Clothing sacred scripture (Zurich 9-11 Oct 14)

Zurich, Oct 9–11, 2014
Deadline: Feb 25, 2014

David Ganz

International Conference. Zurich, October 9-11 2014

Organizers:
Prof. Dr. David Ganz (University of Zurich)
Prof. Dr. Barbara Schellewald (University of Basel)

In a traditional perspective, book religions are seen as agents of logocentrism, establishing a sharp dichotomy between scripture and aesthetics, religion and art. This judgment was based primarily on dogmatic assumptions and posterior idealizations, however. In the light of their material, performative and artistic practice, religions of the book show a surprisingly strong tendency to evolve their own »aesthetics of inlibration«. Especially in pretypographic cultures, »clothing« sacred texts with precious materials and ornate forms was a powerful instrument for creating a close relation between the divine words and their human audience.

The questions this conference aims to address grow from a comparative and transcultural approach to religious book culture. Whereas traditional research on book art has focused on single textual communities within exclusive religious frameworks, we propose to look beyond these boundaries. Our discussion of various strategies for clothing sacred scripture shall include objects and practices from all Abrahamic religions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam developed different approaches to the aesthetics of inlibration. By analyzing and comparing these practices of religious book art, we aim to better understand their cultural and historical specificity within a broader spectrum.
To which extent the choice of materials, book formats, and artistic patterns mark religious difference and shape religious identity is one of several questions this conference will address. Yet »Clothing« the book could also produce the contrary effect. Since it was based on practices of circulation and exchange between different religious cultures, it could also undermine claims of religious identity and absolute truth.

Furthermore, addressing questions of materiality and mediality should not obfuscate the conflicts and tensions that arise at times between the visual and tactile dimension and the invisible and intangible dimension of sacred books. In this respect, the activity of adorning holy scripture appears to be located between two extremes that characterize the concept of the book. On the one hand, the book is a visible and tangible container of God’s animate speech, on the other, the book is a threshold that leads to the invisible and immaterial realm of God’s holy words.

This conference will explore both sides of the nexus between sacred scripture and art. How did

art shape the religious practice of books, and how did the central importance of religious books shape the evolution of artistic practices? The organizers welcome contributions from a wide range of medievalist research, discussing topics such as:

- the spatial and temporal structure of books. How do books articulate the process of opening, unfolding, and closing, and how does their physical or visual structure contrast exterior with interior spaces, beginnings with endings? How do these elements create different spheres and times of revelation?

- the performativity of book rituals. Which kind of ritual activities (in the broadest sense) involve sacred books? How does book art answer to the dynamics of animating the letter by reading, singing, displaying, carrying, illuminating and writing or burying books?

- materiality and its transformation. Which materials were chosen for creating sacred books, which semantic values and transformative forces were ascribed to them, and in which ways did these materials contribute to mediate between human and divine spheres?

- ornament and its rejection. Analyzing the art of sacred books can lead to a more nuanced understanding of ornamental practices. In some contexts, traditional ornament is rejected in favor of scripture in its purest form, thus generating a kind of anti-ornamental décor for the book. So when was ornamentation considered merely a mundane practice? And which arguments were put forward to propagate ornament as evocation of divine beauty?

- iconicity and aniconicity of decorated books. Recent scholarship has underlined analogies between the cult of books and the cult of images. This approach has opened new avenues of thought for perceiving books as objects and not just as texts. Some book religions tend to contrast books with images, however, and treat books as alternative solutions for worship. How is the clothing of books related to these contrasting principles of iconicity and aniconicity?

Please send Please send proposals of up to 300 words for 30min papers and a short CV to:
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Reference:

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