Lived Religion. Proposal for a new, congenial definition.

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1. Introduction: what is lived religion?

One of the newest branches on the tree of the scientification of religion at the interface of practical theology, empirical theology and religious studies is the study of lived religion (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020). What do we mean by ‘lived religion’? As a concept, lived religion became popular at the end of the twentieth century. In a rather simple way one could say that lived religion is individual religion or individual religiosity, or to put it slightly different and more meaningful: lived religion is personalized or ‘personalized’ religion. It is not difficult to imagine within which cultural context this interest in lived religion blossomed. The decline of the monopoly position of institutionalized religion is obviously the background against which lived religion arose. And that background can be clearly heard in all terms that are used as synonyms for lived religion such as everyday religion, unchurched religion, invisible religion, implicit religion (Dillen, 2016). They all point at one and the same aspect of lived religion: its focus on individual spirituality and religiosity. Incidentally, this should not be interpreted as meaning that lived religion is purely individual oriented. On the contrary, lived religion is in a sense highly relational oriented. So, lived religion is highly personal, but not individualistic, in its daily manifestations and practices. And in its personalized meaning it is a reaction against a focus on institutionalized religion. Therefore it is sometimes called unchurched religion, but it is not necessarily unchurched.

2. Definitions: two examples

Let me give two examples of definitions of lived religion. The first one is formulated by McGuire (2008). Lived religion refers to the complex contemporary religious and spiritual experience of people within, outside or on the border of traditional religions. The context of a complicated, disputed, critical relationship to institutionalize religion is immediately clear from this definition. However in an affirmative way she wrote that lived religion is about how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced and expressed by ordinary people in the context of their everyday lives. It is important to note that in putting it in this way the actual experience is distinguished from the prescribed religion or institutionally defined beliefs and practices. Again, the criticism is loud and clear.

The second example, according to Ammerman (2014), is this one: Lived religion is the embodied and enacted forms of spirituality, she explains, that occur in everyday life. While belief and membership – two aspects for identifying religion - are certainly a part of what lived religion entails, instead of starting from official organizations and formal membership, lived religion begins with everyday practice. The critical connotation is apparently inevitable to make a statement. We hear the intent to differentiate between informal and formal, popular and official religion. As an approach, lived religion starts by the very beginning, there where religion or religious practice is to be found, in daily life.

Such an approach asks for empirical research as a result. And then the outcome of that research asks for critical reflection on the existing concepts and theories, because it cannot be ruled out that such research brings attention to phenomena, people, practices, and locations that might be marginalized by the conventional perspectives.

3. Three questions: What is a person, what is a practice, and what means the affirmation of daily life?

I do not want to disown definitions such as the two mentioned, formulated by two outstanding experts, or any of the aspects pointed at. However, I am searching to find and formulate a less critical and more congenial definition that recognizes not only the same cultural background but also the emergence and significance of positive health (Slade et al., 2017) in that same cultural context, and its connection, not to say overlap, with human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017), religion, spirituality, and meaning making, thus with lived religion. Three elements are involved in the description and definitions we found: an individual, personal aspect, the aspect of practice and the obvious acceptance of daily life. Therefore I discuss three questions, preceded by the formulation of a more congenial definition of lived religion.

The definition I propose is:

Lived religion as personalized (or personalived) religion
is a daily life practice, characterized by a kind of self-expression,
and by initiating something new, a change of life, a miracle alike.

The three questions are: What is a person? What is a practice? What means the affirmation of daily life? The answers to these questions lay the foundation for the proposed definition.

What is a person?

It is not a strange matter to ask what a person is, since the concept of a person is at home in a network of social, legal, cultural, moral and health perspectives. Religion, spirituality and meaning-making share a lot of commonalities with these domains. Taylor (1995) gives a very useful and comprehensive description: A person is a being who has a sense of self, has a notion of the future and the past can hold values, make choices, can adopt life-plans. A person is a being with her own point of view on things. The life-plan, the choices, the sense of self must be attributable to her as their point of origin. So a person is located in a spatiotemporal way and a person has beliefs and concepts. A person is an agent engaging in that life-plan and in these choices (Evnine, 2008). A person is a being who can be addressed, and who can reply. A person as a being of this kind is a 'respondent' (Taylor, 1995, 96). This means that a person has the ability to have thoughts about her being a person and about having beliefs and concepts in general and with regard to daily life practices in particular (Evnine, 2008). However, the matter is not just what a person is, but also who a person is. That brings us to our second question.

What is a practice?

According to Aristotle, the difference between 'theoretical' and 'practical' is its goal (its 'telos'). Theoretical knowledge (metaphysics) is in the service of knowledge per se (truth). Practical knowledge (ethics) is in the service of an action. A practice is an action which brings about a change in the situation of the actor. More precisely, practice brings about a change that has its origin in the actor, who initiates the action. Hannah Arendt (1958) wrote extensively about human praxis. She argued that in acting or doing people show who they are, reveal their unique selves. The revelation of 'who', as opposed to 'what' a person is, of his or her qualities, virtues, shortcomings, that one can demonstrate or hide, is involuntarily comprehended in everything a person does. (It also refers to what Kierkegaard named 'indirect communication'.)

Lived religion as practice, in this qualified sense, brings about a change, something new, even unexpected, as Arendt wrote. The appearance of the new therefore always has something of a wonder.

Stories people tell about their lived religion precisely express these aspects of practice: the action, the choice to act that brought about a fundamental change in self-awareness and conduct of life. It brought about something new, like a miracle, new for the person acting and new for all who knew that person.

What means the affirmation of daily life?

Lived religion is grounded in daily life. Its point of departure is the affirmation of daily or ordinary life. The notion of the affirmation of daily life is an invariable given in philosophical and religious traditions. Aristotle made a distinction between the life and the good life. The first term encompasses all aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, needed to continue and to renew life. In religious, but not only Christian, thinking the good life was no longer a special range of higher activities (such as contemplation) as it was according to Aristotle. The affirmation of daily life is the endorsement that the fullness of existence is to be found within all activities of ordinary life, 'in one's calling and in marriage and the family' (Taylor, 1989, 211, 218; see also Arendt, 1958). That also means that the full range of daily activities is included. For a long time that was not the case with regard to the object of the study of practical theology. Today, however, a shift is underway, calling for a broadening of the study of practical theology from the ecclesiastical to everyday life. That includes, to name a few, practices such as gardening and leisure, but also care and education (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014).

4. Conclusion

The discussion about lived religion is lively. As opposed to a definition characterized by a certain denouncement, I propose a more congenial definition based on three core elements, which are easily recognizable in the stories of those involved (stories as presented in literature, see Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; McGuire, 2008). The core is lived religion as a personal practice, a form of self-expression that initiates something new in everyday life. Daily life is thus recognized in its entirety as the domain in which lived religion manifests itself and as such is the object of empirical and practical theology. Described in this way, the practice of lived religion can be seen as a strength, which has strong parallels with positive health and human flourishing.

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