

Press release

“The 21st century is no longer familiar with positive utopias”

Researchers analyse visions of the future from antiquity until today – lecture series of the Cluster of Excellence on apocalypse and utopia, starting 14th October in Münster, Germany

Münster, 2 October 2014 (exc) According to the assessment of cultural scientists, the 21st century is no longer familiar with positive social utopias in literature, arts and politics. “Instead, the challenges of the future such as climate change and digitalisation are often depicted in an apocalyptic language and rhetorically linked to the end of the world”, explains literary scholar Dr. Christian Sieg from the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” in Germany. “In the light of economic crises, wars and environmental disasters, we have for decades been looking to the future with scepticism.” There are rather few positive visions of the future. “Today, hardly any people buy into the utopian master narratives of the previous century such as socialism or the belief in progress by technology.” The scholar announces the Cluster’s coming public lecture series on “Visions of the Future between Apocalypse and Utopia”.

Organised by the Cluster of Excellence’s postdoctoral programme, the lecture series will begin on 14th October. It will address the history of apocalyptic and utopian thinking from antiquity until today. The topics will range from prophetic texts from ancient Egypt, philosophical concepts of the future and Richard Wagner’s “The Artwork of the Future” to female Spanish Fascists’ utopian image of woman. Green utopias of the present and cinematic narratives like “Avatar” and “Cloud Atlas” will also be examined. The lectures will be held on Tuesdays from 18:15 to 19:45 p.m. in lecture theatre F2 of the Fürstenberghaus, Domplatz 20-22.

Unknown island of Utopia

According to Christian Sieg, “Globalisation has gathered the world so closely together that it is difficult today to still imagine an unknown place ‘Utopia’ as a model for an ideal future”. “At best, desires are associated with colonising faraway Mars. We no longer dare to conceive universal utopias. The idea of being able to do things completely different and far better has lost in plausibility, which is also due to our historical knowledge of problems in building ideal societies.” People today are at best looking for solutions for the future in subdomains such as environmental protection or human rights.

English statesman and author Thomas More (1475-1535) described as “Utopia” (“no-place”) a fictitious island with ideal social conditions, thus criticising the conditions in Europe at that time, the expert explains. “Ever since More, utopias have served as alternative drafts to a contemporary society.” At best, utopian visions today are

conceivable as fairy tales, and films such as “Avatar” borrow from their ideas. “The series’ 14 lectures will show that apocalypse and utopia are two historically significant visions of the future, which created images and narratives that persist today.”

Representatives from the fields of history, law, political science, German studies, philosophy, theology, archaeology, Egyptology and musicology will speak in the lecture series.

“People have always given thought to the future, availing themselves of different media”, according to Christian Sieg. “The oral accounts of visions were joined by literature, music, film and architecture.” Early examples are the accounts of visions in the New Testament. “John’s apocalypse describes a concept of salvation which was to comfort the oppressed Christians in the Roman Empire. Here, the end of the world becomes the beginning of a new, better age, the Heavenly Jerusalem.” This idea is in many cases also reflected in architecture, as the scholar argues using an example from the lecture series: “In the early modern period, urban planning was in some cases guided by descriptions of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Cities thus became a sacral space.”

Until today, literature has also resorted to the Bible’s apocalyptic motifs, as the literary scholar explains. The stereotypical phrase of the vision’s account “I saw” can be found in Günter Grass’ “The Rat” (1986), for example. The emotional reaction to dreams and prophecies that is typical of biblical prophets is taken up in Christa Wolf’s “Cassandra” (1983). “The modern age, however, often uses the term ‘apocalypse’ differently from the Bible. It no longer refers to a promise of salvation but is equated with the final end of the world. There is a rudimentary post-apocalyptic life at the most, as many science fiction books and films such as ‘The Day After’ (1983), ‘I Am Legend’ (2007) or ‘The Road’ (2009) show.”

“The drafts of the future’s political and religious functions are just as manifold as the media which transport them”, underlines the cultural scientist. Hence, many 20th-century utopias served as warnings of threats or as alternative drafts to a present that people wanted to change. In history, visions for the future also served to secure hegemony, as was the case with the First Crusade, which was justified as a Biblical eschatological battle. The National Socialist propaganda term “Thousand Year Reich” also stood in the tradition of apocalyptic conceptions. “After all, drafts of the future also served as a religious articulation of the afterlife, as did those visions that were reflected in ancient tomb portraits. By using examples like these, the lecture series will illustrate how religious and political elements are interwoven in visions of the future.” (vvm/ska)

Pictures: Literary scholar Dr. Christian Sieg (Photo: Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, Brigit Heeke)

Contact:

Viola van Melis
Centre for Research Communication
of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”
Johannisstraße 1
48143 Münster
Tel.: 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.