



Call for Papers

“Gendered Charismas: Historical and Transnational Perspectives”

19-20. March 2021

The faculty of theology at Heidelberg University and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies invites proposals for an international conference—to be held digitally in its entirety—exploring religious charisma through the lens of gender.

In recent years, the rise of populist movements in the Western world has stoked academic interest in both why and how charismatic leaders come to command authority in various social domains. Religious motivations and gender dynamics have typically played significant roles in fostering and perpetuating these phenomena. This conference will focus on the intersections of charismatic authority, gender, and religion in historical and contemporary contexts. In these colloquia, conference participants will present and discuss topics related to the operational dynamics and long-term effects that “gendered charismas” have had on society in general and churches in particular. Due to the pandemic, the conference will take place online on March 19-20, 2021.

When Max Weber first conceptualized his ideal types of charismatic leadership, his examples of charismatic authority among religious leaders included the Mormon founder Joseph Smith Jr., Native American shamans, and the Dalai Lama. However, he did not consider female examples and, thus, neglected the gendered resonances of religious charisma. Historians of religion in their analyses of exceptional women, such as the medieval mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg or Ellen G. White (foundress of the Seventh-Day-Adventists), have both utilized and moved beyond Weber’s relatively narrow and exclusively male-oriented concept to present the various ways in which charismatic women shaped confessional and denominational theologies, altered social cultures, and promoted innovative agendas. Historians of gender have noted how charismatic authority can promote progressive personal and public empowerment, and work to limit progress in these areas through the machinations of toxic masculinities and appropriations of hegemonic power and patriarchy.

Keynote speaker: Professor Marilyn J. Westerkamp (UC Santa Cruz)

We seek papers that investigate different approaches to and elements of ‘gendered charisma.’ Contributions could speak to one or several of the following areas:

- Operational mechanisms that allowed charismatics to establish themselves within specific cultural milieus and historical moments.
- Differences in producing and ascribing authority to potential female or male religious leaders.
- Utilization of various status-inducing strategies, such as new sacred writing or preaching.
- Charismatic authority working across national borders and cultural boundaries (in new religious movements, reform, or revival movements).
- Influences of female spiritual authorities on theology and religious practices.
- The role of historical memory in the developments of new charismatic movements.
- Historical expansions and contractions of feminine and masculine charismatic authorities.

Please email paper abstracts (up to 300 words) to Claudia Jetter (cjetter@hca.uni-heidelberg.de) and Benjamin Pietrenka (benjamin.pietrenka@ts.uni-heidelberg.de) by 20. December 2020.