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Lay Readings of the Bible in Early Modern Europe: Introduction

Erminia Ardissino and Élise Boillet

Although the early modern period saw the questioning and even overthrow of accepted knowledge, the emergence of modern science, the formation of new professional and social identities, and the creation of nation states – all of which meant radical changes for individuals, communities, and society at large – the Bible was still a book of reference for ecclesiastics and laypeople alike. Its interpretation determined new religious doctrines, changes in social behaviour, and even influenced the outcome of political conflicts. While spiritual, theological, exegetical, and institutional aspects of the question of the importance of the Bible have been studied extensively, much less is known about the relationship between the laity and the Bible across early modern Europe, despite a growing awareness of the role of the believers, the whole community of worshippers, in the transformation of Christianity from the late Middle Ages into the early modern period. In fact, although laypeople initially played a secondary and accessory role in the institutions of the medieval Church, from the thirteenth century across Europe they started to play a much larger role, through the development of lay confraternities and lay congregations of mendicant orders. Following this increasingly active participation of the laity in religious life, which already included the use of vernacular biblical texts, Christian humanists and Protestant reformers came to promote universal access to the Bible as a means of religious reformation of Christian society. The relationship between the laity and the Bible is thus an issue of central importance and demands further inquiry to illuminate a period of great change in Europe.

From the late Middle Ages the laity struggled to achieve spiritual influence and representation. This was not in opposition to the clergy, but rather a process of continuous negotiation, as men and women outside religious orders acquired greater confidence in spiritual matters and deeper knowledge of the Bible thanks to the promotion of lay religious literacy. The affirmation of vernacular languages as a means of cultural communication greatly helped a lay religious consciousness to develop, giving the laity the chance to approach the sacred text, even interpret it, and write about it for themselves, as part of the general late medieval increase of lay literacy and culture across Europe.¹ This was in contrast to earlier times when most laypeople would be exposed, in the vernacular, mainly to oral and visual communication while listening to homilies, attending mystery plays, and reading the narratives mostly made up of images conveyed as a form of *Biblia pauperum*. By the fifteenth century the idea that personal knowledge of the Bible was essential for a Christian life prompted translators to offer new vernacular biblical translations which were variously taken up by other writers, printers and publishers, and ultimately many different sorts of readers and listeners across Europe. The increasingly influential role played by the Bible in early modern European history cannot be overestimated: it not only became central to religious practices and spiritual life, but it also determined political ideas, educational methods, ethics, social and family behaviour,

¹ See Hamilton B., “Religion and the Laity”, in Luscombe D. – Riley-Smith J. (eds.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History, c. 1024–c. 1198* (Cambridge: 2004) 2, 499–533; Heffernan T. (ed.), *Scripture and Pluralism. The Study of the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Leiden: 2005); Francois W. – Hollander A.A. den (eds.), *‘Wading Lambs and Swimming Elephants’. The Bible for the Laity and Theologians in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Era* (Leuven – Paris – Walpole: 2012); Corbellini S. – Hoogvliet M. – Ramakers B. (eds.), *Discovering the Riches of the Word. Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden – Boston: 2015).

professional rules, technological innovation and artistic production. The introduction of mechanical movable type in Europe ushered in an era of mass communication, permanently altering both clerical and lay perceptions of the sacred text. Printing meant that books could be widely distributed among communities, giving laypeople the possibility of interpreting, discussing, and forging a critical consciousness similar to that which is said to have inspired much sixteenth-century religious dissent and warfare. It also encouraged the intellectual development of what we might consider recognisably modern views of social tolerance, and the right to free thinking, especially since printing met well the demand for religious reading coming from a richer, more politically powerful and more educated middle class.

The Bible at the time was in fact a reference book for many fields, including those touching upon professional rules and ethics. As the traditional Aristotelian ethical references taught at universities appeared increasingly remote from everyday experience and practice, a Christian society considered its sacred text more than a simple collection of words useful for building a spiritual life and for obtaining eternal salvation. It is well known among literary historians, for example, just how much Shakespeare was indebted to the Bible for shaping how he expressed his profound knowledge of human nature.² The same point holds true for French, Spanish, German, and of course Italian poets and writers such as Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, and also Boccaccio.³ Similarly, philosophers and natural historians used the Bible as a source of knowledge.⁴

The Bible was indeed widely read and referred to by educated people with no explicitly theological or spiritual aims. It is particularly notable how the Bible was foundational in terms of the development of early modern legal principles and theories of government. The tightened bond between monarchy and Bible had its foundation in St Paul's sentence: 'Nulla potestas nisi a Deo' (Rom 13, 1), and in the kingly models provided by the stories of David or Saul.⁵ Not only did early modern political science subscribe to valid biblical principles, but it also based its theories on them. It is well known that Machiavelli in his *Prince* considered Moses the first great leader and drew political suggestions from the Bible. The final exhortation to the Medici is full of prophecy, apparently written in the faith that God would help his people against tyrants by offering another Moses to lead Italians against foreign rulers and occupants. Other political thinkers, such as Bodin and later Locke, similarly measured their theories against the sacred text. So did Botero and Grotius, who were deeply inspired by Christian ideals, as was Hobbes whose social contract theory is indebted to Pauline principles.⁶ While ancient and medieval law

² Marx S., *Shakespeare and the Bible* (Oxford – New York: 2000), which includes previous bibliography.

³ See for instance Barblan G. (ed.), *Dante e la Bibbia. Atti del Convegno internazionale promosso da Bibbia*, Firenze, 26–28 settembre 1986 (Florence: 1988); Benfell V.S., *The Biblical Dante* (Toronto: 2011); Ledda G., *La Bibbia di Dante* (Turin: 2014); Chessa S., *Il profumo del sacro nel Canzoniere di Petrarca* (Florence: 2005); Fumagalli E., "Petrarca e la Bibbia", *Nuova secondaria* 30 (2012) 13–46; Leonardi M., "Boccaccio 'gran maestro in Iscrittura'. La citazione delle Scritture in funzione ironica e tragica nel Decameron", *Levia Gravia* 15–16 (2013–2014), 31–45; Ghidini O., "L'epica tassiana e la Bibbia", in Gibellini P. – Melli G. – Sipione M. (eds.), *La Bibbia nella letteratura italiana. V. Dal Medioevo al Rinascimento* (Brescia: 2013) 629–647.

⁴ See for example Killen K. – Forshaw P. (eds.), *The Word and the World: Biblical Exegesis and Early Modern Science* (New York: 2007); Berns A., *The Bible and Natural Philosophy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: 2015).

⁵ See for example Boillet E. – Cavicchioli S. – Mellet P.-A. (eds.), *Les figures de David à la Renaissance*, Cahiers d'Humanisme et Renaissance 124 (Geneva: 2015).

⁶ Soulié M., *La Bible et la politique au XVIe siècle*, in Bedouelle G. – F. Roussel (eds.), *Le temps des réformes et la Bible* (Paris: 1989) 545–562; Fragonard M.M. – Peronnet M. (eds.), "Tout pouvoir vient de Dieu" (*St. Paul, Rm 13. 1.10*). *Actes du 12me Colloque du Centre d'histoire des Réformes et du Protestantisme de l'Université de Montpellier* (Montpellier: 1993); Foisneau L., *Politique, droit,*

largely drew on Roman *ius*, the main reformers of the period under discussion often explored questions concerning the form of social organization. Their impulse was to elevate the Bible as the ultimate norm and rule for faith and ethics, subjecting all other traditional sources of legal knowledge to lower levels of authority.⁷ The Bible was also referred to in many other fields of knowledge beyond politics and law. For instance, as one essay in this volume will show, the changing nature of early modern medical culture inspired physicians to approach the Bible not only as a divine work but also as an aid to their profession. The sacred text was a kind of encyclopaedia, not only suggesting advice on appropriate behaviour for a physician, but also providing information on medicine and herbal remedies.

Finally, the same was true for aspects of everyday life, with the Bible playing an important role not only in education, art and music, but also in public rituals such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, and religious and civic ceremonies and feasts. In domestic terms one might well ask how much a person's private life was determined by reference to the sacred book, or how much early modern family life depended upon biblical models and teachings? Recent scholarship has suggested, for instance, the importance of biblical references with regard to dietary choice in Catholic homes, alongside the domestic practices of many Jewish communities in Europe, whose nutritional rules were dictated by the Torah.

This central role of the Bible in the individual and collective life of Christians in early modern Europe requires deeper examination of its appropriation by laypeople. The question of lay readings of the Bible addressed by this volume covers a number of interconnected issues, such as the very definition of biblical culture and literature, the dissemination of the Bible in many languages, various literary genres and different media, the specificities of the different European biblical traditions, the connection between oral and written cultures and between textual and visual cultures, the position of ecclesiastical authorities vis-a-vis reading the Bible and the legal dispositions regarding publishing and reading biblical texts, the actual production, circulation and use of these texts, and many other issues besides. All of these issues need to be clearly distinguished and separately addressed, before being brought together, in order to avoid premature conclusions, and instead to provide an accurate picture of the situation. The contributors to this volume took this as their starting point, in order to nuance and to renew the current vision of lay readings of the Bible in early modern Europe. The volume explores a range of situations and diverse developments, going beyond the traditional narrative of the divide between a Protestant North and a Catholic South, and also connecting threads of lay readings of the Bible in Europe by identifying common aspirations and recurrent power relationships within communities and societies. While further exploring the riches of early modern European biblical culture, it shows how and why the Bible was an inescapable point of reference for redefining both sacred and profane knowledge, and for building new social identities, a development considered specific to the advent of modernity.

'Lay Readings of the Bible' refers, beyond the question of the access to the Bible for laypeople, to the participation of the laity in a range of Bible-based practices, such as reading, reciting, singing, listening, praying, meditating, engaging in exchanges and discussions, taking part in rituals and ceremonies, buying, borrowing, lending, editing, printing and selling books, copying biblical passages, rewriting them, and writing para-biblical literature, or literary works

théologie chez Bodin, Grotius, Hobbes (Paris: 1997); Lynch C., "Machiavelli and Reading the Bible Judiciously", *Hebraic Political Studies* 1 (2006) 162–185.

⁷ Tierney B., *The Idea of Natural Rights. Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150–1625* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1997); Witte J. Jr, *Law and Protestantism. The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: 2002); Berman H.J., *Law and Revolution. The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA – London: 2003); Oakley F., *Natural Law, Laws of Nature, Natural Rights. Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Ideas* (New York: 2005); Virpi M., *Lutheran Reformation and the Law* (Leiden: 2006).

inspired by the Bible, all activities that constitute forms of interpretation implying emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual involvement. The first group of essays highlights some essential issues which must not be forgotten regarding these multiple ways laypeople would appropriate the Bible in early modern Europe: the continuing importance of orality in the transmission and sharing of biblical culture; the deep connecting role of the Bible across Europe, despite confessional divides; and the inescapability of the Bible as a point of reference even for those who questioned its authority.

In “*Fides ex auditu: Hearing and Reading the Bible*”, Gordon Campbell discusses the very notion of reading the Bible, recalling that in the ancient world reading sacred or literary texts meant reading aloud, a practice which remained very common even in the age of the spread of printed texts. The tradition of reading aloud from the Scriptures continued from ancient Israel through to the early Church, Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians ending with the injunction that it should be read aloud to all brethren. In the same way, in the early modern period Christians heard the Bible, sometimes through the prism of the liturgy, sometimes read from the lectern or the head of the table; when literate persons read it, it was often in order to memorise selected passages to be recited. Also inherited from ancient times was a tradition of reading being connected to translating, both practices pertaining to oral culture. In the Second Temple period there was always an interpreter in the synagogue who translated and paraphrased in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. In the late medieval and early modern period, biblical translations in vernacular languages for the most part were aimed at listeners rather than readers, which, for instance, is reflected in style and punctuation. The question of how early modern bibles were read must be answered considering how they were written. Campbell discusses this issue with reference to English Bibles, which culminate in the King James Bible, the last English translation intended to be ‘read’ by the laity with the ear rather than the eye.

While Campbell’s chapter recalls the fundamental importance, from antiquity to the print era, of the oral dimension of the Bible and its transmission, Dupuigrenet’s essay recalls how early modern exegetes took up the medieval interpretation of the Bible as the ‘sign of Jonas’, considering it not only as the Word of God converted into written texts, but also, allegorically, as God made book. This potent symbol corresponds in material terms to the massive and durable presence of biblical books in the West both before, but mostly after, the advent of printing. Looking at the production of printed vernacular biblical translations in Europe up to 1700, Dupuigrenet focuses on the French case, which reflects a situation that was common to the whole of Northern Europe, where a genuine cultural community united Protestants and Catholics through shared familiarity with Scripture that Southern Europe lost as a result of Catholic prohibition. In fact, from the time of 1596 Roman Index onwards, a new geographical divide split Europe, Northern Europe where access to vernacular biblical translations was licit, from Italy, Spain, and the Spanish territories in America, where translation of the Bible was and remained forbidden until 1758. In Northern Europe, it was not only Protestants who could read vernacular versions of the Bible; Catholics could be granted special permissions to do so, a recognition of the needs of confessional coexistence. The famous Catholic preacher François Véron, who published more than two hundred anti-Protestant pamphlets and called for new Catholic translations to be used against heresy, actually considered the Bible to be the ‘judge of controversies’. Thus, in the midst of all the troubles in which European societies were caught during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries due to opposing interpretations of the Bible, it can be said that, at least in Northern Europe, a cultural community precisely related to reading the Bible did exist. More specifically, it was mostly through the work of biblical exegetes from Erasmus to Amyrault, and to Locke and Le Clerc, that the difficult birth of the idea of civil tolerance of different religious cultures can be traced.

Another paradoxical feature of early modern biblical readings is that the Bible widely served for the defence of both religious and sceptical authors and texts. Jean-Pierre Cavaillé’s

“Some Irreligious Uses of the Bible in the Early Modern Period” shows how the Bible constituted an inescapable reference for irreligious authors who questioned established religion. So-called libertine literature abounded in more or less veiled parodies, and ironic and licentious evocations of passages or books from the Scriptures. Apologists who denounced the libertines, like the Jesuit François Garasse, author of *The Curious Doctrine of the Wits of Our Times* (1624), accused them of consciously perverting the true sense of the Bible by singling out the passages and books that suited their irreligious intentions and discarding those which did not. Since direct criticism of the Bible was an essentially clandestine activity, works like Garasse’s, which discuss those biblical passages and books, constitute precious sources for the historian. All through the seventeenth century, however, authors also openly published (though always with caution) works in which the Bible was used to contest all or part of the historical, scientific, and theological knowledge that it was normally used to support. In particular, the works of Hobbes, La Peyrere and Spinoza contributed to the enterprise of historicising the Bible that culminated with Richard Simon. A lesser known work, the critical edition of which Cavaillé provided in 2017, is Canon Louis Machon’s *Apology for Machiavelli* (1643 and 1668). This work is of great interest because it illustrates a much more ambiguous enterprise. Machon based his rehabilitation of Machiavelli on the Scriptures, sustaining that they attest the truth, and even holiness, of the Machiavellian precept of accommodating religion to state. Nevertheless, Machon’s approach, steeped in a deep-rooted naturalism, was very different from that of the authors who attempted to draw from the Bible a political doctrine in conformity with the teachings of classical authors.

The second part of this volume, “To Read or Not to Read the Bible: Instructions and Prohibitions about Lay Readings of the Bible in Early Modern Europe”, concerns the intellectual and pastoral debate on the pertinence of lay reading of vernacular versions of the Bible, and its promotion through instructions or its control through censorship. The essays presented here show how this debate existed in Catholic as well as Reformed areas, strongly influenced by ecclesiastical censorship. They also demonstrate that the discussion cannot be simplified by assuming that Catholics were against and Protestants in favour of lay biblical reading.

In his essay “The Debate Surrounding Lay Bible Reading in Spain in the Sixteenth Century”, Ignacio J. García Pinilla places the sixteenth-century issue of lay biblical reading within a longer history which sees the first flourishing of vernacular translations of the Bible as early as the thirteenth century. In this history, suspicion of lay biblical reading developed, well before the Reformation, with regard to Judaising groups and *alumbrados*. A brief survey of sixteenth-century biblical translations in Spanish shows that all religious trends were represented. The large number of Protestant versions is significant, but Catholic authors also produced a remarkable number of translations, especially before the 1559 Inquisition ban, which signified the triumph of a hard-line position over several differing stances. All the reasons for prohibiting lay reading of the Bible in the vernacular ultimately went back to the fundamental argument of the difficulty of the Bible which leads to misunderstandings that in turn lead to heresies. The formulation of this argument by Friar Alfonso de Castro in *Adversus omnes haereses* (1534) was then taken up by several authors. At the same time, promoters of lay reading of the Bible in the vernacular were found among Spanish Catholics, be they clerics or humanists: the Benedictine abbot Juan de Robles made a forceful plea for Bible reading in his translation of the Gospels, which he failed to print; Friar Antonio Porras recommended Bible reading in his *Tratado de oración* published in 1552, specifically mentioning women, those who do manual labour, and even the ‘pagans’; and, in a more moderate way, Friar Bartolome Carranza, in his *Comentarios al catecismo christiano*, deemed the current prohibition as circumstantial and subject to change in the future. Among the humanists were unapologetic promoters of lay biblical reading influenced by Erasmus, such as Alfonso de Valdes, Juan Luis

Vivès, and Juan de Molina. The largest group of promoters, however, was associated with religious dissent and Protestantism. From 1543 to 1596, Francisco de Enzinas, Juan Pérez de Pineda, Casiodoro de Reina, and Cipriano de Valera defended vernacular Bible reading in their biblical translation printed abroad. Fadrique Furio Ceriol and Canon Bartolomé Turlán, who were both active in the Netherlands and, although they never broke with the Catholic Church, can be labelled dissidents, are also of relevance. While the 1559 prohibition marked a dividing line, one should not conclude that lay Bible reading disappeared completely from Spain after the prohibition. Indeed, a careful study of sources suggests that the capacity of the established powers to impede the circulation and use of written material should be considered as relative, and that debate, with all the limitations and self-restrictions imposed by the Inquisition, remained ongoing among the literate.

In his “Lay Debates about the Sacrality of the Bible in Sixteenth-Century Geneva”, Max Engammare takes back the question of personal reading of the Bible by laypeople in Calvin’s and Beza’s Geneva. Using new sources dating from 1555 to 1588, he shows that the reformers in Geneva did not favour personal reading of the Bible, justifying their position with the argument that the clarity of the Scriptures can be shown to common people only through the guidance of preachers and doctors. Drawing on examples from the Records of the Consistory of the Church of Geneva (1547–1555), he demonstrates that laypeople reading the Bible ‘en leur particulier’ (‘at home’) was a reality. Some statements explain why common people were summoned to appear before the Consistory – such as that nobody has ever seen God, or that the prophets said nothing about singing the psalms – clearly imply that whoever made them must have read the Bible carefully. Some free readers of the Bible pushed criticism as far as questioning its sacred nature, declaring that Scripture was nothing but paper, and that those who wrote it, the prophets and the apostles, were only men. Such criticism resulted ultimately in an attitude – reading the Bible freely without any authorised guidance, criticising it, and seeing it as a mere fable – very close to the libertinism Calvin attacked in his 1545 pamphlet. The Records of the Consistory allow us to uncover the day-to-day libertinism of relatively undistinguished individuals, literate craftspeople, such as a hosier, a baker, a foundry worker of character, women, and also a printer. The link can easily be made between this biblical criticism and the trial for atheism of Jacques Gruet in 1547. Indeed, each Thursday, at the sessions of the Consistory, Calvin could see the consequences of ‘free’ reading of the Bible on the people of Geneva, which even led to statements that were openly atheist. After 1555 and the victory of the Calvinist party, tongues fell silent. Whilst some minds may have continued their critical thinking on the sacred nature of the Bible, they stopped taking the risk of articulating that thought.

In his “The Bible and the Early Modern Catholic Tradition: from Rome to the Margins of Europe”, Ó hAnnracháin first offers a close examination of the position on the authority of the biblical text articulated by Robert Bellarmine in the first book of his *Controversies*, arguably the most important work of scholarship by the most influential Catholic intellectual of the early modern period. On the issue of the Vulgate, while identifying the grounds on which the Hebrew and Greek sources could legitimately be used to amend the Latin version, Bellarmine defends its sufficiency for confirming the dogmas of the faith. On the issue of vernacular Bibles, accepting that Protestant championing of the vernacular Bible is a critical distinguishing mark between his own confession and the Reformed churches, he points out that the Church does not operate a blanket ban on Scripture in the vernacular, but rather does not give permission to read vernacular translations to all, taking up the idea that misunderstanding of vernacular Scripture is a key element in the growth of heresies. All of Scripture is not accessible to everyone: people might be misled by reading a biblical text such as the Song of the Songs, or stories such as the adultery of David, or the obscure and difficult passages that need interpretation that only the clergy can provide. The publication of Bellarmine’s text in 1587 was a crucial step towards

establishing the tenets of Catholic thought on issues relating to Scripture. After the decrees of the Council of Trent, it helped to cement Catholic hostility towards open access to the Bible in the vernacular, which crystallised in the final, 1596 version of the Index. Under the new geographical divide thus created, while a blanket ban was imposed in Southern Europe, the Roman Church decided that permissions to publish vernacular versions of the Bible could be granted in Northern and Eastern Europe because of confessional coexistence. However, three case studies from the periphery of Europe show that acquiring explicit permission from Rome was often risky. The Hungarian vernacular Bible was ultimately accepted in Rome *post factum* but it was actually the personal authority of Péter Pázmány which resulted in its publication. The Croatian subjects of the throne of St Stephen failed to acquire the same privilege, although authorised Catholic Bibles had already been produced in other Slavonic languages such as Czech and Polish. In Gaelic Ireland, no attempt was made, even at the height of a wide-ranging and successful period of confessional literary production, to produce a Gaelic version of the Scriptures. Here it would appear that the lack of Protestant threat meant that the directors of the movement of Catholic renewal were happy to follow a sub-Alpine and sub-Pyrenean model of literary endeavour, by supplying the faithful with improving devotional, catechetical and hagiographical material, but continuing to make use of the Vulgate as the fundamental version of Scripture.

The third group of essays shows how specific biblical textual traditions in the vernacular languages and in Latin survived the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. As García Pinilla and Ó hAnnracháin have already suggested with regard to the Iberian Peninsula and Gaelic Ireland, the debate on the permissibility of vernacular translations involved not only biblical translations but biblical literature at large. While the first three essays explore how specific European vernacular textual traditions born before the Reformation adapted to the early modern confessional context, the fourth essay shows the renewed way in which a medieval Latin tradition went on through the seventeenth century. While the previous group of essays shows that connecting Catholic culture to Latin and Protestant culture to the vernacular languages is rather simplistic, this latter essay demonstrates that the idea that only vernacular languages would ensure a true understanding of the Bible for the Latinless should be revised.

In her “Reading the Gospels in the Life and Passion of Christ in French (ca. 1400–ca. 1550)”, Margriet Hoogvliet deals with the high number of late medieval lives of Christ and Passion stories. She gives an overview of this surprisingly rich and versatile textual tradition in French that still has not been mapped in its totality. She examines these works from the perspective of the medieval reader, trying to identify which parts of the Gospels lay and religious readers were reading in these popular texts. She focuses on six of the most widely read works during the fifteenth century: *La Passion de 1398* (edited as *La Passion Isabeau*); *Ad Deum vadit* (1403), originally a sermon by Jean Gerson; *Le pèlerinage de Jésus Christ* by Guillaume de Digulleville (written by 1358 and of which the printed edition, Paris, Jean Petit, 1514, is particularly relevant); *La Vie de nostre benoist saulveur Jhesus Crist*, written by an anonymous Carmelite friar between 1429 and 1455; *La Vie de nostre seigneur Ihesucrist parlant du viel testament et du nouveau*, Lyon, Arnollet, 1495; and *La benoiste Passion et Resurrection par le bon maistre Gamaliel et Nichodemus son neveu*, Paris, Trepperel, 1497. In earlier research all of these texts have often been perceived as secularized substitutes, intended for reading as a pastime, in a way similar to literary texts, rather than for religious reading practices. Taking an opposite approach, Hoogvliet shows that each of them has incorporated parts from the Gospels and that, consequently, they should be considered as Bible-based works. Quotations from the Gospels are often marked by para-textual signs informing the readers about the nature of the text they are reading. The lives of Christ and Passion stories provided lay and religious readers with a direct access to specific parts of the Gospels, translated into the vernacular and selected in view of specific cognitive and devotional reading practices. Archival,

codicological, and contextual evidence shows that reading lives of Christ and Passion stories was actually conceptualized as a useful form of Bible reading. Thus, those texts written during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with printed editions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, maintained an audience through the early modern period, even long after the rise of Protestantism.

The Italian context is the subject of Élise Boillet's essay "For Early Modern Printed Biblical Literature in Italian: Lay Authorship and Readership". It is apparent that the participation of the laity in biblical culture had long preceded the invention of the press, but was also greatly boosted by the nascent industry. Like the Italian versions of the Bible (91 editions between 1471 and 1600, listed by Edoardo Barbieri), Italian biblical literature, including not only translations, but also commentaries, anthologies, summaries, paraphrases, meditations, rewritings, sermons and plays, was wide-ranging. Like the tradition of late medieval lives of Christ and Passion stories studied by Margriet Hoogvliet, this biblical literature in Italian has long remained underexplored. Using a new catalogue compiled together with Erminia Ardissino, Boillet examines this production asking some basic questions: what was the ratio of religious to lay authors? How did this change over time? How was the category of lay readers defined? What was the cultural intention behind addressing works to the laity? While trying to answer these questions, she underlines the connections that existed between lay and religious milieus involving writers, printers, and readers. The intended readership of vernacular biblical books was large and shifting; vernacular translations were addressed to a range of readers, clerics and devout laypeople, whose knowledge of the Latin was insufficient to access the Bible without vernacular aids. In the same way, a psalter made up of a collection of homilies primarily addressed to nuns remained successful during the sixteenth century by extending its readership to all devout readers; furthermore, while the *Epistles and Gospels* were considered useful to all Christians and were widespread, the *Office of the Virgin Mary* was crucial among books intended for lay confraternities, although it was in Latin with directions in Italian; lastly, collections of sermons and writings presented as an aid for both preaching and meditation, increasingly numerous in the period studied, were intended for both the clergy and the faithful, readers and listeners, the humble and the learned. This first investigation based upon the forthcoming catalogue of printed biblical literature in Italian suggests the lasting presence of biblical books defined as books 'for all'. It also supports the idea that this literature was not only a 'popular' one. Finally, it invites further investigation into the complex relationships between ecclesiastical and lay milieus and their common interests and purposes.

In his "Bible Production and Bible Readers in the Age of Confessionalisation: the Case of the Low Countries", Wim François maintains that 'Confessionalisation' is still a very useful paradigm – notwithstanding the criticism to which it is susceptible – for describing the process that took place from the 1540s onwards in the religious communities of Western and Central Europe. In the course of this process, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites and other groups defined their own particular confessional identity, with which they distinguished themselves from other groups and which they encouraged their own members to adopt. The production of creedal statements, catechisms, and indices of forbidden books, as well as the performance of specific rites, the observance of set moral codes, and the establishment of proper Church structures were, among other things, instrumental to this process of confessionalisation. Focusing on the Low Countries, François shows that, from the 1540s, the vernacular Bible editions were divested of their confessionally ambiguous or composite character and were transformed into distinct Catholic, Reformed, or Mennonite versions, each having a defined text, a distinctive set of paratextual elements, and even peculiar material characteristics. These versions eventually received quasi-canonical status and would be used in their respective communities for decades and even centuries to come.

In Calvinist schools, reading the Psalms helped the rise of a Reformed identity within the general process of confessionalization at the end of the sixteenth century. In his “The Other Psalm Singing: Biblical Training in the Catholic *Petites Écoles* during the Late Renaissance”, Xavier Bisaro explores its Catholic counterpart, nearly unknown, to show how Latin psalms were widely used to teach reading. He first examines episcopal instructions, which applied the pedagogical technique to a group of Latin texts found in Books of Hours, some of them, designed for school use, containing up to a third of the whole psalter. That this reading of psalms was not a mere mechanical exercise without consequences on the shaping of the faith is clearly shown by bishops’ concern about an activity which they likened to commentary of the Bible which led to contestation or heterodoxy. In fact, some Books of Hours included careful explanations, verse after verse, of the main prayers, becoming a guide for both children and schoolmasters to keep them safe from any ‘dissidence’. For bishops interested in educational problems, psalm reciting and singing was a positive factor for Christian instruction as well as a risky nod to the Reformation. Leaving ecclesiastical government to consider the local level, it appears that more modest ambitions, limited to learning by rote a couple of prayers and the penitential psalms, were widespread. Memorising a minimal ‘emergency kit’ was standard for numerous schoolmasters and, consequently, for their pupils. This, however, did not exclude some more demanding conceptions of psalm reading or singing, of which remarkable examples can be found. Finally, Bisaro reflects on the significance of psalm reading and singing, highlighting the fact that it was much more complex than simply pupil/master interaction. The daily or weekly repetition of a few psalms articulated to a ritual was very important, concretely allowing pupils to connect the Latin text they had learnt, its wider significance, and the word-by-word commentary provided by the schoolmaster, with each text sung by children being distinguished by a particular moment, place, and some visual references. So, psalm reading and singing in early modern Catholic schools may be regarded as a true reading of the Bible and, further, as a preliminary to the several levels of understanding mastered by biblical scholars. Indeed, school instruction allowed children to combine a modest theological comprehension of Latin psalms with a sociohistorical integration of those texts in the present.

The last group of essays offers examples of the use of the Bible in integrating old and new knowledge as well as old and new conceptions of the organization of society. While the first two essays deal with the reconciliation of sacred and secular medical knowledge sought by the physician Francisco Vallés, and with the reform of astronomy undertaken by Johannes Kepler as a ‘priest of the book of nature’, the third essay examines how female authors in the Venetian area from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century made use of their knowledge of the Bible to support gender equality and undermine the foundations of patriarchal society.

In the many studies of the relationship and conflicts between science and religion from antiquity to the modern age, medicine, especially early modern medicine, is a field that needs further study. In her “Francisco Vallés’ *De Sacra Philosophia*: a Medical Reading of the Bible”, Concetta Pennuto shows how the medieval dialogue between medicine and theology was prolonged and renewed during the early modern period when medicine was already an art and science independent of theology. The physician Francisco Vallés (1524–1592), whose works included commentaries on Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen, wrote in his old age a *De Sacra Philosophia* which was organized in chapters commenting upon biblical books, with the aim of finding in them the causes of natural phenomena. With this book published in 1587, the author followed the trend of the development of the sacred philosophies following the condemnations of Aristotelianism and the crisis of Renaissance Aristotelianism, but brought out a feature which was specific to medicine, the preservation of the Aristotelian writings that were connected with Hippocratic and Galenic works. One of the most interesting fields for the application of a medical interpretation of the Bible proposed by Vallés’ *De Sacra Philosophia* is gynaecology, not only because gynaecology is a medical field which took shape as a modern specialty in the

sixteenth century, but also because Vallés himself was quite attentive to contemporary publications on women's health and to modern discoveries in feminine anatomy. While discussing reproduction, building on Genesis, 18, 11, and virginity, building on Deuteronomy, 22, 13–17, Vallés shows that medicine and theology can support each other: medical exegesis explains the physics found in the Bible and the Bible can be used as a useful source for physicians and philosophers, since the natural phenomena that one can read in it are the same that one can find in physics. Vallés' faith in the veracity of the Bible, which could stand up to modern sciences' scrutiny, was, however, considered as a problem by the Church, since censorship labelled *De sacra philosophia* through 1618 'donec corrigatur' and through 1603 'donec emendetur'.

In his "The Finger and the Tongue of God: Johannes Kepler, Reformation Theology, and the New Astronomy", Stefano Gattei focuses on one of the chief protagonists of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), who was educated in biblical reading. Nowadays he is primarily known for the formulation of the three laws of planetary motion, but his enormous output touched on a wide variety of subjects. Kepler's works are in fact characterised by a complex interplay of mathematical, physical, metaphysical, and theological issues. Early in his life, Kepler wished to be a theologian, and he later thought of himself as an exegete of God's works in nature. A growing recognition of the centrality of religious ideas and motivations has been emerging in Kepler scholarship over the last few decades. However, there remain many unanswered questions, not the least of which are the complicated ways in which Kepler uses the Bible and its categories in thinking about nature. Gattei shows that Kepler's understanding of his task and his resultant cosmology are deeply informed by biblical categories, while simultaneously rejecting any attempt to make the Bible into a scientific authority. For Kepler, if God can be known through both the book of Scripture and the book of nature, each has its own purpose and language, so 'everyone with strong religious scruples will take the greatest care not to twist the tongue of God so that it refutes the finger of God in Nature'. Drawing on the theological principle of accommodation, Kepler gives it his own twist: in order to convey the message of salvation, Scripture needs to be able to speak to the ignorant as well as to the learned and therefore uses images comprehensible to the simplest mind, while nature, which does not need to be adapted to the capacities of the ignorant, can reveal some aspects of the creator God more clearly. So, whilst declaring himself 'a Lutheran astrologer, throwing away the nonsense and keeping the kernel', Kepler undertook a reform of astronomy which was to be measured by the *liber naturae* rather than the *liber scripturae*. He was a reformer whose understanding of *sola Scriptura* ended with *sola natura*.

Finally, Erminia Ardissino examines how in and around Venice the defence of women's dignity was inspired by biblical reading. In her "Women Interpreting *Genesis* in Early Modern Italy: Arguments Supporting Gender Equality", she shows how the traditional judgement that assigned to Eve greater responsibility for original sin was first opposed by Isotta Nogarola, a learned young woman who had received a refined classical education in Verona in the fifteenth century. Nogarola made use of various biblical passages to support her argument that Adam was equally responsible for the Fall. In the following century, Moderata Fonte used a similar interpretation of passages from Genesis to defend the worth and nobility of women. This interpretation of Genesis became even more significant when the praise of women, developed during the Renaissance, turned to misogyny in the seventeenth century, and women's dignity was seriously threatened in an oppressive society. Lucrezia Marinella's removing biblical reference from her defense of the nobility and excellence of women is only the first step towards a *volte-face* on the question, which will be developed in her subsequent works. But again Arcangela Tarabotti's arguments in her *Paternal Tyranny* were mainly taken from Genesis and

opposed the anti-woman positions adopted in some novels written by members of the Accademia degli Incogniti concerning the story of Adam and Eve.

The volume ends with an afterword by Sabrina Corbellini, who led a European project on “New Communities of Interpretation. Contexts, Strategies and Processes of Religious Transformation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe” (Cost Action 1301 EU, 2013–2017). This project has greatly contributed to a renewed vision of European religious history to which this volume is certainly indebted. Corbellini highlights the reality that this volume explores, of the dissemination of the Bible in Europe in a period of time which saw major religious, political and cultural changes. The dissemination of biblical knowledge was neither limited to Protestant countries, nor to editions and translations of the Bible, nor to a few specific purposes and uses, nor to some limited audiences, but rather involved readers and listeners, men and women, people of all social status, culture and occupations, the devout and libertines. Thinking in terms of European patterns, the Bible constituted a common reference point in a politically and religiously fragmented early modern world, a common background and starting point for study and discussion across confessional divides and political boundaries. For Corbellini, a fundamental issue that emerges from the volume, and deserves to be high on the future research agenda on European religious culture from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period, is the agency of the laity, individuals and groups, in the process of dissemination of the biblical text. Linked to this issue and also in need of further inquiry is how the laity reflected on their role and responsibilities in this process of dissemination in terms of ethics and moral behaviour.

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