

Lived Catholicism: A Roundtable Discussion

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Abstract

The study of Lived Catholicism seeks to step away from the normative forces of institutional expectations to explore Catholicism as it is found in the practices of daily life. It draws on the foundations of lived religion in recognising the importance of improvisation, negotiation, resistance and subversion in everyday religiosity. It foregrounds the voices and experiences of ordinary people to explore the places of Catholicism in their lives. However, if this emerging term is to find its place in the academy, it must stand up to rigorous critique from across the disciplines. Here specialists from the fields of sociology, anthropology, history and theology discuss the potential of Lived Catholicism to generate new categories of thinking in the study of Catholicism.

Keywords

Catholicism – lived religion – lived Catholicism

Introduction

The study of Lived Catholicism seeks to step away from the normative forces of institutional expectations to explore Catholicism as it is found in the practices of daily life and in the stories that Catholics tell about themselves and one another. It draws on the foundations of lived religion in recognising the importance of improvisation, negotiation, resistance and subversion in everyday religiosity, highlighting the delicate dance of power between actors and unpacking the notion of lay agency in an institution that is often seen as highly clerical. It identifies Catholicism as a powerful forming and deforming force, present not only in the rituals of Sunday Mass but shaping education, architecture, family and community, identity, patterns of migration, embodiment, sex and gender, food and feasting, mourning and celebrating. The influence of Lived Catholicism reaches as far as the curriculum of an Australian business school to the rituals of intermarriage in Mumbai to the patterns of farming in Ghanaian villages (all papers at the first Lived Catholicism conference hosted by the Centre for Catholic Studies in November 2020). While these topics can be explored from a variety of disciplines, what is central is the fore-grounding of the lived reality of an individual or community rooted in a particular time and place.

Here, we map out important epistemological and methodological concerns for lived Catholicism. Doing so requires turning first to the origins of the study of lived religion. As noted by David Hall, the concept of popular religion allowed historians to explore the difference between official state religion as it changed over the Long Reformation and everyday practices, in some cases pre-Christian practices that could be seen as subversive of or actively opposing those prescribed beliefs. In a further move, scholars of Lived Religion collapsed this opposition, complexifying popular religion beyond both resistance and folk practices to engage with the impact of religion on the everyday. This then opened up interdisciplinary perspectives including: ritual studies; the cultural anthropology of Geertz and Turner; Ammerman's sociological work in congregation studies; and above all an emphasis on meaning-making which allows for complexity and nuance.

From these beginnings, we can see how these important themes have been further developed by Catholic scholars including the authors of this roundtable. Robert Orsi, in a chapter in Hall's book, destabilises the Durkheimian dichotomy of the sacred and profane, seeing religiosity as fluid and improvised, entwined with all parts of life. He rejects practising/non-practising binaries or linear ranges, noting instead that key words are 'hybridity, ambivalence, irony.'¹ From *The Madonna of 115th Street* onwards, he demonstrates how layers of often-paradoxical meaning making are created and held. This approach has proved particularly helpful for scholars studying Catholic young people as they wrestle with the extra layers of complexity and meaning-making associated with adolescence and youth cultures. One example of this is the work of Mandes and Rogaczewska, studying Polish Catholic twenty-somethings who negotiate complicated identities amid family pressures, Western consumerism, and notions of spirituality, cultural practices, and Polish nationalism during the fall of communism. The authors note that in such circumstances, the processes determining the relationship between belonging and believing are complex and multifaceted. Despite the 'religious wars' between the generations, 'many young adults prefer to live in the ambiguity between the intellectual rejection of propositional belief and the emotional acceptance of embodied belief, rather than choose the clear-cut position of a non-believer.'²

1 Robert Orsi, 'Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion', in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, by David D. Hall (Princeton University Press, 1997), 11.

2 Slawomir Mandes and Maria Rogaczewska, "I Don't Reject the Catholic Church – the Catholic Church Rejects Me": How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings in Poland Re-Evaluate Their Religion', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28, no. 2 (2013): 272.

Notions of power and resistance were key to the beginnings of popular religion, and Foucauldian understandings of authority have coincided with the sex abuse scandals of the last twenty years to throw fresh light on power-structures within Catholic spheres. On a macro level, Catholic anthropologists have used the work of Carl Schmitt as a basis for critiquing missiology and the impact of theology on politics, but also the workings of the institutional Church itself.³ On a micro level, Orsi's work has charted the many ways in which women, children and disabled people were subjected to, but also often able to negotiate, the Church's narratives of sacrifice and repression.⁴ Tricia Bruce's work, *Faithful Revolution* and *Parish and Place*, challenges notions of power across the Church, bringing to light the unexpected interplay of agency and powerlessness which exists at every level, but also, significantly, the ways in which processes of negotiation allow the Church to flex to accommodate difference within the institution.⁵ Questions of power resonate when contemplating the ways in which abuse survivors, queer Catholics, young people, women, and migrants, among others, negotiate their Catholic identity in relation to, and against, the Church.

Finally, cultivating a norm-free approach opens up routes to inter-disciplinary conversation about Catholicism. At the first Lived Catholicism conference there were papers not only from sociology, anthropology and theology, but also human geography, psychology, literary studies, history and architecture. This diversity of perspectives brings real insight. Alana Harris's exploration of Lourdes pilgrimages brings both spiritual and therapeutic perspectives to bear on the motivations of pilgrimage helpers. She uncovers meaning-making that is able to move seamlessly between religious and health-based narratives that are occupied with individual experience, but is also, unusually, deeply collective. By applying different disciplinary perspectives, Harris shows how Catholics bring a variety of worldview understandings – including psychological, therapeutic and New Age type spiritualities – within a Catholic frame, revealing something of how Catholic identity remains resilient within late modernity.⁶

3 Kristin Norget, Valentina Napolitano, and Maya Mayblin, eds., *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader*, 2017.

4 Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

5 Tricia Colleen Bruce, *Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 Harris, Alana. 'A Place to Grow Spiritually and Socially': The Experiences of Young Pilgrims to Lourdes'. In *Religion and Youth*, edited by Sylvia Collins-Mayo, 139–48. Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective. Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series in Association with the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2010.

If Lived Catholicism is to succeed, however, it must make two further partnerships. It must grapple with the difficulties of generalising from small groups to wider theory, connecting granular accounts to generalised statistical analysis, such as the work of Stephen Bullivant. With care, differences and even dissonances can be revelatory of new strands of work, but attentive epistemological and methodological work needs to be undertaken. The other partnership is with theology. How does Lived Catholicism interact with the Church's theological understanding of itself, while maintaining Orsi's stance of 'hybridity, ambivalence, irony'? How does the empirical speak to the conceptual? Marcus Pound here lends a philosophical and theological lens to the question of Lived Catholicism, bringing to bear some of the concerns long held by theologians about how to discuss theology and practice without imposing a false dichotomy between the two (for example, as addressed by Clare Watkins in *Disclosing Church*).⁷

We used the questions above as the basis for a roundtable discussion hosted by Avril Baigent. Her doctoral work with Catholic teenagers had prompted her to explore the ways in which the notion of Lived Catholicism might generate new lines of enquiry by foregrounding the voices of ordinary Catholics. Key scholars came together from a range of disciplines and the following framework of questions were proposed: First, what does Lived Religion bring to the study of Catholicism? Second, is Lived Catholicism simply a subset of Lived Religion? Third, how does the study of Lived Catholicism situate itself in terms of the institutional church? Fourth, how does Lived Catholicism relate to theology? Fifth, to what extent should the study of Lived Catholicism transform Catholicism? Sixth, should practitioners of Lived Catholicism encourage radicalism and subversion? And finally, what can we expect for the study of Lived Catholicism going forward?

It is fitting that the discussion of 'Lived Catholicism' took the form of a round table to the extent it yields to the discursive environment, facilitated the interaction of voices, and allowed the questions and answers to be developed in that setting, providing the type of reflection characteristic of a group discussion. In short, we wanted to provide a kind of 'lived academic' approach to the question of Lived Catholicism.

⁷ Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (Routledge, 2020).

Question 1: What does Lived Religion Bring to the Study of Catholicism?

Alana: I remember in the 1990s exploring David Hall's work and thinking about lived religion through those very tentative gestures that were coming out of history. I then got distracted and worked as a lawyer and a civil servant for 10 years before coming back to the debate ahead of starting a doctorate. In the interval, it seemed to me that the sociology of religion had caught up with the conversations initiated by social and cultural histories, through the work of Nancy T. Ammerman and Meredith McGuire. This might just be a historian's take on it, but I remember in those first years of my doctoral study around 2004–5 going to the British Sociological Association conferences and beginning to speak into a place that was only just beginning to question secularization, thinking (again) about the intersections of class and experience, and taking a renewed interest in materiality. I was stitching things together to try to lever into this space that was simultaneously modern history, contemporary sociology of religion, theologically inflected but beyond the 'empirical', and meshing together the discursive and experiential. In applying this to Catholicism, I was inspired by historians of earlier periods like Sarah C. Williams and Ann Taves to explore what it looked like if you took seriously the beliefs and devotional practices of ordinary people. This approach could perhaps be called lived Catholicism, but it's a tributary of, and inherently related to a broader spectrum of faith positions and confessional forms grouped under the term 'Lived Religion'.

Tricia: I see the study of lived religion as a reaction to who controls the narrative. It's a response to the classic Marxist conception of the elite – or even capitalist motives – dictating the story of what religion 'is.' Lived Religion creates a space to look at meaning-making from the bottom-up, from the perspective of those who *don't* write or control the narrative. It asks and challenges what *are* the dominant narratives, and what do they reveal about gender, race, class, and more. What does it mean to flip the script and open up avenues for this kind of thinking and study within a dynamic, global Catholic Church?

As this has developed, one of the challenges that has emerged is the *over*-reaction to 'formal' religion which, in essence, saw 'Lived Religion' as exclusionary of formal religious structures, positions, and roles – including things like congregations or parishes – as though 'Lived Religion' and extant religious institutions were mutually exclusive. Now, there's an invitation and opportunity through work by scholars such as Ammerman, myself, and others that reinserts structure into lived religion. It pushes back against an either/or frame pitting structure against agency, religious elites against lay people.

These promising lines of thought provide us with a chance to *synthesize* mutually influencing dimensions for 'living' religion and investigate the taken-for-granted contextually.

Alana: The methodological field termed 'Lived Religion' was always intended to get past reductive binaries like elite versus grass roots, thereby taking the approach beyond earlier analogous expressions looking at 'folk religion' or 'popular religion'. That was already a well-developed field when this slightly more agile framing emerged – intended precisely to challenge an approach which contrasted orthodoxy with the 'heterodox', and to look towards the 'vernacular' and outside or across limited framings such as the nation-state. Ideally, for example, the study of Lived Catholicism totally complicates, indeed confounds the often taken-for-granted scale or scope of analysis – the Catholic church is a global, transnational actor persisting and adapting to newer institutions and expressions of power through the modern nation-state or 19th century empires. The Catholic church is a corporate entity which often functions as a global actor – and for me, this takes the study of 'lived Catholicism' beyond a more individual, subjective focus on 'lived religion'. There is this inherent and inescapable dialogue between the experiential and the discursive, the individual and the corporate. The study of nuns or women religious, for example, offers a perfect example of gendered, female piety and religious charisma through the foundress, and collective outplays of that mode of religious expression and spirituality through mission and the differentiation between the mother house and the operation of the Order in different parts of the world.

Marcus: I arrived at lived Catholicism through a mixture of the vernacular sensibility within medieval studies, critical theory, and theology. Medieval studies took us beyond the conceptual confines of scholasticism and monasticism (intellect vs experience) into a 'third-dimension' of theology, articulated in the vernacular and by the laity. Meanwhile, critical theory took us beyond the confines of a secular positivism vs religious myth; rather than view religious practices as an uncomfortable anachronism in an otherwise secular landscape, better to read them within the complex web of symbolic codes from within their existing framework. Carolyn Walker Bynum's work on the theological significance of food to medieval women was exemplary of the approach from the standpoint of history. Her work foregrounded the vernacular traditions of medieval theology and gave primacy to the experience of women by reading their reception of both theology, ecclesiology, and food in terms of their symbolic coding. Rather than adopt a positivist stance and impose western medical categories such as anorexia on those emaciated female saints who starved to death, she draws out a far more complex theological play of symbols and values whilst attentive to the classical concerns of sociology (gender, class,

etc.), to suggest altogether different readings. Bynum's power was not only in the dignity she recovered for those women, but in the generative effect of her work: if we can look at the significance of food to medieval women, what other materially affective sites and objects can we look at to enrich our understanding of Catholic social history and theology beyond the narrow confines of the secular paradigm? By contrast, while theologians have long been cognizant of the experiential turn, the debates can be reified as that: what status has the experiential turn, rather than, what other sources or approaches are available to us to discern the 'life' of Catholics in ways which help us do our theology better? So, for me, lived Catholicism was not a natural progression from the academic study of 'religion' as such, but arrived at through the genuine desire to see Catholicism as lived and in all its complexity.

Stephen: One of the reasons why this kind of thinking about the study of Catholicism - this foregrounding of the lived - is helpful is because we tend to think of the Catholic church as a single thing. We talk about Catholics in England and Wales, and we might distinguish the Irish or we might talk about Poles as a specific group but once we dig down then we realize you're actually looking at lots of overlapping distinct groups whose Catholicisms are very different within the span of Catholicism. From the outside they all look the same, but to understand what's going on within the Catholic church then you need to understand the differences say between Venezuelan and Mexican Latino Catholic devotional cultures within a particular suburb in Brooklyn. Or how is the Italian Catholic experience different to the Polish Catholic experience? In order to dig into that you're already going deep into the lived-ness of what it means to be a Polish Catholic and Italian Catholic, you know an Italian Catholic living in the middle of Wales or wherever. Foregrounding the lived is helpful for me in thinking through how those sorts of underlying dynamics build up to the bigger picture, like pixels that all contribute in different ways to this overall picture which is normally where you know my work sits. It's been particularly helpful in focusing on the lived because the dominant social histories of Britain or America aren't focused on the Catholics or where they do touch on Catholics it's in a very superficial way. My wife finds this because she's a music historian working on Edward Elgar. Within the mainstream of British musicology there's no intuitive understanding of what it meant for Elgar to be Catholic and particularly that kind of middle-class Catholicism that Elgar grew up in and lived out. We don't have those narratives and that rich social, historical and ethnographic data that you can just say - and there's the Catholic bit of it. We have to think, what does it mean to be a Catholic in this world in this place?

Question 2: Is Lived Catholicism Simply a Subset of Lived Religion?

Robert: This is an important question. ‘Lived religion’ as way of approaching religious phenomena entails epistemological, political, and ethical questions as well as historiographical and technical or methodological ones. I first turned to it – drawing on European and British historians – because, as a graduate student and then a young scholar with a Catholic background, I was painfully aware of how much of what I thought of as fundamental to religious culture (the centrality of the body, for example, or the complexities of religious suffering, or the role of images) was omitted from the liberal Protestant scholarship that dominated the study of religion. Beyond this, so much of modern scholarship, as so much of Western modernity, was constructed in relation to Catholicism as the at once real and imaginary other. In other words, not only was it missing, it was denied, repressed – necessarily missing. This means that the very categories we used – having to do with the nature of time, for instance, or the meaning of the ‘global’ – are built around the exclusion of Catholic ways of being in and understanding the world. This is what I write about in *History and Presence*. So, in response to your question, no, Catholicism is not a subset of ‘lived religion,’ it is its hidden interior, it is the other than makes it necessary. Lived religion was meant to (re)surface what had been denied, excluded, rendered into the disciplinary languages of ‘magic,’ ‘cult,’ ‘superstition’ in the study of religion. To proceed without an awareness of this political, ontological, metaphysical background is not only to turn ‘lived religion’ into an inert and banal ‘method,’ it is to strip it of its truly subversive potential.

Tricia: I would echo that to say in many ways, Lived Catholicism might be even more expansive than lived religion. The Catholic intellectual tradition hints of ecumenism and builds upon a premise of understanding truth(s) across different spaces and contextual realities. In the sociology of religion, we have an unfortunate tendency to call things ‘religion’ in a blanket way when we really mean ‘Protestantism’ or some more narrow construct of religious tradition and experience. Lived Catholicism is rendered invisible in such accounts, as are the local Catholics who engage with life and faith differently therein. There is something both distinctive and necessary about asserting a uniquely and specifically ‘Lived Catholicism’ perspective, if for no other reason than one that says Catholicism, too, is a part of the story. Subtract that, and Catholicism gets marginalized and forgotten in this blanket default that is both incomplete and incorrect.

Marcus: From the standpoint of the study of religion, it is difficult to see how lived Catholicism is not simply a subset of lived religion, but from the standpoint of both critical theory and theology, this remains problematic.

As critical theorists like Talal Asad have highlighted, religion might appear as self-evident, but ‘religion’ as a social category was constructed and extrapolated from its moorings in the traditions of the West to be deployed as a Universal concept whose emergence was tied up in various ways with the rise of liberal thought and colonial rule; in short, ‘religion’ is entirely ideological and the return to lived Catholicism exposes something of the difficulties inherent within the category of religion, not least of which is the related concept of secularization. But if religion is not a genus of which Catholicism is one of its species, then it no longer makes sense to talk about lived religion, but rather, lived Catholicism, and by implication, lived Buddhism, Lived Islam, etc. Lived Catholicism takes the normative ‘religion’ out of the mix as it does the normative out of Catholicism; but the latter only emerges when we contend with the former.

Question 3: How Does the Study of Lived Catholicism Situate Itself in Terms of the Institutional Church?

Alana: I find it profoundly reassuring – indeed liberating – to recover and rediscover the pluralism (historically as well as contemporaneously) within the institution that is the church. It leads to the conclusion that the norm is, there is no normative! Across two millennia, there are moments when certain people and power dynamics in the church have been problematized by that diversity and maybe sought to enforce different understandings of what is permissible. This is illuminating too in view of what surrounds those attempts to establish (and police) boundaries, to define who’s in and who’s out. In focusing on the ‘lived’ experiences of the laity (and men and women religious, as well as clergy), alongside the discussive and dogmatic definitions of Catholicism articulated by episcopies and papacies, we might well move to the position of speaking about ‘lived Catholicisms’, past as well as present.

Tricia: In the same way that an emphasis on the grassroots and distinctive localities make lived Catholicism unique, so, too, does the emphasis on connective layers of power and structure. Lived Catholicism is a laboratory through which we can understand both stability and change through multiple levels of society. It’s an illustration of the classic ‘Coleman’s Boat’ depicting the mutually influencing relationship between the micro and the macro. Studying agency and structure within Catholicism lets you see how people influence structure and how structure influences people. Countless threads of interconnection make Catholicism a fascinating place to understand the fundamental principles of social life and the social world.

Avril: I have been reflecting on what Tricia said at the conference, which is 'what happens when Lived Catholicism meets institutional Catholicism?'. One perspective is that institutional Catholicism is just another kind of Lived Catholicism, that there is not an 'unlived' Catholicism. So in this scenario what we have is two kinds of Lived Catholicism, with the possibilities of exploring how different worldviews and lived realities overlap and interact. Ammerman's critique of lived religion was that it did not engage sufficiently with institutional forms. However, all of you have written in a way which constantly relates back to the institution in your accounts of people's lived Catholicism, whether it's the Lourdes pilgrimage, or power structures and personal parishes, or Robert Orsi's writing about the impact that the Church has on our sense of our self and how that self-understanding then impacts on our relationship with the Church. Perhaps Lived Catholicism must relate to the institution because we can only be Catholic in relation to the institution, even if this is only in a former or distant configuration? The interest then lies in the way that people negotiate, subvert and craft this relationship.

Tricia: This is a reminder that the 'Church' – or people like priests or bishops who seem to represent the 'Church,' whatever that is, are likewise living Catholicism. It's a rather radical invitation of Lived Catholicism to decentre that power, to say that this is collectively made and lived and challenged. Ironically, there may be no group within Catholicism about whom less is known than priests, and almost intentionally so. By excluding ordained Catholics from Lived Catholicism, we struggle to answer even simple questions about how priests live, how priests negotiate relationships or friendships, or how priests get things done in a parish at different times in history – collaboratively or not. Lived Catholicism reminds us not to take such things for granted.

Alana: I did some oral histories with a dozen priests a few years ago and was looking for a literature. The literature that I could find, at least in a British context, was all about leaving the active priesthood, which was a very specific optic but not representative of the vast majority who stay and seek to negotiate Vatican precepts and pastoral sensitivities (and exhaustion). In the week in which Pope Francis announced that priests cannot bless same-sex unions,⁸ I have been thinking about how this development can be interpreted from a lived Catholicism perspective. On one level, there are the terms of the debate as constructed through the lens of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and antagonism to LGBTQ+ perspectives, compared to how this is received and experienced by those gay Catholics that I know (and with whom I am in solidarity),

⁸ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/atican-says-priests-cant-bless-gay-couples-why-did-pope-francis-approve-decree>.

the priests who minister to them and the parishes in which they find support and community. This is just one example of radically competing versions of Catholicism that play out through a number of thorny issues about theological anthropology, biopolitics and sexuality. For all parties involved in the debate, these issues turn around understandings of authenticity and various competing constructions of truth. Some of the new research emerging is trying to join up the work that's been done on the experiential and the embodied with the affective. I think this really breaks open new ways of thinking about what faith is, how it works, why it matters, why it animates people, and why it is a source of such conflict and guilt. Not enough new conceptual thinking has been done about 'belief' as a category of analysis when exploring the relationship between categories of gender and history of emotions. That is, how might gender, emotional communities and faith positions intersect? I am encouraged though by the new developments auspiced by the HEX Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences at the University of Tampere, Finland.⁹

Avril: My interest in Lived Catholicism lies in the very ordinary. When we stop taking norms for granted, we start to see instead the ways that they are negotiated, crafted, and improvised. As Alana and Tricia have noted, we also start to see the ways in which power is held in a much more complex dance between laity and clergy, bishops and their dioceses, and laypeople in authority and the rest of the Catholic community. These can be seen playing out in any parish, for example, around the ways in which access to the sacraments is permitted and the variety of expectations of the behaviour of participants. As Peter McGrail has illuminated, not all families on a first Communion programme have signed up to the fullness of the Church's teaching on the Eucharist.¹⁰ This is so common that it is not anomalous (despite what any parish catechist might say), and what is generative is to explore these different perspectives and why they are so resistant to the official doctrine of the Church.

Question 4: How Then Does Lived Catholicism Relate to Theology?

Alana: I think theology (as capaciously defined) is absolutely capable of embracing and dialoguing with everything that has come out of this conference

⁹ <https://research.tuni.fi/hex/lived-religion/>.

¹⁰ McGrail, Peter. *First Communion: Ritual, Church and Popular Religious Identity*. Liturgy, Worship and Society Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

on Lived Catholicism ... but I hasten to add that I learnt my theology in an ecumenical institution. There we used an inherently dialogical method – for example taking the Nicene Creed and collectively unpacking and deconstructing each clause – in a classroom composed of Jesuit seminarians, Anglican women priests who saw themselves as ‘refugees’ from the conservative Diocese of Sydney and ordinands from the United Church of Australia. Putting all these emerging theologians (and pastors) together in a room with fabulous scholars from different faith traditions and then reading together something shared by all our churches, you encounter first hand a pluralism of theologies, which can also point to the interpretative possibilities *within* Catholicism. This is picking up on Tricia’s point too – the basis for a generous, open, empathetic conversation because there is no normative, but rather an eschewal of the dogmatic, and an openness to different positionalities and faith positions.

Tricia: Like Alana, I think this question has to start with another about the purpose of theology. As a sociologist of Catholicism, I find myself eager to engage with theologians’ questions about normativity, boundaries, and interpretation – while also defensive to showcase the important and much needed role of empirical data. There’s a long history of sociologists getting in ‘trouble’ for disclosing lived practices and opinions that aren’t exactly in line with formal Church prescription. We could call the study of Lived Catholicism an experiment in the ‘real world’ evaluating how core tenets of faith play out imperfectly for individuals, families, communities, and nations. Lived Catholicism is a mirror; combining theological, sociological, and other perspectives shows who and what Catholicism is. And as something like the crisis of abuse in the Church makes clear, such exposure is both revelatory and troubling.

Alana: Something which I think has come very strongly through this conference is the (often unacknowledged) importance of the theological and the intellectual/ideological system in which so much of our interpretations of the experiential are undertaken. Reading through the nuances in interpretation that are present within divergent theological approaches enables undertaking of ‘what is at stake’ and to parse the ideological commitments that undergird these contestations and conversations. I’m a product of an Ignatian theological formation which starts from the prosaic and highlights the contemplative in the everyday (through the Spiritual Exercises). This strand of the Catholic spiritual tradition places an accent on an intensely incarnational theology – which cannot escape being embodied and therefore enters into potentially dangerous, freighted territory. To be able to wend our way through the conversations and the complications of this embrace of the enfleshed, the erotic, and mystical desire as sometimes intertwined with faith brings us to the heart of perennial debates about the relationship between mind, body and spirit.

For me, this conference was a rallying call for more creative and critical theology which can also open up new questions and debates within, but especially beyond, the discipline.

Marcus: Perhaps the question is better put in terms of ecclesiology and our thinking about the church rather than beginning with theology. Afterall, as Christopher Brittain¹¹ puts it, 'ecclesiology cannot live by doctrine alone'. Theologians can be wary of the turn to the empirical on the grounds that it reduces all phenomena to social phenomena to natural causation, as if the real enemy was secularism; on such a reading, there can be no real room for grace. But we are misguided as theologians if we think that getting doctrine right is the first step to ensuring the integrity of our practice or accompanying ecclesiologically. One finds this logic at play for example in the claims that sexual abuse in the Catholic Church was the result of secularism and the failure to take the theology seriously. Such an approach merely re-asserts doctrine as the normative model which, as lived Catholicism has shown, is not the case. Better for ecclesiologists to reflect on their churches in terms of their concrete reality as a means to perform their pastoral care. In this sense, it might be further argued that the empirical study of lived Catholicism, placed in the service of our churches, re-constitutes those empirical studies precisely as theology.

Question 5: To What Extent Should the Study of Lived Catholicism be Transformative of Catholicism?

Tricia: Part of what attracts me to sociology is the approach to studying religion that – I won't say it's 'objective,' because it reacts against positivist claims by acknowledging positionality – but it's an approach that surfaces voices, narratives or experiences without the imperative of normative judgment. As a sociologist, I can identify what 'is' without having to name what 'should be.' Others who study Catholicism from different vantage points, including some theologians or folks motivated by a strong social justice orientation, might approach it differently. There's possibility and value there. But to me, our most powerful role as scholars is peeling off the layers to show what's there and who's there and what's said. It's less about my voice and more about listening to many voices.

By way of example: I am currently completing a book about Americans' attitudes towards abortion. This topic is very political in nature, of course, and

¹¹ D Christopher Brittain, 'Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live by Doctrine Alone' in *Ecclesial Practices*, 1 (2014) 5–30.

strong claims sell books. But what gets lost in that approach is a more empathetic exploration of how people actually think and feel, and the countless complexities and contradictions within that. Too often, we skip over understanding in our valiant effort to effect change. But the quest for understanding across difference is what drives my work as a sociologist and how I study Catholicism. I'm not coming in with a hardened agenda, even if I hold personal feelings about things. I'm there to develop understanding and then share that understanding among audiences where it may be missing.

Alana: That resonates really strongly with my response to that question too which is about the extent to which, particularly in historical settings, this approach is capable of resourcing different ways of living Catholicism (of 'being a Catholic') and the extent to which there might be historical parallels with the present of different ways of believing and belonging: the ways in which it's a complicated, messy business. People don't fit neat categories, and this is not a product of modernity or a present conundrum but something that you can see historically in all times and places. There are moments where certain powerful people, agencies, or lobby groups in the church have been challenged by that diversity and seek to enforce different boundaries and criteria for 'belonging'. I find myself going back to this question of what is radical and subversive in certain renderings, and for certain generations, but not so for others decades, centuries or millennia later. Taking a historical view on that means that you are starting to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar.

Robert: I think Catholics have had ample opportunity of seeing in recent years just how vacant the standard histories of Catholicism have been. How is the history or sociology of parish life useful to Catholics if it excludes the reality of clerical sexual crimes and misbehaviors, or the place of violence and shaming in Catholic schools (and novitiates), or the way the sacrament of confession was often so dangerous to parishioners? How do we make sense of someone like Cardinal Spellman – whom I use here as a synecdoche for all prelates, perhaps for Catholicism itself – apart from his sexual life and secrets? Lived religion offers a post-naïve approach to Catholic life and history. It shatters what I think of as the 'Tridentine consensus', by which I mean the idea that after Trent, a new, thoroughly disciplined, fully reformed Catholicism took shape. This wasn't true. The post-Tridentine church was haunted by the unaddressed crises of the 16th century, and eventually the determination to repress all awareness of internal problems led to corruption. This is one of the problems with repression: it doesn't make the past go away, it makes it fester and burn. Catholicism became an 'empire of secrets', in theologian Mark Jordan's phrase. To the extent that a lived religion approach to Catholicism (or any other religious tradition) sets itself against the authority of secrets, it holds the

possibility of being transformative. How much better for Catholicism would it have been, for example, if the horrors – cultural, religious, psychological, and sexual – of Catholic-run schools for Native Americans had been fully included in the history of US Catholicism, or the complicity of religious orders, prelates, and dioceses in slavery? This is not to say Catholicism is bad; but neither is it good. It exists within time and space and therefore is it as susceptible to corruption as any other human practice and as occasionally transcendent. Lived religion has always been about taking an adult approach to Catholicism, rather than a frightened child's.

Stephen: In sociology there's this activist role and part of that is the questions you choose to study which are often relevant to particular bigger concerns that you or others might have, but I don't like the idea of trying to change it while doing the study of lived Catholicism.

Question 6: During the Living Catholicism Conference, Robert Orsi Noted his Surprise by 'How Benign the Attitude of the Conference was Towards Catholicism'. Should Practitioners of Lived Catholicism be Encouraged to be More Radical and Subversive?

Robert: Right, we should be asking ourselves always, who are we making uncomfortable, are we making enough people uncomfortable or are we giving them reasons for complacency? If we fail to be deeply challenging, we become part of the problem, as Catholic history has too often been for too long.

Tricia: This idea of a subversive imperative harkens back to questions about positionality and insider / outsider perspective. The origins of the sociology of Catholicism, for example, emerge among scholars trained as servants of the Church: nuns and priests with religious credentials but also degrees in sociology who found themselves straddling two worlds uncomfortably and, sometimes, at great cost. Now, those of us who are asking these questions are doing so from different positions and yet still carry risks, whether in institutional positionality, or how we're perceived by our own families, or critiques about the authenticity of our Catholic identity if we claim one. What 'type' of Catholics are scholars of Lived Catholicism? What is the litmus test of Catholic identity among those who ask hard questions about the Catholic Church? In many ways, these questions challenge us to think about not only what Lived Catholicism *is*, but who are *we* in doing Lived Catholicism? And what does our work mean for whatever versions of Catholicism we may live or contend with in our personal and professional lives?

Alana: It is really interesting too from the English Catholic experience as a minority, indeed Britain's largest minority. I've been finding over the last couple of months in my institutional setting debates about equalities agendas that are increasingly acknowledging the operation of Islamophobia or thinking about anti-Semitism, but very uncomfortable in beginning to contemplate Christian religious minorities and how they fit (or might sound discord) in debates about diversity and inclusion. I don't have a full answer for that – when there are competing 'protected characteristics' commitments raised often around biopolitics – but thinking through the experiential dimensions of all these debates and what it means when there is an 'Established Church' casts the conversations about structural exclusions and inequalities in a new light. In some ways by introducing a 'religious literacy' agenda into these conversations about diversity, 'decolonisation' and 'cultural competencies'¹² feels radical, disruptive and troubling in a higher education institutional setting that takes the secular, or secularized, classroom as a starting presumption.¹³

Tricia: There's discussion to be had about what questions are safe to ask, sanitized versions of scholarship, and the extent to which exposing stories and ambiguity feels threatening to the institution and those invested in its longevity. Lived Catholicism troubles sanitized spaces safeguarded through long-standing tradition and power. At the conference, Robert Orsi posed the daunting question that lingers with me, still: 'Why aren't you all angrier?' Maybe there should be something more transformative and subversive and risky happening within Lived Catholicism and among the scholars who do it ... and maybe that scares me a little bit.

Question 7: What Can We Expect for The Study of Lived Catholicism Going Forward?

Robert: I am often thanked for contributing (alongside many other scholars) to the attention to embodiment that persists in contemporary religious studies, or materiality, or the role of special beings, of Italian street festivals, thanked, in other words, for bringing a Catholic lens to the study of religion. But I would hate to see what began as a subversive and confrontational encounter with

12 Jack Frawley, Gabrielle Russell and Juanita Sherwood, 'Cultural Competence and the Higher Education Sector: A Journey in the Academy', 2020, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-15-5362-2_1.

13 Sam Brewitt-Taylor, 'Notes toward a Post-secular History of Modern British Secularization', 60(2)(2021), *Journal of British Studies*, 310–333.

the inheritances of the modern study of religion be domesticated into a mere religious studies methodology. This is why in recent years I have turned to ontological or metaphysical questions, and to theology. The liberal Protestant impulse in the modern study of religion is resilient. There is an enduring insistence on reframing various visual, material, aural practices of the 'secular city' as 'religious'. So, we're right back to the liberal Protestant/Christian hegemony, the determination of liberal Protestant and post-Protestant scholars to denominate their way of construing reality as 'religious'.

We ought to bring ourselves into conversation with scholars taking a lived-religion-esque approach in religious contexts other than white European Catholicism, in the varieties of African Caribbean Catholicism, for example, or Mexican Catholicism, and then beyond this boundary. I loved Shahab Ahmed's book, *What is Islam*, for example, which challenges fundamental and ideologically fraught constructions of 'Islam' with case studies of all the ways living Muslims challenge these.¹⁴ We might want to talk with scholars of religious 'revivals' or reconstructions in post-Soviet spaces, or African religions (for example Bilinda Straight's *Miracles and Extraordinary Experiences in Kenya*).¹⁵ As fields of modern inquiry took shape, religious practices and ideas around the world were reinstantiated in terms of the mental world that was created in Europe and Great Britain around the exclusion of Catholicism, as idea and fantasy. The study of lived religion, or lived Catholicism, has much to learn from and contribute to the study of other religious traditions.

Marcus: I sense that tension Robert describes is precisely the tension between the sociological construction of the category 'religion' and the ways we explore the lived experience of practitioners of a given faith tradition such as Catholicism or Islam.

Alana: Revisionist interventions are possible if we lever open this notion of Lived Catholicism and the difference that it might make to broader conversations within our home disciplines. The multi-disciplinary conversations have been a wonderful feature of the gathering, but 'lived Catholicism' should not only be a supplement to, or augment longstanding debates but also ambitiously open out new horizons that can reconfigure and reinvigorate 'religious history' or the 'sociology of religion'. This approach should venture to the 'periphery' and upturn established verities – meshing together, for example, histories of black power and anti-racist activism with, say black liberation

14 Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

15 Straight, Bilinda. *Miracles and Extraordinary Experience in Northern Kenya*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

theology as experienced and enacted. Reflecting on the queer readings that we were prompted to consider in Robert Orsi's keynote, alongside the insights from Katherine Lamontagne's paper on LGBTQ Catholics in the 1920s in this journal edition, what insights might emerge if we mainstreamed such queer readings and centred the history of sexuality within our discipline? What happens when we apply insights from post-colonial theory to Stephen's narratives about Italian Catholicism in Wales? This pushes us beyond established narratives within the history of Catholicism in various national settings and prompts new lines of interdisciplinary analysis that tackle the thorny issues of religious imperialism, colonisation and mission, and the intersections between religion and race.

Robert: Going forward, one of the things I've always been struck by is the way in which the phrase lived religion has given people permission to do work they feel they might otherwise not have been able to do on phenomena that might otherwise not have been visible had 'lived religion' not gone before. Such is the authority of the liberal Protestant, neo-secular in the study of religion. It would be great if lived religion might continue to play this role, disrupting the taken-for-granted in the study of religion. The field has changed much since David Hall's book came out, and it is time to push the problematic into new areas. How religions' worlds are coping with/fighting climate catastrophe is one. But to retain not only its subversive power, but its heuristic promise, the study of lived religion/lived Catholicism must resist being conscripted into whatever is left, and whatever is resurgent, of the old agendas of the study of religion. This would be to reduce all reality to the narrow categories of the modern, or to paraphrase Wittgenstein, to ways of writing and thinking that would not disrupt the comfort and ease of a modern scholar.

Tricia: Well said. I agree that the study of Lived Catholicism will continue to provoke the edges, trouble our sense of what 'is,' and compel us to listen more closely to everyday manifestations of church in the world.