

**Bonnie Morgan. Ordinary Saints: Women, Work, and Faith in Newfoundland. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-77355-890-8**

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Bonnie Morgan. *Ordinary Saints: Women, Work, and Faith in Newfoundland*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-77355-890-8

With this monograph Bonnie Morgan has made a major contribution to the history of religion, material culture, and gender in Newfoundland, as well as to the social and cultural history of religion and gender in Canada more generally. Morgan demonstrates clearly the value of a “lived religion” lens in truly understanding how religion is lived at the local level, and how this understanding changes over time as it intersects with broader social, economic, and cultural changes.

While this work is in some ways a microhistory of a particular location, it provides a valuable comparative context by looking at both differences and similarities in how various issues played out in several small communities within the Anglican parish of Foxtrap and Hopewell, along the south side of Conception Bay. By exploring an impressively large range of interconnected topics linked to lived religion and its relationship to gender, family, feminism, community, class, material culture, and rural–urban tensions, it provides deep and rich arguments about how religion was an integral part of how the women and men of Foxtrap and Hopewell were born, played, worshipped, lived, and died. As Morgan notes, little work has been done on the place of religious faith and practice in rural and working-class communities in Newfoundland and Canada. *Ordinary Saints*, which demonstrates the broad range of ways in which religion and spirituality were infused into the very fabric of these communities, goes a long way towards dealing with this gap, and towards explaining that we cannot fully understand these communities without an understanding of religious belief and practice. By exploring these issues from the early twentieth century to the 1970s, Morgan also provides fascinating arguments about the impact of change over time, particularly as these families moved from a rural household economy to a male-breadwinner economy. And while this work is focused on a few small communities, it is very much situated within the broader literature within

North America, Britain, and beyond, thus allowing Morgan to contribute to a number of important international debates in the fields of gender history, material history, and lived religion.

Morgan's central argument, woven through this work, is that women in Newfoundland were not primarily responsible for religious practice within families, as is assumed in literature on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North America. She argues that men also played a significant role in the religious lives of their families. Morgan grounds this argument in the fact that the family economy in rural Newfoundland was not based in the kind of separation of spheres common in more middle-class homes. She provides evidence for the more shared religious roles within families in Conception Bay in a range of contexts, from family prayer to the laying out of bodies, and she sees the move to a male-breadwinner model in the post-war years as leading to the church's efforts to push women into a more central religious role within the family. At the same time, as she does in other cases, Morgan is careful to nuance her argument. While she argues that religious practices, such as taking children to church and laying out dead bodies, are shared between men and women, her chapter discussing mixed marriages, that is, marriages between those of different denominational groups, shows how such marriages, and the religion of children within them, can provide a window into viewing the particular centrality of spirituality and religious affiliation for women.

One sees throughout this work how Morgan's creativity and willingness to engage with a range of both traditional and non-traditional sources allow her to develop insights about her subjects that would otherwise not be possible. Her use of oral history adds depth throughout the work, while her use of visual sources and of epitaphs is particularly rich and valuable. Morgan convincingly utilizes women's choices in religious art to argue for their focus on mutuality in religion and the nature of their attitude to the divine. Her use of epitaphs is also impressive, providing a range of insights into women's attitudes towards official religious doctrine, such as towards the value of suffering, as well as into their family relationships.

The use of material culture in the discussion of the women's church-related textile work is also fascinating, and points to Morgan's meticulousness as a historian, as well as her ability to use her imagination where appropriate to understand a world different from that of most of her readers. Once again, she demonstrates differences between the communities of Conception Bay in how women's church-related textile work could be used to support the churches and each other. Morgan's convincingly demonstrated arguments about the creativity, mutuality, and spirituality entwined with the women's textile work are among the most compelling in this exceptional piece of work, and it is hoped this discussion will encourage those who tend to dismiss women's "church work" to look at it with new eyes.

It is difficult to do justice to all of the important insights to be gained here. Morgan's discussion of the role of midwives in birth and their role in baptisms as necessary is also fascinating, providing further insight into lived religion, while her discussion of attitudes to suffering among rural Newfoundland women, although brief and suggestive rather than definitive, adds valuable insights to a complex and important literature. The discussion of the increasing control and domestication that male religious leaders tried to impose on Anglican church women in the 1950s and 1960s, and their complex responses to such efforts, contributes to the ongoing historiographical discussions about the extent to which religious women can be seen as feminist, in their work both in the community and in their interactions (and conflicts) with the church hierarchy.

In *Ordinary Saints* we see the women of Conception Bay very much as active agents, for whom religion is a key part of their lives, from birth to death. We see them as loving family members who are also very much part of local women's religious webs of mutuality. However, Morgan is very careful not to romanticize these women, and we are shown how they can unnecessarily control other women, for example, in the lead-up to the churching ceremony, following the birth of a

child, or in the conflicts between women of different religions, both within and between families.

Morgan's monograph is a most impressive piece of work that introduces readers to the crucial insights of lived religion, provides us with a deep understanding of the complex lives, beliefs, and relationships of the Anglican women of Conception Bay, and moves the field of women's religious history in Canada forward on a number of important fronts.

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