

Project Description:

God in the Details: Ethnography and Comparative Religion in the Spanish World, 1550-1700

Dr. Ran Segev, February 2017

I am a historian of the early modern period, whose interests include religious culture, colonial encounters and the interplay of science and religion, especially as they pertain to the Spanish world. My work explores the social, intellectual and religious transformations that came with the colonization of the New World. At present, I am in contact with academic publishers regarding my first monograph – *The World in Their Hearts: Catholic Renewal and the Study of the Earth in the Old and New Worlds, 1530s-1640s*.

The World in Their Hearts examines the quest of Europeans to define their religious identities by observing nature in a time of colonial discovery. The book expands our understanding of the imbricated nature of Catholicism and the study of the earth during Spain's imperial expansion. Whereas historians have focused on the ways by which European colonial exploration, and specifically the encounter with the New World's geography, animals and plants, profoundly shaped global commercial networks and early modern science, my book demonstrates how new bodies of knowledge provided innovative ways of conceptualizing and transmitting religious ideologies across the Spanish world. Bringing together historical narratives on the "Discovery of America" with the scholarships on the Counter Reformation Church and Atlantic science, my research revises our understanding of the cultural role of observing nature: in a period that is often associated with the emergence of new ways of thinking, I argue that Spanish friars, nuns and laymen of science employed new scholarly approaches, methods and overseas empirical data to support confessional visions, and by so doing, connected the natural world in America to the teachings of the Church.

A postdoctoral fellowship at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University would support my new research project, under the supervision of Professor Yosef

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Schwartz, tentatively titled *God in the Details: Ethnography and Comparative Religion in the Spanish World, 1550-1700*. This project continues themes from my earlier work and sheds new light on the early beginnings of the study of religion and ethnography. By placing ethnography in the context of Church history during its renewal (the Catholic Reformation), I offer a new analysis of the emerging scholarly study of faith and practice. Examining ethnographical works by Spanish friars, such as the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún, the Jesuits José de Acosta and Barnabé Cobo, and the Mercedarian Martín de Múrua, this study proposes that these primary texts reveal contemporary confessional identities. Through these sources, I will focus on the representation of native liturgical performances (for instance, purity rituals) and religious belief systems as a way of exploring early modern ethnographic methods and thinking. I am interested in studying how in the midst of European religious struggles and renewal movements, classifications and categories of the religions and beliefs of mainly non-European subjects generated self-reflective documents on Christianity and were repeatedly used to redraw borders between true and false religions. I aim to explore how the category of “religion” itself evolved across the Atlantic world, shaping Europeans’ very awareness of world religions.

Spain is known for its long legacy of religious encounters. Yet as its imperial reaches extended across the globe, Spaniards and other Europeans were exposed to new peoples, an experience that shaped the understanding of religion and the systematic study thereof. As the scholar of religion Guy Stroumsa has reminded us, “the intellectual and religious shock” that came with observing unknown religious rituals and beliefs “provided the trigger” for the emergence of the modern study of religions. Spanish writers recorded native rituals and beliefs in great detail, developing innovative ethnographic methods, which included the use of visual

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images and standardized interviews in the vernacular. These studies supported a religious vision that sought to bring universal salvation to the native peoples through the Church and served, too, as an imperial device that subjugated indigenous neophytes to Christian rule. As much as these texts served the political goals of their time, modern scholars have also recognized in these writings the basis for later, more sophisticated ethnology. Anthony Pagden has successfully argued that the origins of comparative ethnology can be found in the application of classical-Aristotelian categories to the study of indigenous societies. This emphasis on the importance of the classical tradition has continued in the works of historians such as Anthony Grafton, Sabine MacCormack, and David Laupher who have understood humanistic traditions and classical antiquity as the lens through which early modern writers viewed New World peoples. I aim to nuance these arguments by additionally situating ethnographic developments in the cultural climate of Counter Reformation Spain and new Roman universalism. As such, I want to relate the production of ethnographical works to three inter-related historical contexts: first, to the increasingly sophisticated inquisitional methods and the authentication of “evidence” (i.e. how discussions about New Christians – their beliefs and customs – fostered the expansion of the field of early-modern ethnography); second, to the post-Trent desire to gather complex geographical and anthropological information from around the globe in order to convert potential neophytes, a process which culminated in the creation of the office of *Propaganda Fide*; and finally, to bring to the forefront the distinct intellectual traditions and theological schools of various religious orders. My work will explore the effects of Iberian global explorations on the study of religion and early modern ethnography by addressing how Catholic writers came to speak of religion at a time of stark confessional confrontations.

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The thriving intellectual community at Tel Aviv University is a particularly productive environment for fostering my scholarship, since there are several specialists on the intersection of scientific knowledge and religious perspectives in various contexts and eras. In addition to collaborating with Professor Schwartz whose work on religion overlaps significantly with my research, especially as it pertains to cross-cultural encounters and the exchange of knowledge in the pre-modern world, I would also like to continue to work with Professor Feldhay (with whom I am currently working as part of the Migration of Knowledge research group at the Minerva Center) and with Dr. Naama Cohen-Hanegbi who examines similar questions in her own research.

Thank you for your time and consideration.