

CLOSED PANEL I
Religion and Literature (I)
Exploring the Potentials of the Intersections of Literature and Religion

Stefanie Burkhardt , University of Hamburg

On World Habitation and Real-Making in Religion and Literature: Imagination, Narrative, and Realism

Scholars of religion have long been concerned with questions of commonality and difference among religious traditions, as well as how religious worlds function so that invisible beings and unseen realities are experienced as real by believers. Concepts developed to address these issues include William Paden's notion of world habitation (2001) and Tanya Luhrmann's concept of real-making (2020). Although emerging from different theoretical frameworks and methodological commitments, both approaches focus on the processes through which worlds and realities are constructed as shared, inhabitable, and experientially convincing configurations of immediate and ultimate reality. Central to these processes are imagination, creativity, and narrative—understood as human capacities and practices fundamental to the construction and inhabitation of religious worlds. Literary studies, this paper argues, offer particular expertise in analysing these dimensions of human meaning-making and can therefore provide valuable insights for the study of religion. Moreover, literary texts themselves constitute a rich source for examining the dynamics of world construction, realism, and imaginative engagement. By drawing on selected approaches from literary studies and on examples of literary texts, this paper proposes literature as a productive site for investigating religious worlds and realities and for advancing interdisciplinary dialogue between religious studies and literary scholarship.

Kristina Göthling-Zimpel , University of Hamburg

Do Cursed Objects Have Agency? Exploring New Materialism Through Literature

Objects are not merely passive things: they are not only circulated, viewed, or appropriated, but exert effects, respond, and intervene. This perspective has been decisively shaped by New Materialism. However, literary and visual narratives allow this question of material agency to be pushed even further by exploring its imaginative, symbolic, and affective dimensions: where do its possibilities and limits lie, and how are they narratively constructed? Can agency extend so far that objects affect, overtake, "possess," or even curse humans? These questions become particularly tangible in the literary trope of the curse, which is highly charged in both religious studies and postcolonial discourse. Cursed objects—such as gemstones, sarcophagi, or statues—are repeatedly narrated in colonial and popular texts as active agents reacting to ethically reprehensible practices of appropriation. Illness, loss, or death affecting scientists, collectors, or archaeologists are framed as consequences of object agency. Such narratives are not neutral: they reproduce colonial power relations by continuously reactivating stereotypes of the "mystical," "vengeful," or "dangerous" object, especially in media contexts that privilege repetition and recognizability. It is precisely here that literary analysis becomes indispensable. Graphic novels, in particular, constitute a striking medium in which image and text jointly negotiate, stage, and visualize the efficacy of cursed objects. Through the interplay of visual framing, sequential narration, and textual commentary, graphic novels not only represent agency but actively produce it at the level of perception and meaning. This medial constellation allows both the stabilization of colonial imaginaries and their disruption. Drawing on two case studies, this presentation examines how the curse trope operates at the intersection of New Materialism and postcolonial theory: on the one hand, through the repetitive reification of colonial stereotypes, and on the other, as a form of postcolonial writing back. In this latter mode, the curse emerges as a literary strategy of resistance, enabling the re-narration of history and the reclamation of agency from a subaltern perspective.

Sarah Ntondele , University of Hamburg

Beyond the Questions We Already Ask: What Literature Reveals about Religion

This paper explores how literary texts can be taken seriously as independent objects of inquiry within religious studies and how they can be rendered methodologically productive. Rather than limiting their function to addressing pre-existing research questions, the paper argues that their value lies precisely in their distinctive mode of knowledge production and in their capacity to open up specific religious questions of their own. Using Sharon Dodua Otoo's novel *Ada's Room*—which narrates diverse experiences of womanhood looping through centuries and across the globe—this paper tests an interdisciplinary approach that remains attentive to the literary text as an object of research in its own right while engaging with questions central to religious studies. This paper aims to clarify both theoretical considerations and methodological issues involved in working with literary texts: How can literature be understood as an epistemic resource that not only expands the analysis of religious narratives but also challenges taken-for-granted assumptions within the discipline? Overall, this paper argues for recognizing literature as a productive site of knowledge within religious studies, one that opens up new perspectives on religion.

Claudia Jahnel , University of Hamburg

"Where there are no gods, ghosts reign" (Novalis): Literature's Role in Enriching Religious Ambiguity and Challenging Fixed Boundaries

Using the example of the novel "Afterlife" by postcolonial writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, this paper aims to demonstrate that literature is highly relevant for understanding religion because it strengthens the ambiguity of religion. The power of literature lies in its resistance to the production of knowledge marked by clear boundaries, as the term 'religion' itself attempts to establish. The power of the beauty of the "belles lettres" lies in stories that demand an epistemological shift in perspective. They invite us to see through the eyes of others, while simultaneously confronting readers with their own ideas, stereotypes and the 'white gaze', as well as their desires and dreams of the 'mystery'. New insight – including in the study of religion – is only possible if we leave our own "single story" (Adichie) behind for a while and engage with histories of emotions.

CLOSED PANEL II

Islamic Prophetic Relics in Transformation

Susanne Olsson , Stockholm University

Between Veneration and Innovation: Al-Maqqarī and the Making of "Orthodox Innovation" through the Prophet's Sandal

This paper examines how the Algerian Maliki scholar al-Maqqarī (d. 1632) negotiates the boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy through his treatise on the Prophet Muhammad's sandal. Focusing on the sandal's devotional and symbolic significance, it explores how he distinguishes legitimate veneration from prohibited innovation. Al-Maqqarī draws on chains of authoritative testimony, catalogs miraculous interventions, and preemptively addresses theological objections to defend these practices. He responds to the Maliki and Sufi scholar Ibn al-Hajj's (d. 1336) critique that such veneration resembles pre-Islamic idolatry, mobilizing multiple legal schools and prophetic precedents to define acceptable devotional conduct. In doing so, he produces an "orthodox innovation," a paradoxical category that demonstrates how material devotion actively shapes and negotiates the boundaries of orthodoxy. This study highlights the dynamic, contested, and context-sensitive nature of Islamic normativity, showing that the line between tradition and innovation was neither fixed nor self-evident in early modern thought.

Jonas Svensson , Linnaeus University

Large Language Models as Research Infrastructure: Computational Methods in Humanities Workflows

Generative AI, and especially Large Language Models are transforming how humanities scholars conduct research, offering capabilities that extend across the entire research process. This presentation explores how generative AI can be integrated into data collection, organization, analysis, and synthesis, using a project on Islamic relics, funded by the Swedish Research Council, as a case study. The multilingual nature of Islamic source material presents particular methodological challenges. Working across diverse languages, LLMs enable semantic search that identifies relevant passages through conceptual rather than lexical matching, effectively navigating linguistic boundaries that traditionally fragment corpus-based research. Translation becomes a collaborative process where AI handles initial rendering while scholars refine interpretive nuances, dramatically accelerating access to sources. For analysis, LLMs facilitate thematic extraction and content coding at scale. Rather than manually coding thousands of texts, researchers can employ AI to identify recurring themes, classify material by content type, and perform topic modeling that reveals conceptual patterns across genres and periods. Custom-built tools help organize materials, suggest connections between disparate sources, and highlight unexplored questions within existing literature. Critically, these methods create research workflows that iterate between close reading and broad pattern recognition. AI functions as a discovery layer making massive corpora navigable, allowing fluid movement between specific textual evidence and theoretical synthesis. The presentation demonstrates these tools in practice, discussing how accelerated translation, thematic analysis, and topic identification transform what becomes empirically tractable in humanities research, while addressing questions of scholarly rigor and interpretive depth in AI-augmented research.

Luca Patrizi , University of Turin

The relics of the kiswa of the Ka'ba and the sitāra of the tomb of the Prophet: devotion and circulation of sacred Islamic textiles

The practice of covering sacred sites with precious textiles is ancient and widespread across different religious traditions, closely connected to the symbolic concept of the "sacred veil." In Islam, it predates the religion itself: Arabic sources report that the Ka'ba was already covered in the pre-Islamic period with a textile called *kiswa*, literally "covering." Over time, these textiles reached high artistic refinement. The oldest surviving examples, from the 17th century onward, were produced mainly in the Ottoman Empire, made of Bursa lampas silk, richly decorated with Qur'anic inscriptions and showing chromatic variations

over time. The origins of annually replacing the *kiswa* and distributing its fragments as contact relics remain undocumented. A similar practice existed for the *sitāra*, the textile covering of tombs of prophets and saints, including the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. While fragments of the Ka'ba's *kiswa* continue to be distributed today, those from the Prophet's tomb ceased with the establishment of Saudi Arabia, due to Wahhabi restrictions on intercessory practices. Historical examples of these textiles are preserved in museums and private collections, notably at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. In Italy, four Ottoman *sitāras* from the collection of antiquarian Ettore Mentore Pozzi were donated to Turin in 1932 and are now held in the Civic Museums' non-displayed collections. These objects offer insight into the history, devotional use, and circulation of sacred textiles. This paper examines these issues, focusing on the Turin examples and situating them within the broader context of Islamic devotion and the mobility of sacred materials.

Jenny Berglund, University of Stockholm

Constructing a Muslim Sacred Geography: The Sahabi Tree as Living Relic in Hashemite Jordan

This paper examines how the Sahabi Tree in northern Jordan functions as a "living relic" (*athar*) and serves as a pivotal element in constructing a Muslim sacred geography within the Hashemite Kingdom. The study explores how material and immaterial dimensions converge to create religious meaning and political legitimacy. The Sahabi Tree, presented as the tree under which the young Muhammad rested during his journey to Syria, links Jordanian territory to prophetic biography and early Islamic history. Since the 1990s, the Hashemite monarchy has promoted this and other holy sites as part of a broader strategy of territorial sacralization, presenting Jordan as a "holy land" comparable to Jerusalem or the Hijaz. This process transforms the Jordanian landscape into a space imbued with religious significance, reinforcing the monarchy's self-presentation as custodian of authentic Islamic heritage. The paper analyzes how this sacred geography is constructed through multiple mechanisms: state-sponsored preservation and promotion, religious tourism as spatial practice, interfaith symbolism emphasizing coexistence, and musealization through the tree's cutting displayed at the Prophet Muhammad Museum in Amman. The latter illustrates how sacred heritage is institutionalised and integrated into the national narrative, expanding the sacred geography from the remote desert to the capital city. Despite theological, biological, and historical challenges to the tree's authenticity, it remains a powerful symbol where Jordanian nationalism, Islamic piety, and Hashemite legitimacy intersect and manifest in the landscape itself.

CLOSED PANEL III
The Light and Shadow of Artificial Intelligence:
Soka Gakkai's Buddhist Perspective

Márk Nemes, Center for Studies on New Religions

AI-Assisted Lethal Weaponry in the Contemporary Age – Approaching a Crucial Moral Problem from the Perspective of Soka Gakkai

This paper examines the moral issues of employing Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) in modern warfare. During Daisaku Ikeda's presidency – decades before the introduction of modern AI-driven autonomous weapons systems – Soka Gakkai International (SGI) already took a strong stance against systems without direct human oversight and opposed the military use of autonomous technologies even more loudly. SGI's overall opposition is rooted in Buddhist Humanistic views on the value of life and the moral imperative of creating value and peace on a scale that affects humanity, rather than chasing a never-ending technological arms race. Their current social campaigns, such as "Stop Killer Robots," actively highlight the ethical and legal concerns of deploying LAWS, underscoring that the use of autonomous systems further removes the crucial concept of human responsibility when the decision-maker for deadly force is a pre-trained algorithm that lacks human oversight. In SGI's view, such a form of automation in warfare not only dehumanizes the participating soldiers and the eventual civil victims to the point that their lives become mere statistics and learning data for an ever-evolving algorithm, but also undermines the fundamental human moral responsibility of valuing life. My contribution aims to provide an overview of Ikeda's position on this matter and to reflect on SGI's former president's position-taking from a humanitarian and ethical perspective.

Massimo Introvigne, Center for Studies on New Religions

Intuition and Thought: Why Tsunesaburō Makiguchi's Teachings Are Relevant for AI

Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944) died long before the emergence of artificial intelligence, yet his distinction between intuition and thought in "The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy" offers a remarkably relevant framework for assessing AI today. In dialogue with German and French philosophy, Makiguchi argued that human cognition operates in two complementary modes: the intuitive, holistic grasp of reality characteristic of poets and artists, and the apperceptive, sequential mode of reasoning typical of scientific analysis. Both are necessary for value creation and for a fully developed human life. Daisaku Ikeda later applied this framework directly to AI, noting that AI functions almost entirely at the level of apperception: it processes data, identifies patterns, and performs linear reasoning with extraordinary speed, yet lacks the intuitive, creative, and ethically grounded dimension that Makiguchi saw as essential to human cognition. AI can extend human analytical capacity but cannot replace the intuitive insight through which humans generate meaning, respond to suffering, and create values. This paper argues that Makiguchi's distinction provides a powerful tool for evaluating the promises and risks of AI. It clarifies the limits of machine intelligence, highlights the need to cultivate intuition in an age dominated by data-driven systems, and supports a human-centered ethic of technological development. Makiguchi and Ikeda together offer a vision in which AI serves human flourishing rather than displacing the uniquely human capacities that no machine can replicate.

François Brémond, Institut national de recherche en informatique et en automatique, Sophia Antipolis
Buddhist Teachings and Chatbots: Can They Mislead Users?

The general public widely uses AI systems and intelligent chatbots to answer existential and moral questions, helping them make everyday decisions and choose life paths. Chatbots are specifically trained in accordance with different philosophies and religions to answer these questions. Avatars modeled after famous people are also created to meet user expectations. Is this desirable? Can chatbots provide users with relevant and accurate answers? The paper examines the question from the perspective of Buddhism,

particularly Soka Gakkai teachings. The answer is yes, if the chatbots are well-trained and users know how to ask their questions. Can they provide incorrect information? Can chatbots make mistakes and mislead users? Yes, and what's more, there is no guarantee that the answers will be correct. However, we can always ask to see references and sources to check the quality of the answers ourselves. So, the advantage of using chatbots is that you can easily get answers to your questions. On the other hand, one risk is that we may not develop the wisdom to consider different types of questions, sort through them, and ask ourselves the right ones. Making the effort to read the original texts allows us to immerse ourselves in the founders' state of life, their confidence in the teachings, and their spirit or intention. Nothing can replace the effort we make to immerse ourselves in a teaching and live it in our daily lives.

Shai Feraro, University of Haifa and the Technion

Female Esoteric Authorship Between the 1890s and 1990s – Reflections from a Study of the British Occult Bookshop Scene

This paper presents exploratory data from my ongoing research project, which focuses on occult and New Age Spirituality bookshops in Britain and aims to illuminate their function as hubs and arenas for the transference of knowledge and information within these respective milieus, between the mid-1890s and mid-1990s. Within this time frame, roughly encompassing the period between the founding of John M. Watkins' esoteric bookshop in London the rise of the Internet, archival data provide us with important insight into the state and changes in the participation of women in esoteric authorship during the course of the 20th Century. For this paper, 82 catalogues published by Watkins Books between 1897 and 1994 will be analyzed utilizing digital humanities methods to reveal changes in the percentage of female authors during the period, and what subjects they tended to write on, as well as additional points of interest such as the use of pseudonyms for female authors. These statistics would be compared with data derived from the catalogues of additional occult and New Age Spirituality bookshops (documents that, sadly, survived in significantly fewer numbers than Watkins' catalogues) to establish patterns or discrepancies, aiding us in establishing a more complete picture of the proliferation of new and alternative religions in western societies.

CLOSED PANEL IV
Charisma Re-examined:
Paradoxes of Plagiarism, Prestige, and Proximity

Manon Hedenborg White , Associate Professor, Malmö University
Towards a Theory of the Charismatic Aristocracy

The paper aims to further theorization on what Weber (1947) referred to as the "charismatic aristocracy"; "elite" or "inner-circle" disciples of charismatic leaders. Inner-circle disciples often play an essential role in transmitting the leader's charisma, simultaneously ensuring their own elevated status and enacting a sometimes precarious, secondary authority. However, scholarship on the processes through which inner-circle disciples are elevated, ousted, and enact authority is limited. This paper brings theorization on inner-circle disciples by Joosse (2017) and Palmer (2021) into dialogue with the notion of "proximal authority" (Hedenborg White 2021), to further the understanding of how elite disciples enact authority through their relationship with the charismatic leader. Cases are drawn from the Rajneesh movement, Wicca, Children of God/The Family, and Thelema.

Jonas Svensson , Linnæus University
Prestige-Based Authority and Charisma: A Cognitive-Evolutionary Framework

This paper proposes a theoretical model for understanding charismatic authority as a subcategory of prestige-based authority, grounded in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. Drawing on Henrich and Gil-White's prestige theory, I argue that prestige-based authority emerges from human capacities for "infocopying"—a specialized form of social learning where individuals identify models possessing high-quality information and adopt behaviors that facilitate knowledge acquisition from them. Charismatic authority arises specifically when individuals respond to unconscious signals of superior information possession without consciously understanding the basis of their attraction. In such cases, psychological essentialism provides the cognitive mechanism through which people explain their responses: they attribute an ineffable inner "quality" or essence to the charismatic figure. This essentialist attribution is reinforced by intuitive folk-biological thinking about substance transfer through contact and inheritance. Using examples from Islamic tradition—Sufi shaykhs and prophetic descendants (sayyids)—the paper demonstrates how cultural institutions exploit evolved cognitive biases and social learning heuristics. These include rules-of-thumb based on proximity, formal designation, physical contact, and biological inheritance. The framework offers a parsimonious explanation for charismatic authority that requires no ontological commitment to actual inner qualities, instead grounding the phenomenon in universal cognitive mechanisms and their cultural elaborations.

Philip Deslippe , UC Santa Barbara
Saturn Teacher: The Para-Charisma of Yogi Bhanjan

In her 2023 article about an iconoclastic Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Sara Swenson coined the term "para-charisma" to describe "how leaders attract followers by subverting or distorting moral expectations." This paper analyses the para-charisma of Yogi Bhanjan (1926-2004), the creator of Kundalini Yoga, founder of the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO), and leader of thousands of Western Sikh converts. While Yogi Bhanjan was lauded in public by his followers for common qualities in a spiritual leader such as wisdom and compassion, in private he was known for verbal abusing and humiliating his students, wearing gaudy jewelry and receiving expensive presents, and being constantly served by a legion of female attendants. Rather than threatening his moral authority or status as a teacher, these behaviors solidified his position. I argue that there were three reasons for the success of Yogi Bhanjan's para-charisma: his creation of what he described as his role as a harsh and incomprehensible "Saturn teacher" for his students, the idea in the wider New Age milieu of "crazy wisdom" among various spiritual teachers, and the own background of Yogi Bhanjan's students. His example provides a different way to understand charismatic authority.

CLOSED PANEL V

**Governing Orthodoxy in Times of War:
Authority, Discourse, and State Power in the Baltic States**

Alar Kilp, University of Tartu

Wartime Securitization of Orthodoxy and Nation-Building in the Baltic States: A Comparative Political Analysis

This paper examines the post-2022 securitization of Russian Orthodoxy in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as a reaction to the Russian Orthodox Church's alignment with Russia's war against Ukraine. It explores how this securitization intersects with nationalizing state policies, ethnic and value cleavages in Baltic political systems, and distinct patterns of church-state relations. While the ROC's internal securitization in Russia transformed Orthodoxy into a 'security object' to be defended and an instrument of imperial nationalism, in the Baltic states, its local branches - formally or canonically affiliated with Moscow - have become politically framed as security threats rather than religious institutions. The paper identifies convergent logics of securitization across all three states: each links ROC-affiliated churches to potential foreign influence and treats their continued canonical ties with Moscow as incompatible with national sovereignty. Estonia pursued legal amendments, revoked the residence permit of the EOC-MP's leader, and sought through legislation to sever the Estonian Christian Orthodox Church's ties with the Moscow Patriarchate—measures that encountered constitutional resistance. In contrast, Latvia granted legal autocephaly to its Orthodox Church and introduced state oversight in appointing church leaders, though canonical recognition from Moscow remains absent. Lithuania facilitated the establishment of a parallel Orthodox structure under Constantinople, supporting religious dissenters critical of the war. These differences reflect variations in religious landscapes, the salience of ethnic cleavages, and church-state institutional arrangements. The analysis draws on primary sources, legal texts, media coverage, parliamentary debates, and church documents, and is grounded in securitization theory, constructivist nationalism, and Brubaker's "nationalizing state" framework. The paper emphasizes that while theological positions are not central to state responses, religious arguments have been selectively instrumentalized by political actors to justify legal and administrative measures. It argues that positive wartime securitization of Orthodoxy in Russia has indirectly produced defensive securitization patterns in neighboring Baltic democracies—revealing both democratic resilience and its tensions with religious freedom. This comparative study contributes to ongoing debates on religion, security, and democratic legitimacy as well as resilience in times of geopolitical crisis.

Milda Ališauskienė, **Grażina Bielousova**, Vytautas Magnus University | Vilnius University

Negotiating Ecclesiastical Identity and Legitimacy under Conditions of Geopolitical Turmoil: the Case of Orthodoxy in Lithuania

This paper examines how Orthodox actors in Lithuania negotiate ecclesiastical identity, legitimacy, and religion-state relations under conditions of geopolitical securitization following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Drawing on twenty semi-structured interviews with Orthodox priests and lay leaders affiliated with both the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the study analyses how religious communities reconstruct symbolic and institutional boundaries in a context where Orthodoxy has become entangled with national security discourse. The public support of Patriarch Kirill for the war and the long-standing "symphonic" relationship between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state have intensified scrutiny toward churches under Moscow's jurisdiction, which are increasingly framed within Lithuanian political debates as potential carriers of the ideology of the "Russian World." Using a qualitative interpretive framework informed by theories of securitization and boundary work, the paper explores how representatives of both ecclesiastical traditions articulate their positionality vis-à-vis the Lithuanian state, the wider Orthodox world, and each other. The analysis demonstrates that securitization does not produce a simple dichotomy between "loyal" and "suspect" religious actors. Rather, Moscow-affiliated clergy engage in strategies of distancing, reinterpretation, and claims to pastoral autonomy,

while representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate navigate the paradox of increased symbolic legitimacy alongside limited institutional capacity and smaller communities. The study argues that the Lithuanian case reveals how religious identities are reshaped when theological affiliation becomes a matter of political security. By tracing how Orthodox actors negotiate belonging, authority, and recognition under conditions of heightened scrutiny, the paper contributes to broader debates on religion, nationalism, and governance in post-Soviet and post-secular Europe.

Gražina Bielousova, Deividas Zaicevas, Vytautas Magnus University | Vilnius University

Orthodoxy, Interrupted: Discursive Rupture and Orthodox Authority in Lithuania, 2014 - 2022

This paper examines the public discourse of the Lithuanian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate across two critical geopolitical moments: the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Drawing on a comparative discourse analysis of official and semi-official Church-affiliated media texts, the paper asks how Orthodox narratives of war, legitimacy, and ecclesiastical authority were articulated across these two moments, and how shifts in discourse relate to subsequent institutional realignments within Lithuanian Orthodoxy. The analysis shows that in 2014, despite internal linguistic, ethnic, and social differences among clergy and laity, the public-facing Orthodox discourse in Lithuania was largely unified. Church-affiliated media articulated a coherent narrative aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate's framing of events in Ukraine, marginalizing dissenting interpretations and presenting ideological cohesion as ecclesiastical unity. At this stage, differences within the Orthodox community were present but remained largely latent and did not translate into overt institutional or discursive fragmentation. By contrast, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, these previously subdued differences became explicit. The paper argues that 2022 constitutes a discursive rupture: divergent interpretations of war, responsibility, and moral authority emerged, ultimately contributing to a schism in which a group of Orthodox priests and parishes broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate and aligned themselves with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Importantly, this ideological fracture increasingly intersected with linguistic and ethnic divisions within Lithuanian society, intensified by heightened perceptions of geopolitical threat. By tracing continuity and rupture in Orthodox discourse across these two moments, the paper contributes to broader debates on religion, nationalism, and war, showing how geopolitical crises can reconfigure religious authority and render previously stable narratives untenable.

CLOSED PANEL VI

Classical Philology, Mythology and History of Religions

Philippe Borgeaud, Université de Genève
Karl Otfried Müller's Mythology: From Then to Now

Karl Otfried Müller's *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie* offered a deliberately anti-allegorical approach to myth, and indeed an explicitly tautegorical perspective, in the sense advocated by Schelling. The latter in fact cited and commended Müller's book, while at the same time attempting to consign it to realm of philology and classical studies, that is, label it as an enterprise in his view inferior to philosophy. It is true that Müller's tautegorical approach was paired with what he presented as an archaeological method, intended to disclose an archaic datum embedded in the oral memory of narratives known to us only through written sources, themselves stratified over time. Such disclosure was achieved through an inquiry that takes into account all variants of a given narrative, as well as the rites in relation to which it originates. The narrative was thus grasped within its context of emergence, its original landscape. Müller strongly insisted on the need to understand a myth in the context of its first articulation, that is, by attending to ritual, and by considering its natural environment no less than its cultural one. On the occasion of the first publication of a French translation this paper asks what the *Prolegomena* can contribute to contemporary debates on myth.

Steven Geusens, VUB
Hugo Windischmann at the Intersection of Classical Philology, Oriental Studies, and History of Religions

This paper examines the work of Friedrich Heinrich Hugo Windischmann (1811–1861), a largely overlooked German Catholic scholar at the intersection of classical philology, Oriental studies, and the emerging History of Religions in the mid-19th century. Trained by his father, the Bonn professor K. J. H. Windischmann, and later in Sanskrit by Friedrich Schlegel and Christian Lassen, as well as in Armenian in Venice, Windischmann pursued his philological study of mythologies across linguistic and cultural boundaries. We will here highlight how Windischmann combined close textual analysis with mythography and evolutionary approaches to religion. His *Mithra. – Ein Beitrag zur Mythengeschichte des Orients* (1857) best illustrates his style and approach: Moving beyond classical corpora, he tentatively explored correspondences between Indo-Iranian mythological traditions and Graeco-Roman examples, reflecting broader mid-19th century attempts to link East and West through comparative philology and mythography. Windischmann's adherence to the Aryan hypothesis also demonstrates how philological frameworks shaped scholarly interpretation. By examining his methods, interests, and theoretical assumptions, we will show how under-studied scholars like Windischmann engaged with the same disciplinary trends, philological rigor, comparative frameworks, and evolutionary narratives that would preoccupy later, better-known historians of religion.

Annelies Lannoy, Ugent
Beyond Philology. Hermann Usener on Myth, Ritual, and Comparison

This paper reconsiders Hermann Usener (1834–1905) as one of the foundational historians of religions in the German-speaking academy. Often remembered primarily as a classical philologist, Usener in fact developed a program that moved decisively beyond the boundaries of *Altertumswissenschaft*. Starting from philological work on Roman and Greek sources, Usener increasingly argued that ancient Greco-Roman religion must be studied comparatively and historically, in dialogue with advances in linguistics, ethnology, and oriental studies. I will show that this comparative turn was not a neutral methodological expansion. It was also shaped by Usener's own religious horizon: a liberal-Protestant interest in understanding religion as a human phenomenon with a history, and in rethinking (Protestant) Christianity's place within a wider denominational landscape. Central to this project is Usener's sustained attention to both myth and ritual as "Heilige Handlung". My main source is an unusual document: Franz

Cumont's lecture notes from Usener's Vorlesungen on "Mythology" (Bonn, Winter Semester 1886–87). These notes offer a concrete entry point into Usener's classroom synthesis of philology, comparative religion, and anthropological interest in ritual, allowing us to reassess his place in the genealogy of modern religious studies.

Danny Praet, University of Ghent

Franz Cumont. Classical Philologist and Historian of Religions

Franz Cumont (1868–1947) is widely known as a historian of religions and the specialist of "his" oriental religions in the Roman Empire. Few people know he did not study history but was trained as a classical philologist at Ghent University, after which he also spent several semesters in Bonn, Berlin, Vienna and Paris studying with pioneering historians of religion such as Hermann Usener. Cumont never published a theoretical work on the history of religions but one can reconstruct his reflections from his rich correspondence and occasional remarks in his published writings. This paper will try to contextualize the work of Cumont on Mithras and the other oriental religions within the classical philology of the late 19th and the early twentieth centuries and the emerging comparative history of religions. Specifically it will focus on the stereotypes about East and West, the rational and the irrational, progress and decadence we can find in this era. Cumont managed to change the paradigms he had inherited but to a certain degree he remained indebted to a colonial mind-set with regard to the ancient and the contemporary Near-East.

Christian Hoekema, University of Ghent

Philological and Confessional Stakes in Late Antiquity: Sulpicius Severus between classical scholarship and ecclesiastical historiography (1861–1914)

In twentieth-century religious studies, the appeal to classical philology as a turn to the history of scholarship functioned as a polemical methodological choice. Arnaldo Momigliano, for example, made this move explicit by drawing on nineteenth-century philologists like Hermann Usener and Jacob Bernays in direct contrast to his Chicagocolleague Mircea Eliade. Bernays' work reveals a scholarly environment in which the boundaries between classical philology, biblical studies, and the emerging history of religion remained fluid. His 1861 study of Sulpicius Severus—dedicated to Friedrich Max Müller—already positioned Christian antiquity within both classical and biblical scholarship, while later publications framed his scholarship even more explicitly as history of religion. This paper interrogates that fluid scholarly environment by tracing Sulpicius Severus as the focal point of another controversy at the turn-of-the-century. The German philologist Bruno Krusch and the Belgian Catholic historian Godefroid Kurth advanced sharply different readings of Severus' Vita Martini. Because this work served as a foundational model for later saints' lives, the dispute over its reading shaped interpretations of Merovingian hagiographical source-material. Reconstructing the Krusch–Kurth rivalry over Late Antiquity therefore shows how methodological claims became entangled with broader confessional and national scholarly identities that clashed during World War One.

CLOSED PANEL VII

Contemporary Muslim Materialities

Maria Lindebæk , Schmidt Lyngsøe , University of Copenhagen
Scandinavian Islamic Decorative Items

In the Scandinavian context as elsewhere, an increased interest in what could be called Islamic lifestyle products is manifesting itself these years. This includes art and decorative items that are identified as Islamic and appeal to the stylistic preferences of emerging groups of Muslim middle-class consumers. Responding to and promoting such an interest, a group of Scandinavian entrepreneurs who design, promote, and sell such items – for example, posters or hanging ornaments – is emerging. Building on one and a half years of fieldwork among such Danish and Swedish entrepreneurs, this paper attends to the work of these entrepreneurs and to the decorative items they make, highlighting the creative process of entrepreneurship as a mode of Islamic engagement. The paper's basic questions are: What motivates the entrepreneurs in their business endeavours, and which semiotic resources and aesthetic programmes are built into and out of the production and promotion of the decorative and art items? Answering these questions, the paper scrutinizes the production and promotion of the decorative items, as well as the materials, actors, and spaces involved in the process.

Petek Onur , University of Copenhagen
Modest Aesthetics in Wedding Celebrations among Immigrant Communities from Turkey in Denmark

Wedding rituals and celebrations are critical life-cycle events that showcase piety and cultural identity, often enhanced by aesthetic preferences. This paper emphasizes their importance for immigrant communities from Turkey in Denmark. It is based on a research project that investigates the dynamics and diversity of performative activities and aesthetic expressions of piety within wedding traditions and celebrations, and couples' stories and experiences of these events. The research comprises interviews with couples and service providers in the wedding sector, and observations of wedding celebrations. This paper shows that the emergence and expansion of the Turkish/Kurdish wedding market in Denmark over the last decade have responded to and shaped a demand for aesthetic and material expressions of modesty and piety in wedding celebrations. In particular, new banquet halls, bridal wear boutiques, and wedding photographers offer goods and services that cater to diverse tastes, reflecting piety and beliefs, cultural diversity, transnational fashion and trends, and the peculiarities of the Danish context. It is argued that the aesthetics and materiality of religious norms come to the fore in kaleidoscopic ways in these events, which bind together not only the bride and the groom but also immigrant communities from Turkey in Denmark.

Zenia Henriksen , University of Southern Denmark
Materializing Green Scripture: Islamic Environmental Ethics in the Qur'anic Botanic Garden

This paper examines how Islamic environmental ethics take material form at the Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG) in Doha, Qatar, focusing on how scriptural references to nature are translated into plants, spatial design, and sensory experience. The garden cultivates species mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith and embeds scriptural citations in its landscape, creating a material assemblage in which Islamic conceptions of nature are physically enacted rather than merely represented. The QBG is approached as a site where religious meaning emerges through material practices that engage bodies, senses, and space. Curatorial strategies transform abstract theological principles into experiential encounters with living matter, situating Islamic environmental ethics within an ecological space. The QBG thus functions as a material infrastructure of contemporary Islamic environmentalism, where text, vegetation, architecture, and aesthetics are bound into a coherent environment. Drawing on material religion and postcolonial environmental humanities, the paper argues that the garden operates as a site where sacred texts are enacted as spatial and sensory practices. This case contributes to broader discussions on the material and aesthetic

dimensions of religious environmentalism and the role of scripture in shaping ecological ethics through lived, material worlds.

Ingvild Flaskerud , Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo

Unpacking material configurations: The hejlah Qasim as a devotional object

Ritual props are an integral part of Twelver Shia rituals. They take on representative qualities referring to persons and events, and from a semiotic perspective, function as materialized elements in the narration of stories, and as symbolic signifiers of something beyond their material appearance and narrative signification. Furthermore, their aesthetic qualities shape emotional sentiments among ritual participants, and they are significant devotional objects. In this paper, however, I take a step back from the props' ritual context of being on display, to look at the process of their materialization. The setting is the semi-public space of domestic rituals, organised by lay women in Shiraz, and the prop is the hejlah Qasim. I examine its manifestations, and the relationship between objects and concepts, the sensory and the semiotic, and how theology and belief are interpreted and expressed through materialization. But the hejlah's configuration involves more than what meets the eye. Unpacking the hejlah's material configuration, I detail the components combined to make it, track the procedures employed, and ask who are involved, and what are their responsibilities and motivations. The study contributes to the understanding of the triangulation between materiality, semiotics, aesthetics and devotion.

CLOSED PANEL VIII

Saint Cyprian in Context

José Vieira Leitão, University of Coimbra

Understanding and condemnation of Cyprianic magic literature in Portugal

Magic occupies a complex cultural space in 'western' Christian society. While throughout the medieval and early modern period one may find positive definitions of magic, this is, more often than not, a category which is constructed as a result of religious and intellectual exclusionary discourses. In the Iberian Peninsula, since the early modern period, 'autochthonous' learned magic tends to be associated with Saint Cyprian of Antioch. Besides several magic prayers and, eventually, an entire tradition of magic books, typically referred to in Portugal as the *Livros de São Cipriano* (Books of Saint Cyprian), literary references associating this name with magic practice can be found as early as the 1515 play *Exortação da Guerra* by Gil Vicente, as well as in local editions of the *Flos Sanctorum*. Taking as a starting point the Iberian reception of the 'Prayer of Saint Cyprian', a talismanic magico-religious text of wide geographic dissemination (both within and without Europe), this talk aims to follow the local Portuguese interpretations and understandings of the Cyprian literary tradition by theological authorities from the early modern to the contemporary period. Arriving at this point, it shall be seen how these early religious and condemnatory readings frame new academic, 'secular' and even political interpretations of these books, impacting their legality and their eventual position within Portuguese esoteric counterculture.

Bernadett Smid, Eötvös Loránd University

Saint Cyprian's Prayer in Practice: Counter-Witchcraft Rituals in 17th-Century Catalonia

Texts associated with the figure of Saint Cyprian of Antioch belong to a long-standing and multifaceted historical tradition. A central element of this tradition is a prayer recounting the conversion of a former pagan magician into a Christian saint. From the early 16th century onward, the prayer circulated widely in printed vernacular translations of Latin versions, appearing in multiple Romance vernacular languages. Source evidence indicates that in the early modern Mediterranean this functioned primarily as a ritual text employed for healing purposes. At a symbolic level, both the text and its uses reflect a broader transformation whereby exorcism evolved from a charismatic, saint-centered practice into a clerically regulated ritual. This paper examines the role of Saint Cyprian's prayer in practices aimed at counteracting witchcraft-induced harm (*maleficium*) in the 17th-century Principality of Catalonia. The circulation of Catalan and Spanish vernacular versions is therefore analyzed within local ritual-magical practices, rather than as an autonomous philological process. Drawing on a comparative analysis of 17th-century Catalan inquisitorial trial records, this study reconstructs the ritual contexts and procedures in which the prayer was used, its association with counter-witchcraft practices, and the additional texts that may have reinforced its perceived efficacy. Finally, through an analysis of inquisitorial procedures and verdicts, the paper explores how the prayer could function as an object endowed with magical power and how ecclesiastical authorities sought to regulate hybrid counter-witchcraft practices. The study demonstrates how inquisitorial regulation intersected with persistent popular demands for protection against *maleficium* following the promulgation of the *Rituale Romanum*.

Tove Ekholm-Meurling, Stockholm University

Fragments of Cyprian in Historical Sweden

In Scandinavia Cyprian has primarily been associated with the local grimoires generally known as black- or black arts books. In Denmark and Norway in particular the saint has often been presented as the original or ultimate author of such books, which have also been referred to simply as "Cyprians". A recurring legend, frequently referenced in the books themselves, identifies their place of origin as the city of Wittenberg. A city of dual significance, Wittenberg is, on the one hand, the city of Martin Luther and the Protestant reformation that made a lasting impact on the religious landscape of early modern

Scandinavia, and, on the other, the city of Faust, a legendary magician whose story partakes of similar diabolic themes as that of Cyprian. Compared to Denmark and Norway, Cyprian casts a relatively small shadow over Sweden, where he only appears in a minority of surviving black arts books, prayers, and divination manuals containing material of at least partially foreign (principally Danish and German) origin. This presentation explores the Swedish reception of Cyprian based on these historical sources and with attention to their broader contexts. Focus will be on the fragmentary, fleeting or contested elements of this reception. In one sense this is an examination of the limits and periphery of the sorcerer saint's reach, in another it speaks to what can be interpreted as a broader pattern of how continental magical and religious figures and practices have been received historically in the region.

Inês Teixeira Barreto , Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo

'The Basis of All Their Knowledge': The Book of Saint Cyprian in Brazilian Imaginary and Printed Culture in the 20th Century

The Book of Saint Cyprian is a significant element of magical practices and the Brazilian religious imagination. Despite being regarded as a cursed book, it has been published in Brazil for more than a century and remains widely available in bookstores, shops specializing in religious items, and online. Drawing on Portuguese editions that circulated in Brazil from the 1870s onward, local publishers produced their own versions, as well as related works focused on magic. The enduring popularity of the Book of Saint Cyprian in Brazil can be explained by two factors: the book addressed a readership situated within a cultural context connected to oral traditions and accustomed to practical printed materials, such as almanacs and manuals; its reception was shaped by the Brazilian religious landscape, marked by the strong influence of African and Indigenous traditions, in which interactions with spirits are commonplace. This context provided fertile ground for the circulation, appropriation, and practical use of operations presented in the book. Following, as a starting point, one of the earliest references to the Book of Saint Cyprian in the Brazilian press, found in the book *As Religiões do Rio* (1904), written by the journalist João do Rio, the presentation will analyze the editorial trajectory of the Books of Saint Cyprian during the first half of the twentieth century, combining press sources and publishing history. By doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on popular religion, print culture, and the circulation of esoteric knowledge in modern Brazil.

CLOSED PANEL IX

Experiencing Transcendence through the Arts.

A Comparative Study on Mysticism and the Arts in Contemporary Islam, Buddhism, and Bāul

Francesco Piraino, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Contemporary Sufi Arts: mediating Islam and negotiating blackness between universality and particularity

This paper focuses on two Murid Senegalese-Italian artists: the photographer Maïmouna Guerresi and the glassblower Moulay Niang. In the fields of social sciences, contemporary Islamic art has been often described as a form of commodification of Islam. For many scholars, contemporary Islamic art represents the surrender of Islam to Western modernity and its entering into the society of spectacle. This paper contests this narrative showing how for these artists, art cannot be separated from the religious quest. Art is a form of "mediation" of religion, another way of practicing Islam. Furthermore, they consider art as an instrument to change the world, challenging racism and sexism through symbols, but also through art materiality, which is considered to be infused with *dhikr* / *baraka*. Finally, this paper discusses how these artists represent and negotiate blackness, in between its metaphysical universality and racial/cultural particularity.

Keith Cantú, Harvard University

Listening for Deeper Meaning: Mysticism in the Songs of Bengali Bāuls and Fakirs

This paper focuses on the category of mysticism as commonly applied to the songs of Bengali Bāuls and Fakirs, an early modern tantric and contemporary global esoteric movement that has its origins in an interconnected society of male, female, and androgynous musician-sadhus, artists, and yogins who are mostly found in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. The first part of the paper analyzes examples of specific Bāul and Fakiri songs that resonate with mysticism, which in Bangla has been rendered as *maramivād*, literally the "discourse of they who understand meaning." The songs have been defined as such by Bengali intellectuals given their clear focus on knowing oneself, being united with one's beloved, and dissolving linguistic boundaries, and also based on a selection of Sanskrit and Middle Bengali texts from which they take inspiration and upon which they creatively innovate. The paper concludes with a claim that mysticism in Bāul and Fakiri songs cannot be merely dismissed as a superficial post-Orientalist framing, but that—when used responsibly—is indeed an appropriate category to capture the semantic range of emic terms like *sādhana* "practice" and *bhed* "riddle," "distinction." The paper shows how their songs as a whole promote a mystic search for inner significance and a rejection of external "shells," and how such a search leads to enduring social and religious consequences.

Hajar Masbah, EHESS

Ecstasy and Liminality in the Contemporary Artification of Whirling Sufi Dance

Whirling Sufi dance was established in the thirteenth century by the successors of Jalal al-Din Rumi within the Mevlevi Order as a ritual practice known as *Samāʿ*. Since the 19th century, this practice has undergone processes of patrimonialization, becoming a cultural symbol in countries such as Turkey, Syria, and Egypt. From the 20th century onward, it has also been shaped by processes of globalization and artification, circulating as a performative dance form and being presented on international stages in Europe and the United States. Through this shift from a primarily religious framework to an artistic one, the experience of ecstasy has not disappeared; rather, it continues to be sought and experienced through the power of whirling, both in religious and artistic contexts. This paper explores the liminal zone of ecstasy which converge *betwixt and between* dizziness and equilibrium, presence and absence, control and surrender, individuality and universality, and expressed with both religious and holistic poetic language. Based on testimonies and embodied narratives collected from dancers and practitioners engaged in both religious and artistic approaches in Europe (France, Belgium, Italy) and in Turkey (Konya), this presentation traces how ecstasy is lived, interpreted, and verbalized by practitioners. It highlights how

language itself becomes a key site for negotiating spiritual meaning and legitimacy at the intersection of art and mysticism in contemporary contexts.

Francesca Tarocco , Manuela Lietti , Ca' Foscari University of Venice

"Nothing!": Buddhism-Inspired Contemporary Art Practices in East Asia

This paper attends to the religious and mystical imaginaries of Buddhist-inspired contemporary artworks in East Asia. It explores the inter-implication of aesthetics and ethics in order to take up both the materiality of Buddhist life and its moral implications for personhood in contemporary East Asia. We are especially interested in some specific artists and in the influences their participation in Buddhist practices, as an ethics of spiritual searching at the very least, has upon the aesthetics of their work. Conversely, we are also keen on moving from the artistic work, from its aesthetic, formal qualities, to understand how the recent proliferation of Buddhist-inspired activity through aesthetic engagement and art making influences the spread of Buddhism and its projects in modernity.

CLOSED PANEL X
Political Theology and Political Mythology:
Historical and Contemporary Intersections between Religion and Politics

Sergio Glăjar, University of Texas at Austin
Fascist Divine Kingship in Interwar Romania

The myth of divine kingship is amongst the oldest in human history. Using as a case study the figure of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the founder and supreme *Căpitan* of Romania's interwar mystico-fascist movement, The Legion of the Archangel Michael, this paper argues that the ostensibly archaic political theology of divine kingship is precisely the mythical structure that undergirds fascism. Drawing from David Graeber's and Marshall Sahlins' theoretical approach to kingship as well as from Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies*, I will look at both major Legionary publications and concrete Legionary deeds in an attempt to show that fascism represents a kind of "reboot" of key aspects of divine kingship, adapted for the new soil of mass 20th century electoral politics. Seeing as the Legion was the most explicitly mystical of the major interwar European fascist movements, it offers an opportunity to analyze 20th century mythical divine kingship in particularly high relief. This fascist "reboot" of divine kingship ultimately amounts to an attempt to re-enchant a nation and society that was seen by interwar Romanian ultra-nationalists to have become deeply disenchanted as a result of the forced importation of secular liberalism from the West and the Satanically-conceived threat of so-called "Judeo-Bolshevism" from the East.

Robert Yelle, LMU Munich
Long Live the King: The Political Significance of Several Ancient Myths

My presentation will outline some new principles of myth interpretation in the structuralist tradition, which suggest an alternative reading of certain narratives in the first and second books of Moses against the background of their Ancient Near Eastern and wider Mediterranean contexts. Beginning from a reconsideration of the Oedipus story, I will suggest that a number of mythological narratives represented reflections on the nature of sacred kingship and particularly on the problem of succession within the royal line. Greek, Egyptian, and Hebrew stories addressed the practical problems associated with monarchy in different ways. This rereading, which draws *inter alia* on Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, and Marshall Sahlins, contributes to illuminating certain peculiar features of myth, including the widespread occurrence of the incest motif, which in some cases serves to reinforce the identity and legitimacy of the royal/divine lineage.

Cristiana Facchini, University of Bologna
On the Notion of 'Political Religion': Interdisciplinary Perspectives

In 1938, Eric Voegelin published *The Political Religions* in response to the rise of Nazism and the Anschluss, marking a crucial moment in the conceptualization of modern political movements as quasi-religious phenomena. This paper examines the historical and intellectual development of the notion of "political religion," situating it within broader debates on Italian Fascism and early theories of totalitarianism. Particular attention is given to the work of Emilio Gentile and other scholars who applied this concept to the analysis of authoritarian regimes. Rather than focusing solely on the descriptive use of political religion, the paper explores the entanglement between religious studies and emerging political science in the early twentieth century. It argues that categories and methods derived from the study of religion played a significant role in shaping theoretical approaches to mass politics and ideological mobilization. By tracing these interdisciplinary exchanges, the paper highlights how intellectuals transformed religious concepts into analytical tools for understanding modern political power and collective belief.

CLOSED PANEL XI
Occult Tibet: Euro-American Esoteric Readings

Lukas K. Pokorny, University of Vienna

"The Reputed Fountain-head of Esoteric Lore": Tibet and Its Masters

This paper systematically traces how occultists and esotericists imagined Tibet as the locus of "esoteric lore," introducing its key brokers from A.P. Sinnett (1840–1921) and H.P. Blavatsky's (1831–1891) Mahatmas to the Ascended Masters of the New Age current. It elucidates the contexts for the creation of the "occult Tibet" trope and its manifestations, and delineates the common threads of the ever-expanding masters of wisdom narrative. The paper highlights the main trajectories of occult Tibet and its salvific inhabitants.

Franz Winter, University of Graz

Going Underground in the Himalaya: The Writings of Theodore Illion (1898–1984) and the Ambivalent Image of Tibet

Theodore Illion (1898–1984), a German author who also published under the pseudonyms Theodor Burang and Theodor Nolling, produced popular accounts of his alleged travels to Tibet in the early 1930s, as well as several successful post-war books on "Tibetan medicine." His writings are marked by a pronounced admiration for a mystical Tibet imagined as a land of marvels, and he recounts numerous encounters with figures who allegedly grant access to higher forms of knowledge. Among the most striking elements of his narratives is a detailed description of an underground city said to exist in the region, inhabited by a community of initiates under the leadership of a "Prince of Light." Over the course of the narrative, however, the wonders of Tibet are ultimately revealed to be the manifestations of a malevolent force that poses a grave threat to the world. This paper seeks to contextualise Illion's ambivalent portrayal of Tibet through a close examination of comparable travelogues. The motif of the underground realm, in particular, offers a productive lens through which to situate Illion's writings within a broader tradition of mystical "cities" associated with the Himalayan region, with a specific focus on occult discourse starting at the end of the 19th century. In this regard, the writings of the French occultist Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842–1909) and his "Agarttha," are specifically important as they were later popularised—often with a strong emphasis on Tibet—by influential intermediaries such as the Polish writer Ferdynand A. Ossendowski (1876–1945), the British author James Hilton (1900–1954), and, in a markedly different ideological register, the German Ludendorff circle and their profoundly hostile image of Tibet.

Robert Corso, University of Naples "Federico II"

Tibet and Traditionalism between Religious Universalism and Political Radicalism

This paper examines the reconfiguration whereby Tibet, initially peripheral, gradually entered Traditionalist discourse and assumed an increasingly significant role. Beginning with the work of René Guénon (1886–1951), Tibet became integrated into the Traditionalist construction of the "East" and endowed with metaphysical and symbolic authority. The analysis then turns to two pivotal Traditionalist figures who devoted sustained attention to Tibet in their writings: the Greek-British Marco Pallis (1895–1989) and the Italian Giulio "Julius" Evola (1898–1974). By comparing these two case studies, the paper highlights how Tibet functioned as a central symbolic resource within Traditionalism, while also revealing the internal diversity and tensions that characterised the movement. More specifically, the Tibetan case illustrates how a transcultural interpretation of Tradition—understood as Perennial Wisdom and primarily related to spiritual and religious concerns—coexisted within Traditionalism alongside a more ethnocentric and racialised interpretation, in which spiritual discourse was mobilised to support an anti-modern political agenda.

Samuel Thévoz, University of Vienna

"Is There a Secret Doctrine?" Occult Tibet Revealed, the Initiate Concealed

Alexandra David-Neel (1868–1969), a globally acclaimed writer on Tibetan Buddhism, established herself early on as a prominent authority on “occult Tibet.” From her first publication in 1893 to her final books in the 1960s, she consistently engaged with and shaped Western perceptions of Tibetan esotericism. At once sceptical and engaged, she demonstrated a keen awareness of the Euro-American occult imaginaries of Tibet, critically examining both the imagined and lived dimensions of esoteric Buddhism, while also assessing diverse theories and practices in Europe and Asia through the dual lens of firsthand experience and what she considered orthodox interpretations of the Buddha’s original teachings. This chapter first reflects on how authoritative figures perceived David-Neel and her subsequent evaluation as a mystifier. It then considers how she engaged with the question “Is there a Secret Doctrine?”, thereby challenging Euro-American perennialist claims about Tibet and actively asserting her own legitimacy within the field. The chapter highlights three key periods (1890s, 1920s, 1950s) in the global history of occult Tibet and reveals the complex politics involved in translating and staging the so-called “Secret Teachings of Tibet.”

CLOSED PANEL XII

Esotericism, Politics, and Social Imaginaries

David Dijkman, University of Amsterdam

Thermal Scheme of the Imponderable Embodiment: The Politicisation of the Subtle Body in the West German Alternative Milieu

The second half of the twentieth century saw significant advances in medicine, ranging from pharmaceutical breakthroughs and the first successful human-to-human heart transplantation to the introduction of molecular engineering and genetic manipulation. At the same time, however, increasing scepticism toward the medical sciences arose among both intellectuals and the public. While most gravitated toward forms of "alternative medicine," a minority sought to do away with medicine entirely. Among them was a West German collective called the *Patientenfront* (Patients' Front, 1973–present), the successor to the better-known *Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv* (Socialist Patients' Collective, 1970–1971). This collective regarded the medical establishment as a disciplinary institution deeply entrenched in the logics of capitalism. New forms of imperialism were being formulated, no longer concerned with colonising the planet as much as with the body and its organs. To escape the medical gaze, now pervasive at the molecular level, a new body scheme had to be formulated to match these new forms of control. Through a creative reading of thermodynamics that mends science with spirituality and politics, this collective conceptualised a subtle body that not only resisted medical capture, but that was to disrupt and dismantle all forms of categorisation altogether. This paper will trace the conceptualisation of this liberated body in relation to and in conversation with contemporary esoteric discourses stemming from the West German "alternative milieu." In doing so, it will offer insights into the entangled histories of politics, science, and esotericism in the West German context, specifically, and European modernity more generally.

Gregg Harmston, Independent Scholar

Non-linear Summonings: Political and Esoteric Rhizomes of the CCRU

This paper examines the political and esoteric production of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), an interdisciplinary collective active between 1995 and 2003 originating from the University of Warwick. Situating the CCRU within the intellectual and cultural conditions of late twentieth-century technocapitalism, the paper argues that the group developed a distinctive synthesis of sociopolitical theory and contemporary esotericism that continues to exert influence across digital subcultures and fringe political formations. Particular attention is given to the contributions of Sadie Plant, Nick Land, and Mark Fisher, whose divergent political commitments and theoretical orientations shaped the trajectory and internal tensions of the collective. The paper first traces the CCRU's emergence from cyberfeminist and poststructuralist frameworks into increasingly experimental engagements with esotericism. It then examines Land's subsequent turn toward the political right, which precipitated a rupture with Fisher over the meaning and implications of accelerationist political theory, and culminated in Land's later articulation of technomonarchist and neoreactionary positions that nonetheless retain important continuities with earlier CCRU esoteric motifs. By analysing the interestingly varied receptions of CCRU concepts across politically heterogeneous milieus, this paper argues that the collective's legacy cannot be understood through conventional Left–Right distinctions alone. Instead, the CCRU exemplifies a broader transformation in contemporary theory, wherein technological, political, and esoteric imaginaries converge to destabilise established categories of critique, subjectivity, and political possibility.

Matouš Mokřý, University of Pardubice

Esotericising Toynbee in the Order of Nine Angles

Since the 1960s, the international extreme right has become increasingly aware of its political marginality, which forced its thinkers to formulate alternatives to electoral competition and mass movements.

Extreme-right strategies have also been rethought by British neo-Nazi David Myatt (b. 1950). Apart from his activities in the neo-Nazi milieu, Myatt frequented esoteric circles since the late 1960s, intending to create an elite Satanic organisation. Central to Myatt's ideological synthesis was the work of British historian Arnold J. Toynbee and his notion of the "creative minority," a civilisational elite responsible for initiating cultural transformation. In Myatt's esoteric writings, Toynbee's "creative minority" is woven into ideas about consciousness development and techniques of mastering the material world that are common in post-1960s esoteric ritual magic. Myatt instrumentalised his understanding of "creative minority" in the establishment of the esoteric system "Order of Nine Angles" (ONA) around 1983. The ONA focuses on building a creative elite that will supposedly direct Western civilisation by magical and other means towards cosmic expansion. This paper analyses ONA's re-imagination and instrumentalisation of Toynbee's "creative minority" in the context of changing strategies of extreme-right politics. After briefly discussing recently uncovered evidence proving Myatt's involvement in the ONA, it turns to key texts of the ONA's formative period (1976–1998). By analysing this material, the paper demonstrates how "esotericising" Toynbee helps David Myatt and the wider Order of Nine Angles to reconceptualise political marginality as a strategic resource and provides novel arenas for societal change.

Max Lokin, Maynooth University

Esoteric Anti-Communism: Olavo de Carvalho and the Politics of Reaction in Brazil

This paper examines how esoteric styles of knowledge reconfigured a long-standing Brazilian tradition of reactionary anti-communism in the work of Olavo de Carvalho (1947–2022). Often portrayed as an eccentric polemicist or as the personal "guru" of Brazil's new right, Carvalho becomes more intelligible when situated within the *longue durée* of Brazilian political culture, in which "communism" has functioned less as a concrete political programme than as a metaphysical symbol of disorder, atheism, and civilizational decay. From early twentieth-century Catholic anti-socialism and Neo-Thomism to Integralism in the 1930s and Cold War military doctrine, Brazilian anti-communism repeatedly framed politics as a struggle over transcendence, hierarchy, and moral order. Carvalho did not invent this grammar; he radically transformed it. Drawing on Catholic traditionalism, perennialist philosophy, esotericism, and conspiratorial epistemologies, Carvalho recoded anti-communism as a form of spiritual warfare between transcendence and immanent "gnostic" revolt. He reimagined political conflict as a battle over hidden structures of reality, in which access to truth depended on initiatory intellectual and moral transformation rather than on institutions, expertise, or empirical verification. Through online courses, polemical writings, and disciple-like communities, Carvalho established an alternative epistemology in which authority derived from esoteric insight and moral purity. By situating Carvalho within the *longue durée* of Brazilian reactionary anti-communism, this paper shows how contemporary esotericism participates in the production of alternative social imaginaries, in which political struggle is experienced as a battle over truth, destiny, and the spiritual meaning of history.

CLOSED PANEL XIII
Competing Orthodoxies:
Struggles for Authority, Recognition, and Legitimacy in Eastern European Orthodoxy

Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy , New Europe College, Bucharest

Who Speaks for Orthodoxy? Authority and Dissent within the Romanian Orthodox Church

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Romanian Orthodox Church reached its nadir as an institution. This state of affairs was pointed out by numerous priests and theologians of the time who agreed that the Church was in need of immediate reform. The rapid spread of the so-called sectarian movements was attributed to the Orthodox Church's failure to satisfy the general desire for a spiritual revival. It was in this context that the Church started to promote renewal from within the Orthodox Church itself, even though the Orthodox leaders were aware of the fact that by promoting revival they were increasing the risk that new, foreign, Protestant ideas would be introduced into the Church and, indirectly, that the limits of Orthodoxy would be redefined. This paper asks the question: who speaks for Orthodoxy? Focusing on the Romanian Orthodox Church, the paper aims to examine the emergence of internal spiritual movements during the interwar period and the ways in which they challenged the institutional authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Groups such as the Old Calendarists and the Tudorists, which will be approached in the study, did not see themselves as leaving Orthodoxy; rather, they positioned themselves as preserving or renewing it. In doing so, they raised broader questions about who holds spiritual authority, how it is exercised, and what counts as true orthodoxy. For the Orthodox Church, however, they proved to be a real competition. Using archival sources, the paper examines the manners in which the Romanian Orthodox Church addressed these internal challenges and how its responses were shaped by broader social and political changes, such as modernization and national consolidation. These tensions did not disappear under communism; rather, they were transformed within a new political framework and reemerged after 1989 in fresh forms, influenced by legal pluralism, public debate, and ongoing negotiations over what counts as legitimate religious authority.

Iuliia Kornichuk , New Europe College, Bucharest

One Faith, Two Borders: Competing Legal and Ecclesial Logics in Ukrainian–Romanian Orthodoxy

This paper explores divergent interpretations of religious freedom within intra-Orthodox relations between Ukraine and Romania, shaped by European integration and the geopolitical shifts triggered by Russia's war against Ukraine. Rather than offering a general study of religious policy, it focuses on the competing logics through which Orthodox church actors and state authorities in both countries define the boundaries of religious rights, religious and national identity, security, and sovereignty. While Romania is marked by the institutional dominance of a single Romanian Orthodox Church, Ukraine's Orthodox landscape is represented by several major churches, each holding distinct institutional positions. This Ukrainian model, which Casanova (1998) defines as part of a broader pattern of denominationalism, was destabilised by the Russian invasion and by the active instrumentalisation of religion as a source of legitimation and as a partner of the Russian state in its war of aggression. In response, the Ukrainian state introduced a series of restrictions affecting religious organisations, which have been received ambiguously outside Ukraine. One notable point of tension was the Romanian Orthodox Church's announcement of its intention to establish a parallel jurisdiction in Ukraine, which it presented as a means to better protect the religious rights of Ukrainians of Romanian background. Drawing on official church and legal documents, interviews, and statistical data, the study demonstrates how intra-Orthodox disputes expose structural tensions between national sovereignty, minority protection, and ecclesial jurisdiction, thereby revealing the limits of harmonising religious freedom norms within the framework of EU integration.

Dumitru Lisnic , "Ioan Petru Culianu" Institute for Religious Studies, "George Emil Palade" University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology

State, Bureaucracy, and Religious Authority: Lay Resistance and the Failure of the Living Church in 1920s Ukraine

This paper takes a materialist approach in examining the emergence of the parish councils as organisations resisting the restrictions imposed by the Soviet regime in the Soviet Ukraine. Gregory L. Freeze explores the parochialisation of power in the Russian Orthodox Church as the process through which the laypeople took over the control in the Eastern Orthodox parishes, but his analysis does not include an examination of the bureaucratic techniques and artefacts (stenographs of the meetings of religious communities, forms of registrations, lists of parishioners, agreements for the right to use religious buildings) introduced into religious landscape by Soviet regime. Additionally, Freeze explores the parochialisation as a phenomenon which occurred exclusively in the Eastern Orthodox parishes, while similar processes took place in other religious communities in the 1920s USSR. The important role of the bureaucratic practices and artefacts in the relations between Bolshevik atheism and religions and the impressive proportions of the phenomena called by Freeze "the parochialisation of power in the Russian Orthodox Church" calls for a fresh revision of our understanding of the interaction between Soviet regime and religious congregations. This paper explores the contingent role of the bureaucratic artefacts and techniques in those relations by drawing on the theories and research methods of the Actor-Network-Theory School and Society and Technology Studies. By examining the procedure of compiling official documents co-produced by believers and Soviet officials, my paper demonstrates that the bureaucratic artefacts participated to the organisation of religious resistance, facilitated the emergence of lay religious leaders, and shaped the perceptions of believers and those of the Soviet policymakers regarding the sources and political nature of the religious revival in the 1920s.

CLOSED PANEL XIV
Gurdjieff Studies:
New Research Papers and a Critical Assessment of the Field

Carole M. Cusack , University of Sydney

The Institute and the Institution: G.I. Gurdjieff's Community at the Prieuré des Basses Loges and its Literary Portrayal as an Asylum

Greek-Armenian esotericist G.I. Gurdjieff (1877-1949) established the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Prieuré des Basses Loges in January 2023. This launch was overshadowed by the death of New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield (1888-1823) on 9 January, the day before the official opening. Before Mansfield died Gurdjieff was referred to in the correspondence of many people, and in contemporary journalism, as a "magician" and "charlatan," and the Institute as an "asylum for the insane." After his death some pupils wrote accounts of their time with their teacher, including descriptions of group living in the Prieuré, and how it functioned as a template for intentional communities led by Gurdjieff's pupils and successors. Several novels have taken up the idea that the Prieuré was a kind of mental institution. Surrealist novelist Leonora Carrington was a veteran of incarceration in an asylum and a Fourth Way group, and *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974) sites Gurdjieff as the medical director of an aged care home; while in Andrew Crumey's novel *Beethoven's Assassins* (2023) the Prieuré becomes a psychiatric hospital in the Scottish Borders with mystical interests run by the enigmatic Dr Hyle. The equivalence between Gurdjieff's Institute and psychiatric institutions posited by Carrington and Crumey is interrogated and its implications the popular reception of Gurdjieff himself are assessed.

Steven J. Sutcliffe , The Open University

Neil Gunn and G.I. Gurdjieff: Reception of "The Work" in Scottish Literary Modernism

The Scottish Highland novelist and sometime Scottish National Party activist, Neil Gunn (1891-1973), was a major figure in the Scottish Literary Renaissance of the 1920s and a significant writer in mid-20th Scottish/British Literary Modernism. Born in Caithness in the North-East of Scotland, Gunn's novels developed an aesthetic-political view on the possibilities of a revitalised Highland culture as a foil to the European 'waste land' (Eliot 1922) wrought by post-war military-industrial decimation and the rise of the dystopias in Germany and the Soviet Union. Many of Gunn's novels were published by the *ur*-Modernist taste-making firm, Faber and Faber, of which T.S. Eliot (who attended P.D. Ouspensky's London lectures) became literary director in 1925. For example, Gunn's autobiography, *The Atom of Delight* (1956), is influenced by his understanding of Zen Buddhism as mediated by Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1953 [1948]) to which he was introduced by his friend and future biographer, the Quaker-educated literary critic and conscientious objector, J.B. Pick (1921-2015). This 'Zen side' to Gunn has been examined by John Burns (1988). But Gunn was also interested in Gurdjieff (Hart and Pick 1985: 241-45), again encouraged by Pick, whose personal interest in Gurdjieff is clear (I have Pick's copy of *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* [Lefort 1971] with his annotations). Gunn wrote essays on his reception of Gurdjieff in periodicals including *Saltire Review* ('Remember Yourself', Gunn 1959) and *Point* ('Light', Gunn 1968; 'The Miraculous', Gunn 1968-69) and exchanged numerous letters with Pick referencing Gurdjieff (Pick [ed] 1987) mostly via Ouspensky's explication of Gurdjieff in *In Search of the Miraculous* (1950). This paper will contribute to emerging research documenting and analysing Gurdjieff's influence on transnational literary modernism: in this case, Scotland. I will draw on personal communications with John Burns and with J.B. Pick's literary executrix, and on the Neil M. Gunn archive in the National Library of Scotland.

Carole M. Cusack , **Steven J. Sutcliffe**

Gurdjieff Studies' since the 1980s: between New Religions, Western Esotericism and the Study of Religions – a Critical Assessment

This presentation takes the form of a chronology and critical assessment of key academic works on G. I. Gurdjieff and the movement which developed around his personal teaching and texts from the late 1910s, through the interwar and postwar periods, and into the present. Following the pioneering academic studies inter alia by James Webb (1980), Andrew Rawlinson (1997) and Sophia Wellbeloved (2003), Cusack opened a new current of Gurdjieff studies in the early 21st through numerous articles and edited collections with co-contributors and doctoral students, to which Sutcliffe has also contributed. This has supported important new studies of Gurdjieff by practitioner-scholars including Joseph Azize and David Seamon. This presentation will set out the 'big picture' of Gurdjieff Studies in relation to specific issues in the study of new religions, to 'western esotericism', and to themes in the general Study of Religions/s.

CLOSED PANEL XV

Social Ontology and Beyond

Niels Reeh, University of Southern Denmark
Religious groups as relational and collective entities

Building on previous research (Reeh 2013; Reeh 2020), that combined Social Ontology with a relational approach, the paper continues the theoretical development and includes research in the human hormone system (neurosociology) as another way to revitalize Emile Durkheim's notion of collective consciousness. Drawing on new research in neurosociology, Gregory Bateson, John Searle, Norbert Elias, and Roy Rappaport, the paper argues that a productive synthesis of these approaches enable a more nuanced understanding of religious groups. The paper conceptualizes religious groups as dynamic collective entities oriented toward maintaining themselves internally as well as externally or simply as continued living (Bateson). The theoretical framework is applied to selected contemporary developments in Danish society, demonstrating how a combined social-ontological and relational approach can illuminate current processes of religious change, negotiation, and boundary formation.

Andrea Rota, University of Oslo
Boundary Construction, Disaffiliation, and the Social Ontology of Religious Groups

The paper presents the theoretical framework of a forthcoming research project that combines a relational approach to religious disengagement with recent debates in the social ontology of religion. Growing scholarly attention to the category of the so-called "nones" has sparked renewed interest in processes of religious disaffiliation. These processes are most often examined through the lens of individual experiences, exit trajectories, and their underlying determinants. By contrast, this paper uses disaffiliation as a proxy for studying the constitutive dynamics of religious communities, with particular attention to commitment structures and interpersonal relationships. The paper contrasts two approaches to understanding the boundaries of religious communities. The first emphasizes the construction and policing of boundaries through theological and moral discourses and the effects of social and juridical pressure on inclusion and exclusion. The second enriches Norbert Elias's figurational approach with insights from social ontology to analyze individual and collective commitments. It foregrounds shifting degrees of commitment along a continuum ranging from full devotion to passive engagement, temporary distancing, and eventual disengagement, and explicitly examines how interpersonal relationships and obligations persist, change, and are actively renegotiated across—and sometimes in tension with—the discursive insider–outsider divide. The paper illustrates the framework with preliminary empirical material from the Church of Norway and the Watch Tower Society, treated as ideally contrastive cases.

Gabriel Levy, Norwegian University of Science and Technology
The Role of the Shared Sense of Agency in Ritual

Recent work in cognitive science distinguishes personal sense of agency (p-SoA)—the felt control over one's own actions—from shared sense of agency (s-SoA)—the felt control distributed across co-actors during coordination. My paper argues that religion provides a context for transforming agency in various ways, sometimes offloading it from the individual to the social and sometimes "onloading" it on the individual. However, most of the literature on agency from a cognitive perspective assumes that its "proper" domain is the level of the individual. Tools from the field of Social Ontology thus provide a useful intervention for rethinking agency from a distributed perspective and help us to better theorize the concept of a shared sense of agency. Recently researchers have used an online coordination paradigm to test the relation above: raising s-SoA with a predictable partner increased social closeness without necessarily reducing p-SoA. When this manipulation was followed by an intergroup moral game, s-SoA—together with "binding" moral foundations—predicted more ingroup-favoring deception under certain payoff conditions; conversely, lower s-SoA was linked to more outgroup-favoring lies at low stakes

(Piperno *et al.*, 2025). These findings illuminate how ritual synchrony may cultivate s-SoA fostering cohesion within the group, while also shifting moral calculus in intergroup contexts (e.g., justifying norm-violations as loyalty). I propose to integrate this model with ethnographic cases (e.g., high-synchrony rites across traditions) to explore the relation between agency and religious behavior.

CLOSED PANEL XVI

**The war in Ukraine as a catalyst for global religious transformations:
a 360° shift in religion**

Hanna Kulahina-Stadnichenk , National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

The War in Ukraine as a Turning Point for Global Orthodoxy

The Russian Federation's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has become not only a geopolitical disaster, but also an event that is radically changing the confessional landscape of global Orthodoxy. Whereas previously intra-Orthodox disputes revolved around canonical boundaries, autocephaly and conciliar supremacy, the war has confronted churches with questions of a moral and existential nature. In this sense, it has become a point of bifurcation - a critical moment when the system emerges from a state of relative equilibrium and enters a new phase of development. Applying the concept of bifurcation from complex systems theory allows us to view Orthodoxy not as a static tradition, but as a dynamic structure that responds to external shocks. The war in Ukraine revealed hidden tensions and shifted the canonical conflict into the realm of ethical rupture. The granting of the Tomos of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019 has already become a turning point in inter-Orthodox relations. Moscow perceived this act as an invasion of its canonical territory and severed Eucharistic communion with Constantinople. At the same time, the OCU became a symbol of the decolonisation of Ukraine's religious space, while the Russian Orthodox Church interpreted these events as a threat to its historical identity. After the outbreak of full-scale war, the nature of the conflict changed radically. Theological disputes became intertwined with the rhetoric of a 'holy struggle,' and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church openly supported the Russian Federation's state policy, interpreting the war as a metaphysical confrontation with the 'fallen West.' This raised a fundamental question for Orthodoxy: can the church bless aggression while claiming the universality of Christian truth? As a result, the canonical dispute ended in an ethical rift. Local churches were faced with a choice between formal unity and moral clarity. Neutrality began to be perceived as a form of complicity. The war in Ukraine transformed the debate over jurisdiction into a question about the very nature of Christian witness in a world of violence. The conflict has taken on a global dimension. New 'canonical fronts' are emerging outside Ukraine, particularly in Africa, where parallel jurisdictions are being created. At stake is no longer just a territorial dispute, but a struggle for the model of world Orthodoxy: a centralised model closely linked to the state, or a conciliar model that recognises the legitimacy of autocephaly and national characteristics. In this context, the OCU takes on symbolic significance as a church that emerged during wartime, declaring its openness to pan-Orthodox dialogue. Its very existence calls into question Moscow's monopoly on the interpretation of the Orthodox tradition in the post-Soviet and global space. Further possible scenarios include deepening polarisation between the blocs around Moscow and Constantinople; the gradual international isolation of the Russian Orthodox Church due to its loss of moral legitimacy; a review of the model of primacy and the procedures for granting autocephaly; and the development of a new public theology capable of addressing the challenges of war, human rights and international law. At the same time, a return to the pre-war status quo seems impossible. The war has become a 'test of authenticity' for Orthodoxy, revealing the danger of the sacralisation of the state and the loss of moral autonomy. The point of bifurcation means not only division, but also the possibility of profound reforms. The future of global Orthodoxy will depend on whether it can reconcile canonical unity with the demands of justice and moral responsibility.

Tetiana Havryliuk , National Academy of Statistics, Accounting and Auditing

From Institutional Religion to Lived Ethics: Anthropological Dimensions of Christianity in Wartime Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become a powerful catalyst for religious transformation within the European context, long described through the paradigm of secularization. In public debates, these changes are often interpreted either as a revival of religion or as its political instrumentalization. Wartime

conditions have accelerated a shift from an institutional and doctrinal understanding of religion toward its lived and ethically intensified dimensions, articulated through anthropological categories. Within the framework of the philosophy of religion and religious studies, Christian anthropology is treated here not as normative theology but as an analytical lens for examining transformations in conceptions of the human person under conditions of extreme violence. Public statements by religious leaders, commemorative practices, volunteer initiatives, and everyday moral reasoning demonstrate that the focus has shifted from confessional identity to broader anthropological categories such as human dignity, vulnerability, responsibility, solidarity, and the protection of life. This shift entails a transformation of the social function of religion. Rather than remaining primarily a symbolic or ritual presence in society, religion increasingly functions as a space of moral agency and social mobilization. At the same time, the context of war intensifies the tension between religious legitimation of violence and religious resources for humanity, revealing competing anthropological models within contemporary Christianity. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that the "360-degree turn of religion" occurs not only at the level of institutions or geopolitics, but above all at the level of rethinking the very concept of the "human," thereby opening new perspectives for the academic study of religion in times of global crisis.

Igor Gudyma, Mariupol State University

Demythologization of Religious Consciousness in Wartime: Socio-Ontological Dimensions

The most dramatic transformation of contemporary reality is war, which today threatens the achievements of modern civilization, the fragile balance of the ecosystem, and the very existence of humanity. War is an extreme situation of being, a time when established illusions collapse and the familiar symbolic order of consciousness is destroyed. In such conditions, consciousness itself is compelled to respond to challenges of meaning, evil, and responsibility. The military factor has triggered a profound transformation of religious consciousness, one of whose principal trajectories is demythologization—the radical confrontation between constructed myth and the ontological and existential reality of wartime catastrophe. Ideological stereotypes of peaceful life are often permeated with illusory content—unwarranted assumptions about security, infantilized notions of social responsibility, and faith in inevitable divine intervention to restore ultimate justice. The realities of war compel a reassessment of such expectations and redirect faith from mythologemes toward the factors of existential demand. Thus, the demythologization of religious consciousness in its socio-ontological dimension emerges as a return of religious awareness to the authenticity of being itself and as a transformation in the very mode of experiencing existence, followed by the reaffirmation and justification of ultimate sacred meanings. Religious representations, emotions, and forms of worship leave the sphere of mere cultural background, undergo revitalization, and ultimately become a genuine response to the contingency of being and its particular instability under the conditions of contemporary warfare. Providential interaction between God and the world ceases to be perceived as an unconditional guarantee of order and meaning; instead, it is complemented by the recognition of the necessity to strengthen human social responsibility and to emphasize the social autonomy of the individual. At the same time, the theology of providence is reinterpreted through a doctrine of God as maximally co-present in suffering, in ethical choice, and in the acceptance of fateful decisions. This brings religious consciousness closer to its authentic origins—the prophetic tradition—where providence is not merely the embodiment of coercive power from transcendent institutions, but the unfolding in time of the majesty of higher justice and mercy. A time of military action is a period of compelled spiritual search for a new ontological foundation for survival. The reassessment of internal and external objective factors (the resource capacities of one's state, changes in the geopolitical situation, etc.) affects the quality of conceptualizing social identity, shifting emphasis from collective self-justification toward an ethic of individual responsibility. Religious consciousness becomes liberated from abstract speculation and rhetorical imagery, moving toward a sharply articulated doctrine of responsibility and imperatives of direct action. This restores certain worldview categories—justice, guilt, debt, duty, enemy—to their authentic meaning, freeing them from manipulative connotations and various pseudo-layerings. Thus, the demythologization of religious consciousness in wartime is neither the annihilation of religious ideology nor the loss of its sacred foundations. Rather, it is a return to its sources

under conditions in which the cost of intellectual illusion is exceedingly high and unacceptable. It is not the emptying of consciousness but, on the contrary, its deepening in the transition from mythological-stereotypical patterns to sacred truth—an очищення of the horizon of existential truth, moral determination, and social responsibility.

Eduard Martyniuk & Olena Nykytchenko , Odessa Polytechnic National University
The Attitude of the International Religious Community Toward Religious Life in Ukraine

How difficult it is today to formulate the prospects of religious life in the world in general, and in Ukraine in particular, can be illustrated by recent events in Jerusalem – a sacred place for three world religions. Due to threats to the safety of believers, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was closed to pilgrims from all over the world. It was shut down on the eve of Easter, and rumors began to spread that the Holy Fire – a highly significant and meaningful event for Orthodox communities, including those in Ukraine – would not descend this year. Thus, in a world of such uncertainty, which may even escalate to the cessation of life as such as a result of nuclear war, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of strengthening the efforts of all humanity to end war in all its manifestations, including those with any religious motivation. Undoubtedly, all forms of religious perception of the world should be involved in addressing this task, provided that human rights are respected – above all, the fundamental right to freedom of conscience. At present, it can be stated that the international religious community demonstrates a high degree of solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Global religious centers perceive Ukraine as a country fighting for the values of freedom; however, they remain sensitive to any signs of restrictions on religious pluralism. They emphasize that responsibility for collaboration or treason must be individual rather than extended to entire religious institutions, and they remind of the necessity of alternative service for believers even under martial law. Therefore, the future of religious life in Ukraine, as perceived by the international community, depends on the state's ability to balance national security measures with the individual rights of believers, as well as on the ongoing discussion about protecting a democratic society from the authoritarian ideology of the "russkiy mir."

CLOSED PANEL XVII

Negotiations of Religious Authority and Authenticity on Social Media Platforms

Ariane Kovac, Ruhr-University Bochum

'You need a minimum of intelligence to not take that too seriously.' Christian Social Media Users' Strategies of Discerning and Claiming Authority

Following the observation that her interviewees often echo concerns from public discourse, Ariane Kovac examines how Christian social media users distinguish between true and false teachings online while positioning themselves as capable discerners of truth on platforms they view as potentially dangerous. Her paper "'You need a minimum of intelligence to not take that too seriously.' Christian Social Media Users' Strategies of Discerning and Claiming Authority" argues that her interlocutors assess authority through individualized "mental maps" of the Christian field. These maps, partly shaped by, but not reducible to, denominational categories, allow them to contrast their "normal," well-researched Christianity with an "extreme" religious Other, and claim discursive authority.

Gabriela de la Vega, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Godfluencers: The Disappearing Medium and the Making of Digital Religious Authority

The paper covers how female Christian content creators mobilize the qualities of social media to present themselves not as mere influencers but legitimate tools of God. She argues that creators and social media platforms become accepted as conduits for divine action in three ways: 1) by framing content as divinely sent; 2) by breaching the boundaries of the platform through enactments of immediate religious action; and 3) by constructing a "right" kind of Christian influencer, emphasizing self-effacement and moral responsibility in their self-presentations.

Jasmin Eder, University of Erfurt

Followers of Ahmadiyya: Audiovisual mediation of religious knowledge among Ahmadi-Muslims in Germany

The paper scrutinizes audiovisual practices of Ahmadi-Muslims on social media. More concretely, Eder focuses on how Ahmadi-Muslims in Germany use social media platforms to transmit their (religious) knowledge and messages. She examines how her interlocutors interact with the logic and limitations inherent to social media platforms to convey their ideas successfully, while remaining true to their Islamic principles. This analysis aims to explore the concept of audiovisuality further and to highlight how practitioners' own audiovisual mediation shapes both the production and consumption of Ahmadi content.

Leoni Wohlfart, Goethe University Frankfurt

Manufacturing Displays of God-written Lives for Social Media Platforms

The paper draws on interviews and field work with Christian content creators who aim to enact an alternative to the supposedly negative, false, inauthentic or incomplete image of Christianity in German-speaking social media contexts. It explores digital self-representations as the result of author's interlocutors' creative processes. She shows how digital displays of Christian life and teaching not only depend on the creators' individual religious and aesthetic inclinations but also on specific social media platform cultures and the content creators' assumed expectations of authenticity and authority of their imagined audiences.

CLOSED PANEL XIX

Religious Transformations and Pluralism reflected in the Religion Class: the Romanian Case

Alina Pătru , Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

Legislative Frameworks and Students' Perspectives on Religious Education in Romania: Navigating Between Confessional Commitment and Interreligious Openness

Within the broader European landscape, Romania represents a distinctive case. Sharing its Orthodox majority and post-communist trajectory only with Bulgaria, Romania reintroduced Religious Education (RE) in schools shortly after 1989, integrating it into the regular school curriculum. Thereby, it offers a unique opportunity for examining how Orthodox confessional RE in a post-communist setting adapts within an EU framework marked by diversity and secularization. The presentation scrutinizes Romanian Orthodox Religious Education in accordance with both ministry regulations and school realities, with a particular emphasis on the engagement with religious diversity. Investigating the Romanian Ministry of Education's curricula and methodological standards, it will emphasize how and to what extent confessional religious education is designed to educate about non-Christian faiths as well. However, the dilemmas surrounding RE in Romania go beyond curriculum design, reflecting a rising tension between transmitting confessional faith and fostering openness to other religions, which raises questions about how effectively the current educational framework can accommodate diverse religious perspectives and promote interfaith dialogue. Therefore, this inquiry is situated within the context of increased questioning of the traditional confessional model of RE in Romania, driven by broader societal changes such as globalization, religious pluralism, and evolving democratic educational reforms. Further, the paper will examine Romanian high school students' perspectives on the aims of RE and their openness to learning about other religions. Drawing on data from an online survey, it explores whether students' perspectives reflect the social tension between strengthening faith and openness to other religions, whether they want more education about religious diversity or consider that the role of RE is to foster their own faith. The inquiry seeks to advance understanding of RE in post-communist, predominantly Orthodox contexts; to decipher how social and cultural changes influence the perception of RE and the expectations from it; to ask to what extent the Romanian transformations mirror changes that already occurred in other European contexts; and to what extent they represent particularities of a specific context. The findings will be relevant not only for understanding a contextual situation but will also generally offer insights for societies negotiating the tensions between religious heritage and cultural diversity.

Vlad Anton Ștefănoaia , Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu | University of Erfurt

Confessional Identity, Religious Pluralism, and the Classroom: Perspectives and Approaches of Religious Education Teachers in Romania

This paper analyzes the strategies employed by Religious Education teachers in Romania to navigate the intersection between confessional identity and religious pluralism in the classroom. Religious Education (RE) within Romania's public educational system has prompted several debates since its reintegration into the curriculum following the fall of communism in 1989. Discussions over RE assessed whether the curriculum should maintain a confessional focus or incorporate contents pertaining to religions other than Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Nonetheless, in these debates, the classroom viewpoints seem to remain underrepresented. This study seeks to investigate the perspectives of a pivotal agent in structuring the curriculum in practice: the RE teacher. Drawing on qualitative data collected via semi-structured interviews, the findings highlight the critical importance of emphasizing and maintaining the confessional identity of both students and the RE in the face of religious pluralism. Addressing religious plurality becomes essential and unavoidable, determined by students' mobility through various social spaces and exposure to various sources of information. Using the framework of symbolic boundary theory, the study explores how religious education teachers negotiate religious pluralism and confessional identity in the RE classroom. The analysis highlights the presence of various approaches, raising concerns regarding students' readiness to engage with content on other religions, their curiosity and interest, and

addressing religious pluralism while preserving (and enhancing) the Orthodox confessional identity. The data reveals a spectrum of strategies articulated by RE teachers, ranging from complete rejection and conditional acceptance to emphasizing the imperative of comprehending the religious other for a peaceful coexistence.

Constantin Ioan Necula , Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

Bridging Beliefs: A Comparative Pedagogical Model for Teaching the History of Religions in a Multi-Religious Classroom (Prep to 9th Grade)

In contemporary educational environments characterized by diverse family backgrounds, teaching religion requires a highly inclusive pedagogical framework. This paper presents a methodology developed through practical experience: teaching the History and Philosophy of Religions at a private school, spanning from preparatory class to the 9th grade. The primary challenge addressed is how to teach foundational Christian concepts within a multi-religious student body without alienating students of other faiths or secular backgrounds. By shifting the focus from confessional instruction to a comparative and philosophical approach, the curriculum was designed to explore religious narratives as shared human inquiries rather than exclusive dogmas. The methodology adapts to students' cognitive development: emphasizing universal moral values through comparative storytelling in early education, exploring the historical intersections of major world religions in middle school, and engaging in complex ethical and philosophical debates during the transition to high school. This paper will outline practical strategies for educators, demonstrating that a carefully structured comparative approach not only prevents exclusion but actively fosters critical thinking, cultural empathy, and a nuanced understanding of global belief systems.

CLOSED PANEL XX

Religion, Myth, and Occultism in Nazi Germany

Ansgar Martins, University of Bern
Martin Buber's Mythology of National Socialism

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber did not leave Germany until 1938. Until the very end, he sought to advocate within Germany for the continued presence of Jewish life and for a dialogical philosophy grounded in relationality. This lecture examines how Buber religiously interpreted and classified the National Socialist movement he opposed. Buber's response reveals an idiosyncratic mythology in which he mobilizes figures such as "the" Gnosis, the Jewish arch-heretic Shabtai Zevi, and the "egoistic" philosopher Max Stirner. In Buber's framework, the "true" relation to God is egalitarian and dialogical. The problem of "Gnosis," by contrast, lies in its tendency toward self-redemption—an emancipatory impulse that severs itself from God and seeks autonomy in isolation. While Buber does not offer a systematic or convincing theory of National Socialism, he constructs a panorama of dark religious figures and spiritual counterforces. What emerges is not a sociological analysis of fascism, but an anti-völkisch mythology of nationalism: a religiously inflected counter-narrative that seeks to unmask spiritual problems underlying modern politics, while at the same time reflecting key elements of *völkisch* religiosity.

Moritz Maurer, University of Vienna
Racial Religion or Third Confession? New Insights into the Nordische Glaubensgemeinschaft

Völkisch religion in Germany has been a topic of interest for scholars far beyond the field of religious studies for many decades. The influence of these groups on National Socialism and the wider field of German politics and culture remains a subject of debate. Still, the lack of sources often complicates work on these elusive movements. The talk will examine one of these groups: Wilhelm Kusserow's Nordische Glaubensgemeinschaft ("Nordic Faith Community"), the successor organisation of which was only outlawed by the German federal government in 2024. The *Nordische Glaubensgemeinschaft* had been active since the 1920s and was involved, among other things, in the discussions leading up to the founding of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer's German Faith Movement in the early years of National Socialism. Using a newly discovered collection of sources from one of its regional branches dating to the 1930s and 1940s, the talk will attempt to paint a much clearer picture of this group than has been possible to date.

Dirk Schuster, University of Vienna
Russian Orthodox Churches in the Third Reich and in the Austrian Fascist Corporative State—a Comparison

In 1926, the German Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad was officially established. Ten years later, the National Socialists granted it the official status of a public corporation in the Third Reich. The National Socialists pursued their own goals with the recognition of the church, using it for propaganda against the Soviet Union. However, it must be noted that little is known about the role of this church in the Third Reich. Based on files from the Reich Ministry for Church Affairs and the Reich Security Main Office, the history of this Orthodox Church in the Third Reich is reconstructed for the first time from the perspective of the National Socialist state. The same can be said about the state of research on Austria during the period of the fascist Corporative state 1934–1938. On the one hand, this fascist state was decidedly anti-communist, but on the other hand, it was also anti-National Socialist. For the period between 1934 and 1938, nothing is known about the assessment of state authorities with regard to the Russian Orthodox Church in Austria. The analysis of the assessment by state authorities in the Third Reich and in the fascist Corporative State contributes to the reappraisal of religious history in both countries. At the same time, the comparison shows the significance attributed to Russian Orthodoxy, as both state systems presented themselves as openly anti-communist and stylised Russia as the absolute enemy in both systems.

Maggie Kastlund , University of Gothenburg

"Protective Prisoner No. 303": The Persecution of Occultism in Nazi Germany

The aim of this paper is to examine how occultists active in the Third Reich (1933–1945) navigated the Nazi state's political persecution of occultism, examining archival materials including persecuted individuals' narrations of wartime persecution. Throughout its existence, the Nazi state surveilled perceived enemies of the state, including religious groups, among which occult groups are of particular interest to this paper. The surveillance included monitoring of publications and assemblies, alongside surveillance of telephone calls and mail. The consequences faced by occultists understood as hostile to the state, belonging to what was jointly described as "Masonic-like organizations" (*freimaurerähnliche Organisationen*), entailed interrogations, physical assault, and confiscation of materials, along with arrest and incarceration in prisons or concentration camps, all executed by the Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei, established in 1933). Through an examination of archival materials such as formal documents, correspondences, and personal accounts recounting house searches and confinement in prisons and concentration camps, the paper departs from central figures of twentieth century German-speaking occultism. Ultimately, the paper seeks to understand how occultists responded to persecution, and how they addressed their experiences in the postwar period.

CLOSED PANEL XXI
Pedagogy, Technique, and Transmission in Esoteric Currents:
An Esotericism and Didactics (EsoDid) Network Panel

Olivia Cejvan, Malmö University.

Learning to Taste a God: Apprenticeship and the Education of Attention in Swedish Initiatory Wicca

How is religious perception taught? This paper approaches that question through apprentice ethnography in Court of Aine, a Swedish Wiccan coven, where I have trained as an initiate since 2025 alongside a longitudinal interview project begun in 2018. Because the object of study is learning itself, the method is doubled: I submit to being taught while documenting how the teaching works. Wiccan covens transmit a curriculum that is transparent in outline and opaque in substance. Novices are shown the year's structure at the outset, yet what a rite means remains unavailable until it has been undergone — often several times. Drawing on Birgit Meyer's "sensational forms" and Tim Ingold's "education of attention," I argue that what is withheld in such traditions is not information but perceptual readiness. Concealment operates as didactic pacing: by delaying interpretive closure, the coven protects the time in which perception matures. The paper traces this pedagogy across the single rite, the annual cycle, and the post-ritual meal where experience is compared and calibrated. Divine presence, I show, is learned through ordinary socially trained senses: bread that sticks to the palate, a shift in an officiant's voice, soil handled at a graveside. Where recent scholarship on religious learning foregrounds the cultivation of inner senses, this material shows presence arriving through the outer ones. Failure proves instructive. When clay refuses to crack on schedule, the form becomes visible and the circle reassesses it — sharpening the diagnostic capacity on which future recognition depends.

Tim Rudbøg, University of Copenhagen

Cultivating Experience: H.P. Blavatsky's Texts as Esoteric Didactics

This paper examines the pedagogical dimensions of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's writings, focusing on *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), *Esoteric Instructions* (1889–1890), and *The Nightmare Tales* (1892). Rather than treating these works solely as repositories of occult doctrine, the paper approaches them as deliberately constructed didactic texts designed to cultivate specific modes of knowing and being in the reader. For Blavatsky, true knowledge was frequently framed in terms of initiation and inner transformation, extending beyond empirical observation and rational cognition. Knowledge was understood as emerging from spiritual discipline, altered states of consciousness, and the integration of intellectual, moral, and imaginative faculties. This raises a central problem: how can such non-discursive, experiential forms of knowledge be transmitted, or at least facilitated, through textual media? To what extent can texts function as instruments of initiation rather than as vehicles of propositional information? Drawing on pedagogical theory and lived philosophy approaches, this paper argues that Blavatsky's writings employ a distinct form of esoteric didactics. These didactics are characterized by strategies such as intentional obscurity, contradiction, and fragmentation; the use of secrecy and selective disclosure; and the mobilization of correspondence thinking, symbolism, imagination, and narrative. Rather than guiding readers toward immediate comprehension, these techniques function as forms of scaffolding that destabilize habitual modes of understanding and invite prolonged engagement, interpretation, and self-transformation. In this way, Blavatsky's texts can be read as pedagogical environments that seek to initiate readers into alternative epistemologies, positioning reading itself as a gradual, experiential process of esoteric learning.

Ethan Doyle White, University of Copenhagen

The Otherworldly Witches' Sabbath: Dream Journeying and Oneiric Instruction in Modern British Esotericism

Having emerged in the Western Alpine region during the early fifteenth century, the notion of the witches' sabbath provided major fodder for the development and spread of the witch trials that afflicted

early modern Europe. Subsequently, the diabolical sabbath itself has been reimagined in various ways, including by practitioners of certain new religious movements active since the 1950s. While early Wiccans understood the sabbath as a physical meeting of witches that they sought to recreate with their festive Sabbats, several other British esotericists perceived the sabbath in a wholly different manner, as an etheric space to which a practitioner could journey in a hypnagogic or dreaming state. A key figure in the development of this idea was the London occultist and artist Austin Osman Spare, who constructed his ideas in collaboration with Kenneth Grant, a writer who helped to get Spare's ideas published. Spare and Grant's beliefs would also prove a formative influence on Andrew Chumbley, the Essex magician who established the Cultus Sabbati in 1991. As envisioned by Chumbley and other self-described "traditional witches," the sabbath is a space of occult pedagogy, to which a magician can send their spirit-form and there receive instruction from both the spirits of other human occultists, whether living or deceased, and also non-human entities. This paper explores this significant reinterpretation of historical witchcraft imagery and the ways in which dream-based spiritual experiences have become an important vessel for instruction, transmission, and legitimacy within these British-derived occult currents.

CLOSED PANEL XXII

Quantitative Methods Inquires within Religion

Bogdan Vasile Ileanu, **Tudorel Andrei**, **Claudiu Herțeliu** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies) & **Adrian Pană** (Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy)

The impact of gold price on scheduling the religious and traditional events of marriages in Romanian major ethnic groups

The impact of gold price on major life events has been previously challenged in Indian culture. In this paper we search to find if gold price impacts the gap between legal and religious marriages in various Romanian communities. Our approach mixes daily data from National Institute of Statistics with convenient public available video files. Statistical methods such as Vector Autoregressive models (VAR) are employed to test our hypotheses. On brief, the results show an interesting significant lag for pure and mixed Roma marriages and no statistical impact on the other branch.

Claudiu Herțeliu, **Bogdan Vasile Ileanu** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies), **Marcel Ausloos** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies | University of Leicester) & **Giulia Rotundo** (Sapienza University of Rome)

Baby Conception and Religious Rules in Romania. Comparing Eastern Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Populations through Very Long Daily Time Series (1905-2001) Analysis

Eastern Orthodox tradition bans sexual intercourse during Nativity and Lent fasting periods. When one tests the effect of this interdiction during the 20th century, it seems that Lent is obeyed in a greater extent than the Nativity. Fertility (births and subsequently their conceptions) shows seasonality all around the world. There are geographical factors (latitude, weather, day-length), demographic, economic and socio-cultural characteristics (education, ethnicity, religion) that have been proven to affect babies' conception. Censuses (1992 and 2002) data for daily births for 97 years (35 429 points) is taken into consideration. Based on the reported birthday of each person, the estimated time of conception was computed using standard gestation duration. The population has been grouped into two categories (Eastern Orthodox and Non-Orthodox) based on religious affiliation. Data analysis was performed in a comparative manner for both groups. Religion affiliation acts as an important factor; the data analysis indicates smaller error bars on the parameters for the Eastern Orthodox group as compared to the Non-Orthodox one. The models are tested for validity using F test (ANOVA) while the regression coefficients are tested by the Student t-test. All models are statistically valid (p value less than 0.01) and all (except for rurality between 1990 and 2001 where the p value is less than 0.05) of the regression coefficients for the Eastern Orthodox group are valid to a large extent (p value less than 0.01).

Claudiu Herțeliu (Bucharest University of Economic Studies), **Loredana Manasia** (National University of Science and Technology Politehnica of Bucharest), **Marcel Ausloos** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies | University of Leicester), **Bogdan Vasile Ileanu** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies), **Victor Dragotă** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies | Babeș-Bolyai University) & **Ionel Jianu** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies)

Saints' given names and their (lack of) effect on national exams outcomes

Exhaustive data (more than 387 thousands data points) about two sessions (2003 and 2004) of Romanian Baccalaureate exams is analysed in the current manuscript. The main tested hypothesis assumes that the given name(s) of the pupils should not count in regards to the exams' outcomes. Due to the fact that the Eastern Orthodox Church's calendar contains in each day some saints to be celebrated, only a selection of about a dozen of the most popular saints' are considered for the current endeavour. Preliminary exploratory analysis about saints' given names occurrences is also performed. Contradictory results in

testing the main hypothesis of our research are found. However, pupils' gender seems to play a key role in exams' outcomes.

CLOSED PANEL XXIII

Esotericism, Science, and Knowledge Claims in the Twenty-first Century

Adas Diržys, Vytautas Magnus University

Normativity in the Study of Esotericism Reconsidered: A Knowledge-Generating Practice

In recent years, the study of esotericism has been marked by a prevalent emphasis on the role of normativity across various historical, social, and political dimensions of the field (Asprem, Strube 2021; Cheadle, Ferguson 2022; Hedenborg White, Rudbøg 2024; Grieve-Carlson 2024). While considerable attention has been devoted to specific case studies, much less has been said about the theoretical grounding of normativity itself. Although conceptual transfers from one discipline to another are common in interdisciplinary research, I argue that the study of esotericism occupies—and can further develop—a distinctive position in its use of this conceptual tool by analyzing how particular systems of knowledge are generated through the introduction of norms. In current debates on metanormativity (inquiries into what norms are and how they function), a new position has emerged that seeks to demonstrate the unavoidable connection between ethical and epistemological normativity. As new approaches to the study of esotericism invite scholars to reconsider their normative biases toward previously overlooked subjects, could it be that the study of normativity itself is not only critical but also constructive (that is, generative) in nature? Is there a genuinely "pure" theoretical position from which "counternormative" (Hanegraaff 2025) action might emerge? Moreover, does this not render the scholarly perspective increasingly akin to practitioners' engagement? In this presentation, I propose a theoretical analysis of normativity as a generative instrument of knowledge in the contemporary study of esotericism.

Aaron French, University of Copenhagen

Strategies of Legitimation: Stigmatized Knowledge in the Discourse of UAP Esotericism

This presentation explores the legitimation strategies used by researchers and experiencers in the discourse of Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAP) regarding the esoteric aspects of what American astronomer J. Allen Hynek called the "UFO Experience." The UFO topic was stigmatized due to its New Age and esoteric connections, which overlapped with conspiricism. This included the rise of so-called "UFO cults," identified by Religious Studies scholars as New Religious Movements. In the early 2000s, several Marxist theorists, including Mark Featherstone and Jodi Dean, approached the subject from the perspective of counterfactual and non-knowledge. Others relegated the issue to studies of conspiricism. Recently, however, there has been a concerted effort by scientists, academics, high-level government officials, and military personnel (primarily in the U.S., but also in other countries) to distance the field of UAP studies from this history while retaining the esoteric "high strangeness." This involves a complicated process of boundary work and strategic engagement with governments and established scientific institutions, such as the Galileo Project at Harvard and the Sol Foundation at Stanford, as well as the introduction of a new conceptual vocabulary (UAP instead of UFO, Experiencer instead of Abductee, Non-Human Intelligences instead of Extraterrestrials, etc.). The discourse now addresses broader questions reflecting scholarly debates over anthropocentrism and human/non-human relationality. This presentation reconstructs this complex process to illustrate how contemporary esoteric ideas collide with scientific discourse in pursuit of legitimacy.

Grace Conway, Independent Researcher

Inventing the Ancient Past: Two Histories of Pseudoarchaeology

This paper argues that pseudoarchaeology is best understood not simply as false archaeology, but as an epistemic formation produced through the historical entanglement of esotericism, colonialism, and scientific discourse. Rather than evaluating pseudoarchaeological narratives primarily by their factual inaccuracies, it examines how they construct and sustain authority as alternative forms of knowledge about the ancient past. The first genealogy traces nineteenth-century diffusionism through figures such as Josiah

Priest and Ignatius Donnelly, whose theories attributed monumental architecture and complex civilisation to vanished source cultures while denying historical agency to Indigenous and other non-European peoples. The second follows Theosophical writers Helena P. Blavatsky and William Scott-Elliot, alongside the clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, who transformed diffusionist speculation into a perennialist history of humanity grounded in occult revelation, “Root Race” theory, and technologically advanced lost civilisations. The paper concludes by examining Graham Hancock as a contemporary synthesis of these traditions. His work combines the colonial logic of hyperdiffusionism with the perennialist conviction that diverse cultures preserve fragments of a single primordial wisdom, while selectively appropriating the language and authority of science to challenge archaeological consensus. By tracing these intertwined genealogies, the paper argues that pseudoarchaeology is best understood as a historically constituted knowledge tradition whose authority emerges through the convergence of colonial and “esoteric” ways of imagining the ancient past.

CLOSED PANEL XXIV
The Legacy of Hermes:
Texts, Transmissions, and Transformations from Late Antiquity to Modernity

Chiara O. Tommasi , University of Pisa

The Playful Hermes: Irony and Hermetic Thought in Thomas Mann

This paper addresses the afterlife of Hermetic ideas in modern literature through the works of Thomas Mann, with particular focus on *Der Zauberberg* and Felix Krull. In the latter, special attention is given to the final section set in Lisbon, where alchemical motifs and Hermetic symbolism come to the fore, opening a space in which questions of transformation, identity, and illusion are playfully yet suggestively explored. In *Der Zauberberg*, by contrast, Hermetic themes are refracted through irony and scepticism, most notably in the figure of Settembrini. His rationalist stance is accompanied by a series of *Witze* that explicitly or implicitly target Hermetic and esoteric modes of thought, casting them as objects of Enlightenment critique while at the same time revealing a more ambivalent engagement with the boundaries between knowledge, mystification, and interpretation. Taken together, these texts illustrate how Mann reworks Hermetic *topoi* within a modern literary framework, oscillating between fascination and irony, and thereby contributing to a curious reconfiguration of the Hermetic tradition in twentieth-century culture.

Christian Bull , University of Bergen

Hermes at the Crossroads: The Authority of Ancient Egyptian Wisdom in the 5th and 6th centuries CE

This paper examines the reception and transformation of Hermetic motifs in Late Antiquity, with particular attention to Coptic literature and the Anthology of Stobaeus. It considers how Hermetic materials were excerpted, reframed, and integrated into broader intellectual and religious discourses, highlighting both continuity and adaptation in a context marked by linguistic and cultural plurality.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff , University of Amsterdam

Hermetism and Translation

This contribution places the question of translation at the centre of Hermetic studies. Building on research presented in *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination* (2022), it offers a critical reassessment of the modern reception of the so-called "spiritual" Hermetica. Through a comparative analysis of major modern translations (notably in English, French, German, and Dutch) and a re-examination of influential scholarship since Reitzenstein's *Poimandres* (1904), it identifies recurring patterns of misunderstanding and ideological distortion in the rendering of key Hermetic concepts. Particular attention is given to the work of authoritative figures such as André-Jean Festugière and Walter Scott, whose translations, despite their philological sophistication, frequently fail to capture the semantic and conceptual specificity of the original texts. To account for this paradox—wherein highly competent classicists produce what may be termed mistranslations—the paper argues for the central importance of core Hermetic vocabulary. Two semantic fields are especially crucial: first, terms relating to what is (or appears to be) real; and second, those concerning human perception and cognition of reality. The analysis suggests that Platonic-Hermetic assumptions about reality and knowledge are so fundamentally at odds with modern epistemological frameworks that even expert readers have often been unable to recognise what they were encountering. As a result, translation becomes not merely a technical exercise but a site of interpretative negotiation shaped by deeply embedded conceptual presuppositions.

Piero Latino , Salento University

The myth of Hermes Trismegistus in literature

French culture is likewise the object to explore and show the presence of Hermes Trismegistus in some authors, most of all Charles Baudelaire: addressing his readers by the words "Sur l'oreiller du mal c'est Satan Trismegiste," Baudelaire explained to the reader how the demonic principle acts and influences human beings, and likewise an Hermès inconnu is evoked in *Alchimie de la douleur*. Investigating the 'myth' of Hermes in literature is a way to highlight that literature is a key way of affirming, exploring and passing on the values, beliefs, messages and myth of a religious nature: literature becomes religion, whilst religion is expressed through literary texts.

Claudio Moreschini , University of Pisa

A Christian Reading of Hermetism: François de Foix Candale bishop of Aire

This contribution turns to Renaissance Hermeticism, focusing on the figure of Foix Candale. It investigates how Hermetic texts were appropriated within the context of the French Wars of Religion, where they were actively mobilised in the ideological struggles between Catholics and Protestants. Candale advances a distinctly Catholic interpretation of the Hermetic corpus, yet one that diverges in significant ways from the earlier Florentine tradition associated with Ficino and Italian Hermeticism more broadly. Indeed, his engagement is marked by a polemical stance towards these precedents, as he reinterprets Hermetic authority in light of contemporary confessional concerns. The paper thus highlights how Hermetic materials could serve not only as vehicles of philosophical speculation but also as instruments of religious argumentation, reshaped to meet the urgent demands of a fractured Christian landscape.

CLOSED PANEL XXV
Cultural Apocalypse and the Reordering of Mourning:
(New) Religious and Social Practices

Tehri Utriainen , University of Helsinki

The "Long Corridors of Death" as the Dark Side of Modernity

Modernity has been described as an optimistic, predominantly secular project aimed at improving both collective and individual lives through political, cultural, and technological advancements. Despite this optimistic self-image and the often successful aspiration to reduce suffering and enhance life, modernity also encompasses, and even engenders, many profound dark sides, as emphasized for example by Jeffrey Alexander. One notable downside or shadow aspect that arises from the technological advancements of modernity is what I have termed the "long corridors of death." This term refers to the prolonged suffering often experienced by those who linger in the liminal space between life and death, as well as by those nearby. This phenomenon occurs because advanced medical technologies can extend physical life beyond what was previously possible. My presentation aims to reflect on this phenomenon of suffering, drawing on the works of Alexander and Norbert Elias, in particular. I also invite panel participants to discuss potential ways to incorporate this phenomenon into qualitative empirical research.

Pasqualina Eckerström , University of Helsinki & Human Geography | University of Turku

Digital Rituals of Mourning: How Social Media Frames Death and Justice in the Iranian Protests

In recent years, social media has become a key space for negotiating the meanings of death, particularly in politically charged contexts. This paper examines social media comments left under photographs from the recent protests in Iran, some of which depict sensitive content, such as the bodies of protesters killed during demonstrations. These images, widely shared on social media, evoke a complex range of responses that blend political outrage with religious and cultural interpretations of death. The paper analyses how different religious, moral, and political frameworks shape the ways in which these deaths are discussed in online spaces, focusing on themes of dignity, martyrdom, and the value of the deceased. By exploring the comments, this study highlights how religious and cultural narratives shape public understandings of mortality in the context of political violence. It examines how concepts such as martyrdom, sacrifice, and divine justice are used to frame these deaths, and how such frameworks may vary across different social and religious backgrounds. The paper also addresses how these commentaries reflect broader social inequalities, questioning which lives are valorised and mourned in the digital sphere, and which are marginalised. In doing so, the paper investigates social media as a modern platform for collective mourning and commemoration, exploring how the digital space functions as a site for ritual memory and public visibility. It concludes by examining the role of religious and cultural normativity in shaping online discourse around death, political violence, and the broader struggle for recognition and justice.

Andrea Di Lenardo , Ca' Foscari University of Venice, University of Udine | University of Trieste

Law, Mourning, and Apocalypse in the "Letter of James"

For Paul of Tarsus, as is well known, the death of Christ constitutes a reorganization of the symbolic, normative, and moral order, in which the Law of Moses is surpassed and believers are no longer saved by adherence to the Law. Salvation, in fact, now comes from the grace bestowed by Jesus, who died and rose for us, and whose second coming at the end of time Paul awaits (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 5:1–11). But in the Letter of James, included in the New Testament, what is the relationship among these elements—Law, the soteriological interpretation of Jesus' death, and apocalyptic expectation? It is unclear whether this source should be attributed to James, leader of the Church in Jerusalem after the death of his brother Jesus, or to a community that identified with him. This community anticipated an imminent cosmic upheaval at the end of time. Such an upheaval also entailed a social reversal, in which the rich and arrogant would be overthrown (Jas. 1:10–11; 4:6; 5:1–6), while the poor and humble would be chosen for the Kingdom (Jas. 1:9;

2:5; 4:6). In this upheaval, however, the Law of Moses remains an indispensable and constant guide for the Jewish people, through which they are saved and brought to happiness (Jas. 1:4, 25; 4:11). Indeed, James addresses only the Jewish people (Jas. 1:1). Those who remain faithful to righteousness, resisting temptation from the devil (Jas. 4:7), will be saved (Jas. 1:13–15)—a theme, like others in the Letter, that resonates with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Regarding the conception of sin, the purification of the body, specifically of the hands (Jas. 4:8), transcends the physical dimension to become a metaphor for spiritual cleansing from sins, in accordance with a series of theoretical elaborations produced in Second Temple Judaism, particularly in the first century. So another theme connected to the Law concerns the regulations of purity (Jas. 1:21, 27). This element, too, is present at Qumran and stands in opposition to Paul's doctrine of the general supersession of the Law, and of purity regulations in particular. The dialectical relationship with Paul becomes evident in the affirmation of the primacy of works (of the Law) over faith, which is dead without works (Jas. 2:14–26). As an example, James cites Abraham (Jas. 2:21–23), whereas Paul uses Abraham to assert the exact opposite—the primacy of faith over works of the Law and the supersession of the Law (e.g., Rom. 3:28). James appears to address a specific audience (Jas. 2:20; 4:11) and warns against false teachers (Jas. 3:1). But what role does the death of Jesus play within the theology of the Letter of James? How is the mourning for their teacher reinterpreted? First, in the Letter, Jesus is Messiah/Christ and Lord (Jas. 1:1; 2:1). James writes that the Father generated humans through the word of truth (Jas. 1:18). Unlike the Johannine prologue, however, it is not affirmed that the Word is Jesus; rather, it is identified with the "law of liberty" (Jas. 1:25; cf. 2:12). The concept of liberty appears in opposition to the Pauline notion: it does not entail liberation from the Law, because, on the contrary, the Law itself is a law of liberty (Jas. 1:25). Certain verses closely echo the sayings of Jesus (often derived from the Q source, the earliest document underlying the Gospels), presented as teachings but never as *ipsissima verba*, suggesting that the content of the good news preached by Jesus remained paramount over the cult of his personality—an indication, moreover, of the antiquity of the letter. Thus, at least in this Letter, there is no developed reflection on the mourning for Jesus, except from a political perspective, nor is his resurrection mentioned. In fact, the only possible reference to the death of James' brother Jesus appears amid an apocalyptic and political invective against the rich, who have withheld wages from field laborers (Jas. 5:4). The rich will weep and wail over the calamities that befall them (Jas. 5:1), over the slaughter that will come upon them (Jas. 5:5; cf. Isa. 5:9), and their wealth will be consumed (Jas. 5:2–3). In this context, James recalls that the rich "condemned and killed the righteous one; and he doth not resist you" (Jas. 5:6). Death, Law, and apocalypse are thus interconnected as key themes, but in a configuration different and even opposed to the well-known Pauline doctrine of grace, making the Letter of James an extraordinary document that illuminates an early "Jewish-Christian" community of which, unfortunately, very little has survived.

CLOSED PANEL XXVI

Notes to Religion The Interdisciplinary Significance of Occasional Recordings,
with Japanese Pure Land Buddhism as an Example

Markus Rüsçh , University of Münster

Structuring the Almost Unstructured Genre of Diary: Perspectives on Material Religion

This paper will examine the most comprehensive example in the history of Shin Buddhism, namely the *Diary from the Tenbun Period* (*Tenbun Nikki* 天文日記). Written by the tenth abbot, Shōnyo 証如 (1516–1554), during the 'Warring States Period' in Japanese history, the diary offers valuable insights. The main temple of the school, Honganji, which Shōnyo administered, was directly involved in the wartime conflicts that culminated in the Ishiyama War between the Shin Buddhist community and Oda Nobunaga, ending in defeat for Honganji in 1580. However, during Shōnyo's leadership, the temple sought to strengthen ties with various segments of society, including the court, warriors, and religious leaders, resulting in greater political recognition. The *Diary from the Tenbun Period* comprises notes from 1536 to 1554, with Shōnyo making multiple entries each day. Despite its significance, the *Diary from the Tenbun Period* remains largely unanalysed, as do many diaries in the history of Japanese Buddhism. This paper aims to explore Shōnyo's diary with a focus on the material aspects of religious practice, including conducted rituals, architectural developments such as the evolution of temple halls, and also the role of food in daily religious life and its associated politics. A key question will be what role material aspects of religion played in establishing a resilient centre for religious practice.

Yoshiya Nishimura , Ryukoku University

"Verbatim records" (kikigaki) in Shin Buddhist Literature

This paper will examine the meaning of those texts in medieval Shin Buddhist literature and seeks to clarify their significance. In Japan, the term *kikigaki* originally referred to records of the lectures given by a master written down by their followers. However, its meaning changed over time, and it was eventually used for texts as certificates of Dharma transmission and simple memoranda. In Shin Buddhism, various types of *kikigaki* have also been identified; however, most are now regarded as heterodox writings and are not considered canonical texts. Therefore, there are few previous studies on *kikigaki* in Shin Buddhist studies today. Although En'ya (2023) classifies *kikigaki* as one form of doctrinal writing in medieval Shin Buddhism, it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of extant *kikigaki*. Furthermore, *kikigaki* cannot be defined in a single, unified way. For example, the *Recorded Dialogues on the Afterlife* (*Gose Monogatari Kikigaki* 後世物語聞書), an early 13th-century text, is regarded as a canonical text in Shin Buddhism, which Shinran repeatedly recommended his followers to read and study. In addition, Shin Buddhism regards 'hearing' (*mon* 聞) as the essential factor of faith. Thus, *kikigaki* (literally 'hearing and writing') could also have had a unique meaning at that time. This study examines *kikigaki* to reconsider its multi-layered roles, and I argue that this literature served as an important type of text for clarifying the faith and thought of Shin Buddhism in medieval Japan.

Yōko Itō , University of Hamburg

The Unintended Archive: Eshinni's Letters as a Primary Source for Female Religious Agency

This paper will examine *Eshinni shōsoku* 恵信尼消息, ten letters written by lay nun Eshinni (恵信尼, 1182–1268?), the wife of Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262), the founder of Shin Buddhism, to their youngest daughter Kakushinni 覚信尼 (1224–1283) between 1256 and 1268. Discovered in 1921 in the Honganji 本願寺 treasury in Kyoto, these letters are the only primary source authored by a person in direct contact with Shinran, and played a decisive role in establishing his historical existence. Despite their significance, Eshinni herself has rarely been the subject of independent scholarly inquiry. Drawing on a historical-philological analysis and following Dobbins (*Letters of the Nun Eshinni*, 2004) and Imai (2013), this paper

will explore two key aspects. First, the letters serve as evidence of the social status, property rights, and religious agency of a woman from the medieval Japanese aristocracy. Two of the letters function as legal transfer documents (*yuzurijō* 譲状), demonstrating that women of Eshinni's social standing held independent property rights that were neither transferred to nor shared with their husbands upon marriage. Second, the letters represent the earliest surviving confession of Pure Land faith authored by a woman within the Shin Buddhist tradition. Eshinni's accounts of her dream visions and her conception of the Pure Land as a place where 'nothing lies in darkness' offer a rare window into the lived religious experience of a medieval Japanese woman: a wife, mother, landowner, and Shin Buddhist adherent.

CLOSED PANEL XXVII
Twenty Years in the Study of Esotericism 360 °

Marco Pasi, École Pratique des Hautes Études – PSL

The Study of Esotericism in the Past Twenty Years: Two Major Shifts

The academic study of esotericism has grown considerably since its emergence in the mid-1990s and especially in the past two decades, establishing institutional spaces, professional organizations, and a vibrant global scholarly community. Yet beneath this apparent success, the field is showing some signs of a crisis rooted in two significant developments. The first is a push toward placing esotericism in the framework of global history. This trend has problematised the "Western" label that has been long, and largely still is, applied to the name of the field. The second is a growing emphasis on practices and lived experiences of contemporary practitioners, at the expense of the historically and textually grounded research that defined the field's early identity. Both trends converge most visibly in large-scale research initiatives that combine global and practice-oriented perspectives. While neither development is inherently problematic, and useful insight can be gleaned from both, together they raise fundamental questions about the field's identity. When esotericism is stretched to encompass transcultural and global phenomena, and when the perspective for conceptualising it shifts from history to the social sciences, its object of study risks dissolving into categories already covered by the study of religion.

Henrik Bogdan, University of Gothenburg, **Manon Hedenborg White**, Malmö University

Twenty Years in the Study of (Western) Esotericism: A Scoping Review

Over the past twenty years, the academic study of (Western) esotericism has developed from a relatively marginal and often contested subfield into an established and increasingly diversified area of research. This co-authored paper presents and reflects on a scoping review designed to map this development and to assess the usefulness of scoping reviews as a method for field-level analysis within the humanities. The paper has two main aims. First, we discuss how the scoping review was conducted, including questions of database selection, search strategies, inclusion criteria, and the analytical affordances and limitations of this method. The review is based on systematic searches in the databases Scopus, Web of Science, and the ATLA Religion Database. Second, we present and discuss the main findings of the review, focusing on patterns in empirical focus (geographical distribution and historical scope), methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and publication venues. By combining methodological reflection with an analysis of key results, the paper highlights how research on (Western) esotericism has evolved over the past two decades. In doing so, it demonstrates how scoping reviews can contribute to a more reflexive and cumulative understanding of the field's development, internal dynamics, and future research priorities.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, University of Amsterdam

Esotericism in a Changing World between 2016 and the Present

At the time of the first EASR session on esotericism in 2006, the field was still largely dominated by the perspectives of the French scholar Antoine Faivre. About ten years later, in 2016, with the development of a new center of teaching and research at the University of Amsterdam, many scholars in the field had come to adopt or take for granted a new research paradigm focused on historiography and captured by the term "rejected knowledge." But this dominance was about to be challenged in turn. The hyper-marketization of university management in Europe after the 2008-9 financial crisis together with a process of extreme political polarization in the wake of the rise of social media and Donald Trump's first election victory in 2016 resulted in profound transformations of the academy itself and academic mentalities more in particular. These developments had a heavy impact on how "esotericism" came to be perceived by new scholarly generations, resulting in severe tensions and controversies around politically sensitive issues. Today it often seems as though critical dialogue has become virtually impossible because different segments of the academic field disagree about even the most basic principles of method and

theory or responsible ethical conduct. In this paper I will analyze these recent developments from a critical historical perspective while exploring possibilities for positive change in view of the upcoming decade.

Francesco Piraino, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Beyond the 'Esoteric-Mystical Nebula': Reclaiming a Sociological Approach to the "Longue Durée"

The study of Western esotericism has long been dominated by the history of ideas, primarily through intellectual (Faivre, Pasi, Sedgwick), historiographic (Hanegraaff), and discursive (von Stuckrad) frameworks. While more recent ethnographic (Luhrmann, Magliocco, Crockford), semiotic (Engler, Roukema), and material (Forshaw, Otto) methodologies have emerged, sociology's contribution remains underdeveloped. Despite a foundational lineage tracing back to Georg Simmel's 1906 work on secrecy, sociological production on esotericism has remained scattered, never achieving the disciplinary weight seen in history or religious studies. This paper suggests that a primary obstacle is sociological ahistoricism, which over-emphasizes the rupture between "traditional" and "modern" phenomena. By treating contemporary esoteric practices as mere symptoms of late-modernity, sociologists frequently decouple them from their *longue durée*, often reducing subjects to the commodification and banalization of religion. Furthermore, while historians are frequently preoccupied with boundary-work and definitions, sociologists have tended toward a terminological laxity. By using categories such as "spirituality," "New Age," and "mysticism" interchangeably, sociological frameworks—such as the "cultic milieu" (Campbell) or "esoteric-mystical nebula" (Champion)—risk a flattening of heterogeneous phenomena, obscuring the specific structural and initiatory dimensions of the esoteric. Despite these limits, sociology offers a vital empirical and qualitative contribution to the field. This paper first performs a *pars destruens* by questioning the limits of the sociology of esotericism—specifically its ahistoricism and reductionism. It then proposes a *pars construens* focused on concrete discourses (Moberg), describing how social, ritual, and political dimensions intersect with and incarnate esoteric ideas.

Mark Sedgwick, Aarhus University

Islam and the Study of Esotericism

One significant development in the Study of Esotericism in recent decades has been the growing realization that much of so-called Western Esotericism is closely connected to Islam. In the earlier periods, there is a corpus of esoteric texts written in Latin and another corpus written in Arabic, but both corpora share a common heritage in the late antique world. Both are confronting similar issues as their immediate theological environments have much in common. There was also exchange, especially with the translation of crucial texts from Arabic to Latin: the *Secretum Secretorum* started as the *Sirr al-Asrār*, and the *Picatrix* as the *Ghāyat al-Hakīm*. The very word *alchemy* comes from the Arabic *al-kīmīā*. In the modern period, Western esotericists have often looked to Islam, most importantly in the case of René Guénon, whose understanding of esotericism has proved widely influential, and was derived in part from Sufi conceptions. The European Network for the Study of Islam and Esotericism (ENSIE) is one product of this realization, and is now in its tenth year. It has had some success in closing the gap between the study of Western Esotericism and of Islam, but more remains to be done. A similar situation exists in the study of mysticism, where things have actually gone backwards. During the 18th and 19th centuries the comparative study of mysticism in Islam, in the late antique, and in Christianity advanced considerably, only to come to a halt during the twentieth century when such approaches came to be condemned as "Orientalist," and a new consensus emerged that mysticism in Islam was purely and authentically Islamic, and further investigation was positively undesirable. Much needs now to be done to reverse this consensus.

Chiara O. Tommasi, University of Pisa

The Study of Esotericism in Italy: Challenges and Developments

In recent years, the academic study of esotericism has moved from the margins of Italian higher education towards increasing institutional recognition. Yet esotericism as an object of scholarly inquiry has never

been wholly absent from the Italian academy. Rather, owing to the strongly connoted and often polemical nature of the term esotericism, such studies were historically cultivated under different disciplinary "umbrellas," most notably philosophy, intellectual history, and the history of religions. Thinkers, symbols and currents commonly associated with Western esoteric traditions were therefore examined indirectly, embedded within broader investigations of Gnosticism, Renaissance thought, and psychology. Over the past two decades, however, a gradual consolidation of methodological approaches within religious studies and cultural history has fostered a more explicit and self-conscious engagement with esotericism as a distinct field of research. This process has contributed to its progressive legitimisation within academic discourse, as evidenced by the volume dedicated to the subject in the *Annali d'Italia*, edited by Gian Mario Cazzaniga (Turin: Einaudi, 2010). After reconstructing this cultural framework, I shall discuss the premises that led to the establishment, at the University of Pisa, of a postgraduate Master's programme dedicated to Religions, Esotericism and New Spiritualities, which exemplifies this transition from implicit presence to formal institutionalisation. I shall also offer an initial assessment of its first edition, since directing this programme has allowed me to bring into sharper focus the longstanding dialectic between enthusiasts and academics. Rather than constituting a simple opposition, this tension has stimulated reflection on epistemological boundaries, encouraging a field that is both critically rigorous and attentive to lived spiritual phenomena. In this sense, the Italian case may help to illustrate a broader negotiation between cultural vitality and scholarly discipline in the contemporary humanities.

CLOSED PANEL XXVIII

**Are there limits to religious freedom when it comes to national security interests:
international norms and local cases**

Liudmyla Fylypovych (National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine), **Milda Ališauskienė** (Vytautas Magnus University), **Vita Tytarenko**, **Yaroslav Yuvsechko** (Khmelnytskyi National University), **Oleksandr Brodetskyi & Iryna Horokholinska** (Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University)

Since 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, international law has developed toward expanding the rights and freedoms of individuals and communities in the religious sphere. Over time, the scope of religious freedom has broadened and deepened through clarifications, additions, and interpretations. At the same time, the range of permissible restrictions has narrowed. International norms have consistently specified when, under what conditions, and to what extent limitations may be applied. Thus, international law has largely functioned as a permissive rather than restrictive system, reflecting the democratic understanding of law as a framework that guarantees rights and freedoms while limiting them only in exceptional cases. Nevertheless, several key international documents define circumstances under which religious freedom may be restricted. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966, Article 18(3)) allows limitations prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health, morals, or the rights of others. Similarly, the European Convention on Human Rights (1950, Article 9) permits restrictions that are lawful and necessary in a democratic society for public safety, order, health, morals, or the protection of others' rights. The OSCE Copenhagen Document (1990) also affirms that any restrictions must comply with international human rights standards. These frameworks emerged from historical experiences of persecution based on religion or belief and served as safeguards against totalitarianism. However, in recent decades, growing radicalization in social and political life has prompted concerns that unrestricted freedom of conscience and religion may pose risks to democratic stability. As a result, discussions have intensified regarding the need for reasonable limitations in the religious sphere, accompanied by concrete policy decisions restricting certain organizations. Examples of such measures include France's policy against "cults" under the About-Picard Law (2001), aimed at groups considered harmful to human rights and freedoms; Germany's ban in 2021 on Ansaar International for financing extremism, as well as earlier restrictions on networks linked to Hizb ut-Tahrir; and Ukraine's 2022–2023 initiatives to limit religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation, particularly those connected to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). Germany has also maintained long-standing surveillance of the Church of Scientology due to concerns about its practices. In the United Kingdom, multiple Islamist organizations have been banned under terrorism legislation, while in Belgium the court in Antwerp designated Sharia4Belgium a terrorist organization in 2015. In 2025, Sweden implemented measures against a Russian Orthodox parish in Västerås, including withdrawal of funding and steps toward expropriation. In response to growing tensions between security and religious freedom, the OSCE issued the 2019 policy document *Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: Policy Guidance*. This document emphasizes that freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right and should not automatically be subordinated to security concerns. Instead, security and religious freedom should be understood as complementary rather than conflicting values. It also notes that excessive restrictions may weaken rather than strengthen security. At the same time, the document acknowledges that limitations may be necessary in exceptional cases. Such measures must respect human dignity and human rights, be prescribed by law, and account for their impact on vulnerable groups. Importantly, restrictions should target specific unlawful actions rather than beliefs themselves, avoid collective punishment of religious communities, and be applied only as a last resort. However, the Ukrainian experience highlights the limitations of these principles under conditions of war. A framework designed for peacetime has proven insufficient in the context of military aggression, occupation, and other extraordinary circumstances. This raises fundamental questions about whether existing international standards adequately address situations where national survival is at stake. Ukraine's case suggests the need to reconsider the relationship between religious freedom and national security and to

develop new approaches for balancing these priorities. In extreme conditions, certain forms of religious activity may become entangled with geopolitical influence, disinformation, or security threats, challenging the assumption that religious freedom can remain entirely insulated from broader societal risks. At the same time, similar concerns are increasingly evident in Europe. There is growing recognition that unrestricted religious freedom may, in some contexts, create tensions with societal cohesion and cultural identity. This shift is reflected, for example, in the European Parliament's 2026 resolution on human rights and democracy, which for the first time explicitly acknowledged the concept of "Christianophobia" and condemned the global persecution of Christians. According this background, Ukraine may offer a unique perspective for rethinking the balance between individual rights and collective security. Its ongoing experience of war forces the development of practical solutions that attempt to preserve democratic principles while addressing existential threats. Such a model could contribute to broader European and international debates. Ukraine has the opportunity to propose a new model to Europe, one that is being systematically developed under wartime conditions and is relevant as a viable approach to balancing human rights and national security. This panel aims to explore several key questions. First, is it legitimate to limit individual, including religious, rights in the interest of society as a whole, particularly when the survival of the state is at risk? Second, can the universal right to freedom of religion or belief be adapted to specific security contexts, especially when norms developed in peacetime prove ineffective in wartime conditions? Third, should international standards become more flexible and responsive to changing circumstances, reflecting evolving societal demands? Ultimately, the discussion raises a broader issue: whether the time has come to develop new international approaches to defining the limits of religious freedom. Ukraine's experience, shaped by the need to balance individual rights with collective challenges, may provide important insights for this process.

CLOSED PANEL XXIX
"I Have Chosen My Religion":
Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Issues of Religious Conversion

Samir Abdelli, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales | Centre d'études turques, ottomanes, balkaniques et centrasiatiques

Becoming a Muslim While Remaining a Christian? Reflections on the Conversion of Eva Meyerovitch (1909–1999)

If conversion is commonly understood as a change or movement it does not necessarily entail a complete rupture with pre-existing identities, nor does it occur in isolation from a given social environment. Although conversion narratives often emphasize a form of personal rebirth, they also reveal a space of negotiation in which conversion may *work with*, rather than break from, prior social and religious trajectories. In this perspective, does religious "entry" necessarily imply religious "exit"? Drawing on press sources as well as private and institutional archives, this paper examines religious conversion from an intellectual and social-historical perspective through the case of Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, a French woman of letters from a dominant social background (bourgeois, educated, and Catholic). Having converted from Catholicism to Islam in late-1950s Paris, she claimed to be fully Muslim while maintaining that she "did not renounce" her Christianity. If her mentor, the renowned orientalist Louis Massignon, has been described as a "Catholic Muslim," can a similar designation be applied to his former student? Situated at the crossroads of Christian Orientalist milieus and Muslim intellectual circles, this paper explores the extent to which collective experiences and processes of (inter)religious socialisation accompany and shape conversion, while also revealing underlying social structures. By comparing conversion narratives with the social history of converts, the paper aims to test the hypothesis that pre-existing identities continue to play a predominant role after conversion. The relative autonomy of individual religious trajectories is examined through an analysis of personal narratives and forms of public self-presentation.

Marie Antunes Serra, University of Strasbourg | Institut Thématique Interdisciplinaire - Centre de Recherche et d'Expérimentation sur l'Acte Artistique

Religious Conversion in Music: The Examples of Arvo Pärt and John Tavener

Since the late 1960s, we notice a recurring phenomenon in musical creation: the coincidence of religious conversion and "musical conversion". Indeed, among several European composers, religious conversion is often followed or accompanied by an abundance of religious works and by an "aesthetic turn" expressed through "reduction" of musical elements. This situation is particularly exemplified by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (*1935) and the English composer John Tavener (1944–2013). Despite coming from completely different geopolitical backgrounds — the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic for Pärt and London for Tavener — they both freely converted to Orthodox Christianity in the 1970s. Their interviews emphasise the significance of monastic communities (Pühtitsa Convent for Pärt, the Monastery of the Assumption, Yorkshire, for Tavener) and influential figures of Orthodoxy, such as Antoine Bloom, in their conversion process. Moreover, religious conversion is materialized in the creative process. Indeed, many drafts in the Arvo Pärt Centre's archives show "musical rituals" such as setting psalms to music daily. Furthermore, many of Pärt's works are only based on biblical or liturgical texts and deal with the theme of repentance, which is often associated with conversion. In Tavener's case, his religious conversion is also followed by rejections from members of the Orthodox Church who criticise his lack of faithfulness to Orthodox liturgical tradition. As Pärt's and Tavener's works are mostly performed in secular spaces and diffused through various medias, we will also consider the direct effect of the materialization of these conversions on their reception in a global context.

Kerem Gökem Arslan, University of Strasbourg | Droit, Religion, Entreprise et Société

Exiting Islam: Conversion to New Religiosities as a Process of Negotiation

Conversion is a frequent process within new religious movements, particularly among neo-pagan groups, where it tends to unfold as a gradual transition rather than a single transformative event. This paper examines the place and meanings of conversion in emerging forms of religiosity in contemporary Turkey, focusing on individuals who turn to neo-pagan practices. Drawing on ethnographic research, it explores the motivations behind distancing oneself from Islam and the challenges encountered when engaging with alternative spiritualities. In a context where normative Islam remains deeply embedded not only in religious life but also in social and cultural practices, these movements develop through continuous negotiation with popular Islam. They often incorporate and reinterpret folklorized practices shaped by Islamic influence, producing hybrid forms of religiosity that complicate the notion of conversion as a clear rupture. The analysis is structured around: (1) the pre-conversion stage, often marked by personal tensions and crises, where individuals question the possibility of sustaining hybrid "Islamopagan" practices; (2) the moment of conversion, in which initiation rituals centered on nature and unity play a pivotal role, raising the question of whether these experiences signify rupture or convergence; (3) the post-conversion phase examines the persistence, reinterpretation, or abandonment of Islamic practices that remain socially anchored. For instance, circumcision – sometimes reinterpreted as bodily violence – may still be maintained due to social and familial pressures. By highlighting these dynamics, the paper argues that conversion should be understood as a complex process of negotiation, involving both transformation and continuity across religious, social, and cultural domains.

Tara-Lou Iftene, Écoles des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales | Centre d'études en sciences sociales du religieux

Maisons de conversions, maisons de correction (From Conversion to Correction): The Refuges in France, 17th–18th Centuries

In 17th-century France, as in other European countries, institutions dedicated to the conversion of so-called 'debauched' women proliferated. Within the post-Tridentine context of spiritual renewal, devout Catholics intensified their efforts to reform the morals of various social groups—Protestants, the poor, and prostitutes, for whom the *Refuges* were established. These establishments were often placed under the patronage of Mary Magdalene, the archetypal figure of the repentant sinner. Initially conceived as asylums for prostitutes seeking to embrace religious life, the *Refuges* swiftly evolved into sites of confinement for all women deemed 'debauched'. Thus, what began as a religious conversion aimed at the salvation of the soul transformed into a moral conversion, achieved through imprisonment and punishment to correct the behaviour of sinful women. Drawing on the analysis of Statutes, Regulations, and the deliberations of the *Refuges'* administrative boards, this presentation examines the causes of this shift. It explores the hybrid nature of these institutions (situated between convents, asylums, and prisons), the profiles of the women admitted (and the sins they had committed), and the rules imposed upon them. A comparison with the *Maisons des Nouvelles-Catholiques*, which targeted young Protestant girls, reveals that the conversion of the *Madelonnettes* relied less on spiritual awakening than on the erasure of the past and physical and moral penitence, betraying an intent to enforce amendment. Finally, this study questions the limits of religious conversion: can inner transformation be imposed? What role does the forgetting of the past play in this process?

Maïann Stachnik, Sorbonne Université – Faculté des Lettres

Puritan Conversion among Indigenous Youth in Present-day New England, 17th–18th Centuries

Since the 1970s, there have been ongoing debates about the authenticity of Indigenous conversion in early America. Indeed, as historian Neil Salisbury has argued, many of these conversions were motivated by the prospects of economic gain or of a military alliance, and some were sometimes easily forced onto communities which had been nearly decimated by an epidemic imported by European sailors in the years

1615-1617. However, historians like Michael D. McNally have shown that Indigenous individuals could adopt some elements of Christianity without discarding their own traditional religion, thereby creating enduring forms of hybrid Christianity. Yet, the place of children and adolescents in these dynamics remains to be explored. Indeed, few scholars have yet looked into the ways Native youth experienced Christianity in the 17th and 18th centuries, while they were the main target of missions, as missionaries sought to convert them before they could learn about their traditional religions. However, if some of these children and adolescents were sent away from their families, others grew up in Indigenous communities where Christianity coexisted with Native cultures and traditions. This paper thus proposes to explore the paradoxes inherent to the conversion of Indigenous youth to Puritanism, an English form of Protestantism, in late-17th-and-early-18th century New England. It will examine the different contexts in which these youth were exposed to Christianity and look into the ways, both material and spiritual, in which conversion helped these young people survive and protect their communities in a colonial and colonizing society.

CLOSED PANEL XXX
Queen Marie of Romania and the Bahá'í Faith:
A Message of Love and Faith (1926–2026)

Oana Ursache, University Stefan cel Mare din Suceava

Queen Marie of Romania and the Bahá'í Progressive Revelation: Unity Instead of Strike, Hope Instead of Condemnation, Love Instead of Hate (1926–2026)

The year 1926 begun as an *annus funestus* for the Queen Marie of Romania; yet it unfolded as a revelatory period of profound transformation both spiritually and diplomatically, with significant repercussions for her young state. Inaugurated by her encounter with Martha Rooth, a Bahá'í from the United States and an impassioned promoter and culminating in a long-deferred American tour that materialised somehow unexpectedly, the year ultimately merged as one of the apogees of her public discourse and symbolic trajectory. This experience, from crisis to spiritual awakening, anticipates a discrete participation to the embetterment of the world through the Bahá'í World Religion. In August the same year, the queen wrote a message to Shogi Efendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith is the successor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the Prophet Bahá'u'lláh, expressing her great joy of receiving His letter. "Indeed a great light came to me with the message of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It came as all messages come at an hour of dire grief and inner conflict and distress, so the seed sank deeply" (D. L. Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown. Queen Marie of Romania and the Bahá'í Faith*, 2000) This paper explores quite an extensive period of 13 years of correspondence theoretically grounded scrutiny of Queen Marie's affiancing with the Bahá'í Faith, which she studied constantly and promoted dearly and openly, especially in her articles written for the American media. Within framework of this new global religion, the symbolic mediation, the granddaughter of Queen Victoria and the Czar of Russia articulated a powerful public discourse on the Oneness of humankind. Queen Marie's textual self-representation, her writings, diaries, confessions, autobiography, correspondence, articles, novels, short stories, or children literature are to be approached as articulations of the transnational and transcultural spiritual configuration, taking into the consideration the theories of mediation and performativity (Butler, Bakhtin) that could explain how our Queen's public persona, charisma, authority, transcending the boundaries of her adopted or original country assuming a pivotal part for the global Bahá'í community. The gender perspective – one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Religion – of a queen consort after all who is so powerful within the masculine world of military elite and political and diplomatic circles, playing an decisive role not only during the WWI, but also at the Peace Conference at Versailles, finds her way to promote this world religion. Martha Root talks about a *queen-womanhood* that perfectly aligns with her "daring and enthusiastic" *modus operandi*.

Wargha Enayati, Member in the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'í in Romania

Community in Evolution. The Romanian Bahá'í Journey from Early Encounters to National Consolidation

Our paper examines the early presence of the Bahá'í believers in Romania, their trajectory and how the first groups were created, tracing its evolution from early sporadic encounters with the Faith to the emergence of a nationally organized and consolidated community. One of the earliest documented connections appears in the 1930s, when Romanian intellectual circles were introduced to Bahá'í teachings through the distribution of *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, published in Bucharest in 1934 with financial support from Queen Marie—one of the first royal figures in the world to openly admire the Bahá'í teachings. These early seeds, while limited in scale, established a foundation for future growth. As a matter of fact Romanian newspapers sporadically mention in small cassettes details about a new faith, mentioning both *babism* and the *Bahá'í Faith*. The first personality who openly speaks about this new fever that was considered very modern in West Asia is Martha Bibescu, Queen Marie's great rival, who is part of a real adventurous automobile journey in Persia, in 1905. She even publishes in 1908, in French a very well applauded book about the experience, "Les Huit paradis," for which The French Academy gave her its most prestigious prize. The English translation is published in 1923, with another title "The Eight Paradises. Travel Pictures in Persia, Asia Minor, and Constantinople" by Princess G.V. Bibesco. In this book she

mentions the *Babism*. In 1926 Queen Marie becomes "the first of the queens of the world who recognized and acknowledged the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh," as The Hand of the Cause, George Townshend, states. From then on our queen "recognizes and publicly hails the divine reality of the message of Bahá'u'lláh", as Ian Semple expressed it. After decades of political restriction under the communist regime, the 1990s marked a renaissance in Romanian Bahá'í activity. Following the fall of communism, the Bahá'í Center in Bucharest became a vibrant hub, especially for youth who organized firesides, public meetings, and study gatherings across the country. This period saw renewed enthusiasm, international collaboration, and the strengthening of local communities. By the early 21st century, the Romanian Bahá'í community had expanded sufficiently to host large-scale national events and participate actively in global Bahá'í processes. The bicentenary celebrations of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh in 2017 illustrated this maturation, with twenty-four distinct events held nationwide—from formal receptions in Bucharest to cultural festivals in Transylvania, or at the Black Sea —highlighting the community's diversity and engagement with both civic leaders and the general public. Overall, the evolution of the Bahá'í community in Romania reflects a progression from isolated individual contact to a cohesive, nationally recognized social and spiritual body, contributing to the social, cultural and spiritual life of the country. This transformation demonstrates both resilience under adversity and dynamism in periods of openness and renewal, qualities that our research underlines.

Simona Melnic, Member in The Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'í in Bucharest
World Peace in a Time of Global Turmoil: A Bahá'í Vision

The concept of World Peace in the Bahá'í Faith, a modern religion that promotes the unity of all humankind as a central principle of social progress, is not merely the absence of conflict but a global process of spiritual, moral, and structural transformation. According to the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, this process recognizes humankind as being one family in which cooperation, justice, and solidarity become the fundamental base of this structure. While Bahá'í Teachings emphasize the unity of humanity, the reality we witness reveals an unprecedented escalation of conflicts, in a repetitive cycle of active wars and tension zones has reached record levels worldwide.

In 1985 The Universal House of Justice released *The Promise of World Peace* an important message delivered to world leaders during the United Nations International Year of Peace, as an invitation to consider themselves active parts of one single family. "The Great Peace towards which people of good will throughout the centuries have inclined their hearts, of which seers and poets for countless generations have expressed their vision, and for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly held the promise, is now at long last within the reach of the nations. For the first time in history it is possible for everyone to view the entire planet, with all its myriad diversified peoples, in one perspective. World peace is not only possible but inevitable. It is the next stage in the evolution of this planet in the words of one great thinker, *the planetization of mankind*". Why should we wait to reach peace only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behaviour? Why couldn't we embrace it now by an act of consultative will? If we were able to create the League of Nations, or United Nations Organization, or the European Union, why can't we struggle to realise the impossible dream of unifying all people? As the Universal House of Justice puts it, "co-operation among hitherto isolated and antagonistic peoples and groups it is possible in international undertaking in the scientific, educational, legal, economic and cultural fields; the rise in recent decades of an unprecedented number of international humanitarian organizations; the spread of women's and youth movements, the scientific and technological advances occurring in this unusually blessed century portend a great surge forward in the social evolution of the planet, and indicate the means by which the practical problems of humanity may be solved. (...) Whatever suffering and turmoil the years immediately ahead may hold, however dark the immediate circumstances, the Bahá'í community believes that humanity can confront this supreme trial with confidence in its ultimate outcome. Far from signaling the end of civilization, the convulsive changes towards which humanity is being ever more rapidly impelled will serve to release the "potentialities inherent in the station of man" and reveal "the full measure of his destiny on earth, the innate excellence of his reality".

Marius Opris , Partner Ascendis

Faith Under Siege: Persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran

The present article examines the inhuman and systematic persecution of the Bahá'í community in certain parts of the world, but especially in Iran, a phenomenon spanning even from the martyrdom of Bab (9th of July 1850), and widely recognized by international human rights organizations as one of the most severe cases of state-sponsored religious repressions in the contemporary history. Expanded diachronically (19th – 21st centuries) and geographically (Iran, Caucasus, Turkmenistan) the persecution of the Bahá'í believers has the coherency of a doctrinal state-mediated meticulous discriminatory persecution. Widely recognised by international human rights organisations, the anti-Bahá'í repression is one the most severe case of continuous state-sponsored religious violence of our contemporary world. Originated in Qajar era of clerical-political alliances and later institutionalised by the Islamic Republic, the Bahá'í oppression covers multiple forms of limitations, exclusions, confiscation or destruction of properties, various types of injustices, forced conversion, denial of education and employment, and the destruction of cemeteries, to severe cases of torture, mutilation or even executions. So many crimes against humanity! A long durée structural institutionalised meticulously analysed in this paper, from the theological anxiety of the Persians to the political repression and Bab execution in Tabriz, the widespread massacres of Bábís and the inherited pattern of violence that lead to the subsequent exile of Bahá'u'lláh to Baghdad, Constantinople, Adrianople, and finally Akka, represents both a strategy of imperial containment and a foundational moment in the diasporic configuration of the Bahá'í community. The article further examines the diffusion of Bahá'í populations into the Caucasus and Turkestan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly under Russian Czar, While the Russian Empire initially offered relatively greater tolerance compared to Qajar Persia, Bahá'í communities in regions such as Baku, Ashgabat, and Tashkent remained vulnerable to fluctuating political conditions. The establishment of one of the first Bahá'í Houses of Worship in Ashgabat (1908) symbolized a brief period of institutional consolidation; however, this stability was short-lived. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet anti-religious campaigns led to the closure of Bahá'í institutions, arrests of believers, and deportations to Central Asian labour camps, effectively dismantling organized community life, as it happened to all believers in a communist state that declared itself atheist. The Pahlavi period (1925–1979) in Iran presents an ambivalent phase: although overt mass violence decreased, Bahá'ís were still subjected to systemic discrimination, exclusion from certain professions and periodic incitement by religious authorities. This precarious tolerance collapsed entirely after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when the Bahá'í Faith was explicitly excluded from constitutional recognition. Since then, the Iranian state has implemented a coherent policy of persecution, including executions of community leaders, denial of access to higher education, economic marginalization, destruction of cemeteries and holy sites, and continuous surveillance. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian authorities have executed, abducted, and forcibly disappeared hundreds of Bahá'ís, including elected community leaders, while institutionalizing policies designed to block the social, economic, and cultural development of the entire community. The article insists on the execution of 10 women of Shiraz by hanging in the Chowgan Square on the night of 18th of June 1983. Recent developments indicate an intensification of these violations. Reports from 2025–2026 describe a sharp rise in arrests, home raids, and propaganda campaigns portraying Bahá'ís as national security threats, often accompanied by forced confessions broadcast on state television. The Bahá'í International Community has documented hundreds of cases of harassment, economic discrimination, and land seizures, demonstrating increased sophistication in the government's strategy to suppress Bahá'í life at every level of society. Educational discrimination remains particularly severe: Bahá'í students and educators continue to face systematic exclusion from universities and academic institutions, reflecting a long-standing state policy intended to marginalize future generations. Our paper highlights how the Iranian state's ongoing repression of the Bahá'ís reflects broader ideological, political, and theological dynamics.

Edith Vulturar , Bahá'í Voluntary

Teaching Spirituality to a Global Community: New Perspectives of the Baha i Principles on Education

Our article offers a personal perspective on the educational paradigm of the Bahá'í Faith as a new model for the spirituality transfer within a global and culturally diverse community. Being the most spread religion in the world, the Bahá'í communities unifies different languages, beliefs, social norms, into a Religion of *oneness*. Inspired by the wisdom of the Prophet Bahá'u'lláh, written by his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the principles of the Bahá'í education derive a process of moral, spiritual, and social transformation oriented toward the principle of the oneness of humanity, rather than a mere acquisition of random knowledge. We intend to examine how Bahá'í educational practices function as structured open and adaptable pedagogical environments. Children's classes, junior youth empowerment programs, and study circles elaborated by the Ruhi Institute mobilize specific tools (texts, memorization practices, consultation methods), spatial configurations (community-based learning spaces), and relational dynamics (facilitation, collective reflection) that enable the embodiment of spiritual principles in everyday life. Special attention is given to the transnational worldwide usage of the *Ruhi Institute* as a framework that simultaneously standardizes and localizes spiritual education across diverse cultural contexts. The analysis argues that Bahá'í educational practices operate as forms of *spiritual socialization*, fostering ethical dispositions such as service, unity, and reflexivity, while negotiating the tensions between universality and cultural specificity. By situating Bahá'í education within broader debates on religious pedagogy and global religion, we aim to prove that spirituality can be through participatory practices and spaces that cultivate a shared religious ethos across cultural boundaries.

Sânziana Covaliu , Member of Local Assembly, Bucharest

Unification of Symbols: The Bahá'í Faith and the Artistic Reinterpretation of Religious Imaginaries

This article investigates the reinterpretation of religious symbols within artistic practices, focusing on the Bahá'í Faith as a paradigmatic framework of unification across spiritual traditions. Rather than treating symbols as static carriers of fixed meanings, the study conceptualizes them at the intersection of cultural memory, visual expression, and spiritual hermeneutics. Drawing on theoretical contributions from symbolic anthropology (Clifford Geertz), semiotics (Roland Barthes), and the phenomenology of religion (Mircea Eliade), the article proposes that artistic reinterpretation as a mediating space in which inherited religious symbols are artistically inspiration that reconfigures them, enabling their circulation across temporal, cultural, and doctrinal boundaries. The Bahá'í Faith, founded by Bahá'u'lláh, is examined as a particularly fertile case study due to its doctrinal emphasis on the unity of religions and the progressive revelation of truth. Within this theological paradigm, religious symbols, whether drawn from Islamic, Christian, or other traditions, are not mutually exclusive but understood as historically contingent expressions of a single divine reality. This interpretive openness creates the conditions for a symbolic convergence especially visible in contemporary artistic practices inspired by Bahá'í principles. The reinterpretation of religious symbols in art contributes to the construction of a shared, trans-cultural spiritual imaginary. Ultimately, the study positions symbolism as a dynamic bridge between tradition and innovation, proposing that the Bahá'í conceptualization of unity offers not only a theological framework but also an aesthetic and epistemological model for understanding the transformation of religious meaning in a pluralistic world. Overall, by focusing on art and religion, the article invites reflection on how symbols continue to shape human understanding and communication in a modern, pluralistic world.

CLOSED PANEL XXXI
Materialities of Religion in the Classroom:
Tools, Methods, Perspectives

Lina Aschenbrenner, Universität der Bundeswehr München

What to Teach when Teaching "Materiality and Culture"? Discussing an Exemplary Course Syllabus

Designing and teaching an entire seminar on "Materiality and Culture"—not least as a mandatory course within a master's program in cultural studies—is both a valuable opportunity and a considerable responsibility. What content should be prioritized? How can the theoretical foundations of materiality—especially in relation to religion—be meaningfully combined with practical applications within the constraints of approximately ten sessions? This paper presents the course syllabus I developed as one possible response to these questions. The course has been taught, and student feedback is taken into account. Drawing on this syllabus, I both exemplify and critically reflect on what I considered important when teaching "Materiality and Culture" from the perspective of a scholar of religion. In doing so, the paper aims to open up a broader discussion with the audience about pedagogical choices, disciplinary priorities, and the challenges of balancing conceptual work with applied learning in this field.

Robert Langer, Universität der Bundeswehr München

A Multi-Methods Approach Towards Devotional Space: (Why) Should Details Matter?

Drawing on my research on devotional spaces and places in West Asian contexts, I have developed a hybrid and flexible multi-methods approach to the study of religiously used and legitimized spaces. This methodology combines philologically grounded historical source analysis with descriptive approaches from archaeology and the history of art and architecture, as well as (museum) ethnology, material culture studies, and ethnographic methods such as participant observation. The approach has proven sufficiently flexible to engage students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, accommodating a wide range of interests and competencies. When applied comprehensively, it also generates data of practical relevance for community stakeholders, for instance in the context of heritage protection initiatives or renovation planning. This paper presents an overview of the methodological framework and illustrates its application through selected examples from student research projects conducted since 2020 in the wider Munich metropolitan area.

Sophie Moser, Universität der Bundeswehr München

Teaching Islam through Objects: Material Approaches to Teaching Foundational Topics

This paper examines the didactic potential of material approaches in teaching foundational topics in Islamic Studies. It explores how objects, such as miniature Qur'āns, prayer beads, or pilgrim bottles, can serve as starting points for learning. Objects provide a low-threshold, sensory entry into complex religious topics and offer first-year students an accessible orientation. Through observing, describing, and handling objects, abstract concepts can be concretised and curiosity stimulated. At the same time, challenges arise: students often lack theoretical knowledge of materiality and skills in object analysis, requiring these to be taught simultaneously. Moreover, objects are embedded in specific historical and regional contexts, which may lead to misinterpretation or overgeneralisation. In addition, individual objects can only partially represent the inherent complexity of Islamic Studies topics, such as the diversity of interpretations and practices. Combining object-based approaches with textual, historical, and theoretical perspectives enables a more integrated teaching framework that preserves this complexity.

Rafaela Eulberg, University of Bonn

Excursion-Based Teaching as Epistemic Practice: Materiality, Positionality, and Knowledge Production in the Study of Religion

This presentation reflects on excursion-based teaching in the Study of Religion within the thematic frame of Materialities of Religion in the Classroom. I argue that excursions offer a productive format for engaging materiality not as static objecthood but as spatially embedded and socially negotiated practice. Situated within a broader project on innovative and practice-based teaching formats at the University of Bonn, the model conceptualizes excursions not as supplementary field trips but as structured methodological tools for training students in the critical assessment of religious materialities. Excursions function as epistemic practices in which knowledge emerges through guided observation, encounter, and analytical reflection. Visits to religious sites expose the negotiated character of material religion. Objects, spaces, and practices are framed, authorized, and contested by different actors, making insider/outsider dynamics and claims to authority empirically visible. Rather than serving as illustrative examples, these material configurations become data that require description, contextualization, and interpretation. A didactic challenge lies in mediating between sensory immediacy and analytical distance: how can embodied perception become a resource for critical inquiry without resulting in unreflected impression? To address this, the teaching format follows a four-step structure: preparation, encounter, reflection, and documentation. This sequence organizes perception and translates situated experiences into academically communicable knowledge, enabling students to approach religion as a materially mediated and socially negotiated practice while cultivating methodological awareness and epistemic self-reflexivity.

Evelyn Reuter, University of Graz

Designing Materialities: Reflective and Creative Approaches to Teaching Religious Objects

This paper introduces a design-oriented approach to teaching the materialities that moves beyond traditional seminars focused primarily on textual analysis and theoretical discussion. Students engage with religious objects—such as icons, statues, ritual artifacts, or buildings—by conceptualizing them, reflecting their meaning, analyzing their functions, and (re)imagining them across various historical and socio-cultural contexts. Rather than simply observing or participating within established contexts, as in ethnographic fieldwork, students become active creators who design and transform religious materialities. This process involves both embodied engagement and creative practice, reflecting higher-order stages in models of learning taxonomy such as from Anderson *et al.* As a result, students develop analytical, interpretive, and problem-solving competencies while also discovering the potential of creative, hands-on participation to deepen their understanding of religious objects. By bridging theory and practice, this approach fosters critical engagement with materialities and opens new possibilities for participatory and comparative learning in religious studies.

Katja Rakow, Utrecht University

Practicing Texts: Object-Based Learning and the Materialities of Religious Texts

What do people do with religious texts, and how does their material form shape that engagement? These questions are rarely the starting point in the classroom, where studying religion and texts is often equated with interpreting content. This paper proposes "practicing texts" as both a conceptual framework and a pedagogical orientation. The framework integrates three interrelated elements – texts as material artifacts, their embodied users, and the practices through which they are engaged – into a triadic model (Rakow 2025) that moves students beyond hermeneutical analysis toward a practice-centered understanding of how religious texts work. Object-based learning, using textual artifacts as entry point, will make this framework tangible. Encountering textual objects such as Sutra scrolls, annotated family Bibles, amulets, hymns, prayer wheels, etc., students are invited to ask not "what does a text mean?," but rather "what does this text do, for whom, and through what material form?"

CLOSED PANEL XXXII
Pagan Studies:
(Re)Enchanting the Old Ways

Kerem Görkem Arslan , University of Strasbourg

Navigating Invisibility: Methodological Reflections on the Study of Contemporary Pagan Movements in Turkey within a Transnational Framework

This paper presents methodological and epistemological reflections drawn from ongoing research on contemporary pagan and heterodox religious movements in Turkey, situated within a transnational framework spanning several European countries. This study critically interrogates the analytical tools required to study religious phenomena that are fluid, hybrid, and structurally marginal within dominant religious and political landscapes. Operating within a context defined by an institutionalized Islamic framework and a politically sensitive environment surrounding religious identity, pagan practitioners in Turkey navigate what this paper conceptualizes as strategic invisibility, a condition that fundamentally shapes both the object of study and the research process itself. This is particularly evident in movements such as Neo-Tengrism, which occupies an ambiguous position between spiritual practice, cultural identity, and political ideology, thereby challenging conventional religious taxonomies from within. The paper advances three interrelated methodological arguments. First, it advocates for a qualitative, multi-sited approach, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, discourse analysis, and netnography, as epistemologically necessary to capture embodied practice, digital community formation, and subjective meaning-making. Second, drawing on a positionality of situated proximity, it reflects on the productive tension between insider familiarity and analytical distance, arguing that reflexivity must be treated as a methodological resource rather than a limitation. Third, it examines the emic/etic distinction in designation, treating categories such as "Neo-Pagan" or "witch" as sites of negotiation between self-identification, external categorization, and power relations, and thus as windows into how legitimacy and recognition are actively contested. Ultimately, the paper proposes a processual framework attentive to the emergence, adaptation, and visibility of new religiosities under constraint, contributing to broader methodological debates within Pagan Studies.

Stian Sundell Torjussen , University of Inland Norway

Three approaches to the question of ethnicity among contemporary Hellenic polytheists in North America

This paper examines how questions of ethnicity, cultural appropriation, and "Greek-ness" are negotiated within Contemporary Hellenic Polytheism in North America. While this religious tradition is rarely described as an indigenous religion in an American context, debates on ethnic identity and ownership of tradition nevertheless occur, though generally with less intensity than in comparable movements such as Asatru. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with practitioners, analyses of websites of different religious groups, and emic literature, the paper identifies at least three distinct approaches to the question of ethnicity among contemporary Hellenic polytheists in America. The first is a universalist approach, in which the tradition is understood as open to all, regardless of ethnic background. The second is a more cautious approach, in which practitioners attempt to navigate a middle ground between religious engagement and concerns about cultural appropriation. The third is a critical approach, where Greek heritage, symbols, and terminology are seen as in principle accessible to everyone but simultaneously understood as something that should be protected and curated primarily by ethnic Greeks. These three positions do not exhaust the spectrum of views but serve as illustrative examples of the diversity of opinions on ethnicity within Contemporary Hellenic Polytheism in a North American context.

Agnieszka Kedzierska Manzoni , École Pratique des Hautes Études-PSL

Ethnic Paganism(s) in the Global South? Kemitism or Pan-African Religion in Making

The neologism "Kemitism" – derived from Ancient Egyptian eponym "Kemet," (standing for Africa in the Bible) –, was popularized in the United States from the 1980' by Afrocentric intellectuals, notably Molefi Kete Asante, building on the foundations laid by Senegalese Cheikh Anta Diop and advocating a return to a supposedly original African religion that this neologism was meant to name. Today, "back-to-the-roots" postulate resonates deeply across the African continent, where Kemitism is rapidly expanding. Drawing on ethnographic data from Mali, where I have conducted research for more than 20 years, supplemented by more recent netnography, I will first present Kemits' practices and discourses as hybrid, complex and tailored for the diasporic audiences with a Pan-African agenda. I will then examine the movement's eclectic inspirations, ranging from indigenous traditions and colonial-era ethnographies to Christian theology and liturgy, and, last but not least, Western esoteric currents (Theosophy and Freemasonry), from which draw also other contemporary Paganisms. Finally, will I argue that Kemitism shares many features with these Paganisms, more precisely with "Native Faiths" that emerged in post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., in the Baltic states, Hungary, Poland, and Russia) in the 1990'. By situating Kemitism within a wider spectrum of contemporary Paganisms – an unprecedented attempt due to the compartmentalization of knowledge production within academia –, I aim at the better understanding of the current appeal of ethnic revivals globally while questioning the categories such as "Indigenous Knowledge Systems," and "African Traditional Religion," but also "alternative spiritualities" and "Western esotericism".

Michal Puchovský, Institute for the Sociology of Slovak Academy of Sciences

They Criticised My Conversion to Paganism at a Catholic Mass: A Short Introduction to Relations Between Modern Pagans in Slovakia and Majoritarian Society

New religious movements often challenge the status quo within national religious fields. What is important is not whether religious alternatives are able or not to change the balance of power in the religious field, but rather the dynamics between so-called "traditional" religions and new religious movements. Modern Paganism in Slovakia entered the country in the mid-1990s as part of a broader alternative socio-cultural movement that was (a) critically reflecting the ongoing processes of post-communist transformation and westernization of the country, (b) responding to the re-entry of Catholic Christianity as the major religious player with strong ties to politics, and (c) interested in alternative spirituality, new religious movements, and ecological lifestyles. This conference presentation discusses the current state of relationships between majority society and minority religions, using modern Paganism in Slovakia as a case study. The paper is based on data from 37 semi-structured in-depth interviews with modern Pagans in Slovakia, conducted between 2024 and 2025 as part of a broader research project on motivations for affiliation with modern Paganism. First, I discuss the ambivalent relationship between modern Pagans and Christianity. Second, I examine how affiliation with Paganism is perceived within the families of the respondents. Third, I analyze the relationship between contemporary Pagans and the state, focusing on motivations to declare—or not declare—Pagan identity in national censuses.

Néphélie Skarlatos, École Pratique des Hautes Études & École française d'Athènes

Not Folklore, Not New Age: Competing Claims of Legitimacy in Contemporary Greek and Roman Polytheism

Based on long-term ethnographic research conducted since 2021 among contemporary polytheist groups in Greece and Italy, this paper examines how practitioners construct and defend the legitimacy of their ritual forms in post-Christian contexts historically shaped by Orthodox and Catholic dominance. It focuses on the discourses and practices through which these groups explicitly distance themselves from labels such as "folklore," "neopaganism," or "New Age," which they consider reductive and disqualifying. The analysis relies on a comparison between two influential actors within the contemporary European polytheist landscape: the Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes (YSEE) in Greece and the Roman polytheist group Pietas in Italy. In both cases, religious practice is primarily structured around orthopraxy, understood as the importance attributed to the correctness of ritual gestures, sequences, and material

arrangements. In Greece, YSEE frames this orthopraxic practice within a claim of exclusive Hellenic continuity, combining ritual performance with sustained engagement with ancient Greek sources, calendars, and philosophical references, in order to present polytheism as a living ancestral tradition. In Italy, Pietas similarly emphasizes ritual precision, but situates its approach within a more explicit process of ritual reconstruction, characterized by formalized rites and a broader use of multiple ancient references. By bringing these two configurations into dialogue, the paper argues that contemporary polytheist revivals cannot be reduced either to simple re-enactments of the past or to undifferentiated forms of syncretism. Rather, they involve active processes of selection, differentiation, and coherence-building through which religious practices are made meaningful and defensible in the present. Finally, the comparison shows that claims to legitimacy are negotiated not only in relation to dominant religious institutions, but also through the categories used to describe and present these forms of religiosity, including those mobilized in academic and public discourse.

Emiliano Russo , La Sapienza University of Rome

The Witch's Toolkit: An Ethnography of Domestic Altars and Ritual Materiality - The case study of the Temple of Ara in Italy

This paper examines domestic temples, private shrines and ritual tools among adherents of the Wiccan tradition known as the "Temple of Ara" in Italy (Tempio di Ara Italia), focusing on the meanings practitioners attribute to their personal altars and witchcraft instruments. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework at the intersection of Pagan Studies, Anthropology of Religion, and Material Religion, the study employs an ethnographic methodology based on 26 interviews and the observation and shared exploration of intimate sacred spaces. The analysis explores how contemporary Pagan spirituality is constructed, negotiated, and legitimated within everyday domestic settings, highlighting the role of non-institutional religious spaces in the transmission and reinvention of ritual practice. Central to the discussion is the perspective of material religion, which conceives "materia magica," including altars, ritual tools, and sacred objects, as possessing agency, social lives, and cultural biographies that actively shape spiritual experience while mediating between individual narratives and collective traditions. The ethnographic findings reveal a plurality of approaches to domestic sacrality, showing how personal altars function as microcosms where lineage, authenticity, and creativity are reflexively negotiated. By situating domestic ritual spaces at the crossroads of lived religion, Western esotericism, and contemporary Pagan identities, the paper contributes to broader methodological debates within Pagan Studies on tradition-making, legitimacy, and the boundaries between private devotion and public religious discourse.

Efstathios Kessareas , University of Erfurt

Researching Contemporary Hellenic Polytheism: Fieldwork Challenges and Methodological Strategies

Researching contemporary Paganism presents distinctive methodological challenges for scholars of religion. Pagan movements are often highly diverse, ritual-oriented, and characterized by a degree of tension with the dominant culture and established religions, alongside an attitude of caution toward outsiders, including researchers. Drawing on my fieldwork among practitioners of Hellenic polytheism in today Greece, I will reflect on challenges related to access, participant observation, and data collection, as well as the methodological strategies developed to address them. Rather than treating these challenges merely as obstacles, I approach them as sources of meaning that reveal important aspects of the underlying logic of this religious field.

Agita Misāne , University of Latvia

The guardians of Latvianness – the Dievturi movement and national identity

The Dievturi is hundred-year-old Native faith movement that is currently recognized as a "traditional" religion in Latvia by a special law passed by the Parliament in 2025, a privilege enjoyed by only a selection of religious organizations in the country. The peculiarity of the Dievturi is the contrast of organizations'

small size (never more than a thousand members) and its cultural and social significance. This paper will discuss the Dievturi perception of Latvian national identity and its major components, their interpretation of national history and contemporary politics, and argue that social impact and broader recognition of a small movement can be achieved by involvement in broader social networks and employment of references outside religious faith and practice. By applying some ideas from the Rodney Stark's and William Sims Bainbridge's theory of religion, the paper will also contemplate on the meaning of "success" for a new religious movement.

Karina Oliveira Bezerra , University of Oxford

Magism: Pagan reality in Brazil

This work is based on the results of my doctoral thesis, which aimed to explore the Pagan reality in Brazil, specifically identifying the founding and unifying links among Pagan religions. To achieve this, I investigated eight different Pagan religions, compiling a history of these faiths in the country through bibliographic and documentary research, as well as interviews, questionnaires, and fieldwork. My findings indicate that Pagan religions create an idealised reality based on ancient cultures through a concept I refer to as "threefold magic." This includes ritual, symbolic, and participatory magic. I describe this worldview as "magism" and draw a comparison to Whitehead's concept of process philosophy. Pagans from different denominations share similar beliefs, while individuals within the same denomination can hold differing views. In my search for commonalities among contemporary Pagan religions, I also discovered that the myths serve as the belief system for these faiths, distinguishing and characterising each religion. In this paper, I will present how I arrived at these conclusions.

Konsta Kaikkonen , Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

Modern paganism and Indigeneity – some critical remarks from terminological and bureaucratic points of view

Modern pagans have often been accused of cultural appropriation by Indigenous actors. Drum circles, dreamcatchers, and other similar cases have sparked debates and controversies between representatives of majority positions and Indigenous actors and organisations. This paper tries to look at these discussions from other viewpoints that have had less coverage in academia and in the media. In the Saami context, especially Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) and their public accessibility have received attention from different actors. The Norwegian Saami parliament has decided to restrict access to public information about sacred sites at least since the 1990s, and the Ethical guidelines for research involving the Sámi people in Finland have directed special attention to research involving sacred sites, to give two examples. One of the major reasons for this is the fear of non-Saami religious actors performing rituals at these sites. One can, for example, ask, when do ritual offerings become littering? And how do streams of visitors to sacred sites expose these natural formations to damage and erosion? Furthermore, if a certain family has a special relation to a sacred site, but has ceased to make physical offerings at these places, how would they react to outsiders performing rituals at their traditional sites? At the same time, some pagan practitioners have begun to claim Indigenous identity and label their practice as Indigenous religion. Why and how has this blurring of the line between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous practitioners of modern paganism happened? I will try to take part in this terminological discussion and ask how this can be seen from a historical and bureaucratic point of view, presenting different ways to approach how the adjective "indigenous" is being applied to the noun "religion".

Evgenia Fotiou , University of Crete

Becoming an Ethnic Hellene: Identity and Meaning Making among Native Faith Devotees in Contemporary Greece

This paper will discuss the revitalization of Hellenic Religion in contemporary Greece and the ways that its adherents construct their identity vis a vis the prevailing religious discourse in Greece. It is based on

ethnographic fieldwork and life histories collected using qualitative interviews. This movement, active since the 1990s, has challenged the official state narrative of seamless continuity between ancient Greece and Orthodox Christianity. One group, called the Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes, has been more active and publicly vocal in this respect. This challenge is not only present in the public discourse of the group and its scathing critique of Christianity but dominates the life histories of group members. An emerging theme in these narratives is the definition of identity in contrast to monotheism and particularly Orthodox Christianity, as well as the desire to find and create community among other followers of the Hellenic religion. This community provides a way to make meaning in an increasingly hostile world as well as a worldview through which they can interpret it. I will discuss common themes in members' life trajectories and the ways that they incorporate ancient Hellenic worldview in their daily lives as well as how they navigate living in a culture that still holds much prejudice regarding their faith. Based on my data, this movement, as a unique response to the specific socio-cultural context of contemporary Greece, has developed an idiomatic response to a perceived widespread socio-cultural crisis.

CLOSED PANEL XXXIII
Imagining India:
Young Scholars on European Understandings of Indian Religions

Vilém Skopal, Technical University of Liberec

A Religion Without God? Conceptual History of the Early Czech Discourse on Buddhism

Europe of the second half of the 19th century witnessed a massive spread of both academic and personal interest in different branches of Buddhism. Scholars reflecting on orientalism have described and analysed modern European reception of Buddhism in the context of colonialism and thus have focused mainly on former colonial powers. However, due attention is scarcely paid to orientalist discourses of smaller countries of Europe unburdened by colonialism which formed their own conceptually rich discourses. The presented research is part of the broader aim of filling this knowledge-gap by analysing the early Czech discourse on Buddhism between 1860 and 1948. In the paper, the focus will be on the two prominent figures of Czech debates on Buddhism who formulated strikingly opposite views on Buddhism: an orientalist and the founder of the Czech academic study of religion, Otakar Pertold (1884–1965), and the first Czech Buddhist monk, Martin Novosad – Nāṇasatta thera (1908–1984). Through the analysis of semantic fields used by the two authors, it will be shown that despite both having used the term "Buddhist atheism," each of them understood it as a different concept. This difference made possible the formulations of conflicting views not only on Buddhism but also on the issue of whether Buddhism is a suitable religion for Europeans. This conceptual analysis will provide us with a better understanding not only of the discourse on Buddhism of the time, but also of the more general discourse on religion during the peak of European modernity.

Yana Stefanova, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Changing Clothes, Changing Caste: Strategic Identity in the Madurai Mission

This paper examines the missionary strategy of Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) through the lens of European encounters with Indian religious and social categories. Rather than focusing solely on Nobili's theological writings or his conceptualisation of Indian traditions, the paper analyses his adoption of three distinct social and religious roles in the Madurai mission: the European Jesuit priest, the sannyasi addressing Brahmins and other high-caste groups, and the pandaraswami working among lower castes. Each of these roles corresponded to a specific and socially recognisable position within South Indian society and involved different forms of authority, lifestyle, and social accessibility. The paper argues that Nobili's strategy reveals a fundamental asymmetry in the encounter between European and Indian religious worlds. While religious and social identities in the Indian context were to a large extent inherited, stable, and socially regulated, the European missionary was able to adopt and abandon religious roles strategically, moving between different social strata depending on missionary needs. Religious identity thus appears not only as a matter of belief or doctrine, but also as a socially recognisable role that could, under certain circumstances, be performed and strategically employed. By focusing on the performative and strategic aspects of missionary identity, the paper proposes to approach European engagement with Indian religions not only as a process of describing and conceptualising the religious "other," but also as a process in which Europeans repositioned themselves within Indian religious society. The aim is not to offer a definitive interpretation of the Madurai mission, but to open a discussion on religious identity, social roles, and the conceptual limits of the category of "religion" in early modern intercultural encounters.

Anna Vrkoslavová, Technical University of Liberec

Magical Revelation, False Penitence or Means to Gain Superpowers? An Analysis of Yoga, Yogis and Fakirs in Czech Literature at the Turn of 19th and 20th Century

During the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, various descriptions of yogis and fakirs began to appear on a large scale in Czech literature. Authors from diverse fields and from different reasons

started to incorporate yoga into their travelogue descriptions, theories of religion, and sometimes even hermetic practices. The paper aims to analyse the shared presumptions which lie at the heart of these various descriptions at the turn of the century. Using a textual analysis, it will dive into period literature to examine what ideas lie within their interpretations and what concepts they used to express them. Works of figures such as the philosopher František Čupr (1821-1882), the traveller Josef Kořenský (1847-1938) and the occultist Otokar Griese (1881-1931) shall be used as examples of the above-mentioned fields of study towards yoga. The main questions this paper aims to answer are: How did they perceive yoga? Which were the basic presumptions that shaped their perspective on yogis and fakirs? And what concepts did they use to describe foreign practices? This paper represents only a part of a larger and more complex dissertation research that is still in its early stages, therefore, it covers only basic questions, topics, and findings.

Maja Sevenant, Ghent University

Myths about Indian Goddesses: A Comparative Study of Conceptual Frameworks for Research on Indian Stories

Stories are omnipresent in Indian social life and storytelling traditions permeate in Indian culture. Understanding the role of such narratives in everyday life in India requires insight into the scholarly approaches to Indian stories. Which ways of studying Indian stories are dominant and how did these emerge? Throughout the past two hundred years, Europeans have engaged in describing and studying various Indian narratives, including stories about Indian goddesses. This paper focuses on the continuity between early European descriptions of Indian goddess stories and the conceptual background framework that contemporary scholars draw upon. Indian goddess stories have generally been studied as myths, i.e. as carriers of religious messages, moral or ideological values, and as oblique historical accounts. The stories are thus believed to make truth-claims about the world. This dominant approach appears to derive from European cultural intuitions and, as a result, is limiting our insights into the culture-specific role of stories in India. In this paper, early European descriptions of Indian goddess stories are approached as a test case, revealing the origins of the conceptual background framework for studying Indian stories that is culture-specific to Europe. This approach (1) offers insight into European culture and its culture-specific concepts through which Europeans understand the world and (2) enables the exploration of an alternative hypothesis that draws on a conceptual framework that is accessible and intelligible for people within Indian culture itself.

CLOSED PANEL XXXIV

Myth, materiality, and power

Cecilie Endresen , University of Oslo

Demon Trees and Illuminati Mountains. Modern Prophets, Spiritual Mapping and Territorial Exorcism: New Apostolic Reformation and Spiritual Warfare in the Philippines

This paper explores the material and territorial aspects of spiritual warfare mythology in a native Christian community in the Philippines influenced by the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). This hyper-charismatic, 'post-denominational' movement is diffuse and rather unknown, but has tremendous influence worldwide, particularly in the MAGA movement and the Trump administration, and in the global south. Its radical reinterpretation of Christian authority is textbook charismatic, replacing existing church structures, traditions, and bureaucracies with modern-day apostles and prophets. Its spiritual warfare mythology absorbs and reformats a range of non-Christian religious elements. This glocalized, hybrid, reenchanting cosmos densely populated with mythical agents, considered active and present, and the esoteric and occult dimension is quite prominent. Worship and piety revolve around spiritual mapping, discerning territorial spirits and demonic strongholds in the local landscape and public sphere and disbanding them through e.g. innovative prayer practices and shofar blowing. Evil forces from Christian demonology and biblical mythology, particularly Revelation, are understood as local and material, with "small antichrists" discerned in logos or local politicians. Other evil forces are demonised Catholic saints and statues, pre-Christian deities, nature spirits, sea monsters, and conspiritual newcomers such as clones, AI, aliens, and ancient giants. Good intermediary beings include the believers themselves, God's spiritual super warriors, both ordinary 'anointed' members with prophetic potential and those in the congregation who display charismatic gifts, for example visiting Heaven, predicting electoral results, or teleporting to Jerusalem. Other agents include designated apostles, angels, modern martyrs, and pastors and prophets from the charismatic orbit with miraculous powers, as well as populist presidents and the Philippine nation itself, with its messianic mission, as "Spiritual Israel" and "Prince Nation to Asia".

Jane Haug Skjoldli , Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

Christianist Power: Materializing Myth in (Post)national(ist) Contexts

From Pharaohs embodying Set on the battlefield through Roman armies bargaining with adversaries' gods to the United States Secretary of War baring his crusader tattoos in public, prospects and realities of war have spurred fighters, rulers, and peoples across time, space, cultures, and religions to materialize myth. When successfully materialized, myths function (among other things) as empowering amulets for fighters, useful legitimization for rulers, and sources of new myths for the peoples they govern. Through such processes of materialization, old and familiar myths are reimagined and materialized in ways that work backward to remake those myths themselves. What are key ways in which myth is materialized in contemporary Christian(ist), Christian nationalist and postnational discourses, and how may the concept of augmentation assist in understanding them?

Deva Nandan Harikrishna , University of Oslo

Srividya, Sanskritisation, and Ritual Hierarchy at the Kodungallur Bharani Festival

The Kodungallur Bharani, a predominantly lower caste festival in Kerala, is known for its animal sacrifice, erotic worship songs in praise of the goddess, and self-harm rituals of the oracles. With its controversial rituals, the Bharani has often faced pressure, including from high caste Hindu religious reformists, rationalists, and political and civil society groups. Legislative interventions, along with the transport and communication revolution, and the explosion of photo/videography have contributed to changes in the form and content of the festival rituals. As a lower caste festival, these rituals and their mythical justifications have often been beyond the confines of what could be conceived as 'mainstream' temple-centred Hinduism in the Kerala context with its Sanskritic, high caste temple culture. In this paper, I

examine the rituals and their evolving mythical-schematic practices which reconstruct power relations in the imagined cosmology of the festival. Sanskritic worship schemas like 'Śrīvidyā' are promoted by certain high caste temple actors (with the tacit support of Hindu nationalist groups) as underlying the heterogeneity of lower caste Hindu praxis. This then aims and leads to, directly or indirectly, to the standardisation and sanskritisation of lower caste religiosity to some extent. These didactic endeavours, from the organising of large Vedic fire sacrifices (*yajña*) to the education of lower caste groups in Sanskritic temple knowledge, de/re-materialise these practices into more abstract cosmological-philosophical realms.

Linda Gustavsson , University of Oslo

(Re)claiming a Sacred Pond through Myth in Sikkim, India

"Sigay Pokthang Pokwa, A Sacred Pond, Mangsabung, Sikkim" ... reads the roadside sign, featuring pictures of Limbu shamans performing a ritual by the pond. It states that admission requires permission from a local committee and that Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags are prohibited. Referring to a local myth, a committee member claims that if the pond is polluted by prayer flags, bad things will happen to the villagers. In Mangsabung village in the Indian state of Sikkim, the villagers are mainly Limbu, categorized in the Indian context as a 'tribe.' Since 2024 the committee has sought to have the pond recognized as a Biodiversity Heritage Site and to rename it with a Limbu name. They ground this claim in a myth in which shamans restore peace and save the pond and the villagers, tying its residents and their mythological ancestors to the site. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Sikkim, this paper examines how the pond's renaming (re)claims ownership and belonging to the land. It argues that the renaming functions as resistance both to perceived Buddhist colonization—linked to the former Buddhist kingdom and to ongoing political alienation after Sikkim's integration into the Indian Union in 1975—and to the authority of urban Limbu elite segments whose revivalist projects codify a "Limbu religion" as a "world religion" with temples and festivals. Actors in Mangsabung instead locate authenticity in shamans and the immediate landscape, which are thus transformed into a local 'sacred materiality' grounded in the myth revolving around the pond.