

Call for Papers

BODY TROUBLE

*THE AMBIVALENCE OF SEX, GENDER AND DESIRE IN RELIGIOUS
DISCOURSE*

Conveners:

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10 to 14 March 2014

Venue: San Millán de la Cogolla, Spain

This conference is designed as a last meeting of former fellows and faculty of this first period of the KHK consortium on the Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe. Looking to the future, during this occasion we will include ample time for informal meetings to assess what we have accomplished thus far and explore opportunities for more collaborative work for the next years. The venue is ideally suited for discussing the topic of religion without external distractions, so we have planned it to take place in the medieval monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla in Spain. Founded as a Christian cave-hermitage in the 6th century and featuring a long history, it is where the first Spanish vernacular glosses to 11th-century Latin manuscripts were discovered. Participants should take this into account considering the limitations of available lodging. Acceptance to the conference will be on a first-come first-served basis.

Description:

The epistemic ambivalence and interpretive ambiguity concerning the physical body in religious thought – in its capacity to represent gender, incite pleasures and transcend sexuality as a mere procreative act, is not peculiar to any given religion, but is discernible in the scriptures, practices and disciplines in the world's major religious traditions. The responses of religious traditions to the physical body range from castigating it as a source of defilement, instituting boundaries to the ways it should and should not be deployed, and even impersonating it by thematizing it as a vehicle for religious experience, ecstatic vision and spiritual consummation. The physical body serves as a foundational category of religious identity in terms of its repression, regimentation and even sublimation in ascetic contexts – for example, the desexualization of the monastic/ascetic body and the transgression of the sinner for whom salvation is denied on the grounds of his/her unbridled corporeality. Though a certain stability in notions concerning the body vis-à-vis salvation schemes may be ascertained in religious scriptures and practices there seems to be an overt discontinuity between sexual bodies and religiously constructed genders where

most often than not, the female body is deemed inferior to spiritual attainment due to its pollution as a menstruating body and through alleged female unrestrained sexual desire. The struggle with the body as a subject of religious representation is that it cannot be understood in stable terms and when it does, it is only the result of its being acknowledged as a subject and site of contestation. However, precisely because ‘body’ cannot be construed as a stable notion, its meaning is troubled and unfixed. It gains its troubled signification as a relational term in and across religious contexts.

This conference will address the inherent ambiguity of religious approaches concerning the body in its multiform expressions that render them as ‘myriad bodies,’ which constitute the domain of religious subjects, instruments or mediums for doctrinal exegesis, interpretive and regulatory practices, disciplinary measures, and constructions in terms of sexuality and gender, while equally serving as markers of differentiation between different religious traditions, within the same tradition and between the religious and non-religious spheres. The body as a site of religious colonization has been constructed and deconstructed from within a binary frame that invents and reinforces divisions and hierarchies between the ‘male and female,’ ‘natural and unnatural,’ ‘eternal’ and ‘temporal,’ ‘physical and spiritual,’ ‘outer and inner,’ ‘pure and impure,’ etc.; while as Foucault has pointed out, systems of power, like religions, define and reproduce the subjects they subsequently came to represent. The stability and instability between these binary terms give rise to a number of challenges that may take the form of exploration, question and problematic: when and how does the body becomes a topic of doctrinal discourse, scriptural exegesis and institutional regimentation (i.e., monasticism, clerical hierarchies, public rituals, taboos, dressing codes, food abstention and consumption, etc)? Can there be salvation, or even religion, with and without the body? How does religious language construct the categories of the body and its conflation in terms of sexual appetites, its gender (dis)continuities and the alleged relations between these? How does the differentiation between body and soul operate in the formation of religious discourse and institutional practice? Is there a recurring tension between Eastern and Western conceptions of body and religion even during a recent acceptance of Eastern prayer and concentration techniques? What is the agency of sexuality and gender in spiritual transformation? On the other hand, how is religion embodied and why do we feel the need to situate intellectual and gender excellence in the body?

If a stable notion of ‘body’ no longer proves to be a foundational premise of religious discourse, perhaps a new sort of religious exegesis is desirable to contest the very reification of gender and desire, one that would take the variable construction of corporeal identity as a normative prerequisite and an embodied soteriological goal.

Deadline for submission of proposals:

Following the KHK format we are looking for original case studies drawn from different religious traditions, historical periods and disciplines that address the theme and aims of the conference. If you are interested in participating **please submit a brief proposal and title of your presentation** (150-200 words) and a **short biographical statement of your current affiliation and research interests** (100 words) to all three conveners **no later than November 30** for immediate consideration.

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