

Introduction

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A key issue for the anthropological study of religion – especially of large world religions with long-lasting textual and institutional traditions – has been how to account for the complex duality of religion as an everyday practice and a normative doctrine. The problem is evident and well-known. If we ask people to explain how they understand belief, ritual, life and death, and if we look at the way such issues are presented and debated by experts, institutions, authorities and traditions of learning, we commonly gain an image of a specific religious tradition as a comprehensive metaphysical, moral and spiritual order. In such an order, the key problem is how to provide justifications and explanations, how to draw lines – in short, how to maintain the coherence of a religious world-view. If, on the other hand, we ask people about their specific concerns, experiences and trajectories, and if we look at the way people live lives of which religious beliefs and practices constitute a part, we gain an image in which religion is a highly immediate practice of making sense of one's life, coming to terms with fear and ambivalence, all-present at times and absent at other times, very sincere in some moments, and contradictory in other moments. In such a practice, the key problem is how to navigate a course of life, and coherence and order are less of an issue.

There is quite some debate about whether and under what conditions 'religion' is a sustainable anthropological category (see, e.g. Asad 1993). And while our specific concern is with traditions and practices which are generally recognized as religious in some way, many of the themes of this book might be transferred to political ideologies, human rights discourse, and other powerful ways of making sense of the world (see Marshall, this volume). Our concern, however, is not with the question as to what is or is not religion (a question which is historically and culturally contextual and therefore has no general answer), but rather with accounting for a feature that appears to be characteristic of many of the most powerful religious traditions and practices around the world: they have a strongly normative character, offering compelling ways to act, to live, to be and to

perceive the world – and yet how people actually live religious lives appears to be a very different business.

Numerous solutions have been suggested to deal with this difference, some of them blunt, others subtle. One very influential solution has been to take the articulation of normative doctrine as the primary field of religion, and to look at the practical enactment (and non-enactment) of that doctrine as a secondary one, a watered-down ‘popular’ version of religion proper. This solution has been increasingly questioned in the past two decades, and there is wide recognition in the fields of anthropology and sociology of religion that we have to look at the ways religious beliefs on the one hand inform people’s subjectivities, and on the other hand allow people to make sense of their experiences and anxieties. In short, it has become clear that there is little use in distinguishing between religion proper and religion popular, be it in terms of institutions vs. laymen or in terms of doctrine vs. enactment. If there is such thing as religion proper, it involves all these.

And yet the hierarchy of a primary and secondary field of religion lives on. When we, the editors of this volume, met at a conference in 2007, our research on Muslims who see themselves as believers but live lives that are impious at times, was instinctively identified as dealing with ‘popular religion’ by many colleagues. Why were the kinds of religiosity we studied popular? Intrigued by this we decided to organize a panel on the subject at the EASA biannual conference in 2008 to pursue the question about what exactly it is that makes popular religion popular. The more we pursued the question during the panel, however, the clearer it became that we had to rethink the problematic altogether. This volume presents the outcome of that rethinking, suggesting that the persistence of the notion of the popular in spite of its well-known shortcomings points out at a gap in the anthropological approaches to religion, a gap that is located exactly in that moment where daily practice and grand schemes come together. And they often come together in contradiction as people navigate a complex and inconsistent course of life partly by evoking a higher moral, metaphysical and spiritual order.

Building on ethnographic studies from various locations and from different religious traditions around the world, we argue for a view that takes this everyday practice (in the sense developed by Michel de Certeau) of religion as the starting point, looking at actual lived experiences and their existential significance for the people involved. Grand schemes constitute one part of this experience – in fact a highly important one, and their significance lies precisely in their grandness, in their being posited above and outside the struggles and manifold paths of daily life. Doing so, they can be evoked, they can offer guidance, and they can be employed in the use of power. But all of this is only possible through the actual little practices of evoking authority, searching guidance, exercising power – practices that are always also informed by the lifeworld they are embedded in, ‘the

knowledge whereby one lives a life' (Jackson 1996: 2). Herein lies the often amazing power of persuasion that religious traditions can have. And herein lies also the plural, complex and essentially unsystematic nature of religion as lived practice.

With this book, we do not claim to offer anything even distantly approaching a general vision of religion and everyday experience. But we do suggest that the elusive nature of religion as part of a complex ordinary life can be better understood through the notion of the everyday and through an existential, phenomenological perspective that grants primacy to the complexity and openness of practices and experiences.

From the Popular to the Everyday

The question about the relationship of grand schemes and ordinary life became an issue for anthropology after the World War II as anthropologists, moving forward from an academic tradition once primarily focussed on 'primitive' and 'small-scale' societies, increasingly came to look at global power relations and industrial societies. Doing so, they also slowly began to develop an interest in established world religions like Christianity and Islam. It is in this context of a widening focus of the ethnographers' outlook on the world that the relationship of people's immediate practices and stories with grand systemic, economic and ideological frameworks first became a key analytical problematic.

It was in this time that Robert Redfield, a Chicago School sociologist, came up with analytical directions to pursue the problematic that have remained influential until our day (Redfield 1960a; 1960b). Redfield tries to understand the society and culture of small village communities, and he argues that these communities can never be understood on their own terms as cultural isolates. Peasant communities especially, Redfield argues, are heavily dependent on the political, religious, economic, educational and other influences of the metropolitan centres, an influence that makes them what they are, but in which they never have a full share. To account for the way all communities are influenced by and dependent upon each other, albeit in an unequal way, Redfield describes the dominant culture of the urban centres and high civilization as 'the great tradition', and the dependent culture of the villages as 'the little tradition'. (Redfield 1960a: 146)

Redfield's articulation of great and little traditions inspired a generation of scholars to conceptualize the differences, transformations and exchanges of – especially religious – traditions. One of the most influential (and most problematic) proponents of this line of study has been Ernest Gellner (1981) who develops a holistic view of Islam as 'the blueprint of a social order' that consists of two clearly distinct variants, interdependent but always distinct and often antagonistic: a central, orthodox, intellec-

tual, potentially modernising ‘great’ variant and a peripheral, heterodox, ecstatic, traditional ‘little’ variant.

Gellner’s vision, influential though it has been, was contested from the beginning on by ethnographies that offered a more nuanced look at Muslims’ religious lives without resorting to such sharp dichotomies (see, e.g. Gilсэнan 1982). In past decades, it has become widely accepted in the anthropology of religion that the notions of great and little tradition, and of official and popular religion, are problematic by default because they are based on an implicit recognition of a hierarchy. Meredith McGuire (2008: 45–46) points out that such notions are based on a distinction between a proper realm of ‘real’ religion, and a secondary realm of (semi-) religious practices and beliefs that are seen to be something less than the real thing. Doing so, they take for granted hierarchies of class, gender, expertise, political power and access to public that should better be made the focus of study. The fact that deviation thus understood has often been appreciated, even celebrated as a moment of popular resistance (see, e.g., Fawzi 1992; Scott 1990) does not change the core hierarchy involved.

Furthermore, the distinction of great and little traditions offers a dichotomous image of the pure religious doctrine of the specialists vs. the syncretistic practice of the ordinary people which is more often than not empirically wrong. The power of religious establishments to systematically discipline their followers is, in fact, a rather modern phenomenon (McGuire 2008: 41). And in our time, many of the most powerful movements promoting rigorous anti-syncretism – such as the revivalist movements in Islam, Pentecostalist churches in Christianity, and indigenous religious movements resisting the pressure of missionary religions – are largely carried out by people without formal religious education and at times in open confrontation with religious establishments (Gifford 1998; Bowie 1999; Bowie 2006; Hirschkind 2006b; Laffan 2007). Religious establishments in turn – notably the Catholic and Orthodox churches – are often intimately involved in promoting and organising religious practices which they frame as ‘popular’ (see Mesaritou, this volume).

But if the answers inspired by Redfield’s work have been proven wrong, the question he phrases is still worth asking. At the time of its emergence, the notion of great and little traditions seemed to solve a key problem: How to account for the way ideas travel, transform and become part of people’s lives? How can we account for people’s belonging to traditions, living complex lives and evoking great powers and grand schemes in a way that does justice to their unity in everyday practice?

One solution has been presented by Catherine Albanese (1996) who argues for an understanding of the popular in relation to religion that is not based on a hierarchical model but instead takes popularity in the sense of very wide circulation and (typically electronic) mediation. While this approach to religion as part of popular/mass culture may prove itself useful where priests turn to stars and rites of initiation are recorded on video

in a way to look like a telenovela (van de Port 2005; 2006), we still lack an approach to those many things in everyday life that are not (or not primarily) linked to the mass mediation that defines the analytic value of 'the popular' in this context. In fact, much of what is commonly described as 'popular religion' is not mass mediated and often not even known to a wide audience: devotional practices and objects, saints veneration, healing, divination, festive culture, etc. These are often highly personal practices, and sometimes secretive or socially marginal. They require a different kind of account.

It is therefore helpful to turn to the large body of literature that develops approaches to the complexity of religious practice that do without the notion of popularity and without hierarchical models of the proper and the secondary. We should take the popular seriously as an emic category that, inspired by Christian theology, nationalism, folklore studies, the social sciences, etc., has become a very powerful notion in service of claims to orthodoxy and authority around the world. Yet when it comes to issues of syncretism, travelling ideas, different styles of religiosity, and the place and significance of religious practice and concepts in people's life experiences, different approaches are needed.

In their edited volume *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism*, Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (1994) develop an approach that can be helpful when we try to think about the daily significance of grand schemes not as something ready and separate from daily life, but as something that is continuously in construction. Religious beliefs and practices do not simply mix with other traditions, cultural models, and ideologies; more than that, their development and articulation, their growth and decline, emerge from a lived engagement with a multitude of ideas, expectations, pressures and possibilities. This engagement does not necessarily take the form of a friendly and inclusive syncretism – Stewart and Shaw show that it can also take the form of anti-syncretism, a demand for purification for the sake of an untainted authenticity. Religious synthesis, Stewart and Shaw argue, is essentially a practical, political matter, and therefore essentially contested (1994: 2; see also Meyer 2006; Feuchtwang 2001). For us, this opens the question about the work involved when people try to find and establish new or authentic bases for life and action. To look at attempts of organising life and universe is also to look at the uncertainty and complexity of life that people try to thus put into order. Finally it is to look at what happens to life as people try to do such ordering.

In this regard, the issue of ritual has inspired some very interesting and useful approaches that deserve closer attention. One very interesting approach to the relationship of ritual and doctrine has been offered by Talal Asad (1986) who argues that the attempts by anthropologists (especially Gellner) to define what Islam is have all been unable to come up with a satisfactory solution because they have looked at the religion of Muslims in a fragmentary fashion, split into separate entities defined by region or

class that have very little to do with the way Muslims see their religion. Instead, Asad suggests, we need to look at Islam as a discursive tradition that is constituted by the way Muslims make reference to their textual sources (the Qur'ân and the authoritative traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), debate them, and try to reach a coherent normative sense of correct practices, their aims and shapes.

Asad's intervention has been followed by a veritable wave of anthropological research that shows that Muslims are engaged in debating and enacting their religious tradition in a way that makes a hierarchy between proper and popular religion irrelevant (Bowen 1993; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Hirschkind 2006a; Osella and Osella 2008). The question of orthodoxy, in consequence, becomes a political one: orthodoxy is nothing else than the capability to credibly claim to represent the true, correct reading and practice of a tradition – a position that is subject to change and contestation. Orthodoxy is thus never given, and cannot be made the starting point of the anthropological study of a religious tradition.

This is a very fruitful approach which probably could be made to work in regard to other religious, quasi-religious and non-religious traditions as well: Christianity, Marxism, the human rights discourse and academic standards of scientific research could probably all be shown to have a similar sense of discursive connectedness to founding persons and texts, a living tradition of debate, a concern with correct practice, an outlook towards a history and a future, and an aim to reach normative coherence. But as a solution to the problem of accounting for the relationship of grand schemes and lived practice, Asad's notion of tradition is only a partial one. This becomes evident when we look at one of the most influential works inspired by Asad: Saba Mahmood's (2005) study on the Muslim women's piety movement in Cairo, Egypt.

Looking at the way women of the piety movement try to make their own pious, God-fearing attitude, Mahmood argues that bodily practices such as praying and weeping are not merely instruments of indoctrination but core elements of a sense of the relationship of the body and the virtues of a Muslim, informed by a discursive tradition. Pursuing to enact that relationship, the women in the movement are not being simply oppressed nor are they making choices of the autonomous, liberal kind. Instead, they are working to fulfil a sense of personality that they see as the right one by the power of the tradition they belong to.

Mahmood presents a convincing critique of feminist and liberal notions of freedom and volition that compels us to enquire what senses of embodiment and volition people have, rather than just assuming a pre-defined ideal. This approach becomes problematic, however, when we try to take it back to its original field of empirical enquiry: the lives of people who want to be good believers. Even when people are seriously engaged in trying to fulfil a certain moral ideal of themselves (and this is not always the case), this does not yet allow us to understand how such attempts

actually inform their lives, and for what reasons they resort to them. In practice people may refer to such perfectionist ideals not in order to reach perfection, but in order to make at least some sense of the imperfections and complexities of their lived experience (Jackson 1996; 2005).

In their book on Jaini ritual, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) develop an interesting approach on ritual that specifically looks at the intentions and meanings involved in engaging in ritual. They provide a useful working definition of ritual (in contrast to performance) as a modality of action characterized by an objective, external quality granted to it by those involved in the ritual. This is an understanding of ritual that can help us a step further to understand the peculiar relation of lived practice and grand schemes: the particular logic of performing a ritual entails that the act of ritual is granted some kind of independent existence outside and above the person performing it, and yet it only gains its significance because it is being performed by somebody with an intention. If we think with Humphrey's and Laidlaw's notion of ritual, the apparent perfection and factuality of grand schemes turns into a pragmatic condition of action. By being granted coherence and objective power, they become things that people approach, use and do. This allows for a high degree of ambiguity and leeway when it comes, for example, to the perfectionist nature of ritual obligations and moral ideals. Falling short of them does not make them less valid, and their being clearly different from how people actually live does not make them less useful as sources of guidance.

Albanese, Stewart and Shaw, Asad, Mahmood, and Humphrey and Laidlaw all offer useful directions to think about religious practice in a way that is not based on a hierarchy of proper and secondary religion. Why is it so difficult, then, to do without at times calling practices, ideas and traditions 'popular' when they seem to be characterized by an unruly and ambiguous relation to religious texts and authorities? It seems that these approaches, each with their specific focus, still leave open a question which continues to attract the shorthand notion of popularity (for a discussion of this problem from a historical perspective, see Cabral 1992). That question, we argue, is the same question which we posed at the beginning: how to account for the relationship of articulations of a coherent world-view and the practice and knowledge of living a life? In this volume we therefore focus specifically on situations which are characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, anxiety, creative play and contestation whereby people are engaged in living a life partly (but seldom if ever exclusively) by evoking, claiming or submitting to a sense of higher power. Such situations are not exceptional – they are, in fact, the essential way in which religion is lived as part of human lives in our time, as Lila Abu-Lughod reminds us:

Yet the dailiness, by breaking coherence and introducing time, trains our gaze on flux and contradiction; and the particulars suggest that others live as we per-

ceive ourselves living – not as automatons programmed according to ‘cultural’ rules or acting our social roles, but as people going through life wondering what they should do, making mistakes, being opinionated, vacillating, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragic personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of laughter. (Abu-Lughod 1993: 27)

This requires us to choose a different starting point. A religious life is inseparable from the wider course of life which involves different pursuits and interests, different emotions and experiences, varying periods and degrees of engagement, and complex motivations (see, e.g. Stafford 2008). This calls for an approach that is sensitive to the phenomenological unity of being and acting in the world in its complex ways.

Uses and Pursuits

The contributions of this volume develop a perspective on religion that focuses on everyday practice. Such everyday practice is complex in its nature, ambivalent, and at times contradictory. It is embedded in traditions, relations of power and social dynamics, but it is not determined by them. The task of an anthropology of religious practice is therefore precisely to see how people navigate and make sense of that complexity, and what the significance of religious beliefs and practices in a given setting can be.

Focussing on the everyday, we do not aim to make a distinction between experts and laymen, or between institutional and non-institutional forms of religion. In contrast to Nancy Ammerman who argues that ‘everyday implies the activity that happens outside organized religious events and institutions’ (Ammerman 2007: 5), we argue that everyday practice is not a matter of a social setting or a group of people, but a modality of action.

With the notion of the everyday, we lean on Michel de Certeau’s work. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* and other works, de Certeau established the study of everyday life as a valid academic subject in its own right. As his collaborator from the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life* Luce Giard writes, de Certeau was interested in ‘ways of doing (walking the streets, shopping, cooking, decorating one’s home or one’s car, talking to one’s neighbours)’ (2003: 2). His goal was to make ‘everyday practices, “ways of operating” or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity’ (de Certeau 1984: xi). By focusing on the ‘ways of doing’ de Certeau gives previously overdue attention to ‘the irreducibility of practice that is a thorn in the side of the crafting of hegemonic knowledge’ (Napolitano and Pratten 2007: 5). De Certeau did not agree with the hierarchy of high culture versus popular culture, a dichotomy in which popular culture is always since a second best. But he was highly attentive to the power relations under which everyday practices take place, therefore turning his glance to the way in which people

who act under circumstances they have limited influence on make do with them, arrange themselves within them and divert them without challenging them.

This point has found its perhaps most compelling expression in de Certeau's distinction of 'strategies' and 'tactics', the first being characterized by the abstract vantage point of power and a modality of action involved in outlining systems and totalizing discourses, while the latter is characterized by quick moves, manipulations and diversions that make use of the system without seriously trying to challenge it. Such tactical uses, de Certeau argues, are indeterministic but not autonomous: they can divert a system but they cannot avoid it. It is this peculiar relationship of 'strategies' and 'tactics' that in our view makes de Certeau's approach to the everyday a highly fruitful tool for accounting for religious practice, albeit with some modifications.

The most significant modification has to do with the notion of 'uses'. Looking at the practice of consumption, de Certeau asks: 'The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers of the supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends – what do they make of what they "absorb", receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?' (1984: 31)

This is, essentially, the question which we can also ask about all those complicated things people commonly call 'religion' – but with the modification that these things are not just out there to be used; they would have never existed without a use. A church is truly a church only when it is an active place of worship. A holy book is truly a holy book only when it is read, interpreted, referred to for guidance, for authority, for divination, for protection. This use is grounded in communities, traditions, hierarchies, but it is also at the same time constitutive of them on a daily basis as the source of countless small adjustments, shifts and pragmatic considerations that, in long run, make up a religion in its historical continuity and geographic spread.

This means that common knowledge and everyday practices are not just a way to manipulate grand schemes, but are constitutive of them on every step. Here it may be necessary to critically revise de Certeau's approach to the relationship of the powerful and the weak. De Certeau's analysis, valorization and, at times, celebration of everyday practice is based on an explicit political concern: 'We are concerned with battles or games between the strong and the weak, and with the "actions" which remain possible for the latter' (de Certeau 1984: 34; see also Napolitano and Pratten 2007). But who, in the case of religious practice, are the strong and the weak? The distinction of powerful clergy and weak laymen was always questionable, and it has become even more so in the current times of lay movements successfully promoting an anti-syncretistic, strict and unforgiving sense of religion and of religious establishments involved in tactical moves towards political powers and public opinion. Thus the 'strategies'

of the vantage point of power and spatial planning which de Certeau describes appear as only partly external to the condition of daily 'tactics'. Everyday practice may subvert and divert grand strategies, as de Certeau argues, but it may also be aimed at achieving an even greater rigour. The question, then, is what makes specific articulations so compelling? Why do some search for rigour while some search for reconciliation, and some simply try not to be bothered?

Here Michael Jackson's approach of highlighting the existential primacy of lived knowledge is helpful to amend de Certeau's notion of the everyday. Jackson convincingly argues that we need to be attentive to the practical knowledge of living a life, and to its existential significance rather than its ideological justifications: 'The meaning of practical knowledge lies in what is accomplished through it, not in what conceptual order may be said to underlie or precede it' (Jackson 1996: 34). This, in turn, implies that different practical concerns are likely to inform different articulations of a conceptual order: 'People tend to assent to notions of absolute authority and objective knowledge in situations of personal crisis. On occasion, therefore, such beliefs are instrumentally necessary and existentially true because they help people regain effective control over their lives' (13).

In his recent study on Muslim prayer in Indonesia, Gregory Simon (2009) shows that while the people he worked with would often articulate very clear and specific ideals of proper Muslim subjectivity, their own lives often looked very different. This difference, Simon argues, should not be understood either as people falling short of their religious discourse, or the discourse containing impossible demands. Instead, the Muslim prayer's

key position as an Islamic practice allows it to serve as a site of crystallization for the tensions that pervade moral selfhood in everyday life. The ritual offers the possibility of experiencing their resolution – or being faced with their stubborn endurance. It may push people toward at least momentary transcendence, but the elusiveness of this promised transcendence may also be a source of anxiety and frustration. (Simon 2009: 265)

Such moments can help us understand how and with what kinds of intentions people may engage with religious notions and practices. Religious grand schemes can be so powerful because believers locate them outside their lifeworld to grant them the purity and certainty which life can never have. This allows them to be evoked to navigate the complexities of life: the horizons, the social relations, the promises, the pressures, the necessities, the desires, the fashions and the discussions that together make up in a given moment what is important, what is possible, what can and what needs to be done and thought. But this does not mean that this actually 'works' in the instrumental sense, nor does it mean that the grand schemes and powers evoked remain truly external, out there in heaven. Robert Orsi (2005) argues that we should understand religious practice and lives as relational, as people develop intimate and emotional relationships with

God, saints, etc., much the way they do with family and friends, and with the same complex and strong emotions like hope, love and consolation, but also pain, fear and betrayal. These are necessarily open and indeterminate relationships that cannot be deducted from discursive rationalizations. They are also highly ambivalent. The things that offer people moments of dignity, hope and recognition are often the same things that also produce greater suffering, further marginalization and repeated denial (Orsi 2005; McGuire 2008: 53). We do not see this as an inconsistency that needs to be solved in favour of the one or other version of people's lives and words. Ambivalence and inconsistency are more helpful for anthropologists when they are taken seriously, rather than just solved (Ewing 1990; Berlin 1990).

Arguing for the openness, indeterminacy and ambiguity of religious practice does not mean choice in a liberal sense. People in most cases have little choice – on the contrary they cope with circumstances over which they have little or no power. This becomes obvious when we look at the issue of consumption that is crucial for the last two empirical chapters of this volume. While consumption under conditions of contemporary capitalism is essentially framed in terms of choice, and also religious trajectories tend to gain the flavour of consumerist choices, in practice being a consumer means facing a powerful framework of compelling pursuits that makes some choices much more likely than others. Both disciplinary (e.g. Appadurai 1996: 66–85) and anti-disciplinary (e.g. de Certeau 1984) approaches to consumption share this insight: to consume is to make do with powerful paradigms of life one faces day by day. As Daniel Miller points out, the practice of 'making do' does contain a transformative power. The object of consumption is transformed by the personal relationships it enters (Miller 1993). The agency of the consumer, however, does not lie in the moment of choice, but in the emotional work of living with what one ends up consuming (Miller 2008).

Therefore we do not follow the line of research that emphasizes individuality, fluidity and choice as characteristic moments of modern religion – or more specifically, religion in modern Europe and Northern America (Ammerman 2007; Hunt 2005; Davie 2000; Hervieu-Léger 1999). While we do argue that there is always some room for playfulness and bricolage, we also want to point out that in most parts of the world – also in many parts of Europe and North America – the spaces of action are limited, and religious experience continues to be characterized by a precarious balance of hope and tragic suffering (Orsi 2005; Smilde 2007; Ortner 1989). Playfulness is the child of this precarious balance.

With this approach, we join a wider current of attempts to find grounds to study the human condition beyond the duality of psychology and society, subject and object, body and mind that is implicit in traditions of anthropology that highlight structures, symbols, meaning and discursive rationality (Jackson 1996; Ingold 2000; Tomlinson and Engelke 2006).

While emphasising the phenomenological unity of knowledge, practice and experience, we do not aim to open a separate empirical field in the study of religion. In fact, the contributors of this volume all take up established topics in the anthropology of religion: divination, ritual, prayer, cult of saints, authority, community, pilgrimage, festive culture, syncretism, congregations, afterworld, etc. But they approach these topics from the specific point of view of everyday practice, an approach which, we hope, will offer a better understanding of what is actually involved in consulting a diviner, performing a ritual, praying to God, venerating a saint, evoking authority, living together, undertaking a pilgrimage, celebrating a festival, combining ideas and expecting a life after death.

Outline of Chapters

The individual chapters of this volume develop the different aspects of the general argument on the basis of detailed ethnographic fieldwork in different locations around the world. Christian and Muslim religious practice feature most prominently, a pragmatic choice based primarily on our view that to include different aspects of the general problematic was more important than including as many religious traditions as possible.

The first two chapters by Knut Graw and Liza Debevec develop the core argument of the volume about the need to look at everyday uses and their existential significance. Graw suggests that we can look at divination in Senegal and Gambia as an ‘intentional space’ in which people are able to articulate their anxieties, concerns and plans for future. From this perspective, the most important question regarding divination is how people use it to make sense of their often confusing and troubled experiences and expectations. Debevec looks at Muslims in urban Burkina Faso who claim that they are waiting for the right time to start performing the five daily prayers on a regular basis. Their explanations are based on vernacular notions of piety that allow them to accommodate different pressures, urges and aims without having to openly challenge any of them.

The two chapters by Alison Marshall and Giovanna Bacchiddu take up the issue of community-making through everyday sociality. Marshall examines the ‘doing’ of religion in relation to community-making in a situation where various religious and political discourses came together in the life of a Chinese migrant community in Manitoba, showing how the ambiguity of complex relationships and identities was essential for the Chinese migrants’ social and family lives. Bacchiddu highlights the way a unique version of religiosity indirectly pervades social interactions and regularly builds and regenerates the community on the Island of Apiao in southern Chile. While the inhabitants of Apiao insist on being good Catholics, being a good Catholic in Apiao has little to do with adherence to the official Church’s doctrine.

The two chapters that follow, by Séverine Rey and Evgenia Mesaritou, turn the focus to the issue of acting under conditions of hierarchy, authority and power. Rey interrogates the apparition of three saints in Lesvos, Greece from a gender perspective. She shows how the theological notion of ‘popular piety’ was used by the Greek Orthodox Church in a tactical and ambiguous way that allowed it to claim its competence towards laywomen who initiated the apparition. Mesaritou illustrates the role of the spatial context at a pilgrimage site in Italy where the organizers and visitors have quite diverging visions of the proper meaning of the place. Doing so, she thus turns our attention from the tactics of establishing authority to the question of the possible agency of those who are at the weaker end of the relationship.

The last two empirical chapters, by Jennifer Peterson and Samuli Schielke, take up the issue of complexity that appears as the essential condition of everyday uses. Peterson explores a trend of grassroots Egyptian dance music inspired by Muslim saints-day festivals. She explores the ways that the producers and fans of this dance trend navigate notions of both street-smart coolness and spiritual virtue, seeking to strike a balance between the piously moral and the jadedly tough. Schielke explores the intertwining of capitalist consumption and religious revival in Egypt after the downfall of Arab socialism, showing how economic and religious promises come closely together as a source of both hope and anxiety in people’s lives. As such, they are in turn informed and transformed by everyday existential concerns and uses, often in unexpected ways.

In the afterword, Robert Orsi relates these themes to the challenge posed by the persistence of everyday religiosities to modernist visions of world, arguing that if we want to understand the political power of the so-called fundamentalist movements across the world, we must first take seriously the persistent enchantment of the world beyond the binaries that so often characterize academic thinking about religion. For better or worse, the lived reality of gods and great powers is a fundamental moment of the human condition also in the modern era.

Note

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