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The devotional turn in early-modern history

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« **The devotional turn in early-modern history** »
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These are just a few notes to contribute to this discussion on the ‘devotional’ turn in early-modern. I will present some of the Church records I have been working on for some years now.

- Devotion : worship (public), devotional practices in churches+ domestic/family devotion (prayer, meditation, fasting, reading, singing, repeating sermon notes / domestic and clandestine worship...) + « private devotion » (individual or the couple), and the relationship between the three.

Talking about devotion, very often starts with people, **women and men**, and the desire to understand what they were doing, in keeping or in opposition with prescriptive injunctions by the state or the clergy.

-So it starts with people, rather than texts, and the reconstruction of their beliefs and practice. And this is why for the past four years, we set up a joint seminar with Queen Mary about the **lived experience of religion**, a term that’s been often challenged by our participants. What would be a religion that wouldn’t be ‘lived’ and even if such a thing existed, were we right to import methods from sociology into history ?

But then perhaps, and this is what I tried to do in my last book, the essential word is not ‘lived’ here, nor ‘lived religion’ but indeed the word ‘experience’. And I still think we’re missing a collaborative project in France that would address the notion of experience in the early modern world. See the The Centre of Excellence in History of Experiences (HEX) in Finland, at Tampere University, <https://research.tuni.fi/hex/>.

-For the early-modern period, the limitations of the sources can be a problem. You can study liturgy, egodocuments such as diaries, spiritual biographies or letters, but what happens when people did not write ? We’re back to old methodological problems of trying to hear the voices of the most humble

-So what drew me to that topic, as a French person, was the old drive towards « **popular religion** » **below literacy level.**

-So I turned to material that would allow me to at least get an indirect glimpse of their practices through what their Churches was saying about them. So, **I’ve always tried to integrate private devotional practices into their necessarily collective context.**

For national Churches, one good approach would be through ecclesiastical courts ; but from people outside the Church of England, you also need to look elsewhere. And this is how I came to study **Church books, the minutes of the monthly meetings of separate or congregational churches**, and I’ve spent the last decade examining them, and especially how, when, and why people were received into the Churches, through a conversion narrative. I think it’s Alec who mentions this in our preparatory talks, that included children, between 9 and 12. But also how, when and why people were excommunicated. I will come back to the limitations of the records later on.

-One aspect I'm now moving onto, is the **articulation between devotion and places, especially communal space**. It's relatively recently that thanks to scholars such as Tara Hamlin, the **interior decoration of domestic houses** have been taken into account in the story of Protestant devotion, dominated until then by textual teaching or reading, at any rate verbal, rather than non verbal language.

Similarly, there are not many studies of the spatial and devotional impact of early meeting houses.

As somebody who came largely from a non-practising background, it has in fact taken me some time to realise that churches, chapels, meeting houses, were not simply places of worship, far from it.

Link with **material turn** and the way people interacted with objects within cultural practices. And to avoid just assuming that the Dissenters, with their conception of Churches as gatherings of visible saints, had little sense of the sacred, little attachment to buildings, and were perfectly happy to meet in a barn or in somebody's rented room. **I'm trying to sense what happened when the experience of persecution and domestic, often clandestine worship, started fading away and a new generation was left to imagine and create spaces that were neither domestic, nor public, as they term it, when referring to parish churches.**

So by moving into the eighteenth-century, at a time when more permanent buildings were built, I'm trying to take better account of the spatial and material dimensions of collective devotion, and, for instance of the relationship between the meeting house, the pastor's house, the Church vestry. That went hand in hand with many more managerial functions of ministers and church officers and their desire to have places that would be both places of worship but also places where to conduct all the other « business » of a Church. Were they the same, physical places ? Sometimes, the answer is yes, sometimes the answer is not, and I think there's more to do about coffee houses where London churches were routinely conducting meeting.

Church records of independent or separate churches :

The term « records » is vast and define all type of written documents, including legal documents, deeds and property titles, accounts books, correspondences, kept by a Church. Among those records there are Church Books, which take the form of the minutes of monthly meetings to conduct the affairs of the Church, and also of « discipline books ».

One can't ask those records to be what they are not but they do yield evidence as to the devotional practices of early modern dissenters, albeit at times negatively, when admonishing them for failing behind puritan standards :

-Conversion narratives and how those were deemed successful or not. We have some MSS and printed collections but the records do give us insight into their performance, whether indoor or outdoor, of the ways believers read the Bible and selected elements to reinterpret their own spiritual lives, the nature of the audience, the training of children or members of the family

-Indifference : not sure this is an *emotion* but the story of religious indifference should be told in more specific term : very often, even those more rigid protestants failed to turn up on Sunday, even on communion Sunday, failed to participate in church meeting or to contribute to religious collections. But they would of course consider themselves as true believers; but it means that communal worship, rituals, and direct participation into the daily workings of a Church were perhaps not as central as we imagine in their daily lives

-Their behaviour in Church : snoring, talking, arriving late, departing early, refusing to sing hymns or on the contrary insisting upon it...

-Their opposition to some rituals : the laying on of hands, baptism (with some become Baptists, for instance)...