

Religion, Gender and Body Politics

Post-secular, post-colonial and queer perspectives

International conference on behalf of the international research project “Interdisciplinary Innovations in the Study of Religion and Gender: Postcolonial, Post-secular and Queer Perspectives”, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, 12-14 February 2015.

Titles and abstracts of the keynote lectures

Sensorial Visuality and Material Cultures of Shia Islam

Keynote lecture 1 by Prof. Minoo Moallem, Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies, University of California, Berkeley. (Thursday 12 February, 20:00-20:45)

Abstract

I will argue that religious practices are sensual and affective everyday experiences that are aestheticized through embodied experiences of sight, sound, touch, and memory. I specifically focus on the ways in which objects, artifacts and commodities contribute to the creation of a 'gendered community of affect' beyond the binary opposition of religion and secularism.

The ‘Hagaramic’ as a provocation for Euro-American, ‘Judeo-Christian’ Provisionalism: Surrogate, Rogue, Resident Alien, Foreign Body

Keynote lecture 2 by Prof. Yvonne Sherwood, Professor of Biblical Studies and Politics, University of Kent. (Thursday 12 February, 20:45-21:30)

‘In excavating the archaeology of Jewish identity, Freud insisted that it did not begin with itself, but, rather, with other identities (Egyptian and Arabian)’. (Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*¹)

In his strangely haunting book, *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud makes Moses an Egyptian and attributes the origins of ethical monotheism to this ‘great stranger’. In his 2001 lecture ‘Freud and the Non-European’, Edward Said reads this trauma to identity as a challenge to European parochialism. The striking book cover turns Europe into a Rorschach test. Europe arises as an eery spectre with a shadow self. In this lecture I explore how the scandal that Freud tried to enact by inserting the foreign-Egyptian at the point of Jewish origin is already being performed on the surface of the Bible: Euro-America’s ‘home’ text. The geneses of the book of Genesis are perverse, tortured, and haunted by others who precede ‘our’ ancestor. Abraham is a resident alien, whose story is proleptically mirrored (and pre-empted) by the story of Hagar. Hagar is the alien slave body used by the Abrahamic family to give birth as the stand-in body for the barren mother. She is a physical surrogate and a textual surrogate: an immigrant mimic of the Abrahamic. She is a prosthesis for the

¹ Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 44.

Abrahamic family; a resident (Egyptian) alien who becomes (in her own complex genealogy) the mother of Ishmaelites, the Hagarites/Hagarenes and Islam, (only) just off the Bible's page. In the New Testament and post-biblical tradition, Hagar becomes a figure of the body, the natural, as opposed to the supernatural realm of divinity and the spirit. The other son, Isaac, is elevated over and *above* her son Ishmael—the first born—because the second son is (in an anticipation of the perversity of the virgin birth) conceived by God's 'visit' to the post-menopausal, barren Sarah (Gen. 21.1).

In this lecture I want to use the stubborn, concrete, and embodied figure of the Hagaramic to trouble bland invocations of the 'Abrahamic' on the contemporary political stage. The 'Abrahamic' is the anxious and also very careful successor of the 'Judeo-Christian'. Abraham and the Abrahamic have been increasingly invoked since 9/11. We are regularly reminded that 'Jews, Christians and Muslims are all children of Abraham' and that 'This is the moment to bring the faiths closer together in the understanding of our common value and heritage', in the words of Tony Blair. In this lecture I want to explore what happens when we replace the spiritualised, bland and often vacuous figure of the Abrahamic with the far more concrete figure of the Hagaramic—and all those troublesome gendered bodies (and concrete details of the religious corpora) that she represents.

Adriaen van der Werff, 'Sarah Presenting Hagar to Abraham' 1699.



Confessions of the Flesh. The Performative and the Material Body in the Documentary Fake Orgasm

Keynote lecture 3 by Prof. Ulrike Auga, Professor of Theology and Gender Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin. (Friday 13 February, 9:00-9:45)

Abstract

Michel Foucault's unpublished lectures *On the Government of the Living* were the intended fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* to appear under the title *Confessions of the Flesh*. In the 1980 held, and 2012 published, lectures he explains the historical foundations of the obedience of the Western subject. It is his idea that confession has largely shaped the 'modern' concept of the subject. Foucault locates these foundations in the connections between obedience and confession within early Christianity. In his genealogy of confession he underlines that the 'West' developed a concept of confession as 'liberation', which does not hold in other contexts. The confession has both made us aware of our own subjecthood and subjected us to the powers extracting confessions. The problem is: to confess, to seek to know, and to produce the truth concerning oneself, amounts to a submission. The injunction "Who are you?" is an innovation of the Christian West intended to guarantee obedience.

Jo Sol's documentary *Fake Orgasm* (2010) stages performer and activist Lazlo Pearlman who explores the subversion of confessional culture via the use of the nude transsexual body. As a female-to-male transsexual performer he experiences the strong request of the audience to confess his 'identity', which he resists. The film is more than an examination of why people feign sexual pleasure. Pearlman performs a corporeal insurrection. In his *Fake Orgasm Manifesto* he writes "Fake Orgasm uses that space to find freedom from the normative; to subvert it, defy it, redefine it; even, and in fact, to enjoy and play with(in) it, whenever, however, with - and as - whoever we please". The example at hand denounces the production of the ontological, identitarian body and bio-political regulations in face of certain regimes' of truth and allows for a genealogical, and critical discussion of the body. Along the questions raised with Foucault and Pearlman epistemological, including conceptual and institutional developments from feminist to/and post/de/colonial, post-secular and queer perspectives in the field of Theology and Religious Studies can be scrutinized.

Islamic reflections about the body beyond heteronormativity

Keynote lecture 5 by Prof. Scott Kugle, Associate Professor of South Asian and Islamic Studies, Emory University, Atlanta. (Saturday 14 February, 9:00-9:45)

Abstract

This talk gives me the opportunity to reflect on research and writing about the body in contemporary Islamic discourse. The talk will be based on my involvement over the past decade of theoretical-theological work done in the queer Muslim movement.

The post-colonial environment and post-secular perspective are crucial, as religion interjects itself forcefully into the experience of the modern West, which once imagined the colonized peoples

would be assimilated and religious authority would be domesticated. Today, Islamic communities, by choice or by force, signify the battleground between modernist aspirations and real limitations of modernism's persuasive power. Against all the presumptions of many intellectuals, religious belief and authority remain persuasive forces for many (if not most) people in the world. Muslims stand as emblematic in this regard, due to their physical-political proximity in the West and due to their intimate-alienation within the rival familiar Abrahamic faiths.

Queer Muslim activists increasingly turn to theology to argue for rights and acceptance within their communities. They promote the body as an increasingly autonomous zone for asserting rights, but have also advocated reform Islamic theology to better assess the body as a complex phenomenon involving gender identity and sexual orientation rather than merely sexual lust and behavioral deviance. Thus activists have increasingly been thrust into Islamic theological discussion, as critics of tradition and also constructive creators of tradition. Rejection of Islamic theology that was formulated in a patriarchal past is no longer an option, as secular alternatives have failed to deliver their messianic promises of progress and liberation.

This talk will discuss the scholarly and activist work of writing about the body in Islamic theology from a queer perspective. It will discuss my work and personal experiences in this field, including successes, failures and compromises. I hope to explain for the promise of Islamic liberation and the risks entailed by engaging with theology.

Negotiating the 'F-words' in Academia: 'Faith' and 'Feminism' within Contexts of Gender-Based Violence

Keynote lecture 6 by Prof. Sarojini Nadar, Professor of Gender and Religion, University of KwaZulu-Natal. (Saturday 14 February, 9:45-10:30)

Abstract

The South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights rank among the most progressive in the world with regard to gender equity, and yet the statistics of gender inequity in South Africa is consistently on the rise. These inequalities manifest themselves in varied forms of gender based violence – physical, sexual and epistemic. This paper proposes that the persistence of this violence is because there is an over-reliance on legislation to promote gender equity, without recognising that beliefs about gender are more likely to be deeply rooted within cultural and religious worldviews than the Constitution. Hence the essential need for critical research and teaching in this area. This lecture traces my more than a decade-long journey researching and teaching within gender and religion – on feminism and faith and the intersections between them in a post-apartheid public higher education context. The paper opens with a discussion of the challenges facing this fundamentally inter-disciplinary field within (South) African academia and society. Thereafter, a critical review of my publications, pedagogy, and praxis will be conducted in order to identify the challenges and opportunities for future research and teaching in this area.