editor if s/he had recommended that she write one excellent article instead of one average book.

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