

## Reconstructing early modern religious lives: the exemplary and the mundane - Introduction

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# Reconstructing early modern religious lives: the exemplary and the mundane

## Introduction

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- 1 When the first readers of *L'Histoire de la vie et moeurs de Marie Tessonnière* (1650) turned past the title page, what did they hope to find? The text is described at the beginning of the dedicatory epistle as “Cét ouvrage de Devotion” (de la Riviere a2), signalling that the work was intended to provide spiritual guidance for the reader as well as offering a record of the life of Tessonnière herself. In its dual purpose, this was a very typical religious biography. In common with funeral sermons and other varieties of texts and objects, such works aimed to help the reader pursue a programme of improvement by encouraging them to feel optimism and a sense of endurance inspired by the positive role model of an exemplary subject. As individuals, religious readers are promised the chance to become better Christians. There is a sense, too, of a communal endeavour: the act of reading an exemplary life forges an imagined community of the pious. This could be done in very practical ways, such as including biographical sketches of other godly or holy individuals (as de la Riviere does at the end of the dedicatory epistle). By linking together the everyday lives of readers with those of remarkably pious individuals, either implicitly or explicitly, authors and editors of religious biographies were asserting that religious belief fundamentally affected day-to-day existence.
- 2 In this issue of *E-rea* we take this simple premise as our starting point for an exploration of the interrelation of faith and practice, thoughts and acts, agency and submission. The articles partly stem from the on-going collaboration of the Lived Religion study group at the Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone (LERMA, UR 853) and of the Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature in English (Queen Mary University of London), and partly from a separate project which explored experiences and expressions of female spirituality as a joint endeavour between the LERMA's Lived Religion group, the history research centre TELEMME

(UMR 7303 CNRS, Aix-Marseille University) and the *Groupement d'Intérêt Scientifique* (GIS) "Institut du Genre". As both projects matured, it became apparent that they presented some tantalisingly comparable questions; the present issue intends to offer a discussion between these two distinct yet complementary approaches to religious lives, experiences and practices. The different perspectives of contemporary sociological approaches to recovering past understanding of lived religion, case studies of female spirituality, and the methods of book history have particularly informed this project. The intersections of day-to-day life, public worship and personal belief among the clergy, the laity, and women religious are the central objects of study across this issue of *E-rea*. The preferred textual forms, emphasis on lived examples, and social and political preoccupations of the subjects themselves have given us our key themes: biographies, autobiographies and diaries; living examples; charity, work and care; negotiating uniformity and conformity.

- 3 The concept of "lived religion" emerged within the French school of sociology during the 1930s when extensive enquiries were made into the state of French Catholicism, first by Gabriel Le Bras, then by Fernand Bouvard (Desroches 15-20). It took some time to percolate through France to English-speaking countries which is why David Hall could still observe, in his introduction to *Lived Religion in America* (1997), that lived religion was a "relatively novel" notion in an American context (Hall vii). Our enquiries began four years ago when we established a series of seminars bringing together Francophone scholars from the LERMA and fellow Anglophone academics at the QMCRLE to determine whether "lived religion" could be a useful conceptual tool for all early modernists. Our aim was to focus on historical, literary and material sources, seeking new ways to approach private and public devotions, religious practices and the everyday religion of the laity. We sought to treat lived religion in a historical manner, reconstructing the daily experiences of individual believers and the ways in which they interacted with religious institutions.
- 4 Few works on lived religion have been cited as much as Robert Orsi's seminal monograph of 1985, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, a work that straddles the boundaries between history, sociology and religious studies. Orsi's definition of lived religion originated in his growing discontent with the term "popular religion" which appears in the title of the introduction to the first edition but was dropped thereafter. Popular religion, with its undertones of superstition and magic, has often been discussed in ways that implicitly assume a more acceptable and supposedly "higher" form of religiosity, usually involving oppositions between rich and poor, emotional and rational, institutionalised and domestic, illiterate and lettered, male and female, Western and non-Western, and so on.<sup>1</sup> For Orsi, "religion-in-action cannot be separated from other practices of everyday life" (Orsi, *Madonna* xxxix). Adopting an essentially anthropological approach, he tries to encompass "all religious creativity" by directing attention "to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas—all as media of making and unmaking the world" (Orsi, *Madonna* xxxvii).
- 5 American sociologists since Orsi, notably Meredith McGuire and Nancy Ammerman, have continued to investigate the concept, paying particular attention to "religion as expressed and experienced in the lives of the individuals" (McGuire 3). However, "lived religion" remains a concept open to interpretation. For instance, Ammerman has declared "[f]inding religion in everyday life means looking wherever and however we find people invoking a sacred presence" (Ammerman 191). Such an approach, she

suggests, might lead us away from institutional settings and religious professionals. Yet during our own meetings in seminars and study days, and as the articles that follow suggest, we have preferred a nuanced and inclusive approach that values the interactions of people of faith with both formal and informal structures of religion. After all, men and women who belonged as professionals to the institution of the Church remained, first and foremost, people of faith. From within the constraints of prescribed established practice, they often found personal and original ways of experiencing and expressing their religious lives, whether individually or communally.

- 6 With that framework in mind, and following the example of historians from France and elsewhere who have recently begun to use the concept of lived religion as a means to examine the question of lay and clerical engagement with one another, our contributors have contended that the concept of lived religion can be used by historians and literary critics to make sense of the religious past, and of the early modern religious past in particular, in both lay and religious contexts.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 Lived religion therefore takes us away from doctrines, canonical texts and the writings of a clerical elite to the creativity, inventiveness and agency of believers in ordinary places and domestic settings: in the bedchamber, the closet or the barn. This does not mean focusing only on marginal or individual case studies, nor does it imply that individuals could only live their religion in opposition to organized institutions and clerical injunctions. Matters were, to be sure, far more complex than that.<sup>3</sup> It does, however, mean focusing on what people *did*, on the interactions between individuals and institutions, between women and male clergy (Lux-Sterritt, Schiano-Locurcio), and between nonconformists and the Established Church (Harris), while paying particular attention to places of worship, to material culture, from books and manuscripts to religious objects (de Mézerac-Zanetti, Bowden) and to apparently mundane forms of devotion (Vine). Our enquiry has led us to a study of discursive strategies: how early modern people wrote about themselves and about others, how they used biographies, autobiographies, diaries and “lives” to write history (Harris, Gimaret, Queiros).
- 8 Aude de Mézerac-Zanetti shows how investigating physical documents from the past through the lens of lived religion helps emphasise process over product and invites us to see material texts as performative spaces. Through the study of traces of use in English sixteenth-century mass books, she demonstrates that the religious experiences of ordinary layfolk and questions of royal supremacy and national church identity were mutually constitutive. For instance, bidding prayers, which are communal, social and performative, knitted together a proteiform community – a local community that included foes and sinners as well as pious neighbours but also an imagined community that included the monarch.
- 9 Through such processes, conformity was woven into the daily practice of parishioners, thus promoting uniformity. In post-Reformation England, conformity was to remain one of the most central yet problematic issues, as it encompassed both a personal (or communal) expression of faith and a public declaration of belonging to an established national church. As Colin Harris’s study of nonconforming ministers highlights, some believers would come to construe their dissent as a defining trait of their religious practice. Their personal diaries reveal how they justified their decision not to conform, and replaced their nonconformist identities within broader, familial and local traditions. Yet even within communities whose conformity to their church is all taken for granted, religious lives could be experienced and expressed in unique ways. The

study of the religious writings of nuns, for instance, reveal original personal and individual strands in the spirituality of certain nuns. Moreover, Laurence Lux-Sterritt shows that some convents came to develop spiritual practices that directly opposed the authority of their male superiors, and that they consciously constructed their communal religious identity around that nonconformity. Thus, as Claire Schiano-Locurcio highlights, the religious lives of contemplative enclosed Orders were not a simple mirror image of the ideal of the Catholic Reformation; despite the nuns' avowed desire to implement the decrees of the Council of Trent to the letter, living one's religion often entailed some amount of conflict between the convents and their clerical superiors, whether on core spiritual tenets or more mundane matters of authority. Yet as both articles show, the conflicts which emerged around nuns' religious practice were rarely about practice in itself: rather, they stemmed from a discrepancy between male clerical ideals of female religious life and the lived religion of the women themselves. Those tensions were therefore the result of gendered role definitions within a given society. When religion was expressed in everyday practices it reflected myriad facets. Lived religion was an on-going process of negotiation between a normative ideal and a personal, more immediate engagement with one's faith. Thus, as Caroline Bowden shows, English nuns developed very distinctive ways of living their religion and taking part in the movement of Catholic recovery from, on the one hand, teaching young girls who would move on to become pillars of recusant communities to, on the other, fashioning objects of devotion that were relatively distant from the prescriptions of the Rules and Constitutions. Between the lines of their prescriptive texts, they found room to express their individuality. Yet these original expressions of lived religion are not what readers will find highlighted in their necrologies. Those texts were fashioned as promoters of orthodoxy and uniformity; they were meant to be formative for future generations and as such, they tended to silence personal expressions to dwell upon the exemplarity of prescribed female practice. Nuns' necrologies might, therefore, reveal less about the lived agency of the people whose lives they stage than the agendas being promoted by their successors.

- 10 When women lived out gendered ideals and came to embody the perfect expression of female spirituality and lived religion, they became the object of clerical praise. Their personal cases were written up as role-models in biographies meant to inspire others. As this collection shows, the tendency to use the memory of a particular individual to personify idealised models recurred across Europe and across confessions. It was constructed in different languages according to similar patterns. Helena Queiros shows that, in the case of Portuguese nuns, female exemplarity often came at the price of one's femininity, as clerical discourse repeatedly construed female religious perfection as accessible only to those who transcended the limits of their gender to become "virile" women. The publication of those biographies took the model of a "virile" approach to religious practice beyond the walls of the convents and into secular society where it could be imitated by devout housewives. The interrelations of religious practice and personal identity are shown over and over again to be profoundly significant for individuals and their communities. Antoinette Gimaret emphasizes the way in which Marie Tessonnière's exemplarity is utilised by her biographer to promote the model of the mixed life or "vie mêlée". The permeability of secular and religious states of being is the key to understanding Tessonnière's life and emulating it, according to de la Riviere. Emily Vine finds a similar balancing of public life and private devotion to be highly characteristic in the way women of different denominations are

represented and praised in funeral sermons. The agency that faith granted women of means living in otherwise highly circumscribed circumstances is shown by the emphasis placed on what Vine terms their “elective charitable works”. Across these texts, however, there is little acknowledgement of the difficulty of effecting such emulation in practice for laywomen (both Catholic and Protestant) and women religious.

- 11 As this series of snapshots has aimed to show, the essays gathered here collectively illustrate the depth of respect for spiritual experience in day-to-life among people of faith in early modern Europe. They do so in a number of ways. Firstly, by demonstrating how to read sources against the grain in order to account for problems while yet finding value in them. The celebration of exemplary piety in funeral sermons may owe as much to literary convention as to strictly evidentiary matters of fact, but such texts do nevertheless contain fragments of evidence of lives lived in faith. The precise meaning of physical marks of book use may be obscure to us today but they do point us to sections of the liturgy that were put under pressure at certain historical moments.
- 12 Secondly, by highlighting the significance of many different kinds of interpersonal interaction, these essays foreground religious community as the centre-point of identity. Relationships between clergy and laity; between those in enclosed orders and their companions, confessors and families; between local clerics and national establishments; between the living and the dead were all continually being enacted, interrogated and celebrated. The practicalities of these interactions (ministers writing and arranging for the publication of biographies and memoirs of lay people and the composition of conversion narratives for example; or recording examples of persecution for non-conformity in diaries and church books) had political and social implications in terms of how groups defined themselves within or against larger structures of nation, region, and faith. This, in turn, prompted inward reflection on the nature of religious identity. Such reflection was often sharpened by comparison of the self with exemplary lives as presented in print and manuscript. Could those with special skills in piety be imitated in every respect? How might ordinary life incorporate religious experiences? The articles collected here demonstrate that, for historical subjects from different countries and religious denominations, the challenges posed by exemplary lives were not easily resolved. Responding to positive examples and recording particular acts of faith were central ways of attesting to the place of religion in the lives of individuals and communities.

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## NOTES

1. For Orsi's definitions, see for instance: the three introductions to *The Madonna* reprinted in the 2010 edition; his "Everyday miracles: the study of lived religion" in Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America*, pp. 3–21; and "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in?", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 42, no. 2, June 2003, pp. 169–74.

2. See Laurence Croq and David Garrioch (eds), *La religion vécue. Les laïcs dans l'Europe moderne*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013; Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo (eds), *Lived Religion and the Long Reformation in Northern Europe*, Brill, 2016.

3. See the project led by Alison Searle, "Pastoral Care, Literary Cure and Religious Dissent: Zones of Freedom in the British Atlantic (c. 1630-1720)", <https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/arts-humanities-cultures/dir-record/research-projects/1523/pastoral-care-literary-cure-and-religious-dissent-zones-of-freedom-in-the-british-atlantic-c-1630-1720>. The Amsterdam Centre for The Study of Lived Religion, <http://www.livedreligion.org/>, publishes a new series with Palgrave MacMillan, "Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Challenges".

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