Giving credit to both the motto of the 2016 German Historians’ Convention, Glaubensfragen (‘religious matters’), and the convention’s guest country, India, the conference section „Transcending Boundaries. The Religious, the Secular, and Negotiations of Cultural Hierarchies in Turn-of-the Century Counter-Cultural Contexts between Europe, Asia, and Africa“ set out to discuss the influential but often criticized concept of ‘secularization’ through an examination of various transcultural movements and initiatives, all of them related to some extent to South Asia. For long, historiography maintained rather unchallenged narratives of a strong and linear connection between the two laden concepts of ‘secularization’ and ‘modernization’. Only since the 1990s scholars have started to question this understanding. Following these newer critical perspectives and highlighting entanglements and exchanges of persons and thoughts between various parts of the world, the individual contributions of the panel problematized prevalent and often Eurocentric notions of ‘modernity’ and the place of ‘religion’ therein.

JULIA HAUSER (Kassel), who is currently writing an entangled history of vegetarianism, presented the first paper of the section. Her presentation focused on three vegetarian associations in colonial India, examining vegetarianism as a contact zone and opportunity of cooperation for diverse actors with diverse aims and intentions. Although concepts of meat-less living had been present in Europe and India for a long time, Hauser stressed that it was in the nineteenth century that ‘vegetarianism’ in Europe became a distinct term as well as an organized movement. In India, too, vegetarianism assumed new connotations during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, discourses in Europe and in India became increasingly entangled.

As Hauser noted, there was among the various associations present in British India a common ambivalent attitude toward animal welfare and the status of the animal in relation to the human. Even while most embraced animal welfare as one of their aims, one of the rhetoric tools frequently used when arguing for the superiority of a vegetarian lifestyle was the ‘animalizing’ of non-vegetarians, thus apparently degrading them both morally and physically. Equally important in the arguments of the various associations, regardless of their sometimes diverging objectives and motives, was a merging of Western science and religion viz. spirituality. Further, the vegetarian movement in the Indian colonial setting, even when based on alliances between Europeans and Indians, often proved to be a source of anti-colonial critique.

ROBERT KRAMM (Konstanz), based on his current research project which examines radical utopian communities in early twentieth century Japan, Switzerland, South Africa and Jamaica, spoke about the co-operative ‘Tolstoy Farm’ in Johannesburg, South Africa, which had been set up by Mohandas Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach and existed from 1910 to 1913. As Kramm emphasized, utopian communities have so far been mostly analyzed in their respective national contexts. He chose a different perspective, intending to draw light on aspects of transnational entanglements and circulations of utopian knowledge, as the multinational utopian communities were niches for retreat and formative hubs of radical ideological exchange. Kramm pointed out the ambivalent fact that while these communities were unified in a common rejection of so called ‘modernity’ and capitalist forms of production and consumption, they still relied heavily on the particularities of modernity, such as steamships and new media, to uphold their transnational connections and outlooks.

In his programmatic paper Kramm praised the potential of analyzing these institutions which figured as nodal points of various
forms of life reform, and described the radical utopians as ‘moving subjects,’ borrowing a term coined by Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton.\(^1\) The study of communities such as Tolstoy Farm in Johannesburg thus seems to promise many insights on the range but also limits of actors of globalization, on the global circulation of knowledge and for the writing of a decentered global history of the early twentieth century.

Due to her absence, only an abstract of Judith Grosse’s (Zürich) paper was read. It dealt with the World League for Sexual Reform (1921-1935), a network of sex reformers with a cosmopolitan outlook and reformist ideas explicitly grounded in a European enlightenment discourse against Christian sex morality. Her paper focused on the Indian sexologist A.P. Pillay, who tried to reconcile science and spirituality in his visions of marriage reform. Although Pillay was able to enter the circles of sex reformists through the imperial networks of science, his work never got in-depth reception among the European community.

Isabel Richter (Bremen) presented the last research paper. Her paper dealt with Western travelers to India in the 1960s and 1970s and the corresponding hippie counterculture as a transnational youth movement. Due to a growing corpus of autobiographical accounts from these travelers, Richter was able to analyze this group of actors, who were substituting their search for a perfect society at home with a search for a perfect inner mind in India. In referencing the travelers’ images of India as a place of the eternal and timeless, Richter pointed to the long-standing tradition in Western academia and popular culture which constructed the ‘Orient’ and ‘India’ as ‘the other’ and a projection screen of multifarious imaginations, as has been deconstructed by scholars such as Edward Said or Ronald Inden.\(^2\)

Embedding her research in the broader discourse on secularization and the often claimed erosion of religion in the ‘West’, Richter pointed out that the India-oriented hippie movement in its search for a new spiritual freedom has to be seen as a phenomenon countering secularist narratives of religion as an anti-liberal, anti-emancipating and anti-modern historical force. Instead, Richter stressed the emergence of new forms of ‘bricolages’ of religion resulting from these transcultural encounters which also helped distribute and popularize elements from Indian culture such as sitar music, tantric ideas and practices, ayurvedic food systems as well as yoga and meditation systems and techniques outside of India.

Hans Martin Krämer (Heidelberg) concluded the section with a comment. He interpreted the section’s contributions as further refutations of the often heard, but too simplistic classical assumption of a direct and unidirectional link between modernization and secularization. He advocated a more fruitful approach as outlined for example by Talal Asad\(^3\), looking rather at the modern project of secularism as a structuring ideal than at alleged processes of secularization. Krämer described the movements presented in the research papers as going against a normative secularist interpretation of religion that distinctly differentiates between secular and religious spheres. Pointing to complex science-cum-scriptures arguments in vegetarian discourse, Gandhi’s anti-secularism at the Tolstoy Farm, A. P. Pillay’s reference to the religious base of marriage, and the western travelers’ spiritual search in India, the commentator located in these movements moments of a „resacralization“ or „respiritualization“ in a distinctively modern and transnational world.

With its varied selection of alternative and counter-culture movements analyzed – from utopian living communities to vegetarianism, sexual reform and the hippies – the section shed light on insightful moments of transcultural encounter, exchange as well as the negotiation of hierarchies. In this way, it managed to give the audience an apt impression on the historical complexities and contradictions of too often unquestioned notions of the ‘modern’, the ‘secular’, and the ‘religious’, and pro-

\(^{1}\) Tony Ballantyne / Antoinette Burton (eds.), Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire, Champaign 2009.


provided intriguing and inspiring perspectives and approaches to the topic.

**Session Overview:**

Section convenor: Julia Hauser (Kassel)

Julia Hauser (Kassel): Between Humanitarianism, Colonial Critique, and Nationalism. British Vegetarians and Hindu Activists in Turn-of-the Century India

Robert Kramm (Konstanz): Radical Utopianism at Tolstoy Farm: Building Communities at the Margins of Global Modernity

Judith Große (Zürich): Cosmopolitanism, Secular Morality, and the Boundaries of Universalism in the Transnational Movement for Sexual Reform in the Interwar Years

Isabel Richter (Bremen): Spiritual Seekers, Pilgrims and Psychonauts. Travelers to India and the Transformation of Religion in the long 1960s

Hans Martin Krämer (Heidelberg): Commentary