

Press release

“Arab world does not want a state without religion”

Only a minority of people in Arab countries support the secular principle according to Islamic scholar Gudrun Krämer – de facto, however, secularisation already exists in many instances – public lecture at the German Oriental Studies Conference

Münster, 24. September 2013 (exc) According to academic opinion, a consistent separation of religion and state cannot currently be established in Arab countries. The secular principle is widely rejected not only by Islamist forces, said the Berlin-based Islamic scholar Prof. Dr. Gudrun Krämer on Monday at the German Oriental Studies Conference (Deutscher Orientalistentag, DOT) at the University of Münster. In Arab Spring countries or Iran, those who promote secularity as a way of social pacification do not find a majority so far. “Many associate the separation of religion and politics with atheism. And those who are godless have neither values nor decency.” Thus, even secular forces shy away from openly advocating secularism. “In Islam, though, religion and state do not necessarily form an entity”, according to the expert. “Koran and Sunnah actually allow for the secular principle – not, however, in *the* manner currently predominating in the Middle East.”

According to Krämer, “actual secularisation processes” have indeed long been observed in Arab societies – in politics, law, economics, culture and education. The rejection of the secular principle is thus all the more astonishing. Commonly, it is both religiously and politically justified: “Secularism is depicted as an ideology of authoritarian governments imposing it on their own societies by force”, said the scholar of Freie Universität Berlin. Examples are Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), Tunisia under Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000) and Irak under Saddam Hussein (1937-2006). “At the same time, secularists are denounced as agents of the West.” From this perspective, the separation of religion and state is a means of “colonisation and cultural alienation”. For many Muslims, this is just as serious as the fear of Islam becoming less important.

“Against guardians of public morals also controlling private life”

The Islamic scholar analysed several examples of already existing secularisation processes in Arab societies: Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Egypt or the Gulf States, for instance, largely agree that Islam should define rules for public spaces and that all Muslims should make their religious affiliation publicly apparent by means of an appropriate lifestyle. “However, if Islamist circles intend to consistently control even *private* life, they incur the displeasure even of pious practising Muslims. These condemn alcohol, homoeroticism and prostitution, but they do not wish to be constantly called to

order by guardians of public morals.” This reveals an “almost Victorian attitude of ‘my home is my castle’”.

However, the borderline between private and public is fluctuating, says Prof. Krämer, referring to the Internet: “Owing to the protection offered by cyber anonymity, social networks open up spaces for contents to Muslims that are not tolerated in public discourse.” At the same time, appearances are kept up outwardly towards authorities and neighbours. “It is up in the air how this will permanently affect the separation of the private and the public in the Arab world, to which above all women are subjected.” Parallel to this, an “Islamic market” is developing which offers Islamic media, consumer and entertainment products. This is a dimension that “leaves the sphere of the state far behind.” It remains to be seen whether an open market will develop which has different religions on offer, as is the case in America, Western Europe and parts of East Asia.

“Nowhere is sharia applied exclusively”

In reference to Islamic law, the expert explains: “Nowhere in the Arab world today is sharia applied exclusively, not even in states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, which, according to their own accounts, do so.” To the greatest extent, sharia is not a divine law but rather a legal law as lawyers developed it from the Koran and the Sunnah, allowing for social realities at all times. Neither in pre-modern times nor in the modern age has sharia been applied without restrictions. Criminal law, for example, which in some countries includes draconic physical punishment for theft or illegal sexual intercourse, is not consistently observed nowadays.

“In view of secularisation processes, which cannot be overlooked, the question is not whether Muslims are able to live in a secular system”, says Prof. Krämer. “It has sufficiently been answered by millions of Muslims who are doing so, who do not intend to reorganise their societies in accordance with the sharia – not only in Europe, America, Australia and the Russian Federation, but also in countries like India, where Muslims form a vast majority. The question now is rather whether Muslims in the Arab world consider the secular principle as a legitimate and desirable instrument to organise their societies.

The public lecture at the University of Münster was entitled: “Arcs of suspense: Islam, secularisation and the secular principle”. Prof. Dr. Gudrun Krämer is head of the Institute of Islamic Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. She is also director of the “Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies”. Her main research includes religion, law, politics and society in modern Islam. In 2010 she received the prestigious Gerda Henkel Prize for her research. The 32nd German Oriental Studies Conference continues until Friday with over 900 lectures and 80 panels presented research on Africa, Asia and the Arab world. Some 1,300 experts on Oriental studies from all over the world are attending the conference. (vvm)

Please note: Journalists interested in covering the DOT may register with the Centre for Research Communication: Tel. Int. Code +49 (0)251/83-23376, religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de

Conference participants will find information on registration and the conference fee at:
www.dot2013.de

Caption: Islamic scholar Prof. Dr. Gudrun Krämer (Foto: Exzellenzcluster „Religion und Politik“)

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32nd German Oriental Studies Conference (Deutscher Orientalistentag, DOT) at the University of Münster

More than 1,300 Oriental scholars from all over the world are expected to participate in the largest German Oriental Studies Conference (Deutscher Orientalistentag, DOT) at the University of Münster from 23 to 27 September 2013. Scholars will present recent research results about cultures in Asia, Africa and Arab regions in about 900 lectures and 80 panels. The spectrum ranges from basic research to contemporary issues such as the Arab revolutions, the politics of Iran, Islamic environmental movements, or Chinese people in multinational companies. The German Oriental Society (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, DMG) will host the conference.

The conference is aimed at the professional and interdisciplinary exchange of experienced and young Oriental researchers from all over the world. The programme is as comprehensive as that of no other DOT before. The sections represented most strongly are Indology, Islamic Studies as well as Politics, Economy and Society, followed by Sinology, Iranian Studies, Turkish Studies and Arab Studies. The programme of the DOT is open to everybody who is interested. A conference fee is charged. The University of Münster, the Philologies Department, the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” and Münster Marketing promote the conference.

Among the speakers are top-class guests such as Sinologist Wilt Idema and the Ottoman scholar Cemal Kafadar from Harvard, Byzantinist Hugh Kennedy from London, art historian Robert Hillenbrand from Edinburgh, the Freiburg Indologist Oskar von Hinüber and the Berlin Islamic scholar Gudrun Krämer. A framework programme including a concert and an exhibition is also scheduled.

German Oriental Society

Every three to five years, the German Oriental Society (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, DMG) convenes the German Oriental Studies Conference. The Society was founded in 1845 and is the most important association of German Orientalists. Its members deal with numerous

languages and cultures in Asia, Africa and the Arab regions. The disciplines of Egyptology, Ancient Oriental Studies, Semitic Studies, Hebraic Studies, Arab Studies, Islamic Studies, Christian Oriental Studies, Iranian Studies, Buddhist Studies, Indology, Turkish Studies, Altaic Studies, Mongolian Studies, Tibetology, Sinology, Japanology, Southeast Asian Studies, African Studies and related fields form part of the DMG.