

New Perspectives on the Historiography of Christianity

Veranstalter: Judith Becker, Lehrstuhl für Neuere Christentumsgeschichte, Theologische Fakultät, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

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The global nature of Christianity with its steady presence on six continents, as well as the cultural and linguistic plurality of Christian traditions has increasingly come to the attention of Western academic research. While Christian communities and theological approaches from outside Europe often remained unnoticed in the past, new historiographies increasingly aim to incorporate global perspectives. Therefore, researchers all over the world struggle with the question of how to write a history of Christianity, which does justice not only to the plurality of Christianity, but also to the interconnectedness and mutual influences between different world regions.

To address this issue, JUDITH BECKER (Berlin) brought together scholars from all continents who have already contributed to evolve and enrich the field of „World Christianity“. In her opening remarks, she indicated that the historiography of Christianity needs to develop global perspectives, not only to embrace the widespread distribution of Christians in various world regions, but also to overcome conceptual limitations of existing (Western) approaches and to conceptualize historiographies that appeal to people from around the world.

Therefore, the workshop sought to explore possibilities for reshaping the historiography of Christianity. The participants were encouraged to delineate and to discuss new ways of writing a history of Christianity in a multi-perspective way, which pays special attention to the fact that Christianity is a globally spread, pluralistic, and multi-linear phenomenon. During two days, nine papers presented various approaches, methodological tools, and case studies.

The first paper by Judith Becker aimed to apply global perspectives to the historiogra-

phy of Christianity by delineating selected approaches written by African theologians, which are widely unknown in German historiography. Becker referred to the works of Lamin Sanneh, Kwame Bediako, Allan Aubrey Boesak, and Ogbu U. Kalu in particular. After examining the relevance of the paradigms of inculturation and translation for the historiography of Christianity, Becker delineated the focal points of these authors regarding ethics and dogmatics. She identified concerns with culture, power relations, social justice, and identity issues as specific characteristics of these approaches. To gain a deeper insight into the complexity of Christianity, she suggested to include approaches, research topics and methods from all over the world, which is why the first step might be to notice the various existing approaches and to intensify the dialogue.

One specific way to approach the concept of World Christianity is the notion of „entanglement“. Two papers paid close attention to the usage of this concept and asked how spaces were created in which entanglement happened.

DANA L. ROBERT (Boston) examined cross-cultural Christian friendships, a phenomenon within mission studies and intercultural theology that, according to the author, deserves closer attention. For her case study, Robert chose the friendship between Savirayan Jesudason and Ernest Forrester Paton who founded the Christukula Ashram (family of Christ Ashram) at Tirupattur in 1921. It was the first Protestant Christian Ashram and became a role model for various other Christian communities in the 20th century. The founders and members of the Ashram tried to rethink Christianity from an Indian perspective, searching for a ‘world brotherhood’, a union of the Christian world community, where mutual relationships are based on the shared relationship with Jesus Christ. Robert argued that these Christian Ashrams, with their particular religious practices, have created a space where entanglement happened and where local practices shaped the global Christian community and vice versa.

The usage of the term entanglement in the research of the historiography of Christianity also constituted the leading question in AN-

DREAS FELDTKELLER's (Berlin) paper. He analyzed travel diaries to gain insight into the production and distribution of topographical knowledge in the 19th century, which was relevant for biblical studies. His analysis demonstrated how Arab intellectuals, European missionaries, local people from villages, and travelers worked together. Hence, simplifying narratives that depict the measuring of the world as a mere imperial project need revision. The paradigm of epistemic entanglement proved to be helpful to describe these transcultural projects.

In the subsequent debate, advantages and limitations of the notion of 'entanglement' were discussed. One of the problems identified was the difficulty to narrate or visualize entangled history without reducing the complexity of the process. The approach offers the possibility to portray alternative histories, which might help to contradict dominant narratives. Since the notion of entanglement pays attention to relationships, it was considered as valuable to analyze complex, but unstable moments of history.

The question of appropriate methodology for the global history of Christianity was subsequently taken up in the four following papers:

With reference to John C. B. Webster, JAYAKIRAN SEBASTIAN (Philadelphia) claimed that historians and theologians have a public responsibility both for the depiction of the past and for their readers. For today's scholars of World Christianity, Sebastian elaborates four methodological aspects: first, the reality of interconnections among and beyond communities, including the agency of the marginalized that has to be incorporated into historiographical approaches; second, as the history of Christianity is an integral part of the socio-cultural context, interventions need to provide necessary corrections; third, a scholar of global history has to recognize the intersections, the unique impact of circumstances and the complexity of biographies; and fourth, the writing and teaching of World Christianity requires engaged interpretations. One of the challenges for today's historians of Christianity consists in finding out what doing engaged research today exactly means, which fosters a deeper and more elaborate

understanding of World Christianity.

Based on her research experience among Christian communities in Africa, ISABEL MUKONYORA (Bowling Green) pointed to the need of checking on both methods and terms with regard to the actual social context. While doing research on practicing Christians and their ways of applying religion in the day-to-day life, the change of social structures, gender, ecology, and the use of language have proved to be important issues. All these aspects require appropriate methods in order to capture the theological relevance of complex human questions. Hence, interdisciplinary methods are inevitable for the study of World Christianity and terminology that pretends to abstract theological questions from social context needs revision.

The paper by SEBASTIAN KIM (Pasadena) addressed some of the major challenges scholars in a Korean context face when writing a history of Christianity for Western academics, paying attention to the fact that Christianity is a World Religion, which cannot be delimited by national boundaries. One challenge is to develop an appropriate perspective, which is simultaneously locally rooted and global, taking into account that Korean Christianity does include not only Christians in Korea but also diaspora congregations and missionary movements outside the country. Additionally, as most of the early sources are produced by missionaries and therefore overemphasize the European influences, historians need to find Korean sources. Two other challenges are to overcome both the denominational and institutional limitations which marginalize minority traditions and lay people. Kim closed his talk with questioning academic conventions which favor European languages and Western paradigms.

The next talk shifted the focus to the existence of prevalent narratives in the historiography of Christianity. JEFFREY COX (Iowa City) argued that the concept of 'secularization' is one of the master narratives with a hidden agenda and can therefore not be used as a mere descriptive category. The assumption of a 'downward slope' – a steady decline of religion in the modern world – is, claims Cox, 'inherently causal', teleological, invocatory, and unverifiable. Cox suggested

banning the rhetoric of secularization from academia and being aware of its underlying agenda. Since so far there seems to be no alternative, he concluded his talk with the invitation to think about new concepts to describe the relationship between secular and religious in a non-linear way that pays close attention to overlaps, dialectics, and the wavelike dynamic which he called 'bouncing'.

The specific multiplicity that characterizes Christianity in various moments of its history was addressed by two more papers.

Characterizing the history of World Christianity by its global and polycentric structure constituted the key aspect in the paper presented by KLAUS KOSCHORKE (Munich). The concept aims not only to incorporate the voices of Christians of the so-called 'global South' into the historiography of Christianity but also to focus on transregional and transcontinental links. Examining journals and other sources of Christian elites in Asia and Africa around 1910, Koschorke argued that these documents reveal a wide variety of South-South links and multidirectional networks outside the realm of missionary societies. When, for instance, an article of an African journal was reprinted in India, it contributed to the mutual awareness among Christians in the South. Thus, the paper suggested interpreting the notion of the 'Edinburgh-Ecumené' within a broader context of Christian internationalism around 1910.

CHRISTOPH MARKSCHIES (Berlin) shifted the focus to ancient Church history, emphasizing the fact that, from the early times, Christianity was global. He questioned language conventions in the historiography of Christianity, using the Greek cleric Irenaeus from Smyrna, who in the 2nd century was a bishop in Lyon. The successive Latinization of names, book titles and theological terms were part of the Westernization of formerly Eastern traditions and thus contributed to the marginalization of many other Christian perspectives. Also, the historiography of Christianity is facing challenges not only of finding a language that is as little judgmental as possible, but also of developing a new sensibility for the multilingual and transcultural, even entangled character of

ancient Christianity. The acknowledgment of 'multiple antiquities' and, as added in the discussion, of multiple receptions of these antiquities may help to overcome traditional hierarchies of knowledge.

The workshop inspired fruitful discussions concerning the advantages and limitations of both approaches and methods. Specific challenges which scholars face while writing a history of Christianity in a global perspective were intensively explored, such as avoiding the mere reproduction of dominant historiographies, doing justice to the complexity of religious issues, as well as being aware of shortcomings and implicit prejudices within established modes of academic inquiry. The papers and discussions stressed the need to critically reflect on the categories, terminologies, and sources. In particular, the accessibility of sources was identified as a major task for scholars in every world region. A greater diversity of approaches and the development of less hierarchical scholarly perspectives can be fostered by different forms of direct cooperation. Studying, describing and narrating history of Christianity in this framework might allow deeper insights into the complexity of Christianity, but might also help to see the fractions within one's own history.

Conference Overview:

Judith Becker (Berlin): Welcome and Introduction

Chairs: Andrea Hofmann (Berlin), Andreas Feldtkeller (Berlin), Dana L. Robert (Boston), Judith Becker (Berlin)

Judith Becker (Berlin): Applying Global Perspectives to the Historiography of Christianity

Dana L. Robert (Boston): Cross-Cultural Friendship, Spiritual Practices, and Witness to World Christian Community: A Twentieth Century Case Study

Jayakiran Sebastian (Philadelphia): Interconnections, Interventions, Intersections, Interpretations: A Methodological Journey through Global Christianity

Andreas Feldtkeller (Berlin): Global Christianity and Transcultural Knowledge: The

Paradigm of Epistemic Entanglement

Half time discussion

Klaus Koschorke (Munich): Christian Internationalisms around 1910. Transregional and Transcontinental Missionary and Indigenous-Christian Networks prior to WWI

Isabel Mukonyora (Bowling Green): Interdisciplinary Methods for the Study of World Christianity

Jeffrey Cox (Iowa City): Eliminating the Concept of Secularization

Sebastian Kim (Pasadena): Researching Korean Christianity in the Context of World Christianity

Christoph Marksches (Berlin): Globalized Religion? Towards a European Attempt to Write History of Ancient Christianity from a non-western Perspective

Concluding discussion

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