**SACRED STORIES, SPIRITUAL TRIBES: Finding Religion in Everyday Life**

**By Nancy Tatom Ammerman (Oxford University Press – 2014)**

**Book Review by Rev. Don Eastman – 2017; updated 2022**

*“Congregations gain their potency as spiritual tribes, not through their exclusivity or high boundaries but to the degree that they create spaces for and encourage opportunities to imagine and speak about everyday realities through the lens of sacred consciousness.” Nancy Tatom Ammerman (Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes, p 302)*

Everyone has a story. For most people that story has a religious and/or spiritual dimension. A major study by sociologist Nancy Tatom Ammerman brings new insights on religion and spirituality in the everyday lives of Americans. By listening carefully to the stories of 95 people, Ammerman and her team of researchers were able to gain in-depth perspectives on the wide range of religious/spiritual understandings, commitments, and practices today.

Ammerman and her associates at Boston University and Emory University (Atlanta) attempted to “recruit a group of participants that would, as closely as possible, mirror the religious demography of the United States.” Respondents were selected in the large urban areas of Boston and Atlanta. Most of them –84– were affiliated with 17 religious bodies reflecting the diversity of religion in America. The remaining 11 were unaffiliated. Extensive details of the methods of this study are given in the book’s three appendices.

Stories were obtained from respondents in various ways. They first responded to a questionnaire that provided demographic data and included the question, “Today, how important is religion to you personally?” Researchers conducted an initial life history interview with each respondent. Respondents were given cameras and asked to take photos of places important to them. They were also given tape recorders with which to make daily verbal journals. All of the data were transcribed, coded, and processed through qualitative data analysis software. This occurred between 2006 and 2008.

Various studies over recent decades have made a distinction between religion and spirituality, making common the phrase “spiritual but not religious.” But this study reveals that for most people the two overlap. According to Ammerman, one problem with such studies is that “the surveys fail to tell us what the respondents mean by either of these terms.” She and her associates took a different approach. They relied on descriptions by participants to identify practices the respondents considered spiritual and/or religious.

**Talking About Spirituality**

What do we mean when we talk about spirituality? Ammerman’s team “chose to look for the way definitions show up in everyday life.” They discovered *four types of spiritual discourse*. The first and most common (used by 71%) is *Theistic*. Its language is about God and one’s relationship with God. It’s about mystery and miracles. The second (used by 57%) is *Extra-Theistic*. Its language is about a sense of awe in the beauty seen in the world; about the interconnectedness of all life; about the inner core of self worth. Importantly, many people embrace the language of both of these types.

The third type of spiritual discourse is *Ethical*. In earlier work, Ammerman has identified this as “Golden Rule” spirituality. It is wide-spread and present in virtually all spiritual tribes. But it is the prominent feature of some. It speaks the language of kindness and compassion. It’s about loving God and one’s neighbor as oneself. Yet, it requires deeds as well as words. It results in serving a purpose larger than oneself. As Ammerman says, “It provides guidance for how people treat each other.”

*Spiritual but not religious* is the fourth type of spiritual discourse in today’s world. It was rarely used by the participants in this study. The two types of respondents who did use this language were 1) some of the unaffiliated and non-attendees of worship services; and 2) some conservative Protestants who had left a previous religion they considered to be “empty” in favor of deep personal spirituality.

What were people talking about when they referenced spirituality or described something spiritual? There were eleven identifiable themes for which participants used the designation “spiritual.”

1. 79% -- associated spirituality with participating in a religious institution or tradition to get the spiritual sustenance that is needed.
2. 73% -- spoke in of spirituality in terms of living a life of caring or serving, being a good person who lives by the Golden Rule.
3. 72% -- linked spirituality with God, talking about divine presence and relationship; a sense of friendship with God.
4. 60% -- identified spirituality with particular practices which people engage as disciplines or activities (such as study and prayer) that are seen as links to the spiritual domain.
5. 53% -- linked spirituality with mystery; miraculous or unexplained happenings that they saw as something beyond everyday reality.
6. 51% -- saw spirituality as finding a sense of meaning in life, such as a kind of wholeness or purpose.
7. 49% -- associated spirituality with belief in God.
8. 49% -- talked about spirituality in terms of a transcendent sense of connections to others and to the world.
9. 47% -- cited group rituals as indicative of things spiritual.
10. 41% -- mentioned experiences of awe in face of the natural world or things of beauty as spiritual
11. 31% -- saw cultivating the self as a spirituality that develops the distinctive qualities or gifts of their own personality.

**Spiritual Engagement in Religious Communities**

One of the most valuable results of this study is the insight it provides on the spiritual engagement of congregants. Those identified as *spiritually engaged* spoke about their spiritual lives as highly important and actively pursued individual spiritual practices. Most previous studies of religious participation focused only on frequency of worship attendance. In contrast, this study addresses the questions “how do people participate and what difference does it make?” That said, frequency of worship attendance does correlate with spiritual engagement.

The practices of religion and spirituality in America, while not limited to, are strongly associated with participation in religious communities. Participants in this study told 1,186 stories about these communities. Ammerman observes, “These stories give us a window on what people are doing, learning and experiencing in these explicitly religious sites.” Most participants (64%) attended worship at least once a month; most of those (65%) attended weekly or more. They also spoke of a vast array of spiritual practices, some commonly practiced by most people; other practices were more unconventional.

A total of 778 stories about practices were identified and analyzed. Based on answers to the question on religion’s importance and on the frequency of references to spiritual/religious practices, researchers created a “*spirituality salience score*.” Participants were ranked from a low of 0 (no interest in spirituality) to 5 (seem to center much of their identity and activity on spiritual life).

Using the salience score, researchers ranked respondents in three categories; minimal spiritual interest, typical spiritual interest, or high spiritual interest. They further categorized respondents by attendance; rarely or never, 1-3 times per month, or weekly or more. Based on this construct five *levels of engagement* were established and the percentage of respondents at each level was reported. The levels and percentages were: *spiritually engaged* 27%; *spiritually typical* 37%; *marginal members* 20%; *spiritually disengaged* 15%; and *seeker* 1%.

Involvement in religious communities is the most common expression of spiritual engagement in America. The main form of such involvement is attendance at religious services. This is also the form of religious involvement most studied and reported by the various social sciences. The type and day(s) of such services vary by tradition, such as the Catholic mass, the Jewish Sabbath, or Protestant worship services. One factor in a person’s level of spiritual engagement is frequency of such attendance.

Some *spiritually engaged* congregants attend service from one to three times a month while most attend once a week or more. Beyond worship attendance, the *spiritually engaged* are more likely to be involved in the group life of their church. They are often engaged in learning, teaching, and leading; they are more likely to develop friendships. Ammerman notes that they “not only participate more often in their congregations but also have intimate conversations there about everyday life.” For them, “spirituality is deeply embedded in close social relationships.”

Although this pattern of the *spiritually engaged* is more common in conservative Protestant and Mormon congregations, Ammerman points out that “*Spiritually engaged* people are present in all the other traditions as well.” In these other traditions the spirituality being nurtured often speaks in language both *Theistic* and *Extra-theistic*. It may bring focus to the “spiritual dimensions of nature, community, and lives well lived.”

*Spiritually typical* congregants may attend services weekly or more, but most attend one to three times a month. For them, like the *spiritually engaged*, “worship is the most common subject of participation stories.” In contrast, the *spiritually typical* are more likely to talk about being inspired by the music or learning from the sermons. They are less likely to join small groups or classes for learning. They also “help keep their congregation running” but do so in ways different from the *spiritually engaged*. They are more likely to do “necessary work” in roles such as administration, finance, or governance.

In summary, Ammerman concludes that the *spiritually typical* “members participate in their religious communities for ordinary and practical reasons as well as the support and inspiration they find. It is less often a place where wide-ranging spiritual conversations take place.

*Marginal members* maintain some level of connection or affiliation with their faith community but rarely or never attend services. Some may participate in ways other than the religious services. Some may have stopped attending due to a change in their personal lives; for example, a recent move to a new area, a new job, family demands, aging, or health problems. Some continue to maintain spiritual practices on their own but they are “essentially without a spiritual tribe.”

The *spiritually disengaged* rarely or never attend religious service and they have minimal spiritual interest. All but one of them in this study “began life in a family that encouraged at least sporadic religious attendance. Ammerman says, “What all of the disaffiliated share is a way of telling their religious story that highlights the pains of the past.” They recall “the nasty characters and boring hours, the silly beliefs and meaningless rituals, the hypocrisy and the cultural pressure to conform.”

One participant in this study is called a *seeker*. He never attends the services of a religious community. Yet, he has high spiritual interest and is active in a wide range of spiritual practices. He is the one person who really fits the “spiritual but not religious” label.

**Spiritual Practices Everyday**

Engagement influences not only how people talk about spirituality but also how they act through spiritual practices. In this study spiritual practices are defined as the “meaningful actions that are deemed spiritual by the people who described them to us.” The study was “designed to catch patterns of varying degrees of seriousness and across a wide range of definitions of spirituality.”

Researchers relied on the participants to “identify the things they do that they think of as practices that are spiritual.” The resulting lists included “explicitly religious and spiritual practices – things about which there is common cultural agreement.” These are spiritual practices (such as prayer, Bible study, and church attendance) commonly measured by surveys. Prayer is the single most common spiritual practice heard in the stories of participants. Often drawing from the norms of their faith community, the forms of prayer could be regularly scripted rituals or impromptu, extemporaneous conversations.

Participants were also asked about actions they found spiritually meaningful that other people might not think of as spiritual. Their list of practices grew to a “rich collection of everyday stories” which opened a “broad window on how and where spiritual encounters are pursued in American life.” A remarkable strength of this study is the light it shines on the diversity of spirituality and spiritual practices. All the participants were named (pseudonyms) and parts of their stories were shared throughout the book.

Levels of engagement are related to the types of spiritual practices predominant in the daily lives of participants. Broadly speaking, spiritual practices cited by participants mirror the two main types of spiritual discourse; *theistic* and *extra-theistic*. This is somewhat similar to the findings of sociologist Reginald Bibby in his Project Canada studies of 1995 and 2005. In response to the question, “What do you mean by spirituality?” Respondents’ answers fell into two broad categories: *conventional* and *less conventional*.

In short, practices are influenced by a person’s spiritual tribe. Ammerman says, “The particular religious communities of which people are a part provided a repertoire of practices and expectations.” *Spiritually engaged* people “speak of their spiritual lives as highly salient and they actively pursue individual spiritual practices.” The practices of those who are *spiritually engaged* mostly align with Bibby’s category of *conventional* spirituality. Although *spiritually engaged* people are found in all religious traditions, they appear more often among Conservative Protestants and Mormons.

For *spiritually engaged* persons, “the life of the congregation is intimately tied to their own spiritual nurture and growth.”

* They attend worship regularly; 65% weekly or more and 35% from 1 to 3 times per month.
* They are more likely to spend time in routine Bible study (especially Conservative Protestants and Mormons; 92%).
* They are more involved in organized educational and spiritual nurture activities of their congregations such as classes, workshops, retreats, and small groups.
* They are more likely to be engaged in leadership roles within their spiritual tribes. This may involve serving in areas such as teaching, pastoral care, and/or leading small groups or other specific ministries.
* They tend to have a more robust spiritual life in the home. This may include family routines of practices/rituals of their religious traditions, the presence of religious symbols or artifacts, and/or other individualized spiritual practices.
* Ammerman observes that in all spiritual traditions the spiritually engaged “were more thoroughly immersed in the sacredness of everyday life than less spiritually engaged church members.

The *spiritually typical* make up the largest segment of this study, which is consistent with other major studies of religious participation and importance. Ammerman says, “Here in the middle of the spectrum, it is not so much spirituality that drives participation but participation that shapes spirituality….the effects of the religious community itself are readily apparent.”

* Typical members participate in their religious communities for ordinary and practical reasons such as gaining social capital and raising children. It is less often a place where wide-ranging spiritual conversations occur.
* As noted above, most of them attend worship regularly. But compared to the *spiritually engaged*, the pattern is reversed; 37% attend weekly or more and 63% attend from 1 to 3 times per month.
* Worship is the core practice of most typical members but their stories differ from the *spiritually engaged*. They are more likely to speak about what they gain from the sermons and they are more attuned to excellence in the music.
* They may participate in educational activities of their congregation but tend to do so less frequently than the *spiritually engaged* and with a more cognitive focus.
* Typical members spoke of a different kind of leadership such as balancing the finances, managing the property, or serving on boards; tasks that some may not think of in spiritual terms. As Ammerman perceptively quipped, “People seem rarely to meet God in the congregation’s boardroom.”

Religion is less important for *Marginal members* and they rarely attend worship services but “a little more than half of them remain somewhat interested in spiritual life, and about half of those are still marginally connected to their spiritual communities.” Those members may participate in their congregation in ways other than worship services. Other *marginal members* maintain whatever spiritual practices they have on their own.

**From my perspective there are three main take-aways from this remarkable study:**

1. We need to think of spirituality/religion in both/and rather than either/or terms. Spirituality is both profoundly personal and powerfully relational.
2. We need to appreciate religion/spirituality in all of its rich diversity. People are in very different places and spaces. The differences have always been vast and often valuable. Diversity is the design of God’s creation.
3. We need to focus on building connections, conversations, and community. It’s all about relationships. Social networks are the beating heart of the church as the Body of Christ.

*“The people with the most robust sense of sacred presence in everyday life are those who participate in religious activities that allow for conversation and relationship.”* *Nancy Tatom Ammerman (Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes, p 302)*

**Perspectives of Other Studies**

**American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us**

Written in 2010 by political scientists Robert Putnam (Harvard) and David Campbell (Notre Dame), this book explores the transformations of both polarization and pluralism in American religion. The authors discuss a number of dynamics, trends, and questions related to religion in America. At the core of this massive study are the Faith Matters Surveys conducted in two waves, first in 2006 with interviews of a nationally representative sample of 3108 individuals. In 2007 the second wave followed up with interviews of 1909 of those same individuals. The epilogue includes a 2011 update. Another key feature of this study is its “religiosity index,” based upon six questions related to participation, importance, and belief.” This is somewhat similar to the “salience score” of Ammerman’s study. This book is provides additional contemporaneous context to Ammerman’s *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*.

**Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion’s Demise and Rise and Why It Matters**

Written in 2011 by Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby (University of Lethbridge) this book also brings focus to polarization and pluralism but with an international perspective. It draws upon Bibby’s extensive Project Canada studies of religion that date back to 1975. See also his *2002/2004 book, Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*.

**A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion**

Published in 2005, this book is a collection of publications of sociologist R. Stephen Warner (University of Illinois/Chicago) between 1990 and 2004. It begins with his influential 1993 “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States.” This book is especially valuable for the insights it brings on diverse congregations that Warner has studied. Ammerman cites his publication on “Religion, Boundaries, and Bridges” as helpful for bridging religious differences.

**After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s**

Written in 1998 by sociologist Robert Wuthnow (Princeton), describes changes in American spirituality in the second half of the 20th century. He observes that the long-standing spirituality of dwelling had evolved into a spirituality of seeking and argues that the “ancient wisdom that emphasizes the idea of spiritual practices needs to be rediscovered,” a practice-oriented spirituality as a new alternative. Ammerman’s description of spiritual practices is informed by this ideal.

**Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith**

Written in 2006 by church historian Diana Butler Bass (UC-Santa Barbara/Virginia Theological Seminary), this inspiriting book is based upon an ethnographic study of healthy, growing mainline Protestant churches in the USA. This included 50 churches from 6 denominations. Bass identifies these vibrant churches as practicing congregations. They focused on 10 vital spiritual practices: Hospitality, discernment, healing, contemplation, testimony, diversity, justice, worship, reflection, and beauty.

**Growing an Engaged Church: How to Stop “Doing Church” and Start Being Church Again**

Written in 2006 by former Methodist pastor Albert L. Winseman, currently a Senior Consultant with the Gallup Organization, this book on the engagement of church members is rooted in the work of psychologist Donald Clifton (University of Nebraska) who pioneered strength-based psychology and developed a successful model for employee engagement in the workplace. It was then adapted for use in churches. Although very different from Ammerman’s approach, the Gallup model is helpful and I have developed a full book review on *Growing an Engaged Church*.