
H-France Review Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 95

Virginia Reinburg, *French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400-1600*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xiv +297 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-00721-5.

Review by Moshe Sluhovsky, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

There is an on-going discussion among anthropologists, theologians, scholars of religion, and (too few) historians about the nature of religion. Is it first and foremost a set of practices people perform or, rather, a belief system that precedes and gives shape and meaning to practices? And are creedal statements speech acts or rites? In her beautifully written and carefully argued *French Books of Hours*, Virginia Reinburg makes numerous important contributions to this crucial philosophical debate, while at the same time historicizing it within a defined historical moment. In this respect, the book's title does it a disservice, as it is about much more than French Books of Hours. It is about what religiosity meant to late medieval and early modern people, mostly but not only the laity. It is also about practices of devotion, the tension between the private and the communal, and what Reinburg calls "the ethnography of prayer," and the archives of familial and personal practices of prayer (pp. 2, 5, 131). It is a thorough and thoughtful history and meditation not only on what was prayer in the late medieval and early modern period but on what is prayer. As such, it makes a contribution not only to late medieval and early modern French religious history but to religious history tout court.

Books of Hours were best sellers in late medieval and early modern Europe, the most commonly produced and owned books. They were a primary means of communicating with the divine, but they were often also a mark of social and economic standing in the community as well as of cultural capital. Reinburg reminds us that Books of Hours were the bridge between church and home. They enabled readers to participate in liturgical activity while in their own private space and to combine liturgical prayers with vernacular and personal invocations. Their dual status as both a material object and a devotional practice leads Reinburg to divide her book into two parts. The first part deals with the Book of Hours as a material object, "an artifact of the religious past" (p. 9), and the second section addresses it as key to the late medieval and early modern ethnography of prayer.

Based on her thorough reading of many hundreds of Books of Hours in both manuscript and printed versions, the author documents their development from monastic books of canonical hours, the increase over time of intercessory prayers to saints and to the Virgin, the important (and often neglected) coexistence of manuscript and print forms well into the seventeenth century, and the bilingualism in many books of prayers in the period. This social history of the Books of Hours is an important intervention in the currently revived interest in the history of the book in the early modern period. Reinburg reminds us that printed books in general and printed Books of Hours in particular often included hand-written additions, that the prestige of manuscripts did not decline with the mass production of printed books, and that even printed books with no additions were still manipulated and "individualized." Buyers chose specific editions of books from an array of wares in booksellers' shops, basing their choices on liturgical, aesthetic, material, and economic considerations. They often also chose the binding for the book. One should not, however, ignore the revolutionary impact of print. Mechanical reproduction contributed to standardization, as invocations of local saints receded and

“national” saints gained popularity, and as Roman liturgies replaced Parisian or other local liturgical traditions. The market obviously shaped these developments, but Reinburg points out another important plausible explanation: the consciously motivated creation of a French religious culture in the years of Louis XII and François I. As such, the history of French Books of Hours is also part and parcel of the history of the early stages of French state building.

The Book of Hours, then, was a commodity. It was valued, marketed, commissioned, collected, exchanged as a gift, and willed upon one’s death. Reinburg emphasizes especially the use women made of Books of Hours. They not only commissioned and read them, but also often used them as gifts to other women and as primers for learning the alphabet and basic prayers. Readers, especially women, did not always understand the Latin of the liturgical prayers. Yet, as Reinburg explains in one of the many precise and original insights that saturate the book, comprehension was not necessary when the actual performance of the act of reading as an embodied practice demonstrated and enhanced fidelity and devotion. One additional important observation in the social analysis of the Book of Hours is Reinburg’s assertion that these texts were dialogic instruments: dialogues with the divine and with intercessors, above all, but also an on-going dialogue with ancestors, donors, patrons, friends, and community.

The second part, titled “An Ethnography of Prayer,” moves from the book as an object to the book as an amalgamation of practices, of “words, rites, acts, and symbols” (p. 131), but also gestures, comportments, postures, and networks of relationships. She is right to point out that these were far from being codified. They too were shaped by tradition and custom, but also by family, community, and individual choices. As such, she creates a convincing parallelism between the content of prayers, which was a mixture of liturgical, intercessory, communal, familial, and the personal, and the form of prayer that was equally multi-dimensional.

The book of Hours was “the liturgical language of everyday life” (p. 237), but it was a language that was not solely read but also enacted in embodied forms: people read aloud, kneeled, gestured, and cried. It is therefore not clear, at least to this reader, what Reinburg means when she insists that “practices of prayer should not be conflated with the experience of prayer” (p. 135). It seems that most (if not all) of her nuanced readings of the ethnography of prayer point out the exact opposite, namely, the inability or utter futility of trying to separate the two. The experience of prayer was embodied and therefore a practice. The praxis of prayer imbued the prayer with experiential meaning. As Reinburg says, it was both a speech act and a practice (p. 4), both private and communal, both ritualized and mutable. Books of Hours were acts of faith, oral rites, that “oriented devotees in time and space” (p. 171), and situated them in an orderly, hierarchical cosmos ruled by God and shaped by social relations of kinship, patronage, lordship, mutual aid, and norms of exchange.

Reinburg’s French Books of Hours archives for contemporary readers the wide varieties of prayers, blessings, invocations, and charms that late medieval and early modern French devotees used. It also recreates their pantheon of intercessors and saints, and invites us to participate in the experience of prayer as both a devotional personal act and as a communal experience connecting individuals to one another and to ancestors, supernatural entities, and the divine. It is a new and important contribution to the history of late medieval and early modern French history. First and foremost, however, it is a major contribution to the history and anthropology of religion in general.

Moshe Sluhovsky
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
msl@huji.ac.il

educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172