

Behaving Like Heathens? Polemical Comparisons and Discourses of Religious Diversity across the Cultures

Veranstalter: Christina Brauner, Universität Tübingen / Universität Bielefeld; Sita Steckel, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
Datum, Ort: 29.11.2018–01.12.2018, Bielefeld
Bericht von: Andra Alexiu / Sita Steckel, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster; Ionuț Cucu, Freie Universität Berlin

The phenomenon of polemical comparisons is well known in the cultural history of religious perceptions: Religious opponents were often the subject of disparaging comparisons, to animals such as pigs and dogs but also to established religious „others“. Bad Christians could be accused of being like – or worse than – Turks or Jews, Jews were admonished not to fall so low as to behave like Christians, while deviant Muslims might be likened to unbelievers and so on. Polemical comparisons thus appear to play an important role in the negotiation of religious difference and diversity. Yet the phenomenon remains underexplored, presumably because of its location at the intersection of different fields of research. In an attempt to redress this state of affairs, the conference brought together scholars from medieval and early modern history, literature, Christian theology, Islamic, Jewish, and Buddhist Studies to facilitate analysis of the types and functions of polemical comparisons in different historical and cultural contexts. It was co-sponsored by the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1288 „Practices of Comparing“ (Bielefeld University) and the Diltney research project „Diversitas religionum. Thirteenth-century foundations of European discourses of religious diversity“ (Volkswagen Stiftung/WWU Münster).

In their introduction, co-conveners CHRISTINA BRAUNER (Bielefeld/Tübingen) and SITA STECKEL (Münster) pointed out that most research on comparisons of religion has remained focused on the emergence of modern religious plurality and modern forms of comparative Religion Studies and inherently pluralistic comparisons. As a result, the many varieties of pre-modern asymmetrical

and polemical comparisons have not been studied in detail – even though they highlight the processual nature of negotiations of religion and religious diversity, opening up a neglected perspective on (currently much-debated) concepts of religion. A focus on polemical comparisons also establishes an interesting cross-cultural comparative perspective. Not least, it highlights the links between inter-religious and intra-religious debates, as comparisons often disparaged religious opponents „within“ by likening them to „incomparable“ religious others „without“. This form of comparison remains dependent upon the basic assumption that a true religion is incomparable with any rivaling faith, yet also transgresses it by making religions comparable in practice, potentially contributing to the establishment of greater comparability over the long term. The study of polemical comparisons may thus allow us to relate different historical conjunctures of religious polemics more clearly.

During the presentations and discussion, two different basic functions of polemical comparison emerged, a more dynamizing and a more stabilizing one. „Dynamizing“ polemical exchanges typically arose in situations of emerging religious differences and divergences, which then led to the creation and manipulation of (polemical) categories describing religion, a process modern research is currently historicizing. ANTONELLO PALUMBO (London) thus began his paper by pointing out a number of aspects in which Buddhism differs from, and defies comparison with the Abrahamic creeds. He then reviewed the main theories concerning the origins and nature of the Mahāyāna (Greater Vehicle), and stressed the divisive aspects of this form of Buddhist discourse. His focus was on the notion of Hīnayāna (Lesser Vehicle), until recently used in scholarship as a descriptive label for early Buddhist schools, in fact a polemical category which followers of the Mahāyāna deployed against both internal and external opponents. Palumbo discussed the success this category enjoyed in medieval China, including its adoption in Taoist doctrinal taxonomies.

As other papers showed, the use of pre-established categories in polemics also typi-

cally generated an entangled history of „external“ and „internal“ deviance, which forms a shared historical basis for the modern distinction of intra- and inter-religious polemics in both Mediterranean and Asian discourses. STEPHEN C. BERKWITZ (Springfield) for example discussed how the ancient Pali Buddhist term *titthiya* (roughly translatable as „heretic“) was redeployed in the monastic landscape of medieval Sri Lanka by the adherents of the Mahavihara school against its rival within the Theravada tradition of Buddhism. The term *titthiya* was traditionally used to denote the ancient adversaries of the Buddha (Brahmans, Jains, or other ascetics), therefore people from outside the Buddhist community. In the context of social and political conflicts, the Mahavihara then used the term in the logic of monastic lineage, claiming to be the only true practitioners of the Theravada tradition. The use of *titthiya* was thus no longer restricted to outsiders but came to incorporate those that claimed to be the adherents of the Buddha.

Where religious difference was already established, in contrast, polemical comparisons often took on the functions of stabilizing and popularizing constructions of religious alterity. This could be accomplished by comparing opponents with animals, by creating contrasts of „good and bad“ or „ideal and perversion“, but also through comparisons with established enemies. MÓNICA COLOMINAS APARICIO (Berlin) thus discussed the way Christians and Jews were described in two Muslim polemics from about 1500, al-Gharīb's adaptation of al-Qaysī's *Kitāb Miftāh ad-dīn*, and the anonymous Tunisian Refugee's *Treatise of the Two Roads*. Especially the latter, which juxtaposed and contrasted Islamic and Christian religiosity in the metaphor of the narrow or broad way, suggests that comparisons between religious groups and classifications likening one religious opponent to another (or to animals, in this case: donkeys) were common among the laypeople of Iberia.

ALEXANDER KÄSTNER's (Dresden) paper traced different modes of invective in and beyond an escalating pamphlet war between parties of the early German Reformation, taking place in the Protestant enclave of Buch-

holz and the neighbouring Catholic town of Annaberg in Saxony. As Kästner showed, the exchange featured basic and fairly traditional comparisons, e.g. Protestant rhetoric drawing on biblical motifs likening the religious opponents, particularly Franciscan friars, to wolves in sheep's clothing, foxes and robbers. More importantly, contrasts and parodies also juxtaposed and thus compared ideals and (ascribed) realities to unmask the opponent's feigned piety and hypocrisy, for example in a mock procession staged by the Buchholz Protestants to ridicule and denigrate the Catholic cult of saints.

Analyzing comparisons on a textual level, MARKUS VIEHBECK (Vienna) focused on the use of polemical interjections, including comparative insults, as a framing device in Buddhist scholarly exchanges. As he argued, the polemical elements used by religious scholars affiliated to different Tibetan monastic traditions generally had a paratextual function and could be embedded in the formalized sequence of Buddhist disputation. In the cases from a debate between Ju Mipam and Pari Rapsel, polemical comparisons and insults were specifically used to mark a boundary and hierarchy between the roles of yogin and scholar. They ultimately served to delegitimize the opponent's view as a denatured, non-Tibetan form of Buddhism.

A special case is constituted by comparisons linking one religious opponent with another, a classic mechanism of 'othering', illustrated for example in SOPHIA DEGE-MÜLLER's (Bochum) investigation of Ethiopian Christians using imagined projections of Jewishness against Christian enemies. Between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, especially during the reign of Zar'a Ya'qob (d. 1468), elites connected to the Solomonic dynasty used harsh invectives against Jewish practices, among other things describing a dog's religiosity as more valuable than that of a Jew. This strategy largely appears to have been intended to stabilize authority and doctrine. Dege-Müller also showed how the terms roughly corresponding to Jew (Ayhud), Pagan (Arami), and Infidel (Elew) were applied to various Christian opponents such as the fifteenth-century Stephanites.

MARTIN PRZYBILSKI's (Trier) paper in contrast showcased a more complex example of linked contrasts and of hierarchization between gendered religious opponents. In discussing circumcision, German Jewish exegetes repeatedly mentioned the theory (or perhaps fear) that the sexual prowess of Jewish men might be inferior to that of uncircumcised and therefore more lusty Christian men. While the accusation of hypersexuality is common in polemics, Przybilski argued that the accompanying self-denigration of Jewish men allowed a more subtle alternative construction of hierarchy: Christians were portrayed as more beautiful and potent than Jewish men but also as unrestrained and degenerated – not least by comparing them to animals, especially horses and donkeys. The corresponding Jewish self-image subverted racialized and gendered tropes of sexually less competent, less attractive Jews and built an ideal of inwardly pious, sexually restrained and therefore culturally superior masculinity instead.

Beyond the dynamization and stabilization of religious difference and cultural hierarchy, comparisons linking one religious opponent to another often served more particular functions. DAVID FREIDENREICH's (Waterville) discussions of Christian comparisons of Muslims with Jews distinguished several different effects: Christians identifying Islam as „Judaizing“ or as a mixture of „stolen“ doctrines from Judaism and Christianity aimed to discredit Islam by associating it with a familiar, disdained opponent. Setting Islam up as a more dangerous and threatening version of Judaism also warned Christian audiences against „Judaizing“ practices. In the context of legal classifications, the identification of Muslims and Jews finally allowed lawmakers to insert Muslims neatly into pre-established restrictive laws applied to Jews.

ANNA AKASOY's (New York) presentation nuanced this perspective by discussing the diverging strategies Islamic ethnographers employed to categorize and describe the „pagan“ religions of Asia and Africa. In travel narratives and geographical works, for example by Ibn Faḍlān, Abū Dulaf and al-Iṣṭakhri, pagan religiosity was typically described through pre-established categories

such as unbelief and idolatry, but often without an aggressive stance. Such identifications could be made legally relevant, for example by circumventing the prohibition of enslaving fellow Muslims through an identification of any stateless group with unbelievers. However, religious practices were also described as a reflection of human nature, which amounted to „religion minus revelation“.

Several papers tied conjunctures of polemical comparisons very clearly to shifts in the intra-religious or interreligious landscape. MALTE VAN SPANKEREN's (Halle) paper for example revisited the intersection of inter-religious and intra-religious polemics against the backdrop of a growing division within Protestantism. While the trope of „being Turkish“ had long been a staple of Lutheran anti-Catholic polemics, scholars such as the Lutheran Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608) soon also used it in their treatises against Reformed Protestantism, bearing witness to the emerging institutionalization of confessional divides and the controversial attempts at establishing Protestant orthodoxy.

IONUT CUCU's (Berlin) paper in contrast highlighted shifts among the „others“ serving as polemical *comparata*, discussing how (re)discovered creeds of the Zoroastrians, Hindus, or Chinese were incorporated as *comparata* in the writings of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Anglican writers Henry Lord, Thomas Hyde, and Humphrey Prideaux. Brief comparisons denouncing Catholicism for its rigidity, excessive ritualization, and incomprehensible language mainly seem to have served to underline an existing cultural hierarchy.

GERHARD WIEGERS' (Amsterdam) presentation provided an example of polemical discourses becoming entangled. His example, Muḥammad Alguazir's *Apology against the Articles of the Christian Faith* (1610), was translated into Latin in the context of a Moroccan embassy to the Netherlands. Among a series of arguments and refutations of the Christian and Jewish religions, Alguazir also incorporated intra-Christian, particularly Protestant polemics, which he used to portray Christianity as heavily divided and degenerated into heresy. The fact that Reformed Protestants appeared as the less degenerated ver-

sion of Christianity, however, seems to mirror a mooted political alliance between Morocco and the Protestant Netherlands.

The concluding commentators connected the topic to different overarching research perspectives. MARCO CAVARZERE (Frankfurt/M.) situated the study of comparisons in the emerging research field focusing on the cultural entanglement of different Christianities. He highlighted comparisons as processes of entanglement, which provide an important route towards tracing religious differences without essentializing them. As a project leader within Bielefeld's SFB 1288, ANTJE FLÜCHTER (Bielefeld) stressed the patterns of historical comparisons becoming visible in the study of polemics, foremost the obvious structural similarity between modern, superficially 'neutral' comparisons of religions made from a secularized point of view and pre-modern polemical comparisons of deviant religions made from within the religious field. Both Flüchter and ALMUT HÖFERT (Oldenburg) pointed out the potential of transcultural approaches to defamiliarize historical trajectories and to identify shared concerns for further research. Höfert concluded with thoughts on the comparability of historical transformations visible in different cultural settings across the long period under investigation.

Conference overview:

Christina Brauner (Tübingen/Bielefeld), and Sita Steckel (Münster): Welcome & Introduction

Session I: The Armoury of Comparison. Morphologies of Religious Polemics

David Freidenreich (Colby College): Instructing Christians by Constructing „Jew-ish“ Muslims: Case Studies in Medieval Rhetoric about the Old Testament

Martin Przybiski (Universität Trier): Hypersexuality in Jewish-Christian Polemics

Alexander Kästner (TU Dresden): Mocking Monks and Saints. The Invective Mode of the Early Reformation in Annaberg and Buchholz, 1522–1524

Markus Viehbeck (Universität Wien): Polemics as Literary and Conceptual Frame-

work: A Case Study from Nineteenth-Century Tibet

Session II: Polemical Comparisons and Organization of Knowledge

Mònica Colominas Aparicio (MPI Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin): Comparison and Religious Polemics in Late Medieval and Early Modern Christian Iberia: A Hitherto Unknown Mudejar-Morisco Source

Anna Akasoy (The Graduate Center, CUNY, New York): Religious Polemics and Beyond: Paganism in Medieval Islamic Literature

Session III: Intra- and Inter-Religious Comparisons

Sophia Dege-Müller (Ruhr-Universität Bochum): Jews, Heretics, Pagans – Describing the Religious Other in Ethiopian Sources

Gerard Wiegers (Universiteit van Amsterdam): Polemical Comparisons in the Apology against the Articles of the Christian Faith by Muhammad Alguazir (1610)

Ionut Cucu (FU Berlin): „No Worse than the Papists“: Zarathushtra and Zoroastrianism as an Argument for the Anglican Attacks on Catholicism

Antonello Palumbo (SOAS, London): Religion in the Second-Class Carriage: The Fortunes of 'Lesser Vehicle' as a Buddhist and Taoist Polemical Category in Medieval China

Stephen C. Berkwitz (Missouri State University): Buddhist 'Heretics' and the Logic of Lineage

Malte van Spankeren (Halle/Saale): Insult as a Cultural Practice. The Confessional Polemical Functionalisation of Islam by Lutheran Theologians around 1600

Concluding comments

Marco Carvarzere (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/Main); Antje Flüchter (Universität Bielefeld) Almut Höfert (Universität Oldenburg)

Tagungsbericht *Behaving Like Heathens? Polemical Comparisons and Discourses of Religious Diversity across the Cultures*. 29.11.2018–01.12.2018, Bielefeld, in: H-Soz-Kult 22.05.2019.