Friendship and the Cultivation of Religious Sensibilities

Brenna Moore*

In recent years, some scholars have argued that our field’s focus on society, discourse, and bodily practice has been insufficiently attentive to the power that personal relationships exert on the shaping of religious selves. Inspired by their insights, this article argues for the importance of friendship in understanding the cultivation of religious sensibilities. I also offer a further elaboration of how we came to sideline realms of personal intimacy in our approaches to religion. I then trace the bonds of friendship in my own area of research—a renewal movement in twentieth-century French Catholicism, or the renouveau catholique. There, friendship was the key to generating religious experience. But to analyze friendship, we must situate it within broader structures of discursive power, and it must include not only face-to-face bonds, but bonds that existed across a wide range of human experiences, including memory, dreams, fantasy, and imagination. The result is an intermediary category between the individual and society, and a richer understanding of the cultivation of religious sensibilities.

THE FORMATION OF RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITIES, scholars have long argued, is never a solitary, volitional affair. The habitual practices and social forces that inculcate the religious subject’s “moods and

* Brenna Moore, Department of Theology, Fordham University, 441 East Fordham Road, Bronx, NY 10458, USA. E-mail: brmoore@fordham.edu. I would like to express sincere thanks to Mary Dunn, John C. Seitz, Robert Orsi, Constance Furey, and Stephen Schloesser for inspiration, and for reading this essay in advance and offering invaluable feedback. Thank you also to the Fordham undergraduate students involved with the IgnatianQ conference, who asked me thoughtful, probing questions when I presented a portion of this research on campus in April 2013. Thank you also to Amir Hussain, for his excellent suggestions and generous assistance, and I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and helpful responses.
motivations” (Geertz 1973: 90) have long occupied the attention of researchers in the field of religion. Whether focused deliberate practices of piety, or the effects of diffuse processes like secularization, many scholars in recent decades have explored the power that discourse, society, and bodily practice exerts on the inner life of the subject. In the process, these kinds of studies have helped break down some old impasses in the field between interiority and externality, subjectivity and history.¹

Yet, for all the creativity and excitement that these studies have generated, there are voices wondering if there still might be something missing. I am not referring to the discussions about the place of agency in the processes of subject formation, discussions that have generated a more complex reading of how agency and subjectivity are made possible precisely through the constraints of language, practice, and tradition.² Instead, most recently here in the JAAR, Constance M. Furey wondered if the field’s approach to subjectivity has occluded certain crucial areas of human experience, particularly the interpersonal ones (2012). According to Furey, the key works in the past twenty years that have enabled religious studies to move beyond the Protestant focus on individual belief have done so by highlighting the formative power of bodily practice and the disciplinary power of societal norms (2012). In the last two decades, topics such as asceticism, ritual, eating, the human senses, and materiality have occupied the main sites of intellectual foment for our field. Furey cites Peter Brown’s justly famous book The Body and Society, “especially its pithy main title,” she writes, which can “serve to represent them all, for it proclaims what became a truism in religious studies: the religious subject is best studied as an amalgamation of body and society” (2012: 8). According to Furey, as necessary and productive the turn to bodies and social norms has been to religion, the religious subject who has emerged often stands “alone in a crowd, participating in communal rituals, subject to religious authorities and disciplinary practices, but oddly detached from intimate relationships” (2012: 10). A focus on society and practice has steered our attention away from the interpersonal realms (friendship,

¹See essays in Bernauer and Carrette (2004) exploring Michel Foucault’s theoretical innovations around the relationship between interiority and politics. Steven Bush’s article gives a useful overview of how the field came to pull religious experience “out of the recesses of unassailable interiority and situate it soundly within material and social practices” (Bush 2012: 199). Other influential texts include Mahmood (2004) and Lester (2008); Lester reworks Asad’s and Foucault’s ideas of disciplinary power and self-formation toward subtle “micropractices” as a way to effectively understand processes of “alternation of internal experience” (2008: 22–36). See also Charles Taylor’s discussion of how the “conditions of secularity” have generated the “immanent frame” in which we live, feel, and experience life in the modern world, a world predominantly possible to live “non-sacramentally” (2007: 77, 268, 23).

kinship, and so forth) for the impersonal ones. Robert Orsi has similarly claimed that the religions we study “continue to be imagined and treated as conglomeration of religious individuals, rather than as thick contexts of intersubjective exchanges among humans and between humans and special others (gods, ghosts, angels, ancestors, and so on)” (2011: 9). Oddly, as a result, Orsi continues, “by ignoring the web of relationships in which the subject comes to be and always exists, the individual as a living multi-dimensional reality disappears as well into the mass . . . the individual becomes a cypher of discourse, discipline, and power in much writing on religion” (2011: 9). I want to pursue the lines of thought Furey and Orsi invite us to consider, and think about what happens when we see friendship in particular as a real, if often overlooked, constituting force in the formation of religious sensibilities. To pull back on the widespread attention to discipline and power in our field does not mean we must resort back to “some numinous inner realm” (Sharf 1998: 113), but it does suggest we need a fresh look at the intermediary space between the person and society.

I want to ask, what happens if we consider the theoretical potential for the category of friendship in particular for scholars interested in the inner life, subject formation, and even religious experience? If we shift our attention away from the subtle realms of social forces, bodily practice, and tradition and instead toward a more interpersonal, amiable realm like friendship, does power drop off the map? As I have come to see it, friendship is no safe haven from other kinds of power, no magic circle protected haven from race, gender, and class, but intimacy and friendship have their own specific religious power within these broader societal forces in ways that can never be fully disentangled. If we take seriously interpersonal relationships, we cannot neglect an analysis of power and politics; but it keeps our studies of structure tethered to people’s experiences, and offers a crucial matrix for analyzing that intermediary realm between the individual and society. This line of inquiry can help break down some old impasses in the field between the “new materialism” (Chidester 2000: 367) and the older, classic theorists whose individualism and recourse to pure interiority have been so thoroughly critiqued (William James’ religion as “experiences of individual men in their solitude” as one classic example [1985: 34]). Just as friendship as a category of analysis cannot exclude other kinds of disciplinary powers, neither can it occlude hatred, betrayal, and inevitable ruptures in bonds, the disappointments that can overwhelm them. This too provides the occasion to form and transform religious sensibilities.

With these cautions in place, friendship is a useful analytic category and an overlooked realm of human experience that is often tethered
closely to the cultivation of religious sensibilities. To take relational bonds like friendship seriously heeds recent calls from the more phenomenologically oriented scholars of religion, like Kristy Nabhan-Warren, who has urged religionists to experiment methodologically in order get at a “richer understanding of religion as it is believed, lived, experienced” (Nabhan-Warren 2011: 382). I agree with Nabhan-Warren that religion is felt, apprehended, even contested bodily, and it is also rendered real between bodies, among family and friends in contexts of intimacy. A focus on interpersonal relationships pulls persons out of the disciplinary crowd Furey describes, and situates them within their circles of friends and loved ones, where they spent so much time and energy, and where they felt their God vividly come (and go).

To illuminate what a category like friendship can do for understanding religion, I trace the lines of intimacy that traverse the networks in my own particular area of research, the French Catholic revival, or renouveau catholique, in early twentieth-century Paris. The French Catholic revival is one context that helped pave the way for the Second Vatican Council, and its protagonists include names such as Charles Péguy, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Henri de Lubac, and Michel de Certeau, that may be familiar to scholars in other subfields. For the men and women of the renouveau catholique, the affective intensity of friendship was a key—perhaps the key—factor in generating religious experience, deepening or losing faith, and converting or returning to the religion of their childhoods. Despite the power friendship holds in these sources, it is remarkably easy to miss: in my own scholarship, instead of friendship I have tended to focus on other cultural and social factors that seemed more serious, more political, to understand the formation of people’s religious self-constitution. I have analyzed religion in relation to familiar, broad forces such as World War I, gender relations, the Holocaust, and the French program of the laïcité. Furey put it exactly right: friendship seemed to me “not quaint exactly, but not essential either” (2012: 9). Yet it is undeniable that through their intimate friendships above all, men and women of the French Catholic revival aimed to realize the words of Jesus about love, sought to apprehend God’s presence through their mutual bonds, and began to feel themselves taken in, with one other, to the mystical body of Christ. Further, I have found that if we use friendship, we

3I borrow “sensibilities” from Talal Asad, who claimed (as have others before him) that when it comes to religion, “belief in the sense of private conviction has little to do with it” (2011: 56). He turns our attention from belief to sensibilities, thinking about “how the bodily senses are cultivated,” a move that keeps us focused on people in their embodied and affective specificity, their ways of apprehending the world.
must do so in the most imaginatively rich way possible beyond just face-to-face amis. In the world of the renouveau catholique, the affective intensities of friendship often passed into other realms of experience such as dreams of friends, memories of them, and imagined conversations, often provoking feelings for one another so intense that it was almost as good as (and sometimes even better) than the real thing.4

THE OCCLUSION OF RELATIONSHIPS IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Before entering into the specifics of my case study, I ask: how did the bonds of intimacy become somewhat marginal to our field, particularly to those of us interested in the formation of religious subjects? While some subfields have devoted scholarly attention to theme of friendship (particularly historians and philosophers working in the ancient worlds), many of these studies tend to focus on the ideas about friendship particular thinkers have held, or concepts of friendship that circulated in particular religious settings (see essays in Rouner 1994; Konstan 1996; Caine 2009). It is much more rare for scholars of religion to think about the practice of friendship and the power relational bonds can exert on the inner lives of the subjects we study. One compelling exception is the work of the Danish historian of medieval Christianity, Brian Patrick McGuire, whose work on monastic friendship in thirteenth-century Europe aims to “get behind the abundant literary commonplaces or topoi about friendship to the people who formed them and their feelings for one another” (2002: xii). Using a rich, varied set of sources including exemplum stories, correspondence, and spiritual diaries, McGuire shows a widespread emotional harnessing of intense feelings among friends for the purposes of cultivating a shared pursuit of divine love. In the context of thirteenth-century Christian monasticism, the spiritual life is developed in the context of personal bonds, not in solitude. Yet works like McGuire’s are scarce; why has this kind of scholarly attention to friendship been relatively sidelined in the study of religion?

To answer this question, I want to add to Furey’s excellent retelling in the JAAR by focusing on an aspect of Michel Foucault’s work. Although Foucault is often accused of eradicating the subject, his project offered an account of how subjectivity is constituted historically. Foucault characterized his genealogical method as an attempt to demonstrate “how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted

4For a helpful analysis on the relationship between dreams and imagination for the real world in the field of religious studies, see Amira Mittermaier (2010).
through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.” (1980: 72). Crucial for this story is the fact that Foucault’s constituting forces were not readily available to the subject to apprehend; they were *impersonal*, diffuse networks of habitual thought, discourse, and practice. Subject formation occurred, as he put it, “through an obscure set of anonymous rules” (*Foucault 1980*: 97). The (often under-appreciated) ethical impulse of Foucault’s project was to render these subtle forces visible, subject to analysis, and quite possibly even (as he put it) “criticized and destroyed” (*Foucault 1988*: 10).

When Judith Butler highlighted the ethical implications of Foucault’s project in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), she also relied on this notion that the norms the subject internalized were typically obscure and in the background. The constituent forces of the subject were in Butler’s words, “indifferent to me, to my life and my death” (2005: 35). What this meant for Butler was that the subject was “opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable,” because it was in the grasp of norms that were somehow not fully legible (2005: 19). This unknowability of the norms, according to Butler, was precisely what gave Foucault’s work its ethical power. We are connected to one another, Butler claimed, by the sheer fact that we are made and the forces of our making are never fully available for our comprehension. A common experience of the self’s opacity could bind human beings together in a kind of ethics of shared estrangement.

In the field of religion, this theoretical direction has inspired a number of exciting studies that Furey documents so well. Rather than friends, godparents, mothers, it was the opaque power rationalities, societal norms, habitual activity, dress, even geography, and architecture that shaped the religious self. To be sure, it is not that Foucault and those inspired by him were *uninterested* in realms of intimacy and friendship: indeed, in an important 1984 interview, Foucault claimed it was necessary to get at the “emotional fabric” of people’s lives, as he put it, and expressed a serious interest in understanding the human capacities for “affection, tenderness, friendship, camaraderie, and companionship” (1984: 206). He wanted to explore “affective and relational virtualities,” but to access this level one had to first get at those discursive structures in the background that become interiorized, and perhaps, unwittingly...

5See, for example, the essays in Bernauer and Carrette (2004). Similarly, in the now classic *No Place of Grace*, Jackson Lears in argued how nineteenth-century America saw an “unprecedented extension” of the secular processes of rationalization from the “outer to the inner life” to include rational control of interior realms such as wishes, dreams, and fantasies. It was this realm of feeling and experience that galvanized the protests of the (tragically ineffective, according to Lears) antimodernist movement in America (1981: 13–15).
limited people’s capacities for things like affection for and curiosity about others, and care for the self—all virtues Foucault highlights (1984: 207). The impersonal nature of these background structures was not incidental but absolutely critical because making them legible gave the project its exciting moral and political energy.

At the same time, another conversation in the study of religion has complicated these issues, steering it in a slightly different direction, moving away from these broad, societal structures and back into the realm of interiority. In his 2006 JAAR article, “Between the Lines: Exceeding the Limits of Historicism in the Study of Religion,” Tyler Roberts usefully brought together a constellation of scholars who aim to push back on this impulse to historicize subject formation and instead theorize an aspect of the self that resists social determinism (2006). Roberts draws from theorists such as Slavoj Žižek and Joan Copjec (1994) who ascribe an “excess” (2006: 707) to the subject, a “nonrelational” “surplus” (2006: 708) of existence that cannot be “caught up in the positivity of the social” (2006: 702). Instead, these remainders of the subject’s psychic life can provide a way to analyze a part of the self that is not necessarily “prior to socialization,” but can intrude onto the social as a site for creative intervention (2006: 703). Like Orsi’s and Furey’s, Roberts’ engagement with these theorists also outlined a similar, persuasive caution against an overreliance on society and history. But by thinking of categories like the “nonrelational” remainder in the subject’s psychic life, it became easy to skip the interpersonal realm altogether, and move quickly instead to those resources deep in the individual human psyche that resist the formative power of other people.

Echoing Roberts in interesting ways, Joan Wallach Scott’s book The Fantasy of Feminist History (2011) urges scholars to pursue a richer understanding of human subjectivity for similar reasons. Scott aims to keep our understanding of the world open to those aspects of experience that seem most resistant to the straightforward narratives of historical causation (2011: 4–21). Scott is interested in those places where humans “cross the threshold” from the ordinary and everyday and engage reality on wide-ranging levels of consciousness, places where unconscious desire can be played out. Attuned especially to realms of experience like madness, passion, unconscious desire, and fantasy, Scott claims that these psychoanalytic dimensions lie somewhat outside historical determinism and causation. Like the methodologies Roberts describes, Scott pushes back against approaches to human experience that attend only to broad, background social forces and disciplining powers, bringing us instead into the inner realm of unconscious desire.
Hence, disciplinary conversations in religious studies have tended to steer us in two directions: to the power of social norms and bodily practice on the one hand, and on the other, the psychic contours of the unconscious self—those resistant realms of fantasy or nonordinary experiences that push back on the determinative force of the social. To suggest that we should take seriously categories like friendship in order to understand how religious sensibilities are formed is not to halt the momentum of these conversations, but it does fill in a critical gap. On the one hand, it continues the most basic premise of Foucault’s project of asking how it is that a subject comes to feel, think, and act in particular ways in time and space, but shifts the attention to how the subject comes to feel and think religiously not only through anonymous background discourses, but through the more personal domain of mutual bonds. A particular challenge for this approach is to see how a study of relationships could ensure that the earlier emphases on the power society exerts on the subject would not go by the wayside. Though it would place the emphases elsewhere, a renewed understanding of friendship must not neglect discursive power. For example, broad social forces and historical process like immigration, war, and exile create the conditions for the formation of particular communities, communities where highly specific bonds are formed between men, women, and children. Other social powers even shape the desires of men and women, desires that come to see some people as more powerful or worthy of love and attention than others, and these become critical energizing forces for friendships. The friendships cannot be extracted from the social conditions that make them possible and animate them. And yet, for the men and women caught up in these social forces, their life experiences are not entirely reducible to them. Personal relationships have their own specific power, particularly a power for cultivating religious sensibilities.

Moreover, a renewed study of friendship can also segue into the conversations about the psychoanalytic dimensions to subject formation: the intense friendships in the religious world I study more often than not sat with ordinary reality in ways that were askew, “off” from the everyday (Scott 2011: 39). In the French Catholic revival, love and loss between friends intensified deeply through dreams and imagination and played out on a wide-ranging temporal grid through fantasy, hope, and memory.

BONDS OF INTIMACY IN THE FRENCH CATHOLIC REVIVAL

For many of the artists and intellectuals working in mid-twentieth-century Paris, there was no topic more captivating than that of religious
experience. The public lectures of Henri Bergson had awakened the idea that experiential contact with what he called l’Absolu was indeed possible, and despite the skepticism emanating from the nearby Sorbonne, this prospect was thrilling. Some went on to write about their own inner lives, like Raïssa Maritain, whose extraordinary Journal recounts thirty years of locutions and visions, and eventually, a sense of actually incorporating the person of Christ into her own body and soul. Others, like the writer Charles Péguy and the theologian Henri de Lubac, perceived powerful spiritual experiences from ancient sources. So they transcribed, translated, and read them aloud to friends, over and over, hoping to recapture something of it for themselves.

The controversial Catholic novelist Léon Bloy (1864–1917) had a major role in the cultivation of religious sensibilities in this community. This was in part due to the powerful affective responses his own writings evoked, but even more because of his deliberate fostering of networks of friendship and spiritual kinship. These groups included a close circle of godchildren and friends, but even more important, a huge, international community of readers who imagined themselves inhabiting Bloy’s personal orbit of intimacy, even long after he died. Included among Bloy’s close circle of amis was the Dutch artist Pierre van der Meer Walcheren, who in 1917 published his memoir, a vivid retelling of his conversion to Christianity. The book met great critical acclaim in Paris and helped energize a growing attraction of Catholicism among the avant-garde. The memoir begins with Walcheren’s journey from Holland to Paris in 1910, when he and his wife made a pilgrimage to meet Bloy, whose novels they had long admired. When Walcheren confessed to Bloy his own spiritual dissatisfaction and inquietude, Bloy advised Walcheren that the first step for the religious seeker was to leave one’s blood family to forge a “nouvelle famille spirituelle” based on friendship (Walcheren 1917: 22). Bloy volunteered to be Walcheren’s godfather and “give him a brother and sister also,” referring to Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, who were by that time in Bloy’s close circle (Mougel 1996: 922). Walcheren accepted, and in a later memoir called to mind these years as a period in which a strong spiritual kinship (par la forte jointure d’une parenté spirituelle) constituted his “spiritual initiation” to Christianity: “We were all so different from one another and came from all different horizons, Bloy’s wife Danish, my

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6For more on the importance of “spiritual families” for the conversions to Catholicism among intellectuals in the early twentieth century, see Guegelot (2012).

own wife Flemish and French, Raïssa and Vera [Raïssa’s sister], Russian Jews, Jacques Protestant French, and we formed together one great big family [une seule grande famille]” (Walcheren 1961: 37). This language of a “core spiritual family” was one whose purpose was “initiation into the profound gifts of Christianity” and enabled, at least for Walcheren, the “discovery of new and luminous treasures” of faith (Walcheren 1917: 37).

As Walcheren and others remembered it, friendship with Bloy entailed an effort to assimilate for themselves what they perceived as the voracious spiritual appetite of their godfather (Walcheren describes Bloy going to mass “like a hungry animal” who left disappointed having found only crumbs [1917: 38]). This meant sacramental participation alongside Bloy (kneeling next to him, walking with him to mass), reading the saints together expressly for the purpose of cultivating emotive intensity, praying with him, exchanging letters, sharing meals, and helping one another through health crises. Through sustained, intimate friendship with Bloy, “apparently life was as it was before,” Walcheren recalled, “but everything was transformed. It was extraordinary! Every idea, every attitude, inner or outer, every action, even the most common and daily activity, was totally different. All things now had meaning, and operated in a climate far more exhilarating and more real” (Walcheren 1961: 41).

Intimacy with Bloy forged the material out of which religious experience (rendering Christianity “real” and “living”) was enacted. It was more than learning about Christianity from a mentor, but interiorizing the dispositions of their new friend in a deliberate and deeply desired way. Friendship and intimacy was how the religion was apprehended, made real.

For Walcheren, describing all of this in his two memoirs written in 1917 and 1961, both long after his experiences of inner and outer transformation, the memories of these bonds contained significant religiously transformative power even in the present. “My memory of this man is in a mysterious attic [grenier mystérieux] . . . and to resurrect experiences of overwhelming joy, and countless old sensations . . . is to make them at once present to the imagination and the heart” (Walcheren 1961: 14). Here friendship pulled up from memory, imagination, and emotion (coeur) can enact experiences for the writer, and ideally even the reader.

In addition to the publication of Walcheren’s memoirs, the rest of the world witnessed the affective intensities that circulated among the Bloys, the Maritains, and the Walcherens when, in 1928, Bloy’s widow Jeanne published the intimate spiritual correspondence between this little spiritual family in a collection entitled Lettres à ses filleuls (Letters to his Godchildren). These letters laid bare for readers an affectively, even erotically charged community whose explicit aim was to inculcate religious sensibilities for one another: In the pages of Lettres à ses filleuls, Bloy
confessed to Raïssa, Jacques, and Raïssa’s sister, on Easter 1914, “I want to take you into my lion paws, you, Vera, and Jacques, and devour you lovingly” (Bloy 1928: 139). He signed his notes with “Tender kisses to my spiritual children” (Bloy 1928: 139). The Maritains and Walcherens fawned over their godfather with almost as much intensity, thanking him for “awakening the evangelical spirit,” “representing the doctrine of God” to them. Readers found something oddly universal and appealing about these highly personal accounts of lavish affection. In reading these letters, Thomas Merton recalls being moved to tears, feeling that “I too am somehow of the family of Bloy” (1996: 145).

Something similar happened to the novelist Georges Bernanos, who never met Bloy personally but considered himself among Bloy’s “friends, if not his disciples, in the very least one of his godchildren” (1947: 1232). Writing at the close of World War II from his exile in Brazil, Bernanos’ thoughts turned toward his “ami” Bloy, whom he knew only though the books and letters he read after Bloy’s death in 1917. In Brazil, Bernanos wrote an essay “Dans l’amitié de Léon Bloy” (“Friendship with Léon Bloy”) dedicated to “friends of Bloy” (1947: 1232). Bernanos wrote that one way the war-torn, weary world could awaken an experience of God is to listen to a “prophet friend” who can “ravish souls” (1947: 1231). But to do that one needed the powers of emotion, intimacy, and imagination. “Listen well,” Bernanos invites his readers, “close your eyes.” Bernanos summoned his readers to see themselves “gathered at any one of his [Bloy’s] hovels . . . of which so few among us have had the chance of breaching the threshold, but where all his readers have entered many times . . . in dreams.” He continues:

The oil lamp burns on the table, there is still a hundred pence coin in the drawer, and a bottle of wine on the tablecloth where Mme. Bloy has only just placed the large glasses. . . . Once more the Spirit will visit this gray-haired gentleman. . . . Once more it will transmit to us the message of which a part will perhaps be lost in his puffy Gallic moustache where a droplet of red wine glimmers, but which will stir our souls without us always being able to explain why. (Bernanos 1971: 850)

Having established Bloy as his “prophet friend” and set the consciously created, fantasy-like stage of intimacy, Bernanos then introduces Bloy’s ideas that could speak to the postwar world in 1949: Bloy’s denunciation of nationalism, the cruelty of the modern world, and the presence of God in those who suffer. The point here is that for the world to hear Bloy, it had to render him as a friend so that it could to experience him religiously (have its “soul stirred” and “ravished”).
While the bonds felt with Bloy—either through memory or in real time—shaped the religious sensorium of so many in the French Catholic revival, the intensity of these ties must also be situated within larger networks of discursive power. Social forces that were there in the background, below the level of conscious reflection, held a prominent presence drawing people like Walcheren, Bernanos, Merton, and the Maritains toward a figure like Léon Bloy. For example, these were intellectuals deeply critical of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anticlerical positivism in France. They sought out precisely those aspects of culture scorned by the reigning secular ideology, an ideology they saw as tepid and overly bourgeois. They rushed into the cultural symbols, practices, and people deemed other as a form of countercultural critique. For intellectuals and critics in Paris, Bloy, as a Catholic and as someone who espoused the ideals of poverty and suffering, was a perfect embodiment of these countercultural symbols. Moreover, Bloy’s writings were hyperbolic, over-the-top condemnations of bourgeois anticlericalism. These broader social forces of power explain the Maritains’ and Walcheren’s fascination with Bloy, and must be part of the story of the formation of the inner lives. But we must also add to our knowledge the highly specific power of their relationship, their devotion, and love of this one man.

For many others in the world of the renouveau catholique, Bloy’s charismatic power for friendship had transferred to his godchildren, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. The writer Julien Green had met Jacques in 1925, and developed a highly affective, even erotically charged, attachment to him almost immediately: “I want to you know that I think of you often, every day and several times a day,” he confessed just a few months after their first encounter (Maritain and Green 1988: 12). Green was gay, and his bond with Jacques was not uncommon; Stephen Schloesser has shown how the improbable attraction to Catholicism among the avant-garde in Jazz Age Paris was due, at least in part, to the open, deeply intimate friendships Jacques Maritain made with so many gay men. These relationships were made public in their widely read and published correspondences (Schloesser 2004). Green was explicit that his love of Jacques, their friendship and bond, was precisely the galvanizing force for his own faith: “For me as for so many others, you have been God’s friend and witness. You have helped souls, whom perhaps you don’t even know, to escape from the demon! . . . It is in great measure due to you that I have kept the Faith” (Maritain and Green 1988: 141). It is not just that Jacques as his friend teaches Green “about” God, but that their relationship creates experiences of God. Even thirty years later, in 1959, their friendship had deepened so much, and Green’s earlier claim intensified: “It is God Who has placed us on one another’s path, so that you might speak
to me, and speak to me in His place. Of that I am very sure” (Maritain and Green 1988: 149). The presence of Jacques becomes the (to borrow from Elaine Scarry’s description of belief) “incontestable reality of a world invisible and unable to be touched” (Scarry 1987: 202). Jacques’ speech for Green renders audible a world otherwise impossible to hear. This communication here does not reflect a religious experience each man has as an individual, but enacts it intersubjectively.

It is remarkable how many men and women echo Green when describing the impact Jacques and Raïssa Maritain had on their inner lives. For witnesses, some thought they were conspiring with the diocese to bring the faithless into the fold. In 1925, the young religious seeker Maurice Sachs befriended the Maritains, and subsequently (briefly) converted to Catholicism. In describing his attraction to the Church, it was not the sacraments, the teachings, but the friendship with Raïssa above all that generated a real inner experience of something perceived as transcendent. He confessed to Raïssa as he began to befriend her, “I felt an electricity go through my body and redirect my life. May God let me always be among you! Perpetually surround me, my soon to be godmother! When I think of you I am filled with joy, and I came to God because I was at a dead end—but I pushed myself forward. I think the goodness of our Lord wanted me to LOVE, even in all my unworthiness, and I did this through you, through Jean [Cocteau], through the calm of your house” (Sachs et al. 2003: 22). Raïssa’s letters to him were “treasures” he “guarded with his life,” letters she often mailed him along with other sacred objects: prayer cards, a picture of Thérèse of Lisieux, a written transcription of the mass in Latin (Sachs et al. 2003: 33, 111). These inner experiences (being electrified, filled with joy, capable of love despite worthlessness) were made possible only though sustained, relational encounters.

As in our understanding of Bloy, also in this highly personal setting, the disciplinary power of societal norms cannot drop out of the picture: Raïssa Maritain was a Jewish convert to Catholicism who never fully severed ties with the Judaism of her family. Part of what energized Sach’s attraction to Raïssa were the orientalist discourses circulating in Paris about the femme juive as exotic and spiritual, discourses that stemmed from the wider attractions to interwar exoticism and primitivism in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s (see Ezra 2000; Valman 2011). These discursive powers steered Sachs toward Raïssa and propelled his imaginings that she was not only a Catholic but a “Jewess consumed by the mystic flame, whose soul was a vertical line from earth to heaven” (1964: 33). The power of orientalism and primitivism wove in and through the friendship itself, but the cultivation of Sach’s religious sensibility—his conversion to
Catholicism—is incomprehensible using only these tools of discourse and power analysis. His friendship and devotion to Räissa just as critical, and formative, but easy to overlook.

The Maritains’ gift in shaping the religious sensorium of their friends certainly stems from a combination of these social forces and their early formation in Léon Bloy’s “famille spirituelle,” but Jacques and Räissa each had their own unique gifts in the arts of emotional intimacy. Their encouragement, their willingness to take on their friends’ sorrow and pain, this was the stuff their friends invariably saw as spiritually transformative. Consider, for instance, the condolence letter Jacques wrote to his friend Saul Alinsky in 1947, after hearing about the horrible death of Alinsky’s wife in a tragic drowning accident. When Maritain learned of this “monstrous event,” he wrote to Alinsky, “our hearts are full of your distress and agony, and what is our love capable of, unless suffering with you? Everything human is powerless in the face of such a tragedy, there is no help on earth. . . . You cannot be consoled, every fiber of happiness in your body has been struck by lightning” (Maritain and Alinsky 1994: 109). For Alinsky, the letter itself became a treasured object, sacred: “Jacques dear. I wept over your letter. It has been placed in a special folder where I can always look at it. I want my children to know it so that in later years they will understand how their parents lived and died” (110). Although Alinsky never considered himself religious, Jacques’ friendship ignited inner transformations of a spiritual sort. Alinsky wrote a dedication to Jacques in one of his books, “To Jacques Maritain: that rare person who not only professes Christianity but whose heart is filled with it and who lives a Christian way of life . . . to know Jacques Maritain is to know a richness and spiritual experience that makes life even more glorious” (17). Whether it was “finding faith,” “knowing a spiritual experience,” or endowing life with a new “richness” and “glory,” these kinds of experiences were made possible in and through close, personal exchanges between men and men, women and women, men and women, friend and friend, godparent and godchildren.

The context for friendship in the French Catholic revival changed a bit during World War II, when many of these friendships had evaporated through death, exile, or the ideological battles that had waged the late interwar period. Jacques and Räissa were exiles in New York during the war, and for some who remained in Europe during 1940–44, it was their memories of Jacques and Räissa that sustained their faith. The Swiss theologian Charles Journet was a close friend of the Maritains who remained in Switzerland during the war and postwar period. Journet wrote to the Maritains in 1946, remembering their times together before the war: masses together in Paris, Meudon, and Versailles, “of these memories of
us, they are like stars in the dark night. Your love has always been that you saw me as God wants me to be. . . . Your kindness is a sweet gift from heaven and I want to become every day less unworthy” (Journet and Maritain 1998: 386). Jacques wondered how he and Raïssa could ever explain the joy they received from Journet’s letters, letters “that are graces from God, God, who has given us your marvelous friendship” (Journet and Maritain 1998: 303). “You,” Jacques had confided to him a few months earlier, “are our consolation, you are Friendship itself, you are Love itself, [vous êtes pour nous l’Amitié même]” (Journet and Maritain 1998: 152). Ideals of love and friendship were often capitalized, elevating them to the heights of the sacred. Here the beloved (Journet) is the embodiment of these religiously significant ideals, and he enables Jacques, through memories described in letters, to experience these ideals in the present. For Journet, the feeling was mutual: “I thank you Jacques,” because through their relationship, and through their shared relationships with the saints, Journet claims to have learned to “love Love” [aimer l’Amour], adding, “Jacques. . . . I embrace you in this Love!” (Journet and Maritain 1998: 386). In this network of remembered friendship, the community included of course Jacques, Raïssa, and Journet, but also Jesus, Mary, and the saints. Journet, Jacques, and Raïssa regularly signed off their letters with “I embrace you in . . . Jesus Christ,” or “sweet friendship in Jesus” (Journet and Maritain 1998: 466). This community held within it the living and the dead and existed on a temporally fluid grid through memory and prayer.

In other cases, the absent beloved is so pronounced that it is not merely memories and letters that form the religious sensorium, but the actual presence of the absent beloved is felt to inhabit the self, if only posthumously. We see this with Jacques after Raïssa died in 1960, during the thirteen years he lived as a widower. After her death Jacques confessed to Green, “I have lost the physical presence of she whom I have loved more than myself” (Maritain and Green 1988: 199). “I am a man in pieces,” Jacques wrote to Journet seven years later, “held up entirely by the hands of Raïssa. I no longer am in control of anything, there remains nothing of me in my agency [il n’y a plus de moi agent] [sic]; if anything good remains in the work for which people want me to survive, it is owed, every time, to what I receive from her, and it passes through me as water through a sieve, I remain empty [je rest vide]” (Journet and Maritain 2008: 478). Jacques no longer felt present to the world, and understood himself to be acting only insofar as Raïssa’s spirit came through him from beyond, propelling him forward. Raïssa, whom Jacques “loved more than himself,” “holds him up” so that “nothing of himself” remains. Throughout this widowerhood, Jacques experienced a kind of repossession of his own inner life by his beloved late wife (Moore 2012b: 192–200). He claimed that each
page of his final book, *Peasant of the Garonne* (1968), was penned entirely by the spiritual presence of Raïssa, guiding his hand (*Maritain* 1968: 251).

These experiences are not exactly the terrain of memory or even a daydream, but are nonordinary religious experiences, “off” from the realm of the everyday. Yet Jacques is at pains to describe their *realness*. Jacques told Julien Green that there is “nothing more certain than this communication between the dead who have eternal life and those who are still living here and now” (*Maritain and Green* 1988: 229). He added “I live much more (I do not want to say in thought alone but in the *reality* of mutual communication) with Raïssa than I do with the people living around me” (*Maritain and Green* 1988: 229). “My real life,” Jacques later told Saul Alinsky, “is with Raïssa: all the other kind of work I was doing before has become impossible for me” (*Maritain and Alinsky* 1994: 43). When Raïssa “passes through him,” there is “nothing more certain” in his life than her presence. She “is real,” is “much more” real than other things in his life; their relationship is reality. Before she died, Raïssa similarly wrote of her experience of the supernatural, straining to articulate its realness despite its *otherness* in relationship to the ordinary. It is, she wrote, “an *other world*. This is no metaphor, no hyperbole, but a reality” (*Maritain* 1975: 326). One calls to mind here Robert Orsi’s suggestion that scholars of religion need to push for a more capacious theoretical vocabulary to understand precisely the kinds of experiences Jacques and Raïssa had—experiences of, in Orsi’s words, “the holy, the really real,” experiences that “unsettle boundaries” between “the imagination and the real” (*Orsi* 2012: 104). For my purposes here, the point is that this kind of religious sensibility was made possible after *sixty years* of training in the arts of relationships and the life of the spirit, back when Bloy insisted that the first step in becoming a Christian was joining a spiritual family.

To be sure, other discourses circulating in the background of Jacques and Raïssa’s lives played a role: for the decades of their marriage, Jacques drew deeply from the well of Christian theological and exegetical traditions that viewed women, particularly sick, weak, or otherwise “lowly” women, as having a spiritual aptitude beyond that of their male counterparts. For Jacques, Raïssa always embodied something of the presence of the supernatural. A God who chooses the least and the lowest chose Raïssa; her constant struggles with illness, her proximity to death, her tireless commitment to prayer and contemplation would always be seen by Jacques as granting him an access to matters of the spirit that would have been impossible for him to access without her. Jacques’ immersion into these gendered discourses in Christian history is undeniably part of the story of the power Raïssa’s posthumous presence exerted on his own
spirits life. But the affective, intersubjective setting had its own special power. Jacques’ spiritual life was formed, shaped, and cultivated only in and through his love for her. Although it cannot be understood without them, it did not happen through the discursive powers of Christian or French history and society alone.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP FOR RELIGION

Scholars today would largely agree, I think, that the religious sensibilities and experiences Jacques describes have very little to do with the gleaming nobility of the man in solitude, the life of the mind/spirit alone. But can we really understand how and what happened—the origins or the content—of these rich religious sensibilities, with only the tools of the subjectivizing power of social discourse, or the “excess” or “nonrelational remainder” of the subject? These were experiences between Jacques and Raïssa, Bernanos and Bloy, Bloy and Walcheren, the Maritains and Journet, Jacques and Alinsky. Without sustained attention to intimate relationships, we would miss a real understanding of their inner lives, and a huge (more real, as Jacques writes) dimension of human experience.

Though the French Catholic revivalists like the Maritains and Bloy are rarely included in the genealogies of the study of religion, many of the thinkers in this context rubbed shoulders (and sometimes collaborated closely) with old, familiar masters like Rudolf Otto, Henri Bergson, Mircea Eliade, and Louis Massignon. Despite the fact many of these early theorists are now maligned for their esoterism, their individualism, their Orientalism, or simplistic valorization of the “spiritual” as opposed to “tradition,” a closer look reveals that many of them (like my protagonists of the French Catholic revival) recognized the power of others in the shaping of inner lives. Many of their theories were not as individualist as we assume. For example, Louis Massignon (1883–1963), a close friend of the Maritains, is widely considered a founder of Islamic studies in the West but has been rightly critiqued for his prioritization of Islamic mysticism at the expense everything else (Said 1979: 268–270). Yet Massignon also had an interesting theory of what he called the “apotropaion powers” that holy people could exert on other people’s apprehension of the sacred. Apotropaion refers to the power of warding off evil, like an amulet: “Hindus call them mahatmas, Arabians abdâl, and Christians

8For an excellent analysis equal parts critical and sympathetic (focused on not only Eliade, but also Henry Corbin [Massignon’s student] and Gershom Scholem), see Steven Wasserstrom (1999).
saints,” Massignon wrote, remarking on the “magnetic” nature some holy people possessed, a power that could affect the religious experiences of those around them. He looked at Mahatma Gandhi who, by an “apotropaion substitution, the reflection of his torch has lighted other kindred souls. . . . The example of this old man grown thin by so many fasts and sacrifices, [is] posted like a gleaming target in the center of a circle of suffering faces which his fire continues to light” (Massignon 1959: 114). Using this theory, we might think of the apotropaion power of Jacques, Raïssa, and Bloy to “light other souls”—their amis in the French Catholic revival.

Similarly, even Rudolf Otto acknowledged that people cannot produce feelings of the “numinous” by themselves, as Robert Orsi has recently argued. In Orsi’s reading of Otto, feelings of the numinous are “induced, incited, and aroused” in ordinary people through the “instrumentality of other more highly endowed natures. . . . Faith, in the deepest sense of the word,” according to Otto, “can only be ‘kindled’” (2012: 94). Along these lines, Suzanne Smith has also written a powerful essay on the understudied role of friendship and love in Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s theory of religion (2013). W. C. Smith is well known for a definition of religion about as thoroughly individualist as one could get (he preferred “faith” to “religion,” and defined it as “an act that I make, myself, naked before God” [Wilfred Smith 1978: 191]). Yet according to Suzanne Smith, later in his career W. C. Smith claimed that “faith cannot be adequately known except in the context of friendship, understood as a mode of love” (Suzanne Smith 2013: 757). Interestingly, W. C. Smith’s theories about the importance of friendship for understanding religious others were generated by his own experiences with interfaith friendships when he worked abroad. Such friendships, according to Suzanne Smith, “left him with an immediate, personal awareness of the extent to which people from other faiths were fully ‘participants in the grace of God and his bounty.’ The experience, via friendship, of this phenomenon came first; the theory as to the status of knowledge conferred by friendship, and its relationship to such knowledge as might be acquired through the study of data, came later” (2013: 766). The emphases on friendship, love, and the power of holy others runs markedly counter to widespread interpretations of these early theorists as overly individualist; like their colleagues in the French Catholic revival, Otto, Smith, and Massignon all saw the formative power of relationships for cultivating religious sensibilities.

Yet, no matter where we look—the Maritains, Otto, Bloy, Smith, Massignon—none of these figures in their letters, diaries, or in their published writings spoke much about the pain of friendships, the darker powers relationships can wield on the inner life. Of course, the bonds of
love can also strain and break, become the source of betrayal and hurt. Constance Furey writes, “relationship seems like a friendly word only insofar as the scholar’s ear inclines toward friendly relationships, avoiding the unequal distribution of resources, the injustices, conflicts, aversions, repugnance, and rejection that relationships also entail. To study relationships, even intimate, intense, and enduring relationships, is to study not only love but also hate, not only growth but also loss, and not only nurturance but also violence” (2012: 25). This too impacts religious sensibilities.

One final example to illustrate this point: consider the one-time close bond and its complete dissolution between the two French Jesuit historians of Christian spirituality, Henri de Lubac and Michel de Certeau (Moore 2012a). De Certeau entered the Society of Jesus just after World War II and chose Henri de Lubac as his teacher. In the 1953, de Certeau wrote de Lubac a letter: “My Reverend Father” (Mon Révérend Père), he began, “this year that is beginning makes me, over each day of silence in this novitiate, a little more your son [votre fils]. This certainty is one of the joys in my communion with Jesus” (Dosse 2002: 52). Here, as with Maritain and Journet, communion with Jesus is rendered certain through the intimacy of relationship (here the relationship between a Père and his fils). Four years later, de Certeau assured his teacher that “you are at the origin of my vocation” (Dosse 2002: 53).

But throughout the years that followed, tensions surfaced and the bond began to sever. De Lubac and de Certeau adhered to different historical methodologies, had opposite interpretations of the student riots of 1968, and de Lubac began to critique de Certeau publically. He condemned de Certeau harshly to his friends and in print. De Certeau’s letters early on in 1965 evince some panic as his mentor distanced himself: “If you were less secretive with me, then I would make fewer errors! Tell me, please, the points on which you have reservations!” (Dosse 2002: 55). But by 1971, de Certeau’s anxiety turns to near resignation: “I have learned through common friends that you reproach me. If that’s true, I’d be sorry. Despite what I know you say about me, I always wanted to express my immense gratitude to you and my admiration” (Dosse 2002: 55–56). The friendship completely dissolved. De Lubac renounced de Certeau.

Yet what interests me is that as de Certeau felt de Lubac vanish—the Père who secured the certainty of his communion with Jesus and vocation as a priest—de Certeau began describing the experience of Christian belief in terms of dissolution, disappearance. “Feeling the Christian ground on which I thought I was walking disappear,” he wrote of the late 1960s, “seeing the messengers of an ending long time under way, approach, recognizing in this my relation to . . . a belief stripped of any
secure site” (de Certeau 2000: 230). De Certeau’s description of the dissolution of religious belief did not mean he now existed outside the circle of faith. He remained a Jesuit until he died, and his close friend Luce Girard writes that he “believed in the Christian God” (Giard 2000: 21). But it was a belief felt and experienced as “weakness,” “marked by absence,” something that appears “in an ocean of language only to disappear” (de Certeau 2000: 21). He called this le mystique. De Certeau, rejected by the father through whom he secured the certainty of belief, came to see faith as precisely that which lacks security, best understood as a kind of incessant walking, and de Certeau himself became the “marcheur blessé,” the “wounded wanderer,” as François Dosse titles his beautiful biography of de Certeau.

To be sure, de Certeau was deeply involved with all of the cultural changes of the global 1960s, and these must be part of how we make sense of de Certeau seeing his faith as searching, weakness, and absence. But the dissolution of the bond with the Père at the origin played a role, and according to his biographer is an absolutely critical piece of de Certeau’s life and thought. In the study of religion, it is this relational piece that is often left unexamined.

Moving toward a conclusion, let us stick with de Certeau for some useful theoretical language here. De Certeau maintains that experiences of God in modernity can no longer be merely “a (linguistic) encounter between Divine Speaker and His faithful respondents” (2000: 91) (though was that ever possible, even in premodernity?). In the early modern era, according to de Certeau, it became necessary to “produce the conventions needed to circumscribe the places where one can ‘hear’ and where one can come to an understanding with others” about God (2000: 91). It became necessary to create a space with others who share the “spiritual will to hear,” and he calls these places for hearing what is otherwise inaudible and absent “dialogic spaces.” In these dialogical spaces, religious sensibilities become enacted. De Certeau’s own work in the history of Christianity abounds with such dialogical spaces. The most moving and striking occurs toward the end of The Possession at Loudon, when the nun Jeanne des Anges is finally relieved from the torments of her demonic possession on account of the loving, pastoral care and attention the Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin showed to her. In the course of their intense friendship, de Certeau describes Surin “taking on” that which possessed Jeanne. Surin became mentally ill for the remaining years of his life and Jeanne free (de Certeau 1996: 201–205).

Inspired by Furey and Orsi’s recent insights, it is precisely to these dialogical, intersubjective spaces between friends that I have tried to turn our attention. To understand historical moments when religious
sensibilities exploded, like in the French Catholic revival, yes, we need to understand the power of secularism, the impact of the wars, the normative relations between men and women, even law, geography, architecture, tradition. The disciplining power of society cannot be ignored: as I have shown, the discourses of gender, orientalism, and exoticism and critiques of positivism in early-twentieth-century Paris made possible all of these friendships. Yet these are not the whole story. They are too far from people’s experiences of the world, and do not give us a rich enough picture of how religious sensibilities were cultivated. Let us follow Furey’s and Orsi’s lead, and bring these individuals in from the crowd, and into the relational realm where they lived their lives and felt their faith most vividly, its development and dissolution. This does not just illuminate French Catholicism more richly: historian of global Christianity Dana Roberts calls friendship the “key that unlocks the history of missions.” Without an understanding of friendship, it is “impossible to understand how Christianity spread across cultures in the twentieth century.” She sees it as the “potent yet underecognized practice and ethic in the creation of world Christianity” [emphasis added] (Roberts 2011: 101).

If we take seriously friendship as a category of analysis, it must understood as expansively and capacious as possible: it must include things such as Bernanos’ imagined intimacy with Bloy, who had long since died, the memories of love that sustained Journet, Jacques, and Raïssa during the war, the posthumous presence of Raïssa that Jacques felt as more real than anything else throughout his widowhood, and the betrayal of de Certeau by de Lubac. All of this enables a capacious, multivalent of the term friendship and an essential way to fully understand the formation of the religious subject.

If we turn our attention to these interpersonal dimensions of human experience that enact religious experience, we are closer to a fuller, more complex conversation about the inner life and the formation of religious sensibilities. Certainly, there is a renewed interest in religion in other disciplines, but it is often how the discourse of religion functions for something else, like nationalism, or how the religious worldview must be understood as a context for a particular intellectual movement or local scenario. Rarely do scholars in other disciplines approach those regions where religion is felt and apprehended and experienced by particular people. Friends play a crucial, unacknowledged role in making what Elaine Scarry has called the “dimly apprehended, incontestably present” (Scarry 1987: 205). In real time, memory, hope, or fantasy, friends did

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9For a set of examples of this approach, see Alister et al. (2009).
not then deplete the inner life, or distract from it, but enriched and transformed it.

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