

## Press release

### Scholars of Religious Studies Establish “European Academy of Religion”

**Some 1,000 researchers expected at first international conference in Bologna beginning on Sunday – University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” involved in foundation of academy – Presentation of research findings on increasing religious pluralism**

**Münster, 14 June 2017 (exc)** Some 1,000 scholars of religious studies from Europe and the neighbouring countries will get together in Bologna, Italy on Sunday for the first conference of the newly-founded European Academy of Religion (EuARe). The University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, which was involved in the foundation of the new academy, will present research findings on the increase in religious pluralism in Europe at the international and interdisciplinary conference which will be held from 18 to 22 June. “With the European Academy of Religion, an unprecedented platform of European religious research comes into being”, says Protestant theologian, Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Großhans from the Cluster of Excellence, who prepared the conference with a group of international scholars. The event will see the adoption of the academy’s articles of incorporation.

“European research on religion is characterised by a variety of subjects, languages and academic traditions. We aim to bring these together”, says Prof. Großhans. “At the same time, thanks to the academy, research findings can be shown even more clearly in politics and society – given the pressing issue of the future.” The European Parliament and the European Commission Representation in Italy have assumed patronage of the conference. It is modelled on the renowned American Academy of Religion (AAR), which brings together scholars of religion from all over the world in North America.

Scholars from about 300 research institutions are expected in Bologna. The aim is to network individual researchers but also university and non-university research centres, academic expert associations, journals, publishers and the media. The “Ex Nihilo Zero Conference”, as it is titled, also serves to organise the academy’s first regular annual conference in March 2018. In addition to annual conferences, to be held at alternating locations, the scholars aim to plan joint international research projects and establish a publicly available publication portal on the Internet.

The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” will host a panel on the increasing religious pluralism in Western Europe at the conference in Bologna, taking place on Monday, 19 June. Speakers will be sociologist of religion Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack, legal scholar Prof. Dr. Fabian Wittreck, and Islamic theologian Prof. Dr. Mouhanad Khorchide. In one of the key lectures of the conference, scholar of religious studies and theologian Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel from the Cluster of Excellence will present his new theory on religious pluralism according to which different religions resemble each other in view of their internal diversity, allowing for new ways of convergence. Prof. Dr. Großhans organises a lecture series on concepts and methods of modern religious philosophy for the European Society for Philosophy of Religion.

The foundation of the new academy dates back to the initiative of church historian Prof. Dr. Alberto Menolli, who holds the UNESCO Chair of Religious Pluralism and Peace at the University of Bologna. He also serves there as the director of the Foundation for Religious Sciences John XXIII. Some 500 delegates from Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Maghreb,

Russia, America and Asia came upon invitation of the foundation for a first meeting in Bologna in December 2016. The preparatory conference was chaired by the EU Commissioner of Research, Carlos Moedas. (dak/vvm)

## **Cluster of Excellence's contributions to the EuARe**

On Monday, 19 June the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics" will host the panel "Religious pluralism in Europe: from the perspective of sociology, law and Islamic theology: the case of Germany" at the conference in Bologna. The speaker of the research association, sociologist of religion Prof. Dr. Pollack, explains that, "Over the past centuries, the degree of religious pluralism in Western European societies has increased dramatically. Whereas in 1949, when the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, more than 95 per cent of the population were members of the Protestant or Catholic churches, their share today is no larger than approximately two thirds. The change in the religious landscape is particularly challenging for political decision-makers and for the legal system, but also on the level of civil society."

In his contribution to the panel, legal scholar Prof. Dr. Fabian Wittreck will address the question as to what extent the legal political systems in Western Europe and, in particular, the model of cooperation between state and church in Germany are able to cope with the challenges of growing religious diversity. He will discuss whether they are in a position to ensure freedom of religion and equality of treatment of religious bodies despite the increasing religious pluralism. Sociologist of religion Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack will discuss the question as to how populations of Western European countries deal with religious pluralism, to what extent they accept it, and to what degree they are willing to show tolerance towards what is foreign. Islamic theologian Prof. Dr. Mouhanad Khorchide will ask what tolerance potential among religious minorities can be found, particularly among Muslims, and "where resources for dialogue, communication and integration as well as barriers of integration exist".

On Monday, 19 June scholar of religious studies and Anglican theologian Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel will present as one of the keynote lectures at the conference "A fractal interpretation of religious diversity", which is a topic he first introduced as part of the renowned Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 2015. "According to my theory," says the scholar, "religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are much more alike than had been previously assumed. They have similarities regarding their respective internal diversity. The foreign religion and the foreign believer are less 'foreign' than one might think in the beginning. This offers an alternative to the widespread view that religions cannot be compared and reconciled. The differences between religions can often be found in another form as differences within one's own religion".

On 20 June Protestant theologian Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Großhans will give a lecture on the topic "Religion after Metaphysics? Reflections on Religion, Truth and Power". This lecture is also part of a 17-part lecture series of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion. Prof. Großhans is the society's Vice-President. The title of the lecture series is "Modern Philosophy of Religion: Approaches, Methods and Concepts".

Other scholars from WWU will be at the conference: on Monday, 19 June Catholic theologian Michael Pfister, from WWU's Department for Medieval and Modern Church History, will give a lecture titled "Interconfessional openness with regards to Old Testament exegesis in the context of the International Congress of Old Testament Scholars in Göttingen (1935)". On the same day, scholar of religion Dr. Melanie Barbato will give a lecture on "The Use of Diplomatic Language in High-level Interreligious Dialogue: A Study of the Vatican's Deepavali Messages". (dak/vvm)

**Program:** <https://www.europeanacademyofreligion.org>

**Pictures:** Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Großhans (photo: Bruno Biermann)

**Contact:**

Viola van Melis  
Centre for Research Communication  
of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”  
Johannisstraße 1  
48143 Münster  
Phone: +49 251/83-23376  
Fax: +49 251/83-23246  
religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de  
[www.religion-und-politik.de](http://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 in the second phase of the Excellence Initiative with 40.1 million euros from 2012 until 2018.