

## **Amira Mittermaier**

### Provincializing Compassion

When German volunteers were clapping for the newly arrived refugees at Munich's train station in September 2015, they might have also been clapping for themselves. The German *Willkommenskultur* has become a source of much pride (and of anxiety). Despite Pegida and the AfD, it seems that Germany has come to embrace what Didier Fassin (2011) calls the "age of humanitarian reason." Compassion – feeling with the suffering Other – has become a moral high ground and a key mobilizing force. But compassion comes with a range of problems and exclusions. As Lauren Berlant (2004) puts it, "compassion and coldness are not opposite at all but are two sides of a bargain that the subjects of modernity have struck with structural inequality."

In my talk I offer a view from outside of Europe in order to provincialize the virtue of compassion. Drawing on recent fieldwork in Egypt, I describe a religious ethics of giving and social engagement that is not contingent on feeling-with the suffering Other but is rather ordained by, and directed at, God. I offer insight into religious modes of care and relationally that are explicitly non-humanitarian. By contributing a non-European and non-Christian perspective, I hope to raise critical questions about the status, scope, and limits of compassion in Europe today.

Amira Mittermaier is an Associate Professor in the Department for the Study of Religion and the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto. Her award-winning book, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (University of California Press, 2011) examines Muslim practices of dream interpretation in contemporary Egypt and makes theoretical and methodological contributions to an anthropology of the imagination. Her current book project, based on fieldwork in Cairo since 2010, examines modes of almsgiving and food distribution to consider how everyday acts of giving relate to, disrupt, and unsettle political calls for social justice in post-Mubarak Egypt.