

God is in the street

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What if the eighteenth century in France was an age of Catholic fervor? Through a study of religious processions, Gaël Rideau presents a tableau of urban life that, in the very midst of the Enlightenment, was marked and organized by public expressions of faith.

About: Gaël Rideau, *Une société en marche. Les processions en France au XVIIIe siècle* (A Society on the Move: Processions in France in the Eighteenth Century), Clamecy, Champ Vallon, « coll. Époques », 2021, 542 p.

Desacralization, dechristianization: by rejecting such commonplaces of eighteenth-century historiography, Gaël Rideau escapes to territory that is accessible only through a history of religion reinvigorated by the ethnography of institutions and social history.

Drawing on an immense documentary apparatus, Rideau catalogs every instance in which religious processions were used by town dwellers to experience their communities and a certain sacred universality. And the conclusion to which one is inevitably led is that the structuring power of rituals and pious invocations remained intact.

A forgotten religious practice

Ceremonies are a highly studied feature of old regime society, to the point that, in the United States, a so-called "ceremonialist" school emerged thanks to Ralph Giesey's work. While religious rituals have not known the same success, Rideau makes a persuasive case for the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the topic. Processions obeyed a formal grammar and complex canons, referenced in religious controversies that, during the eighteenth century, could still be potent. His book avoids these pitfalls, however, by suggesting that processions can be conceived according to a simple model: the display of a divine or holy figure, and even a relic, in a march, in which the town is summoned to participate through song and prayer.

In this respect, processions offered a rare occasion for people to come together and share a common space, when doing so was still forbidden by royal authorities. They provide historians with a unique opportunity to observe an actual society, rather than one imagined by legal scholars and theologians. Processions were practical and tangible *representations* of a town. In these events, secular and lay clergy played an active role.

Whether it focused on the liturgical regularity of feast days (such as Easter, Corpus Christi, Assumption, or those of patron saints) or unpredictable events tied to the weather, war, or epidemics, each town pursued its own rituals which, without exactly being quantifiable, seem to have occurred with considerable frequency. From the standpoint of Catholic piety, processions were not a dying practice. In the towns of a broad northern area (Amiens, Angers, Auxerre, Beauvais, Orléans, Paris, Poitiers, Tours, and Troyes), processions filled streets, plazas, and squares with an array of spiritual and temporal signs: idols, emblems, clothing, and blazons, as well as sounds (bells, hymns, and the crackling of fireworks), scents (candles and incense), supplications, and sermons.

For participants, processions represented a kind of total experience--one that was spiritual, sensorial, corporeal, and social. Historiography has generally reserved this type of analysis for the study of pilgrimages and major Catholic ceremonies. Rideau's work fills a gap in the scholarship.

Against the background of Catholicism's revival following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), calendars that were partly sacred and partly profane punctuated daily life more than ever with ostentatious and unifying rituals.

Corporations and confraternities had their own processions, yet they also summoned the entire city, at least in its social and political form.

Hence the book makes use of municipal as well as diocesan documents, drawn from some fifteen archival collections. In an era of online sources, at a time when intellectual history indulges in facile documentation, this work leaves little doubt that it was a long-haul archival study.

Ritual fixity and historical change

Processions were thus an ordinary occurrence in eighteenth-century cities. Are they evidence of the baroque piety typical of the previous century? The book examines how rituals were anchored into societies that could only be changing. The idea that a community of faith was simply superimposed upon an urban community is no longer tenable.

What may surprise some readers is the detail with which the book documents critical as well as apologetic discourses. Particularly noteworthy is the milieu of the *philosophes*. Voltaire denounced the superstitious absurdity of processions, for instance in 1766: "Thirty corpses then appeared in the procession. If these hypocrisies were the end of the matter, they would be merely ridiculous and disgusting" (p. 57). The Calas and La Barre affairs lend themselves to a well-known--but perhaps misleading--conception of the period as rooted in an incredulity and rationalism that were hostile to the traditional idiom of rituals. Hence some travelers saw processions as little more than an entertaining and peculiar step in their journey.

Yet it was currents within Catholicism that made the most effective denunciations. In a Jansenist vein, these religious currents pleaded for a more inward-looking faith and saw sensuousness and spectacle as inclinations ill-suited for worshipping the divine. The profane gestural idiom was gradually rejected, particularly after 1730-1740. Feasts, dancing, and crowds were slowly suppressed by the clergy and police. No sooner had civic religion vanished from some towns, as in Paris with the end of the processions of Saint Genevieve's shrine in 1725, than a certain kind of theatricality disappeared as well, along with an entire way of relating to the past.

In the early eighteenth century, old times were still seen as a shared heritage, but a different, less commemorative temporality would soon replace them. Contemporaries no longer hesitated to incorporate processions into a future shorn of obligatory references to foundations, heroes, and ancestral tales. Because they could blend personal and collective faith, certain private actions acquired a greater moral and devotional charge.

It is precisely among the clergy that this distance becomes apparent, less in relation to processions as forms of worship and thanksgiving than in their recreational and spectacular dimensions. Clearly, the language and meaning of processions were being redefined.

This "religious shift" is undoubtedly the guiding thread of Rideau's study. Borrowing from Pierre Chaunu's work, he assesses the impact of modern criticism on medieval rites and orthopraxis. What kind of institutions does the processional form imply? What postures and prayers can be extracted from them? Even so, the book is reluctant to explore this path towards religious decline. Why?

First, chronologies differ from one town to another. Significant variations can be seen in the use of processions. Furthermore, at a deeper level, Rideau does not wish to renounce the idea that, throughout the period, processions were an unwavering means for connecting community to religion. The claim that processions constitute an anthropological invariant is central to his book.

Expressing community

Through religious ceremonies, the eighteenth century continued to incorporate urban populations into communities of life and faith. Processions remained a steady vector of urban identity: a community that displayed and extended itself by following a divine or holy image, forging a path through a town's streets, bridges, and gates--binding, in the process, the town to a greater whole.

Processions were narratives of unity and "proclamations of stability" (p. 173). Though they were events in which that town's main components (the town hall, judicial companies, and trade guilds) put themselves on display, processions used the continuity of political authority to legitimate the church's immutability. They also

exercised the power to register and make narratives. Processions were events and, at the same time, a kind of writing, lending itself to retrospective readings.

The book does not fall into this trap. Conflicts over status were never-ending: between corps and companies, among church authorities. Descriptions of these ongoing, quasi-structural struggles abound. They express episcopal control over the secular clergy and confraternities, as well as efforts by civil officers and notables to regulate artisanal and popular milieus.

The creation of a new corps, that of Saumur's doctors, immediately raised the question of its place in a procession's existing order. In 1730, it provoked the vitriol of lawyers and prosecutors. Beyond these concerns, insistence on fiscal and military rights infused the ceremony and shattered the fiction of urban unity. Even so, such controversy rarely appears in chronicles and registers, which were controlled by historiographers and the concerned institutions.

By this point, the reader would like to know about more about these events' concrete characteristics, such as the cost of ceremonies and celebrations and the economy surrounding them (like the torches that, in Angers, stretched the budgets of the professions participating in processions, while drawing to the town a throng of admirers willing to spend money in local shops).

But the first performances of the ritual that the book chooses to focus on are its framing mechanisms. For it is difficult even to identify the boundary between freedom and constraint in the faithful's participation, particularly when rules were constantly at war with the professions' absenteeism. By the mid-eighteenth century, processions had become a tool for imposing submission to the public order. A reticence to participate (or was it just conservatism?) can be discerned among the working-classes once processions were subject to armed policing.

In this way, different conceptions of the city imposed themselves simultaneously on processions. This is wonderfully illustrated by the study of "stations." Stopping points at which a procession honored a particular saint, stations draw attention to perceptions of space that vary from one feast to another, emphasizing the boundaries that are traced, in turn, by a particular square, fortified area, monastery, crossroads, cross, or social group.

In this respect, Angelo Torre's work on the ritual construction of locality might have offered an interesting rural model.¹ For the fact remains that urban unity was artificial, unstable, and contested, even as it proved useful to ruling classes and royal authority. While Rideau does not take this step, one could almost read him as arguing that disorder functioned as a mechanism for regulating and controlling old regime society. Jurisdictional conflicts between temporal and spiritual authority, which spans the entire system of rules unique to processions, are perhaps only one example among others.

Religion, secularity, the public

By the end of this impressive book, its plea has become evident: that the eighteenth century be interpreted in a way that does not jettison traditional forms of collective and communal life and recognizes that religion continued to control social life until 1789--and the great procession opening the Estates General.

The conclusion acknowledges that secularization was underway at the period's very end, yet religion did not disappear as a means for disciplining crowds. Religion remained incorporated into society, politics, and the monarchy until the old regime's end. It remained the way in which the majority of people understood collective life. A reminder of this fact seems in order.

No doubt, the tutelary figure of Alphonse Dupront spans the book. Does it not downplay the role of secular actors? Laurence Croq and David Garrioch's study of "lived religion" has partially qualified the equation of religion with the clergy to which Rideau still clings.² What if religious expression could also articulate the issues advanced and promoted by the laity? The book identifies the ecclesiastical tensions that beset religious rituals, rather than those of the social body as such.

But this breach by no mean invalidates the book's method, and it echoes its lesson: it is not advisable to enter this century teleologically, searching at any cost for the Revolution's origins, unless one begins at the beginning, with the seventeenth century. At that time, space seems to have been seized for collective use, as it was

¹ Angelo Torre, *Production of Locality in the Early Modern and Modern Age: Places*, Routledge, 2019.

² Laurence Croq and David Garrioch, eds., *La Religion vécue. Les laïcs dans l'Europe moderne*, Rennes, PUR, 2013.

confidently regulated, reined in by religious ceremony, and directed by episcopal, parish, and municipal privilege, as well as by their contradictions and litigation, while also being tied to experimentation with the city on the part of its inhabitants.

One cannot fail to see here an experience of the public, provided that one accepts to conceive of the public as still, for the most part, socially instituted by religion. The eighteenth century could only work with this legacy. And Rideau has, in this way, written a great work of situated history.

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