



Francesca E. S. Montemaggi, *Authenticity and Religion in a Pluralistic Age: A Simmelian Study of Christian Evangelicals and New Monastics*, London, Lexington Books, 2019, 215 pages

John McCole

Volume 25, numéro 1, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083825ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083825ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

McCole, J. (2021). Compte rendu de [Francesca E. S. Montemaggi, *Authenticity and Religion in a Pluralistic Age: A Simmelian Study of Christian Evangelicals and New Monastics*, London, Lexington Books, 2019, 215 pages]. *Simmel Studies*, 25(1), 150–154. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083825ar>

accepted conceptual tool in the discipline. Finally, Esteban Vernik reconstructs the paths of reception and circulation of Simmel's writings in Latin America and their recognised and potential relevance for grappling with core issues related to modernity, nation and memory from the local perspective.

While it is impossible to do full justice to the richness of these single contributions and their ensemble in this limited space, hopefully this brief sketch will convey a sense of the very high value and relevance of this Handbook and of the ongoing research and discussions on Simmel coalescing in it.

JOHN MCCOLE

Francesca E. S. Montemaggi, *Authenticity and Religion in a Pluralistic Age: A Simmelian Study of Christian Evangelicals and New Monastics*, London, Lexington Books, 2019, 215 pages.

Francesca Montemaggi has a bracingly broad ambition: to develop “an original concept of authenticity to better understand the transformation of Christian self-identity in pluralistic times” (x). Her study approaches this big issue by blending two more specific aims. The first is to explore contemporary Christian identity through case studies of the small groups that were the subjects of her fieldwork, primarily an unconventional “conservative evangelical church” (xi) in Wales, and more briefly several loosely self-described “new monastic” movement groups in Great Britain and North America. Her second aim is to employ Georg Simmel's theories of religiosity and relational identity to make sense of her subjects' self-understandings and practices and, at the same time, to provide the core of her own conception of authentic identity in general, and Christian authenticity in particular. The result is both a rich theoretical model for understanding authenticity in relational

terms and an argument that these groups are ultimately engaged in the project of living out a specifically Christian form of relational ethics.

Montemaggi conducted her primary fieldwork among the roughly two hundred congregants of the Bethlehem church, a small, loosely-structured group located in a medium-sized Welsh city. Bethlehem's members were originally motivated by their reaction against "traditional" churches, which they experienced as judgmental "holy huddles" that were too focused on drawing boundaries based on holding correct beliefs (60-3). Instead, as their originally informal groups developed into a loosely-structured free church, they devoted themselves to practicing a Christian ethos of acceptance of others, service, and non-judgmental hospitality; they see their activities as oriented to fostering "caring" relationships with others in the larger community who are in physical or emotional need. For them, being Christian is grounded in experience--"belief as experiential," as Montemaggi puts it--and, specifically, in caring relationships rather than doctrines: "the substance of being a Christian...is living in relationship with others and seeing oneself intimately connected with others" (69, 72). Consequentially, their physical church building is effectively a community center, and it looks like one (64). Montemaggi's fieldwork combined participant observation and unstructured interviews, including conversion narratives. She also deftly contrasts Bethlehem with better-known movements in contemporary Christianity, including the "new paradigm" churches that have evolved into megachurches (15-17, 99-100). Bethlehem's members may describe themselves as conservative and mainstream evangelical, but the acceptance of social pluralism in their relationship-building activities distinguishes them from conservative evangelical counterparts elsewhere (xvi).

By her own account, Montemaggi's dissertation research might be called fieldwork in search of a concept. She reports that she "ditched one theoretical concept after another before finding Simmel" and that even once she did, she had to find her own way

through the “maelstrom” of Simmel’s work and Simmel studies (32). She is modest about her account of Simmel, insisting that her goal in reconstructing his theory is to produce a workable model for her own purposes and not to strive for the rigor and nuance that would be expected in Simmel scholarship (37, 51). Here she undersells herself: Montemaggi’s understanding of Simmel is rich and sophisticated. She’s clearly informed by interpretations that have overcome the older view of a dichotomy between sociology and *Lebensphilosophie* in Simmel’s work to see them as part of a continuous project, perhaps most notably in Donald Levine’s interventions. Her reconstruction of Simmel’s theory focuses on three areas. The first is his writings on religion and religiosity, from which she distills three concepts: religiosity as a mode of consciousness rather than a set of doctrines; belief as “belief in,” or trust in the other; and the moment of self-surrender characteristic of religiosity (54, and Chapter 4 *passim*). The second is Simmel’s sociological account of the relational self in what is still sometimes called the middle period of his work, as well as in his writings on religion (Chapter 3). The third is Simmel’s mature philosophy of authenticity, as articulated in his *Lebensphilosophie* and culminating in his idea of the law of the individual (Chapter 5 *passim*). (It’s worth noting that, as far as this reviewer is aware, Simmel himself never used the term “authenticity” to describe the individual law, although it’s commonly done in Simmel studies). She also situates him within the philosophical literature on authenticity, in the process making a series of pointed observations about the merits of Simone de Beauvoir’s conception. In the core chapters of the book, Montemaggi follows her accounts of Simmel with elucidations of passages from her subjects’ narratives and, to some extent, her observations of their activities. As she puts it with admirable directness in the book’s preface, “Simmel gave me the language to understand the Christians I studied” (xi). The structure of the book—theory first, analysis of the fieldwork second—might create the impression that she was looking for a case to fit the theory; but in fact, the path of her inquiry was the reverse.

To be sure, Montemaggi is also explicit about her need to supplement Simmel in crucial ways. The first involves the indispensable role of tradition in her conception of Christian authenticity. This is less a matter of presenting her own view of Christian tradition than of theorizing her subjects' invocations of it. She insists that conceptualizing a specifically Christian form of relational authenticity requires attention to how they inscribe their understandings in Christian values; their "authenticity is not solely ethical" but involves "a cultural framework of reference" (101). However, her idea of tradition is not a fixed, static core but a changing, flexible cultural repertoire from which individuals select and adapt--"the construction and legitimation of tradition by individuals" (120). Here some of the simultaneously countercultural and conservative aspects of the Bethlehemites come into focus: rejecting both consumerist culture and individualism, they frame their self-understandings within the duty of obedience to God (104 and Chapter 6, *passim*).

Montemaggi's other major supplement to Simmel lies in her formulation and illustration of a relational ethics "with and without Simmel," as she puts it (139). Taking her point of departure from Simmel's observations on compassion in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, she argues that a specifically Christian form of authenticity involves a non-judgmental ethic of compassion based on acceptance of the other as a whole person (144-6). In effect, this relational ethic of compassion serves as the counterpart to Simmel's law of the individual, both in Montemaggi's theory and in the lives of her informants. On this point, Montemaggi's sociological account of her informants' ethic arguably also advances theological claims of her own.

Because Montemaggi intends to adapt Simmel's theories to her purposes, it is no criticism of her work to note some important points where she is in fact taking debatable positions on Simmel's ideas. With respect to the interdependence of form and the flux of life in Simmel's mature *Lebensphilosophie*, she clearly emphasizes fluidity. In her account, the authentic self is not only relational, it is

just its relationships and its intentional dedication to them. What's authentic in the Bethlehemites' pursuits is their full commitment to relationships--as they would put it, "Christianity is relationships" (137). In this vein, she explicitly downplays Simmel's language about the unity of the relational self, language that persists in *The View of Life*. "Simmel might long for unity and transcendence, but he ultimately rejects both," she argues (50). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, individuality plays little role in her account; there seems little room for the singularity and uniqueness of Simmel's authentic individual in Montemaggi's interpretation.

Montemaggi's valuable study combines insightful reflection on Simmel's conception of the authentic self with a striking contemporary case study. In the process, she also reminds us of the important role that Simmel's reflections on religion played in his thought. This unique conjunction makes her book important reading for anyone concerned with these issues.

GIULIANO COVETTI

Lucio Perucchi, *Su Simmel. Saggi di filosofia*, Udine, Gaspari, 2019, pp. 207.

Maybe not well known out of Italian Universities, Lucio Perucchi (1947) is undoubtedly one of the most relevant personalities involved in Georg Simmel's thought (his most important work is probably the Italian translation, together with Alessandro Cavalli, of *The Philosophy of Money*). His latest book shows a strong bond with the German philosopher and sociologist that has never weakened in years. As he writes in the preface, this work aims to make available some of his essays on Simmel which nowadays are not so easy to find. But it is not the only one. Perucchi strongly believes that what Simmel wrote (both philosophically and