

Press release

“Religions resemble each other in their diversity”

Scholar of Religion Perry Schmidt-Leukel is the first German in 25 years to give the renowned Gifford Lectures – he will present new theory on religious diversity

Münster, 5 October 2015 (exc) According to the scholar of religion and theologian Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel, traditional theologies provide insufficient answers to the growing challenge of religious diversity and conflicts. “Instead of continuing to pursue theology in a religion specific manner, we should rather opt for an interreligious theology”, says the scholar from the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”. As the “theology of the future”, interreligious theology shows that religions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism resemble each other much more than had previously been thought, but in respect of their internal diversity. “That which distinguishes religions can often also be found, in a different form, as differences within one’s own religion. This insight permits that ecumenical theology be broadened to interreligious theology”, according to Professor Schmidt-Leukel, who is the first German in 25 years to give the renowned “Gifford Lectures” in Scotland. In the lecture series taking place from 12 to 21 October 2015, he will present a new theory of religious diversity for the first time. The invitation to give the Gifford Lectures is one of the highest international academic honours in the field of religious philosophy and theology.

“Interreligious theology, in contrast to intercultural philosophy, takes the confessional dimension of religions seriously”, according to the scholar. The confessions to Muhammad as “the prophet”, to Jesus as “the son of God” and to Gautama as “Buddha” share basic characteristics regarding their underlying motives: “For Muslims, the word of God turns into text, as in the case of the Qur’an, while it turns into a person for Christians, as in the case of Jesus. However, both religions know the other concept as well, and in both cases it is a question of how the presence of God is to be understood in the act of divine revelation”, according to the theologian. Even behind a rejection of other beliefs, there are often more commonalities than expected, for example, if something is rejected that the other actually does not advocate in this form. “Instead of considering other religions as a threat, they can enrich one’s own belief.” Therefore, interreligious theology not only draws on the holy scriptures of one’s own religion but also those of others. According to Schmidt-Leukel, “This provides great opportunities in dealing with the increasing religious diversity in our society.”

“Fractal patters in the style of ferns and cauliflowers”

In developing his “fractal theory of religious diversity”, Professor Schmidt-Leukel draws on the theory of fractals of mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot (1924-2010), according to

which objects in nature such as ferns or cauliflowers are composed of scaled-down copies of themselves. According to Schmidt-Leukel, a fractal understanding of religious diversity can support an interreligious theology. He emphasises that “the other religion and the person of a different faith are less alien than initially assumed. The new theory provides an alternative to the widespread view that religions are incompatible and incommensurable.”

“Basic patterns of religious diversity are reflected in the diversity within every religion and eventually within the religious capabilities inherent in every single person”, explains the theologian. Thus, there is more continuity between a conservative understanding of theology and interreligious theology than one may think: “In interreligious theological discourse, one encounters in new forms issues and questions which are also known from the theological tradition of one’s own religion. Thus, in part, the key to understanding other religions is also found in one’s own religion”, according to the scholar.

Professor Schmidt-Leukel’s Gifford Lectures are entitled “Interreligious Theology: The Future Shape of Theology”. He will present research results of the Cluster of Excellence’s project C2-16, “Interreligious Theology”. The first lecture, “Interreligious Theology: Whither and Why” will explain the principles and methodology of interreligious theology. Lectures two to four will exemplify these by dealing with the Muslim, Christian and Buddhist confessions to Muhammad as the last prophet, to Jesus as the son of God, and to Gautama as Buddha. Schmidt-Leukel will present his new conception of religious diversity in the concluding lecture, “Towards a Fractal Theory of Religious Diversity”.

“Overcoming prejudices against other religions”

Sooner or later, traditional theologies of all religions will develop towards interreligious theology, according to the scholar. This form of pursuing theology and reflecting beliefs brings different confessional and religious perspectives into a permanent exchange. “Interreligious theology aims at understanding the reasons and motives of different religious affirmations and, as far as possible, at sharing them”. It can help believers to overcome prejudices and develop appreciation for other religions. “Against this backdrop, the dialogue of the religions, which is pursued at many levels in society, is to be understood as a theological activity in the strict sense”, according to the scholar. The matter here is not only peaceful coexistence, but also to deal, across religious boundaries, with those larger questions that have always been concerning humanity in all cultures and religions.” However, interreligious theology must not be misunderstood as a theology of a universal “unified religion”.

The five lectures of the renowned Gifford series will initially be published in English and later also in German translation. The edited volume, “Interreligiöse Theologie” (Interreligious Theology) that Schmidt-Leukel published in 2013 together with the Protestant theologian Professor Reinhold Bernhardt from Basel, also deals with the opportunities and problems of interreligious theology. Since 2009, Professor Perry Schmidt Leukel has been director of the University of Münster’s Institute for Religious Studies and Inter-Faith Theology and member of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and

Politics". He had been professor of religious studies and systematic theology at the University of Glasgow from 2000 to 2009. His research is focused on the theology of religions, interreligious relations, the Christian-Buddhist dialogue, interreligious theology and the religions' capacity for pluralism. (ska/vvm)

The Gifford Lectures

Ever since 1888, the four Scottish universities in Edinburgh, Glasgow, St. Andrews and Aberdeen have organised the lecture series every year or every other year. Adam Lord Gifford (1820-1887), judge and advocate, endowed it in order to support "natural theology in the broadest sense". Today, the universities understand this in terms of an academic study of religion that focusses on the rationality and possible truth of religion.

The first Gifford Lectures were given in Glasgow between 1888 and 1892 by the German scholar of religion Friedrich Max Müller. He was followed by numerous renowned scholars, principally from the disciplines of theology, philosophy, history and the natural sciences. German scholars last to give the Gifford Lectures were between 1984 and 1985 Protestant theologian Prof. Dr. Jürgen Moltmann and 1990/91 the German Islamic Scholar Professor Annemarie Schimmel.

Among the Gifford Lecturers are US-American psychologist and philosopher William James (1900-1902), French philosopher and Nobel laureate in literature Henri Bergson (1913-1914), Scottish ethnologist and philologist James Frazer (1923-1925), German-French physician and philosopher Albert Schweitzer (1934-1935), Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1936-1938), German and later US-American Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1952-1954), Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann from Marburg (1954-1955), German physicist and Nobel laureate Werner Heisenberg (1955-1956), as well as German physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1959).

Others who have given the Gifford Lectures were German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt (1973), Anglo-Irish writer Iris Murdoch (1981-1982), US-American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1992-1993), Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1998-1999) and US-American linguist Noam Chomsky (2004-2005). Furthermore, the following philosophers are among the speakers of the Gifford Lectures with the highest international renown: Alfred North Whitehead (1927-1928), Gabriel Marcel (1949-1950), Alfred Ayer (1972-1973), Ninian Smart (1979-1980), Richard Swinburne (1982-1984), Paul Ricoeur (1985-1986), Antony Flew (1986-1987), John Hick (1986-1987), Raimon Panikkar (1988-1989), Hilary Putnam (1990-1991), Keith Ward (1993-1994), Michael Dummett (1996-1997), and Alvin Plantinga (2004-2005). (vvm)

Correction: In its original version the press release stated erroneously that Professor Schmidt-Leukel was the first German in 30 years to give the renowned "Gifford Lectures". The correct information is "in 25 years", since between 1990 and 1991 Islamic Scholar Professor Annemarie Schimmel gave the "Gifford Lectures".

Programme of the Gifford Lectures, “Interreligious Theology: The Future Shape of Theology”

13 October 2015: Interreligious Theology: Whither and Why?

14 October 2015: The Prophet and the Son

15 October 2015: The Son and the Buddha

20 October 2015: The Buddha and the Prophet

21 October 2015: Towards a Fractal Theory of Religious Diversity

Pictures: Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel (photo: Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”/Sarah Batelka)

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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.