

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 10 November 2019



Doctors and Stigmatics in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Podcast with **Gábor Klaniczay** (18 November 2019).

Interviewed by **Sidney Castillo**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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Sidney Castillo (SC): *Well, here we are again at the Religious Studies Project Podcast. It's the fifth and last day of the [EASR conference](#) 2019, in Tartu Estonia. And now I am here with [Gábor Klaniczay](#) from Central European University. Gábor – it's very nice to have you here.*

Gábor Klaniczay (GK): I'm pleased to be here, too. Thank you for interviewing me.

SC: *Thank you for joining us. Would you be so kind as to introduce yourself, please?*

GK: OK. So I'm a university professor at the Central European University in the department of Medieval Studies. I'm dealing mostly with medieval religious history, late medieval Christianity. That's my field of expertise. Within that, the problem of the cult of saints, popular religion, witchcraft, beliefs. And also another aspect of my research is, a little bit, to situate central European religious culture in the whole European or even broader context.

SC: *Excellent. Now your talk in the conference, at the EASR, has been about miraculous stigmata in the 19th and 20th century. Could you speak a little bit about that, please?*

GK: Yes, well that shows that I'm not only dealing with a medieval things! Actually, I'm also very much in favour of historians dealing with the results of neighbouring disciplines. And there is interdisciplinary research, where I'm actually dealing with history but also anthropology, religious studies, psychology. A lot of these things are necessary for understanding phenomena like miracles or

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stigmata or something – the relationship to the supernatural. There is also one other type of inter-disciplinarity which is not very much practised, and that is that medievalists should know the results of modernists and *vice-versa*. So, on the one hand, one says that history is, of course a long train of traditions and one should know about this. But everybody specialised in one's own age and says “Oh that's modern. That's no more my field of expertise.” And I think this is wrong – especially if one deals with phenomena which are basically very similar. So an individual's relationship to miracle and to the supernatural experience, that has something very common and it's not by chance that modern people are reaching back to the prophets or the Bible or ancient church fathers. So one cannot, of course, put an equality sign to the experiences. One has to know its historical context and one should not be anachronistic. On the other hand, religious history has to deal with the *longue durée*. So this is how I started to deal with medieval miracle belief and, within that, a special type of miracle: the stigmata. The stigmata which is a bodily miracle, the most famous initial miracle. Not the first one. But actually the start of the cult of stigmata was with [St Francis of Assisi](#), the thirteenth century saint – a major medieval saint and founder of the Franciscan order – who had a vision in 1227, and got stigmatised . . . at least this is what we got to know after his death in 1227. Actually it happened before his death – two years before his death, as his legend writer, [Thomas of Celano](#), says – during a vision where a seraph, a crucified man, appeared to him in the air, when he was in hermitage. And after this experience the result was that the wounds of stigmata, Christ's wounds, appeared on his body. And this was discovered after his death. Now this is stigmata. And many Franciscans maintain that this is the only unique example where a human being becomes like Christ. St Francis was venerated like another Christ, an *alter Christus*, and the stigmata were actually signs of his being so important and working as much for the redemption of humanity as Christ – or almost as much – in the middle ages (5:00). Now other saintly persons, or other religious persons, men and women – mostly women, by the way – were also claiming to have stigmata, like St Francis. And this was a very long-term history, which started in the middle ages. In the middle ages there was another very famous stigmatic woman, [Catherine of Siena](#), who belonged to the Dominican Order. And her stigmata appeared also during a vision, but did not appear visibly on her body because she wanted them to be invisible; not to pretend that she had that high honour. She wanted only the pain. She wanted the experience. And then there were up-to-the-present stigmatics. And my paper here was about 19th and 20th century stigmatics. And the topic that I was dealing with was actually how medical experts, physicians, related to this miracle.

SC: *Right.*

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GK: Because this miracle was very special, in the sense that the stigmatics have these wounds in their bodies, sometimes for year, sometimes for decades. These wounds bleed periodically. These wounds do not get infected. So this is very special type of bodily miracle. And the religious people – mostly Catholics, because this is a Catholic type miracle – are taking it as a very important proof for the existence of God: that such a God can work such wonders in the human body on earth, which cannot be explained rationally, by scientific or medical or other thought. And of course, doctors were challenged, and wanted to examine, and there was a lot of criticism and disbelief, and there were very interesting cases, debates. And I was presenting some of these cases.

SC: *That's really interesting. And I think you gave a very broad description of how stigmatics happen from the middle ages towards modernity. Just thinking about what [Michel de Certeau](#) said about how mystical phenomena corresponds to the social contexts – what is happening in those centuries – and particularly the 16th and 17th century were very prominent for many, many mystics. I don't about stigmata?*

GK: There were also stigmata. But some of these mystics have stigmata.

SC: *How can we understand the social contexts of the 19th/20th century to explain the stigmata?*

GK: Well, one very important social context is that the 19th and 20th centuries are centuries of secularisation. Also after the French Revolution, Napoleon for example, dissolved many religious orders. And there was- against the Enlightenment, and against the rational thinking which wanted to sort-of make the disenchantment of the world, as [Max Weber](#) said, happen – well, there was a re-enchantment. In the 19th century there was a Catholic revival. [Chateaubriand](#), the *Génie*, [The Genius of Christianity](#), and many other movements. And the church, and certain popes, were very strongly fighting against the separation of Church and state. And also there were certain social classes which were in support for that. In France there was a royalist movement. But also the churches' positions in Italy, for example, which was a place where many of these prophets and stigmatics came. . . . Italy was living, at that moment, the unification, or [Risorgimento](#) (10:00). And at the same time there were a lot of resistances of local vested interests of churches, and a lot of contrast also between Rome and the Vatican, and the southern region or northern region. So each time there was a conflict situation. And in some conflict situations the church had its own policies. And one of the policies was indeed to bring proofs for the existence of God, with very spectacular miracles. The most spectacular miracles were visions like [La Salette](#) in the 19th century- or [Lourdes](#). These were the appearances of the Virgin Mary – Marian miracles. But there were other miracles also related to the [Sacred Heart](#) the *Sacré Coeur*.

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And besides these visionaries there were these living saints, the stigmatics, who had new revelations. So one of the stigmatics, for example, that I was speaking about was living in Northern Germany. Now, Northern Germany was a place where already big contrasts were there between the Protestants and Catholics. Catholics were in the minority in Northern Germany, in Westphalia. But they were there. And now secularisation brought another thing in. So there was an Augustinian nun, called [Anna Katharina Emmerick](#), who had these bleeding wounds, these stigmata and also the crown of thorns. At least, she had the vision where Jesus was placing the crown of thorns on her head. And they were regularly bleeding, the place of the crown of thorns. And later, bleeding wounds also appeared on her hands and also a cross on the chest. And then a debate started. And this was an interesting case. Because it belonged to Prussia. Prussia was a secularised and Protestant monarchy with a lot of important scientists, among them medical scientists. And they formed a commission to examine these things. Some were saying, “Oh, this was just self-inflicted wounds.” Others said that the spiritual advisors were using her as a kind of medium, were telling her that her headache was actually from the crown of thorns, and were influencing her. And indeed that was a 19th century thing, this medium related to [Mesmer](#), and mesmerism, and [magnetism](#). Now all kinds of explanations came up, but at the same time there was also a very famous romantic poet, [Clemens Brentano](#), listening to her and writing down her visions as new revelations. And these visionaries were telling an alternative history of what happened to Jesus, and the Bible, or details. And the collected works of Clemens Brentano are the visions of Anna Katharina Emmerick. He didn't even . . . he couldn't even publish the whole thing during his life. He died and his brother continued to publish it. So, this is the social context and the role of religion in 19th century. And of course we can go on. Let me just switch to the end of the 19th century, to the 1870s. It was the moment of the [French commune](#), it was the [French and German War](#), the defeat of France. And in France and in Belgium there were a lot of prophets. So first prophesying the death of Napoleon III – he did indeed die! But such prophesies are not very difficult, to say that somebody will die at some point. But also they wanted to bring back, after the commune, monarchy to France. There was a candidate, [Chambord](#). So these were actually the questions. And there was a stigmatic called [Louise Lateau](#) in France, and also another stigmatic, Palma Mattarelli in Italy(15:00). And these stigmatics were also related to an Ecclesiastic kind of . . . There was an informal network within the Church, which still exists today, that there is the official Church and then there is a grassroots level contact among the charismatics, who are cultivating supernatural phenomena. Today it is [Medjugorje](#), and all these things. In the 19th century the stigmatics were there. And there were some doctors . . . there was a doctor that I was talking about. He was from Clermont-Ferrand. He was a royalist, a doctor, a professional, called Antoine Amber Gourbert. But he went to the stigmatics to

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explain that these phenomena are indeed unexplainable. And he, as a doctor, says, “I know about everything about dermatology, everything about all kinds of illnesses, speaking about it as a rational explanation. But it is wrong! These explanations are unfounded.” And actually, he was publishing books just to support the stigmatics. So that's the interesting thing. That besides the doctors who wanted to have doubts in the stigmatics, there was a group of believer doctors who wanted to defend the stigmatics with the argument that these phenomena are actually beyond our capacities of explanation. This is why it is coming from God. And it is true that many phenomena are impossible to explain. So today the TV shows X Files, for example. Today's supernatural beliefs are related to UFOs or other things. But the riddles of nature are indeed a good point where belief, and belief in the supernatural, starts. And stigmata is a long tradition, and this is also a riddle. So in many cases, in the first place, what I want to say is that these persons are truly religious persons. And persons who really concentrate on the suffering of Christ, and want to understand with great compassion the suffering of Christ. And even acting on So most of the stigmata appear in Holy Week, when Christ is . . . so before Easter. And on Holy Friday, mostly. And many of these stigmatics are acting out, on Holy Fridays, the crucifixion. So just like a mystery play. And their wounds start to bleed on Fridays. That's a very particular thing, just in memory of Christ. And at the same time, they think that they are suffering the same way as Christ for redeeming humanity from its sins. So helping humanity. So it is a kind-of psychological disposition which is also becoming a bodily disposition. So many things are psychosomatic, certainly. And in some cases it's clear that there is fraud in it, and they are . . . but in other cases it is difficult to say. And these persons are also having very sincere mystical texts and dimensions. So it's a very complicated thing. You mentioned Michel de Certeau, for example.

SC: *I was going to ask you about that, yes the [Loudun possessions](#).*

GK: Yes. Well there is a stigmata... not stigmata but actually Jeanne des Anges also had some wounds, which were actually stigmata from the devil. She was showing it in the royal court and it was there. She had also a very complicated personality. So Michel de Certeau could analyse that this is a very strange and very complex psychological phenomenon when one lives religious experience to that point.

SC: *He would say, “These eyes have seen. These hands have touched” . . .*

GK: Yes.

SC: *Kind-of providing a factual experience towards the stigmata (20:00). One of the things I wanted*

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to ask as well is . . . and you mentioned this in your presentation, that there was Catholic doctors that were giving confirmation that it was in fact a miraculous event and therefore it cannot be explained. But you also mentioned that there were Protestant doctors that were more incisive towards desecrating this phenomenon. So will you elaborate more on that divide within the same medical discourse: how this was different?

GK: Yes. Well basically, yes, as you said, it's not by chance that Protestant doctors One Protestant doctor was, for example, one of the critics of this 19th-century stigmatic, Louise Lateau. Louise Lateau, who lived in the second half of the 19th century in a small Belgian village, and got stigmata at the age of eighteen. And a big medical debate started. And while the Catholic doctors were describing her stigmata and then a very famous authority, [Rudolf Virchow](#) – from Germany, from Berlin, a Protestant doctor – was writing a long study, *Uber Wunder, On the Miracle*. And the Protestants were . . . they did not deny a miracle absolutely. But they denied this type of massive production of miracles that the Catholics have been relating to the saints and to the stigmatics. So they were more for a rational explanation of these phenomena, saying that if one does not have the explanation yet, one should not immediately say it is a miracle. But one can sort-of explore it further. So there was a Protestant discourse which was more rationalistic. But that does not mean that they were refusing miracles on the whole. So they were reaching back to [St Augustine](#), who also said that, actually, the small miracles are just to convince the disbelievers. But the only two big miracles are the creation of the world and the resurrection of Christ. And these are actually the big miracles. And the rest is just . . . it can be explained rationally, just as well. Also the Protestants . . . the 19th century polemics on miracles were a good field for continuing this debate. But actually the debate started already in [Luther](#)'s time. And the Protestantism refused a lot of the things in Catholic beliefs, among them the cult of the saints, and the cult of the relics, as something which they labelled superstition. And there was a long set of debates related to that. So one good authority who examined this in England, for example, was Keith Thomas, [Religion and the Decline of Magic](#). A big monograph, where he pointed out how Protestantism was kind-of refusing what they considered to be the magic of the medieval church, and wanted to bring in more rational arguments.

SC: *Excellent. Well we are almost out of time, but if you could give us some further remarks about your presentation, I think that will be a good way to wrap it up.*

GK: Yes. So I told many things already which were in my presentation. One thing I haven't mentioned yet, that I added, was the famous 20th century stigmatic [Padre Pio](#). Padre Pio, who was a Capuchin

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friar in South Italy, who was stigmatised in 1918. That was also a typical historical moment – a moment of the First World War, with a lot of horrible experiences that European people and Italians also went through (25:00). And the stigmata was also interestingly related to the South Italian situation and history. There were strong clashes between a triumphant Socialist movement and the Catholic Church. Padre Pio himself was also an interesting individual. He was an ailing person with a lot of illnesses. That's why he was exempt, he was drafted as a soldier but was exempt from military service because of his illnesses. And he became a friar in a very remote Capuchin convent in [San Giovanni Rotondo](#) – a place where a lot of miracles happened because it was just behind the [Monte Gargano](#) where the famous miracles of [Saint Michael](#) the archangel came. So Italy, in general, was very favourable to miracles. And the old places where miracles used to happen made it kind-of common knowledge that miracles *do* happen. And this is how the stigmata came out from Padre Pio. And the story itself is a very interesting story. Because from the point of view of medical debates, his stigmata were very debated. They were debated. Because a pharmacist denounced him, saying that he had some iodine tinctures to disinfect his wounds. And some doctors accused him that this was actually to perpetuate the wounds which could have happened out of illness or other reasons. Because, for stigmata, it's very important that the stigmata should happen by divine intervention, not by self-infliction. That can also have devotional background, but it is not a miracle. So stigmata should be miraculous. And then the debate started and there was a long inquisition, an examination of Padre Pio with all the witnesses and everything. And there was a very important Catholic person, a Franciscan friar, [Agostino Gemelli](#), who later was the founder of the Milan University, the Catholic University, and he was very . . . he had many doubts. He was also not only a Franciscan friar, but also a psychiatrist and a doctor. And he thought that Padre Pio was doing a fraud. But other supporters of Padre Pio were defending him. And there was a long, long debate. He was sentenced to isolation for ten years and also that he should not have – because he was also a pre-consecrated priest, Padre Pio – but he should not confess and give public sermons. He gave the public sermons with stigmatic hands, like Christ, so that was very impressive. But some others said that this is just a fraud. But then in the 1930s he was a pardoned. And then his cult was starting in his life. And actually, he lived with those stigmata for fifty years. And he had some very popular actions. He built a huge hospital in San Giovanni Rotondo, in a very, very background region, where he was really bringing a lot of good things to his surroundings. And he was later on very much venerated by some popes like Pope Giovanni, John Paul II – the Polish Pope, who was doing pilgrimage to him already, from Poland, from the 1940s. And when he became Pope, one of his aims was to canonise Padre Pio – which he did, actually. So he started the veneration of Padre Pio. And now, Padre Pio is the most popular saint. He is

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a kind-of saint of the people (30:00). And the notion was also that the people wanted him to become a saint, and the Church – the high priests – resisted for a while. But then they gave in, and now they have canonised him.

SC: *Now he is part of the institutionality.*

GK: Yes. But there are some others still have doubts. So in any case, he's one of the most remarkable saints of the twentieth century. And all his life course is related to 20th century Italian history. And there are very good books on him. There is one good Italian historian Sergio Luzzatto who wrote a wonderful [monograph](#) on him, where he's portrayed Padre Pio really as somebody who represents 20th century Italian history – with all its contradictions.

SC: *Very, very interesting. I think it's like all the mystical phenomena are related to society, in one way or the other.*

GK: Yes, certainly.

SC: *I think that's a very good take-away for our interview. We thank you once again, Professor Klaniczay, for being here on the Religious Studies Project and we hope you'll come here again, soon.*

GK: Yes OK. Thank you very much.

SC: *Thank you very much.*

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