Nancy Ammerman  

There is already a lot of spiritual activity happening under our noses in the mundaneness of everyday life, Ammerman finds in her new book, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*. What counts as religion in society and how it can be pursued and studied are questions at the heart of *Sacred Stories*. A book that takes its place among others making a turn toward lived religion, *Sacred Stories* advances the expansion of the territory of the study of religion beyond theories of secularization and rationalization and complicates established, one-sided sociological and psychological definitions of religion as a system of doctrinal beliefs (so, Max Weber), solitary mystical experiences (so, William James), or a moral community (so, Emile Durkheim). Ammerman shows the complicated nature of religion by listening to the spiritual narratives embedded in interviews, oral diaries, and talk about photographs of ninety-five persons, more or less spiritually engaged and ranging from conservative and liberal committed believers of various monotheistic faiths to the spiritually neutral. As such, *Sacred Stories* provides a helpful glimpse into how “non experts” in America talk about and practice religion in their everyday lives. The workplace, the car, the home, the doctor’s office, the act of community service, a music concert, the bike ride or walk with a pet outdoors—these are but a few of the many common spaces and activities where the ordinary mingles with the sacred and *Sacred Stories* provides ample illustrations of these different arenas of daily life.

*Sacred Stories* posits that everyday life activities can be and often are narrated as secular stories, but what make some of them become spiritual stories ultimately depends more on what resides in the individual than the place or practice itself. Ammerman calls this “sacred consciousness”—a person’s way of seeing and interacting with the world that finds the everyday life enchanted with the “more than ordinary.” Our modern preoccupation with identifying religious domains set apart from secular domains has obscured our vision to ways the everyday world is mingling with the “more than ordinary,” but this sacred consciousness is what Ammerman would like to use in defining religion.

*Sacred Stories* begins by mapping out three kinds of spiritual landscapes that spiritually engaged persons traverse. Exploring how persons use “spiritual” and “spirituality” in their discourse and working from a statistical analysis of their common discourse patterns, *Sacred Stories* identifies nearly a dozen descriptors of what people mean by this term. Three kinds of everyday spiritualities emerge: A Theistic Spirituality tied to a transcendent deity; an Extra-Theistic
Spirituality focused on seeking meaning or a feeling of awe or connection in various naturalistic forms of transcendence; and, an Ethical or “Golden Rule” Spirituality finding the transcendent in everyday acts of kindness and compassion.

In doing this, one of Sacred Stories’ gifts emerges early in the book: it treats and takes seriously the category of spirituality for understanding and studying religion. Spirituality’s popular cultural understanding as an individual’s interior experience that opposes institutional religion has vexed some sociologists of religion who fear that such a privatized understanding hampers the category’s social contours from being properly studied. However, Ammerman, in listening to her subjects and how they use this term, finds that spirituality is not a totally individual creation opposing religion. Many have a “religious spirituality” of belief and belonging to a religious tradition. Further, each of these spiritualities is shaped by and responds to what she calls “spiritual tribes,” or fluid gatherings that through shared conversation and connection provide opportunities for persons to build social and spiritual ties. In narrating their spiritual stories, persons need a spiritual tribe that provides the context or audience for their stories and the relationships and religious practices in them.

What makes someone more likely to engage the everyday world spiritually and where are people are getting a sacred consciousness? Spiritual sensibilities are shaped to a significant amount, Ammerman discovers, by a person’s religious involvement. A finding significant here for American church life and ecclesiology is how and where Ammerman finds the spiritual dimension opening up for many in their daily life: faith communities can be powerful spiritual tribes for engendering a person’s spiritual stories and sacred consciousness. Ammerman’s research discovers that how spiritually engaged someone is in everyday life depends on how active they are in a religious community. In a word, participating in organized religion matters for everyday religion because in various aspects of congregational life, persons can develop ways of talking and thinking about life that carries a sacred consciousness. Thus, Sacred Stories has important implications for envisioning the church less as Peter Berger’s “sheltering enclaves” and more as spiritual tribes that invite the sacred and profane to mingle in conversations and relationships full of everyday life matters. It is not unlike what theologian Pete Ward imagines as “liquid church”—ecclesia as a series of flexible interconnecting networks that can move with culture and so reinforcing the notion that God can meet us anywhere.¹