

Press Release – June 19th, 2009

# ISLAMIC AND WESTERN CULTURES: RESEARCH ON NEW TERRITORY

**Experts on the track of common history – a comparative congress**

Both the Islamic and Western cultures can trace their common roots back to the ancient Roman World. Up to this day, the origins of 1,500 years of common history remain largely unexplored. Forty experts from Europe and the US will tread this scientific new ground at a high-profile international congress in Vienna.

“The Islamic and Western worlds have seen a history marked largely by confrontation and prejudice but also tolerance and exchange. By accepting and exploring this history in its entirety, we can undermine ethnocentric stereotypes. In order to help solve current conflicts, we need to know a lot more about them”, explained Walter Pohl, Wittgenstein Prize laureate 2004 and director of the Department for Medieval Research at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW), at the congress in Vienna on Friday. How have ‘social visions’ evolved? According to Pohl, the international congress entitled *Visions of Community: Ethnicity, Religion and Power in the Early Medieval West, Byzantium and the Islamic World*, which will end this weekend, is the first to deal with this new area of research.

## Closing research gaps

In ancient Rome, political culture in the entire Mediterranean area used to be homogeneous. Against their common political backdrop, peoples began to form the basis for political power one and a half thousand years ago. At the same time, the European way of regarding ethnicity as a basis for political power emerged. In the Islamic caliphate but also in Byzantium, imperial forms of rule that were based on religion evolved in the same period. “Thus far, these different developments have not

yet been analysed on a comparative level. These last few years, the Early Middle Ages have been well explored as the age of ‘peoples in the making’. However, there are no comparable studies for the Islamic World or Byzantium”, states Pohl. Why has political Islam become so attractive for many people nowadays? A closer look at past identities may reveal explanations for this development.

The congress organised in the framework of the Wittgenstein Project *Ethnic Identities in Medieval Europe* marks the first step towards closing these research gaps, which is vital to understand a present fraught with conflict. Misleading western perceptions of the Orient, anything between blinded idealisation (‘orientalism’) and contempt, have caused many of the problems in and with this region. Today, mutual misunderstandings between the majority of the population and Muslim immigrants are threatening to become a problem in Europe. It is, therefore, even more important to better understand historical differences on the one hand, and what these cultures have had in common on the other”, stresses Pohl, an internationally renowned historian.

The four-day congress with 40 internationally leading experts in the fields of Social Anthropology, Byzantine Studies, Ancient and Medieval History, Islamic and Oriental Studies, Theology and Archaeology from Europe and the US started on Wednesday and will end at the weekend. To date, the congress entitled *Visions of Community: Ethnicity, Religion and Power in the Early Medieval West, Byzantium and the Islamic World* has been the first of its kind. The results will be published in a collection of articles in 2010.

The formation of identities and evolution of communities remain among the core questions in international historical research and, linked through close team work, other disciplines. They also form a central field of research of the Wittgenstein Project *Ethnic Identities in Early Medieval Europe* directed by Walter Pohl, professor at the University of Vienna and director of the Institute for Medieval Research at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna. For decades, research on the Early Middle Ages in Vienna has earned itself an international reputation as leading the way in the field of research on ethnic identities. The Wittgenstein Prize, like the Leibniz Prize in Germany, is the most prestigious scientific award in Austria.

## For further information go to:

[http://www.oeaw.ac.at/gema/wittg\\_pro/wittg\\_presse.htm](http://www.oeaw.ac.at/gema/wittg_pro/wittg_presse.htm)

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