

European clerics and vernacular culture in the long nineteenth century

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Sponsors: SPIN (Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms), Oxford University Modern European History Research Centre

Organisers: David Hopkin (Oxford University), Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam University), Jonathan Roper (University of Tartu)

Introduction

From Herder onwards, clerics were among the leading collectors of vernacular culture, and major contributors to ethnography in Europe and beyond. A roll-call of clerical folklorists would include such luminaries as Percy (England), Moe (Norway), Feilberg (Denmark), Hurt (Estonia), Hammershaimb (Faroes), Rhesa (Lithuania), Komitas Vardapet (Armenia), Halbertsma (Friesland), Cadic (Brittany), Webster (Basque country), Alcover (Catalonia), Moses Gaster (Romania and Jewish folklore) ... What is less clear is whether, across the period and the confessional divides, their engagement was motivated by the same religious concerns, and their discoveries applied to similar religious ends. Did religious institutions nurture and propagate interest in vernacular languages and cultures? Was a concern for vernacular tradition expressive of clerical antagonism to modernity and, in particular, the secular state? How did clerics reconcile nationalist or regionalist ambitions with the universalism of religion? How important was defence of mother-tongue education in the culture wars of the nineteenth century? Was there a missionary purpose in learning the culture of even Europe's autochthones? Did clerics seek in folk culture the wellsprings of religious instinct? Did they, in a disenchanted world, appreciate popular engagement with the numinous, however unorthodox the form? In other words, was folklore a path to God?

The aim of this workshop is to establish what these clerical collectors had in common intellectually and institutionally. To what extent did their position in their communities influence their collecting practice? How did folklore feed into their wider pastoral concerns? The workshop also aims to uncover the relationships between them and the wider community of language scholars, folklorists and activists. Yet we also want to know why more clerics were not involved in collecting. Was there a general reluctance on the part of the classically trained to engage with the culture of the uneducated, or was there a more specific rejection of the echoes of paganism and hedonism associated with popular culture?

The workshop is the first stage of a project that will examine the links between the work of clerics in the preservation and promotion of European vernacular culture and European missions overseas. A conference developing these connections is planned in Oxford for 2011. A publication is also planned.

Themes

- Clerical training in philology
- Defence of subaltern languages for religious purposes
- Primitive religion
- Touching the numinous
- Traditionalism and hostility to modernity
- Regionalism and opposition to the state

- Missions (domestic and foreign)
- Commonplaces of clerical collecting
- Clerical hostility to superstition/popular culture

Organization

The workshop coordinator will be Anne Hilde van Baal on behalf of SPIN (Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms, University of Amsterdam). SPIN will cover accommodation and subsistence costs during the workshop, but participants will be expected to pay for their own travel.

Those who wish to participate should send a short proposal (c. 300 words) and a short personal statement with details of institutional attachment, publications and current research (c. 150 words) to Anne Hilde van Baal at A.H.M.vanBaal@uva.nl, before 7 January 2010.