

*Lived Religion in America*, edited by David D. Hall

reviewed by [Carl S. Dudley](#) in the [June 17, 1998](#) issue

David D. Hall addresses the gap between academic theology and the diverse ways people of faith “live religion” in their circumstances. Hall’s book shares an interest in the religion of daily life with such recent books as *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy Bass, and *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, by Laurent A. Parks Daloz et al. Bass’s book gives familiar names to practices that have strengthened the lives of believers and their communities of worship, while *Common Fire* shows how such practices have created and transformed communities in the complexity of contemporary life.

*Lived Religion in America* ranges from the early colonists to contemporary congregations and movements. Hall assembles scholars from several disciplines--history, cultural anthropology, ethnography, sociology--who look closely at radically different situations. Subjects include 17th-century sacramental practices in New England, holy water on New York City streets, the place of scripture among Catholic charismatics, and Ojibwa hymn-singing at Native American funerals. Although the authors are familiar with Christian theology, they restrain (but do not extinguish) their interpretive impulses, preferring instead to show the people they study expressing their faith in their own ways.

The strategy pays off. What these people articulate in word and deed often confounds theological categories. Indeed, the studies reveal lived religion as an ingenious response to changing cultural conditions. Lived religion must often brave both logical contradictions and the theological opposition of religious elites.

Some of the essays are vividly descriptive. “Imagine a small church guild hall crowded with folding tables and chairs set up for an all-night wake,” writes Michael McNally.

*A blue haze of cigarette smoke, backlit by harsh fluorescent lights, disabuses one of any expectations for the exotic in this Native American ceremony. Painful realities are present in the room as mourners come to terms with what was likely an untimely, often violent, death. The Ojibwa singers, men and women in their sixties,*

*file in and sit at the center table as the forty-odd people who have gathered gradually settle down to listen. Coffee percolates on the serving counter; an occasional clinking of pots and pans emerges from the adjacent kitchen as women prepare the potluck dishes for the feast that follows.*

Descriptions such as this by keen observers include a pungent account of the first highly publicized cremation in the U.S. and a reflection on the quiet agrarian loyalties of two contemporary homesteaders in Maine. The researchers' attention to detail draws readers into the studies.

Although the scholars allow their subjects to speak, they weave their own commentary in and around these narratives. The authors' interpretive perspectives become apparent as they discuss what they have learned about the context of the practices under consideration through interviews, published writings, statistics and other data. All seek to clarify misunderstandings or correct injustices that have influenced previous views of their subjects.

As scholars, they are intentionally politically incorrect. They challenge such prevailing dichotomies as sacred/profane, spirit/matter, transcendent/immanent and nature/machine. Having been told that the water from the shrine of Lourdes in the Bronx is "sweeter than regular water" and aware of a rumor of a miraculous spring, Robert Orsi asked his believer-informant, "Where does the water come from?" She responded, "It's city water--it comes from the reservoir, I guess." The authors demonstrate that what seems nonsense in the classroom may have transforming power in the lived religion of daily life.

Each of these essays reveals inconsistencies and logical tensions between the official positions of religious bodies and the practices of the adherents. The actors in these narratives often are unaware that they are transgressing officially drawn boundaries. They show that logical or theological consistency is not a primary concern in lived religion.

Cheryl Forbes, in describing the perennial popularity of the daily devotional *Streams in the Desert*, first published in 1925, writes:

*Mrs. Cowman may offer . . . contrary and problematic views because of the hybrid, patchwork nature of her text--a bricolage. Not only does she cull passages seemingly at random from throughout the Bible . . . she also snips sections from publications of familiar preachers, theologians and writers. Taken together they*

*often clash, . . . jarring each other and the reader, creating disconnections and contractions.*

Lived Religion also presents the voices of subjugated peoples who find in their religious practices a precious shelter from and renewed power to deal with their oppression. Daniele Hervieu-Leger says of the use of scripture among Catholic charismatic prayer groups, "The charismatic practice of spontaneous interpretation is . . . an expression of protest against the stereotyped nature of authorized religious language." In discussing the "cheerful" submission to God and to their husbands advocated by the Women's Aglow Fellowship, Marie Griffith writes about the efforts of Aglow women to develop "beautiful boldness" through a Spiritual Warfare Network.

Finally, these writers offer implicit strategies for religious leaders who are willing to build on the energies that are already alive among their people. After a sympathetic description of the "fuzzy" religion of "Golden Rule Christians" who enact more than explain their faith, Nancy Ammerman notes that "half of people we surveyed define their faith more in terms of everyday morality than in terms of institutional commitment or theological orthodoxy," and she concludes that the "market" for churches that recognize this is "very large."

Readers will not agree completely with this book, any more than the authors agree among themselves. But it models a way of approaching faith that can help pastors bridge the gap between seminary and parish.