

OPEN PANEL I
Spiritual, nonordinary, transformative
New interpretations of religious experiences

Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki, University of Szeged

The Weight of Tradition: Deconstructing Scholarly Bias in the Study of Contemporary Mysticism

The overwhelming variety of contemporary religious experiences presents both conceptual and methodological challenges. Within the phenomenology of religion, this has created a significant gap between the rigidity of academic categories and the fluidity of lived religion. This presentation aims to deconstruct existing scholarly biases surrounding contemporary mystical experiences, focusing first on the limitations connected to the applied concepts of religion. Terms such as *muddled*, *watered-down*, *commercialized*, *superficial*, and *secular* are not only limiting but exclusionary. They draw an arbitrary line between ‘acceptable’ forms of religiosity and those deemed unworthy of study, often based on an idealized, institutionalized, static, and pure conception of religion. This bias further results in the neglect of phenomena that are secular in form, but functionally religious. Secondly, this paper addresses the insufficiency of current terminology. The field currently moves between two paths: the creation of a heap of new terms, searching for scientific legitimacy, or the use of existing ones like ‘mysticism’, which, in their classical sense, evoke elitist and exclusivist standards. This presentation claims that the latter path is viable, with the critical revision of classical frameworks, such as restrictive views of the sacred in the works of Underhill and Stace; or William James’s concept, relying on transiency, noetic quality, and passivity. Ultimately, this presentation proposes that mysticism can be used meaningfully to describe contemporary phenomena by concentrating on its core features: the direct encounter with the ultimate reality, characterized by a radical shift in perspective, transformation in the perception of time, and ineffability.

Sára Eszter Heidl, University of Vienna

Resonance and Ecstasy: The Experience of Festivals

This presentation discusses some of the various terminological approaches to religious experience, arguing that new and existing concepts are needed to demonstrate their diverse interpretive potential. It then analyses one of these interpretations, demonstrating it through empirical evidence from Hungarian festivals: Hartmut Rosa’s resonance theory. This theory does not describe a clear religious experience, but it has religionesque characteristics and connections. The presentation aims to propose resonance theory as a possible interpretation of ‘religious’ experiences, without trying to override previous explanations in other contexts, but to present it as an additional perspective. Furthermore, it aims to demonstrate the empirical applicability of resonance theory at three events from Hungary: Lélek, a Catholic gathering, Everness, a mindfulness festival, and Fekete Zaj, a rock-metal music festival. Bringing examples from interviewees from all three events, it shows the potential of understanding these festival experiences as resonant.

Flore Muguet, EPHE-PSL/GSRL (Paris)

From “Religious Experience” to Conditions of Self-Transformation: Towards a Relational Approach

Experiences reported in contemporary Western settings, such as the “hugging” darshan of Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma) or large-scale participatory environments like Burning Man, are often described as intense, meaningful, and life-changing. Research shows that these experiences imply religious features (intensity, collective effervescence, ritualized forms, emotional effects, and moments of liminality), yet they do not necessarily require strict adherence to a specific belief or doctrine. Drawing on ethnographic research in these two settings, this paper explores the limits of the category of “religious experience” when applied to such contexts. Rather than focusing on how these experiences are classified, the paper shifts attention to the conditions under which nonordinary and transformative

experiences emerge. The key focus here is on the processes through which transformative effects take place. I propose that these effects can be approached through the analysis of relational, spatial, and sensory configurations: patterned interactions, embodied synchronizations, and collective forms of attention that contribute to heightened experiential intensity. This perspective allows us to describe how transformation may occur without presupposing a religious framework. By reframing the question from “what kind of experience is this?” to “under what conditions does self-transformation occur?”, this approach contributes to ongoing discussions on the terminology and methodology of studying nonordinary and self-transformative experiences in contemporary plural contexts.

Courtney Applewhite , École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne
Studying After Death Experiences: Methodological Bridges and Challenges

After death experiences (or ADEs), in which bereaved individuals report seeing, hearing, or sensing the presence of a deceased loved one, are reported by an estimated 30-60% of people and observed cross-culturally (Kamp *et al.*, 2020). Perhaps in part because of their prevalence, ADEs are an ideal case study for examining the methodological challenges central to religious experience research today. This presentation will explain two complementary empirical approaches to studying ADEs. First, we present findings from an online numerosity estimation task administered to bereaved participants with (ADE+, N=48) and without (ADE-, N=63) ADEs, alongside non-bereaved controls (N=63). Results showed differences in perception between bereaved and non-bereaved participants, regardless of ADE status, indicating domain-general cognitive alterations in bereavement rather than specific biases related to certain kinds of experiences. Alongside these results, we introduce an innovative laboratory-based research design that integrates experimental cognitive neuroscience with ethnographic interviewing approaches. Using a robotic presence-induction system, resting-state fMRI, and semi-structured interviews, we are investigating ADEs under controlled conditions while integrating personal interpretations and cultural backdrop. From this study, we will report how factors like cultural milieu, upbringing, and current belief relate to cognitive-behavioral results. Together, these approaches highlight both the promise and the pitfalls of applying quantitative and neuroscientific methods to nonordinary or impactful experiences alongside more traditional religious studies approaches. We reflect on the importance of including phenomenological reports alongside experimental paradigms, and how methodological pluralism can advance the field.

Tomilola Fadipe & Ali Qadir , Tampere University
Logics of Mediation: Joseph Ayo Babalola and the Social Embeddedness of Mystical Authenticity in Modern Nigerian Christianity

Moving beyond a purely inward focus on mystical and spiritual experiences, this paper argues that authenticity of such nonordinary experiences is constituted in a social process. The argument builds on a case study of the life and afterlife of Joseph Ayo Babalola, one of the founding figures of Nigerian Pentecostalism, and examines how his experiences became publicly legible across devotional, missionary, colonial, and wider public arenas in the 20th century. We draw on multiple data sources from 1928 to 2025 and use Bourdieu's field theory to identify three mediating logics through which Babalola's claims moved beyond the moment of personal experience and into public life, viz., translation into recognizable bodily and narrative forms, circulation through testimony and sacred memory, and sponsorship, containment, or regulation by church and state institutions. The paper concludes that to study spiritual experience means to also study social embeddedness, and societal as well as personal transformation.

Hongfey Yu, University of Amsterdam
A (micro)phenomenology approach towards studying altered-states: Understanding Bailado dance in Santo Daime through the lens of 4E cognition

Social constructivism and interpretivism have been two dominant approaches to look at religious experiences. What alternative approaches are available beyond those two paradigms? How can we better understand the complexity of religious experiences, experiences “deemed” religious, or enactive experience more broadly? Based on the researcher’s fieldwork with a non-Brazilian ICEFLU strand of Santo Daime congregation, this paper explores the enactment and experience of being in “the force of Daime (ayahuasca)” among its practitioners during Bailado (a ritual dance). Such experiences have been described as relational, intersubjective, altered states, non-ordinary, and transformative by religion scholars, psychologists, neuroscientists, and the like. Bailado operates as an embodied praxis of transformation situated both within and beyond the immediate ritual context. Inspired by (micro)phenomenology, this paper uses the 4E (embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive) framework from cognitive science as a guiding methodology to understand how practitioners experience ayahuasca through movement and immersion. The researcher pays special attention to actors beyond internal representations, different phases of the experience, and praxis of transformation by using (micro)phenomenologically inspired probes in designing interviews. Overall, this paper attempts to make two contributions: firstly, the somatic character of Bailado challenges traditional notions of religious contexts, psychedelic set and setting, as well as the boundaries between interiority and exteriority in personhood; secondly, this paper proposes a question of methodology. What and how can researchers of religious experiences, most broadly speaking, learn from other disciplines such as psychology and neuroscience?

OPEN PANEL II

What makes a religious persecution and how to research it?

Igor Mikeshin, University of Helsinki

American spies? Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia

In 2017, the Supreme Court in Russia banned the Jehovah's Witnesses organization and declared it extremist. This decision came less than three decades after the end of the Soviet period of persecution. This paper discusses the methods, legal mechanisms, and ideological justifications of persecution during both historical periods. Based on research on the history of persecution in the Soviet Union (e.g., Baran 2014; Knox 2018) and my own study of Russian Jehovah's Witnesses seeking refuge from persecution abroad, I suggest that the political aspect of persecution has substantially prevailed over the religious aspect of it. Different problems and triggering issues in the religious and social teachings and lifestyles of Jehovah's Witnesses are reduced to a major propaganda point, which labels them an American sect that is either significantly influenced by the United States or even actively involved in espionage. I will give a brief account of the current state of persecution in Russia. Next, I will describe my methods, data, and ethical considerations. After that, I will briefly compare persecution in the Soviet times and today's Russia, and conclude with an analysis of the ideological narrative that links Jehovah's Witnesses to the United States as either agents of the U.S. influence or even as "American spies."

Olli-Matti Peltonen, EAJW, Helsinki

Establishing Facts, Not Feelings: Formulating Challenges to Religious Freedoms in Light of the Recent Case Law in Europe

Professor Rik Torfs (University of Leuven), in his keynote lecture in EuARe Conference (Vienna, 2025) underlined the concerning, current trends that are challenging freedom of religion. According to him, victimhood and emotionality are increasingly emphasized in the legal arena. One of the outcomes of this trend is more pressure on religious groups to redefine their doctrine. While emotional narratives need to be taken seriously, their subjective nature adds an important challenge to the scientific community, the legislative and the general public: measures taken against any religion should rely on verifiable standards, supplied by expert research and empirical data. What is more, in the absence of religious literacy, conflicts are easily exacerbated with a sensational emphasis from the start. This presentation analyzes these concepts, and aims to show the danger that exists if emotional narratives, when combined with religious illiteracy, become a consistent pattern of interpretive mistakes, manifesting in a) category errors b) doctrinal caricature and c) neglect of due diligence. Additionally, this paper addresses the underlying factors behind legal cases against minority religions, addressing specifically cases against Jehovah's Witnesses, such as the recent deregistration case of Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway. I will analyze the rationale behind the initial arguments, the Court decisions (Appeal Court, 2025; Supreme Court, 2026), and the scholarly response to the case. I'll close the discussion with a practical proposal on academic research, media literacy and understanding of the religious context as a structural response to disinformation and stereotypes.

Śławomir Mandes, University of Warsaw

Dominant Churches, Minority Congregations, and the Grammar of Non-Compliance: Institutional Position, Historical Memory, and Adaptive Strategies during COVID-19 in Poland, Germany, and Ireland

The restrictions on public worship introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were formally non-denominational in Poland, Germany and Ireland; however, the strategies adopted by religious communities varied considerably. Drawing on data collected as part of the RECOV-19 project (<https://recov19.uni-bremen.de/>), in this presentation I will compare how mainstream churches (the

Catholic Church) and minority communities – Muslims, the Orthodox Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant churches – responded to identical legal restrictions, and how the narrative of ‘persecution’ was utilised by various actors. Firstly, I will show that institutional responses were shaped by organisational capabilities and by historically established patterns, e.g. the memory of the period following the enactment of penal laws in Ireland, the model of cooperation based on Körperschaft status in Germany, and the privileged access resulting from the Concordat in Poland. In particular, I will show that resistance rarely took the form of open opposition. More often it was silent, e.g. ignoring health guidelines, downplaying the risk of infection, bending attendance limits, and performing rituals contrary to episcopal directives. However, the restrictions were also challenged through legal channels, a path taken primarily by minority communities. In Germany, a Muslim association secured a landmark ruling from the Federal Constitutional Court (1 BvQ 44/20) overturning the general ban on religious services, whilst the Catholic hierarchy took no legal action. The very narrative of ‘persecution’ served different functions depending on the context: it invoked historical memory in Ireland, served political instrumentalisation in Poland, and in Germany constituted a legal argument for a religious minority.

OPEN PANEL III
The Eventification of Religion:
New Insights, Theories, and Problems

Alessandro Testa, Charles University, Prague
Examples of Event Religionification in Europe

Over the past 15 years of ethnographic and historical research into European ritual revival and festive culture, mostly focusing on case studies infused with religious or religionesque features, I have often noticed a certain recurring trend of “religious eventification”, or rather, more precisely, “event religionification”. In this presentation, I will introduce these case studies highlighting the elements that have over time been “eventified” or “religionified”, while also exploring the socio-cultural reasons, both contextual (micro) and national and global (macro), that have brought them about. The cases in question are: the Deer-Man carnival of Castelnuovo al Volturno, Italy, the Masopust celebrations in eastern Bohemia, Czechia, and the Krampus parades in Tyrol, Austria.

Martin Pehal, Charles University, Prague
Ritual Infrastructure and the Limits of Eventification: From Civic Carnival to Crisis Commemoration in Prague

The concept of eventification assumes a directional process: traditional ritual transforms into open-air spectacle generating “religionesque” experience for diverse audiences (Bramadat et al. 2021; Heidl 2024). This paper interrogates that directionality from a context where the assumed starting point—institutional religion—is largely absent. The Czech Republic combines extreme institutional secularisation, the product of communist-era suppression rather than gradual Western drift (Wohlrab-Sahr 2011), with dense quasi-religious symbolic culture whose logic requires the tools of religious studies rather than the sociology of belief (Chlup 2020; Hamplová and Nešpor 2009). In such a setting, eventification does not transform existing religious ritual but generates quasi-religious forms *de novo*—forms that, I argue, build transferable competences proving critical when crisis demands non-spectacular ritual action. Between 2012 and 2020, I co-founded the Velvet Carnival (*Sametové posvícení*), an annual masked procession commemorating the 1989 Velvet Revolution—a deliberately eventified civic ritual that acquired religionesque qualities without originating in any religious tradition (Pehal 2022). On 21 December 2023, a gunman killed fourteen people at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, where I serve as an academic. As a scholar of public ritual and then a member of the dean’s collegium, I was tasked with designing the commemorative response. The connection is not institutional but biographical: my formation through a decade of carnival organising—embodied knowledge, design sensibility, collaborator networks—became available when crisis demanded ritual action in a society with no established mourning liturgy. Framed through Grimes’s (1990) ritual criticism, the paper draws on this dual position to access design rationale invisible to outside observers. I propose the concept of *ritual infrastructure*: embodied competences and networks that accumulate through sustained ritual practice and migrate across incompatible affective contexts. Where Connerton (1989) and Taylor (2003) theorised how embodied knowledge preserves and transmits cultural memory, ritual infrastructure names the capacity of such competences to transfer across contexts whose affective register and social function are radically discontinuous. The paper identifies what migrated from the Carnival to crisis commemoration—processional spatial logic, the capacity to design collective ritual resisting individualised narrative, collaborator networks—and what did not. The shooting site resisted processional logic entirely, demanding static votive treatment no festive practice had prepared. This distinction—between what required prior ritual accumulation and what emerged from crisis itself—reframes the panel’s central concept. Eventification may be less a transformation befalling religious traditions than a surface phenomenon enabled by deeper ritual infrastructure-building, whose non-spectacular core is revealed when the event must be refused.

Katri Ratia, Fribourg University | Helsinki University

Evental Outcomes: how is the 'transformational potential' of events understood?

Event studies have shown that participation in planned, in-person events has unique social and individual outcomes in shaping opinions, behaviours, and attitudes. How does this fact relate to the domain of religion and what are the explanatory frameworks used in understanding the phenomenon in the study of religion and ritual? Contemporary religion involves a growing trend where intentional, ritualized events are gaining popularity from more traditional forms of ritual and social practice. Although these types of events are increasingly popular in various kinds of religious contexts, the event form has long been a staple in the realm of alternative-holistic spirituality, where different kinds of gatherings, workshops, retreats, and festivals are a favored form of engagement. Research looking into the phenomenon has called it the 'transformative potential' of events (*Journal of Festive Studies* 5, 2023). The proposed paper examines the concept and reviews the theoretical and conceptual avenues employed in analyzing it, by discussing the relevant interpretative frameworks centering i.a. on the concepts of *space*, *co-creation*, *ritualization*, and *materiality*. The paper asks whether the research done with alternative-holistic spiritual events can inform us about more general dynamics of contemporary religion or transformative experiences?

Linda Gustavsson, University of Oslo

From Household Ritual to Public Festival

Originally a harvest ritual conducted within households by shamans, Chasok Tongnam has, in the last decade, undergone processes of 'eventization' and been turned into an annual public event (Bramadat *et al.* 2021). Since Sikkim joined the Indian Union in 1975, Limbu intelligentsia have mobilized for rights, welfare, and political representation by asserting indigeneity, leading to religious revivalist projects. These activists are the main organizers of Chasok Tongnam and the key agents of its eventization. They fear that widespread confusion about Limbu history, religion, and culture threatens the survival of a Limbu identity. The original harvest ritual is not performed. Shamans and "Limbu artifacts and symbols" are displayed with labels, and shamans usually perform a ritual while a political speech takes place on the main stage. Dressed in newly invented traditional attire, attendees are immersed in a shared festival experience whose aesthetic, visual, and sensory dimensions create a sense of coherent culture and *communitas*. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Sikkim, this paper argues that the eventization of Chasok Tongnam turns the festival into an educational space where attendees (myself included) learn an "authentic" form of Limbu culture through staged material culture and symbols curated by the organizers and tied to their wider political assertions. Thus, I consider anthropological work on 'festival ecologies' a crucial approach, as eventization is a lived process whose myriad elements are interconnected and "more than the sum of their parts" (Frost, 2016), forming an interrelated and multilayered field of interests and motivations.

OPEN PANEL IV

**Alternative Religiosity in Communist and Post-Communist region:
Orientalist Religious Movements and their Features, Manifestations and Transformations**

Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson , Vilnius University

With Orientalist Flow and in the Light of the Teachings of Vydūnas and Roerich: Ideas, Individuals and Networks in Lithuania

In the late Soviet period, Lithuania witnessed the spread of various ideas related to different Asian religions and cultural practices, and the formation of networks and communities of alternative religiosity, such as vaishnavas, Romuvans, yoga and meditation groups, individuals, interested in Buddhism, Roerich teaching, Vydūnas philosophy, Sai Baba teaching, etc. Some had direct links with Asian religions, while others were indirectly inspired by such religions. These movements created an alternative field of spiritual beliefs and practices in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet Lithuania, which has persisted in modified forms until today.

Focusing on the analysis of personal experiences, social interactions and political context, this paper traces peculiarities of alternative Orientalist spiritual seekership through involvement in the social networks related to Roerich teaching (Agni Yoga or Living Ethics) and Vydūnas teaching (philosophical and practical system encompassing the spiritual, moral, and physical development influenced by Eastern religions and ideas of Lithuanianness) in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet Lithuania. Attention is also given to the interaction of the teachings of Roerich and Vydūnas with Theosophy, joint activities of Vydūnas Society (established in 1988) and Lithuanian Roerich Society (re-established in 1989).

This paper is part of the research project “Alternative Religiosity in Soviet and Post-Soviet Lithuania: Orientalist Religious Movements and their Features, Manifestations and Transformations” (project no. S-MIP-24-110, Research Council of Lithuania).

Kristina Garalytė , Vilnius University

Imagining Tibet in Lithuania: Spiritual, Cultural or Political?

There is an extensive literature on the Western imagination of Tibet in different time periods (Anand 2007, Dingman 2021, Dodin and Rather 2001, Lopez 1998, Neuhaus 2012). Western imaginary of Tibet can be understood as a typical case of the oriental gaze (Said 1978), fusing early demonising and later romanticising views, often resulting in essentialized, reductive and stereotypical representations. Many scholars agree that the Western imagination of Tibet is less about Tibet and more about the West's changing geopolitical power, identity, spirituality and fantasies. This paper engages and contributes to this academic literature by analysing a Lithuanian case. It explores how Tibet figures in Lithuanian culture, society and politics. How has it been promoted by different actors - scholars, travellers, writers, religious practitioners, politicians and political activists? How does the image of Tibet transform against the backdrop of changing political regimes? Does Lithuanian engagement with Tibet reproduce existing Western imageries? Finally, what is specific and unique about Lithuanian engagement with Tibetan culture and spirituality? This paper is part of the research project “Alternative Religiosity in Soviet and Post-Soviet Lithuania: Orientalist Religious Movements and their Features, Manifestations and Transformations” (project no. S-MIP-24-110, Research Council of Lithuania).

Deimantas Valančiūnas , Vilnius University

Negotiating the Public Sphere: Asia-Inspired New Religious Movements in Late Soviet Lithuania

In the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet Russia saw the emergence of countercultural movements and alternative religious communities, many of which were influenced by Asian religions, spiritual practices, and cultural traditions. After a short delay, these alternative religious and spiritual movements (including ISKCON, followers of Tibetan Buddhism, various yoga and meditation circles) spread across the USSR,

reaching Lithuania as well. Since atheism was the only correct and appropriate ideology in the Soviet Union, all forms and practices of any religion were treated as negative and harmful for the regime. Therefore, many of the new religious movements were forced to function as underground subcultures, often holding secret meetings and disseminating spiritual and religious teaching through self-published material. Consequently, these communities (ISKCON in particular) were closely monitored and persecuted by the KGB, which sought to control the public sphere not only through surveillance but also by shaping discourse on new religious movements. Therefore, this paper focuses on the public sphere and the 'mediascape' surrounding Asia-inspired religious communities and movements of Soviet Lithuania during the late Soviet period (the 1980s). By looking at both the state-controlled and disseminated media (newspapers and magazines) and independent press published secretly or in the diaspora, the paper investigates how these movements and their core beliefs and value systems were represented. It argues that the interaction between the public sphere and Asia-inspired new religious movements reflect broader socio-cultural and political transformation in Lithuania during a period of historical transition.

Agata Świerżowska , Jagiellonian University in Kraków

From cultural diplomacy to spiritual experimentation: institutional pathways of Indian spiritual traditions in socialist Poland

This paper examines the Polish-Indian Friendship Society [Towarzystwo Przyjaźni Polsko-Indyjskiej, TPPI] and its role as an institutional channel for the transmission and transformation of Indian spiritual traditions in socialist Poland. Contrary to the often-repeated interpretations that situate alternative religiosity primarily outside the structures of the socialist state, this study highlights the importance of official institutions as spaces that enabled its functioning. Established in 1957 to promote official state narratives about India and foster positive attitudes towards Polish-Indian cooperation, the TPPI organized a wide range of cultural and educational activities involving representatives from academia, culture, and diplomacy. Within this framework, yoga and meditation, which were gradually gaining recognition in Poland, were presented as elements of Indian culture and philosophy. This framing enabled their presence in official settings also in a secularized form, often as health-related or lifestyle practices. At the same time, the TPPI functioned as a semi-official space in which more experimental forms of spirituality could develop. From its early decades, the Society became a meeting platform for esoteric circles rooted in the interwar period. It also facilitated the circulation of foreign publications and privately reproduced materials, creating opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and engagement with spiritual practices of Indian origin. Archival materials suggest that the introduction of Indian spiritual traditions followed a dual trajectory of secularisation within official discourse and the reinterpretation and transformation of spiritually oriented practices within semi-official settings. As a result, Indian spiritual traditions in socialist Poland underwent processes of selection, adaptation, and transformation. This paper argues that the TPPI acted as a catalyst for these processes.

Mare Kõiva & Rahel Laura Vesik , Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu

Teaching of the Guru

Our paper is focusing on the Buddhism and Yoga movement in Soviet Estonia. Gunnar Aarma (6 August 1916 – 12 February 2001) was one of the most influential figures in the Estonian Buddhist movement during the Soviet period. Coming from a wealthy Estonian family whose parents were among the founding members of the Estonian Freemasons' lodge Kalevipoeg, he was involved in several movements. He was both an advocate of Freemasonry and an author and translator of esoteric literature, as well as a proponent and promoter of Buddhism and Yoga practices. We employ various methods to characterize his activities as a healer and the dissemination of his ideas through charitable networks, which included the exchange of books, and the publication of the unofficial literature (samizdat). Gunnar Aarma was an active author whose manuscripts on yoga teachings and Buddhism were widely popular. At the same time, recordings of his lectures, his views on health, and his perspectives on education and the world also circulated. An important factor were the large forums of various religious

and health movements in the 1970s–1980s, as well as home gatherings, lectures and courses, appearances in academic societies and health clubs. As an influential and experimental personality, he was highly visible alongside other local teachers.

OPEN PANEL V
Religious identities by degrees?
Critical Insights into Conversion, Continuity and Fluidity in the History of Religions

Alexander Van Der Haven , University of Bergen

Fluid Jewish Identities: Varieties of Becoming Jewish in the Dutch Republic

Fluid Jewish identities have been thoroughly researched across Jewish history, especially in studies of Iberian *conversos*, namely Jews who had converted to Christianity under duress. An exception is fluidity of identities of those who moved in the opposite direction, Gentiles becoming Jewish. These have received attention only in studies of antiquity and the modern period, but not in the long period in between from the early Middle Ages until the Modern Period. The reason is that in this period, Jews universally agreed on a uniform rabbinical conversion procedure, excluding as converts Gentiles who in this period did not undergo a formal conversion process, and scholars have followed suit. But what if the hegemonic Jewish standards of conversion of this period did not dominate social reality and also in this long period more fluid forms of becoming Jewish continued to exist? My presentation argues that this was indeed the case at least in one context, namely the early modern Dutch Republic. Based on extensive research in Amsterdam's Jewish and Christian archives, I will present a typology of convert identities that I compare those developed by scholars of late antiquity such as Shaye Cohen, and well as by researchers of contemporary conversion in the US and Israel.

Erki Lind, University of Tartu

Interreligious contact, conversion, and ritual community in 18th-century South India

When the first Lutheran Missionaries reached South India in the 18th century, they brought with them not only a Christianity-based understanding of religion, but also European notions of religious community. At the same time, they had to orient in a complex political and religious landscape of 18th-century South India with existing interreligious dynamics. With the Lutheran concept of *Volkskirche* (National Church) and the idea that every nation has its own religion, prevalent in South India at the time, the missionaries had to search for a balance where a conversion wouldn't result in exclusion from the previous community. A common approach for both catholic and protestant missions was to separate religion, community, and culture in a permanent negotiation about which cultural practices to accept and which to reject. However, this didn't address the main issue, which was that the question of what changes with the change of religious affiliation was left unsolved. Protestant Christians and the mainly Śaivist Hindus had different understandings of what constitutes a religious community. For one group, religious community was defined by the notions of confession and faith, whereas for the others, by birth, *jāti*, together with the social relations that follow from it. However, by highlighting the differences in concepts, it can be seen that both ideas lead to the same source. I will argue in this presentation that in both cases the religious community was defined as ritual community.

Daan F. Oostveen , University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht

Multiple Religious Belonging, Rhizomatic Belonging, and Conversion

The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging (MRB), individuals who do not limit themselves to the boundaries of religious traditions, but combine elements from various religious sources, is testimony to the fluidity of religious affiliation. In the framework of World Religions, MRB is understood to violate the idea of exclusive belonging to one religious tradition. In my recent book *An Exploration of Multiple Religious Belongings: Rhizomatic Belonging* (Routledge 2026), I argue that we should understand it as a form of rhizomatic belonging: non-hierarchical and non-linear convergences of plural belongings. The idea of conversion appears to run counter to the idea of multiple religious belongings. This idea, which has its origin in the concerns of Christian theologians, assumes exclusive adherence to a faith as the norm, moving from one to the next either as heresy or a return to the true

faith. The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging is testimony to the fact that conversions do not necessarily always adhere to such a neat trajectory. Rather, when people move from one religious environment to the next, there are always traces of the former religious affiliation being maintained or blended into the new one. In this paper I will show how conversion mostly makes sense within the logic of a normatively motivated inside perspective of religious traditions, which understands belonging exclusively. I will argue how rhizomatic belongings such as MRB run counter to the neat, boxed-in religious affiliation, but rather understands religiosities as an immanent frame in which conversions are continuous and multiple.

OPEN PANEL VI
Secular-Religious and Globalized Reconfigurations
in 21st-Century Western Spirituality

Katarina Plank, Karlstad University

Ex oriente lux: Harry Holst and spiritual cosmopolitanism in early 20th-century Sweden

This paper examines *spiritual cosmopolitanism* in early 20th-century Sweden through the microhistory of Harry Holst (1875–c 1932), a largely overlooked actor situated at the intersection of Asian-inspired religiosity, Spiritist networks, and alternative medicine. Born in Denmark, educated in the United States, and active in Sweden, Holst cultivated a transnational repertoire that drew on Hindu philosophy, Theosophical and Spiritist currents, and modern “mind-cure” idioms. His life offers an empirical lens on how “Eastern” religious resources circulated in Europe well before the late-20th-century boom in yoga and mindfulness, and how such resources reconfigured European categories of religion, health, and authority. The study foregrounds three analytical problematics. First, it reconstructs Holst’s participation in early global circuits of Eastern religiosity—engagements with Vivekananda-inflected ideas, travel imaginaries of India and Ceylon, and collaboration in international Spiritist milieus—thereby mapping the infrastructures through which Asian traditions became thinkable, legible, and desirable in Sweden. Second, it analyses Holst’s contested work as a homeopathic practitioner and public critic of biomedical authority (including controversies around vaccination), showing how epistemological critique and bodily practice provided a key site for the negotiation of “religion,” science, and secularity. Third, it explores religious pluralism and identity-making under legal and bureaucratic constraints, focusing on the striking fact that Holst and his household were registered as “Hindu” in the Swedish 1910 census, alongside conflicts over baptism and the limits of dissent in a nominally Lutheran polity. Methodologically, the paper combines archival sources (press material, parish and census records, state medical protocols, tax registers) with a close reading of Holst’s publications. By tracing how a self-styled “Eastern” religiosity was performed through medical practice, bureaucratic registrations, and transnational affiliation, the paper contributes to scholarship on Eastern spiritualities in Europe by historicizing boundary-making processes that continue to shape “religion” beyond national and confessional frames.

Dave Vliegthart, Maastricht University

Shifting Spirituality From Modern to Postmodern to Metamodern Secular-Religious Entanglements

Since World War II, the meaning of “spirituality” has undergone significant shifts. The worldviews of people who identify as “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNR) in particular have shifted from predominantly modern after the war to predominantly postmodern at the end of the twentieth century to predominantly metamodern at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These SBNRs have continuously entangled “secular” and “religious” beliefs and practices from “eastern” and “western” traditions, but in significantly different ways at different times during the past eighty years. Based on three historical examples of the MODERN New Age movement, the POSTMODERN movement surrounding Osho, and the METAMODERN post-Osho satsang network, this presentation explores ideal-typical differences in their secular-religious entanglements. It will pay especially attention to the most recent and (therefore) least researched phenomenon of spiritualities in metamodern contexts, based on Vermeulen and van den Akker’s (2010) theory on “metamodernism” and Eshelman’s (2008, 2025) theory on “performatism.”

Kai Shmushko, University of Amsterdam

Diasporic TeaEscapes: Chinese Tea Houses in European Cities as Post-secular Ritualism

Tea ceremonies have been connected to religious and spiritual traditions in China for centuries. South China is the historical birthplace of tea, where the *Camellia sinensis* (or *Thea sinensis*) plant was first cultivated, resulting in the production of the most consumable commercial drink in the world. In early imperial China, tea was first ritually embedded as a medicinal and religious drink (Liu 2020). The habit of tea drinking as a regular practice seems to have begun in medieval China with Buddhist monasteries, later spreading to the literati and then, probably quite rapidly, to the broader population (Benn 2005; Hinsch 2016). Elements from Daoism and Confucianism were also integrated into the tea ritualism, and through religious networks, tea also travelled to Japan, where tea ceremonies further proliferated and developed within the nexus of the culinary, cultural, and religious spheres. In recent years, tea houses have been popping up in European cities, operated predominantly by new Chinese migrants from the China and Taiwan. These establishments offer not only tea sorts and tools, but also workshops, classes, exhibitions, and meditation sessions, facilitating spaces for casual social events and organized gatherings. People in multicultural cities from various cultural backgrounds take part in tea rituals based on spiritual and aesthetic attributes derived from Chinese spirituality, such as: Harmony with nature (自然 *ziran*), Effortless action (无为 *Wu wei*), Balance of opposites (阴阳 *yin-yang*), and Simplicity and humility (简朴 *Jianpu*). Building on Material and Post-secular approaches to contemporary religion, this study examines tea houses as more-than-cultural and more-than-economic ventures, rendering them as a growing spiritual movement. The study is based on multisided fieldwork and examines case studies from Amsterdam, Brussels, and Berlin. It aims to explore the ways in which the philosophy, practice, and aesthetics of tea fill the spiritual needs of Europeans and Chinese tea house visitors. Considering national, cultural, and linguistic positionalities of participants, the research also asks how this new form of ritualism is negotiated into the lives of people? The paper suggests the example of “teaism” as a form of spirituality that transcends physical, and geographic, cultural and ethnic boundaries. At the same time, “teaism” still carries a heavy cultural and at times political baggage, as the practice taps into the cultural dynamics of territorialism, migratory experiences and transnationalism.

Sissel Undheim, University of Bergen

Bring in the lights! The Scandinavian cult of saint Lucy as selectively non-/religious

In international surveys, Sweden, Denmark and Norway tend to stand out as protestant/secularized countries. At irregular intervals since the Reformation, and with irregular intensity, they have been washed over by waves of anti-Catholic sentiments. The popular pan-Scandinavian celebrations of Saint Lucy's day on December 13 may thus seem somewhat paradoxical. Why this contemporary enthusiasm for a fourth-century Sicilian virgin martyr? Despite national as well as local variation, the recognizable aesthetics of Saint Lucy processions appear in diverse settings and across a range of media. Drawing on fieldwork in Norwegian kindergartens, schools and churches, combined with analyses of recent media representations, I wish to demonstrate how Norwegian Saint Lucy processions tend to foreground aestheticization, affect, and, to some degree, playfulness, while the narrative of martyrdom and sainthood is comparatively relegated to the margins. The aim of this paper is to discuss how Norwegian, and perhaps also Scandinavian Saint Lucy traditions have evolved into hybrid public and semi-public rituals that reflect contemporary cultural negotiations. Collectively as well as individually, participation in these celebrations can thus be communicated and conceived as both non-religious, religious and potentially anything beyond and in-between.

OPEN PANEL VII
Reframing Digital Religion Studies:
Classical Theories and New Perspectives on the Post-Secular Sacred

Emanuele Palumbo , University of Padua | University of Turin

Digital Time as Sacred Time. Revisiting Classical Models of Religious Temporality in Digital Environments

The relationship between religion and time has been a foundational topic within the History of Religions over the last century. From the analysis of ritual repetition and the eternal return of myth to the distinction between sacred and profane time, classical scholarship has interpreted religions as systems that structure, interrupt, and qualitatively differentiate time. Religious traditions have been understood by different religious sciences not only as complexes of belief or practice, but as symbolic frameworks useful for organizing both collective rhythms and individual transitional moments, while providing existential orientation within the flow of historical time and the fear of impermanence associated with it. This paper proposes to reactivate these traditional categories in order to interrogate digital religious experiences as sites of temporal reconfiguration. From the consideration of religious time as an exclusively social structure (Sociology) to a purely subjective and internal view of temporality (Psychology); from the irreconcilable rupture between profane and sacred time (Phenomenology) to the centrality of dehistoricization as a mythical-ritual reintegration of human presence (Italian Historicism), this paper interprets these models not as mutually exclusive, but as complementary lenses through which to examine how digital temporality may still be read in terms of meaningful differentiation, functional repetition, and symbolic regulation. Rather than considering digital temporality as an undifferentiated temporal unicum, the study examines how the theoretical tools developed to interpret the qualitative differentiation of time in religious experiences remain analytically productive in the digital age. In fact, the observation of the dynamics of foreverism and presentification typical of digital spaces and media seems to challenge religious temporality from at least three interrelated perspectives central to the discussion: ontological, epistemological, and social. By bringing classical models of religious time into dialogue with contemporary digital temporality – often described in terms of asynchrony, atemporality, and “timeless time” – this article argues that digital environment does not simply dissolve the sacred/profane distinctions, the dichotomy between collective and individual time, or the chronological structure of rituals. Instead, it reformulates, renews, and reactivates them under new technological conditions. Time thus remains a fundamental component of religious phenomena, even, and perhaps especially, when it takes place in the digital context, yet it still remains partially understudied in Digital Religion Studies.

Marta Kołodziejska , University of Warsaw

Why Mediatization Should Change How We See Religious Institutions. Reflections on the Intersections Between Sociology of Religion and Digital Sociology

The development of digital media has irreversibly changed all domains of social life, religion included. Religious institutions have been part of these transformations, with new organizational, theological, and ethical challenges emerging. In this paper I argue that despite rich interdisciplinary scholarship, the dominant understanding of the active role of religious organizations in mediatization processes needs revising. This reflection is grounded in the frameworks of deep mediatization (Hepp, 2020) and media settlers (Hall, Kołodziejska, Radde-Antweiler, 2023). The paper presents findings from a mixed-methods analysis of religious media, official church documents, and interviews with church leaders in Poland and Ireland (2020–2023), conducted within the RECOV-19 project. The COVID-19 pandemic forced religious institutions into accelerated engagement with digital media, producing a rich natural experiment for the study of religion. Material from three Christian churches – the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Ireland/NI, the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and Jehovah’s Witnesses – shows that

religious organizations actively participate in mediatization on various levels: creating and adopting digital infrastructure, using digital media to attain their goals, acknowledging algorithms and affordances, and formulating ethical and theological concerns about digital media. Drawing on several examples, I highlight the need for an interdisciplinary perspective to encompass the variety of ways these institutions engage with and transform digital media. Rather than being passive recipients of trends or “lagging behind,” religious organizations should be viewed as pursuing their own goals through digital media. This entails that “active role” and “innovation” in the religious context must also be reformulated.

Rebekka Rieser, University of Zurich

Reframing Religious Visibility: A Multidimensional Model of Decodability and Visibility in Digital Public Spheres

Religion in contemporary societies is neither simply present nor absent from public life—a question long debated in both religious studies and political theory—but is continuously classified, framed, and rendered recognizable within historically specific regimes of visibility characteristic of post-secular contexts. In times of overlapping crises—ranging from climate change and political polarization to social fragmentation—the complexity of identifying and defining religion further increases. Rather than disappearing, religion and spirituality continue to assume diverse roles, functions, and forms—serving as moral resources, sources of identity and conflict, modes of critique, and practices of coping and meaning-making. While these functions are not new, they gain renewed societal significance in such contexts and are rearticulated in increasingly multidimensional and digitally mediated ways. At the same time, digital transformation fundamentally reshapes how publics are structured, producing fragmented, networked, and algorithmically curated environments in which attention, legitimacy, and visibility are unevenly distributed. Drawing on the distinction between public and personal culture, religion operates across both stabilized, widely shared classificatory systems and more diffuse, individualized forms of meaning. Digitalization intensifies these dynamics by facilitating deinstitutionalized, hybrid, and often weakly marked forms of religiosity. Classical approaches such as Luckmann’s concept of invisible religion, as well as theories of lived and everyday religion and popular or banal religion (e.g., Ammerman, Hall, Knoblauch, Hjarvard), have long emphasized that religious meaning extends beyond institutional and doctrinal forms. Building on these insights, research in digital religion, particularly Campbell’s typology of networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality, demonstrates how digital media environments fundamentally reconfigure the conditions under which religion is negotiated. In digitally mediated and platformed contexts, religion becomes increasingly deinstitutionalized, fluid, and embedded in hybrid, networked, and affectively charged forms of communication that blur boundaries between religious, cultural, and secular domains. Against this backdrop, invisibility can no longer be understood merely as the absence of institutional religion. Rather, this paper conceptualizes invisibility as a problem of recognition: religious and sacred meanings may remain culturally embedded, decontextualized, or hybridized in ways that render them less readable as religion. This applies not only to diffuse or implicit forms of spirituality, but also to institutionalized religion, which may become difficult to recognize when detached from familiar cultural contexts or shared interpretative frameworks. Religious language and symbolism may circulate within wellness cultures, gender discourses, environmental activism, or political movements, often appearing in unfamiliar or recontextualized forms and frequently in response to contemporary societal and individual crises. These classificatory processes are inseparably linked to visibility, understood as the mediated public presence of actors, ideas, and narratives. Visibility itself is structured through processes of perceptibility, amplification, and valuation, which determine what becomes noticeable, prominent, and socially consequential. However, existing scholarship has tended to focus either on the visibility of religion or on its diffusion into implicit and everyday forms, lacking an integrative framework that captures both dimensions simultaneously. This is particularly relevant in times of crisis, where religious influence operates not only through explicit and publicly visible forms but also through implicit and non-decoded pathways. Religion may function as a source of resilience and

empowerment or as an expression and amplification of crisis, while also shaping whether social orientations appear pluralistic or exclusionary. Addressing this gap, the paper introduces a multidimensional model structured around two analytically distinct yet interrelated axes: visibility—the mediated public presence of religion shaped by perceptibility, amplification, and valuation—and decodability, referring to the degree to which phenomena are recognized and classified as religious within specific interpretative frameworks. The model reveals a central paradox of contemporary religion in post-secular societies: institutional and clearly decodable forms may decline in visibility, while religious meanings persist—and often expand—in hybrid, implicit, and less recognizable forms. To further theorize this transformation, the model is extended into a four-dimensional framework by incorporating two additional dimensions. A narrative dimension captures whether religion operates as a source of resilience and empowerment or as an expression and amplification of crisis. A normative orientation dimension captures whether religious or spiritual expressions articulate exclusive, boundary-drawing worldviews or pluralistic, dialogical orientations. Within this framework, decodability is operationalized along a continuum from explicit to implicit forms of religion, while visibility is reconceptualized as a higher-order dimension of visibility regimes that structure how religion becomes salient and socially consequential in platformed publics. These regimes encompass both salience—the quantitative amplification of content—and valuation, referring to its qualitative framing and evaluation. The model thus makes explicit the continuity between classical theories of religion and contemporary digital religion research, demonstrating how core questions of classification, visibility, and meaning persist while being fundamentally reconfigured in platformed publics. By synthesizing classical theories of religion with insights from communication and platform studies, the paper positions the multidimensional model as both a conceptual and methodological contribution. It provides a systematic tool for empirically mapping religious transformations in digital publics, illustrates its analytical potential through selected empirical examples and exploratory applications, and advances theoretical debates on how the sacred is reconfigured under conditions of digital mediation.

Giulia Evolvi , University of Bologna

Space, body, materiality: rethinking digital religion through the case study of Catholic women's ordination activism

The field of digital religion needs to consider the rapid transformations of digital platforms and the rise of AI. Starting from the premises that materiality is embedded in digital religion, this paper argues that online mediations – or, given the complexity of today's digital technologies, *hypermediations* – need to be theoretically approached through two considerations: first, physical spaces are central in understanding of online narratives and discourses; second, bodies need to be considered as sites of hypermediated religious practices through an intersectional lens that would consider power dynamics. Interviews and content analysis of social media pages illustrate these two points by means of the example of Catholic women who campaign against the Vatican to become priests, a prerogative reserved for men in the Catholic Church. Specifically, the two considerations will be discussed through the example of mediated protests in Rome: regarding the creation of space, these women place themselves outside of the Vatican to demarcate a space they are not allowed to enter; and in relation to bodies, their being women shows how marginalization occurs in the Vatican, where the priest must be male. This is hypermediated through digital media, which hold the three functions of amplifying actions globally, reposting pictures of spaces and bodies to create online communities around shared sensitivities, and using said pictures as material prompts to discuss religious authority. Hence, an attention to space and body would help focus on materiality to offer venues for reflections on the hypermediated character of activist actions.

OPEN PANEL VIII
Sense of Safety in Religious Communities:
Embodiment, Emotions, and Existential Perspectives

Anne Birgitta Pessi & Jenni Spännäri, University of Helsinki

Diverse Dimensions of Sense of Safety: The Role of Religion, and How to Study It

This paper presents the ongoing research and emerging results of the research project "Contested Constructions of Sense of Safety in Religious Spaces" (CoCo), currently conducted at the University of Helsinki. The project investigates how the sense of safety is constructed, experienced, and contested within and in relation to religious spaces. Recognising that safety is not merely a physical condition but a deeply existential and emotional experience, CoCo explores how religious environments can both foster and undermine feelings of safety. Developing methodological tools for spatially approaching the sense of safety in religious communities, understood as embodied, emotional and existential spaces, is one of the major aims of the project. CoCo integrates insights from the politics of belonging, including issues of recognition, exclusion, and identity to highlight how the spatial experiences are shaped by broader social and cultural dynamics, paying attention to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal levels. The paper introduces the Spiral Model for analysing the sense of safety in religious spaces developed within the project. This model emphasises methodological pluralism, encouraging researchers to use qualitative methods, while remaining sensitive to the spatial, emotional, and symbolic complexity of religious environments. The aim is to offer a flexible yet rigorous framework for capturing the multi-layered and contested nature of safety in religious spaces. In the CoCo project, the model has been applied to diverse cases, including Jewish ritual baths, LGBTIQ+ Muslim experiences, and the role of art and embodiment in Finnish Lutheran spirituality, which will be highlighted through examples in the paper.

Teemu Pauha & Ritva Palmén, University of Helsinki

Speaking the Unspeakable: Mysticism as a Heuristic Model for Affect Research

Content analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and other widely used qualitative research methods are grounded in the interpretation of (typically linguistic) meanings. Yet when studying emotions, the phenomena that are often most intriguing and complex tend to be nonlinguistic—or even resist verbalization altogether. Bodily emotional experience and expression lose much of their distinctive character when forced into words and sentences. The difficulty of articulating such experiences is also characteristic of so-called mystical experiences. Throughout the history of religion, prominent mystics have repeatedly emphasized the ineffability of their experiences; yet, paradoxically, they have also produced thousands of pages attempting to describe them. In this paper, we examine the linguistic strategies mystics have used in their efforts to express the inexpressible. These strategies include negation, analogy, metaphor, symbol, descriptions of embodiment, and silence. We argue that the language of mysticism offers a heuristic model for analyzing affects and other experiences that are difficult to articulate. To support this claim, we present examples from our own research materials, demonstrating how linguistic strategies characteristic of mystical discourse are employed therein. We also present concrete suggestions for identifying traces of non-linguistic affects in textual materials.

Liri Sofi Tourgeman, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

Between Halakha and Egalitarianism: safety and discontent in Orthodox Jewish Communities in Contemporary Europe

The current project examines egalitarian trends within contemporary European Orthodox Jewry. Despite an increase in qualitative studies on European Orthodoxy, much research has focused on what sets Orthodox Jews apart from the majority societies in which they live. Such research risks missing out on intra-Jewish dynamics and on processes occurring within, or even enabled by, Orthodox Judaism. This

may be why research on a major development in Orthodoxy – tendencies towards egalitarian practices – is so sparse. This sparsity is placed in sharp contrast to the extent to which Orthodox circles are concerned about this development. This project addresses this gap by exploring how Orthodox European communities, straddling along both sides of the border of hegemonic Orthodoxy Jewry, work to shift gendered boundaries within Orthodox Judaism. Through insights from ethnographic fieldwork, the current paper focuses on the dynamics of frustration and empowerment among the interlocutors of the project, and the sense of safety – and lack thereof – that they bring about. It will explore issues such as attachment to Orthodoxy both as an institution and an abstract spirituality; the experience and concerns of parenting in egalitarian-tending Orthodox milieus; and personal skill-building through embodied ritual practices. By considering both Jewish and ethnographic approaches to knowledge and experience, the project seeks to avoid the dual pitfall of studying Jews without studying Judaism, and studying Judaism without studying Jews. Nevertheless, the exploration serves as an anchor point for questioning broader issues related to belonging, sense of safety and marginalisation in the European religious landscape.

OPEN PANEL IX
Art-Related Methodologies in the Study of Religion:
Intersections and Collaborations

Paride Stortini , Ghent University

Consecrating Art, Evaluating Religion: Theoretical Intersections between Contemporary Art and the Study of Japanese Buddhism

What happens to the value of a piece of contemporary art, often used also in fashion, when it is displayed in a Japanese Buddhist temple? Can art practices such as collection, display, connoisseurship be applied as theoretical concepts to analyze the construction of religious identity and community within contemporary Japanese Buddhism? Building on Oscar Salemink's theoretical suggestion to combine analysis of global contemporary art and hierarchies of value, this presentation will experiment with global art market theory and applying it to the study of contemporary Japanese Buddhism, specifically using case studies where art and Buddhism intersect. Recent scholarship has questioned the separation between the construction of the modern concept of art and the Buddhist context of late nineteenth century, investigating the porous boundaries between museums and temples. This presentation will go further, suggesting the use of theory on art practices to analyze case studies from contemporary Japanese Buddhist contexts. Among the case studies: a Buddhist new religious movement that uses collection of premodern Buddhist art and displays it in specifically designed architectural spaces charged with spiritual language; the way artistic value and religious identity are reciprocally shaped within the context of the temple Yakushiji, where ancient art is combined with the artistic reimagination of the Silk Road by nihonga artist Hirayama Ikuo; the language of spirituality in Kusama Yayoi's art and the display of her art at Zōjōji temple in Tokyo, at the same time as the launch of a new collaboration for a Louis Vuitton collection.

Alexandra Bergholm & Terhi Utriainen, University of Helsinki

Exploring Vernacular Cultural Imagination: Religious, Spiritual and Secular Perspectives in the Reception of Angel-Themed Art

This paper presents the methodology and preliminary findings of our research project, which employed a photo-elicitation method to explore how diverse audiences in Finland responded to contemporary angel-themed photographs in exhibition settings around the Helsinki metropolitan area. By conducting impromptu interviews with exhibition visitors, we collected and subsequently analysed approximately 2000 verbal comments from viewers through the lens of vernacular cultural imagination to understand how the figure of the angel was received, and what kinds of religious, spiritual, and secular interpretations the artistic imagery elicited. In addition to the verbal feedback from our audiences, we will also discuss unique visual material created by volunteer participants who collaborated with our artist to produce their own angel-themed photographs. Both the verbal comments and the new visual artworks are analysed in relation to recent sociological research on the pluralization of worldviews in Western context. Finally, we will briefly evaluate the potential of our exploratory methodological approach, which combines visual elicitation with the perspective of vernacular cultural imagination.

Pasqualina Eckerström , University of Helsinki

ProfanArt: Blasphemy and art as High-Risk Activism in Contemporary Iran

This paper explores how artistic practices associated with the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement in Iran function as multimodal forms of high-risk activism. It gives particular attention to blasphemy, not merely as a theological transgression, but as a means of regulating discourse and authority, a mechanism that artists strategically confront and subvert through creative expression. Using on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this study analyses a corpus of protest songs, embodied performances, visual

artworks, and films to investigate how meaning is constructed across linguistic, visual, embodied, and digital modes within contexts of repression. Drawing on social movement theory, this paper argues that blasphemous artistic practices emerge from conditions of dangerous visibility. These works not only challenge repression, but also actively forge authenticity within subcultural networks where dedication, trust, and solidarity are cultivated and sustained. In this context, blasphemy functions not only as a marker of authenticity but also as a strategic practice that resists and exposes oppression, while holding open the possibility of transforming conditions of repression. By tracing a structured analytical pathway from coding and clustering to theoretical synthesis, the study suggests that artistic practices in this context transcend mere representation: prohibited art becomes a crucial vehicle for resistance.

Carolina Ivanescu , University of Amsterdam

'You must experience it': Art, Embodiment, and Knowledge Production in Shamanic Research

Early in my research, one of the shamans with whom I had been working with for years asserted that key aspects of shamanism could not be understood without direct experience. Taking this seriously as a methodological challenge, we undertook a series of shamanic sessions over several years, treating experience itself as an object of critical inquiry. These encounters were documented through field diaries and artistic practice, generating a heterogeneous body of material that includes embodied, visual, and textual forms. This article reflects on that long-term embodied engagement not as a route to privileged access or insider knowledge, but as a method that produces specific forms of situated understanding while simultaneously introducing new constraints, blind spots, and power dynamics. By critically examining the role of artistic practice in mediating experiential knowledge, the article interrogates the assumption that embodiment guarantees understanding. More broadly, it asks how claims to experiential authority operate in the study of contemporary shamanism, and how art-based and embodied methods can be mobilized without suspending analytical distance.

OPEN PANEL X
Religion and Literature (II):
Exploring Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature and Religion

Mattias Brand, University of Fribourg
Remembering the Future: Obituaries of Erich von Däniken

The remembrance of controversial figures in academic and religious contexts is shaped by the classificatory frameworks through which they are interpreted and contested. Erich von Däniken illustrates this process. He gained international prominence with *Chariots of the Gods?* (1969), arguing for the influence of aliens on human history, and became the subject of polarized debate. Was this a literary work of fiction? Was it a serious piece of scholarship or rather a first step towards establishing a new religious movement? This paper will examine how the competing labels that came up during the six decades of controversy shape his posthumous memory (January 2026). It reconstructs von Däniken's self-positioning and tense relations to adjacent intellectual and literary fields, as well as the major strands of academic criticism. Drawing on 182 German – and English-language obituaries, supplemented by selected French and Dutch examples, the study identifies dominant interpretive patterns, showing where and how the memory of von Däniken as author was shaped through insider and outsider classificatory strategies.

Grațiela Benga, „Titu Maiorescu” Institute, Romanian Academy
Church and Religious (Dis)belief: Beyond a Spatial Figure and Relational Phenomena in Contemporary Romanian Poetry

The ongoing evolution of technology raises fundamental questions about the traditional meanings of religion, as well as about how literature might mirror/ reshape human beliefs and interactions with the church. In this context, the paper aims to explore how a spatial figure (both a mnemonic space and a symbol of absence) turns into a geo-symbolic configuration and brings about an exquisite transgression of spaces. How does religious (dis)belief spatialize the native area and the planet itself? How do we understand (not only in terms of aesthetic aspects) poetry as a mode of subject formation? On the other hand, some fluctuations the relational phenomena have undergone over the past four decades may highlight the strained dialectics between marginality and centrality, salvation and (potential) act of hybris. Starting from some poems written mainly by Magda Cârneci, Ruxandra Cesereanu, and Moni Stănilă, the paper examines at what extent the poetics of transgression is connected to a metaphysical and aesthetic epistemology.

Daria Sterbenc Erker, Humboldt University Berlin | University of Ljubljana
Literature and religions in ancient Rome

This paper explores ancient literature as an epistemic space for negotiating the lived religions of Rome. It focuses on how ancient authors represented traditional rituals and transformed these ritual performances into transgressions of religious norms in their texts. As the religions of Rome were dynamic and relational phenomena, ancient authors reimagined the appropriation of rituals, ritual customs and rules by individuals in their own times, emphasizing the existence of ritual norms and their transgressions. By depicting ritual performers with high social and political standing as religious deviants, ancient authors undermined their authority. Literary depictions of religious deviance aimed to evoke strong emotions in attentive readers, inviting them to visualize the depicted religious practices and react emotionally to religious deviance. I will argue that ancient literature was an important means of creating religious meaning, often debating the fluid frontier between socially appropriate and inappropriate religious practices. Additionally, literary depictions of cults, worshippers, and their rituals constituted a dynamic

arena for the reproduction of religious knowledge that was open to change and an important medium for social and cultural negotiation.

István Keul , University of Bergen

Ways of Seeing: Poets and Ethnographers in a Pilgrimage City

One potential way to methodologically integrate literary texts into the academic study of religions is by examining them not as mere go-to sources for illustrating a religious concept or practice, but as fictional representations *and* alternative descriptions of social realities we as ethnographers and religion scholars encounter in the field. In this presentation, close readings of two contemporary poems on Varanasi, the pilgrimage city on the Ganges, serve as points of departure for reflections on their relationship to Varanasi-related academic texts, as well as on their possible practical uses in the study of religions, both in the classroom and in research. In poetic renderings of a city often selectively envisioned as sacred, vibrant, and shining, Arundhati Subramaniam and Kedarnath Singh provide not only valuable visual imagery and thematic density, but – more importantly – a sense of the ambivalences and nuanced fine-tuning that are indispensable for any form of cultural exploration.

Doris Günther-Kriegel , MLU Halle-Wittenberg

Of Princesses, Promises, and Pleasures: How Religion is Addressed in Literature About Female Genital Mutilation

The study of religion lacks an examination of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) as material-discursive practices by which religion is portrayed, negotiated and contested. If these practices are considered at all from a religious studies perspective, traces of them are sought in discourses on development, in historical archives, in ethnographic studies and in discussions on reproductive medicine. The observation that FGM/C is also a subject matter in literary texts has so far been neglected. In short stories or novels set in East African contexts, FGM/C is mainly portrayed as a socio-cultural tradition. Therefore, the question arises as to how religion is depicted in these texts in intersection with culture, gender, and sexuality. To explore this question, Nawal El Saadawi's essayistic analysis *Women and Sex*, Waris Dirie's memoir *Desert Flower* and Ntailan Lolkoki's fairytale *The Kingdom of Watetu and Songaland* are discussed. Using FGM/C as an example, this article therefore advocates for the consideration of literary texts into research projects in order to broaden the intersectional perspective on religion. Furthermore, this approach highlights the rhetoricity of language itself, calling into question the distinction between literary and non-literary texts.

OPEN PANEL XI

Decolonisation and the Study of Religion

Aaron W. Hughes, University of Rochester | University of Stockholm
Whose Decolonialization?

If theory and method (or critical religion or whatever else we choose to call it) teaches us anything it is that our terms and categories—all our terms and categories—are loaded and often saturated with ideological intent. And that it is our goal not simply to use and recycle them, but to subject them to critical examination. The proposed paper seeks to take one such term, “decolonialization” (*i.e.*, as in “decolonize the study of religion” or “decolonize the study of religion x”) and subject it to analytic scrutiny. What is it? Where does it come from? Does it mean the same thing to different constituencies? And so on. Using the subfields of Islamic studies and Indigenous studies this paper seeks to add some theoretical and methodological nuance to a term that is often overused and underthought.

Hadje Cresencio Sadjé, University of Vienna
Decolonial or Neo-Colonial? The Risk of a Postcolonial Comfort Zone in the Study of Religion

This paper critically analyzes the engagement of postcolonial theory with the academic study of religion. This has unintentionally established an intellectual comfort zone that potentially risks perpetuating the very colonial dynamics it aims to dismantle. While postcolonial critiques have productively challenged the field’s Eurocentric foundations, unmasking the culturally particular origins of categories such as “religion,” “world religions,” and “secularisation,” this paper argues that such critiques often remain epistemologically anchored within Western intellectual frameworks. Drawing predominantly on Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, postcolonial scholarship on religion has frequently marginalized non-Western epistemologies, indigenous conceptualizations of the sacred, and alternative modes of scholarly engagement. The decolonial turn, as articulated by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, pushes beyond critique toward more radical intervention. For Maldonado-Torres, decolonial critique represents an “unfinished project of decolonization” that challenges not only the content but the very foundations of Western knowledge production. It demands exposing how the modern concepts of religion and race were mutually constituted and, together, became central categories in mapping subjectivity and alterity in the modern world. Where postcolonialism emphasizes cultural hybridity and discursive resistance, decoloniality insists on delinking from Eurocentric epistemic frameworks altogether. The decolonial focus on race, racism, and identity politics fundamentally reshapes the field by exposing how the secular religious binary, central to the discipline’s self-definition, is itself a product of colonial modernity. The paper engages the decolonial principle of “nothing about us, without us” to ask whether this destabilizes the field’s traditional etic orientation. It demands participatory intervention that centers subaltern religious practitioners as knowledge producers rather than objects of study. It further examines how the discipline’s responses to critiques of its secular legacy remain contested, particularly as religiously committed scholars increasingly claim epistemic authority in opposition to the field’s founding distinction between studying and practicing religion. Drawing on the framework that postcolonial theory risks becoming a comfort zone that accommodates scholars within Western knowledge economies while claiming radical critique, this paper argues that, without genuine epistemic pluralism that centers non-Western theorists and without material engagement with communities, decolonial gestures risk becoming performative rather than transformative.

Fatima Dhanani, SOAS, University of London
Decolonising the Lebanese Sectarian Framework through Epistemic Negotiation

This paper utilises Aníbal Quijano’s “coloniality of power” matrix and Walter Mignolo’s concept of “epistemic disobedience” to interrogate the production and governance of “religion” within modern

legal frameworks. I argue that the management of religion in Lebanon functions as a colonial classification system that sustains social and political hierarchies, while simultaneously destabilising the presumed neutrality of the religion/secular divide. Rather than viewing these structures solely through colonial imposition, this study examines how local actors actively renegotiate and reconstitute these categories through kinship and institutionalisation. Using Lebanon's system of legal pluralism as a case study, this paper explores how sectarian governance operates as an ongoing "religion-making" process central to the modern nation-state. Drawing on Abdulkader Tayob's research, I reframe Lebanon's legal landscape not as a static colonial inheritance, but as a site of intellectual resistance and reconstruction. Moving beyond reductionist accounts, this study foregrounds the sustained intellectual labour through which local actors redefine the terms by which religion is known, governed, and lived. In doing so, it positions these practices as forms of epistemic negotiation that challenge external analytical authority. Finally, the paper argues that if legal pluralism is oriented toward pluralist values, it can shift from a mechanism of colonial management to a method for recognising lived diversity. Reformers like Muhammad 'Abduh mobilise the category of religion to imagine alternative social futures, suggesting that pluralism offers a grounded pathway for decolonial engagement that is both locally generated and analytically generative for the study of religion.

Jørn Borup, Aarhus University

Rethinking Decolonisation: Critical Reflections on a Critical Turn

While not yet having achieved the status of a general theory, decolonisation as 'epistemologies from the Global South' has become a key concept for some critical voices also in the study of religion. Building on postcolonial theory, decolonial critique questions the colonial foundations of knowledge production, which still continue to shape epistemological and institutional misrepresentations as well as asymmetrical power relations. Beyond the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism, textualization, essentialisation and cultural evolution dressed as universalisation, decolonial critique incorporates notions of race and identity and as 'applied postcolonialism' promotes post-secular activism as theoretical and methodological framework for radical transformation. While acknowledging aspects of 'soft decolonisation' as relevant for critical awareness of the field's metanarratives, this paper also raises some critical issues about 'hard decolonisation', understood as identity-based and activist scholarship, often with a subjectivist and religious orientation. It is argued that arm's length principles, analytical constructs and cross-cultural comparisons – tracing both genealogies and analogies – are essential as constituent points of orientation and identity markers for the academic study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*).

Martin Thomas Riexinger, Aarhus Universitet

Why "Decolonial" Explanations of Sunni-Shia Sectarianism Are Questionable

The surge of violent conflicts along the Sunni-Shia faultline in the aftermath of the Arab rebellions in 2010/11 has led to an increased interest in the historical roots of these conflicts. In opposition to the explanation as manifestations of "ancient hatreds" or recent political machinations, some authors have alerted to the importance of the colonial period with regard to the Fertile Crescent, South Asia as well as the Gulf States. While a turn to "moyenne durée" explanations is as such welcome, some of these approaches are problematic, as they overemphasize the importance of colonial policies through categorization in census and the like for the emergence of sectarian conflicts. On the methodological level such an approach is problematic as both diachronic comparisons with pre-modern Islamicate societies as well as synchronic comparisons with non-colonized countries (Saudi Arabia, Turkey) show that sectarian conflicts exist(ed) in these contexts as well. This is not to deny the importance of colonial policies, but they did not "invent" tensions but influenced how these tensions were played out, and to analyze that aspect is the task of the researcher. Relevant both from the methodological and normative angle is the paternalism underlying this approach built on the assumption that local populations were as

a matter of principle only conceiving of themselves in a narrow framework of regional power relations and not as parts of larger communities committed to transcendent values.

OPEN PANEL XII

The Construction of Sacred Places in Contemporary Time

Abdurrahman Gad Elrab , University of Milano

Praying Without Mosques? Islamic Worship Spaces in Italy Between Religious Freedom and Spatial Constraints

The Italian landscape is characterised by a constellation of places of worship belonging to different religious traditions. However, although religious freedom is extensively protected by the Constitution, geographical context and religious affiliation significantly influence the actual exercise of worship in the country. Indeed, religious freedom, and specifically the right to worship, in Italy is governed by a complex regulatory framework, in which a primary role is played by regional legislations, denoted by heterogeneous and plural regulatory levels. This complexity represents a real challenge to the right to worship, not only for new religious experiences, but also for traditional religions of recent emergence in the nowadays Italian society. In this context, the case study of the Muslim community in Italy is particularly interesting. Despite representing a well-known and widespread religion, both globally and within the country, it does not benefit from the favourable legal framework applicable to other religious communities. Given the application of the ordinary legislation mentioned above, Muslims, depending on where they are, may pray in a mosque, in a basement, or only at home. This phenomenon illustrates how legal regulations can profoundly shape both the religious experience and the spaces in which it is practised. Through the analysis of the places currently used by Italian Muslims for worship, this paper aims to identify the causes underlying this circumstance and its implications for both the specific religious community and the exercise of religious freedom in contemporary Italy.

Maximilian Dinu-Gavrilciuc , "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest

Liminality in New Sacred Sites: The Bruder Klaus Field Chapel

Classical sacred sites often derive their status from historical relics or mythic narratives, while contemporary sacred sites challenge this monumental permanence through the manipulation of materiality and atmosphere to evoke a sense of the divine. This paper examines the Bruder Klaus field chapel (2007) designed by Peter Zumthor in Mechernich, Germany, as a case study for characteristic features in modern holy sites. Unlike established sites defined by historical continuity, communal rituals and fixed iconographies, the chapel embodies emergent characteristics: liminality and radical sensory immersion through a rigorous reduction of form that forces a direct bodily encounter with elemental forces. Drawing on phenomenology – particularly Juhanni Pallasmaa's haptic approach – the chapel's charred larch interior and oculus evoke a primordial void, inviting personal theophany over collective dogma. Victor Turner's liminality framework illuminates its transitional potency, as the structure's stark isolation and ascetic geometry fosters anti-structural states, in contrast to the structured *communitas* of pilgrimage hubs like Jerusalem's holy sites. Sociologically, drawing on Peter Berger's "heretical imperative," it reflects modern pluralism and focus on signals of transcendence, attracting seekers of diverse backgrounds via architectural affect rather than doctrinal authority. Analysis of visitor accounts and Zumthor's design intent reveals how these features sacralize the peripheral and mundane, prioritizing existential encounter over historical gravitas. The chapel thus signals a paradigm shift: new sacred sites privilege phenomenological immediacy and fluid identity, redefining sacrality as an intimate, architecturally mediated liminality amid contemporary spiritual fragmentation.

Butai Kang, Minzu University of China

Transnational Diaspora and the Reconstruction of Sacred Space: Materiality and Healing at the Atherton Hou Wang Temple

Aligning with the EASR 2026 theme "Religions 360°," this paper examines the Atherton Hou Wang Temple (est. 1903) in North Queensland to elucidate how marginalized Chinese migrants reconstructed a localized "sacred canopy" within an exclusionary colonial topography. Moving beyond traditional economic narratives of the Australasian diaspora, this study integrates Peter Berger's sociology of knowledge and C.K. Yang's concept of "diffused religion" to analyze the temple's spatial and material adaptations. Through a mixed-methods approach of historical sociology, material culture, and textual analysis, the research demonstrates that the temple transcended conventional ritualistic worship. Architecturally, it represents a strategic diaspora synthesis: an exterior "localized shell" constructed from Australian cedar and British corrugated iron, which camouflaged and safeguarded an orthodox "Chinese core" of intricately carved, imported altars. Furthermore, textual analysis of the temple's surviving medical divination slips (yaoqian) reveals its vital function as a primary healthcare provider and psychological defense mechanism against tropical diseases and severe racial anxieties. In the absence of traditional clan networks, the temple effectively institutionalized secular welfare and consolidated transnational social capital for the laboring class. Finally, by tracing the site's metamorphosis from an active migrant sanctuary to a contemporary heritage artifact managed by the National Trust, this paper affirms that the spatial, material, and sociological dimensions of migrant temples offer an indispensable lens for understanding the resilience and evolution of diaspora religions.

Elza Kuyk, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Church buildings as territory of both conflicts and peacebuilding

In the late 16th century the catholic church buildings in the Netherlands were brutally claimed by the protestant as part of the dynamics of the reformation, intertwined with the Eighty Years' War. The catholic church interior and objects were destroyed. In contemporary society the upkeep of these church buildings is often too costly for the protestant faith communities which continue to worship there. Sharing the space with others has become very common. While protestant Christians do not have a concept of (sacred) space, the feeling that the church building should be used in accordance with their values and with respect to its history, is certainly there. The multiple use of church buildings is often facilitated by new governance models and legally new owners. The question of who can define and interpret current transformations and who will decide about the practicalities is a daily issue. The protestant faith communities need to (re)define their role in these processes. Maybe relating to their own former role in history might become part of that reflection, depending on how they see themselves as part of heritage debates, similar to how these debates develop regarding colonial histories and the like. This may include also peacebuilding efforts. The renewed public use of church buildings effect the conditions for worship practices. At the same time, ongoing liturgy affirms the architecture and history of the church building, while the specific character of the congregation further defines how this takes shape.

OPEN PANEL XIII Steps in Theorizing Religion

Markus Altena Davidsen , Leiden University

Image Schemas in Theories of Religion: Towards a Typology of Conceptual Models

All theories of religion make use of conceptual models. This talk invites metatheoretical reflection on the matter by offering a preliminary typology of conceptual model types used for theorizing (aspects of) religion. In constructing this typology, I draw inspiration from the field of cognitive semantics, in particular the work of Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, and Leonard Talmy on how image schemas (such as the container and the path) structure thought and language. My thesis is that the image schemas that structure thought and natural language also structure conceptual modelling and that, therefore, awareness of the role of image schemas in our own thinking may help us theorize more creatively and effectively. The overview of conceptual model types put forward in this talk is intended to form one aspect—together with surveys of comparative modes, explanation types, and forms of categorization and typologization—of a grammar of theorizing for the study of religion. Assembling such a grammar of theorizing will enhance our theorizing capacity, make it easier to teach theorizing to our students, and open doors for collaborative projects on theory integration.

Steven J. Sutcliffe , The Open University, UK

Invitations to a Reflexive Study of Religion/s

The premiss of my paper is that theory cannot be decoupled from data or method. A theory without a body of material to explain and a mode of testing is merely philosophy. Here I model a practical, empirical and reflexive Study of Religion/s based on the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu's sociology is rooted in the three co-constitutive ingredients of theory, data and method. In terms of theory he works with a trio of concepts: field, habitus and symbolic capital. In terms of data, he is committed to Durkheimian empirical enquiry whose research objects can be cross-checked and falsified. In terms of method, he combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. Bourdieu has applied the theoretical trio of field, habitus and capital to investigations in advertising, education, aesthetics and religion (Bourdieu 1991). Reflexive analysis of the positionality of the researcher is central, not in an idiosyncratic or 'narcissistic' fashion, but as a historicised datum in which the researcher is objectified and subject to the same level of analysis as other objects in the research field (Bourdieu 2025). Using simple examples from my own research, I will show how a generalisable reflexive study of religion/s can be modelled on a Bourdieusian framework.

Isis Mrugalla-Kalmbacher , Tübingen University

Theorizing Heterodox Knowledge: Collaboration, Relationality, and the Enchanted Epistemes Approach

This paper contributes to a methodology of theorizing religion by presenting the approach of the research group Enchanted Epistemes, which investigates heterodox knowledge formations at the intersections of religion, science, medicine, and esotericism. Focusing on the process of theorizing itself, the paper explores how theoretical concepts emerge from empirical data, historical contextualization, and collaborative interpretation. The group's work draws on ethnographic fieldwork and historical case studies ranging from contemporary spiritual healing practices to alternative scientific cultures. A distinctive feature of the approach of Enchanted Epistemes is collaboration as a method of theorizing. This collaboration encompasses the working group itself: Through workshops, joint discussions, and comparative engagement across multiple case studies, members of the research group collectively develop and refine analytical concepts. However, it also means a collaboration with the research field, following a decolonial and queer-feminist approach to knowledge production and analysis of meaning. The project is informed by a relational research perspective that understands knowledge production as emerging

through relationships between researchers, field actors, practices, and material settings. This approach includes critical reflection on the positionality of researchers and the situated nature of knowledge production. In this paper, I illustrate this process through my ethnographic research on contemporary magical practice. I trace how access to the field was established, how ethnographic data were generated through relational engagement with practitioners, and how these observations were subsequently situated within broader historical contexts of heterodox knowledge. Building on these empirical and historical layers, I show how theoretical concepts emerged through iterative heuristics, research collaboration, and peer-discussions. The paper thus demonstrates how theorizing can develop through a relational research process that connects fieldwork, historical contextualization, and collective analytical work.

Elena Schaa, University of Basel | National Hellenic Research Foundation

Theorizing Gender and Gendering Theories? What Masculinity Studies can offer to the Study of Religion

In 2025, Michael Stausberg published an edited volume entitled 21st Century Theories of Religion. The table of content suggests that theorising religion is a domain by and for men. Of the 16 theories discussed in the volume, none were authored by a woman or by an academic based outside the Global North, and only three received their doctorate after 2000. Taking a closer look at the metatheory by Stausberg in the volume's introduction, begs the question: What type of scientific masculinity is at play here? Starting from a close examination of Stausberg's theory, I argue that in the academic study of religion theoretical work is at times entwined with ideals of masculinity resulting in androcentric theories. The paper employs the analytical category of scientific masculinity to understand how theorising and theories are entwined with androcentric ideas of religion and academia. I first show how Stausberg constructs theorising as a work of intellectually brilliant men—while delineating work by women as well as feminist and decolonial scholars as methodological. Second, I discuss how he 'immunises' (in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann and Jacques Derrida) the supposedly neutral—but actually androcentric—view of theories and theorising against feminist critiques and gender critical approaches. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that recognising gender in theories and theorising is crucial in offering explanations that capture the wide range of data presented by religion/s, whether or not men are involved.

Daan F. Oostveen, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht

Before Theory: deconstruction and critical religion as a necessary first step for concept development and modeling

Reflecting on theorizing religion for the study of religion is crucial and has been too often disregarded within our field. Especially since the study of religion is often multidisciplinary, and not rarely even pre-paradigmatic, a multiplicity of theoretical concepts are just being uncritically "applied" to empirical data and presented as original research. In this paper, I will argue that a necessary first step in the process of theorizing religion is the deconstruction of what is encountered in the theory of religion so far. Much of theoretical frameworks used in the study of religion are adopted uncritically, as a means of applying a "perspective" on empirical material. This practice hinders the critical process of theory construction. However, it is also not possible to start from scratch, since religious studies are no longer a tabula rasa. We have learned by now that even the concept of "religion" has a particular genealogy that continues to influence how we approach our empirical data as scholars. In fact, it should even be argued that any theory of religion is always intertwined with the genealogy and "theoretical rubble" that is characteristic of our field. Deconstruction should therefore be an evaluative practice: what "theoretical rubble" do we find present in our field? How does this rubble constitute logocentric approaches to religion, and what voices are repressed? And after deconstruction: how does a critical assessment of the genealogy of theory of religious studies open up the groundwork for new assemblages for concept formation, modeling, and explanation.

OPEN PANEL XV
Orthodox Christian Presence in Italy
(16th–21st Centuries)

Mariachiara Giorda & Ioan Cozma, Roma Tre University

Spatial Strategies and Shared Sacred Spaces: The Romanian Orthodox Church in Italy (Late 20th Century–Present)

We examine the spatial dynamics underlying the establishment of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Italy from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present, adopting the analytical lens of both diachronic and synchronic forms of shared religious space. Our contribution interrogates how processes of settlement are not merely demographic or institutional, but deeply embedded in evolving practices of spatial negotiation and adaptation. Through a series of carefully selected case studies, we highlight the interplay between temporality and co-presence in the use of worship spaces. Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which ecclesiastical communities have engaged in the sharing of existing religious infrastructures, often within Catholic contexts, as an initial strategy of insertion. Over time, these provisional arrangements have gradually given way to more stable and materially defined places of worship. This transition reflects not only internal community consolidation but also broader patterns of visibility and legitimacy within the Italian religious landscape. The study underscores how spatial stabilization is closely tied to processes of symbolic recognition and institutional acceptance. Nonetheless, this trajectory remains incomplete, marked by ongoing negotiations and uneven outcomes across different localities. We frame the Romanian Orthodox presence as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, situated at the intersection of migration, religion, and space. We contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how religious minorities materialize their presence in diasporic contexts.

Caterina Pignotti,

Spatializing Dialogue: The Romanian Orthodox Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Turin

Urban space is the social field in which religious diversity in contemporary Italy becomes most evident and where religious groups compete for visibility, recognition, and places of worship. The sites of so-called minorities can be observed as indicators of a plural religious geography. Peaceful and conflictual dynamics are both expressed precisely through external recognition, which may be horizontal — religious and social — when between peers or vertical therefore juridical. This study presents the findings of research conducted in the city of Turin, an emblematic case within the Italian religious landscape for the management of religious diversity and interreligious dialogue initiatives. The analysis focuses on the Romanian Orthodox Church located in the historic center, which I interpret as a shared religious place, having undergone a transformation of identity over time. This case renders visible the tensions, negotiations, and forms of resilience inherent in religious presence within a plural society, while also offering a valuable lens through which to analyze the localization strategies adopted by the Romanian Orthodox community and the crucial role played by the Catholic Diocese in the spatialization process of this community. Places of worship are crucial spaces for interreligious dialogue: they serve as laboratories of local peacebuilding and experiments in coexistence, mutual respect, encounter, and conflict mediation. However, the ambiguity of both the national and regional legal systems contribute to marginality of the religious dimension in the city's urban planning policies, ignoring the important role these places play as spaces of cohesion, identity, and inclusion.

Giuseppe Tateo, Roma Tre University

The Romanian Orthodox Church as a Migrant Church

The role of Romanian Orthodox parishes in Italy as hubs of social aggregation is well established. Beyond ensuring liturgical and pastoral continuity, the migrant church functions as a vital nexus for

social interaction, facilitating job searches, networking, and the pursuit of public recognition within the broader citizenry. By exploring a case study from Alpine Italy—the Romanian Orthodox Church of St. Mark in Trento—this presentation examines the church as a cornerstone of identity for migrant communities through the lens of liturgical space management. While newly constructed churches often reflect an idealized, “pure” image of Romanian Orthodoxy – often embracing the Maramureş wooden vernacular despite lacking any direct connection to that specific area – parishes that repurpose former Catholic houses of worship must navigate iconographic and spatial adaptations. These arrangements often result in compromises that would seldom be accepted in the homeland. Thus, in contrast to the pervasive self-representation of unwavering “tradition,” Orthodox churches in migrant contexts must contend with local conditions that generate unprecedented configurations of sacred space.

Angela Bernardo, Sapienza University of Rome

Reshaping Community: Coptic Orthodox Diaspora in Italy between Continuity and Transformation

Modern Copts have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, driven by expanding migration, the establishment of communities outside Egypt, and the growing public visibility of their leaders. Although they are often described as part of a unified global Coptic community with presumed shared and unchanging features, local Coptic communities display specific characteristics shaped by internal dynamics and external conditions. This paper examines the development of Coptic Orthodox diaspora communities in Italy from the late twentieth century to the present, focusing on the dioceses of Rome and Milan as case studies. Based on extensive research on modern Copts in and outside Egypt conducted since 2017, the paper analyses the identities, needs, and relations (Bernardo 2020) of Coptic migrant communities in Italy to assess how institutional structures, both within and beyond these communities, collective narratives, and everyday religious practice interact. Specific attention is given to how continuity with Egypt is maintained alongside processes of adaptation to the Italian context, particularly in relation to language, liturgy, and the use of space. The paper also addresses the intersection of gender and generational dynamics in relation to institutional normative expectations and broader social contexts. By doing so, this paper aims to highlight how an Oriental Orthodox migrant community interacts with a given socio-political and cultural landscape through processes of negotiation. It also offers insights for a critical evaluation of the notion of “postcolonial legacies” and, more broadly, of the analytical categories through which religious communities are conceptualized in the study of religion.

OPEN PANEL XVII (Non)Religion and Language

Rie Wada, University of Tokyo

Secularized Intercession: "Prayer" as a Post-Secular Linguistic Infrastructure in Contemporary Japanese Culture

In contemporary Japan, a society characterized by widespread "non-religious" self-identification and a historical lack of a dominant theological framework, institutional religion has declined. However, the vocabulary of "prayer" (*inori*) persists as a resilient linguistic resource for articulating existential concerns, especially during societal crises. This paper investigates how the linguistic structure of prayer is reconfigured in this highly secularized context by analyzing "prayer" as a secular trope in Japanese popular music. Using a large-scale database of song lyrics from the years surrounding the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic, the study explores to whom these modern prayers are directed. Classical petitionary models of prayer typically presuppose a dyadic relationship between the self and an institutional deity. However, this research finds that in the context of contemporary Japanese music, prayers addressed to institutional deities account for only 10% of the data. Instead, approximately 70% of these prayers are directed toward "stars"—a poetic, non-institutional symbol. This finding suggests a new typology of "secularized intercession," where religious vocabulary provides a triadic relational structure: the self, the poetic mediator (the star), and the distant other. In this model, "prayer" functions not as a petition for divine intervention, but as a vital linguistic infrastructure for expressing empathy and care toward others during times of crisis. By focusing on the functional persistence of religious language, this paper argues that *inori* remains an essential tool for human connection in today's secular society.

Niels De Nutte, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Identifiers, Path Dependencies, and the Historical Vocabulary of Modern Humanism

In 2019 the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) rebranded as Humanists International. While apparently a pragmatic simplification, this change draws attention to a longer history of terminological negotiation within the organised secular sphere. The original compound name, Humanist and Ethical, was not a stylistic excess but the product of historical compromise: its founders could not agree on a single identifier capable of encompassing divergent (national) traditions. Adopting a historical-comparative approach, this paper examines how non-religious organisations in some European countries developed along distinct institutional trajectories and, in doing so, stabilised different vocabularies of self-description. Terms such as *freigeistig*, *laïcité philosophique*, *ethical society*, and *vrijzinnig* are not interchangeable equivalents of "secular" or "secular humanist", but the outcome of specific legal contexts, church-state arrangements, and ideological struggles. Through an analysis of sources, the paper traces how these identifiers became embedded through path-dependent processes and how they continue to shape contemporary umbrella formations. By foregrounding historical vocabulary rather than abstract typologies, the paper argues that scholars of nonreligion must treat identifiers as products of institutional history rather than transparent analytical categories. Doing so reveals how broader processes of secularisation and pluralisation are refracted through nationally specific linguistic traditions, and why apparently universal labels often fail to capture the diversity of modern humanist movements.

Atko Remmel, University of Tartu

How 'True Nones' Discuss (Non)religious and Existential Matters

Alongside Czechia and Sweden, Estonia is considered one of Europe's most secularized countries. Due to Soviet cultural and religious policies that prevailed from 1944 to 1991, religion disappeared from the

public sphere and was pushed deep into the private domain. Unlike in many other Central and Eastern European countries, where religion experienced a revival after the collapse of communism, this has not occurred in Estonia: public religion remains barely visible. This makes Estonia somewhat unique. While in typically secularized European societies religion remains so deeply interwoven with cultural heritage that it cannot easily be avoided (Collins-Mayo 2015), in Estonia a large part of society has distanced itself from religion not only in terms of belief and identity, but also through a lack of cultural knowledge. The “chain of memory” (Hervieu-Léger 2000) appears to have been broken. The paper is based on 38 interviews with non-religious Estonians, with a particular focus on younger and middle-aged generations. These individuals are already second- or third-generation non-religious, i.e. they lack of primary religious socialization at home. However, what makes this sample stand out is that they have grown up and lived in a society where religion has been barely visible, hence they also lack secondary religious socialization. The paper examines how those “true nones” talk about religion and what their vocabulary – or more generally, “existential language” – reveals about their religion-related ideas and life’s deeper meanings.

Sofia Nikitaki, KU Leuven

Studies Talking About ‘Spirituality’: Linguistic Ambiguity in Research with Nonreligious Individuals

While widely used in both theology and religious studies discourses, spirituality occupies an ambiguous and often contested position as the term itself remains conceptually and linguistically variable. This paper examines how the concept of spirituality functions within empirical research on nonreligious individuals and reflects on the methodological challenges that arise when such terms are introduced into qualitative interviews. The paper draws on data from a qualitative study of nonreligious individuals in Belgium (Flanders), Greece, and Norway, where – among other topics – the research participants were asked how they understood the term “spirituality” and whether they would consider themselves spiritual. Their responses reveal significant variation not only in attitudes toward the concept but also in the linguistic and cultural meanings attributed to it. In many cases, interviewees expressed uncertainty or discomfort with the term, questioned its meaning, or associated it with very different phenomena, ranging from monastic religiosity and intellectual cultivation to New Age beliefs or vague existential sensibilities. These difficulties were further amplified in cross-cultural contexts, where linguistic translation and local semantic fields shaped how the concept was interpreted. Rather than treating “spirituality” as a stable analytical category, the findings suggest that it functions as a flexible and contested vocabulary through which individuals negotiate positions in relation to (non)religion, personal beliefs and worldviews, and meaning-making. By foregrounding these linguistic dynamics, the paper argues for greater methodological reflexivity in empirical theology and religious studies regarding the terminology used in interviews and analysis. Attention to how participants interpret and resist such language can offer valuable insights into the lived negotiation of (non)religion and the evolving vocabularies through which existential questions are articulated in contemporary Europe.

OPEN PANEL XVIII
Vampirism 360°:
Genealogies, Practices, and Heritage of Vampiric Phenomena

Giuseppe Maiello , University of Finance and Administration in Prague
Vampirism: A Senile Disorder of Shamanism

This study examines the relationship between shamanism and vampirism by framing the figures of the shaman and the vampire as divergent agents that influence the semiotic articulation of the life/death threshold. Shamanism appears as the more archaic and structurally foundational system of mediation with the otherworld, whereas vampirism—though rooted in animistic imaginaries—emerges historically as a later and more disruptive configuration addressing the same cosmological issue. The East Slavic pair *koldun/eretik* exemplifies this opposition: the *koldun* as the living shaman, the *eretik* as the dead shaman whose return triggers ritual correction through exhumation, stake perforation, grave sealing, or, when necessary, cremation. Drawing on ethnographic materials, the analysis revisits widely circulated notions such as corporeal porosity, highlighting both continuities and divergences between living and dead shamans.

Augusto Cosentino , University of Trieste
From Lamia to Narada: Continuity and Transformations of Vampire Women in the Greek-Byzantine Mediterranean

This study traces the continuity of female vampiric creatures from Greek mythology to the folkloric survivals of Greco-Calabria, highlighting transformations of a millennial imaginary. In the ancient Greek world, Lamia, Empusa, Gyllou embody the prototype of the vampire woman: hybrid and shape-shifting creatures who seduce in order to feed on blood or vital force. Lamia, according to Diodorus Siculus, devours other women's infants; Empusa, linked to Hecate, seduces to devour (Aristophanes, *Frogs*; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*); Gyllou is an infanticidal demon documented in amulets. In Jewish tradition, Onoskelis, with donkey legs, appears in the *Testamentum Salomonis*. Byzantine Calabria (6th–11th centuries) becomes a cultural bridge where Greek beliefs are grafted onto the local substrate. The Greek-speaking communities of Aspromonte preserve legends that testify to these archetypes: the Anarada (or Narada) and other female demons, who threaten mothers and infants, take up characteristics of Empusa and Gyllou, maintaining the name and function of a children's bogeyman. Greco-Calabria represents an exceptional case of preservation of cultural stratifications, offering a unique perspective on the long duration of Mediterranean vampiric beliefs.

Christian Moe , Ljubljana Faculty of Arts
Crying Wolf in Indo-European Religion

A century-old theory proposed by Otto Höfler traces werewolves, and many other folk beliefs and practices, to the ecstatic rituals of secret young men's societies emulating the army of the dead. Despite its troubling ideological origins, unfashionable assumptions about ritual survivals, and ahistorical aggregation of evidence, the theory has not lost its power to fascinate. Noted scholars, including Dumézil, Wikander, and Eliade, continued to develop it and extend it from its original Nordic/Germanic focus to the broader Indo-European area. A survey of this work at the turn of the millennium continues to inspire representations of the past in popular culture as well as in the interpretation of archeological finds. Renewed critical attention in recent years has not produced a comprehensive rebuttal. This paper outlines the trajectory of the theory in the study of religion up to the present, frames it in the debate on ideology in Indo-European studies, and explores key weaknesses in the argument.

OPEN PANEL XIX
Deal with the Devil:
Religion, Spirituality, and Crime

Tancredi Marrone, Masaryk University

Hell on Earth: Black Magic and Dark Forces as a means to Elevation

This paper will address the ideas of social Darwinism and Antinomian ethics that underlie branches of spirituality that find in rule-breaking, blasphemy, and crime a path to self-development or power. Within the context of contemporary religious movements, the Order of 9 Angles and the use of witchcraft in criminal organizations, such as the Narcos. The first is an openly declared lost network dedicated to destroying the current moral and ethical strata of the world to pave the way for a new era. An era of humanity where strength will be the predominant value. The few texts found on this organization describe disturbing rituals that involve human sacrifice as much as the necessity to break social and personal taboos to liberate oneself from societal control. Individualism is so strong that there is no formal network for the group, only individual cells that occasionally collaborate. The use of witchcraft for criminal activity is also tightly connected, with similar intentions, however, with different objectives. The ideas of personal power and freedom from a perceived oppressive government, and the necessity of survival, often appear in these contexts. Cases such as San la Muerte are emblematic of the spiritual necessities of the underworld, where the values of society are inverted, and crime is elevated to justice.

Davide S. Amore, Istituto Comprensivo Statale "G. D'Annunzio", Sant'Anastasia

The Concept of Violence in Islam: From Futuwah to Terrorism

Is contemporary jihadist violence an authentic expression of Islamic tradition, or a radical rupture masquerading as continuity? This paper challenges essentialist readings of Islam by excavating a largely neglected ethical paradigm at the heart of the tradition: futuwah, a chivalric ideal grounded in Qur'ānic anthropology and Prophetic praxis. Far from legitimizing indiscriminate violence, futuwah—as elaborated in Sufi and adab literature (e.g., al-Sulamī, Ibn 'Arabī)—articulates a disciplined ethic of power, where the true “warrior” is defined by restraint, magnanimity, and the moral sublimation of aggression. Here, violence is neither denied nor sacralised, but ethically transfigured: the fatā embodies mastery over the self, privileging restraint (ḥilm), altruism (iṭhār), and moral responsibility over coercive force. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that modern extremist appropriations of jihād operate through a double rupture: hermeneutical and institutional. By severing scriptural interpretation from its juristic and ethical traditions, and by collapsing the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence, these movements produce what may be termed a “theology of immediacy,” devoid of normative mediation. Drawing on postcolonial critique and theories of epistemic violence, the study situates this shift within the broader disintegration of Islamic scholarly authority under modern conditions. By staging a critical confrontation between futuwah and contemporary jihadist discourse, this study reframes the debate: the problem is not Islam's supposed propensity for violence, but the violent undoing of its ethical grammar. Drawing on theories of discourse, postcolonial critique, and the concept of epistemic rupture, the paper argues that contemporary forms of jihadist violence are best understood not as survivals of tradition, but as reconfigurations shaped by modern political and institutional disruptions. Recovering the moral logic of futuwah thus becomes not only an academic task, but an urgent intellectual intervention against the theological impoverishment that underwrites modern terrorism.

Andrej Kapcar, Masaryk University

Forbidden Play: Cursed Video Games, Digital Transgression, and the Logic of Contemporary Magick

Video games have long been subject to moral panic, censorship, and accusations of psychological or social harm. Yet beyond regulatory debates, a subset of titles – banned, unreleased, or circulating through obscure networks – has acquired a distinct afterlife as “forbidden” media. This paper examines how such games function within contemporary digital culture as sites of transgression, myth-making, and occult imagination, producing narratives that resonate with supernatural and quasi-religious sensibilities. Focusing on cases such as *Sad Satan*, a deep web horror game associated with illegal imagery and malware, or *Thrill Kill*, an unreleased title cancelled due to extreme violence, alongside enduring urban legends such as *Polybius*, the analysis highlights how prohibition, illegality, and rumor contribute to their construction as dangerous, mythic artifacts. Online forums and creepypasta narratives amplify these stories, creating communal spaces in which forbidden knowledge circulates and digital myths emerge. Transgression operates on multiple levels. Beyond the illicit act of accessing these games, gameplay often involves enacting taboo behaviors within controlled environments, simulating violations of moral and social norms. Interpreted through the framework of Chaos Magick – where belief is a flexible tool and transgression serves to disrupt normative reality – such engagement can be understood as structurally analogous to ritual practice. In this sense, forbidden video games function not only as objects of curiosity or fear but as digital containers for transgressive experimentation, symbolic exploration, and experiential intensity, positioning play itself as a potential avenue for modern magical practice.

OPEN PANEL XX
Exploring Immanentist Religious Worlds,
Past and Present

Alan Strathern , University of Oxford, UK

Introducing immanentism and transcendentalism with some reflections on comparison

This paper will introduce the immanentist-transcendentalist model, outlining the core concepts and the way they may be applied to the question of studying the long-term global history of religious change and its relationship to the political sphere. It will also offer some brief thoughts on the methodological questions raised by the concept of immanentism, in particular the role of global comparison in the humanities and social sciences. If there is time will go on to offer some first thoughts on the relationship between the transcendent/immanent distinction and the religion/secular one.

Anders Norge , Uppsala University | Aarhus University

Immanentist Onto-Praxis in Annual Rites of Fertility among the Sihanaka of Madagascar

Among the Sihanaka of the Alaotra basin in Madagascar, the grand ritual of Feraomby reconstructs the shrine of the founding sovereign Ndrianampanjaka. Yet this reconstruction is far more than a commemorative act. Drawing on over a decade of ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that Feraomby constitutes what I call an *immanentist onto-praxis*: a ritual complex that does not symbolise cosmological order but ontologically produces it through the material handling of *hasina* — divine power immanent to the cosmos. I trace three interlinked ritual operations through which *hasina* is made to circulate: accumulation, in which potent marsh plants carry *hasina* from metahuman wetland realms into the human domain; preservation, in which the rebuilt shrine houses and concentrates this power; and canalisation, in which water infused with potent plants is sprinkled over the shrine and the gathered community, transmitting *hasina* to people and land. Through this analysis, I contribute to the emerging theorisation of immanentism (Strathern 2019; 2024; Sahlin 2022) by demonstrating what immanentist cosmology looks like as lived, ritually enacted praxis – thus engaging the panel’s methodological concern with approaching such worlds on their own terms rather than through transcendentalist analytical vocabularies. I further propose that *hasina* merits comparative recognition alongside concepts such as *mana* and *semangat* as a cosmic power that differentiates across the living world and is sustained through ongoing ritual labour.

Kaj Århem , Uppsala University

Shamanism as an immanentist religious tradition: a native Amazonian case and its implications

In terms of the distinction between immanentist and transcendentalist religious traditions proposed by Strathern (2019) and Sahlin (2022), the paper suggests that native Amazonian shamanism can be seen as an archaic or elementary form of immanentist religion. The paper analyses fundamental aspects of Amazonian shamanism as exemplified by the Eastern Tukanoan-speaking Makuna people in NW Amazonia. Central to Makuna shamanic tradition are: the animistic premise – the universal personhood of all living beings; the overriding importance of the social self (Sahlin’s “kinship I”) minimizing the significance of the individual self; a corresponding this-worldly collective morality based on ritual rules and cosmological pre-and proscriptions rather than individual righteousness and notions of sin, redemption and other-worldly salvation; a radical localism implying the idea of the ancestral territory as constituting the cosmopolitical domain of the social self (the cosmic House/Home) defining the limits of the moral universe; the idea of an omnipotent and life-giving god objectified in a set of sacred flutes (*yurupary*) ruling the territory and its human and non-human inhabitants; and the semi-divine figure of the shaman as god’s human manifestation (avatar) with divine knowledge and power to heal and renew the world and ensure the fertility and flourishing of all beings in the cosmic House, the ancestral

territory. The paper discusses significant implications of these (and other) cosmological and religious precepts, proposing that they are diagnostic of an elementary form of immanentism.

Marco Ferrario, Northeast Normal University, Changchun

When Kings Win: Paradoxes of Immanentism in Achaemenid Persia

One of Darius I's Persepolis inscription, known as DPg, may be taken as the pinnacle of a long tradition of Near Eastern kings' engagement with mythical mental maps and ideas of world rule focused on the conquest of idealized natural borderlands (bodies of waters, mountains, desert) conceived as the limits of the world and only to be overcome by exceptional individuals (heroes and gods particularly) on whose achievements the monarchs shaped their action and literarily shaped their *persona*. With Darius, the inheritor and expander of the greatest political formation the world had seen up to that time, this rhetoric escalated one step further, *de facto* equating the royal achievements directly with a divinely infused mythical geography which elevated Persian kingship unmistakably into the realm of the gods. By leveraging recent anthropological insights on the matter, this paper explores what happened to Darius' heir, and perhaps already starting under his own reign, when they were confronted, on the one hand, with the traditional imperative of replicating and besting their predecessors; on the other, with an antecedent that was explicitly meant not to be toppled again. In other words, at the heart of this study is the question whether, and how, Dumézil's *celeritas* became *gravitas* in the first hyperpower of the ancient world.

Frederik von Lillienkjold Hjortshøj, Aarhus University

Immanentism among the Sama-Bajau of Wakatobi eastern Indonesia

This paper examines how transcendence is mobilized to produce vernacular forms of human security within an otherwise immanentist cosmology among the Sama-Bajau of Wakatobi, Indonesia. This immanentist logic is disrupted at death. Following the death of an interlocutor, his funeral rite was carefully performed to banish his spirit to a Sky realm, an ontologically separate domain in which the dead are expected to find rest. If it fails, however, the spirit remains among the living as a potentially dangerous presence, and a shaman will be called upon to liaise through ritual. Transcendence thus emerges as an attempt to produce a definitive separation between the living and the dead, a hopeful solution to the problems posed by more-than-human tapestry within immanentism. At the same time, the immanentist character of Bajau cosmology becomes visible through shamanic practice. Mediums are called upon to liaise with vengeful spirits, curb hauntings, and venerate ancestral beings in exchange for fish. Drawing on ethnographic encounters in which interlocutors publicly ridicule the existence of harmful spirits while privately expressing fear of them, I argue that transcendence here operates as a fragile project, as it never fully displaces the immanent relations that continue to structure everyday life. Through the heuristic problem of the funeral rite, the paper suggests that Bajau cosmology is best understood not as a synthesis of immanence and transcendence, but as an immanentist world in which transcendence is achieved only temporarily.

Neil Price, University of Uppsala

Immanentist Imaginaries in the Viking Age

The complex pre-Christian religious worlds of the late Iron Age Scandinavians have been subject to a bewildering array of interpretive paradigms, influenced not least by the disciplinary arenas of their study, and the occasional frictions between textual and material source critique. Recent years have also seen applications of cognitive science, discussions around 'big gods' as a moral force, supernatural monitoring, and similar. Less attention has been paid to the distinctions between different vectors of human agency, ritual communication, and 'metapersonal' involvement in mortal lives. In terms of data, this is complicated by the fact that the Norse did not know they possessed the 'Norse myths', as handily collected in our bookshops. These have instead been built around medieval Christian writers' textual

fossilisation of what was once a fluid, organic world of oral narratives, with both geographic and chronological variation across the North. The effect is of an illusory orthodoxy, that belies the realities of early Norse religion as articulated and performed. In addition, many studies of ‘Norse mythology’ tend to ignore the rather different picture that emerges from the archaeology, which actually derives from the Viking Age itself. Taking a holistic view, this paper attempts an emic exploration of Norse imaginaries, specifically at the level of communal engagement with locally-based ritual specialists in an ensouled world, acting both in counterpoint to and in symbiosis with the cults of the gods. The package of operative rituals commonly seen in terms of shamanism is central here, not least in the context of its practitioners’ relationships to political power. The nature of the latter transformed dramatically through the centuries of the Viking Age, with increasing centralisation alongside more enduring regional structures of elite control – all intimately bound up with a shifting religious landscape and the gradual inroads made by Christianity.

Liu Yisu, École Pratique des Hautes Études | Sichuan University, Chengdu

From Stars to Elixir: The Iconographic Logic of Tang–Song Eight Trigram Mirrors and the Shifting Landscape of Neidan Cultivation

In the Daoist neidan (internal alchemy) tradition, the practitioner’s body is understood as a “crucible” (danlu) for refining cosmic forces. Taking 180 Tang and Song-dynasty bronze mirrors bearing Eight Trigram imagery as its primary material, this paper argues that these images were not mere decorative motifs but key instruments in this esoteric transformative process. Moving beyond archaeological classification, this study pursues the organizational logic of trigram imagery—in particular, how Eight Trigram symbols were configured alongside astral and cosmological elements (Twenty-Eight Lunar Mansions, Four Spirits, Five Phases) within the Tang Shangqing system, and how they were recombined with Daoist talismanic structures in the Song Prior Heaven Eight Trigrams (Xiantian bagua) diagram. This iconographic shift reflects a profound reorientation in medieval Chinese Daoist cultivation: during the Tang, trigram mirrors served “Holding the One” (shouyi) and astral visualization as aids for cunsi (meditative internalization); by the Southern Song, they internalized the textual logic of the Cantongqi (The Seal of the Unity of the Three), evolving into “materialized talismans” for regulating qi and congealing the Golden Elixir (jindan). Analyzing spatial arrangements of mirror imagery, this paper identifies structural correspondences with neidan body schemata—mapping cosmological forces onto specific corporeal loci, thereby synchronizing internal microcosm with external macrocosm. This function transformed from Tang-era externally-oriented Shangqing visualization to Song-era internally-directed neidan refinement. The commercialization of Song mirror production, far from secularizing trigram symbols, converged with the cult of Zhenwu (Perfect Warrior) and Chan practice, facilitating the penetration of neidan doctrines into a wider religious world.

Glen Michalski, The University of Adelaide, Australia

Immanence, Power, and Paradox: Tantra and Kingship in Nepal

Much of our imaginaries of power and hierarchy are derived from the logic of transcendentalism, where the locus of power or authority is taken as external and above its domain. These images of separation rely on a cosmo-logic and cosmo-topology that is far from universal. This paper, with a special interest on kingship, power and Tantra in Nepal, seeks to open new conceptualisations of power and hierarchy in cosmoi without the externalities or rifts of Abrahamic religion. This paper thus places a particular emphasis on locating immanence within Tantric traditions. Conceived in an immanentist cosmos, power, following the work of Jeffrey Lidke in the Kathmandu Valley, might be conceived of as paradoxical and generatively so. A conceptualisation of the life-giving force of power and the hierarchy that enables its flow, allows one to heed Marshall Sahlins’ advice to return to a Hocartesian anthropology while also affording a critical perspective on some of Sahlins’ own conceptualisations.

OPEN PANEL XXII

Ecumenism & History of Religions

Renata Salvarani, Università Europea di Roma
Christian Ecumene: Definitions and Critical Implications

The very etymological origins of the term *oikouménē*, together with the use of the word in the greek christian contexts, clarify the implications of the term, placing its subsequent uses within a historical-linguistic and historical-religious perspective. If *ecumene*, considered in its entirety, coincides with the whole inhabited world, then we must ask when this overlap begins to be understood in a religious sense, when Christianity began to perceive itself as coextensive with the world itself, and Christians as humanity *tout court*? This meaning emerges, in what appears to be a paradox, in connection with the rise of divisions, rifts and conflicts. It asserts itself as an ideal of unity, in contrast to historical reality. At this point, the question that arises is: how is Christian universalism defined in relation to historical circumstances? The Age of the Councils provides several key passages, examined and defined in subsequent historiography: when the aspiration to complete fidelity to the *depositum fidei* clashes with theological, liturgical and political differences, it also crystallises in terminology, precisely around the idea of the *oikoumene*. Unity and differentiation are also defined and delimited through the use of the concept of *discrimen* (discernment), which evolves to the point of overlapping with the definition of heresy (a concept that played such a significant role in the development of medieval Christian theological thought). Difference, otherness and the 'other' are the terms most frequently employed in recent religious historiography. These, too, function dialectically in contrast to the concept of the *oikoumene*, which has been fully embraced, particularly in phenomenological interpretations. The history of the term and categories of interpretation illuminate one another; semantics and etymology, in relation to the analysis of texts and contexts, work as a dynamic element in defining the theme of the panel.

Daniela Dumbravă, Institute for the History of Religions, Romanian Academy
The paradoxes and secrets in Nicolae Milescu's informal interaction with the Jesuits in Peking (1676-1682)

The role of Catholic missionaries in shaping China's relations with European nations cannot be overstated. This influence was particularly evident through the acceptance of Jesuit priests within Beijing's imperial institutions. Their remarkable intellectual contributions, particularly in the fields of astronomy, trigonometry, and mathematics, converged to initiate a significant reform of the Chinese calendar. This development was strongly encouraged by Emperor Shun-chih and subsequently by K'ang-hsi. The linguistic prowess of the members of the Society of Jesus, encompassing both Eastern and European languages, proved to be a significant asset in the execution of the Russian missions commencing from 1676 onwards. Notably, Latin emerged as the functional linguistic conduit in the diplomatic communication between Russia and China, underscoring the linguistic competence of the *Society of Jesus* members. From this standpoint, Milescu's mission to Beijing can be regarded as the inaugural stage in the establishment of secure communication between the two empires. This process was primarily facilitated by Ferdinand Verbiest (director of the Beijing Astronomical Observatory) and Milescu himself, who exhibited a commendable degree of foresight and prudence. Verbiest translated the imperial correspondence, which had previously been drafted in Chinese and Manchu, and communicated it secretly to Milescu, who relayed its contents to the Muscovite authorities. Russia was thus fully cognisant of the diplomatic and political messages conveyed by the Manchu emperor, and preparations were made for the subsequent mission coordinated by Prince Fëdor Golovin — a key figure in Sino-Russian relations in the 17th century — which resulted in an agreement on the demarcation of China's north-eastern borders. The extant evidence in the texts constituting our sources does not explicitly reveal any elements relating to ecumenical relations, let alone the very concept of ecumenism, which is, however, left to the experts of the 20th century. It is noteworthy that the Jesuits in Beijing and even those in Moscow were able to establish a working relationship with Milescu, a diplomat of the

Romanov court. Milescu was Orthodox, a humanist and the author of numerous theological treatises. Despite never having held a position of privilege at the Romanov court, correspondence with Nicolae Milescu suggests that the initial basis for their relationship was the exchange of sensitive information. Furthermore, Nicolae Milescu's account of his mission to North Asia and the Qing court is based on the cartographic and historical sources of Martino Martini, a Jesuit missionary in late Ming China. The objective of this analysis is to ascertain the prevailing trends within the broader context of the relationship between the Catholic intellectuals in Beijing and Milescu, the Orthodox diplomat who maintained confidential relations with them even after the conclusion of his mission in the Far East – a circumstance that could have led the authorities to suspend him from his diplomatic position.

Jan Nicolae , University 1 December, Alba Iulia

Kenotic Ecumenism within the context of communist prisons. Father Ioan Iovan and the Easter Liturgy at Văcărești (1956)

The present paper explores the phenomenon of *Kenotic Ecumenism within the context of communist prisons. Father Ioan Iovan and the Easter Liturgy at Văcărești (1956)*. This refers to an Easter Liturgy celebrated by Father Ioan Iovan in 1956 at the Văcărești prison hospital, to which the Roman Catholic vicar bishop Xaveriu Haider and the unrepentant Greek Catholic priest Opris were invited to join him. He effectively persuaded the congregation, leading to a collective enthusiasm for the Easter celebration. The present study utilises a range of documents to demonstrate the existence of a robust ecumenical movement between Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Roman Catholic faiths both prior to and during their imprisonment by the Communist regime. The date of the event is 6 May 1956.

Alessia Brombin , UER Università Europea di Roma

Thomas Merton's Dialogical Vision: Interreligious Encounter in Twentieth-Century Monasticism

This paper considers how historical-religious studies might approach ecumenism and interreligious dialogue as forms of encounter shaped by particular lives rather than solely by theological programmes. It draws on the diaries and letters Thomas Merton wrote between the 1950s and his death in 1968, asking what one Catholic monk's dealings with religious others looked like across two decades that included the Second Vatican Council. Merton's ecumenism extended across confessional and religious boundaries, bringing him into contact with Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, and other traditions of the East and West. The study asks whether such personal writings can add to the historical record of twentieth-century ecumenism. The disciplinary framework is the history of religions, with attention to biographical sources as evidence of religious practice in specific times and places. Three sets of correspondence are examined. The letters to Archimandrite Sophrony document Merton's engagement with Orthodox Christianity through the spirituality of Mount Athos and the Hesychast tradition. The exchange with D.T. Suzuki, which continued for ten years, records a long conversation across Buddhism and Christianity. The communications with Thích Nhất Hạnh during the Vietnam War years register a form of fraternity built on shared monastic vocation and common concern over violence. Two things appear consistently across these documents. Doctrinal differences are not resolved; they remain present and acknowledged. Yet forms of proximity arise nonetheless, rooted in shared practice, poetic attention, and commitment to peace. These affinities run across confessional lines without dissolving them. The materials suggest that otherness functioned in Merton's experience as a condition to be lived with over time rather than a problem requiring resolution. This historical observation, drawn from the ordinary records of one man's friendships, may contribute to current thinking about coexistence in societies marked by religious difference.

Athanasios Koutoupas , APAC Labs, Science and Technology in Archaeology Research Center

From Urban Transformation to Religious Alterity: Alexandria as a Cross-Disciplinary Laboratory for the Study of Late Antique Christianity

This paper examines how the study of Late Antique Alexandria can contribute to methodological innovation within the History of Religions by integrating historical, archaeological, and topographical perspectives. Addressing the question of how the field has influenced and reshaped other disciplines, it proposes that the analysis of urban space and material culture offers a productive framework for understanding religious alterity and interreligious interaction beyond purely textual approaches. Between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, Alexandria constituted a complex religious environment marked by the coexistence of pagan, Christian, and Jewish communities. Rather than interpreting this context through linear narratives of religious transformation, the paper approaches the city as a dynamic urban landscape in which identities were continuously negotiated and redefined. Central to this study is the concept of alterity, understood not only as a theological construct but as a lived and material condition, embedded in shared spaces and everyday interactions. Drawing on archaeological evidence and topographical reconstruction, the paper explores processes such as the appropriation of earlier sacred sites, the emergence of new Christian landmarks, and the reconfiguration of urban focal points. These developments reveal that religious transformation involved strategies of adaptation, contestation, and spatial negotiation, producing a layered landscape of continuity and change. By foregrounding the spatial and material dimensions of religious interaction, the paper reconsiders ecumenism as a set of practices shaped by proximity, visibility, and the negotiation of shared urban environments. In doing so, it demonstrates how cross-disciplinary approaches can enrich the study of religious history and contribute to broader methodological debates within the humanities.

OPEN PANEL XXIV

Religious Literacy in Action

Titus Hjelm, University of Helsinki

The Impact of Secularisation on Religious Literacy and Attitudes towards Religious Diversity

Increasing cultural and religious diversity has prompted claims that people in secularised societies are incapable of encountering religious difference. Religious literacy (RL) has been proposed as a solution. In this paper, we examine the claimed link between secularisation and religious (il)literacy. Utilising a quasi-experimental survey study conducted among Finnish upper secondary school students, we investigate 1) whether religious literacy is lower in more secularised contexts, higher in more religious contexts, and 2) whether the expected impact of a religious literacy intervention, increased positive attitudes towards religious diversity, is more pronounced in more secular contexts as compared to more religious surroundings. We find that, against the common-place expectations in the RL literature, religious literacy scores are higher in more *secularised* regions. Despite the greater impact of the intervention in the more secular context, the increased religious literacy does not translate into attitudinal changes in either the more secularised or the more religious setting. The results invite scholars to rethink the framework of religious literacy.

Zeinab Karimi, University of Helsinki

Religious Literacy and Attitudes Toward Religious Diversity in Pluralistic Societies: Results from a Quasi-experimental Survey

In recent years, religious literacy has gained significant attention in the study of religion. Proponents champion religious literacy as essential for promoting diversity and coexistence in pluralistic societies, arguing that greater knowledge of religious traditions cultivates tolerance and mutual understanding. However, a critical gap exists: empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness remains largely absent. Through a quasi-experimental survey design, this research examines whether increased religious literacy leads to attitudinal changes. Although the goal is to test this assumption rather than evaluate the educational system, the study draws on religious education in Finnish high schools, using a representative sample of first-year students (capital region, N = 415; Ostrobothnia, N = 315) and reveals a striking paradox. Conducting a t-test in SPSS allows comparison of mean scores for religious literacy and attitudes towards religious diversity before and after a course intervention in religious education. The results show that while religious literacy among students in both regions increases significantly after students receive the education, attitudes toward religious diversity do not improve and, in some cases, even worsen. These findings challenge prevailing assumptions and suggest that societal challenges surrounding religious education stem from deeper structural and political issues rather than mere ignorance of religious beliefs and practices.

Giovanni Lapis, Sapienza University of Rome

"Religious Literacy" or "Religious-studies literacy?". An interdisciplinary discussion of an organizing framework

This paper aims to contribute to the theoretical discussion about Religious Literacy, as well as to outline some possible methodological outcomes, including empirical measurement. It will introduce the overarching framework underpinning some of my past research on the theory and practice of Religious Education from the perspective of the Study of Religions. This framework draws from various branches of the educational sciences, notably general didactics, subject-specific didactics, and intercultural/citizenship education. It frames the topic of Religious Education across four interrelated levels: axiology, epistemology, teaching, and learning. By introducing some concrete examples of the application of this framework from my past research, the paper aims to: 1) show how this conceptual tool may help organize

and clarify the various interrelated dimensions surrounding the Religious Literacy debate: philosophical-ideological, epistemological, and educational; 2) suggest a terminological shift from "Religious Literacy" to "Religious Studies Literacy" or "Study-of-Religions Literacy".

Roosa Haimila, Tuomas Äystö, Jenna Kuronen, Zeinab Karimi & Titus Hjelm, University of Helsinki

Religious literacy in action? Exploring religious literacy as a perceived solution to social problems in transnational organisations

Religious literacy has been called the ultimate applied religious studies project in its aim to overcome social problems. Despite the proposed societal impact, little research has systematically investigated how approaches to religious literacy are applied outside academia. Our research addresses this gap by asking: How is 'religious literacy' represented in transnational organisations? Is religious illiteracy represented as a social ill, and if yes, how is the problem defined and solved? Why are the proposed solutions seen to work? In addition to religious literacy, the importance of knowledge and understanding of religions and nonreligion can be discussed with other terms (such as 'FoRB literacy'). To ensure not overlooking such concepts, we also ask: How are concepts resembling religious literacy represented in transnational organisations? To answer these questions, we conducted a mixed method claims-making analysis on public documents released by four transnational organisations (United Nations; European Union; World Economic Forum; International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement), including documents published between 1/2000–6/2025. The results demonstrate how academic claims about religious literacy have taken root in authoritative international organisations, and how the included organisations also operate with concepts resembling religious literacy. The findings shed light on the ways in which religious literacy has been taken into 'action' for aims such as conflict resolution and preventing atrocity crimes.

OPEN PANEL XXV

Ritual Innovation in Global Religion

Amy L. Allocco , Elon University, North carolina, USA
Hindu Drummer-Priests as Ritual Change Agents

Drawing on extended field research with Hindu drummer-priests (*pampaikkārar*) in Tamil-speaking South India, this paper considers strategic ritual innovations in the performance repertoire of one multigenerational troupe of musicians. These artists perform and/or preside in diverse non-brahminic Hindu ritual contexts, such as temple festivals, lineage deity sacrifices, family life-cycle rites, the installation of ancestors as household goddesses, and post-death recitations. There is a significant demand for these rituals in Tamil Nadu today, including from communities who have not traditionally undertaken these practices and from upwardly mobile and newly affluent families for whom sponsoring these costly performances is now within reach. Among their deliberate shifts, the drummer-priests have devised novel procedures for invoking the deities, interspersing song and story, and leveraging digital technologies in these ritual settings. They have also prioritized visually appealing assemblages, electing to decenter more traditional oil lamps in favor of anthropomorphic icons in their displays. This paper argues that such strategic innovations are responsive not only to changing ritual, narrative, and aesthetic tastes but also to shifting devotional sensibilities that emphasize possession and animal sacrifice. In dialogue with these dynamics, the drummer-priests enact self-conscious changes to ensure that their art will appeal to contemporary audiences and flourish in mediatized environments while asserting and strengthening their own authority. Further, I suggest we must analyze ritual transformations in the musicians' repertoire in light of their social and economic aspirations, especially given their traditionally low status and the tides of globalization and neoliberal consumption so prominent in Tamil society today.

Chad M. Bauman , Butler University, Indianapolis, USA
Ritual Innovation and Co-Creation in the First Church of Cannabis

In 2015, Bill Levin established the First Church of Cannabis (FCOC) in the US state of Indiana, and claimed that the state's newly passed Religious Freedom Restoration Act legalized his church's central ritual, i.e., the corporate smoking of marijuana. Subsequent lawsuits determined otherwise, but the FCOC continues to operate today, gathering weekly to hear sermons, share testimonials, and engage in a feigned version of this central ritual. The endurance of the FCOC and of a denuded version of this ritual raises fascinating religious studies questions. The paper will first explore the necessity and nature of innovation in the face of government prohibitions preventing a religious community's preferred execution of a ritual. Second, the paper will explore the way in which the Church's central ritual, altered of necessity and performed only "hypothetically," still retains the power to organize and link, using Geertzian terms, a community's "ethos" and "worldview." Third, the paper will explore the involvement of congregational participants in the constant creation and re-creation of the ritual, such that in the span of just a few years, the ritual has accrued several elements not originally present.

Gita V. Pai, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
Innovative devotees: Tradition and change in contemporary Hindu religiosity

Arudhra Darisanam is a major Hindu festival celebrated annually in Tamil Nadu, a state in southeastern India. It occurs on the full moon day during the Tamil month of Margali (December-January) when god Shiva appears in his dancing form or Nataraja (Tamil, "lord of dance"). On this day, Nataraja receives a holy shower of oblations (*abhishekam*) in temples where the manifested image of Shiva is kept. Hindu adherents visit these temples to witness priests ritually perform the god's sacred bath and to offer their prayers. Later, when the fully-adorned Nataraja is paraded in procession outside the temple, devotees

flock the streets in the belief that having darisanam (“sight”) of Shiva’s cosmic “dance” is auspicious. This paper examines the devotional acts of a devout Shaiva devotee who deliberately broke away from the generations-long family tradition of sponsoring Arudhra Darisanam at their village temple. In an unprecedented and unconventional way, he continues worshipping the family deity through a reconfigured ritual that allows for a more direct and personal contact between devotee and divine being. In the case of this East Indian returnee to Tamil Nadu after an extended residence in the United States, we see an expression of creativity and innovation in the practice of Shaivism, which materially reworks and reimagines his faith, demonstrating the fundamental flexibility, malleability, and vitality of South Asian religiosity.

Anyia Fredsell, Emory University, Atlanta, USA

“If the kula deviam is happy, the family will be happy”: Ritual Innovation at a Lineage Deity Temple in South India

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in rural South India in 2025-26, this presentation examines ritual innovation at a Tamil lineage deity (*kula deviam*) temple. Inherited patrilineally, *kula deviams* are family- and place-specific Hindu deities that hold an obligation to protect and support members of the lineage, who in turn assume responsibility for their deity’s worship during annual festivals and important life-cycle rites. In this presentation, I will discuss the growing public popularity of a recently constructed *kula deviam* temple in Tamil Nadu and the emerging ritual authority of the brothers who serve as its priests. On Tuesday and Friday evenings, dozens of people arrive from surrounding villages and towns to seek advice from the family’s goddess, who began descending on and speaking through one of the male family members three years back. While the family describes their *kula deviam* as “very powerful” and capable of answering the prayers of all, the goddess’s divine prophecies also direct many devotees back to their own *kula deviams* to resolve difficulties related to health, marriage arrangements, interpersonal conflicts, and so on. The brothers send petitioners off with ritually potent sacred ash and lemons from their goddess, along with instructions on how families may seek the support of and communicate with their own *kula deviams* at home. These innovative ritual exchanges imbue the family’s goddess and priests with a new form of public authority, while reaffirming the importance of private devotional relationships between families and their gods.

Brian K. Pennington, Elon University

Reviving a Buddhist Past in the Indian Himalayas

In the pilgrimage city of Uttarkashi, located along the Ganges River 100 km below its source in the Himalayas of Uttarakhand, India, sits an empty, unused temple building constructed in the rough stone-and-timber style common to the region. Remarkable only for its dilapidation, this temple nevertheless played an important role in the religious life of this small city until its central image was seized or stolen around 1960. The only source to document the temple’s earlier role is a 1953 account by Marxist travel writer Rahul Sankrityayan, who identified its image as the Buddha and noted this site’s earlier importance as a trading center for Tibetan merchants. The statue went missing at the height of young India’s border dispute with China in the early 1960s, after which its doors were padlocked until January 2026. Local rumors have long held that the Government of India itself was responsible, aiming to remove evidence that could support Chinese claims to the region. This past January, a local politician entered the locked temple, the first person to do so in living memory. Hindu priests reconsecrated the structure, and a new temple committee plans to renovate and reopen it for regular ritual use. This paper examines the temple’s second life, in which its guardians openly proclaim rather than obscure its presumed Buddhist origins, refiguring the temple’s history to forge a potent symbolic resource in local political struggles over the place of Hindu nationalism in a region long on the fringes of Indian society.

Weronika Zaczek, AGH University of Science and Technology, Krakow

Waldorf Pedagogy as an Initiatory Educational Strategy: An Analysis of School Rituals

This paper examines Waldorf pedagogy as an example of contemporary ritual innovation, in which educational practices are constructed as initiatory processes rooted in esoteric cosmology. Drawing on theories of ritual as strategic practice (C. Bell) and the anthropology of ritual performance (R. Rappaport), the author argues that Waldorf education does not merely transmit knowledge but actively produces a structured, transformative engagement with the world. The analysis demonstrates that Waldorf pedagogy can be understood as a contemporary form of ritual initiation. Based on qualitative research conducted in Waldorf schools, including participant observation, visual analysis of classroom environments, and interviews with teachers, the author discusses key pedagogical elements such as the rhythmic structuring of time (day, week, and year), the symbolic use of color, narrative forms, and embodied practices such as eurythmy. These elements guide the child through successive stages of development framed in cosmological and spiritual terms. The paper situates Waldorf pedagogy within the broader context of Western esotericism (A. Faivre), showing how it integrates motifs drawn from Hermeticism, Romantic Naturphilosophie, and Anthroposophy into a modern educational system. This process involves both the selective borrowing and transformation of symbolic forms, as well as strategic appeals to tradition, which serve to legitimize these innovations. The paper demonstrates how pedagogical practices can function as sites for the production of authority, subjectivity, and alternative forms of religious knowledge in contemporary societies.

Carl Johan Gurt , Stockholm University

Nuu-chah-nulth Rituals in the 21st Century: Tradition and Innovation

During fieldwork among the Nuu-chah-nulth of western Vancouver Island in November 2025, I witnessed several ritual occasions that illuminate the interplay between tradition and innovation in contemporary Indigenous ceremonial life. The Nuu-chah-nulth hosted a potlatch that deviated markedly from conventional forms, as it was organized around a specific political goal: the removal of fish farms from their waters. While the event at times took on the character of a political rally, it nonetheless retained its more traditional elements, dancing and oratory, functioning throughout as a ceremonial event structured by ritual sequences. Just days later, I witnessed a so-called Brushing ritual, a form of cleansing ceremony described by participants as highly traditional in its execution. Yet even in this esoteric context, innovative traits were discernible. The Brushing is a shamanistic ritual conducted by the patient's relatives under the supervision of a shaman. Through the active ceremonial engagement of the patient's family, healing, understood within the Nuu-chah-nulth belief system, is believed to take place, as the relatives help relieve the patient's burden. Though considered a very old ritual, new elements were present here as well. Analysing contemporary Nuu-chah-nulth rituals requires attention to how participants are situated within their engagement, what motivates their presence and shapes their experience. Today, participation is driven by a broad and heterogeneous spectrum of factors: identity formation, oppositional identity, political commitment, social belonging, and religious conviction, most often in combination. The preservation of old symbols and their meanings is itself an active and ongoing choice, made from sometimes new or innovative vantage points. In this paper, I analyse this heterogeneity and its implications for how we understand ritual continuity and change in a contemporary Indigenous context.

OPEN PANEL XXVI
Beyond religious diplomacy:
transnational spaces and local renegotiations of religion

Abdoulaye Ibrahim Bachir , University of Bayreuth

Muslim aid brokerage and the Reshaping of Turkish Religious Engagement in Niger

In the last two decades, Turkish humanitarian actors have become increasingly present on the African continent. Academic debates have intensified over religion-linked actors, particularly in Muslim-majority countries, who are seen as agents implementing Ankara's global agenda on the ground. Taking a different approach, this paper examines Turkish religious engagement through the lens of the Muslim aid brokerage concept, focusing on the humanitarian aid activities of a transnational Turkish Muslim NGO, IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, in Niger. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the paper argues that Turkish religious engagement is reshaped on the ground by religiously motivated aid brokers who mediate, interpret, and provide aid to their fellow Muslims in need. Turkish religious engagement therefore emerges not as a one-way projection of Ankara's agenda, but as a set of practices produced through aid brokerage in the field, where locals interact and negotiate aid based on a shared faith.

Evelyn Reuter , University of Graz

Engineering the Religious Diversity in Albania: Actors, Inclusion, and Exclusion in the Interreligious Council

This paper explores the role of the Interreligious Council of Albania (ICA) as a key agent of religious engineering in a society redefining its religious landscape after decades of state atheism. Drawing on the concept of “religious engineering”, the study analyses how the state, the ICA, and faith communities act as “engineers” of interreligious dialogue and religious coexistence. It asks: What visions for society are articulated and pursued through the ICA? Who has access to participation, and who remains excluded, despite the country's rhetorical commitment to “harmony and tolerance”? Empirically, the study focuses on several religious communities with different degrees of involvement in or exclusion from the ICA, including the Catholic Church, the Bahá'í, and Sufi orders. The analysis addresses both internal negotiations and exclusions within the ICA and the transnational dimensions, such as the role of religious networks and their centers (e.g. the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa) and Albania's EU ongoing accession process. Special attention is paid to legal and institutional frameworks that regulate religious authority, recognition, and the boundaries of participation in interfaith dialogue. Based on ongoing fieldwork, the paper explores how engineering practices reflect and reconfigure Albania's religious field, especially through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in interfaith dialogue. Preliminary observations suggest that, despite the rhetoric of “harmony and tolerance”, religious engineering within the ICA (re-)produces hierarchies and marginalizes certain groups. Thus, the case provides nuanced insights into the contingencies of religious diplomacy and engineering in a still under-researched post-socialist context.

Adriana Cupcea , Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities | New Europe College, Bucharest

Religious Soft Power in Turkey's Kin-State Policy in the Balkans: The Role of the Diyanet and TIKA in Muslim Communities in Kosovo and the Dobruja Region in Romania

The paper analyses the role of religion in Turkey's kin state policy in the case of Muslims in Kosovo and of the Turkish and Tatar communities in the Dobruja region of Romania. More specifically, by focusing on the work of Turkish state institutions Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey) and TIKA (Development and Cooperation Agency in Turkey), the chapter investigates how Turkey accumulates religious soft power potential in Kosovo and the Dobruja region, by using its kin-state position to

strengthen the Muslim communities in these states and how its kin-state religious policies are influencing and shaping the communities at the local level. The chapter also analyses the extent to which Turkey has the same purpose and the same level of influence in both Kosovo and Romania. The approach draws on Roger Brubaker's triangular relationship of the national minority, the nation state in which the minority lives, and the homeland to which the ethnic group belongs. This framework is complemented by an additional fourth element, which is the transnational Islam, defined by John R. Bowen as a public, global space for reference and normative debate, where the norms and practices of Islam are negotiated and redefined beyond national borders. The chapter finds that in a number of manifestations of public and religious life of Muslims in Kosovo and the Dobruja region the activity of Diyanet and TİKA has produced significant soft power potential for Turkey. The analysis also identifies the key differences between the way religious influence and presence of Turkey manifested itself in the two countries as well as the different goals of Turkish policy in the two cases, largely due to the different structural elements pertaining to issues of demography and ethnic and religious make up.

Şimal Zağra, University of Leipzig

From "Din" to "Maneviyat": How Religion Survives by Not Naming Itself

This paper examines how "spirituality" (*maneviyat*) operates as a strategic and epistemologically productive category in contemporary Turkey, focusing on music therapy practices that consciously distance themselves from "religion" (*din*). Based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and discourse analysis, the paper explores how practitioners navigate historically sedimented tensions between religion and secularism by mobilizing spirituality as an alternative framework of legitimacy. I argue that *maneviyat* does not simply mirror global "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) discourses but emerges from a specifically Turkish genealogy shaped by early republican secularization, the culturalization of Islam, and contemporary neoliberal markets. Within this context, "spirituality" enables practitioners to appeal to secular and Kemalist audiences, access global wellness economies, and maintain Islamic practices—such as Mevlevi sema—without naming them as religious. The paper further analyzes how these practices negotiate a long-standing epistemological bifurcation between *bilim* (positivist, modern science) and *ilim* (disciplined and revealed knowledge). Ottoman makam therapy functions here as a boundary object that allows code-switching between epistemic registers. Within this tension, "spirituality" acts as a flexible third term that temporarily stabilizes it. Last, by foregrounding lived practice and historically situated categories, the paper contributes to ongoing debates in the academic study of religions about religion-making, the analytical status of "spirituality," and the role of Religious Studies in critically examining its own conceptual tools under conditions of secular modernity.

OPEN PANEL XXIX
Metaphor and Materiality:
Conceptual and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Religion

Jessie Pons, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Material Metaphors in Practice: Conceptual Challenges and a Case Study

During the first phase of the Collaborative Research Center “Metaphors of Religion”, an exploratory working group on “Materiality and Metaphor” was established to address how nontextual sources – such as images, artifacts, architecture, and spatial arrangements – can be systematically integrated into the study of religious metaphor. This initiative was grounded in the assumption that metaphors are not confined to language, but operate across multiple media. Two key questions guided this work: how can existing metaphor frameworks be extended to non-textual phenomena, and which methodological steps are required to identify and annotate metaphors in such sources? Building on this foundation, this paper offers an overview of current conceptual and methodological discussions surrounding “material metaphors.” It argues that metaphors should be understood as inherently multimodal processes unfolding across texts, objects, images, and practices. This perspective resonates with broader developments in the study of religion, where increasing attention has been paid to materiality, media, and embodiment, and where recent research has demonstrated the importance of material culture for interpreting verbal metaphors. The paper illustrates these conceptual and methodological considerations through a case study of decorated staircases at Buddhist sites in Gandhara. Positioned as transitional structures linking monastic courtyards to stūpas, these staircases combine architectural form and narrative imagery in ways that suggest metaphorical meaning. Their carved scenes – alternating between jātaka narratives, battle scenes, and depictions of sensual pleasures – create a semantic tension with monastic ideals, pointing to complex layers of interpretation. Approached as “multimodal metaphors,” the staircases can be understood as mapping the physical act of ascent onto the spiritual journey from saṃsāra to Buddhahood. This case study demonstrates how metaphorical processes are embedded in spatial configurations and visual programs, and how they can be systematically analyzed within a multimodal framework.

Julia Stenzel, Leibniz Universität Hannover

Embodiment and Evocation: Non-linguistic Metaphors in Passion Plays and Ta‘ziyeh

This methodological paper develops a comparative performance-analytic account of how spatial and bodily metaphors constitute religious meaning in two ritual-theatrical traditions: the European Christian Passion Play and the Shi‘ite Ta‘ziyeh. It corrects a persistent category error: Ta‘ziyeh is not a “Passion play” in the Christian sense as former research has been suggesting; the two forms organise presence, suffering, and transcendence through incommensurable scenologies. In Passion plays, the conceptual metaphor “passion-as-path” is literalised. The Via Crucis and the Stations of the Cross inscribe a directional dramaturgy of descent and ascent and a teleological arc from humiliation to glorification. Presence is incarnational and mimetic: a human performer bodies forth the descended Son of God as the material locus where heavenly and earthly orders collapse. Non-linguistic metaphors are enacted through walking and bearing weight (the cross), through gradients of up/down and near/far, through touch and kneeling, and through the mobilisation of objects (Arma Christi, veil, nails, blood). Processional routing recruits spectators as pilgrims, orienting their bodies along an itinerary that figures theological passage. Ta‘ziyeh organises martyrdom as lament rather than redemption and privileges evocation over embodiment. Presence is distributed and indexical: sanctity is signalled by colour codes (green/black/red), standards (‘alam), horses, tents; opposing camps are separated spatially to mark truth and injustice. Space is simultaneous and non-mimetic: multiple sites and temporalities are indicated on a bare stage; thus Husayn’s absence is made sensible rather than enacted. Here, dryness versus water (thirst), dust and blood (violence), enclosure and encirclement (siege), and the rhythm of chest-beating function

as tactile and sonic metaphors that pattern collective grief. Methodologically, the paper integrates conceptual metaphor theory, focusing especially on its embodied and spatial turns. Thus, it builds upon the findings of the working group on “Materiality and Metaphor” within the Collaborative Research Center “Metaphors of Religion” and its exploratory on objects, affordances, and space. Drawing on performance analysis (scenology, proxemics, effort qualities), it explores the concept of ‘metaphor constituting acts’. These tools operationalise metaphor-in-action and allow for a comparative perspective on Passion plays and Ta‘ziyeh.

Nikita Artemov, Ruhr University Bochum

God as a Lion. The Interplay of Visual and Linguistic Imagery and the Hebrew Prophecy of Doom

The prophecy of Amos begins with the utterance “YHWH roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem” (Amos 1:2). The Hebrew verb *šā’ag* found in the first half of this verse is used, in its more basic meaning, with reference to the roaring of a lion, which shows that the initial image of the book contains the conceptual metaphor «God is a lion». My paper underscores the use and significance of the lion metaphor in the book of Amos and in prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible and traces the related conceptual metaphor «Deity is a lion» in iconographic images from the Ancient Near East dating to the first millennium BCE, among them, in reliefs from the palace of the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in Ninive. The corresponding iconographic images in Mesopotamian art illuminate conceptual frames evoked or echoed by Biblical texts on a connotational level (such as Storm deity is a lion and ROYAL POWER IS LEONINE STRENGTH) as well as the inherent ambiguity of the lion imagery in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, standing for both destructive, life-threatening and protective aspects of divine power.

Gerrit Lange, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Getting in Touch with the Snake Goddess: A visual metaphor process as cognition, imagination, and feeling

Hindu religion involves a multitude of practices and stories that embed humans in the universe at large, including other worlds and inhabited by nonhuman people. On the level of everyday life, this includes interactions with divine beings embodied in forms that iconically re-present deities and make them present, *i.e.* emotionally and sensually approachable. Arguably, inviting and invoking deities from an otherworld to immanent reality entails a crossing over or “crossing down” (Sk. *ava-tāra*) from the realms beyond the known lifeworld. Folk Hindu traditions literally do what Blumenberg considers a fundamental function of myth: to give names to the nameless and a face to the faceless. Humans localize themselves within mythical stories and cosmologies through the cognitive, imaginative and emotional acts of transfer that, according to Paul Ricoeur, make up the “metaphorical process”. Unsurprisingly, the aspect of imagination, especially visual imagination, condenses into images that make the invisible visible. Good examples for this process can be found in woodprints from Nepal, which are attached to house entrances during the serpent festival, Nag Panchami. The worship of snake deities manifests a particularly “down-to-earth” approach to the invisible forces and dangers immanent in the environment, but also in human psychical and social dynamics. Serpents are pacified through ritual expressions of love and intimacy, both directed towards and depicted within the images. A combination of visual motives and Sanskrit text metonymically links *nāgas* to other venomous animals, such as millipedes and spiders, and, more metaphorically, to natural forces such as lightning, rain or drought.

Licia Di Giacinto, Ruhr University Bochum

Metaphors and the “godly” in Eastern Han (25-220) figurative sources

Eastern Han (25–220 CE) stone engravings are windows into the spiritual life of ancient China, blending symbolic depth with narrative richness. Carved into funerary stone reliefs, this material also offers a new glimpse in the history of Chinese religions, illustrating aspects that are only marginally treated in the

extant received literature. Interpreting this material, however, presents a challenge due to their symbolic density. The often-layered imagery and the ambiguity of scenes, where divine and mortal realms intertwine, further complicates analysis, leaving scholars to navigate between literal representation and metaphorical intent. The present talk intends to look at a group of stone engravings excavated in the suburbs of Suide and Yulin (Shaanxi) from the perspective of Cognitive Metaphor Theory. Cognitive structures such as those examined by Lakoff and Johnson from the 80's onwards are, indeed, easily traceable in Han visual material. The heavens (UP) are often depicted as a celestial abode of gods, rendering the cosmos as both a sacred architecture and a dynamic realm of divine activity. Furthermore, visual narratives of motion—particularly in depictions of “processions”—reveal a dynamic interplay between movement, divine, and cosmic destination (sometimes identified in the heavens, hence motifs of ascension, sometimes, identified in a specific godly figure, hence motifs of veneration). The paper shall finally try to explore whether all this can be systematically analyzed by means of electronic tools like those developed at the Bochum research consortium “Metaphors of Religion”.

OPEN PANEL XXXII
Christian Theatre in Early Modern Europe.
Cultural Transformations, Pedagogical Strategies, Theological Renewal

Mirella Saulini , Sapienza University, Italy

St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spirituality on the Stage of Jesuit Colleges: Christus Nascens, Christus Patiens, Christus Iudex Tragoediae by Stefano Tucci

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola instructs the exercitant to use his imagination to place himself within a scene that is a kind of mental stage where Jesus is the protagonist and other human beings are the supporting characters. We can say that the exercitant is at the same time a silent character and a spectator who, engaging all his senses, meditates on the acting characters with the aim of finding God within himself. Between 1564 and 1569, Stefano Tucci, one of the most distinguished theologians, orators, and dramatists of the early Society of Jesus, wrote and performed in Messina *Christus Nascens*, *Christus Patiens*, *Christus Iudex Tragoediae*. The mental stage of the *Spiritual Exercises* becomes the theatrical stage of Messina's College and the viewers are implicitly invited to meditate respectively on Jesus Christ's Incarnation and Passion and on the final judgement. This presentation focuses on *Christus Iudex*, one of the most spectacular and successful tragedy in the history of Jesuit theatre that is reported to have caused conversions among viewers. The source of this tragedy is The Book of Revelation. Our goal is to demonstrate that *Christus Iudex Tragoedia*, the fifth act in particular, not only invites viewers to meditate on what they see and hear, and on the consequences of every human actions, but that, only a few years after the Council of Trent, it confirms the Tridentine position on the free will and the Tridentine condemnation of the Reformed Church.

Cora Presezzi , Sapienza University of Rome

To repent, or not to repent? A Faustian Question on the Early Modern Stage

In the context of the religious crisis of the sixteenth century, the theme of repentance functioned as a crucial doctrinal "clue" to confessional divisions. The dramatization of the psychological process of repentance—or of the failure to repent leading to damnation—was a prominent feature of Jesuit theatrical production. Examples include *Augustinus conversus* by Jacob Gretser (1592) and the so-called drama of Count Leontius, first performed in Ingolstadt in 1615, which develops the motif of the impossibility of repentance by linking it to the atheistic denial of the afterlife taught by Machiavelli, Leontius' mentor. In the same years, the figure of Faust emerged on the European stage, arising from a complex web of legends circulating in Protestant Germany, likewise closely connected to the theme of repentance, which plays a major role in the *Faustbuch* (1587). This paper offers a comparative reading of the first two adaptations of the Faust figure in early modern European theatre, starting from the question of the roots of Faust's failure to repent. The analysis focuses on the opposition between two female figures—the Virgin Mary and the seductive Helen of Troy—who appear in the two plays. On the one hand, the paper examines repentance in Christopher Marlowe's *Tragicall History* (1592–1593), showing that the figure of Helen of Troy—whose name, in the so-called B text, appears in the form "Hellen"—plays a crucial role in shaping the theme of failed repentance, particularly through the convergence of erotic desire and the desire for hell mediated by her presence. On the other hand, the paper considers the reworking of the Faust story in the Jesuit drama *Theophilus Cilix* (1621) by Georg Bernardt, clearly inspired by anti-Lutheran concerns and centered on the legend of Theophilus of Adana, who makes a pact with the devil but, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, is able to break it and achieve redemption. Bernardt contrasts the traditional and positive exemplum of Theophilus—well suited, from a theological perspective, to a Counter-Reformation reading that emphasizes Marian intercession—with a Faust presented as a negative exemplum of the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone and of the rejection of the mediating role of Marian mercy.

Niccolò Brandodoro , Sapienza University of Rome

“Peregrino en su patria”. Saint Alexius between Hagiographic Traditions and Jesuit Theatre

This paper examines the theatrical reconfiguration of the legend of Saint Alexius in the anonymous *Comedia del peregrino en su patria o de san Alejo*, probably performed at the Jesuit Colegio Imperial in Madrid in the late sixteenth century.

First, I will explore how inherited hagiographic traditions are reshaped within the conventions of Jesuit college theatre. Particular attention will be given to Alexius' renunciation of marriage and family, his return to Rome, and his life as an unrecognised beggar in his father's house, as well as to significant additions such as his mystical marriage to Divine Beauty, the interventions of Angel and Lucifer, and several important subplots.

The analysis will show how the Jesuit theatrical adaptation brings into focus the theological stakes of Alexius' ancient model of *xeniteia*, while also revealing the literary and dramaturgical innovations through which Jesuit theatre reworked inherited hagiographic material. More broadly, the play highlights the role of theatre in shaping post-Tridentine politics of sanctity through the construction and performance of new models of male sainthood.

OPEN PANEL XXXIII
AI, Robots, and Religion in the Asia-Pacific:
Rethinking Agency, Presence, and the Other-than-Human

Kristina Eiviler , University of Zurich

“The Temple where Drone Buddhas Fly:” Technology-Mediated Buddhism at the Ryuganji Temple

The incorporation of the latest technologies into the Buddhist context is not a novelty. In fact, the first robot ever used in any religious context was a Buddhist robot monk Xian'er in China in 2015 (Cheong, 2020). In Japan, similar efforts have been made: from the Buddhist funeral-performing Pepper robot (Gould & Walters, 2020; Gould & Nishimura, 2024), Mindar Kannon Buddhist robot-teacher (Baffeli, 2021; White & Katsuno, 2023; Jackson et al., 2023); as well as BuddhaBot and Teraverse (Kumagai, 2023), the variety of creative technological implementations in different sects of Buddhism seems to be expanding. Less explored example is the self-named “tech temple in Kyoto, Japan, the Ryuganji temple of the Jodo Buddhist sect. At the Ryuganji temple, the latest technologies and creative inventions are not only actively incorporated into Buddhist practices (for example, a drone flying formation of Amitabha Buddha and Bodhisattvas) but also embedded in the temple's identity and branding. This paper explores the necessary balancing act between religious practice and branding of the temple and its implications. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at the Ryuganji temple and in-depth interviews with the main actors, this paper (1) gives an overview of the technological innovations at the Ryuganji temple; (2) explores the reasoning behind the technological implementation from the position of the temple's authority; and (3) analyses the necessary balancing act between technology and tradition and its implications to religious practice.

OPEN PANEL XXXVI
Embodied Lived Religion:
Faith, Practice, and Everyday Life in Roma Communities

Kinga Povedák, University of Szeged
Embodied Sonic Agency in Roma Religious Musicking

This paper aims to examine Roma religious musicking as a site of embodied sonic agency. Engaging with recent approaches in lived religion, affect theory, and material religion, I argue that sound is not merely expressive but constitutes a sensory ground through which religious experience and social relations are produced. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a small settlement close to Szeged (Hungary), this paper examines the central role of music in congregational gatherings within vernacular Roma religious practice. I demonstrate how religious life unfolds through sound through collective singing, rhythmic participation, vocal intensity, and affective dynamics. Sound is understood not only as representational or performative but as something that acts through bodies. Embodied religious knowledge emerges through sonic participation, where singing, rhythm, and movement become central modalities of religious praxis. Emotional intensities are not only expressed but generated through these sonic practices, as participants become attuned to shared rhythms and affective atmospheres. Corporeal expressions such as swaying, clapping, closing the eyes, raising the hands are all closely intertwined with musical structure and rhythm, often taking the form of carefully structured, collectively enacted choreographies. By foregrounding these dynamics, the paper highlights how Roma religious musicking constitutes an embodied practice of identity formation and collective transformation.

László Fosztó, ISPMN – Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities
My church is inside my house: Embodied religion among Transylvanian Roma under COVID Pandemics

This paper revisits the concept of embodiment in the anthropology of religion, building on the foundational work of Thomas Csordas, to argue for its analytical relevance in contexts of mediated communication. While much of the existing scholarship has emphasized immediate, co-present, and sensorially rich forms of bodily participation in religious life, this study proposes that embodiment remains a productive theoretical lens even under conditions of physical separation and technological mediation. The argument is developed through a case study of an extended transnational network of Roma churches that intensified their connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. As public health restrictions limited in-person gatherings, these communities rapidly adapted to online platforms, organizing virtual rituals that included collective prayer, sermons, worship sessions, and personal testimonies. Rather than treating these practices as diminished or disembodied substitutes for ‘real life’ religious experience, the paper examines how participants actively reconfigured embodied engagement within digital environments. Drawing on ethnographic observations and mediated interactions, the study shows that bodily dispositions, affective participation, and sensory imagination continue to play a central role in online religious participation. Even in conditions of geographical distance or enforced isolation, participants report deeply felt experiences of spiritual connection, healing, and communal belonging. By foregrounding these dynamics, the paper challenges a strict opposition between embodied and mediated religious practices. It suggests instead that embodiment should be understood as relational and processual, extending beyond physical co-location to include technologically facilitated forms of interaction. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on religion, media, and sociality, demonstrating how crises such as the pandemic catalysed innovative configurations of embodied religious life.

István Povedák, MOME, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design
Seeing Auras, Wearing Faith: Kalapos Zoli's Embodied Vernacular Theology

"Kalapos Zoli" is a deeply devout Hungarian Roma man of Roman Catholic faith. One room in his house serves as a unique chapel, housing several Virgin Mary statues, candles, rosaries, and various ritual objects. Kalapos Zoli is a highly recognizable figure: he always wears a hat, from which he derives his nickname, and gold rings depicting saints, pentagram necklaces, gold teeth, and traditional Roma attire. Despite his devout beliefs, Zoli does not attend church services. According to his own account, he identifies as a medium, exorcist, chakra-cleanser, fortune-teller, Tarot and palms reader, and claims the ability to see auras. This paper approaches Kalapos Zoli's religious practice through an embodied perspective, emphasizing how belief, perception, and authority are enacted through the body and sensory experience. His distinctive appearance functions not merely as personal style but as a performative and symbolic articulation of spiritual authority. The analysis foregrounds the role of objects and material arrangements in shaping religious experience. Zoli's domestic chapel emerges as a key site where official Catholic iconography intertwines with vernacular and esoteric elements, producing a hybrid sacred space. I argue that Zoli's practice represents a form of vernacular religion in which charisma, sensory perception, and material culture converge to create an alternative, yet deeply meaningful, religious epistemology.

Bernadette Fraioli, Sapienza University of Rome

The Romani people at the Shrine of "Madonna del Divino Amore" in Rome: exceptional practices embodied in the "Open-air Church of the 'Gypsies'" during the Jubilee of the Roma and the Sinti 2025

The Romani people are believed to have left northern India in significant numbers between the 13th and 14th centuries, likely as a consequence of wars and persecution (Jacobsen 2023; Hancock 2002). Their ancestors were presumably Hindus, but as they migrated across different regions they gradually adopted the dominant religions of the societies in which they settled, often more out of social convention than deep religious conviction (Spinelli 2021). Their presence in Italy is documented from the early 15th century. One of the earliest records appears in the Bolognese chronicles of July 18, 1422 (Muratori 1871; Gront 2013). The following year, in 1423, Romani groups are reported in Rome during the Jubilee proclaimed by Pope Martin V, where they participated as pilgrims seeking absolution. Today, the largest Roma settlements in Rome are concentrated in the south-eastern part of the city. This presence is visible both as a social phenomenon—most notably in the so-called "nomad" camp of Castel Romano—and as a religious one, as testified by the 19th-century holograph preserved by The Our Lady of Divine Love Shrine (Santuario della Madonna del Divino Amore), located in the same area. The sanctuary hosted the Jubilee of the Roma and Sinti in 2025 and is home to the so-called "Open-air church of the Gypsies," dedicated to Blessed Ceferino Giménez Malla, the martyr and patron saint of Roma and Sinti communities. This paper analyzes the moment at the end of the procession in which institutional prelates carry the Madonna del Divino Amore to the top of the so-called "Gypsies' Shrine." At this point, the songs and dances performed by Roma participants—practices that appear both at odds with Catholic orthodoxy and as expressions of the authenticity of popular devotion—highlight the central role of embodied practices in Roman religiosity. The Roma and Sinti thus constitute a notable exception to the norm: their presence disrupts the ordinary ordering of Rome's urban, religious, and social public space, simultaneously standing out within the institutionalized traditions to which they formally belong. Although these communities are accepted within the Catholic Church, their religious presence does not appear fully normalized. Rather, it remains in many ways itinerant, temporary, and negotiated. As a result, Roma and Sinti devotional practices occupy a gray area in which belonging and inclusion coexist with persistent marginality, allowing participation within Catholic frameworks while maintaining a position at their edges.

Ryoko Sachi-Noro, Faculty of Sociology

Praying in Many Voices: Embodied Resonance and Togetherness among Manouche Pentecostals in France

Pentecostal Christianity is often described as emphasizing a direct, unmediated relationship with God, yet worship frequently generates intensely collective forms of experience. This paper examines how such

collective experience emerges among Manouche Pentecostals in France, whose social life is typically portrayed as decentralized and organized through fluid kin-based networks. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, I focus on testimonies and collective prayer in worship services. During testimonies, believers publicly recount hardships—illness, addiction, family conflict—and describe divine intervention in their lives. I argue that testimony reshapes how suffering circulates socially. Experiences once shared mainly within kin networks become public narratives addressed to the congregation. Through this shift, private suffering becomes a shared affective resource that extends relations beyond kinship boundaries. These narratives also shape the emotional dynamics of the collective prayer that follows. Building on Thomas Csordas's phenomenology of embodiment, I analyze how prayer creates a dense sonic environment of murmured speech, weeping, singing, and occasional glossolalia. Individual voices do not merge into a single collective expression; instead, they resonate with one another while remaining distinct. As believers open themselves to God in personal prayer, they also become bodily attuned to the voices and emotions of others, allowing individual expressions to resonate within a shared sensory field. By highlighting the transformation of suffering and the embodied resonance of prayer, this paper shows how Pentecostal worship generates a mode of being-together grounded not in institutional authority or preexisting kinship or ethnic identity but in the shared circulation of testimony and affect.

Natanael Alexandru Bitis, School of Advanced Studies of the Romanian Academy (SCOSAAR)
Sacred Sound, Disciplined Bodies: Music and Embodied Conversion among Roma Pentecostals

This paper examines the role of music in shaping embodied religious transformation within a Roma Pentecostal community from Fântânele, Romania. Musical performance, particularly *lăutărie*, generally associated with weddings and celebrations, has long been central to both the livelihood and identity of Roma from Fântânele. Within Pentecostal frameworks, however, given their conversion, such practices are redefined as morally problematic, linked to excess and sin. Conversion thus involves not only a change in belief but a reorientation of the senses, the everyday conduct, and even the body. The renunciation of certain musical forms becomes part of a broader process of disciplining the body and regulating affect. At the same time, music is not simply abandoned but reconfigured. Congregational singing and worship practices generate new forms of sacred sound that produce affective intensity, collective belonging, and experiences of divine presence. Music thus operates as both rupture and continuity, mediating between past and present identities. Based on ongoing ethnographic research combining participant observation in religious services with in-depth interviews, the paper explores how musical practices mediate the transition from “worldly” to “saved” selves. It contributes to the study of lived religion by showing how religious subjectivities are formed through everyday practices of listening, performing, and regulating sound within a specific Roma community.

OPEN PANEL XXXVII
Doing Theology in Antiquity:
Practices, Genres and Contexts

Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler , Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
Theology with/through Oracles: the example of Porphyry

Starting with the third century AD, oracles become increasingly present in philosophical theology. A pivotal figure within this trend is the Platonic philosopher Porphyry. On the one hand, he assembles a commented collection of oracles introduced as reliable divine answers to philosophical, not least theological problems, and therefore a firm basis for salvation (the so-called Philosophy from Oracles). On the other hand, along with his student Iamblichus he draws an existing oracular collection of the second century from obscurity into the orbit of Platonic theology: the so-called Chaldaean Oracles, written by a father-and-son couple who accompany the pronouncements of the gods with a series of explanatory works elucidating their obscurities and outlining an alternative to the Platonic dialogues, especially the Timaeus. The paper will explore how Porphyry uses oracles to craft and/or articulate his theology, analysing both his Philosophy from Oracles and his approach to the Chaldaean corpus. It will highlight how Porphyry selects and interprets his oracular material, comparing his approach to oracles with that to other authoritative texts, such as the Orphic poems or Plato. It will outline the theological ideas that guide Porphyry's exegesis and discuss whether the oracles contribute new dimensions to his theological project. Thirdly, it will attempt to contextualise Porphyry's use of oracles for theology within the intellectual life of the third-century, with a particular focus on Rome.

Jörg von Alvensleben , Universität Göttingen
Worship of the Gods, Theological Discourse, and Literary Aesthetics in Late Antique Philosophical Hymns

Hymns, as we know them from the Stoic Cleanthes, but especially from Proclus and Synesius in late antiquity, seem to represent a point of intersection between philosophy and theology on the one hand and the worship of the gods on the other. The generic term "philosophical hymn," however, is a modern terminology, and the decision (as, for example, in the two-volume edition by Furley and Bremer: Greek Hymns, Tübingen 2001) not to regard such texts as hymns in the strictly religious sense is based on certain assumptions, e.g., that what is presented here is a philosophical theology rather than merely an invocation of gods, or that it constitutes a kind of private intellectual religion that diverges from the generally practiced public religion. The question of how valid this modern distinction may be can only be adequately answered by examining the interplay and relative importance of the various religious, theological, and pedagogical functions in such hymns. But the question is also to what extent these functions are accessible to us as modern readers. Using selected textual examples, primarily the late antique hymns of Proclus and Synesius, I would like to analyze the role played by the divine presence evoked in the hymn, the Epiclesis of God, theological systematics, and the linguistic and literary form, and to what extent these elements are interrelated. To this end, it is necessary to begin the first part of the talk with a brief analysis of the genre of ancient hymns as a whole, before turning our attention to these late antique hymns.

Gabriela Ryser , Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften | Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
«Verbum carmen factum est»: Practicing Theology in Late Latin Biblical Epic.

This paper argues that late Latin biblical epic is not merely a poetic 'translation', a versification, of Scripture, but a site in which Christian authors actively practice theology. It examines how the late antique authors Juvenius, Sedulius, and Dracontius use epic conventions such as meter, diction, intertextual allusion, narrative shaping, and paradoxical imagery to think through and stage central

Christian doctrines at the heart of their faith. The paper asks how these poems move between implicit theological issues embedded into the stories they tell and more explicit, doctrinal reflection, and how this spectrum reflects the different worlds in which these poets wrote and the audiences they addressed. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the inherited epic form constrains, but also enables theological articulation. Poetic strategies such as paradox and visualisation function as pathways to connect abstract, transcendent doctrine with something observable and felt in daily life, translating intellectual belief into an almost sensory experience. Thus, the paper treats biblical epic as a theological practice in its own right, rather than as a secondary, 'literary' reception of more authoritative prose, and invites discussion of what perspectives such a reading might open up for the study of theological reflection in non-prose genres beyond Antiquity.

Charles Guittard, University Paris Nanterre Société Ernest Renan | Société française d'histoire des religions

Is there a specific Latin word for the Greek concept of theology?

The word *theologia* is a Latin loanword from Greek. Is there an equivalent word in Latin? Our attention turns to the expression: *rerum diuinarum humanarumque scientia* (that is, «the science of divine and human matters»). There is no founding text for Roman religion, but rather a set of institutions and practices associated with the reign of Numa. During the Republic, the colleges compiled records (*Libri, Commentarii, Acta...*). Priests, organized into colleges—particularly the pontiffs, the decemvirs, the augurs, and even the Etruscan haruspices—played a role in Rome's political life, regulated relations between humans and the gods, and provided answers to pressing questions (*responsa haruspicum, procuratio prodigiorum*, Sibylline oracles, etc.). It was not until the end of the Republic that elements of reflection on Roman religion began to appear in Latin literature. A historian like Livy can be considered as a historian of Roman religion. Lucretius expounds the doctrine of Epicurus concerning the world and the gods in his great poem *De rerum natura*, and two dialogues by Cicero set forth the doctrines of the Epicureans and the Stoics (*De divinatione* and *De natura deorum*). Varro's theories, the *Antiquitates rerum humanarum divinarumque*, offered a compilation of information on Roman religion; while the full text has not survived, numerous fragments, belonging mainly to Books I, XIV (entitled *De diis certis*), XV (*De diis incertis*), and XVI (*De diis preecipuis atque selectis*), have been preserved by Tertullian, Augustine, and also Macrobius. This compendium of Roman theology was indeed highly favored by Christian polemicists, who often drew their information from it; in particular Varro refers to a tripartite theology (*theologia tripertita*). He distinguished between the theology of philosophers, the theology of poets, and the theology of peoples or cities. Varro also endeavored to classify the gods of polytheism. One expression stands out for designating knowledge of the gods, the science of divine and human matters (*Rerum divinarum humanarumque scientia*). It is also found in the definition of law, about *iurisprudentia* (Digest, Justinian Code). It also applies to wisdom among philosophers and is part of the debate between polytheism and monotheism. What does an expression such as *scientia rerum diuinarum humanarumque* imply? Neither Cicero nor Varro were theologians (*theologi*), but they were, in a sense, representatives of a science of religions (*scientia rerum divinarum humanarumque*), and their works fall within the scope of the history of religions. Through the reflections of Cicero and Varro, we can better understand the place of religion in Roman society and the transition underway between polytheism and monotheism.

Alain Blomart, Universitat Ramon Llull - FPCEE Blanquerna

Roman Prayers: A Synthesis of Law and Magic?

This research investigates the sophisticated intersection of religion, law, and magic during the era of Roman expansionism. It focuses on two pivotal rituals: *evocatio* (the summoning of an enemy's deity to Rome) and *devotio* (the consecration of enemies to the underworld). Moving beyond traditional military interpretations, this project argues that these rituals functioned as "juridical-magical" tools. By treating prayer as a binding contract, the Roman state created a legal fiction that justified the total erasure of

foreign cities and the subsequent seizure of their territory. The study seeks to prove the contractual nature of Roman public prayer by demonstrating how its syntax mirrors private legal agreements. Simultaneously, it identifies "magical" linguistic structures—alliterations, synonyms, and repetitive formulas—that link these state acts to the clandestine world of *defixiones* (curse tablets). The ultimate goal is to analyze how these rites effectively "de-legalized" foreign spaces, rendering their destruction not just a military act, but a religiously and legally sanctioned necessity of empire. Utilizing a philological and comparative approach, the study cross-references historical accounts (Livy, Plutarch) with specific case studies like the fall of Veii and Carthage. By synthesizing legal terminology (*bellum iustum*, *consecratio*) with the mechanics of private magic, the research challenges the "rationalist" view of Roman religion, proposing instead a pragmatic system where the sacred was a tool for geopolitical interests.

Nickolas P. Roubekas, University of Vienna

Theologians, Philosophers, or Theoreticians? Early Greek thinkers on Religion

The paper will discuss the role certain ancient Greek thinkers played in approaching the religious phenomenon and attempting its interpretation and/or its explanation. Traditionally, such figures who addressed the religion question, such as the presocratics, have been dealt with as philosophers only interested in philosophical inquiry. In this paper, however, I will be also approaching these figures as both theologians and theoreticians. "Theology" and "theory" will be further discussed, in an attempt to de-Christianize the former term and explain how "theory" and "theorizing religion" is not merely a philosophical endeavor but, more broadly, a historical and social-scientific one as well. The paper, therefore, aims at bridging a long-standing dichotomized understanding of theological, philosophical, and theoretical thinking that could prove to be quite fruitful when studying ancient theological and religious discourses.

OPEN PANEL XXXVIII

Religion and Nature Relations in the (Post-)Secular North

Henrik Ohlsson , Södertörn University

Holy Circularity: Ethical and Eco-Theological Perspectives on Food-Waste in the Church of Sweden

Awareness of the crisis of climate and biodiversity is arguably the most notable new development within the Church in recent years, seen on a central level through publications like A Bishop's Letter About the Climate (2014 and reissued in 2019). It is also reflected on the parish level with multiple local initiatives on sustainability. Part of this is a seemingly growing practice of gathering nearly expired food products from grocery stores to either organize soup-kitchens or hand the groceries directly to those in need. This paper studies these practices through open textual sources, internal textual material as well as media publications. The aim is twofold: 1) to study the extent and chronology of this phenomenon within the Church of Sweden; 2) to understand how and to what extent practices relating to food-waste are understood in theological terms. As theoretical framework I will draw on the concept of spiritual sustainability, as explained by former archbishops Antje Jackelén, and Anders Wejryd (2024), but with a critical lens that aims to shed light on connections and disconnections between theology and practice and between central establishment and local parishes.

Siv Ellen Kraft , UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Eco-spiritual activism in Sápmi

Sámi artists played key roles in the rebuilding of Sápmi during the 1970s and 1980s, and in ways that combined activist forms and cultural revitalization. They have been equally central to a new wave of activism from the mid-2010s, centered on environmental and climate change concerns. My interest lies in the increasing presence of religion within these forms, formats, and contexts. The aim is to provide an overview of such presence, along with reflections on religio-secular premisses: the ways in which eco-spiritual activism relates to, challenges, and complicates the secular foundations of politics and activism in Norway. My empirical entry point is the artwork *Aahka* by Outi Pieski, from Sápmi on the Finnish side. *Aahka* is a 51-meter-high relief covering the 700-square-meter wall surface of the new government quarter entrance in Oslo, completed in 2025. The term (*aahka*) translates to elder woman, guardian, sacred mountains, and, more recently, to Mother Earth. Pieski (and media coverage) has connected the artwork to Sámi philosophy, to the protection of nature, and to Mother Earth as a legal person.

David Thurffjell , Södertörn University

The Ecological Turn of Swedish Mainland Christianity

This paper presents and discusses recent developments towards eco-theology within the mainstream Lutheran churches of Sweden (primarily Church of Sweden and the Ekumenia church). Steps to let ecological considerations effect religious practices and church maintenance, as well as articulations of a "sacramental theology" are analysed as expressions of an attempt to counteract a diminishing Christianity by connecting it to the immanent sacreds of ecology.

Tõnno Jonuks (Estonian Literary Museum) & **Atko Remmel** (University of Tartu)

Pagan and Lutheran Environmentalism: Estonian Maausk, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Nature Protection

Pagan worldviews are often associated with environmentalism and perceived as natural allies of nature protection. In this context, natural sacred sites are frequently described as the world's oldest nature reserves, and numerous studies highlight their high biodiversity. Pagan discourse itself reinforces this

image by promoting traditional, sustainable lifestyles, organic food production, and restrained consumption. At the same time, pagan approaches to nature and environmental protection differ in important ways from those developed within scientific conservation biology. By contrast, despite the development of eco-theology, national Lutheran churches have generally remained examples of indoor religion in their everyday practices. This is also true of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC), although in recent years it has demonstrated growing interest in environmental issues. This paper provides an overview of how Estonian pagans and the EELC relate to nature and nature protection and how they communicate their nature-related strategies to the wider public. In the case of pagans, the analysis focuses on the reinterpretation of natural sacred sites as protected areas and on the partial incorporation of pagan perspectives into nature conservation discourse. In the case of the EELC, the paper examines selected activities to assess whether a shift towards "outdoor religion" is emerging. Overall, the paper analyses how pagans, Lutherans, and conservationists negotiate points of convergence and tension in their approaches to nature protection.

OPEN PANEL XXXIX
“Spiritual Abuse” as Institutionalized Violence of a Religious Community

Joëlle Fennebeumer, University of Groningen

“Was it a Cult?” Experience, Labeling, and Ambivalence in High-Demand Religious Disaffiliation

This paper explores how former members of high-demand religious movements in the Netherlands engage with the label “cult” when reflecting on their past involvement, with particular attention to the experiences that inform whether this label is adopted, negotiated, or rejected. Drawing on life-narrative interviews, it examines how “cult” functions as a discursive resource through which individuals interpret and evaluate their experiences, particularly in relation to perceived spiritual abuse. Rather than treating “the cult” as an analytical given, the paper approaches it as an emic and relational label that takes shape in the context of disaffiliation and retrospective meaning-making. For some former members, adopting the term offers a useful language for articulating negative experiences, including perceived spiritual abuse. For others, the term is actively rejected or engaged with more ambivalently, as it may be experienced as flattening complex trajectories of involvement, obscuring meaningful aspects of participation, and positioning the past within an oppositional frame. These personal narratives suggest that accounts of high-demand religious groups are rarely unambiguous. Former members may at times combine appreciation with critique, referring to experiences of belonging, purpose, and personal development, occasionally alongside accounts of control, coercion, or pressure. In this context, the label “cult” itself becomes a site of ongoing negotiation, through which individuals balance divergent evaluations to sustain a coherent understanding of their past. By foregrounding labeling practices and lived ambivalence, the paper aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how such experiences are named and interpreted following high-demand religious disaffiliation.

Anne Beutter, Gritt Klinkhammer & Rosa Lütge, University of Bremen

“Spiritual Abuse” as Institutionalized Violence of a Religious Community

Institutionalized sexualized violence against young women was uncovered within a communitarian protestant community in Germany independent from but supported by the Evangelical Church. These incidents went undetected for decades before being first brought to light internally in 2011. Fifteen years later, the Regional Church Hannover is funding an independent study by religious studies scholars. This case is particularly interesting because sexualized violence and spiritual abuse in this type of religious commune needs to be understood not only through the lens of professional sexual and sexualized misconduct in a religious organization but also through the lens of abuse and violence in familial community constellations. The aim of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the forms of violence within this community and to clarify the underlying enabling structures both within and surrounding the community. Our analytical framework embeds the concept of spiritual abuse in a broad multidimensional concept of violence, including individual acts and institutionalised structures. While acts of violence are always linked to psychological patterns of the perpetrators—and sometimes also of the victims—attributing the causes solely to individuals does not do justice to the situation nor does it help potential victims. This is because perpetrators, victims and silent witnesses typically act within socially and ideologically established concealing structures of power, secrecy, oppression, disregard, and coercion. Relating “spiritual abuse” to institutionalized violence we embed it in broader “grammars of violence” and hope to contribute to the question of conditions and limits of violence-free spirituality in community contexts.

Lucie Gott, University of Bremen

Power, Authority, and Their Structural Abuse in Contemporary ‘Fluid Religion’

This presentation will introduce my PhD research project focusing on dynamics of power and the

formation of social hierarchies in selected groups from the wide field of what has been referred to as 'fluid religion' (Lüddeckens & Walthert 2010). I ask how authoritative relationships are produced and sustained in structurally open groups and how they may create a habitat for abuse. Drawing on literature on community formation in new religious movements as well as insights on leadership and submission from the years of the 'cult wars', my focus lies on structural and ideological conditions facilitating the abuse of power. The presentation will discuss key terms and concepts, such as 'spiritual abuse' and 'fluid religion', share methodological and ethical reflections and present first findings from my research. Aiming to shed light on contemporary phenomena of power, the project serves as a model of how the Study of Religion can inform wider societal debates on community formation and the misuse of authority.

OPEN PANEL XLII
From South Asia to Latin America
the Veneration of Mother Earth as Eco-cosmology and Political Dynamic

Lidia Guzy, University College Cork

Mother Earth and her Children – indigenous Eco-cosmology in India and Latin America

This paper explores and compares concepts of Mother Earth in tribal Adivasi India and indigenous Latin America. It compares concepts of Mother Earth in tribal India, such Dharti Mata, Bhum Devi, Basudha Mata, Basmati Mata, Dharani Mata with the indigenous concept of Pachamama (Mother Earth) in Latin America. The presentation frames these vernacular theories within a discussion on indigenous eco-cosmologies (Guzy, Beggiora, Skoda 2024) and “shamanic configuration” (Armand 2026), as an expression of ethnoscience and an indigenous sustainability discourses. This presentation introduces into selected indigenous concepts of eco-cosmology of sacred groves in Adivasi India and comparatively into the indigenous Andean concept of Pacha Mama (Mother Earth) in Latin America. The presentation portrays worldviews not founded on a separation between the human and non-human, but on an ontological eco-cosmology as a relatedness between humans, non-humans and the other than human world. In indigenous Adivasi India “sacred groves” is used as an umbrella term for floral, fluvial, arboreal natural sanctuaries. The socio-ritual institution of sacred groves dates to pre-historical and pre-agrarian societies and is thriving in most parts of rural and tribal Adivasi India. Sacred groves depict a continuous ancient and contemporary tradition of a patch of forest or water body which is either dedicated to local deities or itself represent other than human sacred entities. Sacred groves are always covered by taboos. Nor they can be allowed to be destroyed, nor it is morally allowed to cut plants or to kill animals or any form of life in these sacred abodes. In tribal Odisha the indigenous Rona consider divine and semi-divine spirits like Mauli, Peten, Mahulgachhien, Amgachhien to be residing patches of indigenous forests. In Madhya Pradesh the indigenous Baiga consider every big tree incorporating a potentially malevolent non-human entity, called pret, or bhut if cut. The physical disrespect of sacred forest always results in ontological explanations for disaster, disease or epidemics. In Latin America, the emergence of the indigenous Andean context of Pachamama represents a new political and environmental ontology of sacred Rights of Nature marking a landmark of alternative sustainability and wellbeing models. The Americas in this context are a leading example of accrediting legal protection status to Pachamama, Mother Nature/ Mother Earth with Ecuador becoming the first country in 2008 to include the Rights of Nature in its constitution. In 2010, also Bolivia introduced Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra (the Law of Rights of Mother Earth) based on a created “The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth” agreed by 30,000 people from over 100 countries who came together in April 2010 in Tiquipaya/ Cochabamba.

Stefano Beggiora, University Ca' Foscari Venice

The Fury of Mother Earth: Colonial Rupture and Indigenous Cosmologies in Odisha

This presentation revisits a largely neglected episode of colonial violence in nineteenth-century Odisha, where British intervention among the Kond communities was justified through the denunciation of ritual practices dedicated to the mother goddess Dharani Pennu, including accounts of magic and human sacrifice. Framed by colonial authorities as evidence of savagery, such practices became the moral pretext for military repression, village burnings, and the forced reordering of Indigenous life. Drawing on archival documents and nineteenth-century official reports, the paper examines how colonial power transformed ritual difference into an object of governance, producing a narrative in which violence could appear as both civilizing necessity and political right. Yet these sources are read against the grain through long-term anthropological fieldwork in the region, which reveals a markedly different cosmological horizon: a relational and shamanic ontology in which forest, land, humans, deities, and other-than-human beings are bound within a shared moral and ecological world. By placing historical reconstruction in dialogue with ethnography, the paper explores both rupture and continuity in local

religious life, memory, and territorial belonging. It argues that the colonial reconfiguration of Indigenous ritual and territorial life did not end with empire, but continues to resonate in contemporary struggles against extractive corporations, where the defense of environment, community, and collective dignity remains central.

Uwe Skoda, Aarhus University

The King and Mother Earth. Royal Investiture Rituals in Western Odisha / India

Based on long-term fieldwork paper presents an analysis of the investiture rituals of the kings or *rajas* of Bonai – a former princely state and nowadays a subdistrict in northwestern Odisha / India. As a central element of a “coronation” every new raja has to sit on the lap of a Bhuiyan chief – the highest representative of the kingdom’s autochthonous population. In this position, reminiscent of a birth and mother-child relation, the raja receives a *tika* or a mark on his forehead for which the chief brought soil from the shrine of his tutelary mother goddess. Looking closely at these symbolisms of motherhood, fertility etc performed in royal rituals, the paper unpacks a thick web of relationality involving rulers, mother goddesses and indigenous communities like the Bhuiyan – a term referring to *bhu* or earth marking the community as “earth people”. It is argued that the raja’s ritual anointment with soil offered by the Bhuiyan chief literally represents an authority from below. Not only does it constitute a crucial element in the construction of kingship in Bonai that balances other brahmanical features of the investiture, but it also hints at bottom-up understandings of authority with political ramifications.

Pamela Rita Flynn, University College Cork

Sezhankwa: The Great Mother

The Kogi (Kággaba) indigenous peoples are the spiritual leaders and guardians of the “Heart of the World,” a mountain range in the Sierra Nevada in Colombia. These Indigenous peoples carry an unbroken lineage of ancestral wisdom that they have been entrusted with since the origin of their existence, an indigenous knowledge system that is becoming endangered in today’s modern world. They have dedicated their lives to maintaining the balance of Mother Earth, which they call Sezhankwa, meaning “the Great Mother”. This paper explores the Kogi (Kággaba) cosmovision, Sezhankwa who is understood as a living eco-cosmology and a living vibration interwoven into every fabric of life, the cosmos and the universal laws of nature. In this sense, the Kogi (Kággaba) worldviews offer an alternative ontology that challenges dominant western models of progression and development. It then changes the perspective to responsibility and guides humanity back into harmony with Mother Earth. The Kogi (Kággaba) call themselves the “Older Brother” and the rest of humanity the “Younger Brother,” believing that modern society has become separated from the original laws of nature and has become a divided species. The paper will discuss contemporary Kogi discourses on contemporary’s future of the Earth and Kogi’s agency.

Jyotirmaya Tripathy, Indian Institute of Technology Madras

The Menstruating Earth: Odisha’s Raja Parba and its Eco-cosmology

Celebration of Mother Earth, as old as the beginning of social organisation among the Hindus (Kinsley 178-179), finds a unique expression in the Raja festival in Odisha that reiterates what has been called eco-cosmologies (Guzy *et al*). Popularly known as Raja Parba and celebrated over a period of three days during Mithuna Sankranti (in mid-June) to announce the arrival of the monsoon, it offers fascinating insights into folk cultural practices and creates a template where the female body and the earth-body dovetail into each other and in the process produce eco-experiences and eco-epistemes. The festivals’ conception of the Earth as a raja-swala (menstruating) woman establishes the Earth’s femininity and fertility, elicits matching responses (such as refraining from sowing or ploughing), and involves worship of the Earth, with girls escaping household chores to enjoy new clothes, swinging, and singing. The festival may have its origin in an agricultural universe that conceived the earth as the primary giver of

life and hence the source of human sustenance. Such earth-based practices offer us an alternative account of time that is neither empty nor homogeneous. What is even more interesting is its continuation at a time when the past is often packaged for a difference-hungry, novelty-consuming urban audience. It requires further exploration if the festival, as local/alternative knowledge (Guzy *et al*), produces resistant epistemes or offers opportunities for its co-option into a larger tourism/capitalism discourse.

Sudarsan Padmanabhan, IIT Madras

Subramanya Bharathi's Shakthi: The Acosmic Divine, Cosmic Goddess and the Modern Indian Woman

The great twentieth century Tamil poet, Subramania Bharati, imagined Shakthi, the divine feminine power in three forms, viz, the acosmic divine, cosmic goddess and the modern Indian woman. In all the three forms, Shakthi epitomizes unbounded freedom, agency, energy, potential and force. Bharati was one of the earliest Indian nationalists to strongly emphasize freedom, equality and fraternity for all, when India was divided along the lines of caste, gender, religion and language. Bharati's imagination of Shakthi as acosmic power and cosmic feminine principle gave a metaphysical and ontological justification for the modern Indian woman as strong, independent, self-sufficient and brimming with creative energy. Interestingly, Bharati creates his magnum opus, an epic poem known as "Panchali's Vow", which is a retelling of the portion of the ancient Indian epic "Mahabharata". In this poem, Bharati treats the main character Panchali as a woman humiliated in the Court of the Kauravas, helpless, alone and forsaken by her family and relatives, with no one protesting on her behalf. Is it a ruse on the part of Bharati or a glaring contradiction that undercuts his fundamental assumptions about Woman as an incarnation of Shakthi? This paper looks at the two versions and analyzes whether there is a strong justification or an inner contradiction in Bharati's treatment of Shakthi.

Paolo E. Rosati, Independent scholar

The Sacralization of the Landscape: Mother Earth at the "Margins" of South Asia

Mother Earth in Assam took the form of Kāmākhyā (she whose name is desire), a Goddess who embodies traits emerging from the transcultural dialectic between indigenous and Brahmanic traditions. Her *mūrti* (manifestation) is the *yonī* (vulva) of Sati—which, according to the Śākta Purāṇas, turned into a stone when it fell on Nīlācala in Kāmarūpa (land of desire), becoming her main *pīṭha* (seat). Today, the temple of Kāmākhyā preserves the yoni-stone, underlining the deep-rooted connection between the landscape and the Mother Earth. The *garbhagrha* (womb chamber), where the yoni-stone is housed, emerges as a micro-replica of the cosmos; while the menstruation underpins the link between the *śakti* (energy) of the Goddess and the landscape, which is fertilized and transformed through the flow of Kāmākhyā's menstrual blood. The yoni, indeed, according to Tantric and Purāṇic sources, is the matrix of the universe—a metaphor reinforced by the Ambuvācī melā, which celebrates the annual menstruation of the Goddess. This paper, through a textual and ethnographic approach, links the rise of the Hindu Mahādevī (Great Goddess) to the sacralization of the indigenous landscape in South Asia through the rise of the śakti-pīṭhas. These sacred centres characterize the Mahādevī as the one who incorporates both the Good and the Terrible Mother's traits (Jung 1912; Neumann 1955). Hence, this research sheds light on the intersection of the dual aspect of the Mother Goddess with the longue durée dialectic between the Brahmanic-Sanskritic "centre" of the Brahmaputra lowlands and the indigenous "margins" of the Northeast uplands.

OPEN PANEL XLIV

**When Religion Becomes Political and Politics Religious:
Contesting Secular Governance and Power Structures in Contemporary Society**

Milda Ališauskienė & Evelina Juchnevičiūtė, Vytautas Magnus University

Religionisation in Lithuanian Politics: Minority Religions and the Struggle for State Recognition

In many post-socialist societies, the resurgence of religion in the public sphere has been characterised by a marked increase in religious discourse within the political sphere, as well as the involvement of religious organisations, which frequently wield substantial political influence. This dynamic is evident in areas such as biopolitics, education, and other domains (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; Zielińska, 2019; Juchnevičiūtė et al., 2023; Ališauskienė et al., 2025). The state regulation of religious diversity is generally considered a religion-free sphere, with decisions made solely by governmental bodies (Fox, 2015, 2020). However, Lithuania's approach to regulating religious diversity is more nuanced, distinguishing between traditional, state-recognised, and other (registered) religious organisations. The process of being granted state recognition as a religious organisation is political in nature, involving debates in the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania. The present paper sets out the findings of an analysis of political debates surrounding the state recognition of six religious organisations between 2001 and 2024. The analysis focuses specifically on the religious language used, with the aim of understanding and explaining the discursive practices of the religionisation of politics. The findings demonstrate that the religionisation of politics manifests in the parliamentary debates in various ways. The political recognition of religious organisations by parliament members is considered to be: 1) increasing religious competition to religious majority; 2) threat to public homogeneity; 3) threat to public security, where minority religious organisations are framed as potential carriers of radical ideas, harmful practices, or foreign influence. The findings also indicate a notable shift from 2017 onwards, when the ancient Baltic religious community "Romuva" – the first non-Christian organisation to apply for state recognition – became a focal point of intensified parliamentary controversy and ideological contestation.

Gražina Bielousova, Vytautas Magnus University

Governing Morality: Catholic Media and the Making of Political Legitimacy in Post-Accession Lithuania

This paper employs critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2001; Fairclough 1995) to examine how Lithuanian Catholic news portals participate in transforming theological positions into claims of universal moral authority within democratic debate. Drawing on a corpus of more than 100 articles from Bernardinai.lt and Laikmetis.lt (2004–2024), the study traces how issues such as reproductive rights, gender equality, and civil partnerships move from being framed as matters of church teaching to being articulated as broadly binding moral norms and, subsequently, as criteria of political legitimacy. Rather than treating Catholic media solely as arenas of ideological conflict, the paper conceptualizes them as sites of moral governance and boundary work, where distinctions between theological doctrine, public morality, and civic politics are actively renegotiated. The analysis demonstrates that conservative Catholic outlets more frequently universalised doctrinal positions, recasting political disagreement as moral deviance, while more pluralist media maintain a clearer differentiation between ecclesial authority and democratic deliberation. Through this process, theological concerns are translated into a language of shared ethical obligation that expands their reach into secular political discourse. Situating these dynamics within post-accession Lithuania and wider European debates on religion and democracy, the paper argues that Catholic media play a central role in constructing the moral frameworks through which political platforms are legitimated. By tracing the discursive movement from doctrine to universal norm, the study contributes to understanding how religious actors reshape the boundaries of democratic argumentation in post-secular contexts.

Rosita Garškaitė-Antonowicz, Vytautas Magnus University

Catholic Nationalism in Lithuania: using 'common good' to undermine pluralism

Despite predictions about the end of history and the inevitable decline of religion, both religion and nationalism have made a comeback. Particularly, we face illiberal and exclusive forms of religious nationalism across the world. Many scholars focus on how religion is ‘hijacked’ by right-wing populists in various countries; instead, this paper investigates how religious actors themselves actively produce nationalism in their public communication. The purpose is to examine discursive practices by which Catholicism, the majority religion, is politicised and integrated into the nationalist framework in Lithuania. Rhetorical analysis is applied to the institutional and community communication of the Catholic Church in Lithuania, combining macro and meso levels. In particular, the discursive usage of the ‘common good’ concept by lay Catholics, priests and bishops publicly reacting to political issues in the 2020-2024 period is elucidated. The paper argues that this concept serves to undermine pluralism in society.

Giulio Dalla Grana, Södertörn University

From the Political to the Religious and vice versa: Perspectives in the Study of Secular Religions

With the diffusion of studies on the Shoa in the Seventies, religious terminology began to be introduced progressively in the studies on totalitarianism. From the Nineties, the first studies specifically devoted to the religious conception of politics appeared. Although a few attempts to scientifically delineate and contextualise the topic have already occurred in throughout the Eighties, a debate on its validity and conditions of utilisation involved the scholars until the first decade of the new millennium. Among the several aspects implying the affirmation and the realisation of those concepts in society, a key role was – and is still – played by the relationship between Church(es) and State. While the latter tries to overcome or take advantage of the (soteriological and eschatological) narrative of the first, the first tries to resist or (politically) influence the latter. Since two were the main paths followed by the scholars – the concept of civil religion applied to democratic regimes, and the concept of political religion applied to the totalitarian ones, this contribution aims at investigating the historical-critical perspectives concerning the use of these terms outside the historical frameworks usually considered by scholars and the State-Church relations to them related.

OPEN PANEL XLV
**The Social Worlds of Magic in Antiquity:
 Authorship, Production, and Economic Entanglements**

Hallie G. Meredith, Washington State University

Writing Meaningful 'Nonsense': Producers, Scribal Literacy and fourth- to seventh-century CE Pseudo-Medallions

In a classic paper, Richard Gordon contrasted magical caractères and Roman period pseudo-hieroglyphics concluding that pseudo-writing was so commonplace that ‘it was often the idea of hieroglyphs rather than the text’ that mattered’ (Gordon 2014, 260-1). Similarly, concerning Roman Imperial Greek amulets, Chris Faraone argued that the term ‘magical’ could easily have been replaced with the adjective ‘nonsense’ to describe such texts (Faraone 2018, 5). Whereas pseudo-writing may privilege the appearance of the written word, incomprehensible magical writing (such as voces magicae) is today typically referred to as magic if it fits a known paradigm, and nonsense if it does not. To move beyond a tautological division wherein nonsensical writing is defined as erroneous due to the absence of any known semantic or magical significance, this paper explores the extent to which inscribed instrumenta offer evidence concerning their producers’ linguistic backgrounds. Late Roman so-called pseudo-medallions, concentrated in the fourth-seventh centuries CE, offer an intriguing case study with which to approach authorship, scribal literacies, the visual presentation of script in magical and nonsensical writing, and differences therein (notably, genuine errors, transliterations, and non-standard usages of appropriated alphabets). Examples of such inscriptions on pseudo-medallions from beyond the late Roman Empire are known from modern Germany, Scandinavia and even Pakistan. This investigation considers variations among a group of related artefacts – arguably from a single workshop – including three distinguishable types of so-called nonsense inscription from c. seventh century CE Egypt alongside pieces from the same group featuring word play. Informed by the ‘Third Wave’ approach to sociolinguistic variation, in what ways can so-called pseudo-script on understudied medallions shed light on the space between ‘nonsense’ and ‘magic’? In sum, what can the writers of nonsensical writing themselves reveal about areas of convergence, overlap, and disjunction with the social worlds of magic in late Antiquity?

Sydney Urbaniak, The Ohio State University

If at First You Don't Succeed: Multiple Avenues for Success in the GEMF

This paper examines spells preserved in the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM) and the Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies (GEMF) which include instructions for alternative invocations or substitute rituals. It argues that the inclusion of these alternatives is evidence of a deliberate, shared scribal tradition that anticipated either wholly unsuccessful or partially successful rituals and provided practitioners with alternative methods or strategies to correct them. Previously, these alternative rituals have been dismissed as scribal compilation practices or aiding in the preservation of multiple ritual traditions. This paper argues for a new interpretation: that this was an intentional, formulaic escalation on the scribe’s part meant to be implemented in response to failure. This reading is based on a pattern of escalation seen in several spells in which the magician is guided from simpler rituals to more complex and increasingly risky methods. For example, the spells collected in GEMF 30 contains several rituals that escalate as the spell goes on: invocation hymns, the manipulation of material components, a first coercive rite, a second more complex coercive method involving a medium, an incense burning ritual, and a lynchnomancy. The scribe guides the magicians through these increasingly intricate and potentially risky rituals, eventually directing them on how to force the deity to appear. The spells discussed in this paper are disconnected from each other in language, time period, or intended outcome but follow the same pattern of escalation. If this pattern is a known and accepted scribal practice, it presents magic not as a single decisive act but as a sequence of attempts that can be modified, intensified, or replaced if the desired result is not achieved. Magic in the ancient world had no guaranteed results, and thus the scribes,

anticipating complications, provided practitioners with a built-in method of preventing or correcting a failed spell.

Marsha McCoy, Southern Methodist University, Dallas

Thelyphron and Magic in Apuleius' Metamorphoses

In a new interpretation, this paper sets the magical story of Thelyphron in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (2.21-30) within the sociological framework of "scapegoating," and situates this interpretation within theories of the social function of ancient literature. Thelyphron volunteers to guard a corpse overnight against mutilations by witches. However, after he is tricked into slumber, he wakes in a terror at his lapse of vigilance, but the corpse is curiously intact. When the corpse is temporarily brought back to life, he asserts that he was only spared the witches' mutilations because Thelyphron himself was mutilated in his place. Thelyphron belatedly realizes that the witches have disguised their mischief by creating wax nose and ears for him, to the raucous laughter of the funeral attendees. The sociologist Emile Durkheim (1912) describes scapegoating as a practice whereby individuals are punished in order to regain stability in a society experiencing social disintegration. In Thelyphron's tale, he himself is punished for the magical and destructive practices of the witches. By transferring this awful consequence of death onto to an outsider like Thelyphron, the group can regain its sense of control, evidenced by the laughter at Thelyphron. Discussing the social function of ancient literature, Winkler and Zeitlin (1990) view the continual retelling of Thelyphron's story as affirming his social importance as a scapegoat to suffer and thereby contain the malevolent forces threatening the community, thus ensuring its well-being.

Liudmila Rusinova, University of Erfurt

Doubly Transgressive: Female Agency and Same-Sex Erotic Magic in Roman Egypt

This paper examines a neglected corpus of erotic binding spells composed by women targeting other women in Roman Egypt, situating them within the broader social, legal, and cultural framework of the second and third centuries CE. Only three such texts have been securely identified. All originate from Upper Egyptian towns: Hawara, Hermopolis Magna, and Panopolis and survive on papyri written in Greek. Despite their rarity, these documents offer a uniquely direct window into female erotic agency and same-sex desire in the ancient world. Extant scholarship on erotic magic has largely reproduced entrenched gender stereotypes, casting women either as passive targets of male initiative or, when acknowledged as practitioners, as defensive agents seeking merely to preserve existing relationships. This paper challenges that interpretive framework. Drawing on evidence for women's social and economic independence in Roman Egypt, where there are attested as property owners, business actors, and individuals capable of shaping their own intimate lives, I argue that the women behind these spells should not be understood as marginal figures. Rather, they emerge as autonomous agents operating within the established cultural logic of ritual and desire. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that female practitioners of same-sex erotic magic occupied a doubly transgressive position within Roman moral discourse. They challenged norms both as women claiming active ritual authority and as individuals expressing desires that defied heteronormative expectations. A comparison with literary sources reveals that these two categories (*i.e.* female magical practitioners and women engaged in same-sex relationships) were represented in strikingly similar terms. Both were accused of appropriating the active role culturally reserved for men. It is precisely this overlap that makes these papyri historically significant.

Marinella Ceravolo, Sapienza University of Rome

Constructing the kaššāptu: Counter-Magical Discourse and the Struggle Over Ritual Expertise in Ancient Mesopotamia

This paper examines the figure of the kaššāptu ("sorceress") in ancient Mesopotamia as a socially constructed category emerging within the discursive and ritual practices of institutional cult experts.

Drawing primarily on texts aimed at counteracting aggressive magical activity – most notably the Maqlû (“Burning”) series –, the present study argues that the kaššāptu is not merely the negative counterpart of legitimate practices, but a figure produced through a process of structural mirroring with the āšipu, the leading ritual specialist of Mesopotamian temple culture. The āšipu was responsible for a wide range of authoritative practices, including healing and the neutralization of harmful forces attributed to illicit ritual activities, subsumed under the label of “kišpū”. Within this framework, the kaššāptu appears as the primary agent of such practices, typically portrayed as a female practitioner employing techniques closely resembling those of the āšipu: the crafting and manipulation of figurines, the recitation of incantations, and the administration of substances. The same technical repertoire thus underlies both the production and the neutralization of kišpū. The textual evidence, produced within male, literate, and institutionally sanctioned milieus, suggests that the kaššāptu functions as a polemical construct through which the authority of temple-based expertise is asserted. Anti-kišpū texts may thus be read as sites of competition, where different forms of ritual knowledge are negotiated and hierarchized. This opposition may also encode the marginalization of alternative ritual specialists, potentially including women whose roles, from the Old Babylonian period onward, became progressively excluded from formal cultic frameworks. By situating anti-kišpū sources within broader dynamics of authorship, textual production, and the circulation of ritual expertise, this paper contributes to an understanding of “magic” as a contested social field shaped by boundary-making, professional competition, and the control of specialized knowledge.

Lucy Parr, Ohio State University

From Potsherds to Power: Materiality and the Making of Magic in Olbia

This paper examines a corpus of magical worked ostraka from Olbia (5th–4th centuries BCE) as products of socially embedded magical practice, focusing on their material form, production, and ritual deployment. Rather than approaching these objects primarily as texts, I argue that their deliberate shaping, circular geometry, and consistent use of Attic black-glazed pottery position them within a shared material repertoire that operated across both magical and votive contexts—most notably alongside ostraka from the nearby Sanctuary of Achilles at Cape Beykush. Drawing on a lived religion framework, which emphasizes embodied practice, sensory experience, and the accumulation of personal and communal memory, I suggest that these objects derived meaning and efficacy through repeated encounters within ritual landscapes. Their formal similarity across contexts points to overlapping modes of religious communication, in which cursing, dedication, and prayer were not discrete categories but entangled practices. At the same time, I use a new materialist approach to highlight the role of materiality in shaping magical action. These ostraka were not passive supports for writing but active components of ritual production: their fragmentation, curvature, and associations with funerary and chthonic spheres contributed to their perceived agency. The selection of ostraca for magical or religious practice, therefore, reflects not only availability but participation in broader networks of meaning, knowledge transmission, and ritual expertise. By situating Olbian ostraca within the religious landscape of the Black Sea, this paper argues that their production and use must be understood within interconnected social and material worlds. In doing so, it contributes to current discussions on the social worlds of magic by foregrounding how material form, local practice, and experiential knowledge intersect in the creation and deployment of magical artifacts, challenging rigid distinctions between magic and religion in antiquity.

Clara Locke, University of Cyprus, Nicosia

Ritual Practice as Social Practice - Religious Syncretism and Boundary Fluidity in Amulets from Egypt's First Millennium

This paper examines a selected corpus of ritual objects related to rites of affliction, in particular, healing and protective amulets from Egypt, dating to the third to 10th centuries CE. Rather than treating these objects as isolated magical artifacts, it argues that they are better understood as part of a broad, coherent, and continuous ritual and written tradition. Through comparative analysis, the paper examines how

recurring material and textual conventions reflect a shared scribal and ritual tradition characterized by boundary fluidity within a unique inter-religious and cultural environment. The paper focuses on recurring features across the corpus, including consistency in material form, structure, content, and intended function, as well as the presence of invocations to deities from multiple religious traditions, voces magicae, caractères, palindromes, formulary, symbols, and multilingual elements. These features indicate what this study identifies as ritual logic, the underlying rationale that connects material form, making and wearing, text, names, symbols, and appeals with ritual efficacy. Read in this way, the amulets reveal not only continuity in ritual practice but also the pragmatic reuse and adaptation of religiosities across shifting religious settings. Using 80.AM.53 as a central case and situating it within a wider corpus of seven other amulets, the paper argues that these ritual objects reflect a lived religious environment in which religious and social boundaries were more fluid than often assumed. It further suggests that magical practice in Egypt's first millennium was embedded in broader economies of knowledge and exchange, as evidenced by the circulation, adaptation, and preservation of textual conventions, symbolic resources, and ritual strategies across religious, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. In this sense, the amulets offer evidence of a shared ritual tradition in which practical efficacy consistently superseded doctrinal exclusivity.

Miriam Blanco Cesteros , University Complutense
Writing as Ritual Practice in Greco-Egyptian Magic

In Greco-Egyptian magical handbooks, magical practices specify not only what to write but with what and on what to write, treating writing materials as integral to the ritual itself. Yet despite the growing scholarly attention to magic as a material practice, the study of writing media has remained comparatively underdeveloped. This paper addresses this gap by drawing on a systematic analysis of writing media across the corpus, combined with the experimental replication of selected ink recipes, as a window into the social and technical worlds of ritual practitioners. This study explores some interconnected questions central to the panel. First, it examines the circulation of technical knowledge across traditions—the identification of shared ink formulations across multiple papyri, as well as the presence of specialized technical jargon (*Decknamen*) in certain variants. Second, it investigates the interplay between materiality and ritual practice—the economic value of ink ingredients in connection with ritual efficacy and the degree of ritual penetration into the technical sphere. By integrating philological analysis, experimental replication, and economic contextualization in the analysis of ritual inks, this paper explores the networks—of materials, practitioners, and textual traditions—within which magical (written) artefacts were crafted and deployed.

Christa Müller-Kessler , Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
Mesopotamian Magical Texts of Late Antiquity and Their Religious Environment

For a long time, Mesopotamian magical texts from Late Antiquity were sorely neglected in contrast to the preceding magical text corpus from the first millennium BCE where they are considered an important literary genre. This later material was neglected because of tedious and stereotypical text formulas which were perceived as low-brow literature and belonging to the superstitions of various religious groups. In contrast to the Roman and Greek magical material, for the Ancient Near East of Late Antiquity one lacks external information about their production and usage. Recent contributions on the topic should be read critically as they often pretend to be able to deduce, for example, information from the Babylonian Talmud as a contemporary source and other Rabbinic texts, but the results are meagre and negligible. For the Gnostic Mandaean, Manichaeans, Christians, and other non-surviving sects from that geographical area no information exists which could throw more light on the matter. One should not mix the facts with the situation of Upper Mesopotamia and the region of Edessa, or as often cited in this discussion, Palestine, which has never been culturally connected to the Central and Southern region of Mesopotamia with adjacent Khuzistān (Iran). One should only study these texts within their actual geographical background together with preceding beliefs and cultures of the last

centuries BCE, while taking into account the missing transmissions for certain deities. This paper will demonstrate how magical text content should be analysed to understand its structure, religious content, and “Sitz im Leben.”

OPEN PANEL XLVII
Towards Orthodox Christianity 3600:
History of Religions and Orthodox Christianities

Ionuț Daniel Băncilă , Institute for the History of Religions, Romanian Academy, Bucharest
The Hermeneutics of Distrust in contemporary Orthodox Conspirituality

Understood as simplified imaginings and narratives of the power relations perceived to be at work in the contemporary world, conspiracy theories bring their public together in those locations of oppositional knowledge production, known as “conspiracy milieus”. As socially transient „networks of distrust”, these conspiracy milieus are powered by strong affects and emotions, highly prevalent in those structures and social situations in which inequalities and power relations are perceived to be rampant. Concerning the specific profile of Conspiracy theorizing in Christian Orthodox milieus, the neologism “conspirituality” used by some scholars of religion in describing the intersection of conspiracy theorizing with religion in the Western world (Robertson/Asprem/Dyrendal 2019; Robertson 2025) fits more neatly as a description of Orthodox conspiracism, where conspiracy theorizing functions as spirituality. The focus of my paper is given by the specific Orthodox Christian conspiracy hermeneutics, best described as an exercise in watchful attention on the alleged spiritual subtext of recent social and political events, hinting at manipulations of an elusive “elite”. This hermeneutics of distrust, itself a radical effect of its postmodern condition, becomes effective not only in “connecting the dots” (Bratich 2008: 136-137), but also as a “sign reading game” (Howanitz 2020: 215-216). As a result, the Orthodox believer is called to discern the “spiritual meaning” hiding behind factual historical events. What is at stake is to discern the goal and meaning of the process of world history, the forces and laws that define it, as well as [evaluating] all of these as constructive or destructive, propitious or ominous (Hagemeister 2022: 95). Furthermore, history itself is conceived as a field where an „invisible battle” is raging between the forces of light and those of darkness (Hagemeister 2022: 96). My aim in this paper is to sketch the genealogy of this “historiosophical reasoning”, as part of the traditional “providential” lenses through which Orthodox traditional (ecclesiastical) historiography (Bennett 2005; Bennett 2007) tried to make sense of history along the centuries.

Madli Sepper , University of Tartu
Christ Epitaphioi in Estonian Orthodox Churches their age and practices

Christ Epitaphios is a large textile icon used on Good Friday. My research problem is: “It is unknown which Epitaphioi have survived in Estonian Orthodox churches and how old they are; how Good Friday services have been held with the Epitaphios at different times”. Methodology: Fieldwork in churches and museums; comparing textiles with already dated items in neighbouring countries; comparison of textiles with the order of worship in use and with theological and catechetical literature from different periods. Based on the times, I divided Epitaphioi into four periods: Tsarist era; the period between the two world wars; the Soviet era; the period of restored independence in Estonia. Within these periods, Epitaphioi were divided based on technology and iconography. Within the period of Estonia’s restored independence, the textiles could be also divided into Greek and Slavic styles. From the Tsarist era (since 1840), Epitaphioi with rich gold embroidery produced in Russia have been preserved. Worship was translated into Estonian, but complex theological contemplations were not considered. The Estonian-language Orthodox literature of that time – mostly elementary school textbooks – was intended for the common people. No new Epitaphioi were made between the two world wars. The scripture on the edge was changed to Estonian. Literature developed to approximately high school level. During the Soviet era, the religious literature was banned. Everything old was preserved and used. Literature began to develop again in the restored independent Estonian and it reached the level of scientific theology. Nowadays, both Slavic and Greek styles Epitaphioi are used.

Elias Sodergren , Stockholm University

Modern Selves in Search of an Authentic Faith: Swedish Converts to Eastern Orthodox Christianity

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Eastern Orthodox Christianity has attracted increasing attention from religious seekers in Sweden. This interest has accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic, and several Eastern Orthodox churches in Sweden now report a recent surge in conversions. This development has produced new cultural dynamics as well as growing tensions within the Eastern Orthodox community in Sweden. Converts often develop competing understandings of the Orthodox faith, and some appear increasingly drawn to what scholars describe as an emergent form of Orthodox fundamentalism. This paper examines how Swedish converts position themselves within this growing convert milieu. Drawing on narrative identity theory and social identity theory, it explores the interplay between conversion, orientalism, and identity. Emphasizing this dialectical relationship, the paper interprets conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy as embedded in the narrative construction of a countercultural self. The analysis draws on ethnographic research, including in-depth interviews with converts. It situates conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy within the context of a highly liberal and secular Swedish society and explores the paradoxical relationship between the search for a traditional faith and the late-modern emphasis on the subjective self as the primary source of authority. It argues that Swedish converts—whether liberal or conservative—display distinctly modern patterns of behavior while searching for an authentic Orthodox faith in an open religious market. The findings contribute to broader scholarly discussions on the relationship between religious conversion and identity formation in contemporary society.

Massimo Mammarella , Sapienza University of Rome

Ambiguous sanctity: lived religion and shared devotion at Zočište Monastery in post-conflict Kosovo

Within the framework of "lived religion," Orthodox Christianity in the Balkans often exceeds strictly national and doctrinal categories through syncretic practices and shared sacred spaces. This paper examines the Zočište Monastery in Central Kosovo as a primary site of "antagonistic tolerance" (Hayden 2016), where religious materiality and ritual practice become instruments for negotiating identity in a post-conflict landscape. Despite the trauma of the 1998–1999 war, which saw the monastic complex razed with explosives and the local Serbian population displaced, the reconstructed monastery remains a focal point for diverse ethno-religious groups. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and the "religioscape" model, this study explores how the hidden presence of Muslim pilgrims seeking healing from the relics of Saints Cosmas and Damian challenges the traditional doctrinal confines of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The paper argues that for marginalized Serbian communities in Kosovo, the acceptance of "other" religious participants is not merely a spiritual act but a tactical counter-narrative to highlight their enduring presence within an ethno-Albanian nation-building process. By analyzing these forms of "spiritual coexistence" in ambiguous shared places, the research contributes to the religio-historical scrutiny of how Orthodox Christianity functionalizes popular piety and manages complex secularities in contested territories.