



# bulletin

British Association for the Study of Religions



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# obituaries

## Leonard Norman Primiano

11 January 1957 - 25 July 2021



*Leonard Primiano, Cabrini College, 1995. Photograph courtesy of Dawnielle Marie Phil. This was the photograph Leonard himself chose to be displayed at his Funeral Mass at Daylesford Abbey on September 11, 2021.*

I first met Leonard in the summer of 1995, when we were both conducting research in Newfoundland, and it was whatever the academic equivalent of 'love at first sight' might be. Those few overlapping weeks in Newfoundland were both intellectually stimulating and utterly hilarious, and we were close friends from then on.

Of Italian and Polish heritage, Leonard Norman Primiano was born on 11 January 1957 in Philadelphia, a city he loved throughout his life. Leonard was awarded a BA in Religious Studies from the University of Pennsylvania (1978) and a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School (1980), and then returned to the University of Pennsylvania for both the MA in Folklore and Folklife (1982) and a dual doctorate in Religious Studies and Folklore and Folklife Studies (1993). His great mentor at University of Pennsylvania was the influential scholar of religious folklife, Don Yoder. In 1993 Leonard started lecturing at the Roman Catholic Cabrini University (originally Cabrini College) in Radnor, Pennsylvania, eventually serving as Department Chair and Professor of Religious Studies there until 2021. He also taught at Memorial University of Newfoundland and the University of Pennsylvania.

Instrumental in establishing the Folk Belief and Religious Folklife section of the American Folklore Society (of which he was an elected Fellow), and the Folklore and Religion Seminar of the American Academy of Religion, Leonard perceived the enormous potential in folklore studies and religious studies sharing methodological and disciplinary insights to better understand 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it' (1995: 44). Leonard was also exceptionally engaged in European scholarship; his involvement in the 2nd second symposium of the SIEF (International Society for Ethnology and Folklore) Commission of Folk Religion in Portugal (1996) led to significant European connections and friendships.



Leonard Primiano is probably best known in British religious studies circles for his 1995 article “Vernacular Religion and the Search For Method in Religious Folklife,” (*Western Folklore*, 54: 37-56) which brought about significant refocussing in both religious studies and folklore studies/ ethnology in relation to how we might describe, study, conceptualise and engage with the messy, complex and creative reality of the ways in which people do religion in their everyday lives. However, there was so much more to this remarkable man and his scholarly achievements than this one article, and he continued to write about vernacular religion almost until the end of his life. (A chapter by him will appear posthumously in *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authority, Expressing Beliefs*, a volume I am co-editing with Ülo Valk that will now be dedicated to Leonard.)

Leonard was a prolific author and authority in many fields. For his PhD dissertation Leonard wrote about the Philadelphia chapter of the gay and lesbian Roman Catholic organisation Dignity during the AIDS crisis, an experience which had a profound impact on how he conceptualised vernacular religion. He studied extensively the material culture of vernacular Catholicism, but also researched ‘Sister’ Ann Ameen, an independent evangelical Newfoundland religious folk artist and her vibrant, idiosyncratic rugs.

Leonard invariably prefaced any communication with ‘Peace!’, having worked closely and sensitively for decades with the racially mixed, Philadelphia-based community of Father Divine’s International Peace Mission Movement for whom this was a standard greeting. He not only wrote about the movement, its foodways and its material culture academically but co-produced with Will Luers The Father Divine Project, a documentary series of podcasts about Father Divine, Mother Divine, and the Peace Mission Movement, which constitutes an invaluable oral history resource.

These examples merely scratch the surface of a rich and varied body of work, some of which will be brought together in a collection entitled *Vernacular Religion: Collected Essays of Leonard Norman Primiano*, to be published by New York University Press in 2022, edited by a group of American Religion friends and scholars as a tribute to his significant contributions to religious and folklore studies.

Leonard’s passion for material culture was gargantuan, both personally and professionally. His home and office overflowed with artefacts and artwork. He developed and curated Cabrini’s Religious Folk, Popular, Liturgical Arts Collection from its inception in 2002 and, to his great satisfaction, coordinated in 2006 the acquisition of The Don Yoder Collection of Religious Folk Art. He curated a number of innovative exhibitions, including the travelling exhibition based on his personal collection of Italian ex-voto paintings, “Graces Received: Painted and Metal Ex-Votos from Italy” which was first exhibited in New York City and subsequently seen at various US venues before being displayed at Cabrini in 2014.

Leonard was a consummate communicator, both as a companion vivaciously discussing mutual interests, and as a deeply committed, demanding and effective lecturer; The Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Award (2014) was among his many accolades and awards. Following his death, numerous former students have written movingly of what a great influence and inspiration he was for them. For such a talented communicator, the diagnosis of, and surgery for, oesophageal cancer in 2006 seemed a particularly cruel blow, but with extraordinary resilience and determination he mastered the necessary technology, regained his confidence, and continued to research enthusiastically and lecture engagingly and authoritatively. Despite the initially odd effect of the electronic voice, his humour, personality and passion shone through.

In relation to conferences, seminars and invited lectures, Leonard was a tireless international traveller, invariably accompanied by astonishingly large quantities of luggage. Leonard’s lively, often amusing but always meticulously researched conference papers were ‘must sees’ for many, for example at the conferences of the American Folklore Society (AFS) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR), and SIEF Folk Religion (later renamed Ethnology of Religion) events. It is partly through such appear-

ances that many first encountered the concept of vernacular religion which has gained such traction internationally.

Folklore and Religious Studies have benefitted immensely from Leonard Primiano's innate curiosity, his articulation of vernacular religion (which is NOT a synonym for folk religion!), his detailed study of material religion, and his determination to celebrate individual religious creativity as an exemplar of agency that complements the dynamics involved in collective acts and manifestations of religiosity. Future studies in vernacular Catholicism and vernacular religion will be promoted by awards to be administered by the AFS Folk Belief and Religious Folklife Section established in his memory, and the completion by friends and colleagues of a number of publications Leonard was working on at the time of his death.

One of the best dressed men in academia, and passionately fond of orchestral music and opera, Leonard was witty and mischievous with a great sense of humour. He was unfailingly supportive and generous both with his time and his enormous, eclectic knowledge. Leonard had an immense gift for friendship and inspired huge affection across a considerable range of people, all of whom have benefitted significantly from knowing this delightful, brilliant and resilient man.

Marion Bowman



*Leonard Primiano at the Woodmont premises of Father Divine's International Peace Mission Movement, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Katie Reing.*