Religion, Ancestry, and Identity (Hamburg, 3-4 Apr 25)

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Religion, Ancestry, and Identity. On the Relationship between Theology, Genealogy, and Heraldry in the Early Modern Period.

In early modernity, genealogy was a topic of major religious and theological relevance. During the Reformation, genealogical thinking helped to shape new confessional identities, significantly influencing perceptions of family and kinship. References to ancestry served to illustrate religious continuities and the transmission of the 'true' faith across generations. Thus, genealogy not only contributed to establishing religious authority, but also shaped confessional identities and served as a tool for resolving theological issues. This interdisciplinary conference proposes to discuss the various interconnections between questions of origin or ancestry and confessional contexts.
The conference takes as its starting point the seemingly surprising observation that numerous theologians were simultaneously active in the fields of genealogy or heraldry. On the Protestant side, Cyriacus Spangenberg (1528–1604), Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705), and Johann Ulrich Pregitzer IV (1673–1730) can serve as examples. On the Catholic side, the pronounced engagement of Jesuits in genealogy and heraldry is particularly striking, with Philibert Monet (1566–1643) and Claude-Francois Menestrier (1631–1705) being prominent examples in France.
This phenomenon can be explained through the numerous intersections between the fields of genealogy, heraldry, and theology. Genealogical and heraldic practices served theologians as tools for addressing theological issues, such as resolving the conflicting genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Additionally, the merging of secular and sacred fields of knowledge generated iconographic innovations for illustrating and conveying these topics, for instance in the form of printed family trees, which differed from earlier representations. In heraldic literature, there was cross-confessional discussion up until the seventeenth century about the extent to which the origins of coats of arms could be traced back to the 12 tribes of Israel or even to Adam. Christian symbols, such as depictions of saints, were widely used in early modern city coats of arms—a tradition whose traces can still be seen today. At the same time, Jesuits were particularly active in princely genealogy and heraldry. Their studies were initially connected to the education of young nobles in these subjects at their colleges, but they also resulted in extensive heraldic and genealogical compendia.
At least on the Protestant side, theologians engaged in genealogical and heraldic activities often faced pressure to justify their work. Contemporary criticism of genealogical and heraldic studies as vanity or a waste of time must be understood within the context of a broader moral-theological debate about the Christian valuation of family, ancestry, and birth. A central reference point in this

debate was Paul's (seemingly) critical view of the genealogies of ancient Judaism (1 Timothy 1:4 and especially Titus 3:9), around which an antiquarian-theological dispute unfolded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The influence of this criticism can be traced from Spangenberg to Spener.
While there has been some initial research into the complex and sometimes tense relationship between genealogy, heraldry, and theology during the early modern period, the majority of the field remains largely unexplored. This is especially true regarding Christian discourses on genealogy and heraldry, the use of theological arguments in both fields, and changing perspectives on the family as a result of the Reformation, as well as possible confessional differences regarding these topics. The aim of the conference is to illuminate and discuss the early modern relationship between religion and ancestry in an interdisciplinary way.

Possible topics include:
1. What confessional differences can be identified in the use and discussion of genealogical concepts? How did genealogical concepts help to support or clarify biblical/confessional narratives? To what extent do genealogy and heraldry, as secular fields of knowledge, offer a 'common ground' for understanding between different confessions?
2. What media and narrative forms of expressing ancestry can be identified in religious contexts? What temporal and confessional developments can be observed?
3. In what ways and contexts were theological concepts and arguments applied and incorporated in genealogy and heraldry? To what extent did these applications vary according to region or confession within Christianity? What specific theological challenges could be addressed through genealogical and heraldic approaches?
4. How did the contemporary moral pressure to justify their work affect theologians who engaged with genealogy and heraldry? Can confessional differences in these debates be identified? To what extent did societal expectations and norms influence theologians' approaches to genealogical and heraldic studies? Are there specific examples of conflicts between the outcomes of their research and the doctrinal mandates of the church? What strategies did theologians develop to deal with this pressure and present their research as morally justifiable?
5. How do genealogy and heraldry integrate into the biographies of theological scholars? What motivated theologians to engage in these studies? Was it a matter of personal interest, an exploration of their own family history, a didactic endeavour (for instance, as tutors to princes), or a serious alternative career option?

Contributions from cultural and literary studies, history, art history, and theology are warmly invited. If interested, please send a (working) title and a brief abstract by December 13, 2024, to Kai.Hendrik.Schwahn@uni-hamburg.de.

Reference:
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