How can religion and human rights be reconciled?

New research group at Bielefeld University’s Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF): Inaugural Conference June 4-6, 2014.

The question of religion’s proper role in public life has generated intense debates and conflicts in and between societies worldwide. Internally, countries are divided, sometimes bitterly so, over the secular or religious character of the state, which can pose serious obstacles to constitution-writing in democratic and democratizing states. How and through which arrangements do societies negotiate these competing visions and craft constitutions that both protect human rights and accommodate diverse constituencies? As ongoing and recent processes of constitution-writing and -revision in the Arab world and the wider Middle East demonstrate, the proper relationship between religion and the state remains hotly contested. An international research group newly convened at Bielefeld University’s Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) brings together scholars from different disciplines to address this question in a range of countries and regions.

The research group is convened by Mirjam Künkler PhD (Princeton University, USA), Hanna Lerner PhD (Tel Aviv University, Israel) and Shylashri Shankar PhD (Centre for Policy Research, India) and is made up of 13 fellows, each of whom is an expert in political science, regional studies, comparative law, and/or religious studies. Through collaborative research, the fellows will compare the handling of religious issues in constitution-writing and -amendment in various countries, and assess the impact of the resulting arrangements on the status of human rights in those constitutions.

Say the group’s conveners, “on the basis of the research group’s comparative analyses, we hope to develop an empirically grounded theory on the relationships between the process of constitution-writing on the one hand, and the status of religion and human rights in the constitution on the other. In the fields of law and political science, this is something that is on the whole still painfully absent.”

The group’s research is not only of academic significance; it also bears on current constitutional processes in which religion is a point of contention. Egypt and Tunisia, where Islamic law is part of constitutional law, are prime examples. Israel also falls into this category, as debates on new basic laws concerning the definition of the state as a state for the Jewish people are re-emerging. India, where a Hindu nationalist party has been given a thumping mandate in May 2014, will be facing conflicts over the operationalisation of a uniform civil code, which was in the winning party’s election manifesto. Other cases the group is discussing include Kenya, Spain, Poland, Turkey, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

The research group will be in residence at ZiF from May through November 2014. In addition to weekly working sessions, the group is also convening several conferences, workshops and a weekly lecture series.

The opening conference, “Constitution Writing, Religion and Human Rights, will be held on June 4-6, in English. Members of the media are invited to report on the event.

Further information is available online at:

www.uni-bielefeld.de/ZIF/FG/2014Balancing
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