

ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE “LIVED RELIGION” CONCEPT¹

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The article explores the ethical foundations of the “lived religion” theoretical concept, which arose as a response to ethical concerns within prior research frameworks like “folk religion” and “folk beliefs”. It highlights critiques of the evaluative nature of that previous research concepts. Lived Religion concept is presented as the study of religion in everyday life, offering a non-evaluative approach and emphasizing an emic perspective. Such approach is seen as providing a more ethically sound basis for understanding religious phenomena.

In this article I will look at the ethical foundations of the theoretical concept of “lived religion”. It’s crucial to acknowledge that the inception of the lived religion concept stemmed from ethical concerns intertwined with prior research frameworks like “folk religion” and “folk beliefs,” which have been actively evolving in the realm of social sciences since the mid-20th century. Fundamentally, the advent and evolution of these frameworks accompanied a shift in scholarly interest from macro-level analyses, focusing on overarching phenomena and processes, to micro-level inquiries, scrutinizing localized expressions of social reality and the individual agents and their concrete agency within specific contexts.

“Folk beliefs” were understood as a syncretic manifestation of religiosity, diverging in ideas and practices from the sanctioned creed of religious denominations [10 pp. 38-40]. According to D. Yoder, the term “folk religion” itself emerged in the early 20th century, attributed to the German Lutheran theologian Paul Drews [11, pp. 67-68]. In his instructive didactic article “Religiöse Volkskunde, eine Aufgabe der praktischen Theologie” [5], Drews aimed to illustrate to seminary graduates that they would encounter individuals in real-life scenarios whose faith substantially deviated from catechism doctrines. Subsequently, this theological concept permeated into the domains of history, sociology, and ethnology. The notion of “folk religion” facilitated an expanded exploration of beliefs and practices, prompting scholars to delve beyond religious texts and institutional rituals [6, p. 8].

Towards the latter half of the 20th century, “folk religion” encountered critical reassessment from both methodological and ethical standpoints. Principal among the criticisms was its inherently evaluative nature, rooted in theological paradigms. Notably, “folk religion” was portrayed by researchers as a form of distortion or deviation

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from the purportedly “pure” orthodoxy [10, pp. 39-41]. This perspective engendered dichotomies such as elitist versus popular, high religion versus low (profane), and enlightened, written religion versus unenlightened, pagan, or magical iterations. Essentially, religious practices of non-specialists were systematically delegitimized by researchers as inferior or deviant e.g. [1; 3; 4; 9]. Moreover, this approach engendered substantial terminological quandaries in the examination of so-called “non-Abrahamic religions” [11, p. 86]. By the close of the 20th century, the methodological vulnerabilities and ethical ambiguities inherent in this approach prompted religious scholars to seek alternative conceptual frameworks.

One such alternative paradigm emerged in the form of lived religion, championed by scholars like R. Orsi, D. Hall, and M. B. McGuire. This holistic approach conceptualizes lived religion as the embodiment of religion in action, experience, practice, and comprehension among individuals and groups, situated within the fabric of daily life [6; 7, pp.153–155].

The lived religion concept garnered traction among ethnologists owing to its impartiality and “democraticism,” viewing laypersons as significant actors within the religious landscape. It underscores religious practices and meanings that emerge, even in non-specialized settings such as homes, workplaces, and public spaces. An integral facet of the lived religion concept is the heightened emphasis on conveying an emic perspective. Researchers endeavor to portray the vibrant religious world as perceived through the eyes of believers, eschewing the artificial imposition of religious practices within the confines of sterile research terminology [2, p. 181].

As the concept of “lived religion” is rooted in the idea that religion is not just a set of “official” beliefs and rituals practiced in formal settings like churches, mosques, or temples, but rather a dynamic and multifaceted aspect of people’s everyday lives, the ethical foundations of the concept encompass the Respect for Diversity principle. Lived religion theorists recognize and respect the diversity of religious beliefs and practices within and across cultures. It acknowledges that individuals and communities interpret and practice their faith in unique ways influenced by various factors such as culture, history, and personal experiences.

Another important principle is understanding the context. Ethical considerations in the concept of lived religion emphasize understanding the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which religious beliefs and practices occur. This involves recognizing the complex interplay between religion and other aspects of life, such as politics, economics, and social structures.

Empathy and compassion are another very important principles. Lived religion encourages empathy and compassion towards others, regardless of their religious beliefs or affiliations. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and appreciating the perspectives and experiences of individuals from diverse religious backgrounds.

Thus, the approach offered by the theorists of the lived religion concept allows an equal and non-evaluative approach to the study of both institutional and non-institutional religious practices, and in my opinion is more than the previous research concepts such as “folk religion” and “folk beliefs” acceptable from an ethical point of view. In addition, this approach is more consistent with the spirit of the policy document “Research Ethics in Ethnography / Anthropology (2013)” by R. Iphofen [8], which provides for a respectful and impartial attitude of the researcher towards the personality and views (in our case, religious views) of respondents.

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