In Bed with God: Sleep and Piety in Early Modern England

In *A Treatise concerning Meditation* (1657), the Puritan preacher Thomas Watson felt the need to warn believers not to interpret scriptural instructions such as “thou shalt meditate therein day and night” (Joshua 1:8) too literally. He explained that this didn’t mean sleepless nights but that one should simply try to meditate on the Word of God as much as possible in the time allowed by one’s work and family duties. This seemed a necessary reminder since the Protestant faith encouraged an intensive schedule of regular and frequent private devotional duties which did not end at sunset. Devotional practice such as morning and evening prayers framed the believer’s night but it was fairly common to extend private worship to the nighttime. The early modern believer’s effort to reduce the night period to a very limited amount of hours and the emphasis on the night as a time of spiritual laziness and danger brought about a complex relationship to sleep and concerns about how to safeguard one’s soul during the night. Sleep dulled the senses and made believers less receptive to God’s grace and more vulnerable to the Devil’s temptations. While there have been extensive studies on demonic possession in the early modern period, the night as an opportunity to perform one’s devotional duties has often been overlooked. Prayers, meditations and devotional reading before bedtime were thought to protect one’s soul through the night and spiritual diaries served to purge one’s conscience from the day’s sins. The frequent narrative framing of day and night in devotional writing helped exert control over the chaos of the night and the spiritual dangers of inactivity. This paper will explore how a variety of devotional practices helped rewrite the night as a productive and intimate moment with God.

**Bio:** Emma Bartel is a Phd student at Sorbonne Université. Her dissertation is on women’s interpretive engagement with the art of meditation in seventeenth-century England.