

Press release

How clear is the Bible?

Historian Volker Leppin (Yale University) to speak in Münster on the illusion that the Holy Scripture is unambiguous – public evening lecture at the Cluster of Excellence on 22 June – “How clear is the Bible?” to explore the tension between the claim to infallible authority and the necessity of interpreting the Bible

Münster, 16 June 2026 (exc) With its principle of “Sola Scriptura” (Scripture alone), the Reformation movement of the 16th century made a radical claim: the Bible should be the sole and unambiguous source of what is authoritative in Christianity. But does this claim actually hold water? How clear is the Bible? Historian Volker Leppin from Yale University will address this question and the Reformation conflicts that arose next week at the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, as announced by the Cluster’s speaker, historian Wolfram Drews. Entitled “How clear is the Bible? Authority and Argument in the Reformation Dispute over Truth”, the public lecture will be held in the lecture theatre building of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” (Room JO 1, Johannisstraße 4, 48143 Münster) on 22 June 2026 at 6.15 pm. If you wish to attend via Zoom, please register beforehand at veranstaltungenEXC@uni-muenster.de.

In announcing the lecture, Volker Leppin said: “A truly iconic scene from the Reformation, one that sums up the Reformation conflict over the principle of ‘Sola Scriptura’, is the dispute between Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy. During the dispute, Luther pulls a cloth off the table and shows his opponent the words he had previously scribbled there: ‘This is my body.’” For Luther, this moment was intended to prove the absolute clarity of Scripture in the so-called Eucharistic controversy. “For Luther, what these words showed is that the body and blood of Christ were truly and physically present in the bread and wine. But Zwingli interpreted the words differently, arguing for the symbolic meaning of the word ‘is’ – in other words, that Christ is not physically present in the bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper, but only in faith”, according to Leppin. “Scripture alone could therefore not decide the matter, even during the Reformation.”

“The Reformation is a history of insisting on a claim”

In his lecture, Leppin will analyse the Reformation as a “history of insisting on a claim”, a claim that, in practice, could not be fully upheld from the very outset. A striking example is infant baptism: although the Reformers adhered to this practice, it was only with a great deal of effort that it could be derived from Scripture. Nevertheless, both Luther and Zwingli upheld this practice with great tenacity. “To uphold the enduring claim to the sole authority of the Bible, the Reformers had to construct new authorities and avenues for debate”, says Leppin. “The so-called confessional writings, such as the Confessio Augustana, grew in importance. They then re-established a framework by which Scripture was to be read and interpreted.”

Leppin interprets the Reformation’s scriptural principle as an extreme simplification of highly complex medieval debates. “But such a simplification need not be entirely negative. The sociologist Niklas Luhmann also saw religion’s ‘reduction of complexity’ as a genuine achievement”, explains Leppin. “In this sense, Martin Luther was a ‘brilliant reducer of complexity’, someone who succeeded in breaking down the multi-layered theological debates of

his time into a concise formula. This is what enabled the Reformation to have such a great momentum and impact on society in the first place, yet at the same time creating a new paradoxical situation: precisely because Scripture alone did not in fact suffice, new and pressing questions emerged regarding the legitimation of authority and truth.”

Volker Leppin has been Professor of Historical Theology at Yale University since 2021. His research focuses on the Middle Ages and the Reformation period, particularly on the person and theology of Martin Luther, on whom he published a biography in 2006. Leppin argues that the Reformation should not be understood as a sharp break, but as a development rooted in medieval thought. His other works include publications on Christian mysticism (*Ruhen in Gott* (Rest in God), 2021), on Francis of Assisi (2018) and on the modern understanding of late medieval piety (*Repräsentation und Reenactment* (Representation and Reenactment), 2021). His latest book, *Gottesspuren. Das christliche Europa vor seiner Entzauberung* (Traces of God: Christian Europe before its Disenchantment, 2026) paints a comprehensive picture of Christian religiosity in the pre-modern era. Leppin is a member of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences, the Saxon Academy of Sciences and the European Academy of Sciences and Arts. (fbu)

Public evening lecture with Volker Leppin (Yale University)

“How Clear Is the Bible? Authority and Argument in the Reformation Dispute over Truth”

Monday, 22 June 2026, 6.15 pm

Lecture theatre building of the Cluster of Excellence, Room JO 1, Johannisstraße 4, 48143 Münster

Register to take part via Zoom at veranstaltungenEXC@uni-muenster.de

The lecture will be held in German.

Images: Historian Volker Leppin, Yale University (Daniela Wagner); poster for the lecture “How clear is the Bible?” (Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”)

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The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”

Established in 2007, the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” will continue to study the complex relationship between religion and politics across epochs and cultures until 2027. The approximately 150 researchers from 20 disciplines in the humanities and social Sciences focus on Europe and the Mediterranean region, and their interconnections with the Middle East, Africa, North America and Latin America. The Cluster is the largest of its kind in Germany and the only Cluster of Excellence to focus on religion. Since its inception the Cluster addresses a wide range of historical and contemporary issues.