



Engaging with Living Religion: A Guide to Fieldwork in the Study of Religion

Grett, Stephen E.; and Scholefield Lynne
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015

Book Review

Tags: engaged learning | engaged teaching | teaching religion | theories and methods

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What is “religion”? Many would argue that religion is the single most important element of a person’s existence: “I am [Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, et cetera] and my understanding of reality is predicated by my religious affiliation.” Others would argue that it is nothing more than a sociological aspect of a person’s existence. “I am [Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, et cetera], and it is important to me in the same way that my Irish, Indian, or Russian heritage predicates my social interactions.” On one hand, we have persons who understand themselves within the context of their religion. On the other hand, we have persons who understand their religion within the context of themselves.

Yet, how does one define religion? One definition that I have found helpful for many years is from Winfried Corduan’s tome *Neighboring Faiths*: “A religion is a system of beliefs and practices that provides values to give life meaning and coherence by directing a person toward transcendence” (InterVarsity, 1998, 21). This definition provides a simple construct for understanding what religion is and what it does without taking sides. Whether one is on the devout or the affiliated end of the spectrum, people might generally agree that the purpose of religion is to teach people values that will give life meaning.

The next question, then, is how should students in higher educational classroom contexts study religion? Talk about a tricky wicket! Any student of religion is going to have shelves of books that all make the same claim – this one has the answer! Some offer tremendous analysis on the all-encompassing and captivating nature of religion. Others provide summative studies of various religions that may stir the reader’s appetite for meaning and transcendence. Still others provide a sociological approach to the study of religion, a field manual for

understanding why persons cling to religious belief and practice that belief as they do.

Authored by religious studies professors Stephen E. Gregg (University of Wolverhampton) and Lynne Scholfield (St. Mary's University, Twickenham), *Engaging with Living Religion* offers a practical introduction to the field study of religion. The intention of the book is not to develop religious ideation or affiliation in its readers, but to provide a professionally-appropriate way for researchers to analyze and comprehend why Christians pray with their eyes closed, why Muslims pilgrimage to Mecca, and why Jews light a menorah. While this last statement may sound simplistic, it is anything but – each of these actions are essential expressions of that religion and, as the authors argue, one cannot understand Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or any other religion without understanding the liturgy and locations that provide structure to the world's religions.

Designed as a guide for the fieldwork student (or as a study companion in a lecture course on religious sociology), Gregg and Scholfield create not only a keen eye for studying religion but also a deep respect for religious adherence. Although the volume does take more of a sociological stance – religion is more akin to a social activity or organizational membership than a guiding force for one's life – the authors keep the idea that religion is *living* ever before the reader/researcher. Each chapter is bursting with sidebars, such as passages from foundational readings or case studies, discussion questions, recommended bibliographies, and websites for further research. Although this is a book about the study of religion, one thought comes through subversively on every page – Religion, however it is defined, is living and active, and it provides meaning and direction to individuals seeking transcendence. Therefore, treat it with care and respect.

Overall, I found this volume to be both intriguing and engaging. In addition to a chapter that advocates why studying religion is important, there are chapters on where to study religion, how to study religion through class field trips or study-abroad programs, how to use case studies and social media to understand religion practically, and how to develop an ongoing appreciation for the sociological study of religion.

My recommendation would be that this volume be read alongside a more extensive volume on ethnography. Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field* (University of Chicago, 2011) or Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (University of Chicago, 2011) would constitute good choices.

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