

Press release

“Belief in secular life has itself become a kind of religion”

New York legal scholar Joseph H.H. Weiler on Europe’s Christian heritage – “Understanding of Jewish, Christian and Islamic life has been largely lost”

Münster, 6 June 2023 (exc) According to Joseph H.H. Weiler, professor of European law at New York University, belief in secular life has itself become a kind of religion in Europe. “Understanding of what is specific to religious life, whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic, has been largely lost in secular society”, said the scholar in a lecture on Europe’s Christian heritage that he gave at the University of Münster on Monday evening. “What moves religious people and what their religious experience means is barely understood any longer”, said Weiler, who was born in South Africa. For him, what is specific to religion not only lies in the confession, but also refers to “the sacred”, and includes the religious practice that people live in everyday life.

The legal scholar of Jewish faith pointed out that Christianity as an actually lived religion is already in the minority in Europe, a circumstance to which it has not yet found an appropriate answer. What can be observed is an increasing lack of understanding of religious life in society, which is sometimes manifested as intolerance towards Christianity. This has repercussions: “Many religious people hide their religiosity in public discourse instead of confessing it”. This is the result of internalized social pressure and is often combined with the conviction that religion is a private matter, itself “a legacy of the French Revolution”.

Religion is also increasingly understood as a matter of ethics and morals, according to Weiler, which can also be justified *without* religion. “What is specific to religion is lost in this view. What is specific is to do not with coercion, but with freedom. Those who are religious will reject intolerance towards others precisely for religious reasons”. According to Weiler, religions can enrich political discourse precisely because they attribute duties and responsibilities to people. “This can correct the view of secular liberalism, which is fixated on individual rights. Religious discourse is less concerned with rights than with duties and responsibilities”.

The lecture on Europe's Christian heritage at the "Münster Talks on Public Law" was entitled "Christian Heritage in Europe Today – Religion, Politics, Law". The invitation was extended by the Faculty of Law, the Centre for Religion and Modernity (CRM), and the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics" at the University of Münster. Joseph Weiler came at the invitation of political scientist Prof. Dr. Mariano Barbato as part of the research project "The Legions of the Pope: A Case Study of Social and Political Transformation", which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and based at the CRM. (tec/vvm)

Caption: Legal scholar Prof. Dr. Joseph H.H. Weiler giving a lecture on Europe's Christian heritage (Photo: Michael Möller, Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics")

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The Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics"

The Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics. Dynamics of Tradition and Innovation" has been investigating since 2007 the complex relationship between religion and politics across eras and cultures. The 140 researchers from 20 disciplines in the humanities and social sciences focus in the funding phase (2019 to 2025) on the "dynamics of tradition and innovation". They analyze in transepochoal studies ranging from antiquity to the present day the conditions and factors that make religion an engine of political and social change. The focus of interest is on Europe and the Mediterranean region, as well as on their entanglements with the Near East, Africa, North and Latin America. The research network is the largest of its kind in Germany; and, of the Clusters of Excellence, one of the oldest and the only one to deal with the issue of religion. It will receive funding of 31 million euros from 2019 to 2025.