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## On Commotions and Commodities

### Catholic Celebrities in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Europe: an Introduction

Tine Van Osselaer and Andrea Graus

Recent studies on the sacralisation of celebrities have noted the similarities between the cult of saints and celebrity cults.<sup>1</sup> In his well-known book, *Celebrity*, Chris Rojek observed that fans have adopted practices and behaviours from religion, such as building their own reliquaries with personal objects of the celebrity or turning the celebrity house into a shrine.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on these similarities, scholars have analysed the “popular canonisation” of secular celebrities such as rock stars and Hollywood legends, examining the use of the celebrity photograph as a holy relic, or the pilgrimages and liturgies taking place at their graves.<sup>3</sup> Through such practices, fans create a bond with the star in a similar manner to the way that pious people feel connected to saints and ask for their intercession. As James Hopgood pointed out, today “icons [are] serving as saints in different cultural contexts and saints [are] taking on characteristics of icons and ‘celebrities’ or ‘personalities’.”<sup>4</sup> This latter concern, or how religion is related to the celebrity phenomenon, has been little explored. In this special issue, we study Catholic religious personalities (mystics, miracle workers, charismatic nuns and others) of modernity as “celebrities” of their time.

Simon Morgan defined a celebrity as “a well-known individual who has become a marketable commodity.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, much scholarship understands celebrity as the product of mass media and marketing. In this way, celebrity studies frequently focus on the contemporary age and on the role of the media.<sup>6</sup> Leo Braudy, who examined the history of fame since Roman times, only locates the iconic celebrity/star phenomenon in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> While we agree with Aviad Kleinberg that marketing and the media are not necessary conditions for celebrity, and that religious and other celebrities can also be found in the Middle Ages or even further back

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<sup>1</sup> On the parallels between celebrity cult and religion, see, e.g.: E. Cashmore, *Celebrity / Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); D. Giles, *Illusions of Immortality. A psychology of fame and celebrity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), Chapter 8; J. F. Hopgood, ed., *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005); J.-C. Schmitt, ed., *Les saints et les stars. Le texte hagiographique dans la culture populaire* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> C. Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> R. Howells, “Heroes, saints and celebrities: the photograph as holy relic,” *Celebrity Studies*, 2(2) (2011): 112–30; P. J. Margry, ed., *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World. New Itineraries into the Sacred* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), Chapter 6; K. Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 108–9.

<sup>4</sup> Hopgood, *The Making of Saints*, 140.

<sup>5</sup> S. Morgan, “Celebrity. Academic ‘pseudo-event’ or a useful concept for historians?,” *Cultural and Social History*, 8(1) (2011): 95–114.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., D. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); S. Redmond, *Celebrity and the Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> L. Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown. Fame and its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

in time,<sup>8</sup> we want to focus precisely on the era of emerging mass production and media in Europe. We believe, as Sophia Deboick (a contributor to this special issue) argues, that there is much to be learned from studying nineteenth and early twentieth-century religious personalities as “carefully constructed religious commodities”<sup>9</sup> whose fame and reputation, perhaps even as “living saints,” were cultivated via printed means such as newspaper articles, mass-produced pictures, pamphlets and booklets.<sup>10</sup> This practice was not restricted by national borders, but expanded internationally, where the significance of the Catholic celebrities was reinterpreted.

Focusing on this era not only means studying a period in which new media was rapidly developing, but also an era during which tensions arose about the visibility of religion in the public sphere, and “culture wars” were fought between Catholics and their opponents (e.g. liberal, anticlerical, republican and Protestant).<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, despite their will, the new religious stars became linked to political causes. In this vein, the making of religious celebrities goes beyond the realms of marketing and mass media related to celebrity studies to encompass issues of religious and national identity. In studying fame and Catholic celebrities of this era, we must pay attention to the “cultural definition of a perfect person,”<sup>12</sup> with the Catholic definitions being of central importance. While not every religious celebrity was perceived as a “living saint,” or was beatified, the ideas about saints and sanctity that prevailed at a certain moment tell us something about Catholic interpretations of exceptional (“perfect”) personalities. Thus, two evolutions need to be traced alongside one another: the changing significance, evaluation and public of celebrities,<sup>13</sup> and the fluctuating interpretation of saints – particularly “living saints” (e.g. Was there a shift in focus to the miraculous from the virtuous?).<sup>14</sup>

This special issue studies religious personalities from various perspectives and addresses them as religious commodities, as sources of commotion, and as relevant to identity constructions. The authors adopt a transnational and international perspective, as celebrities were “consumed” differently in various countries, and saints-to-be also attracted foreign devotees. This means considering the circulation of knowledge beyond national borders and examining how the

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<sup>8</sup> A. Kleinberg, “Are saints celebrities? Some medieval Christian examples,” *Cultural and Social History*, 8(3) (2011): 393–97; Leo Braudy went even further, examining the history of fame since Roman times, although he locates the iconic celebrity/star phenomenon in the nineteenth century: L. Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*.

<sup>9</sup> S. Deboick, “Céline Martin’s images of Thérèse of Lisieux and the creation of a modern Saint,” in P. Clarke and T. Claydon eds., *Saints and Sanctity* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), 376–89, 377.

<sup>10</sup> On the marketing of religion, see, e.g.: M. Einstein, *Brands of Faith. Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); S. K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions. Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Y.-M. Werner, J. Harvard, eds., *European anti-Catholicism in Comparative and Transnational Perspective* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> L. Braudy, “Conclusion: Secular anointings: fame, celebrity, and charisma in the first Century of mass culture,” in E. Berenson and E. Giloi, eds., *Constructing Charisma. Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-century Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 165–82, 168.

<sup>13</sup> L. Berlanstein, “Historicizing and gendering celebrity culture: famous women in nineteenth-century France,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 16/4 (2004): 65.

<sup>14</sup> W. Pulz, ed., *Zwischen Himmel und Erde körperliche Zeichen der Heiligkeit*, dl. 11 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012); H. Wolf, ed., *‘Wahre’ und ‘falsche’ Heiligkeit. Mystik, Macht und Geschlechterrollen im Katholizismus des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Oldenburg, 2013), 169–92.

“meaning” of religious celebrities was communicated, perceived or transformed.<sup>15</sup> To avoid an overly structuralist approach, the authors not only look at their “promoters” but also at the “audiences” (their gaze and needs) and the latter’s involvement in the creation of a public personality.<sup>16</sup> The social actors involved varied, from family members and devotees, to political enemies and the Church.

### **Saints, celebrities and commodities**

The few religious figures who have been considered in celebrity studies (e.g. Thérèse of Lisieux, Padre Pio and Mother Theresa) were “products” of the mass media of the twentieth century and, incidentally, all became saints.<sup>17</sup> However, the mass production of cards and statues began over a century earlier and the nineteenth-century press certainly did not abstain from commenting on the whereabouts and activities of religious personalities. Moreover, even before the advent of mass media (after 1850), the number of celebrities was on the rise due to the expansion of newspaper readership, lithography and other media, and “a general democratization of culture and politics in the post-French revolutionary era.”<sup>18</sup>

Several articles in this special issue also address the use of media in the creation of religious personalities. The authors refer not only to communication media such as periodicals, newspapers and newsreels but also to religious media such as devotional cards and statues (the means to gain access to the divine). They consider their production, circulation, control (by national authorities and the Church) and consumption and reception. The various phases of the media’s life cycle inform us about how a religious person could become a religious personality, or be transformed into an article of trade and commerce, as well as inform us about the level of standardisation this implied (e.g. reducing their image to the “recognisable,” using nicknames or turning them into a “brand”).

In this volume, Sophia Deboick shows how industry, celebrity and sanctity form an intriguing triptych. In her opinion, the concept of celebrity is most relevant to modern saints, who were subjected to industrialised forms of devotion. She focuses on the campaign for the canonisation of Louis and Zélie Martin, the parents of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and studies the ways in which Céline, another daughter of Louis and Zélie, represented them in texts and images. Taking her cue from celebrity studies, she addresses the celebrity/saint as icon, which has many potential cultural and social uses. Deboick shows that today, while the Martins feature as ideal

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<sup>15</sup> M. Guest, “Religion and Knowledge: the Sociological Agenda,” in M. Guest and E. Arweck, eds., *Religion and Knowledge. Sociological Perspectives* (London, New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> G. Alpion, “Media and Celebrity Culture—Subjectivist, Structuralist and Poststructuralist Approaches to Mother Teresa’s Celebrity Status,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 20(4) (2006): 541–57.

<sup>17</sup> U. Krass, “Stigmata und yellow press. Die Wunder des Padre Pio,” in A. and T. Kössler, eds., *Wunder. Poetik und Politik des Staunens im 20. Jahrhundert* Geppert (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 363–94; P. J. Margry, “Merchandising and sanctity: the invasive cult of Padre Pio,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 7.1 (2002): 88–115; G. Alpion, “Media and Celebrity Culture,” 541–57.

<sup>18</sup> E. Berenson and E. Giloi, “Introduction,” in E. Giloi and E. Berenson, eds., *Constructing Charisma*, 2. For a recent multidisciplinary perspective on the pope as celebrity, see: P. Limczak and C. Petersen, eds., *Popestar. Der Papst und die Medien* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2017).

Catholic parents, the initial campaign cast them in “the light of a devotional culture where martyrdom, suffering and complete acceptance of the will of God were valorised.”

The impact of new commercial print media and techniques of mass production are also of interest to Suzanne Kaufman in her article on a novel kind of sacred celebrity in the nineteenth century, the *miraculées* of Lourdes. Referring to work that has been done on the use of modern media in the promotion of saints, she notes that one element that has often been overlooked is how the same technologies of modern industrial society also provided ordinary lay Catholics with new opportunities “to experience a parallel kind of celebrity-making,” albeit often more fleeting. These miraculously cured women, and their visibility, were of central importance to the popularity of Lourdes: “For devout Catholics who witnessed these moments of miraculous healing, celebrating the cured pilgrims at Lourdes offered entry into a new sacred drama.”

Creating promotional material is of course only one side of the story. If we want to understand the “circuits of culture” as Gordon Lynch has called them,<sup>19</sup> we need to look into the perceptions of this use of religious objects, merchandise and promotional material. We could consider, for example, how collecting memorabilia from religious celebrities (asking for their autographs, pictures and even drops of blood), purchasing objects with their image on them or their writings, or making attempts to actually visit them, all contributed to their fame. Work on the “selling of religion” has until now primarily adopted a top-down perspective and focused on authorised cults (e.g. Sacred Heart devotion and Lourdes shrine).<sup>20</sup> Alana Harris, however, addresses these issues – considering the promoters as well as the devotees – with regard to the Divine Mercy devotion that was suspect and suppressed by the Catholic Church between 1959 and 1978. She starts her article on the devotion and the cult of Saint Faustina, with the promotional campaign for this devotion in which the rosary, an ancient Catholic devotional, was repackaged to look like a box of antibiotics. This 2011 initiative shows the creativity of the promoters of the devotion and also its resilience after years of institutional and particularly male concern about the erotically charged nature of Sister Faustina’s claims to communion with Jesus, as well as the spreading of unauthorised versions of the Divine Mercy image and its links with Polish nationalism. Today, the cult still flourishes (new devotional practices) as does the commercialised and commoditised version of St Faustina (devotional icons, plaster statues), which reveals an interest in another, more playful, side of the seer.

### **Promotion and commotion**

Scholars who have focused on “celebrity saints” have primarily examined their “afterlife.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, emphasis has been put on how religious institutions promoted “religious stars” such

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<sup>19</sup> G. Lynch, “Religion, media and cultures of everyday life,” in John Himmels, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 543–57.

<sup>20</sup> S. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions*.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Deboick, “Céline Martin’s images of Thérèse of Lisieux,” 376–89; D. J. Tilson and Y. Chao, “Sainthood Campaigning: Devotional-Promotional Communication and the U.S. Tour of St. Thérèse’s Relics,” *Journal of Media & Religion*, 1(2) (2002): 81–104; D. J. Tilson, *The Promotion of Devotion: Saints, Celebrities and Shrines* (Champaign, Ill.: Common Ground, 2011).

as Padre Pio through a rapid and “strategic canonization,” to use Oliver Bennett’s term.<sup>22</sup> However, what happened during their lifetime? How did these religious personalities become icons? How was the public visibility and press coverage perceived? Tine Van Osselaer and Andrea Graus address these questions in relation to the cases of the Belgian stigmatic Louise Lateau (1850-1883) and the Franciscan “wonder nun” Sor Patrocinio (1811-1891), also a stigmatic, prophetess and advisor to Queen Isabel II of Spain. Adopting a transnational approach, their contributions show how news of their “miracles” circulated in the national and foreign press, contributing to their *fama sanctitatis* as well as to their celebrity status. Even when those miracles were considered to be fraudulent, as sometimes happened, the women continued to play a role in the public sphere within and beyond their country of origin. As Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi have argued, with the emergence of new stars (here, two religious celebrities) and their social force, the “established leaders” – among them royals, politicians and clergymen – “[had] to compete for the recognition they had long taken for granted.”<sup>23</sup>

Another focus of this special issue is on the use of celebrities in promoting and supporting certain political and/or social causes, and examining how this plays a role in identity formation. A useful concept here is Donn James Tilson and Yi-Yuan Chao’s notion of “devotional-promotional communication,” which “may be used with the intention of inspiring allegiance for an individual, political entity, or religion.”<sup>24</sup> In particular, the authors analyse how different audiences helped transform Louise Lateau and Sor Patrocinio into icons used in the battle between the secular and Catholic realms in Europe.<sup>25</sup> As Van Osselaer shows, in Germany, Louise Lateau functioned as a “heroic victim” for Catholics during the Kulturkampf, while in Belgium she became a symbol of the conflict between liberal Catholics and ultramontanes following Pius IX’s papacy. In Spain, Graus argues, Sor Patrocinio evolved from an icon of absolutism and alleged prophetess of Carlism, to a symbol of neo-Catholicism and enemy of the republicans. In both cases, contrasting interpretations of the supernatural (stigmata and prophecies) allowed different groups (Protestant, liberal, anticlerical) to advance their political agendas. Thus, the perception and uses of the supernatural played a prominent role in turning religious celebrities into political symbols. The agency that Louise Lateau and Sor Patrocinio appeared to have over this process was very limited. Similarly to modern stars, they were not in full control of their significance to others.<sup>26</sup>

Standing in the spotlight also triggered criticism, turning Catholic celebrities into objects of mockery, gossip and scandal, which contributed to their fame. While functioning as symbols of the culture wars in Europe, Louise Lateau and Sor Patrocinio became the targets of anticlerical caricature; a medium that rose exponentially with the reduction in printing costs, and after

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<sup>22</sup> O. Bennett, “Strategic canonisation: sanctity, popular culture and the Catholic Church,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 17(4) (2011): 438–55.

<sup>23</sup> E. Berenson and E. Giloi, eds., *Constructing Charisma*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Tilson and Chao, “Saintly Campaigning,” 89.

<sup>25</sup> C. Clark and W. Kaiser, eds., *Culture Wars. Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., J. Gamson, *Claims to Fame. Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

events such as the French Third Republic, the Glorious Revolution in Spain and the Kulturkampf.<sup>27</sup> Their caricatures exemplify what Leo Braudy described as “the increasing nineteenth-century vogue for visually conveying and commenting upon public presence.”<sup>28</sup> Only in the late nineteenth century did photographs become a standard element in the press and, even then, caricatures remained important. In the case of Sor Patrocinio, the first public depiction of her took the form of a cartoon, and while pictorial portraits of Louise Lateau were exhibited, the bishop restricted the circulation of her photographs – as Van Osselaer has shown elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> The cartoons of these women circulated not only within their own countries, but also abroad, in France, Germany and the United Kingdom, which shows the transnational nature of anti-Catholicism.<sup>30</sup> Common themes of these cartoons (and of anticlerical iconography in general<sup>31</sup>) include their depiction as “mystic tricksters,” manipulators and/or victims of clergymen; and the royals in Sor Patrocinio’s case. Such depictions contributed to the creation of a stereotypical image of these women, associating their mystical experiences with the above-mentioned political struggles, and turning them into enemies of anticlerical groups.

### *Epilogue*

We hope this special issue will be of interest to the readers of the *Journal of Religious History*. Together, the articles demonstrate that since the nineteenth century at least, Catholicism has become closely linked with marketing, commodification and identity formation. The emergence of religious celebrities was both a driver and a consequence of this process. However, in all the cases discussed, it is not evident whether the new religious stars were actively seeking celebrity, or whether they enjoyed attaining this status. Their fame, it appears, was especially sought by their advocates (family, devotees, the Church) and anti-Catholic opponents.

In combining these perspectives, we want to rebalance the current rather secularist view on modern celebrities, and provide a bottom-up perspective on the selling of religion and religious change. We are well aware that by focusing on Catholic celebrities, comparisons with other denominations and their celebrities (e.g. the evangelists Billy Sunday and Billy Graham) remain unconsidered, and we would like to invite our readers to see this collection as a first step towards more comparative work; a cautious step into a hitherto underexplored field.

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<sup>27</sup> On anticlerical caricature, see, e.g., F. Boespflug, “Brève histoire de la caricature des figures majeures du christianisme,” *Théologiques*, 17 (2009): 85–110; G. Doizy, “De la caricature anticléricale à la farce biblique,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 134 (2006): 63–91; W. Kaiser, “Clericalism – That is our enemy!: European anticlericalism and the culture wars,” in C. Clark and W. Kaiser, eds., *Culture Wars*, 47–76.

<sup>28</sup> Braudy, “Conclusion: Secular anointings,” 176.

<sup>29</sup> T. Van Osselaer, “The “Affair of the Photographs”: controlling the public image of a nineteenth-century stigmatic,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 68(4) (2017): 784–806.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., T. Verhoeven, ed., “Special issue: Transnational approaches to the history of anti-Catholicism in the modern era,” *Journal of Religious History*, 39 (2015): 175–81.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., M. Dixmier, J. Lalouette, D. Pasamonik, *La République et l’Église. Images d’une querelle* (Paris: La Martinière, 2005); G. Doizy, J.-B. Laloux, *À bas la calotte ! La caricature anticléricale et la séparation des Églises et de l’État* (Paris: Éd. Alternatives, 2005).