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# **Living Religion between Orthodox Christianity and New Age Spirituality in Greece: Gender and Power<sup>1</sup>**

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Religion in the modern world is supposed to have become “deprivatized” (Casanova, 1994). Individuals gradually let go of the churches, and ‘believe without belonging’ (Davie, 1994). When it comes to southern Europe and the northern Mediterranean, in particular, Christianity appears to be losing its authority and supposed exclusiveness, while new paths of practising religiosity, such as the ones that belong to the so-called ‘New Age movement’ (Heelas, 1996; Hanegraaf, 1996), claim a solid position within the southern European religious landscape. This paper aims to explore how practitioners of New Age spirituality in the capital of Greece, Athens, “live” (Ammerman, 2006; McGuire, 2008) and transform their ‘vernacular religion’ (Primiano, 1995; Bowman and Valk, 2012) through their everyday sensory engagement with the sacred and their negotiation of gender and power dynamics in the process. The practice of vernacular religiosity is approached ethnographically, by looking into people’s everyday practices

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of ‘ritual proximity’ (Klassen, 2005) between Orthodox Christian and New Age spiritual practices. It is argued that such proximity leads to the transcendence of religious boundaries, while pointing to the existence of a “new religious pluralism” (Berger, 2007, p. 19) in the context of contemporary Greek religiosity.

With only a few exceptions (Rountree, 2010 ; Fedele, 2012, 2013 ; Palmisano, 2010 ; Cornejo Valle, 2013 ; Pace, 2013; Roussou, 2017, 2018; Palmisano and Pannofino, 2017 ; Clot-Garrell, 2019), when it comes to countries of the northern Mediterranean such as Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy, studies have continued to reproduce the traditional stereotype that connects southern Europe to the single-faith, namely Christian, approach. The aim of this paper is to present a different image from the stereotype that Greece is a southern European country where (Orthodox) Christianity appears to prevail. It is argued, instead, that contemporary Greek religiosity is characterized by open religious horizons, where a creative amalgamation of Christianity and New Age spirituality takes place at the level of vernacular religious practice. Focusing ethnographically on one of the most important anthropological perspectives in the study of contemporary spirituality, that of gender and power (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008 ; Fedele and Knibbe, 2013 ; Aune, 2014), analytical attention is cast upon the everyday negotiations of gender and power dynamics in the practice of New Age spirituality.

The concept of “New Age” has been criticized by scholars in the past, being considered by many as problematic and as an umbrella term, without actually offering any analytical usefulness or clarification (see Sutcliffe and Bowman, 2000; Wood, 2007). As Sutcliffe and Gilhus (2013, p. 1) explain: “New Age” is among the most deputed of categories in the study of religion in terms of agreeing content and boundaries’. Recognizing the limitations of the concept, the definition that is closer to how New Age is approached in the present article, which best describes the practices I have studied, is the one given by Sutcliffe and Gilhus (2013, p. 3):

The expression “new age” has been used in the academy since the mid-1980s to describe a sometimes bewildering variety of “holistic” or “mind body spirit” phenomena, including astrology, tarot and other kinds of divination; practices of possession, channelling and medium ship; (...) body practices like yoga, tai chi and ch’i kung (...); and forms of healing positioned as either “alternative” or “complementary” to biomedical healthcare, from reiki to homeopathy.

Subsequently, New Age spirituality is perceived here as a phenomenon that involves “spiritualities of life” that rest on experience

(Heelas, 2006, p. 224) and leads to a ‘spiritual revolution’ (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Besides, as Woodhead (2011, p. 10) puts it, “New Age is distinguished by a much more practical and experiential emphasis”. Spirituality, therefore, is used in the analysis as synonymous to New Age, according to the definition offered above, and refers to the practices I ethnographically encountered that are non-denominational, non-institutional and individualized. Religion, on the other hand, is employed as synonymous to Orthodox Christianity, the institutionalized religion of Greece. Both (New Age) spirituality and (Orthodox Christian) religion are approached here from both an etic and an emic perspective: as categories applied on the analysis, which however are based predominantly on how my interlocutors have defined religion and spirituality during fieldwork.

What also needs to be clarified at this point is that religion and spirituality are not perceived as antithetical and that, at the level of vernacular practice, the tension that supposedly exists between them is blurred. Orthodox Christianity can be thought to entail spirituality and, equivalently, New Age spirituality can be treated as religion by its practitioners. As Woodhead (2011, p. 4) asserts, Christianity and spirituality have always shared a special relationship of “boundary-drawing and mutual repudiation, as well as borrowing, influence and overlap”. Respecting the ethnographic categories, however, as mentioned above, is crucial; and, while conscious of potential limitations that such choice may involve, approaching (Orthodox) religion and (New Age) spirituality as two separate categories, which overlap and amalgamate within vernacular practice, is useful to understand the contemporary Greek religiosity in a clearer manner. At the same time, the terms “vernacular religion”, “vernacular religiosity”, “lived religion”, “lived religiosity”, “living religion” and “religious landscape” refer more generally to the kind of religiosity produced through the creative amalgamation of religion and spirituality, and to the act of living religion and spirituality in an complementary way, through experiencing it in vernacular practice.

What follows is an anthropological re/presentation of how vernacular religiosity is lived in Greece between religion and spirituality. The data presented here come from my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Greek capital of Athens between 2013 and 2018. During these years, I spent four periods of intense fieldwork in Athens: first, between March and April 2013; secondly, between September 2014 and May 2015; thirdly, between January and February 2017; lastly, between October 2018 and June 2019. The methodology followed was traditional

qualitative research, through keeping an ethnographic diary, conducting structured and semi-structured interviews, having open and informal conversations and, perhaps most importantly, observing and participating thoroughly and actively in the everyday life my interlocutors. Out of the approximately fifty individuals<sup>2</sup> I interacted with at a level of closer ethnographic proximity, thirty five were women and fifteen were men, and almost all belonged to a lower middle or middle class<sup>3</sup> and were educated, with almost everyone holding a university degree. In terms of age, my interlocutors ranged from late twenties to mid-forties (thirty individuals) and from late forties to late sixties (twenty individuals). At the same time, I followed a self-reflexive and auto-ethnographic strategy, by participating – rather than simply observing – actively in both Christian and New Age practices that constituted a vigorous part of my interlocutors’ vernacular religiosity; through this research embodiment, I managed to understand the complicated and multiple ways in which religion and spirituality are intertwined in the everyday life of the individuals I encountered in the Greek capital at a much deeper level.

My interlocutors have demonstrated diverse attitudes towards contemporary Greek religiosity and its practice: there are those individuals who are Christian believers and typically reject New Age spirituality in the first instance, yet they, even subtly, engage with discourses that involve it. There are the interlocutors who reject Christianity and instead practise New Age spirituality enthusiastically, belong to New Age groups, but who, at times, also engage their Christian heritage into their discourse and practice; and there are those who

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<sup>2</sup> Fifty individuals might seem few to re/represent the current Greek religious landscape. Yet, these are some of the most knowledgeable and kin practitioners of the spiritual scene in Athens, which is still under development. My ethnographic strategy was to speak to as many New Age practitioners in the Greek capital as possible, in order to understand deeply the newly acquired role of New Age spirituality in Greek religiosity. By no means do I claim that I aim to offer here a generalized argument of the current situation in the Greek religio-spiritual context. Yet, after almost a decade of constant ethnographic observation, participation and thorough discussions with my interlocutors, the objective is to present here as much of a clear image of the contemporary Greek religiosity as I can, being always aware that all ethnographic information is filtered through the anthropologist.

<sup>3</sup> In her research, Altglas has observed that spirituality is class-based: ‘Yoga, meditation, shamanism, Sufism and Kabbalah are “domesticated” by the middle-class as resources to produce an emotionally and culturally competent self. This is what bricolage is all about’ (Altglas 2014, p. 323). In my own research, that link between middle class and practising spirituality did not constitute a means of negotiating a class identity; yet, given that most of my interlocutors belonged to a lower middle/middle class, a link between the two must be recognized.

intentionally amalgamate religion and spirituality, creating a pluralistic religiosity. The common link among the three ethnographic categories mentioned above is their significant contribution to a changing contemporary Greek religious landscape, by living their religion as New Age while entering a new age of personal and collective religiosity, empowering their gender identity in the process.

## **I. Living Religion in Greece: Towards a New Religious Pluralism**

According to Meredith McGuire (2008, p. 12), the term ‘lived religion’ is useful for ‘distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices’. Following McGuire, religion in the present paper is approached as ‘lived in a particular time and cultural setting’ (ibid.), in an attempt to analyse how religiosity is lived pluralistically in a vernacular Greek sociocultural setting. The objective is to demonstrate how vernacular religiosity and creativity go hand-in-hand and the role that gender and power plays, within a Greek religious landscape where spirituality has become an active part of vernacular religiosity in the public sphere (Aupers and Houtman 2006).

In the Greek sociocultural context, more specifically, Orthodox Christianity is still considered to be the institutionalized religion of the country, with strong ties to the Greek ethnic and sociocultural identity (Alivizatos, 1999; Hirschon, 2009; Roudometof and Makrides, 2010; Fokas, 2013). During the last decade, however, Orthodox Christianity has faced a challenge both at an official and unofficial level, due to two recent factors that have resulted in the transformation of the Greek socio-economic, political and cultural context. The first factor is related to austerity policies, which have affected Greece and most Mediterranean countries (Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos, 2017 ; Doxiadis and Placas, 2018). The second one is the continuous influx of migrants from different socio-religious backgrounds, which has resulted in a pluralization of the contemporary sociocultural and religious Greek landscape (Cabot, 2014; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris, 2018). These two factors have in turn affected the status of Greek Orthodox Christianity in various manners. Amidst the dangerous rise of extreme right-wing political parties within the context of the Greek crisis (Kirtsoglou, 2013), Orthodox Christian discourses have been utilized by those parties as a tool to create a neo-populist association between religious and ethnic Greek identity. As a consequence, a part of the Greek population has opted for adopting the

single-faith stereotype of Greek religiosity as exclusively Orthodox. In addition, the Orthodox Church has reclaimed its central position within Greek daily life more dynamically through the social welfare programs developed by the Greek Orthodox Church during the crisis (Molokotos-Liederman, 2016, p. 35-38). Concurrently, there is also a large part of the Greek population that has chosen willingly to distant itself from the imagined exclusivity of its Orthodox Christian roots and be more sensitive to multicultural and global influences; subsequently, it has turned to other forms of religious practice that may provide better spiritual support than the Orthodox Church within the context of crisis.

There is definitely a close link between Orthodox Christianity and globalization (Roudometof, 2014). Greek Orthodoxy has not remained unaffected by the current European and global shift towards novel pathways of sociocultural and spiritual diversity. Yet, albeit remaining the denominational religion of the country when it comes to institutional religious belonging, Orthodox Christianity is challenged these days by other spiritual traditions, leading to a religious pluralism in everyday practice. Of course, Greece has a long historical presence of religious pluralism, where a wide range of other-than-Christian Orthodox religions, including the Old Calendarists, Muslims, Roman Catholics, Jews, Evangelical Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses (Prodromou 2004, p. 477) co-exist. The present paper focuses on a particular form of 'new religious pluralism' (Berger, 2007, p. 19); a pluralism which, as Peter Berger (*ibid.*) argues, is the result of globalization, and which, following Berger's schema, is the direct result of exogenous globalized spiritual influences that belong to the New Age spiritual movement. As such, religious pluralism is examined here from the analytical prism of the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and New Age spirituality, under the particular prism of gender and power.

## **II. Living Religion, Living Gender: Pluralising Religiosity in Vernacular Practice**

The popularity of New Age spirituality has increased rapidly in present-day Greece during the last decade. Tarot centres, astrology and medium consultants, yoga centres, meditation retreats, alternative healing, esoteric shops, reiki healers, and fengshui establishments, among others, all claim their own space in the contemporary Greek religious landscape. New Age spirituality and the process of being amalgamated with Christian belief and practice are these days explicitly evident. As my long-term fieldwork has shown the residents in the Greek capital of

Athens who resort to New Age spiritual practices in order to address their spiritual as well as health and well-being necessities. From yoga, reiki and meditation to (neo) shamanism and practices based on religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Brazilian spiritism, Athenians do not lack options when it comes to choosing from a plethora of New Age spiritual practices that are on offer.

One of these individuals is Agape, a Greek woman in her early forties, who is an enthusiastic practitioner of spirituality and has tried the majority of New Age practices offered in Athens. As she has explained, spirituality is very important to her because it is directly linked to her personal and spiritual empowerment. In order to achieve such empowerment, she tries to do meditation several times a week and during that time she connects with Archangel Michael, who is her favourite Christian figure. Although she considers herself to be a spiritual and not a religious person – a common declaration among New Age practitioners –, Agape has told me that she believes in God, and often invokes Jesus, saints and angels in her prayers. On the other hand, she does not like to go to church liturgies, as she is passionately against the authoritative manner in which priests exercise religious authority and take advantage of their social and religious status.

Over the past ten years she has been involved with various spiritual groups and has acquired a vast experience when it comes to New Age spirituality. Agape has tried, among others, channelling spirits, reiki, yoga, angel healing, meditation, Buddhist massage and participation in spiritual healing retreats. In the course of her involvement in multiple activities of a New Age spiritual and therapeutic character, she developed a close relationship with a female spiritual leader, who possesses a strong position in the New Age scene of Athens, and who created a tight group of New Age practitioners around her to teach them of spirituality. The spiritual leader considered Agape as one of the students that were much closer to her; for that reason, she tried to isolate her from family and friends and oblige her to live with the rest of group members in a special community she had created around her, in order to teach her spiritually and, as Agape put it, “have me totally under her power”. One of the main reasons why Agape had joined this group was because it was female-dominated, and it was mostly women who held the power in the context of spiritual performance. For Agape, this was a way to, according to her own words:

[I] feel liberated from my patriarchal Christian roots, which I always felt treated women like subordinating objects, you know...like you don't have any saying in how to use your spirituality, it is just what the male

priest will tell you, and, despite believing, I wanted to feel that, as a woman, I can be empowered spiritually by myself, and be around a female spiritual leader who would not make use of her power in that way, be around other women, who would praise both female and male spirituality equally.

Agape did not feel well to blindly follow the authority of the spiritual leader, isolate herself socially from all her family and friends and only interact with the other members of the group. Despite being certain that she would be promoted by her spiritual healer to become a popular healer herself in the New Age spiritual context in Athens, she refused to do so due to the lack of egalitarianism in that particular healer's approach to spirituality. In her eyes, the spiritual leader attempted to manipulate her power status the same way an Orthodox priest manipulates his religious power, affecting negatively his religious devotees. In her words, "if I don't tolerate these little power games in church and religion and the priests and I have not set my foot on a church liturgy for that long, there is no way I will tolerate this in spirituality". These days, Agape still actively practises New Age spirituality in her own way, while continuing to pray to Jesus and Virgin Mary, occasionally lighting a candle at church – but still refuses to attend a church liturgy led by a male priest – and living religion in her own, egalitarian manner between Christianity and New Age.

Agape, as most of the women I met during fieldwork, are drawn to New Age spirituality because they believe it offers spiritual freedom outside the authoritative boundaries of the Orthodox Church. Yet, as it can be observed in Agape's story, being involved in New Age spirituality is not just about contesting religious authority. By refusing to surrender to any type of religious authority, whether it comes from an Orthodox priest or a New Age spiritual leader, the majority of my interlocutors who are actively involved with New Age practices live spirituality as religion, while negotiating the boundaries between religion and spirituality and the power fluidity that permeates contemporary Greek religiosity through these complex interactions in vernacular practice.

Stamatis is a Greek man in his fifties. He believes in the existence of a sacred power, but, as he has told me, 'I do not want to define it as God, Buddha or Krishna'. In his own words, he is a 'loose Christian': being born in Greece, with Christianity as the institutionalized religion, Stamatis recognizes Orthodoxy's influence in his perception and practice of vernacular religiosity. Yet, he considers himself to be open to both religion and spirituality and, for more than a decade now, he has actively brought New Age spirituality into his life. Although he has experienced a



variety of New Age practices, during the last year she has become a “student”, as he likes to call himself, of a female spiritual healer in Athens. There, he practices a creative mixture of spiritual techniques and alternative healing, which range from Chinese qi gong and Indian meditation to bioenergetic therapy and Brazilian spiritist healing. Through constructing a pluralistic space where religion and spirituality can creatively interact, Stamatis’ spiritual teacher allows him to approach his personal religiosity openly, without any boundaries between religion and spirituality. For that reason, he regards her as a powerful healer and teacher and recognizes her feminine spiritual and healing authority, as opposed to that of the male religious one of an Orthodox priest. As Stamatis explains:

Her authority is different compared to a priest; she doesn’t want to impose anything on us, we listen to her, go to her with our problems, and recognize her power, because she has the special spiritual gift of healing and that of leading us to a communication with the sacred on our own terms.

For most followers of New Age spirituality I met, one of the most important aspects in its practice is that they gain the opportunity to get in touch with the sacred in their everyday life. This sacred, according to what Stamatis, but also many other interlocutors have told me, is different from the Christian sacred: the religious sacred, through the act of praying to God, Jesus and the Virgin, for instance, appears to them as more distant and less tangible. This is primarily related to the fact that the male representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church claim exclusivity when it comes to entering in communication with the (Christian) sacred. On the other hand, the sacred my interlocutors experience through practising spirituality is much more perceptible and can be experienced and approached more directly, through individual embodiment; it is not an exclusive privilege of a patriarchal religious authority. Stamatis, for example, has mentioned how he frequently senses spirits, during his spiritual teacher’s healing performance and during meditation; these spirits make their presence felt on Stamatis’ body: he experiences chills, sometimes he sees light or the shape of the spirits’ auras, or he sees them as shadows in the room. Such extra-sensory perception has never occurred to him when praying to Christian saints or attending Orthodox liturgies; and he attributes the different experience he has not on his lack of belief in Orthodox Christianity – because he still believes and practises it occasionally – but on the egalitarian character of spirituality, which leads to a lack of strict dichotomizations between religion and spirituality

within its practice of spirituality, especially when it comes to how gender and power are approached and negotiated.

The case of Agape and Stamatis are two very characteristic ethnographic cases, which can serve as an indicator of how religious authority, represented in this framework by the Orthodox Christian Church and its priests, is contested through the performance of New Age spirituality. In the context of practising vernacular religiosity, the locus of power becomes more fluid, shifts position and is claimed by individuals during their everyday lived religiosity, not just by the Greek male priests. At the same time, however, authoritative behaviour is rejected in all its forms, whether it is encountered in the context of religion or spirituality. Whenever a spiritual leader or practitioner in general demonstrates an attention and intent to power-gain, his/her status is compromised and, in most cases, such behaviour is recognized, is compared to Orthodox Christian authoritative attitudes and subsequently condemned.

There is a generalized stereotype that follows New Age spirituality, according to which gender and power are interlinked in its practice in that it is mostly women who are involved in it. It is hence believed that, through such an involvement, female practitioners of vernacular religiosity, who engage New Age ideas and performances in their everyday lived religious practice, have the opportunity to gain social power and a dynamic social status. As has been demonstrated in recent works, feminist spirituality has gained ground in the last decades, and there appears to be a strong empirical and analytical connection between female identity and practices of contemporary spirituality (Eller, 1993; Herriot, 1997; Sointu and Woodhead, 2008; Aune, 2014; Fedele and Knibbe, 2013). The rising popularity of New Age spirituality among women has indeed resulted in female empowerment in the Greek sociocultural context. Many of the women I have spoken to during my ethnographic research have expressed the opinion that their status as spiritual practitioners has given them the opportunity to gain social and spiritual power and to challenge gender stereotypes. By practising both religion and spirituality in their own vernacular ways, without being controlled by the strict authority of the Orthodox Church and its priests, they go against the symbolic patriarchal figure of the Orthodox priest; they deconstruct the supposedly antithetical boundaries between religion and spirituality, and between male and female religious and spiritual power; they become spiritual leaders; they show that the communication with the sacred is not an exclusive privilege of the male priest, but can well be claimed by a female spiritual practitioner. Concurrently, they develop a critique against the patriarchy that they believe is directly

linked to religious authority<sup>4</sup>, expressing a “desire to move away from traditional roles ascribed to the feminine” (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008, p. 260), sometimes less intentionally, other times more consciously. At the same time, however, it is crucial to emphasize here the fact that it is not only women who practise New Age spirituality and criticize the patriarchal Orthodox Christian authority. As in the case of Stamatis described above, men also recognize the female spiritual power, while expressing their scepticism and explicit critique against the authoritative role of institutionalized religion.

What needs to be emphasized is that, through combining Christianity and New Age spirituality in vernacular religious practice, my interlocutors ultimately transform the locus of religious authority not only just through believing but mainly through experiencing and creating their own religio-spiritual itineraries. The shift of religious authority becomes more explicit, as individuals move away from their official religious belonging and towards new spiritual paths, where the practice of vernacular religiosity is a matter of choice and not of a sociocultural and/or institutional-based obligation. Through daily communication with the sacred by amalgamating Christian and New Age routes, it can be observed that there is a general tendency in contemporary Greek society for people to live their religion and spirituality creatively (Roussou, 2017). In doing so, they bodily experience, ritually act, and spiritually negotiate their social relationships and gender roles, ultimately transforming Greek religiosity by not hesitating to pluralize (their) religious identity in powerful ways.

In general terms, Christian symbolism is still part of many of my interlocutors’ lived religion, one way or another. They visit churches in order to connect with the sacred, they place angel figures, icons of saints or crosses to their homes and spaces of work, or they carry small Christian paraphernalia, such as mini figurines of the Virgin or other saints, to create a shield against other people’s negative energy. Some of my interlocutors attend Sunday mass or openly identify themselves as belonging to the Orthodox Christian religion. Most of them have not completely cut their bond with Christianity, but instead carry it along with them, willingly or implicitly, and amalgamate Christian discourses and objects with their practices of New Age spirituality. The contemporary Greek vernacular religiosity is changing; it is not about – or not just about – Orthodox Christianity any longer. It is, furthermore,

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<sup>4</sup> One main criticism against the Orthodox Christian Church is its exclusion of women from its hierarchical ranks. For a thorough discussion of the issue, see Sotiriou, 2004, 2010.

about a New Age of living religion (as spirituality), while and through negotiating (their) gender identity and gaining religious and spiritual power.

### **III. Concluding Remarks: The New Age of/in Greek Religiosity**

What I have tried to do in the present article is demonstrate that, in recent years, contemporary Greek religiosity, in particular, and society, in general, has been affected by a current European and global shift towards novel pathways of sociocultural and spiritual diversity. Christianity, albeit remaining the institutionalized religion of the country with regard to official religious belonging, is challenged by new forms of spirituality, which can be thought to belong to the so-called New Age movement and have begun to change the practice and perception of “lived religion”. Living religion in present-day Greece can denote an active search for the “sacred self” (Csordas, 1999), through opening up to a creative pluralism in everyday religious practice. Such openness is indicative of a change when it comes to contemporary Greek religiosity, where the latter is gradually becoming more individualized, while a criticism is expressed against the patriarchal character of Orthodox Christianity.

At the same time, and as far as my anthropological fieldwork has allowed me to observe, Greeks, even the ones who reject their Christian religious heritage and are avid practitioners of New Age spirituality, do not completely cut their bond with Orthodox Christianity. This, of course, should not come as a surprise for, as Davie (2002, p. 8) has already observed, “many Europeans have ceased to connect with their religious institutions in any active sense, but they have not abandoned, so far, either their deep-seated religious aspirations or a latent sense of belonging”. What is crucial to note is how, even within practices that are considered to be embedded in a denominational religious context, people have begun to re-adjust and re-adapt themselves in relation to how they negotiate their religious identity and how they live their religion. These re-adaptations and the more individualized spiritual paths that Greeks follow play these days the role of a new lived religion, which escapes denominational restrictions, while encouraging the transcendence of rigid religious boundaries and the creative negotiations of religious and spiritual belonging.

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## Pratiques des gens ordinaires : la vie quotidienne à travers quelques entrées thématiques

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