

# Queer and Trans Informed History of Experiences

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Developments in the history of experience in recent years have shown its valuable potential for empowering members of underprivileged groups, contrary to fears of the opposite that were articulated in the 1990s.<sup>[1]</sup> Combining the latest theoretical formulations in the field with queer theoretical and trans studies perspectives, this article discusses the advantages of the history of experience in promoting inclusive research in history. To illustrate the central ideas, the article examines recent scholarship in the context of medieval and early modern Catholicism.

My starting point for the definition of experience and its use in historical analysis is the recent [three-level definition](#) of Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo. For them

experience encompasses: 1) ways of encountering the world; 2) the simultaneous relational, intersubjective making sense of those encounters, gathering them to form knowledge, and testing one's understanding of them against one's own and other people's existing explanations and 3) the influence of this sense-making or knowledge on the 'real' world and what people think there is to be encountered.<sup>[2]</sup>

The first level, experience as daily encounters of individual subjects, is the most familiar category in the existing, yet far from exhaustive, scholarship on historical queer and trans experiences. Often described as 'lived experience', it usually aims to investigate the norm-defying and practical in contrast to norm-adhering and theoretical or abstract phenomena. In the field of religious studies, which is my area of expertise and as such the context for my thinking about the history of experience, this framework is often called lived religion.<sup>[3]</sup> The approach fits well with the queer theoretical aim to deconstruct norms and capture phenomena challenging power structures, especially those related to sexuality.<sup>[4]</sup> For example, normative sources on Catholic doctrine proclaiming sexual acts between a person assigned male at birth and another assigned female at birth as the only 'natural' form of sexuality is contrasted with less dogmatic source material. The analyses, for example, of Karma Lochrie and Amy Hollywood focus on mystical writings and aim to disclose a more varied and nuanced 'lived' understanding of sexuality and gender, although the term lived religion has not been explicitly used.<sup>[5]</sup>

The most extensive work framed explicitly as queer lived religion and including an historical perspective is the volume *Queer Christianities: lived religion in transgressive forms* from 2015. One of the main aims of the volume is to deconstruct Christian normativity on the level of theory and theology by showing that Christianity 'has not only always had the potential to be queered, but has from the start been a site of radical queerness.'<sup>[6]</sup> Moona Kinnunen and I

put forward a similar argument about the innate queerness of the Christian tradition. In our recent article, we used the lived religion perspective to analyse Jesus' polymorphism in the Acts of John and in seventeenth-century Ursuline mysticism. Our conclusion was that the Christian tradition has consistently described Jesus as taking on a plethora of forms, such as that of a child and an adult, voice and light, male and a being beyond gender, making the central character of Christianity fundamentally queer.[\[7\]](#)

Following current discussions about the status of trans studies (also spelled trans\* studies) as independent from queer studies, I concentrate specifically on trans studies' contributions to lived religion.[\[8\]](#) Trans scholarship focuses on the diversity of gender, such as phenomena related to transgender, non-binary gender and intergender. The first volume on medieval religious history informed by trans studies came out in 2021. *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* offers a rich insight into ways of doing trans history.[\[9\]](#) It is also a perfect example of the lived religion approach, although the term is not explicitly used by the authors. The articles examine medieval hagiography with sensitivity to gender diversity, which, according to the stipulations of the Catholic Church and modern conceptions of medieval gender ideologies, should not have existed.

There is still more to queer and trans informed history of experiences than the lived religion approach. Looking at the two other levels of analysis mentioned at the beginning of this article, the deconstruction of cis and heteronormativity can be taken even further to show that lived experiences are more than mere chance stories or evidence of essentialist identities. Examining experiences as social processes that eventually create social structures in varying historical settings, continuities and discontinuities in patterns of diversity can be grasped. For this, the idea of cultural scripts is a useful tool. Cultural scripts are used across the disciplines of linguistics, sociology, and psychology and refer to culturally shared ideas about how to properly live a life. Scripts reflect norms, values, and the emotional repertoire of society and shape social interaction.[\[10\]](#) Sexual scripts are related, referring to socially accepted and anticipated sexual behaviour within a given social group.[\[11\]](#)

Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo have emphasized the need to understand cultural scripts in a nuanced way to suit historical research: scripts vary according to time and place, and sub-scripts exist within cultural spheres.[\[12\]](#) The universalizing discourse of the medieval and early modern Catholic church includes important sub-scripts that can be understood as queer and trans scripts. There are abundant narratives of saints expressing norm-defying sexual desire and gender nonconformity (considered from today's perspective), which were part of the everyday social structure of the lives of contemporaries. These queer and trans scripts offered guidance in constructing an understanding of sexuality and gender and permitted identification for queer and trans people of the past. Diversity was more than coincidental: it was scripted into medieval and early modern culture. The acknowledgement of a plurality of ways of being in the past offers important support for today's minorities in identity construction and empowerment. Thus, the exploration of historical queer and trans scripts that were formative of diverse communities of experience is useful for thinking about the future of inclusive historical research.

## Notes

[\[1\]](#) See especially Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical inquiry* 17 (1991): 773-97. I am indebted to Ida Korppineva for discussions and insightful comments on this

paper, especially on the relationship of trans studies and queer theory. I am also grateful for the encouraging feedback from the reviewers, which helped me sharpen my argument.

[2] Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo, 'Three Levels of Experience', in *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience* (2022).

[3] See Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, 'Introduction: Religion as Historical Experience,' in *Histories of Experience in the World of Lived Religion*, eds. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 2-10.

[4] For an introduction to queer and trans religious studies, see especially Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer religiosities: an introduction to queer and transgender studies in religion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). For an illuminating example of the use of queer theory in history, see Laura Doan, *Disturbing practices. History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[5] Among other works by the authors, see Karma Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies', *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, eds Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180–200; Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays. Mysticism, history, and the study of religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 149–62.

[6] Mark Larrimore, 'Introduction', *Queer Christianities: lived religion in transgressive forms*, eds Kathleen Talvacchia, Michael Pettinger and Mark Larrimore (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 2.

[7] Moona Kinnunen and Rose-Marie Peake, 'Queering Polymorphic Jesus in the Early Christian Acts of John and in Seventeenth-Century French Ursuline Lived Religion', *St.Sunniva*, 1 (2022): 6-25.

[8] Many trans scholars, especially in the US, claim that their approach requires a particular methodology, which is too easily eclipsed by queer theory's main focus on sexuality. See e.g., V. Varun Chaudhry, 'Centering the "Evil Twin": Rethinking Transgender in Queer Theory', *GLQ*, 25 (2019): 45–50; Cael M. Keegan, 'Getting Disciplined: What's Trans\* About Queer Studies Now?', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67 (2020): 384-97. In Finland, queer and trans historical studies are usually grouped under the umbrella term 'sateenkaarihistoria' ('rainbow history'). 'Sateenkaarihistoria' is a young field and does not have an official disciplinary status. The field of trans history is still to be developed in Finland.

[9] Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, eds, *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

[10] See e.g., Onno Boonstra, Hilde Bras and Marjet Derks, 'Historical Research on Cultural Life Scripts. An Exploration of Opportunities and Future Prospects', *Historical Social Research*, 39 (2014): 7-18.

[11] Michael W. Wiederman, 'Sexual Script Theory: Past, Present, Future', *Handbook of Sociology of Sexualities*, eds John DeLamater and Rebecca F. Plante (Cham: Springer, 2015), 7-22.

[12] Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, 'Introduction', 16.

- [Theory](#)
- ● [Lived Religion](#)
- ● [queer studies](#)
- ● [sexuality](#)