

ESF RESEARCH CONFERENCES

Rapporteur Report

Partnership:	Linköping University
Conference Title:	Religion, Gender and Human Rights
Dates:	22-25 June 2011
Chair:	Niamh Reilly, Sara Silvestri, Stacy Scriver
Rapporteur:	Alison E Woodward

General Comments

Any general comments you might have concerning the conference, your role, the scientific area covered by this conference, etc.

The conference was co sponsored with the Humanities Standing Committee. As a sociologist interested in gender and migration issues, it was very rewarding to be able to observe this particular conference, although I was only in attendance for the first two days of sessions, during which time I had a chance to discuss with the organizers about their future plans. The conference secretary (Jean Kelly) may have further remarks on the possibilities for future activities as she presented the Forward Look portion of the conference on the final day.

Quality of Scientific Programme, Presentations and Discussion

Comments on the balance and scope of the scientific programme, the scientific quality of the presentations and discussions.

The scientific area touching on the intersections of religious studies, legal issues of human rights and gender and sexualities is extremely relevant for developments in European and global politics and these areas are seldom brought together. Thus this initiative is very promising. It was quite a challenge to bring experts from such diverse fields and achieve a high level of discussion. The inclusion of several policy practitioners was also ambitious. As the large majority of the speakers were senior scholars and many pre-eminent in their field, the scientific quality of most of the presentations was quite high, with the presentation of much new empirical evidence. Participants had sufficient disciplinary overlap, thanks to their concern with gender and sexuality issues to result in good discussions, which often overran into the break.

The 3 organizing themes: Identity, migration and multiculturalism, contesting religious subjectivities, and Human Rights, religion and the state were divided into sub-topics so that each separate session had an adequate amount of overlap between the contributions to generate relevant discussion. Especially relevant to current debates is the original work on the framing of 'secularism' in European public debate and how gender issues point up contradictions- the veil debate, abortion, homosexuality are all issues of conflict and the papers and posters provided both theoretically and empirically innovative insights on these issues.

Informal Networking and Exchange; Atmosphere

Was the schedule and the atmosphere conducive to an easy exchange of information? Was there time and space for an informal discussion? Were younger researchers integrated?

The scale of the conference (less than 60 participants) is perhaps small for an ESF conference, but very conducive to interchange and networking. It seemed by the end of the third day, after the excursion, that everyone knew who everyone was. Especially successful were the poster sessions, where almost all participants made the rounds and exchanged with each other. (Often times poster sessions are not well attended). The atmosphere was very open, inclusive and respectful; despite the controversial nature of the theme. Thanks to the absence of a few speakers, the panels were not overcharged, and the audience had ample time ultimately to discuss, supplemented by the excellent tea and coffee breaks.

Balance of Participants

Was there an appropriate balance between young and senior participants? Was a balance of national groups and researchers from different (sub)fields achieved?

There was an excellent balance between younger and older participants at various career stages, and the interaction was warm and hearty with little segregation of senior scholars which can often happen at such conferences. Equally so the balance between law, theology, sociology, and political science was quite even, with perhaps fewer people from the cultural studies/humanities type focus than might have been expected. But with such a range of disciplines, the focus remained clear, which was a substantial achievement.

A persistent problem for European conferences is the dominance of Anglo-Saxon and Northern European participants, due to costs and language skills. This was also the case here: 20 of the speakers came from the UK, Ireland, Canada and the US, and several of the non-European participants had trained in the US. 11 came from North Western Europe, while 8 came from 'Other' countries. (Italy, Turkey, Pakistan, Palestine, Poland). However, despite the North Western affiliations, the participants often had histories of migration, so that the participation was quite diverse. Luckily several men attended the conference, which widened the scope of the discussions and themes treated considerably. A particular aspect of balance at this conference was also 'religion'. Roman Catholicism and Islam were the major faiths discussed, and it would have been more balanced if there had been more contributions dealing with this topic in Judaism, and Protestantism (especially more fundamentalist Christian faiths).

Outlook and Future Developments

Will new collaborations emerge from this conference? (How) could the conference outcomes be utilized further? Are there suitable (ESF) programmes or instruments to further the work of the conference?

There will be very useful synergies emerging from this conference. The diverse scholarly communities brought together (law, theology, sociology, political and policy sciences, religious studies) can together provide important new insights into religious/societal problems emerging in today's Europe. Many times issues of gender and sexuality are at the core of conflicts, so the conference will probably help craft networks of gender scholars across disciplines.

Given the societal relevance of many of the papers (masculinity and Islam, role of faith based organisations around migration and gender, debates about the need for a common legal frame for issues of religious discrimination) the conference outcomes might usefully have been distributed as a press release- and certainly the Swedish media should have been contacted.

Whether there will be ESF instruments available for further work of the conference is a difficult question to answer at this moment. The contacts between the groups are still at a rather early stage, but a COST network following up the stream structure might be advisable. The Co-Chairs are actively seeking ways to initiate a project at the European Level, and Reilly is building up a critical mass at her university of scholars in this new area that may make this feasible.

Follow-up

What immediate and long term follow-up would benefit collaborations and dialogues that may have begun at the conference?

The co-chairs have realistic and definite plans for publications (at least one book will be pursued), and feel this is realistic as many of the senior scholars already know each other well. They did not mention other sorts of follow-ups than publications, although the use of new social media such as a Linked-In network or Face Book area or a web forum located at one of the co-chair's universities might be an option.

Although the ESF conference form does not require papers in advance, this should perhaps be discussed. Having some form of draft papers (even the Power Point presentation?) available for consultation can be very conducive to raising the quality of the discussion and also to the reality of achieving good publications. At COST conferences and conferences in political science, having distributed papers does not freeze the debate, but raises the quality of the interaction, and indeed, since the speakers have their expenses covered it seems a minimal obligation to ask for a draft document. Certainly for some of the more theoretical arguments having had a chance to look at the paper would have helped enhance dialogue.

Organisation and Infrastructure

Were venue, catering and accommodation appropriate for this conference? Were participants satisfied with the on-site

administration and support?

The venue was suitable for a closed and intensive conference in that there were virtually no alternatives – the Scandic Hotel is located on the far suburban outskirts of a small Swedish city and situated like a Freeway Motel with no easy access to walking spaces nor shops. However for the length of the conference the catering was more than sufficient with excellent snacks at the breaks encouraging conversation and wide choice of food at the common meals which were at tables encouraging interaction. The room was not suited to the present practice of wide spread use of lap tops as there were inadequate electrical outlets. Other than the monotony of the salad bar and the moderate inconvenience of sharing rooms with unknown colleagues, I heard little negative comments about the efficiency of the venue, but the absence of easy walking or sports accommodation which might have justified such a remote location was a bit of a downside.

Summary & Overall Assessment

Was the conference successful; were its aims achieved?

The conference aim to bring together Human Rights, Religion and Gender in a multi-cultural and multi national context and encourage networking between scholars that disciplinarily seldom meet was definitely achieved. The conference as a conference was successful in terms of its atmosphere, level of scientific quality and depth of interaction and left the impression that new contacts had been made with a potential for endurance. The logistical support (hotel and ESF Conference Secretariat) ensured that the conference ran smoothly.

The topic is extremely relevant for societal developments in a Europe which has to re-think its secularism and reconsider the role of religion in politics and society. The cross cutting concern with gender provided a unifying thread while pointing up new issues. Given the societal and political relevance, perhaps more could have been done to publicize the conference in media, and to follow-up with more formal means for networking.

About ESF Research Conferences

The Scheme

This conference is part of the European Science Foundation's (ESF) Research Conferences Scheme. The Scheme aims to promote scientific excellence and frontier level research throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Conferences aim to provide leading scientists and other participants, including young researchers, with a platform to present their work, to discuss the most recent developments in their fields of research and to network.

Conference Format

The core activities should be based on lectures by invited speakers, who are leaders in their respective fields, followed by extensive discussion periods. An informal exchange of ideas, both inside and outside the lecture room, should be encouraged, and the number of sessions in the daily timetable should be limited in order to allow sufficient time for interaction between the participants. Time should be reserved for a 'Forward Look Plenary Discussion' about future developments in the field.

Participants can take all their meals together to encourage further contact and networking, which can be particularly beneficial to younger researchers who may be less outspoken in the formal lecture room setting. In order to gain optimum benefit from the conference, both the speakers and the participants are asked to stay for the whole duration.

Division of Tasks

The Conference Chair is responsible for ensuring the quality of the scientific programme through the selection and invitation of speakers, and through the selection of participants.

The ESF Conferences Unit is responsible for managing all the logistical aspects of the conference organisation, including the provision of an on-site secretariat.

Further information: www.esf.org/conferences