

Polymorphism and polycentrism in women's religious engagement

Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania, 1400–1900

Université Catholique de Louvain, 6 February 2026
Université du Québec à Montréal, 17 February 2026

The study of women religious has seen in recent years the creation of several national and international collaborative structures, including H-WRBI, SEIFMAR, WRST, Congreso de Monacato Femenino, and HoFeAu. Two further initiatives, ISHWRA (International Scholars for the History of Women Religious Association) and *Sorores* (SORORES. Les religieuses non cloîtrées en Europe du Sud, Xlle-XVIIIe siècles) have now joined forces to organise an event that will bring scholars together to reflect on the study of women and religion in ways that transcend traditional, chronological, geographical, and social boundaries.

Following in the footsteps of Gabriella Zarri and her work on the 'third status', this renewed perspective will draw on multiple approaches—such as those of Eliana Magnani on early Christianity, Nancy van Deusen on seventeenth-century Lima, Alison Weber on the Spanish world, Haruko Nawata Ward on early modern Japan, as well as Angela Carbone, Elisa Novi Chavarria and Isabel Harvey on the Papal States and southern Italy—while maintaining a comprehensive framework for analysis, in order to map and highlight global trends in the history of these women.

These women will be examined from the perspective of the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania through the three thematic axes outlined below. As many of these global experiences are closely tied to colonising states, Europe will only be considered in relation to these non-European cases. The aim is to integrate these models of religious life into the cultural, religious, social and economic history of women religious and devout laywomen, who have often been sidelined in favour of cloistered nuns. These women contributed to the creation of myriad local Catholicisms, as theorised by Simon Ditchfield.

This conference is intended as an opportunity to examine the manifestations of religiosity of women who were not fully considered by the Catholic Church as members of its body, such as *beatas*, consecrated virgins, beguines, *bizzoche*, penitents, tertiaries, *puellae*, as well as sisters of religious congregations, from 1400 to 1900. The long chronological period considered will highlight continuities and ruptures beyond the confessional age. The main objective is to look, on a global scale, at women who were engaged in models of religious life that have been under-researched due to the ambiguity of their status and their presence on the margins of monastic institutions, or because of the scarcity of sources. Building on the methodological framework developed by the *Sorores* project, the focus will be on women living in structured and regulated communities, outside cloisters, or those living religious life more informally but perceived as religious by themselves, the societies around them or the clergy regulating them. Moreover, we will question this very model of female religious life, considering experiences situated in the liminal space of Catholicity.

The conference will focus on three themes:

Axis 1: The relationship with the Church

This theme will explore the ways in which these women saw themselves as belonging to the Church and, on that basis, defined their practices. It will explore the work carried out on religious norms (e.g. Tridentine), as well as the adaptation of models of religious life, the development of a spirituality by women (whether orthodox or not) and questions of governance.

1. Spirituality, identity and self-definition of religious women
2. Functioning and life of communities
3. Institutions and ecclesiastical authority (spiritual direction, etc)

Axis 2: The relationship to society

These women were part of cultural contexts from which they were not isolated: we will consider the performative dimension of their belonging to urban communities, for example. This theme will allow reflection on the cultural, social and economic practices in the interactions between devout laywomen and missionized, civil authorities, etc. How to understand their interactions with lay people who are partners, benefactors and/or the object of their apostolic action? How did these women support and collaborate with lay people? Which collective and individual objectives stand out?

1. Social aspects and cultural representations
2. Economic links
3. Networks and relations with the laity

Axis 3: Relationships with the world

Exploring different geographical locations will enable us to reflect on cultural interactions and the degree of fluidity in the exchange of individuals, material objects (e.g. relics, manuscripts, images, books, statues, masks, etc.) and knowledge. How were these connections made between different parts of the world, often in a missionary context? How can we think about the mediating role played by women on mission, or by indigenous women integrating these communities and working with missionaries?

1. Circulation of individuals
2. Circulation of material objects
3. Circulation of knowledge

Keynote

S. Karly Kehoe (Saint Mary's University, Canada) is the Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Communities and her research explores religion, migration, and minority identities in the north Atlantic. She will lecture on '*Living Faith in Colonial Realities: Women and Religious Observance at the Atlantic Fringe, 1713–1830*'.

Practical details

English will be the primary language of this hybrid conference, but proposals in French, Spanish and Italian are also welcome. The deadline for submission is 30 September 2025. Proposals of 300 words, accompanied by a short biography, should be sent to sarah.barthelemy@uclouvain.be, isabel.harvey@uclouvain.be and perezm.liliana@gmail.com. Responses will be sent by 20 October 2025.

A limited number of mobility grants will be offered.

Date and venue

Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium), 6 February 2026

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Organising committee

Sarah Barthélemy (UCLouvain Saint-Louis)

Philippe Desmette (UCLouvain Saint-Louis)

Isabel Harvey (UCLouvain / UQAM)

Silvia Mostaccio (UCLouvain)

Liliana Pérez Miguel (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú)

Scientific committee

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Gemma Betros (Australian National University)

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Sergi Sancho Fibla (Université de Clermont-Ferrand)