

Mass Conversion and Baptism in the History of Christianity

12–13 April 2024

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

In Protestant historiography, the history of Christianity in general and of Christian faith and life in particular are often portrayed as the history of personal decisions, of the individual, of the single person before God. Mass events, especially mass baptisms and mass conversions, were depicted as an abandonment of the supposedly original Christian ideal of personal conversion. Even in modern research, the image has largely prevailed that the Christianisation of the Roman Empire in late antiquity was not based on mass conversions, but that Christianity spread through personal contacts. Therefore, those who returned to this ideal were considered "true" evangelical Christians. The individual decision in favour of the Christian faith was seen as particularly valuable. This judgement is, on the one hand, influenced by a criticism of a baptised person who only obeys an authority or follows traditions (anti-Catholic impetus), and, on the other hand, by a fundamental reluctance towards mass spiritual movements. It is also assumed that conversion means a complete renunciation of a former religion, although more recent research has identified gradual changes and the boundaries between Christianity and "paganism" or magic, for example, are fluid.

A project group of the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie is therefore investigating the question: Does this picture of the special significance of individual conversion correspond to the sources? Which events and practices can be reconstructed from the sources? What was associated with the conversion in each case? And what about other mass events? Ultimately, the question is whether or not some assumptions of the historiography of Christianity need to be revised.

In this context, an international workshop will be held at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin from 12 to 13 April 2024, which will focus on mass conversions and mass baptisms throughout the history of Christianity. Examples from Latin Christianity and some from the history of Indian Christianity will be brought into dialogue with each other, as will the different epochs.

Online participation in the workshop is possible.

Project led by Prof. Dr. Uta Heil, Wien/Prof. Dr. Judith Becker, Berlin

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Friday, 12 April

14.30–15.00¹ *Judith Becker, Berlin/Uta Heil, Wien*

Welcome and introduction

15.00–16.00 *Thorsten Dietz, Zürich*

Theological reflection on Christian mass gatherings

– Coffee break –

16.30–18.00 *Uta Heil, Wien*

Mass baptisms in Ireland? On texts and traditions in the early Middle Ages

Hermut Löhr, Bonn

ὄγλοι πολλοί. Reflections on the narrative function and historical significance of crowd scenarios in early Christian narrative literature

Saturday, 13 April

9.00–10.30 *Mariano Delgado, Fribourg*

The controversy surrounding mass baptisms in the Catholic missions to the Americas in the Early Modern period

Tintu K. J., Kottayam

A curious case of conversion of a Christian community to Christianity: The Portuguese and the Syrian Christians in Kerala, South India (c. 16th-17th Century)

– Coffee break –

11.00–12.30 *Jan Stievermann, Heidelberg*

American Evangelicalism and the Prussian Erweckungsbewegung, ca. 1815–1850

Mrinalini Sebastian, Philadelphia

The different approaches of the Danish-English-Halle Mission and the Basel Mission towards baptism and caste

12.30–13.00 Final discussion

¹ CET