

Max Kade Lecture

Christina von Braun

The Symbol of the Cross: From Religion to Politics

Friday, November 13, 2:30-4:00

Newcomb Hall 481

Ever since Eric Voegelin created the term “political religion” in the early 1930s, religious elements have been seen as constitutive of both the appeal and destructiveness of National Socialism. This lecture explores the “religious” in this particular political religion.



I will argue that there is a double face to the phenomenon. On the one hand, National Socialism was a secular religion that abandoned all forms of transcendence, thus implying a process of secularisation. On the other hand, we are confronted with a process of sacralisation that charged the secular world with magical power. This double process – secularisation of the transcendent and sacralisation of the secular – also characterizes the history of Christianity, and is already contained in the idea of god becoming man or the word becoming flesh. The history of this development is reflected in the history of the Christian symbol of the cross. Undergoing a series of semantic changes, the cross

came to imply: (1) domination of death, (2) sword and worldly rule, and (3) male empowerment. These elements were taken up and reactivated in the Nazi symbol of the cross – the swastika. Nazi symbols and rituals could unfold their political ‘effectiveness’ only because they drew on a long religious and symbolic history.



Christina von Braun is a cultural theorist, author and filmmaker. She holds the Chair for Cultural History and Gender at Humboldt University Berlin, and has published widely on gender, media theory and religious history. She is currently the Max Kade Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at UVa.