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Review

Sarah K. Johnson, Occasional Religious Practice. Valuing a Very Ordinary Religious Experience, Oxford – New York 2025

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Reviewer

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Reviewed Book

Author	Sarah Kathleen Johnson
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"Mrs. Murphy is dead" (234). As Johnson notes, Aidan Kavanagh's mythical Mrs. Murphy was 65 in 1981, when Kavanagh introduced her to liturgical theologians,[1] which would make her 104 now. Actuarial tables would suggest that the chances of her still being alive today are therefore quite slim. Nonetheless, methodologically, with this book Johnson makes a resounding case that liturgical theology must engage with more than just that "archetypal fully believing, actively participating, morally compliant, and formally affiliated worshipper" (234) but also those whose faith, practice, compliance and affiliation are more complicated, more questioning and more occasional than Kavanagh, and his successors, have allowed Mrs. Murphy ever to be.

At the heart of Johnson's work in this book are the stories of 61 interviewees connected with three partner congregations in the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, 41 of whom are what she terms occasional religious practitioners. The book is more, of course, than just telling their stories, but through a critical dialogue with them, Johnson argues that the ignored ordinariness of their religious practice and engagement is an essential yet

[1] Aidan Kavanagh, On Liturgical Theology. The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, New York 1981 [reprint: Collegeville 1992].

missing element in liturgical theology in the contemporary religious landscape of the North Atlantic world.

Part I of the book centres the concept of religion as practice, in the sociological framework of Christian Smith and Martin Riesbrodt, with whom Johnson identifies religion as "about practice. Not identity. Not belief. Not function. Religion is about actions people do that are concrete and observable." (19) In this understanding, one can practise never, occasionally, routinely, or intensively – where liturgical scholarship has focused on the routine and, or perhaps even only, the intensive, practitioner. From the stories told by her interviewees, and broader quantitative results, Johnson identifies four categories that prompt occasional practice: holidays (the Christmas and Easter attendees), life transitions ("hatch, match, despatch"), crises (which might be personal or communal) and incidental circumstances (tourism, for example). Contextualised examples of each are probably familiar to most with experience of pastoral ministry in any tradition.

Johnson proceeds to locate occasional practice as a long standing part of the Christian tradition and yet also a particularly pertinent question in light of contemporary trends in church attendance and religious participation in the Global North – indeed, a sufficiently embedded trend, that, in general, we can say that while many in Mrs. Murphy's generation were routine or intensive practitioners, their grandchildren likely are not, and their great-grandchildren (the generation of many of Johnson's subjects) rarely are. Although, given the context of the study, many of Johnson's interviewees identify, to some degree, as Anglican, that is by no means universal; rather, their religious self-identification is complex – even (and perhaps especially) among those who identify as somehow not, or not very, religious. Johnson charts a similar complexity as to why these individuals have chosen to practice, identifying a threefold typology of initiators, supporters and catalysts. She is also attentive to the way in which an individual's participation may vary over time, both seasonally (while the example of being "up at the cottage" (117) seems very Canadian to this reviewer, the pattern it represents is not) and over a lifetime (not central to Johnson's study, but a significant pastoral question in many contexts are those she terms "involuntarily occasional" (122), who cannot participate as they would like due to disability or age). Johnson's point here is not to criticise

or "convert" those who choose (or can't) to participate infrequently, instead to highlight that "Occasional practice, in its diversity, is a significant and ordinary way of relating to religion" (130).

In Part II, Johnson presents the first of her significant theoretical contributions, in her development of Catherine Bell and Kimberly Belcher's work on ritual systems theory. Central to both Bell and Belcher's work here is the principle that, as Johnson summarises, "ritual practices relate to other ritual practices in systems; relationships within and among systems interpret and reinterpret ritual practices, informing the meanings and functions of rituals for participants" (137). Johnson makes two significant contributions here: first, by highlighting how the system looks different from the subaltern position (whether occasional or routine practitioner) than it does from the position of the ritual expert, and second, by her attention to the effect of interpreting and reinterpreting the ritual practices of one system primarily though the lens of another, while engaging selectively in both. The consequences of the former are illustrated well by the example Johnson draws from several of her interviews, which contrast the parent who sees baptism as "giving their child a choice in the future" (143) with the clergy who read it as "making a choice for the child in the present" (144). With regard to the latter, she uses the example of the different significances attached to the role of the godparent in the ecclesial ritual system and the familial ritual system, and some of the tensions this can lead to, as well as the complexity that can arise out of the different policies and practices, and yet also similarities, between Anglican and Roman Catholic ritual systems.

Part III of her book develops Johnson's other main theoretical contribution, the shift in how liturgical theology must be done after Mrs. Murphy. It is easy to follow Kavanagh and take seriously someone like Mrs. Murphy as a theological source: she is well catechised, and so can talk about her experiences in language that the cleric or academic theologian can recognise and use. But, as Johnson observes, "Occasional religious practitioners are doing theology, although perhaps not with the words used by the academy or by church leaders" (223). Johnson builds on the work of ethnographic theologians such as Christian Scharen, Todd Whitmore, and Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, along with the liberationist liturgical theology of Cláudio Carvalhaes, to convincingly argue that these margin-

alised voices – the voices of Mrs. Murphy's occasionally practicing great-grandchildren – and the perspectives they bring offer new insight into the rites they participate in, as well as "reveal[ing] ways of doing theology in which others, including routine and intensive practitioners, also engage" (254); that is, as embodied, relational, material act and not just intellectually, linguistically or cognitively. One might even say, the testimonies of the occasional practitioners can remind the scholars and the ritual experts of the true sacramentality of the liturgy.

As a whole, Johnson's work has many potential audiences. There is, despite the specificity of the case study, much that could be learnt by those thinking about the future shape of pastoral ministry in the church across the Global North, so that it serves well those who participate occasionally (though it is certainly anything but fuel to turn them into more regular practitioners). Johnson's contribution to building dialogue between the fields of liturgical studies and sociology of religion is also important. And then there are the two significant theoretical advancements she offers, toward an improved understanding of the interrelationships of ritual systems, and to who the fundamental sources of liturgical theology should be perceived to be.