

Press release

“Religion had a much greater influence on welfare states than has previously been known”

Study from the Cluster of Excellence closes research gap for 13 European countries

Münster, 22 May 2014 (exc) According to a new study from the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, religious communities had a much greater influence on the formation of European welfare states than has previously been known. “Particularly in countries like Germany and the Netherlands, in which the state and the churches as well as the denominations were competing against one another, religions became highly committed to the welfare sector”, according to the Protestant theologian and social ethicist Prof. Dr. Hans-Richard Reuter from the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence. “In countries like Spain or Poland, on the other hand, where Catholicism had the monopoly for a long time and was closely tied to the state, religions had hardly any influence on welfare statism, which is less well developed there to this day.” In this respect, religions played a key role in determining how and how strongly a country’s welfare sector developed. The study analysed 13 European countries. It is so far the largest investigation of the influence of religions on Europe’s welfare states.

As the factor of religion had appeared but little in European welfare research before, the study closes a research gap, as the heads of the investigation, Prof. Reuter and the Catholic theologian and religious sociologist Prof. Dr. Karl Gabriel, explained. The study has been published under the title “Religion und Wohlfahrtsstaatlichkeit in Europa” (Religion and Welfare Statism in Europe) by the Tübingen-based publishing house Mohr Siebeck. In addition to Prof. Reuter and Prof. Gabriel, the first two volumes were co-edited by Catholic theologian Dr. Stefan Leibold and the Protestant colleague Andreas Kurschat from the Cluster of Excellence. The second volume is expected to be published in spring 2015 under the title “Religion und Wohlfahrtsstaatlichkeit in Deutschland” (Religion and Welfare Statism in Germany).

“Meagre welfare state in countries with Orthodoxy and Islam”

The authors examined religious-denominational influences on the welfare state development in 13 European countries from industrialisation to the present. On this basis, according to the strength of welfare statism and of the religious influence on it, the scholars identified different types of countries. “At the same time, every single country reveals a unique form of development of its welfare system”, according to the researchers. The weakest welfare state forms can be found in those countries of the study with a Christian-Orthodox and Ottoman influence. “While the welfare states of

Western Europe handled both class division and conflicts between church and state institutionally, Orthodoxy in countries such as Greece, Russia and Bulgaria never developed a conflictual counterpart that could have led to activities in the social sector.” The researchers found a similar situation as regards Islam and Turkey.

According to the study, “religiously awakened and charismatic personalities” often initiated the social commitment of the religious communities in countries with a stronger welfare state. In Germany, baron Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler (1811-1877) and the social ethicist and politician Franz Hitze (1851-1921) were among them on the Catholic side. The authors name Pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh (1831-1910), theologian Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-1881), social politician Theodor Lohmann (1831-1905) and Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) as pioneering Protestants.

The researchers found a particularly strong religious influence on the welfare state in mixed denominational countries like Germany and the Netherlands. The crucial factor was that the competition among the churches and the state coincided with the competition among the denominations. This also applied to countries in which religion and state carried out conflicts of interest and remained institutionally independent, according to the editors. “Here, religions did not only react to modernisation and the formation of the welfare state but also had an active impact themselves.” Prof. Gabriel said, “In Germany, like nowhere else, the well-organised Catholics discovered social politics as the preferred area for their struggle for social recognition and political emancipation.” It mattered in this respect that religion and enlightenment were not mutually exclusive.

In other Central and North West European countries such as Sweden with its Lutheran influences and Denmark, as well as Great Britain with its Anglican influences, impulses of enlightenment and of Christianity were also combined successfully, according to the authors. “In this way, the orientation of the civil-national revolutions did not become anti-Christian but was positively linked to the Christian heritage.”

The welfare states in Southern and Eastern Europe were less pronounced and also had less religious influence. “In Spain or Poland, for example, Catholicism was closely integrated with the state and held a religious monopoly. Consequently, competition did not develop – neither between religion and state nor between the individual denominations”, according to the editors. The welfare state in Italy was a little more pronounced and featured at least some “Catholic elements effective in the long term”.

The study of the Cluster of Excellence originated in project A7, “The Religious Deep Grammar of the Social”. International social scientists, historians, theologians and legal scholars were involved. They examined welfare statism in Bulgaria, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Spain and Turkey, and dealt with the influence of Catholicism, Lutheranism, the Anglican Church of England and non-denominational Protestantism as well as with Calvinism, Orthodoxy and Islam. According to Prof. Reuter, “The countries were selected so as to cover a broad geographical, religious cultural and welfare state spectrum.” (han/vvm)

Reference: Gabriel, Karl/Reuter, Hans-Richard/Kurschat, Andreas/Leibold, Stefan (eds.): Religion und Wohlfahrtsstaatlichkeit in Europa. Konstellationen – Kulturen – Konflikte, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013, 513 pages, ISBN: 978-3-16-151717-4, € 89.

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Images: Protestant theologian Prof. Dr. Hans-Richard Reuter (left) and Catholic theologian Prof. Dr. Karl Gabriel (photo: Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”/Brigitte Heeke); book cover (photo: Mohr Siebeck)

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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.