

God's Own Gender? Religions and their Concepts of Masculinity

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The international and transdisciplinary conference ‘God’s Own Gender?’ held at the University of Münster in November 2016 aimed to explore the multiple interwoven relationships between religion and masculinity. A brief glance back in time shows that religions have shaped how people thought about and practised gender, a core concept of any social order, throughout history. In fact, religion remains an important source for images of men until today. But both, gender and religion, are no longer seen as reliable social categories. Research demonstrates that they have always undergone manifold transformations: from shifts in men’s gendered identities and contested sexualities to secularization and growing religious plurality. Looking at our present time these changes appear to be more apparent than ever before. The conference therefore wanted to explore how different religions, their holy texts and norms have been sources for images of man in different societies around the world, how masculinity found expression in religious acts and rituals, and how the reciprocal relationship shifted over time.

The centrepiece of the conference was the keynote address given by BJÖRN KRONDORFER. Krondorfer, professor of religious studies at Northern Arizona University, is, without doubt, one of the most distinguished researchers in the field of religion and masculinities. He has coined the notion of „Critical Men’s Studies in Religion“ which is understood to mean the „critical reading of the privileged performances of male gender within [different religious] traditions“.¹ In his lecture, Krondorfer elaborated on the concept, starting off with examples which illustrated

how hegemonic masculinity had dominated studies of religion over decades (if not centuries), but male dominance remained unnoticed because it was omnipresent and unmarked. This has only changed within the last three decades when gay and queer studies as well as women’s and men’s studies made masculinity an ever more important research topic. Against this background, Krondorfer briefly outlined the latest research on religion and masculinity stressing that much is still to be done. In his conclusion he demanded that critical men’s studies in religion should not only be „gender-conscious, self-reflexive and deconstructionist“ but also „transformative“², a claim which the audience controversially discussed.

The conference itself aimed to contribute to contemporary research on religion and men by comparing how different religions around the globe thought about and practised masculinities. For this purpose researchers of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and South Asian religions were invited to present and discuss their findings in four panels. In the first panel on Christianity YVONNE MARIA WERNER (Lund) presented the results of an international research group on the topic of Christian manliness in 19th and 20th centuries which had been established at the University of Lund in 2004 and whose results were published in 2011.³ Werner concluded that in researching the impact of Christian concepts of masculinity on the more general gender construction of Western societies, confessional and institutional differences had to be taken into consideration too. Such an approach would enable us to differentiate the debates on the feminization and re-masculinization of Christian religion; a topic which was also central to the presentation of FRIEDERIKE

¹ Björn Krondorfer, *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical reader*, Stanford 2009, p. xiii. See further Björn Krondorfer, *Religion und Theologie*, in: Stefan Horlacher et. al. (eds.), *Männlichkeit. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart 2016, pp. 204-218.

² Björn Krondorfer/Stephen Hunt, *Introduction: Religion and Masculinities – Continuities and Change*, in: *Religion and Gender* 2,2 (2012), pp. 194-206, quote p. 200.

³ Yvonne Maria Werner (ed.), *Christian Masculinity. Men and Religion in Northern Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Leuven 2011.

BENTHAUS-APEL (Bochum) who elaborated on recent empirical data. She argued that the results did not point to a re-masculinization of religion in our time. FELIX KRÄMER (Erfurt) took the findings of both presentations to discuss the common concepts of hegemonic masculinity and crisis of masculinity.

In the following session, the participants discussed recent findings on the interlinkage between masculinity and (homo-)sexuality in pre-modern and modern Islam. ANDREAS ISMAIL MOHR (Berlin) examined statements of the Qur'an, Hadith, and other crucial texts to outline how pre-modern Islamic legal discourse had marked homosexuality. In discussing different concepts like „zinâ“ and „li-wât“, he was able to demonstrate the ambivalent attitude of Islam towards the topic. The findings combined well with the presentation of AMANULLAH DE SONDY (Cork) who talked about the crisis of Islamic masculinities. Referring widely to his own research on the topic, De SONDY presented the broad diversity of Islamic images and practices of man existing until today. His aim was „to explore the many possibilities of Islamic masculinities in relation to Islamic texts, traditions, and societies“. THOMAS K. GUGLER (Münster), who commented on both presentations, stressed their similarities. He himself underlined the ambivalence of Islam towards the phenomenon of male homosexuality in drawing attention to the medical and literary discourses.

The panel on Judaism and masculinity focussed on perceptions in Talmudic and medieval literature. MATTHIAS MORGENSTERN (Tübingen) reconstructed concepts and debates on masculinities in rabbinic literature and Talmudic culture. Starting off with the observation that „the basic principle of gender construction in rabbinic Judaism is the stipulation derived from the Hebrew Bible that Torah study is an obligation for *Jewish men*“, Morgenstern drew attention to significant changes in Talmudic literature. They resulted, he argued, in the de-masculinization of Jewish men who were no longer heroes but „tricksters“. RUTH MAZO KARRAS (Minnesota/Jerusalem) amplified these findings in examining how Jewish masculinity and sexuality was constructed in medieval Jewish and

Christian texts on King David's adultery with Bathsheba. In Christianity David was mostly seen as a sinner, thereby exposing, according to Mazo Karras, a contradiction in Christian masculinities, which oscillated between the heroic ideal of sexual appetite and „a powerful counter discourse about keeping sexual desire under control“. In Judaism, on the contrary, David did not act sinfully but out of obedience to God. Since both presentations focussed mostly on normative perspectives, the respondent RÜDIGER SCHMITT (Münster) asked about the social realities of men and himself gave examples from the Biblical age.

In a fourth panel the participants discussed the relationship between South Asian religions and masculinities. By examining images of the Buddha, JOHN POWERS (Canberra/Melbourne) explored the manifold interlinkages between masculinity, sex, and the body in Indian Buddhism. According to him the Indian Buddha is characterized with a perfect, hyper-masculine and virile body, in contrast to popular images of the Buddha as androgynous and asexual. Tracing it back to the need for a perfect body for reincarnation, Powers also showed the consequences for contemporary Buddhist men. Focussing on India, too, RENATE SYED (Munich) elaborated on how masculinity was first constructed in Hindu belief and how it was later contested by integrating autochthon pre-vedic cults with their images of powerful goddesses. According to Syed „masculinity is seen as powerful but fragile“ in Hindu India even today. In his comment PERRY SCHMIDT-LEUKEL (Münster) raised three questions regarding the two presentations referring to the general nature of Indian religions, the gender bi-polarity of its gods, and the interplay between religion and social reality.

In a concluding discussion OLAF BLASCHKE (Münster), HEIDEMARIE WINKEL (Bielefeld), and BJÖRN KRONDORFER (Flagstaff/Arizona) commented on the conference, its concepts, papers and debates. They all agreed that the varied presentations offered interesting insights into the complex relationship between religions and masculinities which has broadly been

neglected by research until today. Yet the wide range of topics discussed made common conclusions difficult, as all the commentators emphasised. Thus Blaschke, for instance, argued that the different examples had to be better embedded in their historical contexts to enable synchronic as well as diachronic comparison in the near future. Winkel stressed the importance of research which focusses on ordinary life and the everyday social practices. And Krondorfer in the end asked once again for a general change of perspective, making us aware of the unmarked presence of masculinity. With this demand in mind, and the task to do further research on the relationship between religion and masculinity, the conference ended.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction

Detlef Pollack (Münster)

Panel I: Concepts of Masculinity in Christianity

Chair: Christel Gärtner (Münster)

Yvonne Maria Werner (Lund): Concepts and Ideas of Masculinity in Catholicism and Protestantism in the 19th and 20th Centuries – some Reflections on Recent Research

Friederike Benthous-Apel (Bochum): Feminization or Re-masculinization of Religion? Results from Empirical Research

Respondent: Felix Krämer (Erfurt)

Discussion

Panel II: Concepts of Masculinity in Islam

Chair: Thomas Bauer (Münster)

Andreas Ismail Mohr (Berlin): Which is Worse: Zina or Liwat? Why, and For Whom? Concepts and Practices of Masculinities in 'Pre-Modern' Islam

Amanullah De Soudy (Cork): The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities

Respondent: Thomas K. Gugler (Münster)

Discussion

Keynote

Björn Krondorfer (Flagstaff/Arizona): Critical Men's Studies in Religion. How it started and Where it needs to go

Discussion

Chair: Michael Krüggeler (Münster)

Panel III: Concepts of Masculinity in Judaism

Chair: Rainer J. Barzen (Münster)

Matthias Morgenstern (Tübingen): Concepts and Debates on Masculinities in Talmudic Culture

Ruth Mazo Karras (Minnesota/Jerusalem): Sexuality and Masculinity in a Comparative Medieval Perspective

Respondent: Rüdiger Schmitt (Münster)

Discussion

Panel IV: Concepts of Masculinity in Asia

Chair: Thomas K. Gugler (Münster)

John Powers (Canberra/Melbourne): Manly Monks and Lustful Ladies. Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism

Renate Syed (Munich): The First Gender. The Construction of Masculinity in Ancient India

Respondent: Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Münster)

Discussion

Concluding Discussion: Critical Men's Studies in Religion – Challenges and Perspectives

Chair: Daniel Gerster (Münster)

Olaf Blaschke (Münster)

Heidemarie Winkel (Bielefeld)

Björn Krondorfer (Flagstaff/Arizona)

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