

*Myths – National Borders – Religions.* Akademie Sankelmark (Germany); Sigmund-Neumann-Institut (Germany); Syddansk Universitet (Denmark); Technische Universität Dresden (Germany); Universität Flensburg (Germany); Willy Brandt Centre (Poland), 19.09.2013-21.09.2013.

**Reviewed by** Laura Pelzmann

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2013)

Twenty historians, theologians, political and cultural scientists have gathered for a conference in Flensburg/ Sønderborg to analyze myth, national borders and religion from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Myths are understood differently within regions and countries as they can develop across borders as well as being hindered by them, furthermore, myths can have a strong influence on the relation between the neighboring countries. Additionally, myths contribute a great deal to religion as does the religious aspect to myth, especially with regards to the formation of prejudices and stereotypes in border regions. However, due to the diversity of opinions on the topics, no common definite conclusion to the relation between myths, national borders and religion has been established.

The seminar was opened by ELISABETH VESTERGAARD (Sønderborg, Denmark), head of the department of border region studies at the University of Southern Denmark, who provided an overview of myth, “the fascination myth”, the core elements of myth as well as the importance of myths in history enabling the audience to grasp the relevance of myth as an explanatory factor of history, politics and everyday life demonstrating the overall significance of the seminar topic. SWETLANA KRÄTZSCHMAR (Flensburg, Germany), deputy head of the city council of Flensburg, briefly presented the location of the semi-

nar in Sønderjylland and its special status with regards to borders and myths. Moving to the introduction, KATARZYNA STOKŁOSA (Sønderborg, Denmark) spoke about the increased attention to borders after the demise of the Soviet Union as well as the perception of borders. Furthermore, Stokłosa elaborated on the link between religion and myth to shape the perception of borders on both sides, with this she drew out the framework for the seminar.

In the first panel, myths in history and present times, GERHARD BESIER (Dresden, Germany) examined heroic epics and their common functions with special focus on the *Nibelungenlied*. Besier raised the notion of shared universal myths in the world's epics and their common values and motives as well as the *Nibelungenlied* as a founding myth of the German nation and product of German dominance. He issued the fact that the *Nibelungenlied* is not just a German myth, but a European myth as it appears in various Western, Southern and Northern European epics. De-constructing the history of the saga, placing it back into its original context leads to the finding of the trans-national character of the myth. Proceeding to current myths, Besier analyzed present heroes and their role as promoters of freedom and human rights. Ending his presentation with a controversial statement, he stated

heroes to being demi-gods between average and divine.

Panel II, myths in Northern and Central-Eastern Europe, dealt with the developing of national myths in Sweden and Denmark. ANDERS JALERT (Lund, Sweden) discussed the understanding of Sweden as a peace-power-state, while STEEN BO FRANDSEN (Sønderborg, Denmark) altercated on the construction of a small and poor Denmark after the Napoleonic wars. Both contributions concluded in the significance of constructed understandings in the actual perception of a particular region or nation.

Panel III and IV both concerned myths in Europe. The contributors discussed myths in their home countries concerning identity formation, conflicts, nationalism and how myths can change the understanding of history. The variety of the presentations permitted the participants to engage in an in-depth discussion about definitions, understandings and differences of myths in Europe.

The third Panel started with BRIAN WALSH (Dundalk, Ireland), who contested the myth of Cuchulainn, an early Irish literary epic, as a construction of an Irish national identity across the province of Ulster. JES FABRICIUS MØLLER (Copenhagen, Denmark) lectured about the historical development of the heterogenic Danish state and the accompanied changes over the past centuries. Møller describes a shift from the monarchy defining the nation state to the nation defining monarchy. KIMMO KATAJALA (Joensuu, Finland) drew on the understanding of Finland as the last outpost of western civilization against the east. He discusses the development of this comprehension according to Finland's clear belonging to the west during the Second World War and the now changing attention to Russia. Moving south, ANDREA VARRIALE's (Weimar, Germany) contribution to the conference dealt with the Italian resistance movement in Naples between 1943 and 1945. Varriale discussed Italy's role from an ally to being

occupied during the Second World War as well as the resistance movement as an alibi when discussing Italy and the war.

In the fourth Panel, KYLE JANTZEN (Calgary, Canada) examined the early relationship of the Nationalist Socialist party-state and the German Protestant churches through the lens of church-building. Focusing on one of the hundreds of church-building projects in the Third Reich, the Martin Luther Memorial Church in Berlin, Jantzen demonstrates that this church was a reflection of both Christian and Nazi values and symbols. He concludes that the prevalence of church-building in the Third Reich and the nature of the Martin Luther Memorial Church do not point towards a Nazi regime hostile towards Christianity and its churches, but rather a regime which could find common ground with the Christian churches in a metaphor of rebirth and which was open – at least from 1933 to 1935 – to partnering with churches in the Nazi “renewal” of Germany. LAURA ASARITE (Flensburg, Germany) deals with Euro-myths in Latvia and the attitudes of the population towards the introduction of the Euro. She specifically addresses the important roles newspapers play in the opinion- and myth-forming among society and the formation of pro- and contra-Euro perceptions.

In the fifth and final panel FRANZISKA METZGER (Fribourg, Switzerland) and ANDREA STRÜBIND (Oldenburg, Germany) spoke about the religious character of myths. In her presentation about religion and myths, Metzger discussed the creation of Switzerland as the center of myth, in which all was intertwined. Focusing on the Gotthard myth, she illustrated the spiritual meaning of myths for historiography and national identity formation. Strübind, however, put attention on the myth of reconciliation in religion with regards to healing processes as a core component of strategic policy in nowadays politics. She claims that even though religions still play a central role in guilt and grief issues, deep divisions are hard to

overcome, and thus, reconciliation sometimes has to remain a myth.

Even though it was agreed that there is a strong connection between nations or nationalism and myth, religion and myth as well as border regions and myth, it was rather arduous to develop a common notion to the connection among myths, borders and religions. Nevertheless, all speakers and participants collectively established agreement on the significance of myths in order to analyze and explain not only politics and history, but religion and the understanding of borders as myths are needed to create a multi-faceted understanding of the whole.

### **Programm overview:**

#### *Welcome*

Elisabeth Vestergaard (Head of department of Border Region Studies, University of Southern Denmark)

Swetlana Krätzschar (Deputy Head of the City Council of Flensburg)

#### *Introduction*

Katarzyna Stoklosa (University of Southern Denmark)

#### *Panel I: Myths in history and present times*

Gerhard Besier (Sigmund-Neumann-Institut für Demokratie- und Freiheitsforschung): Does national mythmaking end at the border?

#### *Panel II: Myths in Northern and Central-Eastern Europe*

Anders Jarlert (University of Lund): The myth of Sweden as a peace-power state and its religious motivations

Steen Bo Frandsen (University of Southern Denmark): Little Denmark

#### *Panel III: Myths in Europe (Part 1)*

Brian Walsh (County Museum Dundalk): All icing, not enough cake – the legacy of Cuchulainn in a border context

Jes Fabricius Møller (University of Copenhagen): Monarchy and borders

Kimmo Katajala (University of Eastern Finland): The last outpost of the western civilization? Myths about the Finnish eastern border

Andrea Varriale (Bauhaus-University Weimar): The myth of the Italian resistance movement (1943-1945). The case of Naples

#### *Panel IV: Myths in Europe (Part 2)*

Kyle Jantzen (Ambrose University College): German churches in the Third Reich

Laura Asarite (University of Flensburg): Euro-myths in Latvia

#### *Panel V: The meaning of myths*

Franziska Metzger (Université de Fribourg): Religions and myths

Andrea Strübind (Universität Oldenburg): Reconciliation myths

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**Citation:** Laura Pelzmann. Review of *Myths – National Borders – Religions*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40440>



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