



# Sex, disPlacements, And cross-Cultural EncounterS

## Berichterstattung

### Projektinformationen

#### SPACES

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[Projektwebsite](#)

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[10.3030/795514](https://doi.org/10.3030/795514)

Projekt abgeschlossen

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UNIVERSITA DEGLI STUDI DI VERONA



Italy

## Periodic Reporting for period 2 - SPACES (Sex, disPlacements, And cross-Cultural EncounterS)

Berichtszeitraum: 2020-09-01 bis 2021-08-31

### Zusammenfassung vom Kontext und den Gesamtzielen des Projekts

SPACES has investigated a set of heretical beliefs prosecuted by the Inquisitions in the Italian peninsula between the 16th and 18th centuries. All the defendants praised the pleasures of unproductive sexuality, believing that Adam and Eve practiced anal sex in the terrestrial paradise.

Some of them were also charged with stating that “all can be saved in their own law”, that is, that the eternal salvation was open to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. By analyzing these cases, SPACES has explored the relationship between religious skepticism, atheism, and sexuality in the early modern Mediterranean world. The research has also highlighted how the cross-cultural interactions between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity influenced the development of radical religious doubt not only in the Mediterranean area but also in continental Europe.

SPACES has challenged the well-established interpretation that attributed the birth of religious skepticism and atheism to the Northern European intellectual elites. The defendants involved in the cases under examination clearly anticipated many themes that were relevant to the development of 17th- and 18th-century libertinism; SPACES has shown that, almost a century before the emergence of this cultural movement, similar ideas proliferated in middle-rank environments marked by a high degree of social miscegenation. Moreover, SPACES has demonstrated the extent to which these dissenting ideas were part of a wider cluster of beliefs that were shared not only across the social spectrum but also across the religious boundaries that divided the three main monotheistic religions.

SPACES has also contributed to rethink themes that are urgent to present-day social and political debates. Fundamentalism is escalating as a defensive response to the problems of an increasingly globalized world marked by growing socio-economic disparities. In this context, religion has been exploited as a marker of identity. Sexuality is crucial to these cultural and political conflicts. In western countries the “foreigner”, and especially the Muslim, is depicted as an enemy of both women’s and sexual and gender minorities’ civil rights movements. This rhetoric is sometimes used to justify international military aggression and internal xenophobic propaganda. By analyzing beliefs that were shared across the faiths and questioned religious fundamentalism, SPACES has revealed a long history of interactions between the faiths despite and beyond the ongoing religious and political conflicts that characterize the Mediterranean area

## Arbeit, die ab Beginn des Projekts bis zum Ende des durch den Bericht erfassten Berichtszeitraums geleistet wurde, und die wichtigsten bis dahin erzielten Ergebnisse

SPACES, which was hosted by the University of Verona (Italy), started on Sept. 1, 2018 and included a two-year period of research and training at the University of Maryland (US). I collected most of the archival material before the start of the project. At the University of Maryland, I carried out bibliographic research on religious skepticism, doubt and atheism, the history of the Mediterranean, gender history, and the history of sexuality. I profited from the immense library resources of the Washington, DC area, discussed with colleagues from all over the world the methodology and contents of my research, and attended seminars and workshops organized in the area and beyond. I have also undertaken several training activities in digital humanities and in communication and teaching and contributed to several workshops and conferences. At the University of Verona, I joined the activities of the PoliTeSse research center and organized a series of online events, which included a seminar at the annual conference of the Renaissance Society of America.

SPACES has resulted in a number of academic publications. An edited volume - Mediterranean Crossings (2020) – which contains contributions by international scholars from all over the world came out in 2020. I wrote a chapter on sexuality, religion, and emotions in The Routledge History of Emotions in Europe (2019). I contributed to the critical edition of Daniello Bartoli's Asia, a 16th-century history of the Company of Jesus in Asia that is crucial to the history of the cross-cultural interactions between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists in the early modern world.

An article that outlines the main outcomes of SPACES, titled “The Fall from Grace”, has already been accepted by the Journal of Early Modern History. Moreover, the interactions between religion, dissent, and sexual transgressions have been further explored in a book that was published in 2021 titled Bathhouses and Riverbanks: Sodomy in a Renaissance Republic.

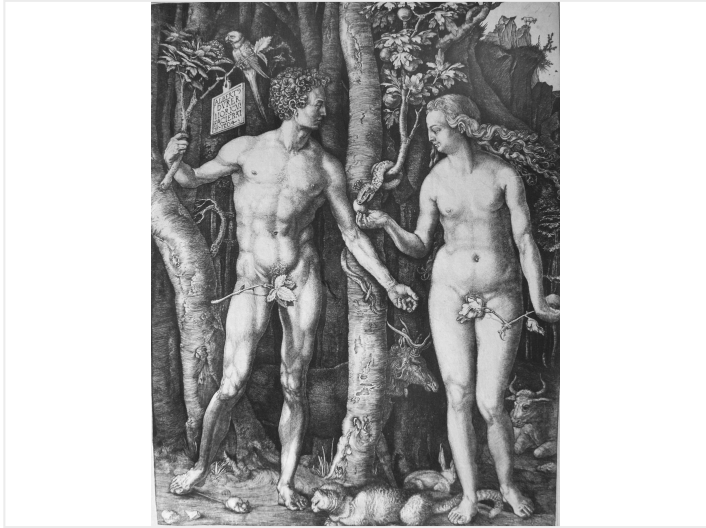
I devoted the last year of the research project to drafting a monograph titled Celestial Pleasures, which will be SPACES's most relevant research outcome. I plan to propose the manuscript to an anglophone university press. The book consists of three parts. The first part is devoted to the relationships between sexual nonconformity and the spread of skeptical ideas in the early modern Mediterranean world. The second part explores the sexual contents of the belief that Adam and Eve committed sodomy in the Garden of Eden, analyzing its relationship to the theory of the “imposture of religions”. The third part reads these phenomena through the lenses of emotions and gender history.

## Fortschritte, die über den aktuellen Stand der Technik hinausgehen und voraussichtliche potenzielle Auswirkungen (einschließlich der bis dato erzielten sozioökonomischen Auswirkungen und weiter gefassten gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen des Projekts)

The cases under examination show that, in the early modern period, people belonging to low- and middle-class environments connected the quest for sexual freedom with the criticism of institutionalized religions long before the emergence of these themes among the cultivated elites in late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. By defending the lawfulness of unproductive sexuality (including same-sex sodomy), these radical dissenters stated that the clergy proscribed sexual pleasure to terrify uneducated people and to keep them under control. These statements are an echo of a widespread cluster of skeptical ideas that, in Western Christianity, was named as the theory of the “imposture of religions”.

SPACES confirms some of the conclusions that have already been drawn by Federico Barbierato's and Alec Ryrie's research on early modern unbelief. The project, however, has made a step forward insofar as it has understood the theoretical role played by the criticism of sexual morality in the genesis of religious doubt in Europe. Moreover, the fact that SPACES has analyzed the medieval Mediterranean roots of these attitudes, which cut across the boundaries between the three main monotheistic religions, has enabled the project to question established interpretations about the genesis of Western-European processes of secularization.

SPACES has explored the roots of issues that sit at the nexus of relevant contemporary social and cultural debates. By questioning established narratives that celebrate the European origins of ideas like “tolerance” and “secularization” SPACES has highlighted how, in early modern Europe, such phenomena have been influenced by the cross-cultural interactions between the three main monotheistic religions. Therefore, SPACES has taken a step further in the radical critique of an exclusively western-centered genealogy of secular modernity. By tackling explicitly sexual issues, SPACES also contributes to rethink Euro- and Western-centric discourses on the conflicts raised by the intersection of religious and cultural identities with gender, sexual, and racial diversity.



Albrecht Durer, Adam and Eve, Engraving, 1504

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