

Religious Press and Print Culture

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„In the beginning was the word ...“ Words – spoken words, printed words, handwritten words, words on computer screens – remain a primary medium of religious communication. The interdisciplinary conference „Religious Press and Print Culture,“ which took place at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Nov. 20-22, 2014, considered the „work“ done by religious words in America across time. For three days, an interdisciplinary group of American and German scholars – from American studies, journalism, religious studies, and church history, among others – engaged in stimulating discussions about how religious print cultures in America have shaped religious identity-formation and social change.

Keynote speeches by senior scholars provided interpretive starting points from which to delve into the chronological panels. Presenters examined the contingencies involved in group identity formation through the religious press, as well as the production, consumption and performance of religious media by diverse religious actors (authors, readers, editors, scribes, and communicative networks). Recurring themes included how religious press causes or simply reflects social change; the community-building and boundary-making function of religious press; how religious manuscript and print media function in the processes of international information flow and religious identification; the religious authority of editors or publishers; how production, marketing or distribution strategies affect religious content and shape culture; and how the materiality of media communicate affectively to readers.

The opening keynote by DAVID COPELAND (Elon, NC) discussed how religious news and ideas circulated in the colonial press before the advent of explicitly „religious“ or denominational magazines.

He detailed the role of early print media in reporting on explicitly religious news (revivals, baptisms, religious events, reprinting sermons). Even when religion was not explicit, however, he argued religious media relied on an implicit, commonly-held Protestant religious interpretive framework and Puritan tropes through which to interpret political events such as the Revolution. Thus, religious ideas penetrated all discourse in early American print culture.

In his method keynote, DAVID PAUL NORD (Bloomington, IN) presented a methodology of reading history with examples from his own research on media and readership. Nord emphasized the need for historians to borrow from social theory in order to formulate research questions that measure concrete behaviors or attitudes and to consider issues such as sampling and dependent variables. Nord acknowledged the challenge that historians have with „found data,“ making opportunism necessary. Ultimately, answers can be found only when the questions are clear, so that listening for the *questions* is the goal of interdisciplinarity when studying print culture and readers.

The first panel examined „Print Cultures and Early Transatlantic Religious Communication“ through German eyes. OLIVER SCHEIDING (Mainz) illuminated the intimate relationship of print and religious identity in the materiality embodied by the *Fraktur* typeset so strongly preferred by Germans in Pennsylvania in early America. Asking how objects enable social worlds to happen through particular artistic and folk modalities, Scheiding analyzed the history and affective visual texture of *Fraktur*, seeing it as particularly German, Protestant and „mystical“ and as both reflecting and shaping the ethno-religious identity of Pennsylvania Germans. He identified the performative context of *Fraktur* within the church, school, and household, and the economy of fracture as made up of typesetters, printers, and readers. In the New World, *Fraktur* was not only a typeset but a unique pictorial expressive manner (including layout and ornamentation) with its own recognizable „personality,“ emotional and political resonances, and visual religiosity. In its newly multiethnic

and migrant context, *Fraktur* contributed to the formation of a Protestant German textual community in Pennsylvania.

Like Scheiding, ANDREAS PIETSCH (Münster) sought to grasp connections between German language, reading, and spirituality among German immigrants. Looking beyond institutional church structures, he used the contents of a 1772 catalog of „old“ German-language books imported by Pennsylvania printer Johann Heinrich Müller, arguing that Müller sought to create „a compendium of true piety“ reflecting the tastes and interests of early German immigrants. This included Protestant classics (Luther, Zwingli) but also a strong interest in Pietist/radical Pietist literature as well as transconfessional works exploring spiritual inwardness and mysticism, such as mystical Roman Catholic books. Based on this, Pietsch provided suggestive glimpses of the spiritual reading interests of German immigrants given the intensely negotiated confessional boundaries of religiously plural Pennsylvania.

In the second panel on the nineteenth century, SHARI RABIN (New Haven) considered how two influential Jewish-American periodicals in the nineteenth century helped readers recreate Jewish life in America in places where there was little Jewish infrastructure, forging a more coherent Jewish-American identity. Through reprinted sermons, local news, advice and advertisements, these periodicals enabled Jewish Americans to connect with one another, advertise or find Jewish products or services, and figure out what Jewish life should look like in America. Rabin highlighted the influential role of the periodicals' editors in particular who served as *de facto* religious authorities for defining legitimate Jewish religious practice in the absence of formal institutional structures.

In a similar vein, JOHN GIGGIE (Tuscaloosa, AL) and JULIUS BAILEY (Redlands, CA) examined how Black periodical editors and readers contributed to Black religious discourse after the Civil War through the „letter to the editor“ section, seeing this as a site of public testimony. Giggie focused on how black periodicals helped strengthen black denominational identity and

forged a broader transdenominational Black sacred identity, while also contributing to the splintering of Black denominations over questions about the „worldliness“ of material Christianity. Meanwhile, Bailey showed how letters to the editor of black denominational periodicals engaged not just denominational issues but broader social and racial issues such as black migration to the West, emigration to Africa, or the use of „African“ in the title of the A.M.E. church.

As a segue to the panel on mission periodicals and transregional religious networks, GISELA METTELE (Jena) offered the case study keynote on Moravian communicative networks and global community. She challenged the dominant assumption that print is a more effective means of communication for promoting close knit religious communities. She noted that scribing and printing coexisted until the mid-nineteenth century in the Moravian movement, with manuscripts playing a central role in fostering global unity for the highly mobile pilgrim group in the 18th and early 19th century. The exclusivity of handwritten manuscripts of news circulated within the Moravian community promoted a stronger sense of community consensus. Despite – or because of the challenges of timely communication – the ritualized reading of the community news each month enforced mutual solidarity and promoted „the mental contraction of space,“ as groups around the Atlantic participated in the „imagined community“ of the *Gemeine*. In the early nineteenth century, community news began to appear in print form and in local or national languages instead of German. While the use of print instead of manuscripts was not necessarily the cause of diminished closeness, it was an indicator of shifting Moravian identity and national identification.

In the panel on missions, FELICITY JENSZ (Münster) then discussed American Moravian missionary periodicals for children in the 1870s, noting the Americanization function of the missionary periodical which created distinct audiences, engaged and inspired readers, and built relationships. Jenz examined how missionary periodicals shaped different layers of community-building and participated in processes of „normalizing“ and

„othering“ in relation to foreign cultures. JUDITH BECKER (Mainz) then drew attention to „contact religiosity,“ describing the impact on religious belief and practice of the information flow from missions back to European sponsors in the early nineteenth century and how this shaped the faith of „awakened“ Christian readers. European Christian readers partook in an imagined global community of religiosity, which changed them, leading to revivals, for example, or helping them adopt new ideas through this mediated intercultural contact. Another perspective on the complexities of how missionary periodicals strengthen and blur national identities at the same time was provided by ASHLEY MOREHEAD (Newark, DE), who described how American evangelicals in the early Republic used missionary periodicals to compete with the British and garner support at home for their own missions, while also fostering international connections and a common sense of Anglo and American mission, contributing to what she dubbed „religious cosmopolitanism.“

The opening presentation of the panel on the 20th century by MATTHEW HEDSTROM (Charlottesville, VA) focused on publishers in particular and the larger cultural impact of the commodification of religious books. The resulting changes in the book market ushered in more diverse and eclectic religious perspectives and represented a cultural victory for liberal Protestantism at a time when their ecclesial institutions were in decline.

The other panelists on the twentieth century focused on periodicals, modernity, and group identity formation. ELESIA COFFMAN (Dubuque, IA), for example, explained how *The Christian Century* magazine came to define and embody the elusive „mainline“ identity in the 20th century during a time of institutional decline. The magazine sought to be the voice of the Christian intelligentsia, exercising an authoritative gatekeeping function through editorial content but also through book recommendations or seminary advertisements. Coffman went on to explore concrete marketing practices and strategies such as circulation, advertising and design, proposing that *The Christian Century* both reflected and shaped a mainline „com-

munity of taste.“

Turning to its main evangelical competitor, *Christianity Today*, ANJA-MARIA BASSIMIR (Mainz/Münster) argued that in the late 20th century, evangelicals were bemoaning a loss of coherent evangelical identity without a clear spokesperson or institutional structures. In this „identity crisis“ *Christianity Today* became a vehicle through which a shared American evangelical identity could develop its voice and how the magazine became an affective plausibility structure that invoked a textual „community of conviction.“ *Christianity Today* thus made evangelical beliefs present in a pluralistic context within which religious identity was seen as precarious by providing not just information but confirmation of convictions – a kind of „identity therapy.“

The last panel moved into the digital age. First, FRANK NEUBERT (Bern) outlined the English-language *Hinduism Today* magazine which serves not only as a way of connecting Hindus worldwide but as a mediatization of global Hinduism. He discussed the history of the American Hindu group that founded the magazine and their early and effective use of computer technology which allowed them to become a kind of spokesperson for the religion and define and shape the concept and practice of „Hinduism“ worldwide. Next, anthropologist MICHAEL KINSELLA (Santa Barbara) considered a newly emerging, networked religious movement of small support groups made up of those who have had a Near Death Experience (NDE) or similar phenomena. Through the group meetings, experience is narrated, shaped, and constructed into a coherent socio-biography and interpreted as proof of an after-life. Such NDE groups are also connected to one another through the consumption and production of afterlife-related print and online materials and through loose social networks online, which promote fluid, hybrid, and multiple spiritual identities.

In her concluding keynote CANDY GUNTHER BROWN (Bloomington, IN) described the state of the field today and pointed out future directions to explore. She hoped to see more work on whether periodicals work in the same ways across time and space, whether the religious press causes or simply reflects

change, and the unintended consequences of different forms of print culture and publishing practices. Brown's research desiderata also included more explorations of print in new religious movements, non-Western religions, and Pentecostal/charismatic movements, as well as studies of print culture and translation/code-switching, materiality, and performance (including hymns/ praise songs).

The conference benefited greatly from the interdisciplinary breadth of methodologies and the careful and nuanced case studies presented. Interspersing such exemplary micro-studies by junior and mid-career scholars with the keynotes by renowned senior scholars was a fruitful approach, as was the chronological and thematic organization of the presentations. These allowed a more complex story to be told about the evolution of religious print culture and its relation to culture over time in America, while raising new questions yet to be examined.

Conference Overview:

Wolfgang Hofmeister (University of Mainz)/Oliver Scheiding (Mainz), Welcome

Opening keynote:

David Copeland (Elon University, North Carolina), Religious Press, Print Culture, and Defining the Nation

Method Keynote:

David Paul Nord (Indiana University), Religion, Reading, and Readership

Panel 1 - Print Cultures and Early Transatlantic Religious Communication

Oliver Scheiding (University of Mainz), Fraktur Writings and Print Culture in the Early German-Language Atlantic World

Andreas Pietsch (University of Münster), Old Books for a New World: John Henry Miller's *Catalogus von mehr als 700 meist Deutschen Büchern* (1769)

Rainald Becker (University of Bayreuth), Catholic Print Cultures: German Jesuits and North America

Panel 2 - Nineteenth Century Religious Press and Print Culture

Shari Rabin (Yale University), *People of the Press: The Occident, the Israelite, and the Origins of American Judaism*

John Giggie (University of Alabama), *The Development of African American Religious Print Culture and Sacred Identity, 1865-1905*

Damien Schlarb (Mainz/Georgia State University), 'A Rendezvous of Advanced Philosophers and Free Thinkers': Skepticist Publishers and Literary Scene of Early Nineteenth-Century New York

Julius Bailey (University of Redlands), *Public Opinion, Social Issues, and the African American Religious Press*

Case Study Keynote:

Gisela Mettele (Jena), *Circulation of Knowledge, Moravians, and Globalization*

Panel 3 - Missionary Periodicals and Transnational Religious Networks

Felicity Jensz (University of Münster), *Communities of Knowledge: Nineteenth Century Transatlantic Moravian Missionary Networks and the Religious Press*

Ashley Morehead (University of Delaware), *American Missionary Magazines and the Promotion of Cosmopolitan Evangelicalism*

Judith Becker (Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz), *International Missions in National Mission Periodicals: The Depiction of a Global World in the Early Nineteenth Century*

Panel 4 - Twentieth Century Protestant Press

Matthew Hedstrom (University of Virginia), *Commodification and the 'Cultural Victory' Thesis: Liberal Religious Publishing in the Twentieth Century*

Jana Hoffmann (University of Bielefeld), *Mainline Ideals of Marriage and Gender Roles in the 1970s Columns of the Magazine *The Christian Home**

Elesha Coffman (University of Dubuque), *Marketing the Mainline: Circulation, Advertising, Design, and Identity in *The Christian Century**

Anja-Maria Bassimir (University of Münster/University of Mainz), 'A long-caged lion

roars': Evangelical Periodical Publications

Panel 5 - The Online Age: Contemporary Religion and Identity

Frank Neubert (University of Bern), Connecting and Educating Hindus: Hinduism Today and the Mediatization of a Global Hinduism

Michael Kinsella (University of California, Santa Barbara), Portraying the Near-Death Experience: Experience, Authority, and Authorship in the Afterlife Movement

Concluding Keynote:

Candy Gunther Brown (Indiana University), Religious Press and Print Culture

Final Discussion

Tagungsbericht *Religious Press and Print Culture*. 20.11.2014–22.11.2014, Mainz, in: H-Soz-Kult 27.02.2015.