

Interfaculty Research Cooperation: Religious Conflicts & Coping Strategies  
Public Lecture: David Nirenberg, Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton  
«Race and Religion: From the Neolithic to the Present»  
4 March 2022

## Speech of Rector Prof. Dr. Christian Leumann

*The spoken word applies*

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

There could be no more appropriate time to talk and reflect about conflicts and coping strategies as these days. What is happening currently in Ukraine is a complete disaster for humanity. Although religion is a priori not the main reason for this conflict, the coping strategies with this situation are likely to be very similar.

Together with all Swiss and European Universities, the University of Bern condemns Russia's military intervention in the strongest possible terms and notes that Russia has thereby massively violated international law. The University of Bern stands in solidarity with Ukraine and its universities.

We support academic freedom, openness and cooperation across all borders. The current crisis affects not only Ukraine and Russia, but all of Europe. We are concerned about the life and well-being of students and researchers in Ukraine. We are doing everything we can to alleviate suffering and to give our Ukrainian university members and those who have to flee Ukraine our full support. At the same time, we

have full respect for researchers, students and all other people in Russia and Belarus who speak out against the war.

You have convened today in Bern to discuss the scientific achievements of our Interfaculty Research Cooperation *Religious Conflicts & Coping Strategies*. I am very pleased to welcome Prof. David Nirenberg from Princeton, who will give us the keynote lecture on this occasion.

Prof. Nirenberg is the first scientist from the field of humanities to become director of the Institute for Advanced Studies, the IAS in Princeton, which is one of the world's preeminent centers for theoretical research in the sciences and humanities. He is a leading historian and author on the interaction of Christians, Jews and Muslims in medieval Europe and the Mediterranean. It is a very big honor to have you here in Bern today and I thank you for your big commitment and support to collaborate with our University on the project „Conflict, Coexistence and Coproduction of Judaism, Christianity and Islam“ in the next years.

What potential do religions have on conflicts, both, in progressing or reducing them? How can societies deal with religious conflicts? These and other questions have been addressed during the last four years in the IFC Religious conflicts and coping strategies. I warmly welcome therefore also all the researchers who contributed to the IFC and worked the last four years under the lead of Prof. Katharina Heyden from the Faculty of Theology, and Prof. Martino Mona from the Faculty of Law.

There were twelve projects who addressed very different aspects: For instance, the conflict in the Middle East, or the Swiss religious wars, questions of gender, rituals, law or images of god.

One of our university strategy's main goals is to foster interdisciplinary research and teaching. As Universities we are expected to contribute to the society's most pressing problems and these, in our view, can only be solved by joining forces of all our competences across the

borders of faculties. The University board therefore strongly encouraged and financed this cooperation of over 30 researchers from different fields.

Besides «Religious conflicts and coping strategies» there are currently two other interfaculty research cooperations running. These are «One health» - a project of the Institute of Plant Sciences and the Department of BioMedical Research that aims to show how chemicals affect the health of soils, plants, animals and humans; as well as «Decoding sleep» - a joint project of the Department for Neurology, the Institute for Psychology, the general University hospital Inselspital and the University hospital of psychiatry to achieve better understanding of the mechanisms of sleep, consciousness and cognition.

Another focus of these IFCs is to promote young researchers. 20 young researchers were funded to work on their PhD and PostDoc projects. With this they had a chance to build lifelong lasting professional and personal networks that are crucial for their further careers.

I thank you all for your hard work and I am looking forward to reading and hearing the results of your research. But now I am curious to learn from Prof. Nirenberg and his wide expertise in the field of religion and societies. I understood that he grew up in a Spanish-speaking household in upper state New York, with a strong interest on conversations across languages and cultures. Let's hope that this is the start of lifelong conversations between our University and yours, for the sake of gaining a better understanding between different cultures and continents and with this contributing to peace.