

The Pursuit of Science in Conservative Religious Settings since 1945

Workshop held in Cologne, Germany, July 21-22, 2022. Co-organized by the German Historical Institute Washington, the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne, Justus-Liebig University Gießen, and the Gerda Henkel Foundation, as part of the research project “Religion and Modernity in the U.S.” Conveners: Stefanie Coché (University of Gießen), Sophia Egbert (a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne), and Axel Jansen (GHI Washington). Participants: Joel Barnes (University of Queensland), Almuth Ebke (University of Mannheim), Greg Eghigian (Penn State University), Manuel Franzmann (University of Kiel), Jana Kristin Hoffmann (University of Bielefeld), Zilola Khalilova (Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan), Adam Laats (State University of New York), David Mislin (Temple University), Rachel S. A. Pear (University of Haifa), Laura Popa (International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture, Gießen), Martin Riexinger (University of Aarhus), M. Alper Yalcinkaya (Ohio Wesleyan University).

While scholars agree that “there has never been systemic warfare between science and religion” (Hardin/Numbers/Binzley 2018), the history of religious approaches to science in the twentieth century remains understudied. Considering their prominent political role in many secular societies, this workshop focused on the support and advancement of science and the humanities by conservative religious groups since 1945. In her introduction to the conference, co-convenor Stefanie Coché pointed out that conservative religious institutions of higher education have made contributions to supposedly secular disciplines even if, from within these dis-

ciplines, they have been accused of being anti-intellectual. Coché suggested that conservative religious institutions and their perhaps peculiar research culture represent an important subject for historical research. What was the role and the influence of religious institutions on secular research?

For the reasons laid out by Coché on behalf of the conveners, the conference focused on the development of higher education and research in conservative religious institutions since World War II. It provided an opportunity to focus on historical case studies in various countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In precirculated papers, presenters homed in on educational traditions and research interests of religious groups and religious scholarship, the perception and implementation of conservative agendas of higher education, and on their role and position within an increasingly global research structure.

The first panel, chaired by Almuth Ebke, featured David Mislin's case study of Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia. Mislin introduced this conservative Catholic institution by analyzing its relationship between science and religion. He did so by focusing on the journal *Faith & Reason* published by Christendom College and a school textbook co-authored by one of the school's philosophy professors. While Mislin refrained from defining "conservative Catholic science," he pointed out that the school proudly considered itself to be ultra-conservative. Mislin showed that Christendom professors who discussed (and criticized) evolution had to be careful not to appear to be too conservative because the Vatican, from the 1950s, had assumed a moderate position on evolutionary theory. Mislin made the point that this seemingly conciliatory approach obscured the school's deeply traditionalist approach to science. He also wondered whether religious institutions could be "too conservative." Mislin concluded by sketching the significant impact of Christendom's ultraconservative ideas on the college and

the town. In discussing Mislin's paper, Axel Jansen picked up on the school's peculiar setting in northern Virginia and inquired about its local role and influence. Adam Laats proposed that the appeal of Christendom College derived from its conservatism rather than from its christianity. He added that the 1980s saw the rise of a cross-religious conservatism for which Christendom College may be a poster child.

In his paper, Axel Jansen focused on the role of the Vatican in debates about, and in research on, human stem cells during the late 2000s and early 2010s. Jansen charted how the Pontifical Council for Culture (which coordinated the Vatican's efforts to engage with cultural developments) came to cooperate with a U.S. biotech company so as to counter the perception that the church, through its opposition to research using human embryonic stem cells, helped block the development of life-saving medical cures. By endorsing the company's research on adult stem cells, the church sought to signal that it endorsed promising "ethical alternatives" to human embryonic stem cell research. The Vatican retained its partnership with the U.S. company even after prominent stem cell researchers published studies to show that the particular type of adult stem cells endorsed by the company likely didn't exist. In her comments, Stefanie Coché stressed the importance of the Vatican's intervention in the stem cell wars. She inquired about the different ways in which the Vatican (or different actors representing the Vatican) responded to scientific developments, and university-based researchers in the U.S. dealt with the Vatican's public involvement in their field.

Rachel Pear presented the final paper of the first workshop day to offer a case study of the Yeshiva, a private Orthodox Jewish liberal arts and science college and university in New York City. While Yeshiva University's roots lie in Jewish migration in the 1880s and date back to traditional rabbinical schools on Manhattan's Lower East Side, the university

has defined itself as an institution for modern Orthodox Jews. Pear illustrated the establishment and maintenance of traditional Jewish religion in American higher education by considering *Torah U-Madda* (Torah and Science), a school of thought and the university's motto, as a particular perspective on the relationship between science and theology in the late twentieth century. For her paper, Rachel Pear analyzed essays by Orthodox Jewish scholars and researchers, who discussed the societal and religious context for research and the university. Even if no common perspective emerged from the essays Pear focused on, she showed how the school's (and the religion's) relationship with science was the subject of an intense debate. In his comments, Greg Eghigian wondered how Pear's paper could be complemented by considering the way in which science was taught and pursued at Yeshiva.

In his keynote lecture on "Institutionalizing Dissenting Science: American Creationism and Conservative Colleges," Adam Laats emphasized the need for making sense of American creationism by understanding conservative American institutions. Highlighting three different examples from the evangelical movement, Laats laid out how evangelical colleges' stands on evolutionary theory and their acceptance within the wider evangelical community were deeply intertwined. In the 1950s, Wheaton College, a flagship school for evangelicals, tolerated the incorporation of some evolutionary concepts into its biology curriculum. As a result, evangelical institutions that were more conservative than Wheaton began to question Wheaton's evangelical credibility. Wheaton quickly brought its biological department back in line. Claiming to protect students and staff from secular influence, the evangelical cultural framework increasingly became relevant for the entire institution and its position in American society.

The second day of the workshop started with Joel Barnes' paper on colleges affiliated with religious denominations (Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Anglican) that have

been part of Australia's public research institutions since 1945: the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne, and the University of Queensland. In his presentation, Barnes presented his analysis of journals published by these colleges with an emphasis on essays that discuss scientific developments including those related to the field of biology. Student authors of these essays, Barnes noted, at their respective universities were all taught in secular fields of study. Barnes pointed out that while some essays discuss issues related to evolution, they did not do so from a fundamentalist religious perspective. Instead, authors usually aligned with contemporary societal perspectives at large when, for example, they criticized the dehumanizing effects of technology on society. The colleges, in other words, despite their religious affiliations, retained a science-oriented perspective. The colleges' religious backdrop, the discussion of Barnes' papers suggested, provided students who lived there with a community and stewardship, at least into the 1970s. In her comment, Jana Kristin Hoffmann raised the question to what extent denominational colleges should be understood as conservative and whether their religious affiliation was sufficient to qualify them as such.

In the panel that followed, Sophia Egbert discussed her research on the historical context of the emergence of Christian psychology through Fuller Theological Seminary, the first evangelical institution accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA). Egbert discussed the school's graduate program in psychology, which sought to mobilize for students an "orthopractical" Christian tradition of deducing practical guidance from theology. Egbert emphasized that the introduction of the degree program, aside from institutional challenges, required the evangelical community's endorsement. The college considered its new program a response to a perceived need for psychotherapists due to a lack of expertise in pastoral counseling. In his commentary, Greg Eghigian pointed to the peculiar time and place

of Fuller Theological Seminary in California in the 1960s, a hotspot of religious and spiritual movements. In response, Egbert emphasized the school's national mission and its efforts to advertise in widely circulated publications such as the *Christian Herald*. Focusing on a question about the individual focus of psychological therapy, Egbert and the audience then discussed whether the practice of counselling retained a religious character by sticking to certain preconceptions (such as rejecting divorce) or if religious counseling tacitly advanced secularizing tendencies by focusing on individuals' problems and options, even if it retained such guardrails.

In her paper, Zilola Khalilova focused on the perspective of Soviet madrasah students in Uzbekistan on the secular sciences. With the onset of Soviet rule in 1918, Uzbek madrasahs, or religious schools of higher education, were closed but they were allowed to reopen in 1945. Based on interviews with former madrasah students, Khalilova in her paper charted the role and development of such schools as tokens of the Soviet state's relationship with Muslim religion. In doing so, she highlighted the school's financial independence since they were supported by voluntary private donations. The schools' curricula, however, were shaped by Soviet prerogatives and the state's desire to educate Soviets rather than Muslims. In discussing Khalilova's paper, Almuth Ebke and Stefanie Coché observed that while madrasahs could perhaps be considered "total institutions," some changes to the schools' curricula seem to have been welcomed by their students.

Completing the workshop, M. Alper Yalcinkaya discussed the Cold War context for debates about science and religion among Turkish intellectuals in the 1950s. Yalcinkaya focused on the cultural role assigned to discussions about science and religion by analyzing essays published in conservative journals. Pointing to the contemporary United States, where President Dwight D. Eisenhower endorsed science and religion together, Turkish authors emphasized the need for

religion in democracies. Postwar intellectuals, in other words, abandoned the view of Turkish intellectuals who had grown up in the Ottoman Empire. This older group had rejected the idea of religion, and they had instead favored atheistic materialism. Yalcinkaya suggested that university students' endorsement of religion was an expression of their national affiliation and of their disassociation from Marxism. In his comments, Martin Riexinger highlighted the influence of the Ottoman tradition and its development of materialism, which conflicted with endorsements of democracy through Cold War rhetoric in response to the communist threat. After the 1960 coup d'état, Turkish intellectuals sought to put distance between themselves and the United States. They now argued that Western societies were turning science into a religion, and that these societies were embracing materialism.

Overall, the workshop brought together case studies for how conservative Christians, Jews, and Muslims conceived of, and practiced, modern science. Taken together, the papers showed that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, religious conservative groups did not always consider themselves opponents of science. But they could hardly ignore science, which had become a powerful source for technological, cultural, and political authority since the Second World War. The papers laid out different ways in which conservative religious institutions dealt with modern scientific research. Moreover, they revealed how conservative religious institutions sought to endorse and develop science on their own terms – by implementing degree programs or by endorsing a particular, “ethically sound” strand of scientific research. In all these ways, religious institutions sought to balance a dedication to their religious communities and a concomitant theological perspective with a commitment to change and transformation represented by modern science.

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