

Religion, Social Commitment and Female Agency. Encounters with subalternity and resilience

Veranstalter: Research Network on Christian Churches, Culture and Society in Contemporary Europe (CCSCE); Interfaculty Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society (KADOC), Catholic University, Leuven

Datum, Ort: 31.05.2021–03.06.2021, digital (Leuven)

Bericht von: Kristien Suenens, KADOC, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

The Research Network on Christian Churches, Culture and Society in Contemporary Europe (CCSCE) brings together individual researchers and research institutes and focuses on historical research on the interaction of religion, culture and society in Europe from the second half of the 18th century until the present.

The online international conference aimed at exploring new perspectives on the fascinating but ambiguous relationship between women and religion. Moving away from an all too exclusive focus on the direct relationship between women, religion, and (political) emancipation, the conference disclosed indirect and implicit channels of female agency, resilience, and self-realization by observing religiously inspired forms of women's social commitment for subaltern groups in society (prostitutes, „fallen“ women and girls, migrants, indigent, lonely and elderly people, the mentally ill...) from the 19th century onwards.

In her keynote lecture, MERVE REYHAN KAYIKCI (Leuven) put an anthropological focus on social commitment, social interactions and volunteering among Muslim women in present-day Belgium. She contextualized the analyses of a four-year study on the motives, expectations and realizations of socially engaged women from Turkish or Moroccan descent within the framework of important Islamic traditions, ideas and practices related to piety and charity. Kayikci problematized some crucial concepts of this conference. Female agency does not always coincide with general understandings of „secular“ female

development. Religiously inspired women can also find self-fulfillment and agency without challenging gender conservative religious and social structures.

The first session further explored the conference themes from a contemporaneous perspective. JOSEP ALMUDEVER CHANZA (Edinburgh) presented his PhD-research on the social commitment of a local fraternity of Spanish Catholic women. The key notion in his contribution was the importance of female devotional labor and its material expressions as mechanisms of female agency. By preparing, selling and distributing a local dessert (*torró*) and organizing devotional processions combined with emotional care for people in need, the Spanish women succeeded in playing their part in the welfare role of the Catholic Church.

RUTH VIDA AMWE (Princeton) examined the role of Nigerian women in street protest against violence and massacres related to tensions in the local communities, banditry and Islamic terrorism. In particular, Amwe analyzed mechanisms of using and exposing the female body and intimate body parts as a tool of female agency and female power. She contextualized this „female genital power“ within the framework of the feminization of Christianity and the shift of the center of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South as well as within deeply rooted traditions of African indigenous religions.

The social commitment of present-day Orthodox nuns within an urban setting in Finland was central to the presentation of TUEVO LAITILA (Eastern University of Finland, Joensuu), NINA MASKULIN and PEKKA METSO (Helsinki). They analyzed the results of an interview project among laywomen involved in the spiritual and apostolic activities of an orthodox women's convent in Helsinki. Three important mechanisms of female empowerment could be distinguished: the convent and its related activities and milieu as a safe heaven for „wounded“ women, as a meeting place of likeminded religiously inspired women and as a female model of Orthodox authenticity embodied by the charismatic female superior of the convent.

In the second session, the focus shifted to the 19th- and 20th-century history of socially

committed Christian laywomen. KARINA BÉNAZECH WENDLING (Paris). Analyzing the role of Evangelical women in Irish charitable organizations between 1800 and 1869, she detected a gradual process of intensifying female agency. Women succeeded in gaining influence and autonomy by using their financing power, they claimed their independence in the administration of their actions, and they developed their own missionary strategies in a system dominated by male actors.

HANNAH FLUIT (Antwerp/Leuven) focused on the evolving gender conceptions of the Vincentian charitable organizations in Belgium from 1845 to 1945. She examined the interaction between the gender roles of socially committed Catholic laymen and laywomen and the concrete charitable praxis of home visits to the poor and placed it against the background of the 19th-century religious revival, the late 19th-century Catholic social and moral doctrine and the development of the Belgian subsidiary system of social provisions in the first half of the 20th century. Crucial in this regard was the entanglement between gender and class identities and the impact of Catholic and Vincentian ideas about social harmony and poor relief.

DOMINIKA GRUZIEL (Florence) examined how different conceptualizations about the role of socially engaged women in the public and private spheres paved the way for divergent models of „modern“ Catholic womanhood. Her analysis of the structures, the gender roles and the opportunities for female agency related to Polish Catholic associations of laywomen in the 19th and 20th centuries problematized stereotype convictions about male dominance and female obedience in pious confraternities. Gruzziel also focused on the capacity of the associations to maintain their relevance in an era of fundamental social change.

DOREEN BLAKE (Vienna) analyzed the perception of and discourses on women's social and charitable activities in the press organs of early 20th-century (1918-1938) women's organizations in Austria. Her research problematized the dichotomy between public and private gender spheres by investigating how socially engaged Catholic women navigated between these apparently dual cat-

egories. The Catholic women's associations were not only active on the charitable scene. By publishing articles and discussing important social, religious and feminine topics on the platform of newspapers or magazines of Catholic women's associations, Catholic women were also able to create public spaces for female action and agency.

The third session moved from laywomen to female religious committing themselves to different subaltern groups. MARIA HEIDEGGER (Innsbruck) analyzed how the commitment of the Sisters of Charity for psychiatric patients in Tyrol in the 19th century was perceived, facilitated, hampered and controlled by (male) medical and religious authorities. Her research linked the history of care with gendered and subaltern historical perspectives. She confronted the voices of sisters and female psychiatric patients and looked for places and approaches to reconstruct the history of women on the margins of society.

KRISTIEN SUENENS (Leuven) focused on the 19th- and early 20th-century prison apostolate of the Belgian Sisters of Providence of Champion. Starting from the dichotomy between „the wise“ and „the foolish“, she concluded that apparent dichotomies between female religious caregivers (the sisters) and subaltern women (the prisoners) had to be questioned and nuanced. In the isolated, harsh and convent-like environment of the 19th-century cellular prison system, living conditions, social positions, feelings and discourses of sisters and female prisoners presented much more similarities and crossovers than might be expected.

The commitment of female religious for vulnerable and marginalized women was also the central theme of JO LUYTEN (Leuven) who analyzed the history of the institute for „fallen women“ of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Brussels between 1827 and 1922, with special interest for the material expansion, internal organization, support mechanisms and pastoral methods of the institute. Examining the foundation of a specific branch within the congregation, offering penitent women the opportunity to embrace „decent“ convent life, he also related to questions of female agency, self-realization and social promotion within the context of a religious institute.

EILEEN GROTH LYON (New York) examined the story of the 20th-century Hungarian religious sister Margaret Slachta and her social commitment. She explored the motives, activities and strategies of Slachta on behalf of subaltern groups and as the first woman elected to the Hungarian Parliament. The contribution originally merged research on religiously inspired social commitment of women for subaltern people (women and children in need and Jews during the Second World War) with an analysis of Slachta's „Christian feminism“ that aimed at promoting women's political rights in early 20th-century Hungary.

The final session kept a firm focus on female religious. FLORA DEROUNIAN (Sussex) presented the results of an interview project among socially committed Italian female religious. Derounian concluded that religious life offered women professional opportunities that were fundamental to create female spaces of autonomy and agency. Although the oral histories confirmed the fact that social or charitable work was of great importance for the self-fulfillment and self-realization of female religious, the interview also reflected the reluctance of religious sisters to express themselves as both individuals and professionals. These narratives echoed wider historical and institutional squeamishness over the recognition of women as workers.

The social commitment of religious women in the Austrian society of the immediate post-war years (1945-1955) were central to the contribution by NORA LEHNER (Vienna). She focused on two organizations taking care of vulnerable and marginalized girls and women that were organized by the Caritas Socialis, a Catholic women's order founded in Austria in 1919, starting from the perspective of the subaltern women themselves. Analyzing ego-documents of female sex workers, she examined how these women perceived the care provisions organized by charitable Catholic women's organizations like the Caritas Socialis.

The last contribution focused on the missionary experiences of female religious. CARMEN MANGION (London) made the bridge between religiously inspired Euro-

pean women and Latin-American missionary work. Examining the Leeds Peru Mission of the Sisters of Mercy, she showed how crucial paradigm shifts in internationalism were enacted on the local level. The research illustrated the shift from the top-down patterns of 19th-century internationalism to the emphasis on solidarity and collaboration with local people and other international groups in the second half of the 20th century.

The conference presented innovative research on women and religion from an interesting transnational and multid denominational perspective. The contributions discussed important issues about the (supposed) gendered identity of social commitment, the specific material and spatial contexts promoting, facilitating or expressing female agency and the search for sources and voices of subaltern people. The conference also questioned the relevance of historiographical and social dichotomies between people in the center and people in the margin and between female piety and female agency, presenting social commitment as an important factor for resilience and reconciliation.

Conference overview:

Keynote lecture

Merve Reyhan Kayikci (Catholic University, Leuven): Muslim women volunteering: Committing to Society is Committing to God

Session I: Care, empowerment and social justice. Religiously inspired female agency in a contemporary perspective

chair: Kim Christiaens (Research Network on Christian Churches, Culture and Society in Contemporary Europe; Interfaculty Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society, Catholic University, Leuven)

Josep Almudever Chanza (University of Edinburgh): Plotting care: women's devotional cartographies in contemporary Spain

Ruth Vida Amwe (Princeton Theological Seminary): „Womanhood on the Streets“: Nigerian Women at the Crossroads of Religion and Social Justice

Tuevo Laitila (Eastern University of Finland, Joensuu), Nina Maskulin, Pekka Metso (Uni-

versity of Helsinki): Lay ascetism of urban women. Empowerment and gender-based Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition

Session II: „The lady and the poor“: commitment, empowerment and perception (19th–20th centuries)

chair: Florian Bock (Christian Churches, Culture and Society in Contemporary Europe, Leuven / Ruhr-Universität Bochum)

Karina Bénazech Wendling (École Pratique des Hautes Études Paris): Experiencing the power of change? Evangelical women agency in the Irish mission field, 1800–1869

Hannah Fluit (University of Antwerp / Catholic University, Leuven): Gender and Catholic poor relief. Women and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Belgium, 1845–1945

Dominika Gruziel (European University Institute, Florence): The Mary's Children and civilizational uplifting of the deprived. The case study of the Polish Sodalities of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Doreen Blake (University of Vienna): Female charitable work in the Catholic Women's Press in Austria 1918–1938

Session III: Female religious and subalternity (19th–20th centuries)

chair: Magaly Rodriguez Garcia (Catholic University, Leuven)

Maria Heidegger (University of Innsbruck): „[...] more powerful than the straitjacket...“. Medical activities of Catholic women's orders in the psychiatric landscape of Tyrol in the 19th century

Kristien Suenens (Interfaculty Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society, Catholic University, Leuven): „The wise and the foolish“. Female religious and female inmates in Belgian prisons (19th–20th centuries)

Jo Luyten (Interfaculty Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society, Catholic University, Leuven): „Oeuvre de la Rehabilitation“. The Refuge of Sainte-Marie Madeleine in Brussels (1827–1922)

Eileen Groth Lyon (State University of New York): Christian Feminism and Social Commitment: Margaret Slachta and the Sisters of Social Service

Session IV: Catholic religious and gender identities in a time of change (post-World War II)

chair: Peter Heyrman (Interfaculty Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society, Catholic University, Leuven)

Flora Derounian (University of Sussex): Working or Calling? Oral histories of Italian nuns' social work

Nora Lehner (University of Vienna): The Caritas Socialis and their care provisions for girls and women in occupied, post-war Vienna (1945–1955)

Carmen Mangion (Birkbeck, University of London): Catholic Internationalism, Women Religious and the Leeds Peru Mission

Tagungsbericht *Religion, Social Commitment and Female Agency. Encounters with subalternity and resilience*. 31.05.2021–03.06.2021, digital (Leuven), in: H-Soz-Kult 10.09.2021.