

The Spirit & the Flesh. Transregional Perspectives on Religion, Race, and Gender in History

Veranstalter: Bruce Dorsey, Swarthmore College/Erfurt University; Felix Krämer, University of Muenster; Jürgen Martschukat, Erfurt University

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On 18th and 19th of June the international conference „The Spirit & the Flesh: Transregional Perspectives on Religion, Race, and Gender in History“ took place in Erfurt. The conference was coordinated by Bruce Dorsey (Swarthmore College/Erfurt University), Felix Krämer (University of Muenster) and Jürgen Martschukat (Erfurt University). Besides Erfurt University (and its platform Weltregionen und Interaktionen. Area Studies Transregional) and the Cluster of Excellence „Religion and Politics“ at the University of Muenster, this conference was made possible through the support of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

At a time of wide discussion on secularism and/or „the return of religions“, this conference set the goal of exploring the relations and entanglement between the religious and the secular – the spirit and the flesh in history. The focus of the conference was transregional. The interdependencies of the categories of religion, race, gender and also sexuality and their political significance in different regions of the world were subjected to comparative analysis.

The first session focussed on religious practices. JULIA KOCH (University of Muenster) presented her paper on Gujarati Muslims both in Gujarat in India and in South African exile. Employing the notions of transnationalism and transnational networks, Koch followed the migration route of young male Muslims, in particular, in search of a better economic situation and looked at how, in performing their Muslim identities, the notions of religion and race are intertwined.

PHILIPP DORESTAL (Erfurt University) also accentuated the performance of religious

and racial identities when he explored the use of style politics in the „Nation of Islam“ in the USA in the 1960s. He showed that a change in the perception of blackness, race, civilisation and sexuality in this African American religious organisation was enacted in a changing discourse on hairstyle and attire.

In his commentary, JAMES GILBERT (University of Maryland) stressed the connections of the two papers by pointing to the use of Islam as a marker of identity by these two very different minority groups. How is Islam – and the notion of Islamic purity – put to use in these formations of identity? In the discussion of style politics especially, it became clear that markers of identity are thought of as authentic at the same time as they are performed and/or adopted.

The conference's first keynote speech was held by BRUCE DORSEY on the dynamic relationship of sexuality and religion, exemplified in the case of the Transatlantic Evangelical Awakening. Arguing against their separate treatment in the writing of history, Dorsey showed that these two concepts are closely intertwined both in their visionary and in their linguistic presentation. In analysing the discussions and the court trial concerning the impregnation and murder of a female factory worker by a clergyman and related sex scandals, he demonstrated how important storytelling and gossip were for society in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

With politics as its main topic, the second session was opened by MARTHA S. JONES' (University of Michigan) presentation on race and the rights of churchwomen in the nineteenth-century USA. Although fighting for the same set of rights, including the license to preach, to vote and hold office in church assemblies and to control fundraising activities, black and white churchwomen appeared to be rather divided by lines of race and denomination than joined in their shared efforts – even though they did meet and know each other.

SHARON ULLMAN (Bryn Mawr College) told the story of the concept of „brainwashing“ in the United States in the 1950s. In the public debate on whether or not prisoners of war in China and North Korea were being brainwashed, religious Christians played an

important role and gained authority.

The third and last paper of this session was presented by FELIX KRÄMER. Also focusing on the United States, Krämer explored the body politics of the 1960s to 1980s. Tracing the connections between the different rights movements of the 1960s and the appearance of the „New Christian Right“ in the 1970s, he discussed the role of gender and especially the ideal of a white heterosexual middle class masculinity. His thesis was that the religious right employed a dispositive of hegemonic masculinity that was staged in a crisis by the mid-seventies and was shaped implicitly already in the discourse about the women's, black and homosexual movements.

In her commentary MARTHA HODES (New York University/Jena University) drew attention to the connections that historians can make that might not be visible to the actors being discussed. She also raised the question of a feeling of competition for rights and power between the different actors.

The third and last session of the conference was dedicated to the subject of mission. FELICITY JENSZ (University of Muenster) used the lives of two women from Moravian missionary circles – one British, one Aboriginal in origin – in nineteenth-century Australia to show how insurmountable race lines remained, regardless of similarities in education and denomination. She revealed the inconsistency in the European so-called „civilising mission“ – the object of this mission would always remain an inferior „other“, no matter how much s/he adapted to European lifestyles and values.

VANESSA KÜNNEMANN (University of Hannover) discussed the role of American female missionaries in China in the nineteenth century and how it is reflected and/or distorted in the writings of the missionary's daughter Pearl S. Buck. Presenting female missionaries as submissive and suffering and their male counterparts in binary opposition as active is an oversimplification. Instead, female missionaries did find ways of displaying power. Buck, though criticising missions especially for their victimisation of female missionaries, acted as a „liberal missionary“ herself.

In his commentary THORALF KLEIN (Er-

furt University) pointed to the contradiction between missionary discourse and practice which becomes obvious when working with missionary sources. Even when all people – regardless of race – might be imagined as one in the face of God in missionary discourse, in practice missionaries were drawing very strict lines that the colonised could never cross.

The final talk of the conference was delivered by JUDITH WEISENFELD (Princeton University). In analysing twentieth-century American film, she demonstrated how African American religious and racial identity was constructed but also contested. Her focus lay especially on the conflicts between mostly white Hollywood filmmakers and African American artists about how to represent African American religious activity. Using *Hal-lelujah* (King Vidor, 1929) and *The green pastures* (Marc Connelly and William Keighley, 1936) as examples, Weisenfeld showed that a representation of black religion as connected to sexuality or of African Americans as child-like are two very influential images that were transported. Black artists like Hall Johnson, Eva Jessye and Langston Hughes tried to counter these representations in their own work because they recognised their potential to limit political and social futures for African Americans. These popular films appear to be the only opportunity that many white Americans had to come into contact with African American religious practice. Therefore their significance for shaping the images of this topic cannot be overstated.

Overall the conference gave many examples of, and therefore many insights into the interdependencies of the categories of religion, race, gender, and also sexuality and education. It has to be concluded that religion appears to be of much greater importance for understanding historical and political processes than is often assumed. The transregional perspective, which may not have been present within every single paper but was always employed in the discussions, was very helpful both for contextualising national histories within a broader framework and for looking beyond these in the first place. A follow up conference could try to take more regions of the world into account which were not at the centre of attention this time.

Conference Overview:

Session 1: Religious Practices

Chair: Nora Kreuzenbeck, Erfurt University

Julia Koch, University of Muenster:
Gujarati-Muslims in India and South Africa.
Performing Muslim Identities in the Indian Ocean

Philipp Dorestal, Erfurt University:

An Orgy of Self-Destroying Mimicry: The Nation of Islam and Style Politics in the USA of the 1960s

James Gilbert, University of Maryland: Commentary

Keynote Speech

Chair: Jürgen Martschukat, Erfurt University

Bruce Dorsey, Swarthmore College/Erfurt University:

Religion, Sex, and Murder: Revivals and Scandals during the Atlantic Evangelical Awakening

Session 2: Politics

Chair: Silvan Niedermeier, Erfurt University

Martha S. Jones, University of Michigan:
Overthrowing the 'Monopoly of the Pulpit':
Race and the Rights of Churchwomen in Nineteenth Century America

Sharon Ullman, Bryn Mawr College:
'Hour of Power' in a Time of Fear: Evangelicals and the Brainwashing Debate in Early 1950s America

Felix Krämer, University of Muenster:

„Take the Helm“: Evangelicals on the Move within a Socio-Cultural Gender Order in the United States of the 1970s

Martha Hodes, New York University/Jena University: Commentary

Session 3: Mission

Chair: Melanie Henne, Erfurt University

Felicity Jensz, University of Muenster:

Broaching the Divide: Nineteenth Century Women Missionaries and Indigenous Women, an Australian Case Study

Vanessa Künnemann, Hannover University:
Between Victimization and Self-Empowerment: Pearl S. Buck and the Role of American Female Missionaries in China

Thoralf Klein, Erfurt University: Commentary

Final Talk

Chair: Olaf Stieglitz, University of Cologne

Judith Weisenfeld, Princeton University:

„The Secret at the Root“: Constructing and Contesting African American Religious and Racial Identity in Early 20th Century American Film

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