



Lectures 10 & 11: Lived Religion & Religious Identity

Dr. Henry: What is Ritual?

Difficult to come up with objective definitions

Scholar Jonathan Z. Smith offers a different perspective, asserting that "ritual is above all an assertion of difference."

Rituals, then, employ culturally specific strategies to create differentiation.

Catherine Bell: 'ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the "sacred" and the "profane", and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors' (Bell 1992: 74)

Malory Nye: Rituals and Meaning

- A basic assumption about ritual action is that it has some sense of meaning and purpose, even if that meaning is not immediately obvious.
- The study of ritual often entails the search for these meanings, particularly in actions which appear meaningless either to observers or to those performing ritual actions.

He argues that a basic definition of ritual could be:

"A basic definition could even be that rituals are actions carried out for more than their utilitarian purpose. That is, rituals are actions which have meanings beyond the actions themselves. Perhaps a simpler – indeed minimalistic – definition of ritual is 'meaningful action'. (Nye 133)



Nye: Rituals and Symbolism

"[R]itual may be seen as 'symbolic action', and symbols are at the heart of rituals." (Nye 2014, 135)

- Symbols, in the context of understanding rituals, are things—either material or non-material—that represent more than just their physical characteristics.
- The things that are symbolic in the religious system itself are culturally determined, and we would have to have familiarity with that system to be able to determine what symbolic ritual action means.
- Example: The Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper, is a ritual in Christian traditions involving consumption of bread and wine. The symbolic meaning of the Eucharist varies among Christian denominations.
- Christians generally believe that during this ceremony, the bread represents the body of Jesus, and the wine represents his blood.

Nye: Rituals & Communication

“[R]ituals are often a means of communicating messages to participants. That is, through the performance of a ritual activity, those involved may come to be aware of some idea or concept or viewpoint.” (Nye 2014, 138)

-Communication can be subtle and non-subtle, verbal and non-verbal





Nye: Rituals and Rites of Passage

- Rituals have transformative power
- Some rituals can transform a participant's view of the world or themselves; confer new status, title; change social status, group membership
- Happens in significant times of life (eg. birth, adulthood, death)
- Main participants are transformed into a new state with a different lifestyle, identity, and social group
- Two notable scholars are Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep

Arnold van Gennep: Rites of Passage

- Rites of passage consist of three crucial stages: separation, liminality, and incorporation
- Participants initially undergo **separation (pre-liminal stage)**, detaching from their usual world, roles, and obligations
- The **transition or liminal stage** is marked by crossing a symbolic threshold and is a vital part of the transformative process
- The final **incorporation or post-liminal** stage signifies the participants' return as transformed individuals with new roles
- Van Gennep emphasized the variability of these stages, with no fixed duration



Liminality (the in-between stage)

- The phase of liminality is emphasized here as it is the crossing between the before and after
- Liminality is the space of change where participants are fundamentally transformed
- The liminal stage often involves a passage or movement, which can be physical or symbolic
- The liminal stage may entail an inversion of 'normal' life, marked by different forms of dress, place, and behavior
- Behavior during the liminal stage may be the opposite of what is usually considered correct
- Alternatively, solemn behavior requiring isolation and quiet contemplation may be expected

Lived Religion

Scholars of religion ask: how is religion "lived" by the faithful? What do they believe in? How do they manifest these beliefs in formal or informal practices? How do they organize their daily lives according to these beliefs? How does this "informal" religion reconcile itself with the "formal" religion, controlled by religious authority?

Lived Religion movement develops to deal with these questions

Lived religion is a framework developed in religious studies for understanding the religion as it is practiced by ordinary people in the contexts of everyday life, including domestic, work, commercial, community, and institutional religious settings.

The term comes from the French tradition of sociology of religion, or "*la religion vécue*" (Lived Religion) - adopted into multiple fields

Scholars of Lived Religion movement include: David Hall, Robert Orsi

Lived Religion seeks to correct:

- Overemphasis on interpreting texts and studying elites.
- Assumptions about the separation of sacred and profane realms of religious practice.
- Emphasis on examining texts in early religious studies.
- Approach challenges the dominant influence of Protestant Christian norms (emphasizing primacy of belief)



Lived Religion Approach

Everyday settings: study non-institutional settings (homes, community gathering places, etc)

Ordinary people: non-elite practitioners

Shift from studying belief to studying practice

Acknowledging religious diversity and pluralism

Material Culture: how physical objects and spaces contribute to religious practice

Descriptive and Interpretive approach: scholars observe people in their everyday settings and consider their self-understanding of religion

Robert Orsi:

"[T]o study lived religion entails a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and of what it means to be "religious." Religion is not only not *sui generis*, distinct from other dimensions of experience called "profane." Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life." (Orsi 1997, 7)

"[T]he focus on lived religion...points us to religion as it is shaped and experienced in the interplay among venues of everyday experience...in the necessary and mutually transforming exchanges between religious authorities and the broader communities of practitioners, by real men and women in situations and relationships they have made and that have made them." (Orsi 1997, 9)

Religious Identity

- Qualities that make an individual or a group recognizable and unique.
- Encompasses a sense of self and the recognition of one's place in the world.
- Shaped by personal experiences, cultural influences, social interactions, and affiliations.

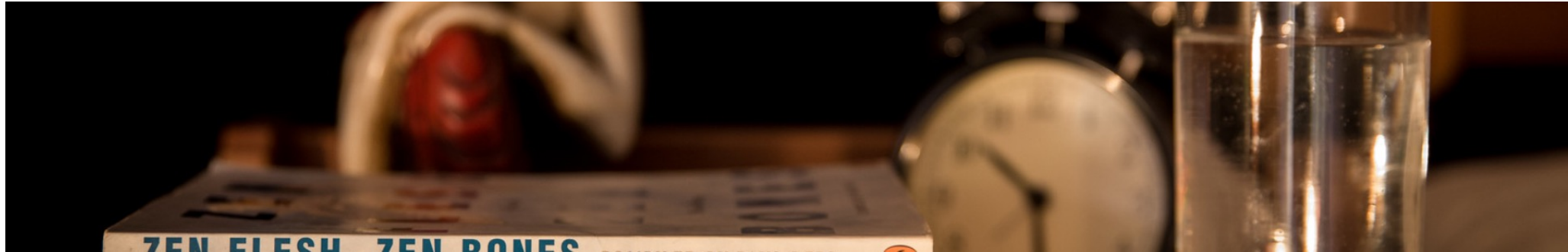
In the academic study of religion, scholars approach religious identity as a complex and multifaceted concept that involves individuals' affiliation with, and identification within, a particular religious tradition or community.

Religious identity encompasses a range of dimensions, including beliefs, practices, rituals, values, and social affiliations associated with a specific religious tradition.

Some key aspects of religious identity are:

1. Beliefs
2. Practices/Religious Actions
3. Community Affiliation
4. Ethical/Moral Framework
5. Personal Experience
6. Culture and Society





Thomas A. Tweed: "Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures"

Argues that, "most Western scholars of religion still have assumed that religious identity is singular and fixed, and that the subjects of studies fall into two categories: adherents and non-adherents." (17)

He also says: "I think that part of the problem in the study of Western Buddhism, and in religious studies more broadly, is that we continue to draw on essentialist-normative definitions of religious identity, those that construct a core or essence of right practice or belief and measure all historical expressions against it." (24)

Religion is complex and hybrid:

- Functional reasons make religious identity complex
- Varied practices and multiple traditions are drawn upon (especially when there is no penalty)
- Boundary crossing occurs in contexts with forbidden traditions and dominant norms (eg. hybridity of religion is observed in colonial contexts with forced conversions)
- Converts experience complexity due to shifts in practice and retention of old traditions (eg. conversion to the dominant religion often grants social mobility while retaining indigenous practices)

Religious Sympathizers: Do not self-identify with a tradition, but "dabble" by adopting parts of a religion



Religious adherents:

Dominant view among scholars: adherent is one who meets certain standards of orthodoxy or orthopraxy

What is Tweed's proposal for studying religious identity among adherents?

