

## Aesthetics of Atheism

**Veranstalter:** Horst Junginger / Katharina Neef, Institute for the Study of Religion at Leipzig University

**Datum, Ort:** 04.03.2021–05.03.2021, digital (Leipzig)

**Bericht von:** Victoria Vitanova-Kerber, Religionswissenschaftliches Institut, Universität Leipzig

The international conference took place in online format. It was a joint conference of the Institute for the Study of Religion and the Centre for Advanced Studies „Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities“ and funded by the German Research Foundation DFG. The conference dealt with one central issue of 20th century socialism: the struggle between religion and atheism, and its visualization. It put the question of whether the atheist visual propaganda was only negatively defined as a counterpart of religion, exploiting classic antireligious narratives, or whether it developed its own autonomous aesthetic configurations. The event, first planned as a workshop, consisted of two parts – one about the representation of religion and non-religion in museums and one about the interplay between religious and anti-religious premises in the concept of atheist aesthetics. A digital exhibition of atheist propaganda posters from the State Museum for the History of Religion in St. Petersburg added an interactive dimension to the conference and functioned as a link between the two parts.

EDIT FRANKE (Marburg) opened the floor with an introduction of the Marburg-based collection of religious objects („Religionskundliche Sammlung“), who aims to depict religious diversity across the world. After a reflection on the difficulties of representing heterodox groups and, even more, atheism, Franke emphasized the role of the museum as a „sanctuary of modernity“, where both processes of secularization and of religionization/sacralization take place. Further, she concluded that museums are political sites, where religion is constantly being constructed or deconstructed. In the discussion, Katharina Neef made the important remark that the border between an aestheticizing and a seculariz-

ing aspect is usually very subjective.

In her talk on the limits and potentials of musealization, SUSANNE RODEMEIER (Marburg) asked how museums should deal with objects that have left their national context (e.g., through Christian missionaries). Taking the example of an ancestor figure from Nias, Indonesia, she demonstrated that questions of restitution can be a very sensitive subject that requires interreligious and intercultural competences.

How the staff of the Grassi museum in Leipzig dealt with the representation of Christianity as a dominant religion in different historical periods, was the leading question of PARDIS ESKANDARIPOUR (Leipzig). She found out, that while it led to an intensifying of the Christian self-identification of the staff in the colonial period and to the merging of Christian European identity in the Nazi period, the topic was barely mentioned in the sources in the socialist time. Eskandaripour stressed the emerging of a new trend after 1990 – the increasing emphasis on morality and ethical aspects in the museum.

PETER BRÄUNLEIN (Göttingen) first told a personal story of himself giving a guided tour through the Hinduism exhibition of the „Religionskundliche Sammlung“ in Marburg to a school group, when a Muslim student insisted that the Hindu goddess Shiva Nataraja was a „devil“. Referring to Peter Berger's notion of „methodological atheism“ in all empirical matters, Bräunlein critically reflected on the limits of exhibitions as a medium for depicting or criticizing religion. He put to discussion important questions like the proportion of entertainment and enlightenment in museums or the curator's dilemma of relativism versus normativism in conflict situations like the above-mentioned.

EKATERINA TERYUKOVA (St. Petersburg) gave a detailed report on the representation of atheism in the exhibitions of the Museum for the History of Religion in St. Petersburg. Using a chronological approach, she pointed out that the aim of the exhibitions was to study religion from the point of view of dialectic materialism and to visualize prevalently antireligious content. In the discussion, Johannes Gleixner noted that it was more the anti-church propaganda, than the promotion

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of atheism that was prevailing in the exhibitions of the museum.

Using a rich variety of mainland Chinese propaganda posters, JOACHIM GENTS (Edinburg) presented three modes of the relationship between science and religion in China between 1951 and 2002. He found out that an anti-sect discourse was dominant in the 1950s, based on accusations in amorality and foreign (Japanese) influence. According to Gents, an anti-superstition campaign was more typical for the 1960s, when an evolutionary perspective was adopted. Further, he stated a tendency towards the replacement of religion by science, starting in the 1970s and saw in the rise of the new religious movement Falun Gong an attempt to „put a secular position in a religious cloth“.

HORST JUNGINGER (Leipzig) problematized the visualization of religion. He pleaded for a differentiation between visibility and perception, referring to the phenomenon of *pareidolia* – the ability to see objects and patterns in e.g. clouds, reflections, shadows and on the moon). Thus, he questioned the possibility and the potential of visualizing something that cannot be objectively seen, but only subjectively perceived, like god. In addition, Junginger followed up on the discussion on the notion of enlightenment in museums and argued that „scholar“ and „public figure / museum director“ are two different modi, between which one should distinguish. The talk was followed by a lively discussion on new approaches to museology concerning the representation of religious diversity.

JOHANNES GLEIXNER (Prague/Munich) opened the second part with a comparison between the visualizations of atheism in Central Europe and in the Soviet Union. He followed the reception of the soviet godless movement in Germany and Czechoslovakia and noticed a disconnection in terms of form and content. Figures from the Russian atheist context were adopted in Central Europe but reframed and used in totally different context. Gleixner further stated that the soviet idea to visualize atheism was rather short-lived in Central Europe.

As MARIANNA SHAKHANOVA (St. Petersburg) demonstrated, scientific atheism was a new concept, invented in the era of „de-

veloped socialism“ (1955–1989) in the Soviet Union. Since atheism purely as a rejection of religion didn't prove to be effective, a positive occupation of the term was needed. The problem of how to depict something that is just the denial of something else emerged in the State Museum for the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad as well and required the construction of a new image of the new society of „developed socialism“. Secular humanistic items became crucial in this process in the 1970s, when an image of „the soviet way of life“ was created, while in the period of *perestroika* emphasis was laid on the activation of the human factor.

In her search of German aesthetics of atheism, ANJA KIRSCH (Trondheim) brought us back to Europe. After studying textbooks on civics („Staatsbürgerkunde“) as a core subject of the socialist worldview education, Kirsch found out that atheism had a rather minor role in DDR's everyday representation of atheism and Marxist worldview. It appeared in only one edition (1983) of a textbook for the 11th/12th grade. A remark on the need for further research on the topic, involving the analysis of history textbooks, was made in the discussion.

KATHARINA NEEF (Leipzig) talked about stereotypes against religions and presented captivating visual materials from the 1930s. Based on atheist propaganda posters, she reconstructed the prejudice against Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, and the alternative religious form „Sektantstvo“ and pointed out the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a main target of the critique until the mid-20th century. The minority religions were in that time used as examples for „otherness“ and „backwardness“ and moved to the center of the antireligious propaganda in the second half of the century as the relationship between ROC and the state became more cooperative. In the discussion, the relationship between religion and state was defined as a „double-edged-sword“ where religion was both criticized and appropriated by the state.

In the last talk, SVETLANA BARSUKOVA and BORIS KRUMNOW (Leipzig) incorporated a contemporary perspective of atheist visualizations in Russia, thus enabling a comparative angle. The authors pointed out that

the anti-religious depictions, which are paradoxically combining anti-conservative with anti-pluralist ideas, are often recognized as „extremist“. Modern forms of visual communication like memes were shown, where popular themes like „sex and body“, „the dark side“, and new interpretations of „god in space“ were among the most popular. Barsukova and Krumnow concluded that the narratives of the contemporary anti-religious propaganda in Russia tend to repeat the agenda of the Soviet era, one example being the stereotypes about women in Islam.

**Conference overview:**

Horst Junginger / Katharina Neef (Leipzig): Introduction

*Part one: Atheist mindscapes: visualizations of religion and atheism in the museum*

Edith Franke (Marburg): Construction and deconstruction of religion in museums

Susanne Rodemeier (Marburg): Limits and potentials of musealization

Pardis Eskandaripour (Leipzig): The changing attitude towards Christianity in the Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig

Peter Bräunlein (Göttingen): The devil in the museum. On crucial communication about religion and its limits

Ekaterina Teryukova (St. Petersburg): The issue of atheism in the exhibitions of the Museum of the History of Religion

Joachim Gents (Edinburg): On the road to heaven. Science and superstition in mainland Chinese propaganda posters

Horst Junginger (Leipzig): Visualizing inexistent gods. Atheistic versus Christian aestheticism

*Part two: Atheist conceptualizations. The interplay between religious and antireligious premises*

Johannes Gleixner (Prague/Munich): Central European perceptions of the Soviet godless-movement and the orientalization of atheism

Marianna Shakhanovich (St. Petersburg): Scientific atheism of the era of „developed social-

ism“ in the visual arts

Anja Kirsch (Trondheim): „Socialism will triumph!“ – Aesthetics of atheism in the GDR?

Katharina Neef (Leipzig): Visualizing prejudice: stereotypes against religions

Svetlana Barsukova/Boris Krumnow (Leipzig): Atheistic pictures. Soviet era and modern Russia

*Final discussion*

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