

## Press release

### **“Religions subordinate woman with respect to man”**

**Historian Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger publishes book about controversial gender issues – burka bans, women in the Church, sexual norms, feminism in Judaism**

**Münster, 23 June 2014 (exc)** In the past, the monotheistic world religions have traditionally subordinated woman with respect to man. Historian Prof. Dr. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger from the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of the German University of Münster explains, “This dates from the patriarchal societies in which Judaism, Christianity and Islam developed and which are reflected in the Torah, the Bible and the Koran.” The scientist has edited a German book on the relationship between religion and gender under the title “Als Mann und Frau schuf er sie” (Man and woman he created them). “The Catholic Church and Islam for instance are preserving pre-modern, patriarchal gender roles. It is common knowledge that women are not allowed to become priests or imams, for example.” According to the researcher, who was recently awarded the Historisches Kolleg Award, the influence of religions today is most visible in the gender relation.

“Messages of faith are rarely the focus of public discussions about religion, which deal rather with sexuality and gender roles”, writes the editor. She cites the examples of fundamentalist sexual norms, feminist critique of religion, and church statements on contraceptives. “Every religious system of meaning probably includes statements on gender order.” The roles of man and woman are anchored in religious myths, are continually reproduced anew in liturgical practices, and they are designed to be permanent by means of the churches’ organisational structures. The publication from Münster’s Cluster of Excellence deals with controversial topics such as the burka ban, feminist moves in Judaism, in Islam and in the Catholic Church, as well as the relationship between fundamentalism and sexuality.

According to the scientist, it is not sufficient to concentrate solely on current problems in order to adequately assess the relationship of religion and gender. Rather, a historically comparative perspective is greatly needed. “It can only be shown from a historical distance how, when and why religion and gender order clash with or support each other, and in what way they can be uncoupled – by, for example, a non-religious legal system.”

### **Equating religious and sexual purity**

The omnibus volume’s eleven articles pursue, from the point of view of different subjects and epochs, the question as to how religions have influenced the gender order. Among the authors are scientists from the University of Münster and other German and Dutch

universities, including the jurist Titia Loenen from Utrecht and the Berlin cultural scientist Christina von Braun as well as Rabbi Elisa Klapheck and the publicist Khola Maryam Hübsch from Frankfurt. Contributing scholars from the Cluster of Excellence are the social ethicist Marianne Heimbach-Steins, the historians Werner Freitag and Sita Steckel, and the jurist Bijan Fateh Moghadam. The book assembles contributions to the Cluster of Excellence's public lecture series "Religion and Gender" of 2011 and 2012. It was published as the seventh volume of the series "Religion und Politik" by Ergon-Verlag, Würzburg.

"In most religions, man and woman might be equal in the afterworld before God, if at all, but not on earth", emphasises the historian. It is of central concern to fundamentalists of all religions to return to traditional gender roles. To them, the equal rights of women embodies everything that troubles them about the modern age. Fundamentalists "often define themselves through particularly strict gender norms. They base their group's identity on the chastity of, above all, women in order to dissociate themselves from the sinful world. Religious purity is equated with sexual purity, the belief of the others with sexual licentiousness."

Conversely, according to Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, religious beliefs may contribute to challenging a dominant gender order, "for instance by invoking the spiritual equality before God or individual prophetic inspiration". The historian thinks that the fact that the Protestant Church and Judaism no longer exclude women from ministry shows "that religious institutions can adapt to the historical change of the gender order. Holy texts are open to interpretation." (ska/vvm)

**Reference:** Stollberg-Rilinger, Barbara (ed.): "Als Mann und Frau schuf er sie". Religion und Geschlecht (Religion und Politik, Vol. 7), Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag 2014, 298 pages, ISBN 978-3-95650-011-4, € 44.

For **review copies**, please send an email to [service@ergon-verlag.de](mailto:service@ergon-verlag.de).

**Images:** Historian Prof. Dr. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger (photo: Richard Rilinger), cover (Ergon-Verlag)

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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.