

CONFERENCE

**IMPERIAL MYSTICISMS:
PIETY AND POWER IN EARLY MODERN EMPIRES FROM A GLOBAL
PERSPECTIVE**

CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY, BUDAPEST, NOVEMBER 27-30, 2019

ORGANIZED BY THE CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES (CRS)

DETAILED ACCOUNT OF THE SCHOLARLY GOALS

1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of early modern empires has led to new innovative observations concerning governance, symbolisms of power, and social organization in societies of ethnic, linguistic and religious plurality. The understanding of empire as practice as well as a representation of power has motivated attempts to combine the scholarly fields of religious studies and political history. The proposed conference will explore an aspect significant for the formation of early modern empires that has largely been overlooked: the impact of mystical spirituality, piety, and ritual on the political and social sphere.

The intimate alliance between imperial dynasties and mystical sects has been crucial for narratives of kingship as well as for political and social alliances; an impact that is confirmed on a global scale. Networks of Sufi brotherhoods, Christian contemplative orders, and Buddhist esoteric schools fulfilled important functions in administration, symbolic legitimation, social cohesion, and cultural exchange. The politics of piety seemed to have provided an imperial glue that responded to the spiritual needs of subjects who confronted an invasive administration and encountered a mysterious distance from the center of power.

By focusing on the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, the proposed conference aims at analyzing the political aspects of mystical traditions, both from the outside, by studying institutions of piety and their imperial functions, and from within, by identifying the tropes of imperial rule in mystical systems of thought. Adopting a global comparative approach to this topic unprecedented so far, the structural parallels and differences between mystical movements shall be explored regarding the major early modern imperial dynasties of the Ming Chinese,

Mughals, Safavids, Ottomans, the Austrian and Spanish Habsburgs, and the Aviz dynasty of Portugal. Hence, this global perspective will allow us to compare the imperial practice and performance of Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and Jewish mystical traditions.

Connecting the field of religious studies with that of political theory and history, the conference aims at convening renowned international experts in the field of the history of early modern empires whose work focuses on religious approaches, as well as scholars of mysticism who reach beyond the history of ideas. By addressing the subject of mysticism and political power in a large-scale context, it will be possible to understand the appeal that mystical spirituality had within the transcultural processes set in motion by imperial expansion within different regions of the world. We will also identify historical contacts and transmission lines that entangled the various religious communities in a direct or indirect way. Using a global approach, we can highlight phenomena of religious politics that transcend the scope of individual regions or bilateral relations. Thus, the conference will be part of new trends that promise to change our understanding of globalized European and Asian history in a transcontinental context. We will finally be in the situation where we can discuss whether a framework can be developed that allows us to conceptualize chronologically these religious and political developments.

CEU's Center for Religious Studies is particularly well placed to address the topic of the convergence of mystical traditions and political power, as some of our members have conducted innovative scholarship in this field. Budapest is also an emblematic location for our conference, since the city combines historical memories from the Habsburg and the Ottoman empires. For example, one strongly evocative legacy of the early modern convergence of mysticism and empire, the tomb of Gül Baba, a Sufi saint whose memory is associated with the 1541 Ottoman conquest of Hungary, is still preserved by the city today.

2. The Inner Empire: Political World Images in Mystical Thought

One focal point of the conference is to discuss how the mystic worldview engaged with experiences of sovereignty with an emperor ruling from a long distance, yet whose power was thought to be omnipresent. Religious imagination has often drawn on the language of political sovereignty in order to represent divine creation, providence and rulership. Mystical cosmologies, however, complicate these metaphors: God is at the same time transcendent and immanent; the religious subject is simultaneously depreciated as a void vessel and sanctified as a co-ruler of the universe. In Sufi tradition, the mystic is a self-sanctified "Friend of God" with universal authority; the Christian mystic is a "bride of Christ" distinguished by his or her intimate experience of the divine presence; and the kabbalist is a co-worker of the sacred in creation and redemption.

We will open the discussion with Shazad Bashir (Providence) and Carsten Wilke (Budapest) on the subject of the political references in mystic doctrines, exploring respectively Sufi thought in the Safavid and Mughal realm as well as the symbolism of the Kabbalist school of Safed.

3. Precedents: Mystical Politics from Antiquity to Early Modernity

Mystic thinkers have often withdrawn from public activity; and their alliance with political sovereignty has only been documented at certain historical junctures, most importantly in the early modern empires. In order to reflect on the ancient and medieval precedents for the incorporation of mystical traditions into the political realm, we preview three lectures. Gábor Buzási (Budapest) will focus on Neoplatonism as a political ideology in the late antique Roman Empire, İlker Evrim Binbaş (Bonn) will speak about the forming of alliances between Sufi brotherhoods and imperial dynasties in 15th century Central Asia and Iran, and Ute Falasch (Budapest) will deal with the origins of the convergence between Sufism and political power in the Delhi Sultanate in India.

4. Sacred Kings and Mystic Courts

Mystical concepts of sacred kingship were used for legitimizing purposes, attributing supreme spiritual virtues to the king's mind and body. Rulers inversely tried to enhance their personal authority by adopting ascetic or esoteric norms of conduct and government, an element that still dominates their image in historical memory. This applied to the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1542-1605), the Ottoman Sultan Murad III (1546-1595), the Safavid Shah Abbas I (1557-1628) and King Philip II of Spain (1527-1598), to name only a few examples. Furthermore, mystical concepts and forms of piety shaped court culture in regards to theology, literature, art, philosophy and sciences. The question of how the ruler's personality and entourage were spiritualized will be one of the topics of the lectures. We propose to bring into discussion A. Azfar Moin (Austin) with his expertise on Sufism and concepts of sacred kingship in Mughal India, György Endre Szőnyi (Szeged), who would speak about the court of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, Dewei Zhang (Guangzhou), focusing on the revival of Buddhism and the imperial patronage of Tibetan monks in China under the Late Ming Dynasty, as well as Hüseyin Yilmaz (Fairfax) with his expertise on the mystical turn in Ottoman political thought.

5. Mystical Networks in Imperial Space

The structure of mystical movements presented potential services to state regulation. Emphasis here will be laid on the social organization of brotherhoods and orders within the early modern empires through new institutional patterns that created far-flung networks. In the course of the stabilization of the Islamic tribal dynasties, Sufi saint-making and hagiography organized space through an effective infrastructure of shrines and pilgrimages. The Sufi infrastructure became ever more embedded in the state administration, which lead to a higher degree of dependence on political authorities. In the context of Christian empire-formation, well-structured Catholic orders modified the solitary piety of their medieval models.

Exploring the strategies applied to incorporate the infrastructure of mystics into state clergy, bureaucracy and educational enterprise, we posit the question: what were the mutual benefits that derived from imperial patronage in terms of governance and propaganda. In the discussion

we plan to organize, Antal Molnár (Budapest) will explore the networks of Catholic orders in Central Europe and the Balkans, Ines Aščerić-Todd (Edinburgh) will present the impact of the dervish brotherhoods on the formation of Muslim society in Ottoman Bosnia; Federico Palomo del Barrio (Complutense, Madrid) will lecture on the written culture of Christian monks in the configuration of the Hispano-Portuguese empire, and Tobias Winnerling (Düsseldorf) will present research on the Jesuit missions in Asia.

6. Mystics as Cross-Cultural Brokers

Mystical spirituality often follows a strategy of confessional ambivalence and was therefore particularly adept at coping with situations of cross-religious encounter. Due to the wide range of access to piety that mystics offered, they were able to reach out to populations that stood socially, geographically, and culturally far from the centers of power. This appears clearly in the "spiritual conquest" of the New World by Augustinians and Franciscans, the success of dervishes in Islamizing the Ottoman Balkans, and attempts of Sufis in India at incorporating Hindu religious concepts and yogic practices into the Sufi path. Mystic forms of piety thus played a major role as vehicles of social integration in the highly plural and complex territories of recent conquest.

It would be crucial to ask in how far mysticism functioned as a vehicle of cross-cultural cohesion in empires with diverse religious, ethnic and linguistic identities and which trans-confessional or universalist concepts were at play in this regard. We intend to bring together Carl Ernst (Chapel Hill), who will focus on Sufi engagements with Indian religious traditions, István Perczel (Budapest) with his expertise on Portuguese Jesuits and Syrian Christians in South India, as well as Franciscan Alex Lopes de Carvalho (Rio de Janeiro), who will focus on the impact of the Jesuit mission on the indigenous population of Amazonia.

7. Mystics of Religious Minorities and Heterodoxies

In the plural societies of early modern empires, mystics were active in all religious minorities. The minority experience has shaped Jewish communities' identities for centuries, while in the case of Safavid Iran, former mainstream Sunni Sufis suddenly found themselves ostracized in the course of the promotion of Shi'ism as state-religion. From their marginalized position, these religious leaders had to negotiate their relations with the state in order to obtain protection against persecution. We invited Pavel Sládek (Prague) to share his research on the posterity and veneration of the most renowned Jewish mystic of sixteenth-century Europe, the Great Rabbi Loew of Prague, and Rula Jurdi Abisaab (Montreal), who is a specialist in the history of Sufism in the Safavid Empire.

8. Subversive Mystics

Many early modern mystics were influential charismatic personalities who developed their own claims to leadership and power in conjunction with the ruler. While the mystic quest for internalized piety did much to legitimize imperial power beyond community boundaries, the

mystics' claim to a superior knowledge by illumination could also become a threat to other political and religious authorities. Hence, the state and the religious authorities undertook attempts to distinguish between deviant and saintly mystics in order to repress the former's threatening activity. It is within the framework of this discussion that we invite Jessica Fowler (Madrid) with her focus on the campaigns against *alumbrados* undertaken by the Spanish Inquisition, and Matthias Riedl (Budapest) working on *Schwärmer* in the Holy Roman Empire. Here we intend to analyze the strategical choices by which certain mystical traditions were incorporated into the state, while others were repressed, persecuted, or alienated from positions of power.

9. Decline and Periodization of Imperial Mysticism

The influence of mystic pietists on the political sphere appears to wane after the 16th century. In the 17th century, mystic movements, such as the French Jansenists, the Lutheran pietists, and the Jewish Sabbatians developed trends towards sectarianism rather than becoming vehicles of imperial power. While in the Christian world, rule and piety seem to have parted ways, Sufi brotherhoods continued to be deeply embedded in Muslim societies. However, their practices and doctrines attracted criticism from more legalistically-minded religious scholars and even from within the Sufi brotherhoods themselves. In comparing the decline of the mystics' involvement in politics and the rise of secular or legalistic models of statecraft, we aim at arriving at a periodization that might be suitable for applying to various religious environments. We invite Derin Terzioğlu (Istanbul) to discuss the legalistic turn in Ottoman Empire, Muzaffar Alam (Chicago) to speak about the Naqshbandi Aḥmad Sirhindi (1564-1624), an internal critic of the Sufi tradition in Mughal India, and Werner Thomas (Leuven) to focus on the Spanish Carmelite Jerónimo Gracián (1545-1614), a disciple of Saint Theresa of Ávila, who lamented the spread of secular politics.

10. Outcome: Publication of Conference Proceedings

Even at this early stage, we are convinced that the proposed conference will produce results that will be of benefit for the academic community and are worthy of dissemination presenting a viable way forward for the fields that intersect at the heart of the conference agenda. Publication of the resulting conference papers is an integral part of the project and we regard it as one of the significant outcomes.