With “Butinage. The Art of Religious Mobility,” the social anthropologists Gez, Droz, Rey, and Soares present a comparative empirical study of the religious mobility of believers and situate lived religion in its mobility and dynamics between religious belief, individualization, and social normativities.

The core argument of the book is that religious identity is no longer designed along formal and exclusive church affiliation, but it must start from the lived religion of individuals. Further, religious identities are seen as “fluid, circumstantial, and somewhat personalized” (p.11) and the practicing believer as a fundamentally mobile one, which becomes the “fundamental way of being” (p.15).

Their observations are illustrated by drawing on the previously developed metaphor of “butinage” (Soares 2009; Gez et al. 2017) to introduce a concept for describing religious mobility that challenges fixed church affiliations and supersedes the classical, Pauline concept of “conversion”. Using the metaphor of “butinage,” the everyday hustle and bustle of bees, the “continuous to-ing and fro-ing” (p.13) between religious communities is described as a “default state” (p.13) of believers, but also influenced by the beehive, i.e., related to the sociocultural environment. The “butineur” ultimately becomes, with reference to Aristotelian philosophy, a “peripatetic practitioner” (p.143), a wandering practicing believer.

With this monograph, Gez et al. connect to discussions of religious mobility and conversion (Hervieu-Léger 1999; Goreen 2010), belonging (Davie 1990), belief (Ashforth 2011; Kroesbergen 2019), and, of course, to questions about theological implications of the phenomenon of religious mobility (Kroesbergen 2019), offering many points of connection with the metaphor of “butinage”.

After a critical examination of religious normativity, the authors provide four field studies (conducted in Brazil, Kenya, Ghana, Switzerland) that are selected in a contrastive manner both geographically and linguistically. Guiding the four cases was a “triangular relationship [...] between religious-institutional scripts, social norms, and individual agency” (pp.141), each differing in the accentuation of the individual factors. In the third part, Gez et al. offer a systematization of the theoretical considerations on the metaphor “butinage” and try to offer a practical tool beyond the metaphor. The authors comprehensibly present a toolbox by means of which different forms of religious identities are designated, which are independent of institutional affiliation and are measured by the intensity of practice.
With a further development of “butinage,” lived religious practices and “contradictions, ambivalences, and inconsistencies between scripts and practices” (p.34) as well as the “embeddedness of religion in the broader spectrum of social practices” (p.32) can become visible. In this way, religious experiences and practices outside of religious institutions become recognizable, and the intertwining of individual, institutional, and social factors becomes clear.

The basis of the publication is a cross-country comparative ethnography of four countries which, while exemplary, bear witness to deep expertise based on many years of research by the authors. Data was collected from in-depth, semi-structured biographical interviews and from participant observation in religious services and analysed along the iterative process according to the principles of Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In selecting interviewees, a variety of criteria, snowballing procedures, and random selection of people in public spaces were used in an attempt to achieve the greatest possible diversity. With this spectrum, the researchers examined “what people actually mean when they conceive of religion and religious practice” (p.43) and are in this way open for putting to the test a Western conception of religion that suggests a necessary connection between religion and belief.

Despite the specifics of the mobility pattern in the different countries, the authors can identify “key trends” (p.141) in the mobility behaviour of believers through comparative ethnography. A convincing “typology of butineurs” (p.143) is elaborated, which can be divided into the categories “polyfloral”, “monofloral” and “monochromatic”, thus illustrating “varying degrees of dynamism” (p.145). While “monofloral” and “polyfloral” butineurs tend to be exceptions, the majority of believers are more likely to be “monochrome mobility,” that is, moving within certain given “territories” (p.147). While it would be interesting to explore the reasons for mobility, the authors shy away from doing so due to methodological and conceptual difficulties. Nonetheless, the authors identify three perspectives of mobility logics, which they divide into “practical, social, and inclined” (p.155). In this way trends in the reasons for movement are highlighted.

Finally, the authors develop the model of “Religious Repertoires” (p.171; also Gez 2018), which allows religious mobility to be understood “as an integral part of a vibrant identity” (p.177), of religious identities and to bridge the gap “between the institutional and the lived religion perspectives” (p.178).

As proven experts on the respective countries, the authors present a concise description of regional practiced religious mobility. Based on the observation of lived religion, the authors criticize the Western concept of membership, shaped by the mainline churches, which no longer corresponds to the reality of many believers, both in the global North and South. Starting from the actual lived
religion, the authors look with a “critical eye toward Eurocentric, Abrahamic conceptions of religious affiliation” (p.21) and criticize a Western-influenced concept of religion. A definition of religion via “belief” and institutionalized commitment is questioned, which needs to be challenged for many regions of the world and thus calls for further research.

This approach becomes the decolonial strength of the work when Western-formed, often seemingly normative conceptions are not imposed on other cultural realities, and voices of local people are heard.

With this publication, the authors enrich the current scholarly discussions about concepts of mobility and belonging, religion and belief, which are of utmost relevance – not only in ethnological discourse. With the concepts of “butinage” and “religious repertoire”, religious practice is taken seriously without neglecting institutional religiosity and integrating social normativity. The findings are important and further-reaching for theological approaches that pose the question of the conception of church and start from people’s lives in a way that is sensitive to the present and does not stop at church boundaries.

The book’s findings are highly relevant and connectable to social anthropology, religious studies, and theologies and is recommended to anyone interested in lived religion between religious institution and individualism.

Theresa Mayer
PhD-Student, Catholic-Theological Faculty, University of Tübingen,
Tübingen, Germany
theresa.mayer@uni-tuebingen.de

Bibliography


