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International Conference

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(Non-) Reproductive Matters: Global Perspectives on Religion, Gender and Procreation

Book of Abstracts

Center for Gender and Diversity Research
(ZGD)

Faculty of Economics and Social
Sciences: Methods Center (MC)



Center for Religion, Culture and Society
(CRCS)

Global Encounters Platform: Rethinking
Global Religion

Conference Theme

We invite participants to a conference that will address current debates on both reproduction and nonreproduction with a particular focus on the role of religion in the Global South and the Global North.

The last decades have seen a rise of debates about reproductive matters. They have moved to the centre of local and global negotiations of legal and moral definitions of diverse kinds of kinship, of (il)legitimate sexuality, and of the integrity of bodies. These debates crystallise in questions of the legality and illegality of surrogacy, debates about international adoptions and different technologies of assisted reproduction, and the legal and medical conditions of abortions. They also crucially inflect anti-racist, postcolonial, or (queer-)feminist perspectives on the right to a life with and without biological and non-biological offspring. Increasingly, controversies about the right to reproductive self-determination become entangled with discussions of the reproductive rights of queer people, people of colour, and people with disabilities.

Religious knowledge and belief systems as well as religious actors and organizations have prominently contributed to shaping practices of reproduction and of non-reproduction, and they continue to do so. Regulating sexuality and gender relations has been part of most religious codes of conduct, turning them into matters of biopolitics. In the past, religions have contributed to shaping body and sexual politics as well as boundaries of legitimate desire. Around the world, religiously (self-)defined communities, actors and organizations, but also multiple secular communities frame reproductive matters as specifically moral challenges of enabling and protecting the life of a particular population. Combined with anthropocentric notions of wealth, these religion-based positions have often led to the promotion of pronatalist perspectives on issues such as contraception, pregnancy termination or artificial insemination. However, prohibitions to reproduce and institutionalised childlessness are also equally rooted in religious belief systems, such as monasticism, and celibate asceticism. Non-religious eco-spiritual and ethical movements for the environment are also prominent voices in the debate on childfree lives in accordance with climate struggle and post-anthropocentric ideas of the good life on earth. Practices and discourses of reproduction and non-reproduction thus appear to be inextricably intertwined, requiring a mutual understanding of their respective dynamics.

Acknowledging the large spectrum of religio-political perspectives, the conference will focus on discourses and practices of (non)reproduction and emancipation emerging from religious, religiously structured, and post-secular contexts and communities, and which reflect, for example, (queer-)feminist, postcolonial, or anti-racist positions.

Practicing Procreation: Religion, Reproduction, and Women's Lives

Nancy Ammerman

We normally approach issues of religion and reproduction through the lenses of law, politics, and theology, asking about beliefs, attitudes, and competing interests. While the constraints of law and the role of cultural tradition or politics cannot be ignored, this talk will suggest that we need also to ask about the lived experience at the intersection of women's bodies and religious practice. As women (and men) engage decisions and actions surrounding procreation, their lives and decisions are often shaped by religious and spiritual practices. We must ask how deciding about procreation (and abortion) is linked to religious identities and narratives of the self in religious community, as well as to experiences of the body and its relation to spiritual and sacred realities. We must also explore the spiritual practices that often accompany the effort to conceive, including sacred understandings of that process, even when it is assisted by technology. In addition, we must pay attention to the material, emotional, and moral realities at play in the pregnant and birthing body. In each aspect of the reproductive process, religion and gender are implicated; and our understanding of those implications is enhanced by engaging a multi-dimensional 'lived religion' approach to religious practices that takes each particular global context into account.

Nancy Ammerman is Professor Emerita of Boston University where she had a chair of Sociology of Religion between 2003-2019. Her most recent research focuses on Everyday Religion, exploring the ways religion and spirituality are part of the everyday world of work, home, health, and public life. Following on that research, she has articulated an invitation to "re-think religion" based on sociological theories of practice and a body of research on "lived religion" (*American Journal of Sociology* 126(1), July 2020). Pulling all of this together is her book *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, which was published by NYU Press in 2021.

Reproduction as a Target of Religious and Political Power: Notes from the U.S. South

Lecia Brooks

This presentation explores the convergence of religious and political power targeting reproductive rights in the Southern United States. It argues that Christian nationalism, a potent ideology advocating for a nation defined by extremist Christian values, significantly influences policy and legislation restricting reproductive autonomy and further erodes the rights of marginalized populations.

Drawing on historical and current events, the presentation will examine how:

- **Christian nationalist rhetoric** frames abortion and contraception as assaults on religious beliefs and traditional family structures.
- **Policymakers with Christian nationalist leanings** translate these views into legislation restricting access to reproductive healthcare.
- **Donald Trump, the MAGA movement and today's U.S. Republican Party** are driven by strong support for the authoritarian political theology of Christian nationalism.
- **The South serves as a testing ground** for practices and policies due to its strong evangelical Christian base and history of white supremacy and social conservatism.

The presentation will conclude by exploring the impact of these policies on marginalized communities and proposing strategies to resist the erosion of reproductive rights in the South and beyond.



Lecia Brooks held several significant roles during her tenure at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), where she also published articles and books. She was the Chief of Staff and Culture from 2019 - 2023, where she provided counsel to the President/ Chief Executive Officer and ensured effective internal and external communication, including commitment to a strong culture grounded justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Before her role as the Chief of Staff and Culture, Brooks served as the SPLC's Outreach Director. There she developed strategic relationships with, and served as a liaison to, allied advocacy groups and organisations. In addition to that she worked with SPLC's Legal, Teaching Tolerance and Intelligence projects on community-engagement initiatives. She also was director of the SPLC's Civil Rights Memorial Center, a museum dedicated to honoring the martyrs of the modern American Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, she was the Director of *Mix it up*, a youth activist program. Prior to that, she served as the Director of special Projects at the National Conference for Community & Justice in Los Angeles. As well as the Youth Program Specialist.

Theology and Reproduction: Postcolonial and (queer)feminist perspectives

Chairing: Fahimah Ulfat

"I can't breathe" in Search of Alternatives to Polarizing Discourses on Reproductive Issues: Can African and Mytics Resources help?

Nontando Hadebe

The polarizing discourses on reproductive issues and the conflicts between different camps determined to fight for their positions continues to make dialogue across differences impossible suffocating innovations and imprisoning imaginations for transcending polarities. Can African understandings of community as defining context of life and some teachings on mystery, beauty and oneness from mystics offer some resources for a journey to unknown where new discourses are imagined?

Nontando Hadebe is a Catholic theologian from Southern Africa, currently residing in Johannesburg, South Africa. She works as the international coordinator for the aid organization Side by Side and as a gender consultant for Bread for the World. Her research interests include gender, race, sexuality, environment, and decolonization. She was a research fellow at the University of Free State, a visiting scholar at the University of Regensburg, and is currently involved in the International Commentary on Vatican II (Vatican II Legacy and Reception). One of her recent accolades includes the Pauline-Jericot Award for her work on gender equality in the Catholic Church.

Islam and Human Reproduction

Gamal I. Serour

The paper deals with the position of Islamic law on various issues of human reproduction, particularly safe motherhood, contraception, and infertility including ART. It discusses the different sources of Shari'aa and the Islamic rootings of the known ethical principles. It also discusses how Islamic rulings on contemporary issues in human reproduction are derived from sources of Sharia'a. Islam highly values motherhood as pregnancy and childbirth are responsible for the continuation of the human species on earth, which is one of the objectives of Islamic Sharia'a. A thorough review of the Quran reveals no text (nuss) prohibiting the prevention of pregnancy or family planning. It encouraged breastfeeding for two years, which has a contraceptive benefit. Several traditions of Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) indicated the permissibility of coitus interruptus. By analogy, temporary methods of birth control available today are permitted. Infertility treatment is encouraged in Islam as it preserves humankind on earth, which is one of the objectives of Sharia. However, in the early days of ART Muslim patients and societies rejected ART. Al Azhar, and other Islamic institutes and scholars in the Muslim world have highlighted that the Sharia'a encourages marriage, family formation, and procreation. Thus, procreation within the frame of marriage by various methods including ART is encouraged. If ART is indicated in a married couple

as a necessary, line of treatment it is permitted and encouraged as it preserves humankind. The paper also deals with the position of Islam on modern practices in ART as sex selection, PGT, gene therapy, In Vitro derived human gametes, and other practices.

Gamal Serour is a professor of obstetrics and gynecology, Director of the International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research- Al Azhar University, and former Dean of the Faculty of Medicine Al Azhar University. He is the Past President of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO). He is also a past member of the Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee (IGBC) and the International Bioethics Committee (IBC) of UNESCO and former chair of the FIGO bioethics committee. He is currently the co-chair of EMRO/ WHO HREC (Health Research Ethics Committee). He is the former member and chair of WHO STAG / HRP, RHR, Geneva. He is currently a member of the Islamic Research Council, Al Azhar. Prof. Serour established with two of his colleagues the first IVF Center in Egypt, in March 1986 and delivered the first Egyptian IVF baby in July 1987. Currently, he is also the President of the Board of Directors of the IVF Center, Maadi, Cairo, and President of the Egyptian Fertility and Sterility Society (EFSS), and the immediate past president of the African Federation of Fertility Society (AFFS).

Theology and Non-Reproduction: Recent Developments

Chairing: Simon Linder

A New Abortion Theology

Myrna Perez

How do we move through historical critique to building liberatory futures? In this talk, taken from a recent essay published in *Critical Approaches to Science and Religion* (Columbia University, 2023), I share my attempt to build a new ethical foundation for abortion politics. I call this attempt a theology, but it is not based in either a metaphysics or a sectarian tradition. It is a theology because it desires to claim and shape a new sacred grounding for abortion ethics in the materiality of pregnancy. I begin by illuminating the current sacred grounding for abortion politics in the United States as it has emerged in the last hundred years out of the racial biopolitics of the American empire and the ethnonationalism of American Christianity. But my history is more than a faithful accounting of the past. In writing history, I claim the hopeful possibilities of contingency— in imagining that our abortion ethics might have been otherwise, I argue now that they still might be.

Myrna Perez is Associate Professor at Ohio University, jointly appointed in Classics & Religious Studies and in Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies. She received her PhD from the Department of the History of Science from Harvard University. She was Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Rice University, and has been a fellow at the Harvard Divinity School, and in the Darwin

Correspondence Project at Cambridge University. She is the co-editor of *Critical Approaches to Science and Religion* (Columbia University Press, 2023) and author of *Criticizing Science: Stephen Jay Gould and the Struggle for American Democracy*, forthcoming Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024. Her audio lecture series “The History of Science, Sexuality and Medicine” is available via Audible and Apple Books. She was a featured contributor of the 2023 AAAS documentary “Science as Mastery: A Story of Race and Power”. She has published widely across the history of science, religious studies, and critical race, feminist and queer studies including in *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *American Quarterly*, *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society*, *Immanent Frame*, *Religious Studies Review* and *British Journal for the History of Science*. Her work has been supported by the Templeton World Charity Foundation, the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe, the American Philosophical Society, the Library Company Philadelphia, the Linda Hall Library, the Huntington Library, and the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History. She is a series editor of *Osiris*, the annual thematic journal of the History of Science Society.

Priests who Coerce their Pregnant Victims into Abortions: a Consequence of catholic Sexual Teaching?

Doris Reisinger

Reproduction is at the center of catholic teaching on sexuality. According to official norms and documents marriage, sexual intercourse, and procreation (the preferred term in this context) are inseparable and they are closely linked to concepts of creation and human dignity. The openness to life, the dignity of women as life-givers, and the uncompromising appreciation of every unborn child are fundamental to the catholic teaching on family, sexuality and marriage. Consequently, the Church has persistently condemned birth control and particularly abortion, often framed as female crimes and relying on a certain understanding of female dignity as a key argument. An investigation of specific cases in which priests impregnated minors and young adults and coerced them into abortions and an analysis of the handling of these cases and the canonical norms regulating them reveal a manifest injustice and ambiguity: While catholic teaching on human sexuality relies heavily on the dignity of women as “life-givers” as an argument to encourage openness to life and the carrying to term of pregnancies even under life-threatening circumstances, there is no sign of any ecclesial effort to vindicate womens’ dignity when they are forced by catholic clergymen to end their pregnancies against their will. While sanctity of unborn life is key and center of the catholic anti-abortion position, to the point that women in extreme cases are expected to die rather than abort, priests who end pregnancies are met with understanding from their ecclesial superiors for rather having the child aborted than risk to lose their clerical reputation. Rather than encourage clergy in accepting their responsibility as biological fathers, canonical norms work as an incentive for them to end the pregnancies they cause and so retain their position as spiritual “fathers”.

Doris Reisinger holds a PhD in philosophy and a Masters Degree in theology. She is a research assistant at the Department of Catholic Theology at Goethe University in

Frankfurt/Main, Germany. From 2020 to 2022 she was a project fellow of “Gender, Sex, and Power: Towards a History of Clergy Sex Abuse in the U.S. Catholic Church” (Notre Dame IN). Her research focuses are philosophy of spirituality / spiritual abuse, and gender aspects of sexual and reproductive abuse in the Catholic context.

Reproduction and Religion: From a Practice Theory Perspective

Chairing: Hannah Bennani

Conceptualising Religion, Gender and Sexuality: Endorsing Lived Perspectives and Complexity

Sarah-Jane Page

Religious discourse is predominantly understood as being highly constraining on matters of gender and sexuality; religious edicts and norms pertaining to bodies can and do lead to reproductive and sexual control (Page and Pilcher, 2020; Page and Yip, 2013). Yet the terrain is highly complex, given that religious traditions have a variety of approaches to these issues. Furthermore, religious practitioners do not necessarily absorb and endorse the perspectives of their religious tradition, such as how British Catholics typically take a different view to the Church on matters of contraception (Harris, 2013) and abortion (Page and Lowe, forthcoming). A key question therefore emerges regarding how scholars can conceptualise the study of religion, gender and sexuality. This presentation will outline the perspectives – taken from the sociology of religion and feminist and queer studies – that I have found useful in my own work. This is important given that studies of gender and sexuality have not necessarily considered religion, and the field of religion has been slow to incorporate queer and feminist perspectives. I will therefore focus on three areas: lived religion (Ammerman, 2021; McGuire, 2008; Page, 2017), embodiment (Page and Pilcher, 2020) and intersectionality (Mirza, 2013; Page and Yip, 2020), and I will consider how these perspectives can work in conjunction with each other. I will reflect on this theoretical work in relation to some of the projects I have undertaken, such as child sexual abuse in religious institutions, sex education protestors, queer young people’s religious and sexual identities, attitudes to abortion in British Catholic communities, and religiously-inspired anti-abortion activism. Overall, my approach endorses lived perspectives that embrace complexity and nuance.

Sarah-Jane Page is Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Nottingham (UK). She has worked on numerous projects in the field of religion, gender and sexuality, including the experiences of women priests in the Anglican Church, young people’s sexuality, controversies over abortion, sex education and child sexual abuse. She has co-authored five monographs and two edited collections, including *Religion and Sexualities* (with Heather Shipley; Routledge), *Embodying Religion, Gender and Sexuality* (with Katy Pilcher; Routledge) and *Anti-abortion Activism in the UK* (with Pam

Lowe, Emerald). Her latest book with Pam Lowe was released in 2024 and is called *Abortion and Catholicism in Britain*.

Contested Natalism: Theological and sociological approaches to non-reproduction

Ursula Offenberger/Michael Schüßler

Our perspective is based on Practice Theory especially framed as Un/doing gender while Un/doing religion. Reproduction as having a family and contributing to population growth has since been considered a standard case of the organization of societies in which growth is associated with progress and prosperity. Thereby, Christian roots can be traced to the biblical Commandment of “dominion terrae” (“be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it”, Gen 1.28) and its biopolitical influence. In our contribution we focus on two aspects.

In Christian Theology, reproductive matters are often framed as an ethical decision-making concerning the fetus and the mother that goes along with a contested and polarized discussion about the political and legal framework. A practice theory approach here offers a broader perspective on how the situation is empirically framed, who and what is involved (i.e. where are the men?) and what kind of religious “echoes” and discourses are influential in which way.

Today non-reproduction is not only a matter of abortion, it is as well discussed as a matter of climate protection and reducing human CO2 emissions on the planet. A situational analysis approach focuses on places of silence or blind spots in this discourse and thus asks who is encouraged and who is discouraged from having children and under what circumstances. To what extent the reproduction of some is marked as desirable and some non-reproductive practices are framed as anomalous and problematic?

Ursula Offenberger holds a PhD in sociology and works as professor for qualitative social research at the Methods Center of the University of Tübingen. Her fields of interest are gender, organization, religion as well as pragmatism as methodology for doing empirical research.

Michael Schüßler is a practical theologian at the catholic-theological faculty of the University of Tübingen. His fields of research are the analysis of ecclesial, religious and social transformations with a focus on contemporary crises and conflicts, un/doing gender, religion and diversity, theology of social work and social justice and matters of decolonization in European practical theology. He is co-editor (with Judith Gruber / Ryszard Bobrowicz) and author of the forthcoming “Dissenting Church. Exploring the power of Conflict and Disagreement” (Palgrave MacMillan/Springer in May 2024).

Voluntary childlessness: Perspectives and practices from the Global South

- Ideas and practices of non-reproduction from the Global South
- Post-secular conceptualizations of contraception and birth control
- Ritual, cosmology, morality, and voluntary childlessness

Childless, Childfree or Whole? In this final day we investigate moral, religious and spiritual dimensions of non reproduction in the Global South. In mainstream narratives of religion and family planning, “fertility” and religiosity are commonly discussed in a linear and directly proportional relation: the more religious the society, the higher the fertility. In other words, religious commitment is entangled with pronatalist feelings and negative perceptions of both contraception and childlessness (Uecker et al. 2021). However, voluntary childlessness has been closely connected to religious knowledge and ritual practice throughout the global history of religions, within and beyond the institutions of renunciation, asceticism and monasticism, as the case of yogic-Tantric consorted renouncers from Bengal clearly demonstrates (Openshaw 2004; Knight 2011; Lorea 2018). Diverse conceptualizations of childlessness have the potential to unsettle the epistemic ethnocentrism of hegemonic and secularist vocabularies of childlessness like the environmental, neo-liberal, and white feminist declensions of “voluntary childlessness” in Global North modernity.

In this final set of four panels, we gather a diverse array of scholars interested in exploring the meanings of childlessness, transcending the disenchanting and positivist language of the Global North, integrating diverse understandings of birth, non-birth, contraception, womanhood, parenting, emancipation and degrowth that take into consideration the entanglement of ritual, spiritual, moral, cosmological, and affective dimensions with human (non-)reproductive bodies.

Discourses and Practices of Nonreproduction in South Asia

Chairing: Poonam Kamath

Can ‘non-birthing’ Muslim Women be part of Social and Political Imaginings of Bangladesh?

Papreen Nahar

Motherhood stands as a revered concept across South Asia, enshrined within the teachings of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, irrespective of its manifestation in reality. In Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim society, Islamic texts underscore reproduction as a fundamental tenet of marriage, elevating the maternal role to a sacred status, which is culturally too embedded.

Despite societal pro-natalist leanings, the Bangladeshi government has adopted an antinatalist stance influenced by global population control initiatives stemming from concerns raised by Ehrlich's "The Population Bomb" in 1968. However, this adoption has drawn criticism for reflecting Western imperialism and marginalizing non-conforming individuals, such as the infertile or voluntarily childless, from social and political discourse. These individuals, navigating societal pronatalist expectations and governmental anti-natal policies, are often excluded from discussions due to their "non-birthing" state.

Examining Candace Johnson's (2023) discourse on the "reproductive subject," this analysis underscores the tension between reproductive justice and rights, emphasizing the exclusion of "non-birthing" identities from mainstream narratives. On the other hand, Openshaw's (2004) exploration suggests the traditional practice of inclusion of "non-birthing" women; *yogic-Tantric* in Bengal, raises questions about the acceptance of diverse identities within Bangladesh's Islamic framework. While Bangladesh historically practised a flexible form of Islam, the rise of conservative interpretations like Wahhabism challenges this flexibility, potentially constraining societal space for women diverging from traditional reproductive roles.

It necessitates a broader discourse on reproductive justice and rights, challenging entrenched norms and advocating for inclusivity, regardless of women's reproductive choices and impairments, which can bring justice and rights to them.

Papreen Nahar is a medical anthropologist, at the University of Sussex, UK, with over fifteen years of experience researching various topics of global health focusing on gender, marginality, and inequity in health. Her primary scholarly contributions are on reproductive health and infertility/childlessness in LMIC, specifically in Bangladesh. Her recent book 'Childlessness in Bangladesh' by Routledge, has used the theory of intersectionality and made a novel contribution. Her geographical area of interest is Bangladesh, India, Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda and UK, research topics include, Antimicrobial-Resistance, Neglected-Tropical-Diseases, Non-Communicable-Diseases, mHealth, Migrants-wellbeing, and Natural-disasters. One of her current research is, WHO funded, 'Male Infertility' in Bangladesh'.

Masters of Conception and Contraception: Childlessness as Wholeness in Bengali popular Religious Movements

Carola Lorea

Bāul, Fakir and Vaishnava gurus, male and female, in rural Bengal have often a thriving career as masters of conception and contraception. My presentation combines oral-literary sources with extensive ethnography to discuss discourses and practices around birth control. Practitioners who take vows of joint renunciation (*bhek-dhāri*, *yukta-sannyās*, *kilāphat*) live as a sexually active heterosexual couples but cannot bear children; their renunciation prevents them from engaging in reproductive labour, and while they might take care of other people's children, they commit to not producing progeny of their own.

I will first discuss the system of knowledge and the techniques of the sexual, reproductive body within these esoteric lineages. I will then argue that these ritual practices have tremendous implications in the social spheres of family planning, reproductive health, and non-normative sexuality. I argue that biotechniques of the reproductive body transmitted by esoteric performer-preachers for the conception of healthy children, or for contraception and *voluntary childlessness*, provide a continuum of tropes, ideas and rituals, connecting premodern Bengal with present day communities across the Indo-Bangladesh border.

Carola E. Lorea is currently a Junior Professor at the University of Tuebingen, Institute for the Study of Religions. She is interested in oral traditions and lived religion in South Asia, Tantric traditions, and sound. She was a Senior Research Fellow at the Religion and Globalisation cluster of Asia Research Institute, NUS. She received research fellowships from IIAS, Gonda Foundation (Leiden) and SAI (Heidelberg) to study travelling archives of songs in the borderlands of India and Bangladesh. Her first monograph (*Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman*, Brill 2016) discussed the intersections of religion, displacement and sacred sounds through the lens of performance. Her articles appeared on *American Anthropologist*, *Asian Ethnologist*, *Asian Medicine*, *Religions*, *History and Society of South Asia*, *Religion and the Arts* etc. Her current book project on the Matua community employs sounds and songs to discuss caste, religion and displacement in the Bay of Bengal.

Responsibility, Suffering, Sacrifice: the Moral Economies of Childlessness

Chairing: Isabel Laack

Transgressing norms: Voluntary Childlessness across Time in Indigenous Ethnic Cosmologies of Ghana

Charles Prempeh & De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway

In Ghana, formerly known as the Gold Coast, indigenous ethnic lifeways generally adhere to a pro-natal perspective. Childbirth is deemed key for the perpetuation of biological and social life. Despite this prevailing cultural norm, our paper seeks to illuminate the existence of “special” instances where certain “special” individuals deliberately choose the path of voluntary childlessness and are socially sanctioned for such decisions. By examining these “special instances and persons,” we aim to uncover how their choice of voluntary childlessness receives social approval in a society where such a decision is typically considered taboo according to ordinary cultural sensitivities. In the context of modernity in the Global North, particularly in Europe, the separation of transcendental and natural realms and the influence of mercantilist and capitalist economies have largely secularised fertility and reproductive matters, incorporating fertility issues, notably childlessness, into secular discourses. Conversely, in Ghana's "enchanted" ethnic spaces, childbirth remains deeply rooted in

religious and spiritual beliefs, perceived as a divine gift and social responsibility. While Eurocentric-Christian and Islamic discourses suggest that childlessness conflicts with Ghanaian cosmogony, our paper argues that indigenous cultures historically accepted voluntary childlessness as a form of spiritual sacrifice, aiming for higher spiritual potency. This paradoxical situation involves sacrificing potential life for spiritual growth, challenging conventional secular interpretations of childlessness as a personal choice for fulfillment. Instead, it highlights a broader cultural understanding where voluntary childlessness serves transcendental purposes, benefiting both individuals and society, showcasing a unique perspective on the intersection of spirituality, culture, and reproductive practices.

Charles Prempeh is a Research Fellow at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. He is PhD holder from University of Cambridge, with specialisation in Theology and Religious Studies. He has taught and researched at institutions like Makerere University and University of Ghana, focusing on interdisciplinary African Studies encompassing history, gender, religion, and politics. His work is published in esteemed journals like African Studies Quarterly and Religion Compass.

De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway is Professor of history (Social and Cultural History of African and African Diasporic Peoples) at University of Cape Coast, Ghana. He has conducted research and taught at international universities, such as University of Cambridge and University of South Florida. As an African Humanities Program Fellow, he had a postdoctoral stint at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa in 2013/2014. Professor Botchway has presented his work in different countries including Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, UAE, and USA.

„Era muito sofrimento! “: Social Suffering, Childlessness and Liberal Feminism among low-income Women in Northeast Brazil

Luminița-Anda Mandache

Once a problem of wealthy nations, emerging economies also experience lower-than-expected fertility rates or what demographers call the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2014). This research turns the gaze on women in Brazil to understand how the increase in living conditions and the spread of liberal democracy, particularly liberal feminism, in the past twenty years, impact women's fertility intentions. This paper presents the preliminary findings of an exploratory study conducted at the periphery of Fortaleza, a city in Northeast Brazil, a place known for its persistent poverty and high fertility rates. Two inter-connected threads are present in the narratives of all women. First, women speak about liberal emancipation as a revelation or awakening to a better life where fulfillment consists of emancipation through education, control over one's body, and desire to be economically independent. Secondly, women, and particularly childless women, speak a great deal about testifying to the suffering brought by pregnancy to other women, especially mothers, but also friends or neighbors. They associate pregnancy with what anthropologists call social suffering (Kleiman, Das, and Lock 1997). For such women unplanned pregnancy leads to suffering and worry about ways to care for children and ended abruptly trajectories

of emancipation for women. The last theme points also to new ideals of womanhood, that move away from marianismo, where women's suffering was associated with cultural value and respect. Between these two themes, presented as morally opposed to each other, stand moments of contradiction or tension, illustrative of how subjectivities are formed.

Luminița-Anda Mandache, Center for Ethics and Poverty Research, University of Salzburg, is a socio-cultural anthropologist interested in political cultures undergoing transitions; her areas of interest include social movements and activism, urban poverty, urban violence, and political polarization. Her current project explores the drop in fertility rate in Brazil, among lower-income women, as related to the creation of a fragile middle-class, and the pervasiveness of liberal feminism ideals. Her areas of interest are Latin America (Brazil) and Eastern Europe (Romania). Email: luminita-anda.mandache@plus.ac.at

Making a Responsible Choice: Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Urban China

Birgit Herrmann

In late 2015, the Chinese government ended its infamous one-child policy after more than three decades and implemented a two-child policy in its place. In 2021, the policy was further relaxed to allow every couple three children. New procreational freedoms notwithstanding, birth rates have continued to decline. Numerous studies have shown that couples are reluctant to have more than one child mainly due to the high cost of raising children and a perceived incompatibility of family and career, especially for women. However, despite their growing prevalence, people who refrain from having children altogether have mostly been left out of the debate so far. The study at hand attempts to fill this gap by taking a closer look at voluntary childlessness in contemporary urban China. Based on problem-centered interviews with ten voluntarily childless women and men in four Chinese cities, it sheds light on the motivations behind the couples' decision against parenthood and the conflicts that arise from it. It illustrates how the informants draw on both traditional and nontraditional concepts to defend their childlessness, and how they frame their decision as a responsible choice – both for themselves and the never-born children – in an environment of pressure and uncertainty. An additional 42 interviews with never-married women and men provide further insight into young Chinese urbanites' doubts and hesitations regarding procreation. The author seeks to demonstrate that voluntary childlessness in China has to be understood in the unique Chinese setting that is shaped by rapid economic development, remnants of Confucian values, state-imposed birth planning, and radical social change.

Birgit Herrmann studied Chinese Studies in Wuerzburg and Beijing and is currently conducting her PhD on Late Marriage and Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Urban China.

Voluntary Childlessness in Indian Buddhism

Chairing: Karin Polit

Restraint amid Obsession? Vignettes of contemporary Indian Buddhist practitioners

Dr. Amrita Nandy

Buddhism views birth as both a cause and a symptom of suffering. And yet, this introspective practice offers only precepts to its laity vis-à-vis matters of sexuality and procreation, unlike the religions of the book that issue pronatalist commandments. Committed lay practitioners though stand to gain more if they do not interpret 'precepts' as sanction or license for freedom of choice. After all, the quintessential Buddhist insight is that the more we entwine ourselves with worldly desire and attachment, the further we get from *nibbana* (liberation from suffering caused by desire and attachment). Since the parent-child bond is, among others, an epicentre of desire and attachment, parenthood can make the human journey even more challenging, especially for those in serious pursuit of the spiritual path. However, forsaking the desire for a potential child can place lay Buddhists, especially women in India, between two opposing ideals---childfreeness, a cherished condition for *nibbana* and parenthood, a deeply aspirational agenda of a very pronatalist culture. Since each position can be a rather different path towards *nibbana*, how do lay Indian practitioners interpret precepts to navigate their *samsaric* (worldly) lives and simultaneously embody their Buddhist ideals, and juggle their affective needs with spiritual goals? Do women find the Buddhist path to be more agentic because it does not emphasize motherhood over *nibbana* and, in this sense, frees them from their otherwise-essentialized bodies and roles? This paper-to-be will explore answers to such queries via the narratives of Indian practitioners from across gender, caste, and other social markers of identity. In doing so, it will juxtapose the canonical (such as the Tipitaka) with lived practice, the historical with the contemporary, the ideal with the actual.

Amrita Nandy (Ph.D, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, MSc. Women's Studies, University of Oxford, U.K) is a lecturer, researcher, and writer whose work spans issues of gender, human rights, and culture. She has taught an inter-disciplinary cohort of doctoral students and a class of Masters' in Gender Studies at Ambedkar University, Delhi. In 2022, she received the Dalai Lama Fellowship for Nalanda Studies from the Foundation for Universal Responsibility, of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, to write a monograph on the intersection of spirituality and social justice. Her doctoral research on women's choices vis-à-vis motherhood and mothering won her the Fox Fellowship at Yale University (2013-2014). Dr. Nandy has spent over a decade with grassroots and research organisations, working on primary, action-research, and evaluation studies. In this time, she has also written for several newspapers and portals. All this work delves into different forms of and issues around sexual-and-gender-based violence against women, unpaid labour, as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights. She is currently working on a conceptual paper on the

understanding and praxis of collectivisation by two Adivasi-led trade unions and their socio-political journeys towards justice.

Voluntary Childlessness and Buddhism: A Postcolonial Conundrum

Sukumar Babu Ramapuram Samuel Vijay

The Voluntary Childlessness is a dilapidated area in Religious studies; also a crucial issue in the contemporary society and its implications are related with gender, economy, society, culture, family and politics. At present whole world is overcrowded, it is a question of survival, existence of a single human being and equal distribution of resources. In this connection, I will be dealing issues related with voluntary childlessness and Buddhism in Global south, special focus will be examined from the South Asian societies, where impact of religion is sensitive, influential and also explosive. Human etiquette is influenced by religion and its associated institutions in the South Asian societies. Religion also makes influential impact on the decision making regarding making and unmaking procreation. There are strong negative attitudes and traditional beliefs associated with voluntary childlessness. From the point of Judaism, in Torah (Deuteronomy 7:12-14) has mentioned about sterility and barrenness as a curse from Yahweh, which is a brutal discrimination against women who are barren. Judaism also has a strong influence on Protestant Bible and Christianity also believes also carry the same discrimination against barrenness, same case with Islam as well. I am not making Buddhism as a model rather I am critically evaluating how Buddhism is inclusive regarding Voluntary childlessness even though Buddhism also has negative sides. I am examining how Buddhism plays an important role to carry the legacy of voluntary childlessness. Interestingly two schools in Buddhism (Theravada and Mahayana) are unique and differ from one another in terms of rituals, monastic life; yet there are certain models of childlessness, however the relationship between Childlessness and Buddhism has not received much academic attention, because Buddhism is understood as a philosophy of life rather than a religion although Buddhism has recognized as one of the major religions in the world. Buddhism does not go against contraception, but having many children is not viewed as a blessing or prosperity, rather it is a personal choice. I will be examining how each religion based on scriptures look at voluntary childlessness and compare, analyze. I also collected some songs in Buddhism in rural villages in India, on how to challenge patriarchy and get Nirvana (Enlightenment) without children. Some songs speak on how important for a woman to take crucial decisions with regard to voluntary childlessness rather than male domination.

Sukumar Babu Ramapuram Samuel Vijay is currently a PhD candidate in Theology at Goethe University, Germany. He has been researching on how sounds are expressed beyond literature by the Dalit (Untouchable) communities in South Asia and also Dalits who migrated as Indentured laborers to Fiji Islands and Caribbean Islands in the Eighteenth century. He teaches Tantric Yoga and Dance Yoga, served as a Priest in Anglican Churches in rural villages in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, and teaches Samavedham chanting.

Voluntary Childlessness in Yoga, Alchemy and Ascetic Traditions

Chairing: Heike Oberlin

The Childless Ascetic: Strategy to break *saṃsārik* chains

Daniela Bevilacqua

In various religious traditions, asceticism has been often associated with celibacy (see Olson 2008). In South Asia, textual sources discussing *tapas*, yoga and then *haṭhayoga* demonstrate the strong connection between asceticism and the development of practices aimed at controlling and retaining sperm within the body to preserve accumulated spiritual power, and to achieve liberation and eventually immortality (see Doniger 1973; Olson 2014; Mallinson 2018). These two goals, seemingly in opposition, may suggest however a more nuanced meaning related to the importance of remaining childless.

Beginning with a historical and textual analysis, this paper then describes how contemporary *sādhus* understand and practice celibacy (*brahmacarya*). To follow, it illustrates how this practice is fundamental for keeping the individual detached from *saṃsāra*, thereby averting involvement in familial commitments. By reversing the process through which the human body is socially constructed, the paper proposes the idea of the human body becoming the means to “dismantle” that societal constructs that foster attachment and desires that usually lead to reincarnation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the paper questions whether celibacy serves not only the ascetic who practices it, but also prevents other human beings from entering *saṃsāra*, thus disrupting the chain from its inception and leading to an immortality that, contrary to Vedic ideals (Olivelle 2008) is linked to the absence of progeny, thereby avoiding the perpetuation of one’s material self in the world.

Daniela Bevilacqua is an Indianist specialized in Hindu asceticism, investigated through an ethnographic and historical perspective. She received her PhD in Civilizations of Africa and Asia from Sapienza University of Rome and in Anthropology from the University of Paris Nanterre. She worked in the ERC- funded Haṭha Yoga Project (2015–2020) based at SOAS. She is currently a researcher at CRIA (ISCTE-IUL) in Lisbon. She authored *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India* (Routledge 2018), *From Tapas to Modern Yoga. Sādhus’ Understanding of Embodied Practices* (Equinox 2024), edited volumes, and written several articles and book chapters on topics related to Hindu religious tradition, gender, and embodied practices.

Menstrual Practices: Conception and Amenorrhea in early *haṭha* Yoga

Ruth Westoby

Reading beyond the misogyny and seeming absence of women in premodern Sanskrit texts on *haṭha* yoga (11th to 15th centuries) reveals sexual and menstrual practices oriented towards ‘spiritual embryology’ that may also have facilitated non-procreative sex and even the halting of menstruation. One of the bodily foundations of *haṭha* yoga is that external procreation, i.e. union of male and female seed through sexual activity, leads to death for the yogi (through the continuing production of *saṃsāra*). However, internal union of male and female seed makes one a yogi and immortal. This paper presents a reading from the margins, and based on marginal readings, to demonstrate that sex where it was enjoined was during the menstrual flow. Sexual fluids, whether the actual products of ritualised sex or their interiorised, celibate correlates, are to be drawn upwards inside the body. Occasionally women are instructed in this practice. The approach is neither erotic nor censorious but pragmatically accepting of sexual pleasure. The implication of this practice for women may have been voluntary amenorrhea, the stopping of menstruation. The paper argues that this evidence demonstrates not only a general context of anti-natalism within ascetic communities, but practical interventions to avoid conception. Further, the paper contextualises these findings by pointing to systematic practices of amenorrhea in Chinese female-oriented inner alchemy (*nüdan*) and traces of these ideas in contemporary New Religious Movements.

Ruth Westoby is a doctoral researcher in yoga and an Ashtanga practitioner. Ruth is writing up a thesis on the body in early *haṭha* yoga, ‘The might yoga body in early *haṭha* texts’, at SOAS University of London, prepared under the supervision of Dr James Mallinson. Ruth has published early research findings in the peer-reviewed *Religions of South Asia* and numerous public articles. Ruth collaborated with the SOAS *Haṭha* Yoga Project’s ‘embodied philology’, interpreting postures from an 18th-century text teaching a precursor of modern yoga, the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, in 2016 and 2017. Ruth is Visiting Lecturer in Indian Religions at Roehampton University, teaching postgraduate theory and method in the study of religion and undergraduate religion, ecology and politics and contemporary issues in global religions. Ruth serves on the Yoga in Theory and Practice Unit of the American Academy of Religions and served a four year term on the steering committee for the SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies.

Chairing Persons:

Fahimah Ulfat is a Professor of Islamic Religious Education at the University of Tübingen. She specializes in empirical research using social science methodologies to explore the beliefs and knowledge concepts of Muslims. Her additional research interests include interreligious education, Jewish-Muslim relation, the intersection of gender and religion, and the use of virtual reality in teacher training. Dr. Ulfat's work is notable for its interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from various fields to address contemporary issues in religious education.

Simon Linder works as a research assistant at the Chair of Practical Theology at the University of Tübingen with Prof Michael Schüßler. He studied Catholic Theology and General Rhetoric at the University of Tübingen. In 2023, he completed his doctorate in Catholic Theology with the dissertation "A disputing church in the digital present: Why a theology of digitality demands synodality and a culture of dispute" (published in German), which was graded "summa cum laude" and awarded with the University of Tübingen's doctoral prize. He is currently researching the topic of assisted suicide.

Hannah Bennani (she/her) is a sociologist who researches, teaches, and advises in the fields of anti-discrimination, human rights, and categorization research. She is interested on social differentiations based on gender, sexuality, disability, and indigeneity. She received her PhD from the University of Lucerne and currently works at the local anti-discrimination agency adis e.V. Hannah is a research associate at the Center for Gender and Diversity Research at the University of Tübingen.

Poonam Kamath is a doctoral student and research assistant in the department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. She studied Medical Anthropology (M.A.) at the University of Heidelberg, Chemistry (B.Sc.) at the University of Mumbai and Biotechnology (M.Sc.) at the University of Bangalore. She has worked as a research associate on two projects: WunschKinder- Differences in the meanings of a "desired child" between German and Indian Women (funded by the DFG) and the other titled, "Home Away from Home": 'Cultural Capital of the Indian Diaspora in Germany which was a collaborative project between the Universities of Bonn, Heidelberg and the Indian Embassy/Consulate. Her ongoing doctoral research deals with the genealogy of Kinderwunsch and its virtual presence in digital environments in Germany.

Isabel Laack is Professor for the Study of Religions at Tübingen University (Faculty of Humanities). Her research focuses on Indigenous Mesoamerican and North American traditions as well as contemporary religiosity in Europe, particularly on Aztec religion, Indigeneity, and (Neo-)Paganism. She works on aesthetics of religion, embodiment,

sound, visuality, and material text practices as well as on processes of identity formation in religiously plural contexts.

Her main publications are *Aztec Religion and Art of Writing. Investigating Embodied Meaning, Indigenous Semiotics, and the Nahua Sense of Reality* (2019) and *Religion und Musik in Glastonbury. Eine Fallstudie zu gegenwärtigen Formen religiöser Identitätsdiskurse* (2011).

Karin Polit is a professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Tübingen University. She is an expert in social anthropological fieldwork with a strong focus on gender, habitus, and memory. She has taught social anthropology, medical anthropology, the anthropology of development, and the anthropology of violence at various universities in Germany and India. She has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Asia and Europe. She has worked on social inequalities, the production of marginality, heritage, and performativity and has published broadly on these topics. Her publications include "Women of Honour", "Ritual Heritage and Identity" and "Childbirth and its accompanying Rituals".

Heike Oberlin is Head of the Department of Indology and, among others, Deputy University Equal Opportunities Officer at the University of Tübingen. She studied Indology, Social and Cultural Anthropology and Sanskrit theatre in the Kutiyattam style. Her main research interests are the performing arts of India, Malayalam and Kerala studies, manuscriptology and gender studies. In 2004 Heike earned a Doctorate in Indology with distinction (Univ. of Würzburg) and was awarded the Ernst Waldschmidt Prize 2008 (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). She was habilitated in 2013 (*venia legendi* for Indology) and appointed as an "Extraordinary Professor" in 2016 (Univ. of Tübingen). Heike was invited as a "Scholar in Residence" under the "Erudite Scheme" of the Kerala State Higher Education Council in 2018. In 2019, she received the Gisela Bonn Award for special achievements in the field of Indo-German relations.