

Theatricality and Imaging Religious Ceremonies (Ghent, 15–17 May 2024)

Ghent University, May 15–17, 2024

Deadline: Oct 2, 2023

Steff Nellis

International Conference “Performing theatricality and imaging religious ceremonies in early modern Western Europe”

2023 marks the 300th anniversary of the publication of the early eighteenth-century book series “Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde”, a work on all the world’s religions known to Europe at that time and originally published in seven volumes between 1723 and 1737 in Amsterdam. Edited by the exiled French Huguenot Jean Frederic Bernard, the original seven volumes of the *Cérémonies* knew a vast distribution across European readers in the Netherlands, France, England, and the Holy Roman Empire, among other countries. Its popularity was at least partly due to the impressive set of prints included within the books. After all, the engravings were for the most part manufactured by the exiled Parisian artist, Bernard Picart, who was known as one of Europe’s most distinguished engravers at that time.

More than ten years after the publication of some pioneering studies on the project – *Religionsbilder der frühen Aufklärung* (2006), *The Book That Changed Europe* (2010) and *The First Global Vision of Religion* (2010) – the intriguing ceremonies and customs of the various religions depicted in the books still capture the imagination. This is not only caused by their ingenuity regarding the comparative method of inquiry into religion in general, as earlier research widely acknowledged, but also because of their importance as an early modern compendium of imaging religious ceremonies. After all, as the title already indicates, the *Cérémonies* discusses global religious ceremonies and customs. It focusses on performing religion, instead of on religion as such. In line with Picart and Bernard’s project, this conference aims to focus on the ways in which early modern Europeans related to religious ceremonies of all kinds, ranging from customs that were familiar to Western Europe’s everyday religious life, to rituals from peoples across the globe that were still rather alien to early modern Europeans.

Largely initiated by a turbulent period of the Reformation and Europe’s imperialist drive, the early modern period witnessed a great growth in religious diversity. Europeans thus encountered a growing number of different religious movements. Hence, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a proliferation of treatises that discussed all kinds of European forms of religious worship, as well as an abundance of travelogues and reports by colonial settlers that narrated on the religious practices of ‘overseas peoples’ in Africa, Asia, and the Americas on the other hand. The social pursuit of knowledge during these previous ages, characteristic of the Enlightenment period, eventually led to the rise of early ethnography and anthropology. In the 18th century,

various studies on religious worship around the world of, among others, Nicolas de Nicolay (1567), Theodore de Bry (1590), Thomas Coryate (1611), John Smith (1624), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1708) grew into general, ethnographic studies of religion as a social and anthropological construct (e.g. Charles de Brosses (1760); Octavien de Guasco (1768)).

The *Cérémonies* operates as an important intermediary between the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises on religious cults and the subsequent ethnographic and anthropological studies on religion of the eighteenth century. As Picart and Bernard's focus is entirely on the ways in which ceremonies and customs are performed within the various religions of the world, they simultaneously attribute a high degree of theatricality as well as a certain performativity to religion. By focusing on the explicit, outward dimension of devotion that is expressed through the performance of standardized religious ceremonies and rituals, they utter a profound critique on the 'manufacturability' of religion. The inherent theatricality and artificiality of religious rites, however, had been the focus of attention throughout the previous centuries, both among Protestant critics that denounced ceremonial splendor, as well as among Catholic clerics who drew up and canonized the laws and restrictions regarding devotional practices. Consider the anti-clerical Protestant tracts of, for example, William Prynne (1632), or the structured religious regulations for performing Catholic worship of Jean-Jacques Olier (1656), Claude-François Ménestrier and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, among others (1689).

The focus in the *Cérémonies* oscillates between a striving for an encyclopedic approach of the world's various religious ceremonies and an ideological critique of the theatricality of religious devotion. Besides the general scholarly intentions and the ideological objectives, economic interest played an increasingly significant part in the studying of religion too. Ethnographic and anthropological depictions of religious ceremonies sold; it seems. As the early eighteenth century saw a proliferation of knowledge production, not least in the field of religion, these types of knowledge became commodities that could be traded, sold, and marketed, and were part of the evolving book industry. The *Cérémonies* knew a deliberate marketing campaign too, as Bernard heavily relied on Picart's fame as a popular engraver to set up his project. Through engravers like Picart, Inger Leemans (2010) argues, the European Enlightenment learned to sell itself not only intellectually but also commercially. Correspondingly, not long after the publication of the first French volumes of the *Cérémonies*, translations in English, Dutch, and German spread across Europe, not least by virtue of Picart's artisanship.

In a reference to the British anthropologists Alfred Gell, Paola Von Wyss-Giacosa (2019) stresses that Picart's illustrations must be considered a 'source of, and target for, social agency'. His imaging of religious ceremonies offered a thought-provoking challenge to the public's conception of religion; to compare, to ponder, and to raise doubts. Correspondingly, this conference aims to bring together researchers from a wide variety of fields to discuss the ways in which early modernity related to performing religious ceremonies and customs across the globe, either in text, print, on stage, or in any other imaginable way. How did early modern Europeans perceive religious rituals practiced in other parts of the world, particularly those in overseas territories? To what extent did early modern knowledge production on religious customs contribute to the development of early anthropology and ethnography in the latter half of the eighteenth century? How did representations of religious rituals either endorse or challenge existing knowledge on various religious practices? In what ways did the early modern period witness a shift toward a more encyclopedic

approach to representing the ceremonies and customs of various religions, and how did this reflect broader intellectual trends of the Enlightenment era?

Ghent University's research groups, Studies in Performing Arts and Media (S:PAM) and Thalia kindly invite scholars from a wide variety of research areas that may include (but are not limited to) the following: religious studies, theology, cultural studies, literature, performance studies, history, art history, history of the book, history of science, anthropology, ethnography, or any other relevant field. Contributions should be in the format of approximately 25-minute presentations. Proposals might consider, but are not limited to:

- Performing arts and religious ceremonies
- Religious customs, rituals, and cults across the globe
- Religion and Enlightenment
- Early modern European ethnography and anthropology
- Cross-cultural and/or cross-religious encounters between (non-)Europeans
- Idolatry, fetishism, totemism, and exoticism
- Religious conflict and toleration
- Religious ceremonies in Reformation- and Counter Reformation- discourses
- Bernard Picart & Jean Frederic Bernard
- Sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century depictions of religious ceremonies
- Ceremonial splendor

To submit a proposal, send an abstract (250 words) and a brief biography to drs. Steff Nellis. All enquiries should be sent directly to Steff as well (steff.nellis@ugent.be).

Suggested reading:

- Gagné, R., Goldhill, S., & Lloyd, G. E. R. (2019). *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology*.
- Hunt, L., Jacob, M. C., & Mijnhardt, W. (2010a). *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World*. Harvard University Press.
- Hunt, L., Jacob, M. C., & Mijnhardt, W. W. (2010b). *Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion*. Getty Publications.
- Palacios, J. (2022). *Ceremonial Splendor: Performing Priesthood in Early Modern France*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Tarantino, G., & Von Wyss-Giacosa, P. (2021). *Through Your Eyes: Religious Alterity and the Early Modern Western Imagination*. Jerusalem Studies in Religion.
- Von Wyss-Giacosa, P. (2006). *Religionsbilder der frühen Aufklärung: Bernard Picarts Tafeln für die "Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde."*

Important dates:

Deadline for submissions: October 2, 2023

Notification of acceptance: November 3, 2023

Dates of the conference: May 15-17, 2024

Reference:

CFP: Theatricality and Imaging Religious Ceremonies (Ghent, 15-17 May 2024). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 7, 2023

(accessed Dec 18, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/39475>>.