Comparing Catechisms – Entangling Christian History (Heidelberg/Oslo – 14-16 May 2014)

Christianity is mostly conceptualised as particular European religion, whereas its transcultural character, its non-European origin and its non-European forms are mostly blinded out. Missionary translations claim to have maintained an orthodox Christian purity. The conference Comparing Catechisms – Entangling Christian History will challenge this perspective and look instead for transcultural dimensions of Christianity. For this it focuses on missionary work in Europe and the world.

Missionary work always entails translation, linguistic as well as cultural. Christian belief and its rituals needed to be translated into the language of the people who were to be evangelized or converted. Translations result always in a modifying of the content, that has to be integrated in another language and in a different cultural pattern. Therefore a translated text, practice or dogma has always some transcultural dimensions. In the historiography of Christianity, a real mixing of cultural elements is mostly acknowledged for the Jesuit strategy of accommodation in Japan, China and India. This limited time and space serves a twofold aim regarding Christian and European master narratives: Christian purity was only for a short period of time (about 150 years) challenged, then the Jesuits were stopped and this failed experiment was followed by an again purified global expansion of Christianity. In a European perspective and against the backdrop of the emerging idea of Western superiority such an accommodation was only possible regarding the interaction with so called high cultures. In contrast, we want to argue that adaptation and transculturalisation are an integral part of all missionary endeavours – and it cannot be stopped by issuing a Papal bull. Accommodation is a general characteristic of Jesuit work, as was argued before, but we assume comparable mechanisms of translation also in the other missionary work.

To explore the scope of transculturation, of religious and dogmatic negotiation, the conference will compare catechisms and their translation. Catechisms are considered to be a central instrument to educate and communicate Christian belief and dogma, both in the missionary as well as in the confessionalising context. Therefore they are also the central media for all kinds of translation processes.

To enable us to compare mechanisms and scope of translation we want to focus on certain topics tackled in the catechisms:
- Eucharist
- Sin, justification, works righteousness
- Monotheism and trinity
- Marriage – celibacy

Via comparing we want to learn more about the scope of transculturalisation and mechanisms. We want to explore conditions like power relations, social differentiation, cultural pattern, gender roles etc.

The transcultural approach relies heavily on cooperation, because so diverse regional and historic expertise is needed. Therefore we want to gather scholars from different world
regions, working on Christianity in different world regions. Moreover, we want to include Europe in this comparison, as the history of mission and the history of European Christianity were separated for too long. The history of Christianity has to be entangled.