

IFRWH Panel Title: Spiritual cosmopolitanism and women's engagement in transnational webs of amity and activism on the cusp of Empire 1860s – 1940s.

Theme: Transnationalism

Session Description

Empires, by definition, involve the collision, contact, complicity, resistance, mobility and appropriations of ideas, beliefs, people, objects and power in multidirectional and unexpected ways. This plenary considers one key field of imperial encounter: that of religion. The three papers, taken together, trace circuits of affect, friendship and emotion in transnational religious networks and liberal cosmopolitanisms. As Dunch (2002) has pointed out, nineteenth century imperial mission Christianity was an important arena for fostering transnational and intercultural communications. As has been well documented by feminist scholars, women – both colonising and colonised – were significant actors in this contact zone, which was intrinsically transnational and trans-empire, as European and North American evangelical Christians pursued their spiritual goal of converting the world. This panel engages with the productive uncertainties that emerged from these encounters, revealing the range and complexity of cross-cultural relationships between women transnationally on the cusp of the imperial era from 1880s to 1940s. Each of the case studies in the panel presentations mines particular moments in the shift from a deeply religious imperial world to one that was more concerned with secular universalisms, mirroring in many ways the trajectory of first wave feminism itself. As Stamatov and others have pointed out, “a distinctively Christian world view is the ultimate source for the rationalist universalism” that characterised the post-imperial world that emerged from World War two and the break-up of European colonialism. The panel draws on a concept of ‘spiritual cosmopolitanism’ to suggest how women of faith participated in this movement to a more secular world. The nineteenth century ‘mission of sisterhood’ broadens out and gives way to a more variegated affective transnationalism based on friendships and activism around building a post-empire world.

Chair: Noriko Ishii

Facilitator/commentator: Jane Haggis

Presenter: Clare Midgley

Caroline Wells Healey Dall and the links between American transcendentalists and Indian members of the Brahmo Samaj

This paper examines how spiritual cosmopolitanism underpinned the development of an informal transnational network of friendship and collaboration between Indian and American social reformers in the nineteenth-century world, and considers the extent to which Americans' interchanges with Indians were distinctive from those of their British co-religionists. The paper focusses on a case study of Caroline Wells Healey

Dall, a well-known American feminist, writer, transcendentalist and reformer whose engagement with India has hitherto received little scholarly attention. Drawing on manuscript sources housed in the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston, it explores the extent to which Dall, despite never travelling to India, was drawn into the close and sustained collaboration that developed between her husband, Charles, Unitarian missionary in Calcutta, and members of an influential Indian movement for religious and social reform, the Brahmo Samaj. It suggests that this laid the ground for Dall's later relationship with pioneering Indian feminist, Pandita Ramabai.

Presenter: Margaret Allen

Circling around Pandita Ramabai and the Little Wives of India

In 1893 the American physician, Dr. Emily Brainerd Ryder published *The Little Wives of India* in Australia, comprising the public lectures on child marriage and Indian marriage law she had been delivering to Protestant church gatherings in Australia from 1892. Her message fell upon receptive ears and 'Little Wives of India circles' sprang up, often including members of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Their feelings towards the child wives and widows was at once sisterly and egalitarian and also hierarchical and racialised. This volume drew together Indian women, US women and those in Australia and New Zealand.

Ryder praised Pandita Ramabai, the Indian Christian feminist, who rescued child widows at Mukti mission near Pune. Women missionaries from many lands flocked to assist her at Mukti, itself virtually a pilgrimage site. The US Ramabai Association provided financial support. Stamatov identifies, 'long-distance advocacy,' 'a typical institution of European modernity', rising from 'religious radicalization'. Dunch notes 'the possibility for transnational and intercultural communications that the missionary enterprise facilitated.' This paper explores the entanglement of the Ramabai and Little Wives circles and the missionary impulse focussing upon India and transnational organisations such as the WCTU and YWCA between 1890-1940.

Presenter: Fiona Paisley

From Missionary Work in the Pacific to the YWCA in India and Sri Lanka: Jean Begg, New Zealander, on the affective entanglements of a cosmopolitan life

In the first half of her life, Jean Begg, a Pakeha (white) woman from New Zealand, wrote a series of lively letters to her family about her adventurous life overseas. From the 1910s until the 1940s, Begg worked as a missionary in the Pacific, trained as a teacher in New York, became the leader of the Young Women's Christian Association in India and Sri Lanka, and was a highly respected delegate to the Pan-Pacific Women's Association. This paper considers these career choices, and the role of international conferences, religion, travel and tourism in shaping them. In her

missives home Begg wrote of her cosmopolitan life as an internationalist and a progressive woman for domestic readers. The ways in which she framed her aims and experiences offer insight into the kinds of spiritual narratives and personal desires that animated the internationalist activism of women like Begg who saw themselves as agents for modernity among non-western women and their communities. In particular, it asks what part her self-consciously cosmopolitan politics of cross-cultural exchange might have played in the modifying the historically hierarchical relationships operating between white women and their local counterparts, and the young women they worked for.