

Press release

“Religious issues are difficult to decide”

Public lecture series on religious decision-making from antiquity until the present – As of 18 October, Cluster of Excellence and SFB 1150 will investigate how Judaism, Christianity and Islam decide on issues of faith – From “God’s hint” to the infallible Pope

Münster, 10 October 2016 (exc) Religious communities find it more difficult than other organisations to make decisions. “Unlike in political or legal decision-making, making decisions about religious issues is nothing that is matter-of-course or trivial as religious truths and norms are usually regarded as sacrosanct”, explains historian Prof. Dr. Ulrich Pfister. “However, particularly in culturally diverse societies, it is significant which religious and ideological concepts are negotiable and which are not – be that dogmas, behavioural norms or the own interests of religious groups. When the latter were regarded as issues that could not be decided on in history, fundamental, and sometimes violent conflicts resulted”, according to Ulrich Pfister, who announced the lecture series “Religion and decision-making” of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” and of the collaborative research centre (Sonderforschungsbereich, SFB) “Cultures of Decision-Making”.

On the basis of numerous examples from antiquity until the present day, the 2016-2017 winter semester’s public lecture series, beginning on Tuesday, 18 October, will deal with how Judaism, Christianity and Islam make decisions about religious issues and who is entitled to do so and in what manner. It will also be discussed what narratives and resources are drawn on in this process – from God’s hint and the scholars’ culture to the infallibility of the Pope. Historian Pfister, who is speaker of the SFB and researcher at the Cluster of Excellence, gives as an example the conflicts about religious education and ethics classes in German schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. “An ideologically pluralistic society needs to negotiate who may teach denominationally which religious and ideological content. It must also find procedures to select suitable players, for example of the Islamic and the humanist associations.”

“Reformation expanded the scope of decision-making”

Another notable example includes the Reformation almost 500 years ago, which expanded the scope of matters that could be decided on to traditional religious beliefs or practices that had been considered sacrosanct until then. “As a consequence of the reformers’ reform efforts, new decision-making processes like religious colloquies and council courts in the towns had to be developed in order to determine how and by whom at all religious matters could be decided, after the previous authorities had been called into question”, says Ulrich Pfister. The lecture series will also investigate philosophical, theological or literary discourses reflecting religious decisions. The 14 lectures will be held on Tuesdays from 6.15 to 7.45 pm in lecture theatre F2 of the F-Haus at Domplatz 20-22 in Münster.

The series will start on 18 October with an introductory lecture of religious sociologist Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack and historian Prof. Dr. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger. It will be followed by lectures on the political ethics of the Old Testament, on legal decisions in classical Islam, on clairvoyants at the Byzantine emperor's court and on the answers of Jewish scholars to questions of faith, *responsa*. Other contributions will deal with the Medieval Inquisition, with the decision-making of the early modern papacy as well as with dogma and infallibility in the history of the magisterium. Further topics will be the Reformation in Westphalia, decision-making as seen by game theory, religious decision-making in literary texts and "possession" as diagnosed by contemporary exorcists.

History, Islamic studies, sociology, ethnology, theology as well as Byzantine, German and Jewish studies will be represented. Ulrich Pfister organised the lecture series together with sociologist of religion Prof. Dr. Detlef Pollack and the historians Prof. Dr. Wolfram Drews, Dr. Philip Hoffmann-Rehnitz and Dr. Iris Fleßenkämper.

Epiphany, clairvoyance or infallibility

The organisers understand "decision-making" as a social practice serving to expressly develop alternative courses of actions and legitimise the choice of an option, which is ultimately always arbitrary. SFB 1150, "Cultures of Decision-Making" has been investigating this on the basis of political, legal and religious decisions since 2015. "It is the specific characteristic of religious decision-making", says Ulrich Pfister, "that the core of religious truth is usually regarded as something that is sacrosanct to human agency and thus something that is or should be beyond decision-making." According to the historian, religious communities justify this by resorting to different resources: their centuries-old tradition, or the charisma of people with a special contact with the afterworld, be that by epiphany, clairvoyance or infallibility.

"Norms for the conduct of life – from sexual behaviour to the prohibition of interest – and for the political and religious life, which are also often considered as sacrosanct in religions, are derived from this as well," underlines Prof. Pfister. However, if attempts came up at changing religious ideas and norms, these took different courses depending on the age, religion or region. "In Western Christianity, for instance, different procedures developed as of the Late Middle Ages for making decisions on and legitimising religious issues, such as the Inquisition", according to the historian. "Modern papal hierarchy and bureaucracy, which will be dealt with repeatedly in our lecture series, can also be understood in this context", explains the scientist.

In Judaism and Islam, by contrast, given the absence of an "institutional organisation" of the religious communities, "more strongly horizontal forms of decision-making" have survived until the present day, essentially involving scholars and their reputation. "In the lecture series, we aim to discuss the extent to which religious decision-making is geared to the authority of individual persons or determined by an institutional or organisational logic." In addition to the "how" and "who", however, the "what" will also be taken into consideration, that is which religious topics could be decided on and which could not, and which social and cultural conditions contributed to a changing of the subjects of religious decision-making. "Thus, looking at the historical conditions, forms and narratives of religious decision-making and their change can altogether increase our understanding of religious change", according to the historian. (vvm)

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The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” and SFB “Cultures of Decision-Making”

More than 200 academics from over 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 relationship of religion and politics from the antiquity until today and from Latin America and Europe to the Arab and the Asian world. It is nationally the largest research association of its kind. The federal government and the state governments support the project with 33.7 million euros from 2012 until 2017.

The Collaborative Research Centre (Sonderforschungsbereich, SFB) 1150 of Münster University, “Cultures of Decision-Making”, established by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) in 2015, investigates the social practice and the cultural fundamentals of decision-making in a historically comparative and interdisciplinary perspective from the Middle Ages until the present age. The subjects of history, literature, law, philosophy, ethnology, Jewish and Byzantine studies are involved.