

Call for Papers

Forbidden fruit. Sex lives and Churches in Central Eastern Europe in different epochs

German Historical Institute Warsaw

24–25 November 2022

Since the beginning of Christianity there has existed a clear distinction between desired and 'immoral' sexual behaviour with the aim of forming the love lives of believers. Different confessions and Churches used a wide range of different means, such as sermons, confessions, curses, excommunication, and other punishments, to achieve this aim. The clergy's growing influence on secular and state institutions and the introduction of Christian sexual ethics left its mark on law, education, science, and arts. The Churches' proselytization affected all spheres of social, private, culture, and political life. In the teachings of the Christian Churches, human sexuality was presented as a source of sin and thus characterised by feelings of shame and guilt. "In such a stupid way did the Lord create us with regard to sexual things"—this citation illustrates the feeling of shame as expressed by young Poles during pre-marital courses on sexuality in the second half of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, the everyday lives of most citizens in Christian Europe had little in common with the sexual norms propagated by clerics. Actions condemned by the Churches, such as prostitution, masturbation, pre-marital intercourse, or sexualised violence remained omnipresent. Thus, the efforts to normalize sexual behaviour according to existing religious dogmas failed (at least partly). Different kinds of ecclesiastical, social, and public sanctions did not remove these phenomena from social life.

Michel Foucault's ideas of "biopolitics" and "governmentality" as well as his book *History of Sexuality* turned the focus of researchers onto Victorian England and its prudish sexual morals. However, new findings show that religious, as well as public and legislative sanctions are not always

efficient in regulating sexuality. During the conference, we want to discuss the ways in which Churches in Central and Eastern Europe have tried to influence human sexuality from the Middle Ages to the present day. In our conference, we ask whether the Churches succeeded in their efforts to impose their ideas about sexuality and to regulate sexual behaviour?

Focussing on a perspective from below, the conference aims to analyse the relation between the Churches' official teachings regarding 'desired' and forbidden sexual behaviour on the one hand, and mundane practice on the other hand. At the core of our interest are questions related to human sexual and love lives, such as pre-marital and extramarital intercourse (adultery), virginity, termination of pregnancies, contraception, 'sexual aberrations', homosexual relationships, 'the first time' or the appraisal of sex. We intend to analyse interdependences between religion-norm-moral and community-state-law regarding this most intimate sphere of human life. We are interested, among others, in the following questions:

- How did people (local communities, social groups) in different epochs relate to Church teachings and the propagated, accepted, and forbidden forms of sexual behaviour?
- How did Christian sexual ethics affect different communities throughout history? Which political, economic, and legislative consequences of its implementation followed? How did it influence arts and science?
- What were the origins of individual or social resistance against the ecclesiastical norms, and which spheres were at the core of this resistance?
- Did different legal norms and systems of values regarding to sex lives exist at the same time and did they overlap?
- What differences between the confessions are visible? Did these differences impact everyday life in a multi-denominational community?
- What differences existed between different social and ethnic groups, milieus, regions, nations? Where did these differences originate?

- How did the Churches' activities affect female and male sex lives? Did women adopt the teachings in a different way than men?
- How did the penetration of social practice by ecclesiastical norms change in the course of history?

We also invite scholars who work on sexual, moral, and teachings of other religious groups in Central Eastern Europe to join our conference. In case of travel restrictions due to the pandemic, the conference will be held in a hybrid or online format. Travel expenses of invited speakers will be reimbursed, accommodation will be provided by the German Historical Institute Warsaw.

Please send proposals for 20-minute presentations to Dr. Jaśmina Korczak-Siedlecka (korczak-siedlecka@dhi.waw.pl) and Dr. Michael Zok (zok@dhi.waw.pl). The submissions should include an abstract of approx. 300 to 400 words, a title, and a short bio. Submission deadline is 2 July 2022.

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