

**Archetypes of Liminality:
Cultural Patterns of Apostasy, Heresy, and Conversion in the Monotheistic Milieu**

(Berlin, 22 to 25 April 2004)

Conveners: Daniel Boyarin and Angelika Neuwirth

1. Outline

Arguably, one of our most deeply held assumptions about the phenomenon of religion is that it naturally comes in the plural: The gamut of beliefs and practices subsumed under the term appears to comprise elements so diverse and irreconcilable that surely somewhere borders must be drawn and individual religions must be sectioned off from each other. Yet a closer analysis of the historical genesis of religious identities frequently reveals the contingent and even arbitrary character of such borderlines: There appears to be no general rule as to when diversity is construed as difference, when accidental variation is turned into essential otherness. Of course this observation is especially pertinent with regard to the historical offspring of Biblical monotheism, i. e. Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Christianity began as a peculiar form of Jewish messianism, and the Qur'ân sees itself not as proclaiming a new religion distinct from its monotheistic precursors, but rather as reasserting their lost kernel and thus as fundamentally identical with them. The general subdivision of the monotheistic tradition into three clearly identifiable religious subsystems is thus at once highly artificial and yet palpably real. Paradoxically, the common traits shared by them appear to fuel, rather than to mollify, their desire for unequivocally marking themselves off from one other. It seems, therefore, that it may be precisely a common background of belief and practice which creates the desire for, and the possibility of, encoding variation as alterity. Where nothing is shared, difference cannot be registered; only a sufficient degree of similarity allows two worldviews to mutually perceive each other as competitors.

Our workshop is thus based on the assumption that religious borders ought not primarily to be viewed as an explanation for other cultural phenomena, but rather as something that itself stands in need of explanation. Just like other kinds of communal identity, confessional boundaries, too, are fundamentally ephemeral, threatened by entropy, and thus require constant re-drawing, re-assertion, and re-enactment; they do not merely constitute pre-given and nature-like constraints on the ways individuals act and express themselves, but are themselves fashioned by these individuals' actions and choices.

One of the ways in which this is achieved is by imposing cultural archetypes on what is seen as the transition of such borders. In all three traditions under discussion, heresiographical and polemical writing is one of the primary tools to this effect. Another one are literary accounts of apostasy and conversion, which present themselves as faithful presentations of the inner psychological data that lead people to cross religious borderlines, but at the same time, and perhaps more importantly, contribute to maintaining and stabilizing these boundaries? precisely by patterning and dramatizing the act of transition in ways that set them clearly apart from similar movements within each religion. Narrative accounts and ritual enactments of interreligious violence also serve this function of protecting confessional alterity against disintegration. What we hope to do in our workshop is to examine the literary strategies devised to this effect within the monotheistic tradition, and to gain an understanding of how such strategies vary according to time and place. In doing this, the political and social reality of conversion and apostasy - be it in pre-modern or in modern times - will of course have to be taken into account. The ultimate aim of our

workshop will be an articulation of the way literary archetypes of religious liminality reflect and shape the ways religions interact with one another, and sanction belief and practice within their own fold.

Our research project envisions 'cultural critique' as an activity that takes place within cultural and religious communities and, despite its critical stance, thus claims a basic loyalty to the very tradition it is criticizing. It is therefore crucial for us to appreciate the modalities through which legitimate continuations and adaptations of particular cultural traditions are distinguished from apostasy, i. e. abandoning that basic loyalty which we take to be constitutive of cultural critique.

2. Format of the workshop

The workshop will open on Thursday, 22 April 2004 at with a joint dinner in the early evening and last until Sunday, 25 April 2004 early afternoon.

Participants will receive the relevant texts for the presentations and the readings beforehand. Presentation/Lectures should be no longer than 30-35 minutes. The discussion will be opened by a short comment of ca. 5-10 minutes length.

3. Program

Thursday, 22 April

Arrival until 18.00 (European Academy, Bismarckallee 46/48, 14193 Berlin-Grunewald)

18.30 Reception

19.00 Buffet

Friday, 23 April

Session 1

Introduction: Daniel Boyarin (Berkeley)

Chair: Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin)

9.00-10.30

Virginia Burrus (Drew University): Christianity and Difference: Heresiology and the "Other" Religions

Comment: Gil Anidjar (Berlin/New York)

11.00-12.30

Daniel Boyarin (Berkeley)

Constructing oppositions between "Jews" and "heretics" in the Talmud

Comment: Tal Ilan (Berlin)

12.30-14.30 Lunch

Session 2

Chair: Daniel Boyarin (Berkeley)

14.30-16.00

Khalil Athamina (Bir Zayt), The Conversion of Ka'b al-Ahbar: The interaction between Jewish and Islamic traditions in the formative period Islam

Comment: Agnes Imhoff (Bamberg)

16.30-18.00

Nasr Abu-Zaid, (Utrecht/Berlin), John of Damascus' 'Heresy of the Saracenes' as a Case of Productive Polemics

Comment: Michael Marx (Berlin)

Saturday, 24 April

Session 3

Chair: Nasr Abu-Zaid (Utrecht/Berlin)

9.00-10.30

Ebrahim Moosa (Duke University)

Ghazali's Heresiographical Tract *Faysal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa* (the Decisive Criterion Between Islam and Masked Infidelity)

Comment: Nicolai Sinai (Berlin)

11.00–12.30

Vahid Behmardi (Beirut), Hermeneutical Commentaries on the Qur'an Become Revealed Scripture

Comment Armin Eschraghi (Frankfurt)

12.30-14.30 Lunch

Session 4

Chair: Farid Esack (Cincinnati)

14.30 – 16.00

Judith Pfeiffer (London), Lived Realities – Narrated Truths: Mongol Conversions to Islam in Muslim Narrative traditions

Comment: Şevket Yavuz (Çanakkale / Berlin)

Sunday, 25 April

Session 5

Chair: Gil Anidjar (New York / Berlin)

9.00-10.30

Oded Schechter (Chicago / Berlin), A Language and The Language: Teitelboim's Babel

Comment: Dirk Hartwig (Berlin)

11.00 – 12.30

Gil Anidjar (New York / Berlin), Conversion Races

Comment: Daniel Boyarin (Berkeley)

12.30 – 13.30 Final Discussion

Chair: Daniel Boyarin & Angelika Neuwirth

13.30 – 15.00 Lunch

4. List of participating scholars

Nasr H. Abu Zayd (Utrecht/Berlin)
Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh (Jerusalem / Berlin)
Gil Anidjar (New York/Berlin)
Khalil Athamina (Bir Zeit)
Vahid Behmardi (Beirut)
Moncef Ben Abdeljelil (London)
Daniel Boyarin (Berkeley)
Almut Bruckstein (Berlin)
Virginia Burrus (Drew University)
Abdelmajid Charfi (Tunis)
Farid Esack (Cincinnati)
Armin Eschraghi (Frankfurt)
Dirk Hartwig (Berlin)
Tal Ilan (Berlin)
Agnes Imhoff (Bamberg)
Birgit Krawietz (Tübingen/Berlin)
Christoph Marksches (Heidelberg)
Michael Marx (Berlin)
Abdelkader Al Mehiri (Tunis)
Mohammed Mojahedi (Tehran/Berlin)
Ebrahim Moosa (Duke University)
Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin)
Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (Jerusalem/Berlin)
Judith Pfeiffer (London)
Oded Schechter (University of Chicago/Berlin)
Naila Silini (Sousse)
Nicolai Sinai (Berlin)
Daniel Tsadik (Tel Aviv/Berlin)
Stefan Wild (Bonn/Berlin)
Sevket Yavuz (Canakkale/Berlin)