

Press release

“Many have mystic experiences”

International conference in Münster on the rediscovery of mysticism in the modern age – public lecture and Sufi concert with a dancing dervish in the Münster Petrikirche

Münster, 27 November 2013 (exc) According to researchers, the centuries-old phenomenon of mysticism still today appears in the lives of many people. “In the Religion Monitor survey 2013, almost half of Western Germans and one third of Eastern Germans claimed to often or sometimes have experiences of unity and totality, that is, experiences that are often related to mysticism”, explains religious scholar Prof. Dr. Annette Wilke from the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” in Münster, Germany. “Many feel at one with nature or the universe in such moments. Not always is belief in god connected with it.” The scholar announced an interdisciplinary conference that will be held at the Cluster of Excellence as of 5 December, “Constructions of Mysticism”, where international experts will investigate, across religious boundaries, the rediscovery of mysticism in the 20th century and the roots of mysticism since Antiquity. In addition, there will be a free Sufi concert with a dancing dervish.

“Mysticism attracts many people today because it offers intensive ways of personal belief and a spirituality that is based on experience. This is in line with our society’s individualisation”, according to Prof. Wilke. “This also explains the appeal of religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, which have the reputation of being particularly mystic.” In contrast to previous centuries, mystic experiences today are no longer exclusively linked to monasteries and contemplative ways of life. Rather, mystic ways of experience are often sought independently of institutions. “Some people thus distance themselves from the churches, others from a strongly rationalistic world view or a consumerist way of life.” According to the expert, mystic experiences can be found “across all milieus, including groups linked to a church”.

Coping with the modern world

The early 20th century rediscovered mysticism as a way of coping with the complex modern world, says Prof. Wilke. “On the one hand, it served the liberation from the ‘shackles of the church’, on the other hand from the ‘shackles of the natural sciences’ – that is what the philosopher Fritz Mauthner said in 1925.” However, the rediscovery of mysticism also served a consolidation of church spirituality. The conference will show numerous examples of mysticism in the modern age, such as in the Buddhist-Christian-Hindu dialogue (please see the programme below), as well as the Christian-Jewish roots which mysticism has in Late Antiquity and the Renaissance.

According to the scholar, mysticism is today considered a universal phenomenon across all ages and cultures. The term “mysticism”, which did not develop before the 17th century, denominates intense forms of, above all, inner religiousness such as contemplative states of mind and experiences of infinity. Today, the collective term covers disparate phenomena, from Jewish Merkabah spirituality or medieval Passion piety to yoga. Many mystics of the past received this designation later and never referred to themselves as mystics, e.g. Laozi (6th century B.C.), Lin Moniang (10th century A.D.), Farid ad-Din ‘Attar (c. 1145-1221), Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-1282), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1328), Nicholas of Flüe (1417-1487), Mirabai (c. 1500-1550), Moses Cordovero (1522-1570) and Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768).

Concert “Sufi Sounds and Dance” and public lecture

The conference will be complemented by a public concert with Sufi music and a dancing dervish from Berlin’s Sufi ensemble Rabbaniyya. Admission to the event on 7 December at 8 p.m. in the Petrikirche is free, allowing everybody who is interested in experiencing mysticism’s sensual sides to do so. “Many men and women who are today known as mystics composed impressive verses. Some engrossed their minds in calligraphy, some were inspired painters, others sought self-transcendence in music and dance”, according to Prof. Wilke. “Music is a particularly suitable means to achieve absorption and was thus used consciously as a technique of contemplation, ecstasy and attunement to the divine.”

In a public lecture about the mysticism exhibition of the Rietberg Museum Zurich, the director of the museum, Albert Lutz, will illustrate how the challenging question, “How can mysticism be exhibited at all?” has been solved. The lecture “Exhibiting Mysticism? Review of the Mysticism Exhibition in the Rietberg Museum Zurich, 2011-12” will be held on 5 December at 7 p.m. in the Liudgerhaus, Überwasserkirchplatz 3.

Transfers between Asia and Europe

The conference “Constructions of Mysticism” will bring together international experts and is aimed – for the first time in an interdisciplinary scope – at reviewing the conceptualisation of mysticism as a universal, transcultural category. It will reflect the history of research and the rediscovery of mysticism in the 20th century. In addition, it will deal with the question how a European and strongly Christian concept of mysticism was transferred to non-European cultures and how it also took on new meanings and function of everyday life in the process. Transfers between Asia and Europe will be examined in this respect.

The Bochum scholar Prof. Dr. Volkhard Krech, for example, will take a look at the concept of mysticism and ask, “Just another Invention of Western Intellectuals?”. The orthodox theologian Prof. Dr. Assaad Kattan from the Cluster of Excellence will present constructions of mysticism in 20th-century orthodoxy. The Vienna religious scholar Prof. Dr. Karl Baier will investigate the “Psychodelic Movement” of the 1960s, which

caused a stir because of the use of drugs. The Cologne theologian Prof. Dr. Saskia Wendel will examine women's concepts of mysticism. The Romanian philosopher Dr. Liviu Bordas will present yoga concepts of the religious scholar Mircea Eliade. There will also be lectures by classical scholars, Judaists, philosophers and Islamic scholars.

The conference is organised by Prof. Dr. Annette Wilke, who heads the Cluster project C2-20 "Global Hinduism – the Chinmaya Mission in India and around the world", and by Judaist Prof. Dr. Regina Grundmann, who heads project C2-22 "Transfer of traditions in the Yalkut Shimoni und the Midrash ha-gadol" and the coordinated project group "Exchange among and between 'world religions': appropriation – transformation – demarcation". (vvm)

PROGRAMME

Thursday 05.12.2013

14:00–15:00 Introduction to the Conference Theme, Annette Wilke

European Roots – Experience and Gnosis

15:30–16:30 'Mysticism' and the Production of Experience, Niklaus Largier

16:30–17:30 Mystic Apophaticism in Middle and Neoplatonism Across Judaism, 'Paganism' and Christianity, Ilaria Ramelli

19:00–20:30 Public Soirée

Exhibiting Mysticism? Review of the Mysticism Exhibition in the Rietberg Museum Zurich, 2011–12, Albert Lutz

Friday, 06.12.2013

East and West – The Constructions of a Universal

10:00–10:15 Opening

10:15–11:15 Just Another Invention of Western Intellectuals? The Concept of Mysticism Revisited, Volkhard Krech

11:30–12:30 Polyvalence and Equivalence. Object- and Meta-Language Concerning the Notion of 'Mysticism' in Buddhist-Christian-Hindu Discourse, Michael von Brück

14:30–15:30 Between Magic and Mystic. Eliade's Early View on Yoga, Liviu Bordas

15:45–16:45 The Role of the Psychedelic Movement in the Modern Construction of Mysticism, Karl Baier

17:00–18:00 Daoist Chinese Mysticism and its Practical Aspects, Florian Reiter

Saturday, 07.12.2013

Transfers and Demarcations – Mysticism as a Source of Empowerment

10:00–10:15 Opening

10:15–11:15 Religious Authority and Empowerment in Concepts of Mysticism of Women, Saskia Wendel

11:30–12:30 The Kabbalistic Library of Pico della Mirandola: A Translation of Jewish Mysticism into Renaissance Thought, Annett Martini

14:30–15:30 Mysticism in Modernity, a Longue Durée and Innovations: The Idea of the Third Reich Between Lessing and Hitler, Christoph Auffarth

15:45–16:45 Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, and ‘Jewish Mysticism’: Reflections on the Self-Orientalization of Jewish Intellectuals in Europe Around 1900, Kocku von Stuckrad

17:00–18:00 Vladimir Lossky’s ‘Mystical Theology’. An Orthodox Construction of Mysticism in the 20th Century?, Assaad Kattan

20:00–21.00 Public Concert: Sufi Sounds and Dance, Berliner Sufi-Ensemble Rabbaniyya

Sunday, 08.12.2013

Mysticism and Modern Spirituality

09:30–10:30 Sufism and the Construction of Modern Western Spirituality: Echoes and Silences, Mark Sedgwick

10:45–11:45 The Construction of Mysticism as a Universal, Trans-cultural Category and as a Product of Interactive Processes Between European/ Western and Indian/Asian Discourses, Richard King

12:00–13:00 Conference Ending/Conclusion

Picture: Prof. Dr. Annette Wilke

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The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of WWU Münster

Some 200 academics from more than 20 disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and from 14 countries do research in the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (WWU). They deal with the complex relationship of religion and politics across epochs and cultures: from the ancient pantheon and Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages and the early modern period to the current situation in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. It is nationally the largest research association of its kind and of the 43 clusters of excellence in Germany, it is the only one to deal with religions. The federal government and the state governments support the project within the scope of the Excellence Initiative with 33.7 million euros from 2012 until 2017.