

NEWSLETTER

June 2012

THE PROJECT

The ultimate goal of this research is to explore the construction of religious/confessional identity in the late medieval and early modern period with a focus on lay involvement in this process. The project will assess changes in religious practice shaped by secular agency in response to the norms set up by the church/churches. However, by taking a closer look at the changes in ecclesiastical prescriptions, both during the late Middle Ages and after the Reformation, this investigation will also consider the possibility of secular impact on the development of church norms. The project will consequently emphasize the role of the two-way communication between the clergy and secular society. It will address such issues as the place of religion in society, the strength of habit in religious practice and the power of allegiance to a confessional community.

Interdisciplinary in its approach, this project will focus on, discuss and refine a number of controversial concepts in current scholarly debate, such as popular religion and superstition, acculturation and confessionalization, piety and confessional identity, religious norm and religious practice. They are the dominant concepts in any recent discussion of religious experience on the threshold of modernity.

The project is consequently centered on a number of research questions, which it aims to answer: Were the laity empty vessels to be filled through the efforts of the church? Or were they active participants in the shaping of their religious experiences? These questions bring to the fore issues concerning lay reaction, and even secular initiative in religious practice, the integration by the laity of the norms designed by the clergy, secular needs and expectations. Were reformed clergy successful in shaping the correct beliefs and proper conduct of the laity? Or were they defeated by the strength of habit in devotional practice and by residual beliefs in the protective powers of intercessors? This raises the issue of change and the possible continuities between religious practice during the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. It also forces ongoing scholarship to grapple with the concepts of superstition and popular religion as they have been defined and constantly refined by historians during the past few decades.

The idea of this research has also stemmed from the state of the art in local scholarship. The latter has mostly focused on case studies and has taken into account primarily normative sources. While older scholarship has shown an almost exclusive interest in

the church as an institution, younger scholars have started to increasingly look at religious life, the relation between patronage and artistic production and religious/confessional identity. However, the specific focus of existing case studies and the dispersed nature of this research have led to fragmentary conclusions. This highlights the need for a broader assessment of the issues related to religious experience in the late medieval and early modern period. It also suggests the need to look beyond the norms at actual religious practices and the construction of confessional identity. Finally, it prompts scholars to focus on approach and methodology while exploring new lines of inquiry. In this way the specific investigation of well-delineated topics can be brought together to create new methodologies for researching the religious experience of the past.



The pulpit in the Evangelical church of Cincu

The project which started on 1 October 2011 has a research team including the director, Maria Crăciun and four other permanent members: Ovidiu Ghitta, Mária Lupescu Makó, Carmen Florea and Ciprian Firea.

THE SOURCES

Meeting on 2 March 2012

If for medieval and early modern individuals it was natural to transgress the norms set out for them by various authorities, even if merely by interpreting them according to their own cultural codes, for historians it may not be equally easy to get beyond the prescriptive nature of the sources they generally work with, be they writings intended to teach the clergy how to perform their pastoral duties, instructions issued by bishops for the benefit of parish priests, testaments written by/for the laity, artifacts commissioned by secular patrons and regulations forged by professional communities. This particular challenge was the subject of the day, when members of the research team of the project entitled **'Beyond the Norms: Religious Practice in Medieval and Early Modern Transylvania'** met on 2 March 2012.



Interior of the Evangelical church of Cincu

Trained to work primarily with texts, historians are not inclined to renounce them in favour of visual or material evidence but they have become more willing to take on board suggestions coming from neighbouring disciplines, such as art history or semiotics. More willing to consider context, historians have also begun to ponder questions pertaining to agency, as well as focus on the dialogue between the elites and the broader segments of society.

The discussion has highlighted that the Church can not be regarded as one single body with only one voice but rather as an ensemble of institutions where local practice and customs had a prominent place. In this context, local clergy could also step beyond the norm in their wish to accommodate their congregations and not remain mere obedient agents of their home institution.

The laity was not a single compact body either and some secular institutions were in a position to generate norms of their own in order to regulate the behaviour of various social factions. The priorities of secular institutions did not necessarily coincide with those of the church and thus mere mortals found themselves in the position to transgress not one but several sets of rules. Consequently, attention needs to be paid to the imbedded

presumption that while norm was the realm of the clergy, transgressions were the domain of the laity.

While during the Middle Ages, the Church was primarily concerned to create the true Christian, in the early modern period, ecclesiastical hierarchies have become increasingly preoccupied by the structuring of norms aiming to foster the development of homogenous and disciplined confessional communities. As norms need agents to implement them, the team has to consider the clergy and its punitive actions as well as the prescriptive documents issued by ecclesiastical institutions.

Whether documents are issued strictly from the initiative of the Church (in the case of instructions, visitation guidelines, manuals for confessors, sumptuary laws) or with lay input (such as testaments or guild statutes), research has to focus not just on ecclesiastical norm but also on its transgression in order to probe the mental world of the testator. For example, if the church attempted to regulate funerary rituals, individuals were equally free to make decisions concerning their last earthly ceremony. Consequently, testaments, where medieval Christians expressed their wishes concerning the distribution of their possessions but also the manner in which they wished to be buried, are a small window into the construction of religious practice at the juncture of ecclesiastical and secular. In some cases, the persistence of pagan customs that have been Christianized and thus accepted by the Church lead one to consider the bi-directional dialogue between clergy and laity.

EVENTS

Project members will meet with scholars interested in this research topic in a workshop entitled 'The Religions of the Laity, a popular religion? Concepts and Directions of Research' which proposes to investigate the ways in which debates concerning this concept have been reflected in Romanian historiography in the past two decades and to identify possible conceptual re-definitions. The workshop will be held in the autumn of 2012. Those interested are required to send a letter of intention (maximum 5000 words) which will highlight their own views on the workshops' topic, together with a list of their own publications pertaining to this subject. These documents should be sent by email to Dr Maria Crăciun, the director of the project by 1 August 2012

email address maria_silvia.craciun@yahoo.com

All expenses involved in participation to the workshop (travel expenses, accommodation and meals) will be covered from the project's budget.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Starting with 1 April 2012 the project team was joined by Ünige Bencze for the remainder of the year, a young archeologist who is a PhD candidate at the Medieval Studies Department at the Central European University, in Budapest.

Between 19-20 April 2012, two project members, Maria Crăciun and Ciprian Firea accompanied by Radu Lupescu and Elena Firea have visited several churches in southern Transylvania and photographed altarpieces and other furnishings preserved in the churches.

Ünige Bencze presented a poster entitled 'Glass production in late medieval and early modern Transylvania' at the international symposium entitled *5. Internationales Symposium zur archäologischen Erforschung mittelalterlicher und frühneuzeitlicher Glashütten Europas* organized by the Technische Universität Bergakademie Freiberg, which took place in Seiffen/Erzgebirge (Germany) between 18-20 May 2012.



Ovidiu Ghitta has presented a paper entitled 'The Greek-Catholic Church of Transylvania and Traditional Popular Religiosity during the Eighteenth Century' at the conference *Ten Years of Historical Anthropology at the University of Cluj* organized by the Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj, The Faculty of History and Philosophy and the Seminar of Historical Anthropology, on 8 June 2012.



Maria Crăciun has given a paper entitled 'Lutheran Liturgical Practices in European Comparative Perspective' at the international conference 'Dissemination and Contemporary Impact of the Reformation in a European Context' organized jointly by *Verein für Reformationsgeschichte*, *Leibniz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte* and *Division for Late Medieval and Reformation Studies-University of Arizona-Tucson*, and held in Haus Hainstein, Eisenach (07- 09 June 2012).

Ciprian Firea will give a paper entitled *Dispersed Parts of a Medieval Liturgical Ensemble. The Altarpieces of St. Mary Church in Sibiu/Hermannstadt (Transylvania)* at the *International Medieval Meeting Lleida. Consolidated Medieval Studies Research Group "Space, Power and Culture"* between 26 and 29 June 2012.

Mária Lupescu Makó will attend a conference on *The Challenge of the Object. The 33rd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA)*, organized by the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, between 15 and 20 July 2012.