

## TOPIC 8: WORSHIP AND EXPERIENCE

**I. *Worship*:** “Congregations’ central purpose is of course the expression and transmission of religious meaning, and corporate worship is the primary way in which that purpose is pursued” (Chaves, p. 127). Because it is a national sample of congregations, the National Congregations Study is also a national sample of worship.

A. Chaves analyzes worship according to a “repertoire” of worship elements (29 in total) that can be assembled by congregations in different ways. But, of course, there are systematic patterns in the elements congregations use and how they put them together.

B. There are two nearly universal elements: singing and preaching (Table 5.1, p. 132). The average worship service is 70 minutes long, of which 20 minutes are devoted to a sermon and 20 minutes to music (p. 133).

C. Congregations tend toward social homogeneity, and other worship element vary systematically according to social class (Table 5.1, p. 135):

1. Poorer, less educated congregations are more spontaneous, informal, and demonstrative. The emphasis seems to be on substance and materiality.
2. More affluent, well educated congregations are more formal in style. The emphasis seems to be on form and discipline.

D. We can also treat major variations in worship styles as independent and see how different denominations combine them. Chaves looks at *ceremony* (8 factors including choir singing, organ music, written programs) and *enthusiasm* (9 factors including raising hands, jumping or shouting, playing drums and electric guitars) as such independent dimensions. Classifying denominations according to their levels of ceremony *and* enthusiasm results in Figure 5.2 (p. 147).

1. The way denominations fill this cultural space seems to overlap with their historic emergence in the Christian tradition and American society.
2. Chaves compares *strategic* and *evolutionary* arguments for this pattern of emergence and sides with the evolutionary (pp. 160-61).

### ***II. Contemporary Worship Styles***

A. Alan Wolfe’s analysis of “Worship” in his book *The Transformation of American Religion* (2003) highlights ways in which religious traditions are being internally transformed to conform with American culture.

1. The Old School view holds that “[b]oth Jews and Christians view their communities as existing in a covenant relationship with God, and the Sabbath worship around which religious life centers is a celebration of that covenant” (Habits of the Heart, p. 227). This is especially evident in liturgical traditions, for Wolfe notes that “the term *liturgy* comes from the Greek word for ‘public duty’” (p. 13).

2. The New School view places an emphasis on the individual’s experiences and inclinations in worship. This is especially true in nonliturgical traditions of Protestantism.

B. These two views obviously overlap with Chaves’ distinction between ceremonial and enthusiastic worship, and Wolfe in fact cites that research (p. 27). He also notes the seeming attractiveness of enthusiastic worship to younger people, and its connection to megachurches.

C. According to Wolfe, “The most intransigent battles in the worship wars of American Protestantism take place over music. And it is clear who is losing: Those who believe that there are standards of musical excellence that, when reached, are capable of inducing moments of genuine transcendence” (p. 30). OUCH!

D. The bottom line for Wolfe: “Personalize or die” (p. 35).

**III. Background: What is Religious Experience?** As we have discussed from the beginning of the class, there are many ways of understanding what religion is and how best to study it. Among other topics, sociologists have examined religious beliefs and the social structures that underpin them (Berger), religious pluralism and dynamics at the societal level (Warner), denominations and movements (Finke and Stark), organizations (Chaves), and the relationship of religion to civil society and politics (the material for later this week). As important as these topics are, they often seem to exclude consideration of an important – and some would say the *essential* – component of religion: the *experiential dimension*.

A. According to sociologist Andrew Greeley, if we want to understand religion, we need to focus not on its prose or “cognitive superstructure” (doctrine) but on its poetry or “imaginative and narrative infrastructure” (experience, symbol, story, community, ritual). For Greeley, “the origins and raw power of religion are at the imaginative (that is, experiential and narrative) level both for the individual and for the tradition” (*The Catholic Imagination*, 2000, p. 4).

B. Recognizing that religious experience is vital to understand is one thing; actually studying it *empirically* is quite another. According to philosopher Michael Oakeshott, “‘Experience’, of all the words in the philosophic vocabulary, . . . [is] the most difficult to manage; and it must be the ambition of every writer reckless enough to use the word to escape the ambiguities it contains.” As with “experience” generally, the difficulty in studying “religious experience” is due at least in part to the fact that the precise referent

of the term is elusive. Varieties of “religious experience” appear under a host of other labels including mystical, ecstatic, numinous, born-again, anomalous, paranormal, out-of-body, flow, transcendental, and conversion experiences. But even those many terms may not capture everything we mean by “religious experience.”

C. William James was a pioneer in the social scientific study of religious experience. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he suggests that any experience that combines religious (sacred, Godlike) objects with appropriate emotions (joyfulness, seriousness) constitutes a variety of religious experience.

1. While James sought the “essence of religious experience . . . in those religious experiences which are most one-sided, exaggerated, and intense,” it is not clear that he intended to limit the study of religious experience only to extraordinary experiences.

2. Unfortunately, James's own work, while not equating mysticism and religious experience, does seem to conflate them in arguing that “personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.” Thus James's notion that there are a variety of religious experiences often has been narrowed to one type: mysticism. While mysticism is certainly one variety of religious experience, and while other varieties of religious experience have some of the same characteristics as mysticism, the two are not identical. Mysticism is but one species of the genus religious experience.

D. Even when scholars have not exclusively studied mysticism under the rubric of religious experience, they have still tended to focus (with James) on the more dramatic, intense types, to the exclusion of more ordinary or mundane experiences. Common experiences such as quiet devotion or ordinary piety fall outside the purview of James and those influenced by him.

E. Indeed, it does seem that some boundaries are necessary if we are going to study religious experience. As C. Davis has written, “not all experiences in a religious context are ‘religious experiences’ – an itch during communion is unlikely to be, for instance!” Thus, in contrast to the Jamesian tradition of focusing on extreme experiences, Alister Hardy and his colleagues have been interested in religious experience as “a continuing feeling of transcendental reality or of a divine presence,” not simply dramatic experiences but also “seemingly more ordinary but deeply felt experiences.”

F. For Hardy, all of an individual's lived experience is a candidate for study under the broad umbrella of religious experience. Religious experience in this view refers to all of the individual's subjective involvement with the sacred: the sense of peace and awe, mysticism and conversion, the presence of God, absorbing ritual experience, and on and on. This is also the approach taken by Timothy Nelson in *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*.

#### ***IV. Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church***

A. Eastside Chapel, an African Methodist Episcopal church of some 300 members in Charleston, South Carolina. Built in 1942, founded by Rev. John Simmons. Current pastor is Rev. Roger L. Wright (9<sup>th</sup> pastor of the church). Distinguishes itself from some other AME churches in emphasizing the gifts of the spirit.

B. Eastside neighborhood is about one mile long and half a mile wide. By the early 1990s, it “had become Charleston’s most notorious and dangerous slum” (p. 17). Around 15 black congregations in that small neighborhood.

#### ***V. Timothy Nelson’s Contribution to the Study of Experience and Ritual***

A. The nature of religious experience. Nelson sees it fundamentally an *attribution process*: “The basic idea is that one’s beliefs about the causes of particular experiences play an integral role in shaping the meanings of those experiences and, thus, in shaping the experiences themselves. According to this perspective, a religious experience is any event that a subject attributes at least partially to the operation of supernatural forces” (p. 53). This has at least two implications (B & C below).

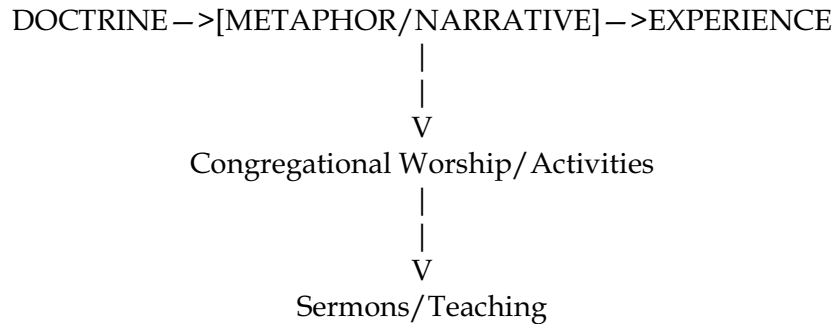
B. Distinguishing different types of religious experience. Nelson wants to look at two major categories (it seems to me):

1. Dramatic experiences in worship (e.g., shouting) or elsewhere (e.g., dreams, visions)
2. Mundane experiences in everyday life (e.g., “providential” experiences).

C. Understanding the relationship of experience to beliefs. Nelson makes a strong argument that experiences are dependent upon particular beliefs. People with differing beliefs have different experiences (pp. 54-55).

1. For example, Eastside Chapel members believe they can and should have relationships with God, Satan and other spiritual beings; they are an objective reality for them, “agents whose actions were perceived to be just as knowable, just as real, and just as consequential in the day-to-day lives of Eastside members as those of human beings were” (p. 49).
2. Especially interesting here is his focus on experiences of the Devil. Many (most?) Americans don’t like to think about Satan as much as God. According to the Gallup Poll, 72% of Americans believe in heaven but only 56% believe in Hell. But Eastside Chapel members see Lucifer present and active in the temptation to sin and various forms of deception in the world.

3. Experience is often seen as fundamentally anti-authoritarian/anti-hierarchical, since experience can provide an alternative basis for religious authority outside of church hierarchies. Nelson takes a different approach, connecting religious doctrine to religious experience through metaphor and narrative (stories) as follows:



In this view, institutional authority (especially the pastor through sermons and other teaching) has an important role in shaping the attribution process (p. 114).

4. Specific metaphors about the God-believer relationship operating in the Eastside Chapel belief system: metaphors of hierarchy (king, master, shepherd, parent) and metaphors of intimacy (friend, confidant, comforter).

5. Doctrine and experience become mutually reinforcing: beliefs about the relationship are reinforced by experiences of the relationship.

D. Understanding the connection between ritual and experience. In *Congregations in America*, Mark Chaves argues that worship is at the heart of congregational life, and this is very much reflected in Nelson’s case study of Eastside Chapel. But their approaches to studying worship are quite different, though complementary. Chaves focuses on the worship style of different types of congregations, emphasizing especially the extent of ceremony and enthusiasm. Nelson tries to bring the study of worship more down to earth, focusing especially on the expectations and emotions people have during worship.

1. In reading Nelson’s description of collective worship at Eastside Chapel, I realized that they didn’t get the memo about the transition from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking that Robert Wuthnow circulated. Lots of talk about “habitation” and boundaries between sacred and profane, the importance of “Sunday’s best,” the idea of worship as an obligation and a form of submission (pp. 118-21). Not very contemporary. A very anti-Radiant Church approach!

2. Nelson also observes that even a spontaneous, informal style of worship has norms that regulate the interactions in the ritual. The concept of “feeling rules” is important here. Part of the ritual norms are the expectation that a person will

have a particular kind of experience, such as experiencing adoration, love, hope, joy, and gratitude. Those expectations motivate people to try to experience the appropriate emotions (p. 134).

a. Compare the “feeling rules” in Eastside Chapel to those in other congregations you know of (this could be a useful conceptual frame of references for your field trip). For example, I think “sobriety” is a big feeling rule in a Catholic Mass. At the Baptist church I went to last Sunday for a neighbor’s baptism, I think the dominant feeling rule was to be intellectually impressed (the service was totally unembodied).

3. The “emotional” style of worship at Eastside is also facilitated by various aspects of the ritual structure: the “space” created by the flexible order of worship, the duration of worship, the diffusion of responsibility through the congregation, music, “discursive strategies” (verbal formulas and stock phrases), and the circularity of the call-response reaction.

4. In the end, ritual is a type of religious experience “because they are both grounded in the same thing: a perception of the interaction between the human and spiritual worlds.” Ritual is a religious experience “imbedded in a collective occasion rather than solely in individual consciousness and biography or in larger events like hurricanes, wars, and famies” (p. 201).

## **VI. Methodological Points**

A. In addition to the substantive insights in the book, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit* is an excellent example of the data collection method that sociologists call “ethnography” or “participant observation.” For a year, Nelson immersed himself in the life of Eastside Chapel, participating in and observing its worship and other activities, talking to its leaders and members, and situating it in its larger social and historical context. In doing so, Nelson and other ethnographers put flesh on the skeleton created by survey researchers like Chaves.

B. Although he was raised in some sort of evangelical Christian home, Nelson is in many important ways a total outsider to Eastside and to Charleston more generally. He’s a white, academic, Northerner whose afraid of Palmetto bugs (of course, since I’ve come to learn that “Palmetto bug” is just a euphemism for “American cockroach,” I can relate!). But as such, he is able to approach Eastside with “new eyes” and see some things going on that an insider would probably miss. Just like you are doing for your field trip papers!