

CONFERENCE HOSTS

PD Dr. Frederike van Oorschot (Zurich/Heidelberg)
Prof. Dr. Hanna Reichel (Princeton Theological Seminary)

CONFERENCE ORGANIZER

Institute of Hermeneutics and Philosophy of Religion (IHR), University of Zurich
www.hermes.uzh.ch

SPEAKERS

Prof. Dr. Marcia Pally: New York University/Humboldt University, Political Sciences

PD Dr. Frederike van Oorschot: FEST Heidelberg/Zurich University, Theology

Prof. Dr. Hanna Reichel: Princeton Theological Seminary, Theology

Prof. Dr. Rudolf von Sinner: Pontificia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Theology

Prof. Dr. Dion Foster: Free University Amsterdam, Theology

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schlag: Zurich University, theology

Prof. Dr. Henco van der Westhuizen: University of Bloemfontein, Theology

Dr. Roberto Che Espinoza: Duke Divinity School, Theology

EVENT LOCATION

University of Zurich
Faculty for Theology and Religious Studies
Kirchgasse 9, 8001 Zurich
Conference Room: 200 (2. Floor)

The conference is open to all interested parties free of charge.
We kindly ask you to register via the QR code or link: <https://www.ema.uzh.ch/RAJUC>



With financial support of



Universität
Zürich^{UZH}

Institut für Hermeneutik
und Religionsphilosophie

TESTIMONY – CONFESSION – TRUTH



Friday, May 8 – Sunday, May 10, 2026
University of Zurich

CONFERENCE TOPIC

What is truth? And how can testimonial and confessional modes of speech witness to it? These questions have long animated testimonial studies as well as public theology. Both share the analysis that testimony can constitute forms of knowledge, especially if and when “objective” truth cannot be had.

Today, on social media and in national politics, algorithmic and populist-driven attention economies generate their own discourses. Their personalized, experienced-based and emotional forms of speech often operate without a shared commitment to scientific objectivity or standards of rational public deliberation.

In this context, our conference aims to illuminate the religious backgrounds of testimonial and confessional speech as political-theological categories and their relevance today.

Testimony stands between the individual and the communal, pointing to truth in ineradicably perspectival and positional modes. An essential category in justice-oriented epistemologies, testimony also applies to an individualized, emotionalized, non-rational forms of public speech especially on social media. The related category of *confession* (“Bekennntnis”) as a particularly public-theological mode of speech runs into a similar tension: In the 20th century, public confession rose to a primary mode of prophetic religious speech to protest domination and oppression well as to form religiously motivated justice movements (e.g., the confessions of Barmen, Belhar, Accra). More recently, confessional speech has increasingly also become a model of right-wing movements (e.g. by anti-vaxxers citing Barmen to resist covid-related government mandates).

Both testimony and confession refer to “*truth*” in a specific way: as that which can only be pointed to, finding its anchor in the embodied and performed act of the witness and within a testimonial community.

Our conference will reflect on the relation between testimony, confession and truth in various historic and contemporary political-theological contexts (Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, Brasil, USA and South Africa), by asking questions like the following:

- How do testimony and confession serve as disciplining, truth-making and subject-forming devices?
- How does testimonial speech relate to rational discourse and embodied/non-cognitive/emotional/personal modes of discourse?
- What dynamics of communal and hermeneutic diversity between demarcation/identity can be observed?
- How do ambiguity and positionality relate to the requirements of transpositionality or trans-subjective testimony in the face of shared political challenges or in a testimonial community as the church?

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Friday, May 8, 2026

Testimonial epistemology and public speech

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| 1.30–2 pm | Prof. Dr. Hanna Reichel/PD. Dr. Frederike van Oorschot/
Prof. Dr. Matthias Wüthrich: <i>Introduction and welcome</i> |
| 2–3 pm | Marcia Pally: <i>Testimonial speech in political debates</i> |
| 3–4 pm | PD. Dr. Frederike van Oorschot: <i>Testimonial epistemology between subjectivity and meaning making</i> |
| 4.30–6 pm | Public Panel Discussion: <i>How to speak truth today? An exploration in the tradition of the Propheze</i>
(in cooperation with Dr. Christian Walti at Grossmünster Zurich) |

Saturday, May 9, 2026

Confessing in political and theological contexts

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| 9–10 am | Prof. Dr. Hanna Reichel: <i>From creed to confession to testimony? Confessing the faith in an age of authenticity</i> |
| 10–11 am | Prof. Dr. Rudolf von Sinner: <i>Bearing witness as citizenship. Insights from public theology</i> |
| 11.30–12.30 am | Paper Session |
| 2–3 pm | Prof. Dr. Dion Foster: <i>Confessing as theo-political act? Learnings from the anti-apartheid movement</i> |
| 3–4 pm | Prof. Dr. Thomas Schlag: <i>Being the church as witness. Ecclesiological implications</i> |
| 4.30–6 pm | Paper Session |
| 6 pm | Visit of Grossmünster Zurich (with Dr. Christian Walti) |

Sunday, May 10, 2026

Doing the truth? Between critical epistemology and activism

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| 9–10 am | Prof. Dr. Henco van der Westhuizen: <i>Truth – and reconciliation as epistemological categories</i> |
| 10–11 am | Dr. Roberto Che Espinoza: <i>Activist theology. Critical epistemology and action</i> |
| 11.30–12 am | Final discussion |
| 12.30–1 pm | Closing of the conference |