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Keynote Speaker of the 2018 EASR Conference, Bern

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Dorothea Weltecke is professor of medieval history at the Goethe University Frankfurt. She specializes in medieval transcultural and transreligious history, including religious doubt and atheism, and in the comparative history of religious pluralism in the Middle Ages. She was invited to give a keynote lecture at the EASR conference in Bern. In her lecture, »Religious Demarcation, Border Violation, and Deviance Discourses in Medieval Religious Groups«, Professor Weltecke addressed religious choice, sanctions of religious border violation, and apostasies in the Middle Ages. The following interview was conducted after her presentation.

1 *Professor Weltecke, thank you very much for being with us. In your talk, you presented examples of religious pluralism in the Middle Ages and suggested three models to conceptualize medieval religion. What are, from your point of view, the most important factors that restricted and limited religious choice in the Middle Ages?*

2 I think that the driving force limiting choices was the reality of social inequality. The distinction between the faithful, the unfaithful, and the tolerated was, for example, a category of both social and legal inequality. In general, social hierarchy and pressure occur within every social group, of course. In the Middle Ages, belonging to a

community was vital. Everything that was going on in your life was organized in the group. This certainly inhibited, however, your freedom to move back and forth between identities and groups. Furthermore, groups had a specific relation to each other and acted from different social positions in the hierarchy. This drove the demarcation process and limited free exchange between the groups. So, on the one hand, there was pressure from above due to the group-based structure of society and the groups' internal hierarchies. On the other hand, there was competition and conflict between social groups. On the marketplace of religions, a variety of communities with different faiths, convictions, doxa, and practices—which one could find more convincing or more beautiful—were competing with each other. These conflicts were, of course, not limited to religious groups but also concerned nonreligious groups.

3   *This means that even within the same hierarchical group, there would be pressure from inside?*

4   This is an important factor, yes. Another factor is rivalry between religious groups, such as dhimmis, different churches, Jews, and Christians, who had to compete with each other. Religious competition was part of the system. But these were reciprocal processes: on the one hand, the groups were oppressed by the authorities; on the other, one group would try to play the authorities off against other groups. All social groups were included in this process. These power games made interaction explosive and volatile.

5   *Could you give an example of the social inequalities?*

6   In German cities, Jews had the rights of citizenship, but this right was still limited. They were burgher or citizens, but they could not take part in the political self-organization of the Christian community, nor could they be part of the guilds. Another example concerns unbelievers like Muslims. They were tolerated but excluded from the military and normally from all sorts of official positions of power. And they were strictly forbidden to missionize. Of course, there were lots of Muslim warriors in the Latin west or Byzantium; and Christians sent high-ranking envoys to the east. But these exchanges were rather pragmatic decisions resulting from the challenges and necessities of everyday life. Of course, there could not be a Muslim king or a Christian sultan. This was definitely not possible in the social framework that defined clear limits for what people could *not* become. These limits did not only concern religious belonging but also applied to other categories of inequality. For example, a woman in the Latin world could become the queen mother or the queen consort, but it was very difficult for her to become the queen. We may say that just like there was no female sultan, there was no Jewish sultan. I think it is important to make clear that the categories of inequality were interrelated.

7   *Is it possible to identify factors that supported diversity and exchanges in the Middle Ages?*

8   Yes, it is. For instance, a common language, knowledge transfer through sharing books, shared theological concepts, a speculative theology based on Aristotelian philosophy, and shared practices like mysticism, asceticism, and visiting graves supported pluralism. People had the same food, liked the same festivities, and wore the same clothes. People lived together in the same world, and encounters in day-to-day life furthered a comparison of concepts and mutual understanding. Why not take part in others' rituals? Sometimes, one family member became a Muslim. Close everyday relations and sharing culture made interacting easy and furthered what we today

would probably call multiple identities. Society provided several neutral spaces, not only religious in nature, that allowed for encounters and fluidity.

9   *The basis of plurality is religious difference or the opportunity to live religion differently. How important was it for different Christian groups to demarcate themselves so as to develop a distinct religious identity, for example, with regard to rituals?*

10   This was very important, I think. Debates and polemics were often centered on rituals rather than doctrine. Doctrinal questions—for example, regarding the role and relevance of Christ as posed within Christology—were a problem, of course. But questions concerning ritual practices were also very important, for example, regarding a certain way of fasting or not fasting, using yeast for the bread or not using yeast for the bread. These rather practical issues were very important for the demarcation process between religions.

11   *So, there was not so much of a difference between inter- and intrareligious demarcations?*

12   These demarcations work very similar to the processes I described earlier. However, one difference might be that it was possible for all Jews to see themselves as Jews. Even though some would have denied others to be »real« Jews, many would have still said »We are all Jews.« Similarly, there were situations where Christians in the Middle Ages could happily say »We are all Christians« despite the different churches they belonged to. But this was not really possible among the different religions. It would have been difficult to say »We are all Abrahamites.«

13   *To what extent were exchange and demarcation between different religious groups key to religious diversity in the Middle Ages?*

14   These were absolutely crucial and instrumental. It was only transreligious interaction that made the different religions. The religions did not develop themselves self-referentially but in interconnection and entanglement with each other. Without transreligious relations and interactions, there would have been no different faiths, no churches, and no religions.

15   *One of your research interests is the transcultural and transreligious history of the Middle Ages. You conceptualize Christianity in the Middle Ages as heterogeneous and decentralized. In your article »Space, Entanglement and Decentralisation«[1], you use three different models to conceptualize and visualize a heterogeneous medieval Christianity. The models are the bamboo forest, the concept of local Christianities, and the network. In your article, you explain the benefits of combining the three models as a method for obtaining a full picture of Christianity in the Middles Ages. Could you please describe each model and its benefits and shortcomings?*

16   The bamboo forest has the strength of showing that there were different churches. The model emphasizes differentiation and the lack of a central authority to make us understand that medieval churches did not arise from one stem but rather grew from somewhere out of a common ground. The downside of the bamboo model is that the idea of the church still seems to be very static.

The local model stresses the existence of *local* churches and thus helps to point out the interrelations between them. In fact, we know that the local churches of Melitene, today's Malatya in eastern Anatolia, or the churches of Mosul interacted and formed a kind of mutual identity with the Christianity of the British Isles. These churches were special and differentiated from the Roman Church even though they shared their basic denomination. These local identities were as important as the churches.

But the local model has the disadvantage of not showing that there were also strong

interregional connections between different groups and local groups. For this I need the network model, which traces relations spanning huge regional distances—for instance between the British Isles and Syrian Christianity—to uncover how Syrian asceticism heavily influenced British monasticism. The network model helps to traverse the bamboo distinctions and shows that crisscrossing between different churches was possible.

17 *This means that if we want to use your models, we should first look at a specific trunk in the bamboo forest and then analyze the local situation and the network?*

18 I would see these three models as parallel perspectives on the same situation, as three ways in which Christianities were organized at the same time. I did not try to combine them into a unified whole. I think it is useful to have them as parallel models and not to move from one to the other but to see them in a certain dialectic relation with each other. Maybe one model is more helpful for a certain question than the others.

19 *When you published your article, you noted that the three models were still untested. Have you had the opportunity to work with these models in your research since then?*

20 Yes, I have been testing them, for example, in my research on the distribution of new saints. The emergence of holy persons is suitable to see a network at work. Cults of saints, like the cult of George or Barbara, appeared at different places and different times and interacted with each other. Here we see network-building activities in history.

21 *At the beginning of your article, you speak of different Christianities. Is there a difference between »Christianities« and »churches and denominations«?*

22 The idea was to emphasize that local Christianities and local customs were just as important and sometimes even more important than institutionalized churches in the Middle Ages. For example, how Christians in the Levant celebrated Easter was very much part of their Christian lives and spirituality. The celebrations were different from those in England even if both of them might have been Catholics. The idea behind *Christianities* was to look closer at the special taste of Christian culture in a certain place, a culture that might not have been identical with a church.

23 *You mean churches could be subdivided into various Christian groups?*

24 Yes, metaphorically speaking. The groups of Christians or Christianities would be the local circles, and the churches would be the bamboo. They would have distant connections in a double sense, but they would still identify themselves and others as Christians even though they were divided into different denominations. This common aspect could be, for example, ascetic literature or a kind of religious culture.

25 *Could you give a specific example of when you have found the models insightful?*

26 I am currently conducting research on cities where Christians, dhimmis, and Muslims lived. Part of this project is an analysis of a Syrian text on Aristotle written for educating pupils. In this text, I can see how traditions are construed by moving back and forth between different churches. To a large extent, the text easily crosses the bamboo forest because all the churches share a language and culture. Still, at one point in the manuscript, someone remarks that a heretic wrote this text. There are always two sides: the churches may share certain traditions while, at the same time, maintaining boundaries by differentiating themselves from each other. And this is where I see both models at play at the same time.

27 *In your article »Multireligiöse Loca Sancta und die mächtigen Heiligen der Christen«², you state that at some holy sites, religions or denominations cross their borders and celebrate or worship the same saint, usually a Christian saint. But at the same time the devotees remain in their religious or denominational traditions, especially regarding the concepts of spatial and unequal convergence. You describe the holy sites as multireligious, but can the concept of religious multiplicity be applied to the devotees who visited such sites?*

28 The pilgrims want different things, and they come for different reasons, but they share the same practice like going to a saint. I think the pilgrims themselves came as Syrian orthodox, Muslim, Shia, or Sunni. The prophets were equally important to all of them, but I do not think the pilgrims themselves were multireligious. They gave rose water as a Muslim, as a Jew, or as a Christian and thus only approved of their own religions. Maybe they experienced the place as sacred because of meeting others and because of the heavenly peace of such places. But they would remain in their own identity. I was once invited by chance to visit the grave of the Shia saint Zaynab in a large mosque close to Damascus. It used to be fairly accepted for everybody to go there. In the early 2000s, it started to become a bit difficult, but my Sunni companion told the guards that I wouldn't cause any problems. I was given some cloth to be decent. It was a Shia site, but my companion was Sunni, and I was a Christian, and there was a Jew and a group of other Christians. We were a bunch of people walking in the fields and then visiting the grave. When you go there, you know what it does to you. Everyone there worshipping Zaynab feels an absolute adoration and senses the importance of this spiritual place. It is immediately understandable because you share the same thing. You know what pilgrimage is and what a saint is, and you know what to do, and you are sort of moved by Zaynab. For me, Zaynab was not very important, but since then Zaynab has had a special importance to me. But I did not become Shia. So the place attracts people from other religious traditions and therefore becomes an important religious site.

29 *Shared practices have effects on people visiting the place but do not lead to multiple religious identities?*

30 It has nothing to do with religious identities. What I am trying to say is that it is just a shared practice. It is the same when a Protestant walks into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and asks »What are these people doing with the oil? And why are they so terribly moved?« Then she starts moving with them, and, by doings things, she starts to understand. But sharing a practice does not make her Orthodox. Consider, for example, the multireligious sites of the entirely unrelated figures of the Prophet Elijah, Saint George, and the mystical figure of the Qoran, al-Khidr. People from three different religions visit these sites, and they all do something different, but they are all also doing the same thing. Yet this has no effect on their identities. It is simply a shared practice.

31 *In your keynote lecture, you said that that urban sites shared by neighbors also led to exchange. Could this also have happened at official holy sites?*

32 It could. But these are holy sites with custodians, sites of religious practice and piety and not of religious dispute. It seems to me that all three religions share the idea of something beyond religious dispute and doctrine. This is maybe what constitutes the holiness of such places. You stop arguing, you just do the spiritual things that you want to do. Religious argument and debate are going on elsewhere, in the monastery, on the street, in the house of the rabbi, or in court. Sometimes disputes even become violent, like in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre when the Romans and the Armenians were

having a fight on timetables. There were also fights in contested places like David's Tomb.

33 *You are interested in Eastern Christianities in the Middle Ages. This also adds Islamic traditions to your research interests. Do you think that the three models you used to describe Christianity in the Middle Ages could be applied to describe Islam in the Middle Ages too?*

34 In another research project, I tried to include all three religions in the same inclusive model outlined above. But Islam and Judaism took longer to develop into groups, and they do not have this pyramidal structure of the bishop and the patriarch but a more informal structure with ulemas, rabbis, and authorities instead. That is why I consider the bamboo model as too strict for them. Even though I occasionally used it in my talks, I think that these two religions cannot be adequately described using the bamboo model. But I have not yet developed an alternative. The only thing that seems identical for all three religions is that they spread at the same time into different branches and networks. The latter was of particular importance for the Jews, who developed strong Hebrew networks from Spain to China. So the local and the network model both seem to work.

35 *Since one of your research topics is atheism and disbelief in the Middle Ages, let us now come to those who doubt or criticize religion. Do you think that late-medieval disbelief or atheism can be regarded as part of a religious identity?*

36 I do not think that disbelief developed into a specific type of religious identity in the Middle Ages. Disbelief is the absence of something. People who did not believe in religious things did what they wanted without paying much attention to the religious lives and practices surrounding them. People would remain Christians and probably in another situation they would stick to their identity as a Christian in order to be distinct from others such as Jews. Actually, I have never thought of a person who says »you may go to church, but that is not for me« as someone with an identity of disinterest.

37 *In your book »Der Narr spricht: Es ist kein Gott«[3], God is the key concept of disbelief or doubt in the Middle Ages. But as you have illustrated elsewhere, for example, in your article »Space, Entanglement and Decentralisation«, Europe was a religiously diverse continent in the Middle Ages. So even though you focus on Latin Christianity in your book, do you think it was possible not to believe in God and instead to believe in something else, for example, in a kind of supernatural power?*

38 Yes. There are examples in inquisitorial protocols where people utter very strange ideas about their religious and cosmic images. And these ideas then provoked polemics. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some Greeks introduced pleo-Hellenistic beliefs that led to the appearance of new pagan beliefs. In sum, it was easier to express deviant concepts of the world and the cosmos than to state that there is nothing at all.

39 *Is this what we can find in the sources today?*

40 Yes. You find polemics against these ideas and you also find the odd heretic writer who tried to promote his cosmic ideas.

41 *What kinds of cosmic beliefs were there?*

42 Some cosmic beliefs combined Neoplatonic ideas with religious practices. Since my focus was on disbelief, I did not do any further research on them. But studies on this kind of cosmic belief add to our understanding of the colorful diversity of religious convictions present in the Middle Ages. We can find a vast variety of different beliefs

when we consider these strange, heretic medieval scholars who were reading ancient philosophies and interpreting them in their own specific ways. These beliefs deserve more attention, but they cannot be studied in the framework of disbelief, I think.

43 *Can you tell us more about the pagan beliefs you mentioned before?*

44 Actually, I found it difficult to learn about pagan beliefs because we only have very few sources that tell us what individuals thought and believed. Of course, people had their own understandings and practices, and they had priests and religious elites. It is difficult to gain further insight into these religions because we can only see them through the lens of Muslim or Christian missionaries who wrote polemics about them. Archaeologists try to get a glimpse of pagan religions by means of excavations, that is, by reconstructing how pagans dropped things into rivers or lakes. But it is still a slow process, and archaeological research is unfortunately not very well connected to the discipline of medieval history. Medievalists tend to focus on Christianity without including the influences of pagan culture that merged into Christian practices, so there is not much research on pagans as a minority during the Middle Ages. After the initial conversion forced by Charlemagne, conversions went rather slow. Especially in eastern European, there were entire villages that remained pagan for a long time. These villages, with their inhabitants' lifestyles and beliefs, were somehow accepted and tolerated.

45 *Your historical research focuses on the Middle Ages. In this interview, we are also interested in the present and would like to build a bridge to contemporary topics. In your research, you challenge the ordinary narrative concerning Christianity in the Middle Ages as homogenous. In particular, you draw attention to the entanglement of different churches and denominations and to the multiplicity of religions. How do you think a different conception of the Middle Ages could affect research on the contemporary religious landscape?*

46 The Middle Ages often serve as the prime example for the historical narrative of eras being entirely different from the present. And »different« here has to be understood in a negative sense, as a boundary marker to explain that we are much more open, secularized, multiple, tolerant, and so forth today. It is true that multiplicity and religious interrelations became more difficult at the end of the Middle Ages when forceful unification and systematic religious »cleansing« were developed. But for me, unification and religious violence are not—as the public discourse often suggests— something medieval. In fact, the ability to enforce religious unity is a modern phenomenon that developed slowly but is part of our heritage today. It was invented by our modern society, and we will hopefully get rid of it. My narrative of modernity is thus more pessimistic and more respectful toward the older world and less pompous about our modern achievements. The other aspect I try to show with my research is that the three religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not ancient phenomena. Of course, Judaism is very old, and Christianity is also much older than the Middle Ages, but both religions changed very much during the Middle Ages. They developed their relations toward each other and underwent a process of »orthodoxification« in this period. It would change religious debates if we had a clearer picture of these historical developments. To understand how these three religions essentially changed in the context of medieval societies may help us better understand and deal with contemporary political challenges.

47 *How could your historical research contribute to the current debate on a multireligious Europe?*

48   One might say there is nothing new—we had a multireligious Europe before, and we managed it. Certainly, the Middle Ages cannot be a model for what we want to do today. We do not want to have religion as a category of inequality anymore. But there were ways of dealing with inequality in the past, and for many centuries they worked quite well. Now we have to think about how to reconcile loyalty to a society with religious »deviants«. This was not done very well in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries when proving loyalty to the state was impossible for Jews and Catholics, for example. Today we argue whether or not it is possible for Muslims to be politically loyal to a Western, democratic nation state. The questions of loyalty and religious deviants were not satisfactorily solved in the Middle Ages, but we have to understand that these questions still remain open and that we need to find another way to solve them.

49   *You mentioned the nation state. Do you think that the nation state hinders multiplicity and pluralism?*

50   The nation state lead to some of the worst cases of religious and ethnic persecution in world history, for instance the 1915 Armenian genocide and the terror of the Nazi regime. I think both events are closely related to the discourse on the nation. The nation state has a historical burden since early attempts to build one have not been very successful. I would not say that nation states never work, but so far, the concept has not proved itself. In the Middle Ages, nationality was not a pivotal category. Courts, for example, welcomed all kinds of competences, and members of different cultures and religions could be interesting for a king for a number of reasons. It could help to remember this way of social organization and problem solving.

51   *Could a more open and positive view of the Middles Ages be an opportunity to think about political concepts differently?*

52   Yes. Being different and being foreign were, in principle, problems that could be dealt with pragmatically. Yes, there was religious violence as a consequence of religion as a category of legal inequality, and it increased toward the end of the Middle Ages, but racism and systematic xenophobia were not inherent features of medieval cultures, and they first started to appear toward the end of the Middle Ages. Foreigners may have had their own quarters in cities, such as the Germans in Venice, but they were good and useful for the city. This technique of integrating foreigners with foreign ideas—also with legal autonomies—is something that seems very alarming to the nation state. The reason for this is that the equality of rights and the monopoly of the state are cornerstones of the modern nation state. This makes it difficult to tolerate autonomous groups. Equality and the state monopoly are well rooted in our understanding of democracy, but there might be alternative ways of thinking, as the American example shows. If history teaches anything, it teaches the variety of ways of living.

53   *This is also very important for the current debate on anti-Islamic tendencies in Europe.*

54   Yes, I think so, too. The current anti-Islamic tendencies remind me of the discourse on tolerated unbelievers in the Middle Ages. This discourse enhanced the social capital of those who talked about them. A similar tendency of enhancing one's social capital by talking about a downtrodden, tolerated, or problematic group is happening nowadays. For example, Viktor Orbán talks about immigrants, or Markus Söder is doing similar things in Germany. It makes me sad to see that it works so fantastically.

55 *Do you think your research could have an impact on the understanding of the Middle Ages outside of academia?*

56 I hope so. But I am not very optimistic because it seems to me that hardly any of what medievalists write finds its way into public debates. It is so important for the public debate to have its old, traditional narratives about the Middle Ages with its Crusades, Inquisition, and the »dark« world of faith. It is surprising to see how these narratives persist—despite all the research that has been done during the last hundred years to disprove and falsify them.

57 *What do you think are the reasons for the persistence of these negative views on the Middle Ages?*

58 The exact circumstances and reasons have not yet been analyzed, I think. Some interesting studies on left-wing politics and medieval history have revealed how, in the 1960s and 1970s, leftists ignored what was going on in medieval history for ideological reasons. Obviously, the Middle Ages served as a useful negative example for justifying the groups' own politics. I became very interested in this phenomenon, which, I think, is now happening on the other side of the political spectrum. Some colleagues and I are preparing a research project on the New Right and the Middle Ages because they draw on all kinds of old stereotypes and they are extremely successful with this nonsense. I cannot fully explain it. I can only say that it does not make one optimistic about the role of academic history in public discourse, especially since we historians are considered elitists and intellectuals not to be trusted. I try to oppose these developments and contribute to public debate by giving public lectures, going to church communities, and visiting schools. And I hope that my teaching has an effect on my students, who will teach something to their students.

59 *Have you thought about writing popular books that would make your research more accessible to nonacademics?*

60 I would like to, but unfortunately, I only have very little time to write. But what I can and will contribute is lectures and talks to smaller audiences and interviews with journalists on my research. These are my preferred methods. I have written a small contribution in a public journal. This is something I can manage, but, unfortunately, not an entire book. I am eager to pursue further opportunities to make short statements and intervene whenever possible.

61 *Professor Weltecke, thank you very much for this interview and for your time. It was our pleasure to talk to you and discuss the different models of religious pluralism, the role of disbelief in the Middle Ages, and the politics of history with you. We wish you all the best with your research!*

62 It was my pleasure too. Thank you very much as well!

NOTES

1. Weltecke, Dorothea. 2017. Space, Entanglement and Decentralisation: On How to Narrate the Transcultural History of Christianity (550 to 1350 CE). In: *Locating Religions,* ed. by Reinhold F. Glei and Nikolas Jaspert, 315–345. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

2. Weltecke, Dorothea. 2012. »Multireligiöse Loca Sancta und die mächtigen Heiligen der Christen.« *Der Islam* 88 (1): 73–95.

3. Weltecke, Dorothea. 2010. *„Der Narr spricht: Es ist kein Gott". Atheismus, Unglauben und Glaubenszweifel vom 12. Jahrhundert bis zur Neuzeit.* Campus Historische Studien 57. Campus Verlag

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