

Call for Papers: “Hallowed Efforts? Work and the Sacred, c. 1350–c. 1815”

Workshop at the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz, Germany

November 14 & 15, 2024

Is work sacred? Does it promise redemption? Who can be sacrificed at the altar of work? Long before the “God of labor” was exalted by nineteenth-century writers, the issue of work had been intimately tied to salvation, damnation, and religious hierarchies. To shed light on this deeper history, the workshop aims to merge the thriving study of late medieval and early modern work with enquiries into sacred ideas and institutions. In terms of geographical focus, papers on Europe and its relationships with other parts of the world are equally welcome.

With its broad spatial and temporal scope, the workshop will bring together historians specializing in diverse fields, enable comparative reflections, and interweave multiple historiographical threads that touch on the intersection between work and the sacred. At least four such threads can be identified:

- First, historians have recently reinterrogated the famous Weberian theme of the **work ethic**, e.g., by illuminating a plurality of premodern work ethics or by emphasizing the *longue durée* of pre-industrial valorizations of work. This ongoing critique of Weber inevitably contends with theories of religious change and “disenchantment.”
- Second, the issue of **worktime**—hours per day but also days per year—has preoccupied social and economic historians in the wake of Jan de Vries’s claim that an “industrious revolution” took place in northwestern Europe after 1650. Religion matters to this debate as well, most notably because early modern attempts to reform the calendar of holy days affected the balance between work and leisure.
- Third, scholars have broken new ground in both European and global history by scrutinizing the heavily **racialized and gendered divergences**—and hidden entanglements—between free and unfree as well as between legally privileged and marginalized labor. Religious attitudes toward the early modern mass enslavement of Black people have already been studied closely. This topic deserves further investigation and similar questions need to be asked afresh about other coercive labor regimes.
- Finally, intersections between **labor and environmental history** have taken on increasing salience. Much of the relevant literature draws inspiration from the classic works of Carolyn Merchant who discussed alienation from labor and alienation from nature in tandem, crucially connecting both to religious transformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Along these lines, possible issues to be addressed by papers for the workshop include (but are by no means limited to):

- historical actors’ use of religious criteria to evaluate different kinds of work activities
- interconfessional and interreligious polemics around labor issues
- the circulation, throughout Europe and beyond, of concepts of (un)godly work
- religious justifications and contestations of various regimes of unfree labor
- work ethics as sacralizations of industriousness
- changing understandings of the created world as the work of God and of human work as a form of stewardship or continued creation

Interested scholars are invited to submit abstracts of 250–300 words and a short CV to harrer@ieg-mainz.de by April 15, 2024. Authors of accepted papers will be informed by April 30. The workshop will be held in person and conducted in English.

The organizer anticipates being able to provide full coverage of the costs of accommodation in Mainz as well as partial reimbursement of travel expenses.

Participants should be open to the idea of subsequently developing their papers into articles, to be published in a special issue of a scholarly journal.

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