In 811, after several years of violent skirmishes with Danish pirates, a sick and weary Charlemagne asked, “are we really Christians?”[[1]](#footnote-1) Religious diversity was not a trait of the Carolingian world. Paganism diminished with every conquest, Muslim communities remained isolated near the Pyrenees, and Jewish populations lacked the privileges afforded to their Christian counterparts.[[2]](#footnote-2) Modern answers split on whether the word “religion” has any meaning at all. Religious studies scholars, like Jonathan Z. Smith, for example, claim that religion has no existence outside academic scholarship.[[3]](#footnote-3) Smith furthers that scholars engage in “imaginative acts of comparison and generalization” to create religion for academic purposes; in other words, it is little more than an analytical tool.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The task of this thesis, however, is not to theorize religion but to historicize Carolingian Christianity as it manifested in rural communities. Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean, in their expansive survey, *The Carolingian World*, synthesize a vast body of modern scholarship and source material in the most up-to-date survey of the age. Not unlike Smith’s suspicions about “religion,” Costembeys, Innes, and MacLean are wary of any detailed outline of a Carolingian faith. Within the empire, “there was not one Christianity, but many Christianities, not one Church, but many churches.” [[5]](#footnote-5) Emerging genres of religious writing, namely hagiography, stressed that belief was a matter of external practices rather than of internal mentality, where any sense of collectivity derived itself from the patterns of religious behavior adopted by a community.[[6]](#footnote-6) Such genres marked a disinterest in the precise *nature* of the divine, and instead a preference for revealing the *presence* of the divine in this world, and on the steps believers “might take to touch it, in both the here-and-now and the hereafter.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Through wars of conquest and conversion, an obsessive attention to *correctio*, and the proliferation of the Carolingian Church’s institutional profile – its buildings, its personnel, their organization – across the empire, the Carolingians formed an symbiosis of the secular and the ecclesiastical.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Historian Thomas F. X. Noble, drawing from the more “practical views” of Martin Marty’s six marks of religion, characterizes Carolingian Christianity as a distinct religious identity.[[9]](#footnote-9) He suggests, as a broad interpretive framework, that Carolingian religion was unifying, specifying, and sanctifying. Noble forwards a bolder claim than Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, arguing that the Carolingians gathered the “many Christianities” into one meaningful whole.[[10]](#footnote-10) A key dimension of Carolingian efforts at Christianization was that becoming Christian “meant discovering oneself the heir and beneficiary of and participant in a new history.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This vertical dimension of Carolingian religion, withs its emphasis on history and tradition, also manifested across social divisions. Religious life in the Carolingian world, argues Noble, was set in the royal and imperial court, where bishops contributed to plans for reform and renewal.[[12]](#footnote-12) These plans promoted the expansion of education and committed the Carolingians to a standard of rightness. Clerical and ruling elites demanded norms, specifying proper religious behavior almost anywhere one cared to look. Charlemagne standardized liturgical chants; scholars produced guidebooks for kings, priests, and laymen; Louis the Pious regulated the use of images in the church; and a circular letter disseminated by the court required more than sixty-one bishops to detail the practice of baptism.[[13]](#footnote-13) These attempts to establish a norm of rectitude were fundamental to the definitive Carolingian project: the creation of Christendom dependent on a collective program of religious teaching and reform.

A bridge between the near structural-functionalist religion of Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, and the exacting, unitive glue of Noble’s Carolingian Church, Mayke de Jong’s *The Penitential State* anchors the discussion around Emperor Louis the Pious’ public penance in 833. De Jong’s meticulous research contests the master-narrative of imperial decline that locates Louis’ action at Soissons as its cause. Instead, de Jong examines the practice of penance with reference to the entire political structure and ideology of Carolingian Francia; a form of power reliant on notions of sin and atonement, and drawing from the Carolingian vocabulary of *correctio, admonition,* and *correptio*. Surrounded by military and personal scandal, Louis “inaugurated a new wave of imperial confidence” by leading the way in penance, correction, and reconciliation with God.[[14]](#footnote-14) Public penance rendered Louis the minister of the kingdom and caretaker of the church: a divine authority that empowered all ecclesiastical and secular leaders. Religious ritual became the primary tactic to address conflict, crisis, and questions of loyalty.[[15]](#footnote-15) By involving every inhabitant of the empire in this atonement, Louis interlocked the political and religious worlds. It ordered the realm into a unique polity that fused religious rituals with public office, a penitential state organized by a need to combat the collective sins of the empire, “lest they incur God’s wrath.”[[16]](#footnote-16) A *populus christianus* emerges with Louis at its center, its membership determined by one’s relationship with the ruler, not bishops, abbots, or priests.[[17]](#footnote-17) But de Jong limits her analysis to elite dynamics: the influence of the patrimonial authority exercised by Carolingian kings, lords, and clergymen *on* kings, lords, and clergymen. Without extending the systemic parts of collective sin and atonement to the peasants, de Jong restricts Carolingian Christianity to a unifying, horizontal force among only the ruling orders of the *populus Christianus*.

Absent from these categories of Church and State, from the Frankish penitential machine propelled by the union of the secular and the ecclesiastical, is the subaltern. Rural cultivators, unfree dependents, and the force of gender do not inform the creation of a sanctified Carolingian identity as framed by the above scholarship. In *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, John H. Arnold pushes against the more structural-functionalist approach of Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, and shifts his study of medieval belief to the margins of society passed over by Nobles and de Jong. Arnold suggests that a history of belief and unbelief “must engage with those elements of faith that are less easily explicable and fit less happily with the core tenets of Christianity,” as thematic chapters provide a cursory overview of the development of the medieval Christian faith.[[18]](#footnote-18) The purpose of his proposal is twofold. One reason is that the periphery of faith may inform the way in which the center *assumed* it central position; another is that the margins may give insights into the beliefs, attitudes, and ideas of lay people.[[19]](#footnote-19) Medieval society normalized the supernatural as an omnipresent force. In the borderlands of sacred and secular power, like in the cases of saints and relics, marginalized lay people could instrumentalize the supernatural to wield power in their communities.[[20]](#footnote-20) Yet as Arnold points out, ecclesiastical authorities sought to police this behavior. Christian rituals of self-examination, such as confession, and of self-discipline, like fasting or abstinence, entwined ideas about selfhood and spirituality with ideas of the body.[[21]](#footnote-21) Discourses of orthodox and illicit belief informed not only the way medieval people regulated one another, but also their own behaviors and thought processes. Through the horizontal, disciplinary power of the social norm, Arnold concludes that the medieval religious community regulated body and mind to enable the formation of a specific Christian identity.

Drawing from the unitive force of Noble’s Carolingian Church, the penitential state of de Jong, and the subaltern focus of Arnold, this paper turns to Michel Foucault’s theories of power to identity the peasant within the religious networks set by the imperial elite. Between 1977 and 1978, in a series of lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault developed the theory of pastoral power. Pastoral power is the art of governing the collective faithful through a matrix of individualizing practices, namely penitence, self-examination, and confession.[[22]](#footnote-22) Ecclesiastical authorities, or the “pastorate” according to Foucault, exercise pastoral power in pursuit of their flock’s salvation. Central to this project is a Christian hermeneutics of the self: a verbal practice and struggle against the “interior Other,” or Satan and his temptations, much the same as the self-examination explored by Arnold. These struggles turn the soul into a visible object with a distinctive character and identity, malleable to external influences, and vulnerable to social norms.[[23]](#footnote-23) This interpretative model does not impose a straitjacket of abstraction but draws out the complex interactions between political authority, orthodox faith, and supernatural engagement. It is an analytical tool that illustrates how the ruling and clerical elites used religion to reorder the empire asthe church, and to specify Carolingian Christianity as a social bond and a source of individual identity. By locating selfhood within these processes, Foucault alerts the medieval historian to the means by which lay people navigated societal power relations.

Evidence of pastoral power relies on sources that emphasize the *ought* – sermons, hagiographies, penitentials – each, perhaps frustratingly, a normative prescription of emotional ideals. In the thoughtful *Emotion Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Barbara H. Rosenwein gives weight to the emotions conveyed in early medieval literature. In short, emotional communities are “groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions.”[[24]](#footnote-24) These communities share elements of the common, Foucauldian “discourse” as a set of shared vocabularies and modes of thought with a disciplining function, that exist in social and/or textual spaces. An emotional community consists of a constellation of emotion words specified to genre, period, and place that historians should not dismiss as mere *topoi*.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the latter half of the seventh century, for example, Rosenwein suggests a resurrection of passionate language obscured by the writings in the aftermath of the Neustrian conquest of Austrasia in 613. Collections of saints’ Lives, martyr texts, and visions surged with passions, the figures of these texts unabashed.[[26]](#footnote-26) Rosenwein’s outline of community through emotions is incomplete, due to both circumstance and application. The lack of primary materials reflecting the lower classes is a serious issue of medieval studies. Extant sources voice the feelings of the elite, and most often the clerical elite at that. But from the primary documents examined in this thesis, ranging from a vision written by a rural priest to the letters of archbishops, medieval authors imagined the emotions of the peasantry. In the *Annuals of Fulda*, chronicler describes the villagers of Kempten as driven to retribution accused thief by a communal fear for their souls. But no one knows how the villagers truly felt; and besides, the author of the *Annals* wrote from the perspective of the social tensions around the archbishopric of Mainz, its controversial political positions, and the broader of political crisis of 858, when King Louis the German invaded the kingdom of Charles the Bald.[[27]](#footnote-27) Even if the *Annals* is smear campaign, its narrative betrays a truth, mainly that in the Carolingian period it was possible to imagine peasants as guided by the passions of retributive emotions.

1. *Capitularia regum Francorum*, quoted in Thomas F. X. Noble, “Carolingian Religion,” *Church History* 84, no. 2 (2015): 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 288. Martin Marty’s six marks that define a system of beliefs and practices as being religious: an ultimate concern, interest in myth, emphasis on ceremony, a metaphysical view of life, behavioral adjustments, and socialization. See Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 293-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Noble, “Carolingian Reform,” 295-300. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814-840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. de Jong, *The Penitential State,* 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 97-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, 187-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 147-148, 168; Ben Golder, “Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 10 (2007), 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 150-159; Lauri Siisiäinen, “Foucault, Pastoral Power, and Optics,” *Critical Research on Religion* 3 (2015), 2-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, 174-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Matthew Innes and Charles West, “Saints and Demons in the Carolingian Countryside,” in *Kleine Welten: Ländliche Gesellschaften Im Karolingerreich*, ed. Thomas Kohl, Steffen Patzold, and Bernhard Zeller (Konstanz: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2019), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)