

Press release

“Converts are looking for truth”

Cluster of Excellence analyses conversions from Antiquity until the present day – lecture series “Conversion. Reversals in faith and life”, starting on 20 October in Münster

Münster, 12 October 2015 (exc) According to scholars, Jews, Christians and Muslims stand in a centuries-old history of conversions when they change their religion today. “Ever since Antiquity, people have repeatedly changed their faiths or their world views fundamentally, and thus also their lives”, explain German Studies scholars Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, Bruno Quast and historian Wolfram Drews from the University of Münster’s cluster “Religion and Politics”. The motif of such reversals in faith and life is often the pressing quest for truth, as is revealed by historical sources. “A dimension of this kind will probably still today apply to quite a few converts, while others might also decide to change their faith for family or job-related reasons”, according to Prof. Drews. The researchers announced the cluster’s upcoming public lecture series, “Conversion. Reversals of faith and life”, starting on 20 October.

The topics of the 14 lectures range from the conversion to Christianity in ancient Rome and dreams of conversion in the Middle Ages to early modern reformers to the baptism of European Jews in the 19th century. Conversions within Islam in Indonesia, the conversion of US-American musician Bob Dylan to Evangelical Christianity and the change from spiritual healing to psychiatry in contemporary India will also be canvassed. The lecture series investigates religious and also political and ideological conversions from Late Antiquity until the present day. “The focus will be on the historical, cultural and social conditions of conversions, the media and rhetorical strategies of their presentation and justification, and the structural similarities between religious and non-religious reversals”, explains Prof. Drews. Cultures outside Europe will also be taken into consideration.

Radicalisation of one’s own faith

Over the course of history, Prof. Wagner-Egelhaaf explains, people had very different notions of conversion. In Antiquity, it was understood as conversion if the attention of the philosopher’s soul was turned towards the deity. The ‘courtly love’ of the Middle Ages deified the beloved woman. In the modern age, the reversal from spiritual healing to psychiatry in part resulted in the uncritical adoption of scientific cures. And when lawyers no longer believe in the legislator, their worldview and self-perception also change in a very fundamental way.

The literal meaning of conversion is “turnaround”, the term describes a decisive change in life, according to Prof. Wagner-Egelhaaf. This can be the conversion from one denomination or religion to another, but also the radicalisation of one’s own faith or the change from non-belief to belief. Entering a cloister is a conversion as well, insofar as this is a radical change of life. Becoming a vegetarian, for example, or an avid reader of Thomas Mann, if one had formerly not been convinced by his works, could be taken as non-religious conversions. What is decisive is that such a conversion fundamentally changes the view of the world and of one’s own self as well as of the value system. Thus, conversions of this kind are often ideological, establishing new general principles for one’s own life.

In the course of history, very different kinds of people converted. Prof. Wagner-Egelhaaf points out that “generalisations are impossible here”. What is rather to be investigated in every individual case are the personal motives as well as the historical and cultural conditions. In addition, not every conversion is based on choice or inner conviction. “Those who convert from inner conviction, however, demonstrate a critical awareness towards predetermined ways of life and faith.”

“Today, attention is focussed on Muslim converts”

The public reaction to conversions has also always depended on the conditions of the respective era, as Prof. Drews adds. Today, for example, public debates focus on Muslim converts in particular. Other conversions also taking place, such as those from one Christian denomination to another, are “less conflict prone”, thus attracting less attention. This was quite different in the early modern period, when, for example, the Protestant queen Christina of Sweden, daughter of Gustav Adolf, who allegedly saved Protestants, converted to Catholicism. “Contemporaries also found it disconcerting when Bodo, palace deacon to Carolingian emperor Louis the Pious, converted to Judaism.”

According to Prof. Drews, the new parishes always reacted differently to the changes in faith. “People can count themselves lucky if they feel accepted by and included in their new religion.” Converts often face the accusation that their decision is not genuine and that it was made for job-related reasons alone. In the Middle Ages, a conversion might also have serious effects on one’s family: a Jew who became a Christian broke with his family. “This could lead to existential isolation.”

“No conversion without a tale or song”

Posterity often hears about conversions in reports that the converts themselves composed, according to Prof. Quast. “Many reappraised their conversion in literature or music. No conversion without a tale, report or song.” This was meant to cast a plausible, consistent and authentic light on the act of conversion, both for the public at large and for the author himself, and strengthened the newly gained identity both inwardly and outwardly. Thus, the most important source of conversion research are autobiographical reports, even if they were reshaped afterwards. An example are the dialogues of Christian convert Petrus Alfonsi in which he stages a soliloquy between Moses, named after his

Jewish name, and Petrus, his new Christian name. Rhetorically, many conversion tales draw on primal scenes such as the conversion of church fathers Augustine and Jerome in the 4th century. There were also compilations of conversion reports in the pietist movement. Other conversions were literalised in a novel-like fashion, as Christian author Ruth Nahida Lazarus did in her novel “Ich suchte Dich!” (I was looking for you!) in 1898, in which she gives an account of her conversion to Judaism.

Representatives of various disciplines will speak in the cluster’s lecture series: of history and law, ethnology, theology, Arabic and German studies, Indonesian philology, Jewish studies and medieval Latin philology. The lectures will be held on Tuesdays from 6.15 to 7.45 pm in lecture theatre F2 of the Fürstenberghaus at Domplatz 20-22 in Münster.
(ska/vvm)

Pictures: Prof. Dr. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (photo: Hilla Südhaus), Prof. Dr. Bruno Quast (photo: Exzellenzcluster „Religion und Politik“/Sarah Batelka), Prof. Dr. Wolfram Drews (photo: WWU/Anna Overmeyer)

Contact:

Viola van Melis
Centre for Research Communication
of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”
Johannisstraße 1
48143 Münster
Phone: 0251/83-23376
Fax: 0251/83-23246
religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de
www.religion-und-politik.de

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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.