

Jens Schlieter, University of Bern  
Guido Nerger, University of Bern

### **Feeding (Im-)Mortality: Sacred Nutrition between Carnism and Vegetarianism in the History of Religions**

In this panel, we will explore the relationship between ideas of immortality, the promise of eternal life or of a “deathless state,” nutrition, and the mortal body. Often, gods had been declared to sustain independent of material food. In Indo-European traditions, they were in possession of the divine (and vegan) nectar of immortality (*amṛta*, *ambrosia*, etc.) that not only helped them to live eternally but also secured their higher knowledge. On the other hand, Ancient religious traditions conceptualised gods that were demanding animal sacrifices – cattle, sheep, goats, etc. – so that they could be pleased by the savour/aroma rising from these offerings. Other traditions include the sacred commensality of god/s and humans eating food obtained from ritual animal sacrifice. These ideas and practices form the background of a religious justification of “carnism,” which shall equally be explored in the panel. Thus, we invite contributions dealing historically or systematically with the following questions:

- What did or do religious traditions conceptualise or even recommend as “anti-aging” diets?
- How do concepts of nutrition or foodways such as omnivore carnism, vegetarianism, or veganism (including its fruitarian and “breatharian” extremes) connect to the idea of mortality and the mortal human body?
- How do these ideas influence the recent religious and visionary discourse of post-humanity?

Amy L. Allocco  
Elon University, Elon, North Carolina, USA

### ***Ritual Innovation in Global Religion***

This open panel invites papers considering “ritual innovation.” Such innovation may involve deliberate changes to ritual structure and performance that have discernible or attested ends in mind (Pennington and Allocco 2018) but may also result from somewhat less deliberate interreligious borrowing or from the unpredictable involvement of participants in the co-creation of ritual. Proposals from scholars working in any religious tradition, time period, or methodology should foreground strategic changes that signal ritual’s inherently creative potential and adaptability to new contexts and circumstances. Attending to religious change under the rubric of innovation will enable presenters to investigate the role of intentionality in the construction and performance of ritual with reference to diverse examples from global religion. Collectively, the specific cases taken up in the papers that comprise this panel will help participants theorize the dynamics that drive and inform ritual innovation.

This panel trains our gaze on ritual as a strategic practice (Bell 1992) rather than simply on the malleability of ritual or the ways its meaning might shift as the social conditions of its performance evolve over time. In acknowledging the political nature of ritual, we are most interested in deliberate inventions or self-conscious changes to rituals or their contexts and the central place innovation has had and continues to have in the life of ritual.

Ritual innovation may entail creative uses of narrative or history to advance specific theological ideas, voices of authority, or political programs. Alternative temple histories, chartering myths, or genealogies may challenge established or entrenched institutional forms or leaders.

Similarly, the development of new sacred sites and their rites can provide the setting for broader social or religious movements. “Innovation” here includes, then, even efforts at evidence-based historical reconstruction of such things as a ritual’s original purpose or form, the genesis of specific forms of leadership, or the origin of temples and other spaces that establish the context for ritual when the intention of that historical reconstruction is catalyzing change.

The shifting role and nature of ritual authority in instances of ritual innovation is of special relevance here. Religious thinkers and specialists may lay claim to ritual “authenticity” and emphasize an unbroken tradition even as they seek to invent and implement new ritual practices. Such authorities often have a vested interest in establishing the legitimacy of new ritual forms by portraying innovations as more genuine reflections of the tradition’s original insights or teachings than those they are replacing.

Individuals and communities may otherwise authorize and legitimize ritual innovation through claims of divine intervention. New rituals may be performed as a response to the perceived instructions, demands, or desires of religious entities who communicate with devotees through processes such as possession, dreams, or material manifestations. While these forms of divine communication and presence often exist within established traditions, such interventions may compel and grant authority to innovations in ritual practices.

Ritual innovation may involve a degree of interrituality, or “borrowing minor ritual acts or elements including ritual objects from other rituals” in order to “simultaneously both invent rituals and refer to them as ‘tradition’” (Hornborg 2017, 17). While Hornborg’s focus is on ritual innovation involving the borrowing and transfer of ritual elements *within a single religious tradition*, we are equally interested in exploring how the process functions *across* religions traditions (especially in New Religious Movements).

Innovation may also result from the involvement of participants in the co-creation of ritual. Roy Rappaport (1999, 24, emphasis added) defines ritual as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances, *not entirely encoded by performers*,” which is to say that clergy and other religious specialists are never fully in control of the rituals over which they preside. Furthermore, in some ritual contexts, participants are encouraged to improvise and add their own flair to the performance of rituals, leading to unpredictable and at times significant ritual change.

In sum, we invite papers that take up examples of ritual innovation that justify, express, or contest class and social status, invest new forms of political or religious authority with legitimacy, or authenticate novel, nontraditional modes of religious selfhood. Proposals representing a range of religious traditions, regions, and time periods are welcome. Preference will be given to proposals that engage the theoretical issues named in this call and show the potential for generating discussion across these boundaries.

Sofia Bianchi Mancini, Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, University of Erfurt

Charlotte Spence, University of Oxford

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

In the past decades, magic in antiquity has attracted sustained and growing scholarly attention, assuming an increasingly central place within the study of religions in the ancient Mediterranean and beyond. The publication of new corpora, the expanding body of research on curse tablets,

magical papyri, amulets, and related ritual artefacts, as well as the fruitful engagement with anthropological and sociological theory, have considerably enriched the field. Rather than being treated as a marginal or deviant phenomenon set in opposition to 'religion', magic is now widely approached as a historically situated constellation of practices embedded in complex social and cultural environments. Magic and magical actions in antiquity cannot be disentangled from wider religious beliefs and cultic activities.

Building on these important advances, this panel seeks to focus more closely on dimensions of magical practice that invite further sustained discussion: authorship and commissioning, textuality and material form, and the social and economic networks within which magical artefacts were produced and deployed. While questions of belief and ritual efficacy have received substantial attention, the social conditions under which magical texts were written, commissioned, circulated, and deposited merit continued exploration.

Magical artefacts were not only ritual instruments but also deliberately created texts and material objects. They emerged within specific social constellations – legal proceedings, household relations, professional interactions, political tensions, intimate attachments, and other forms of interpersonal entanglement. As written objects, they raise fundamental questions: who composed these texts? Were they written by the individuals who deployed them, or by ritual specialists operating within particular forms of expertise? What can layout, formulae, palaeography, orthographic features, and the use of so-called voces magicae, among others, reveal about levels of literacy, training, and textual transmission? To what extent can we identify shared templates, workshop practices, or broader patterns of scribal culture? Attention to writing practices, with their script behaviours, graphic choices, repetitions, and signs, invites us to consider magical artefacts as products of social practice and as evidence for the circulation of knowledge.

At the same time, magical production was embedded in material and economic realities. The crafting of curse tablets, amulets, and other objects required access to raw materials including lead, papyrus, and gemstones; as well as technical competence and, in certain contexts, access to particular depositional sites. These practices presupposed networks of knowledge transmission and, in some cases, remuneration. Magic thus formed part of broader economies of expertise and exchange, intersecting with patterns of labour and resource use. Moreover, magical texts often respond to situations involving inheritance, property arrangements, professional obligations, household dynamics, or other structured social relationships, inviting reflection on how ritual writing articulated claims, anxieties, or expectations within these contexts.

Finally, the panel encourages approaches that consider magic within the networks of interaction through which it operated. Magical knowledge circulated across regions and communities; formulae were transmitted, adapted, or even created anew. Acts of commissioning, writing, and deposition linked practitioners, clients, targets, and divine agents in structured relationships. The choice of depositional site – whether sanctuary, grave, workshop, or domestic space – situated magical artefacts within particular social and spatial contexts. Attention to these dynamics allows us to trace how magical practices reveal and participate in patterns of connection and knowledge transmission.

By bringing together questions of literacy, authorship, commissioning, materiality, and economic exchange, this panel aims to contribute to an integrated understanding of magic as a socially situated practice – one that both reflects and shapes structures of knowledge, authority, and value. Methodologically, we welcome contributions that combine close philological and material analysis with perspectives drawn from sociology of religion, economic anthropology, network theory, palaeography, and material culture studies. Papers focusing on ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Near Eastern, or Late Antique contexts are equally encouraged, as are theoretically informed comparative approaches.

By fostering dialogue across these perspectives, the panel seeks to advance a nuanced discussion of magic as a mode of writing, acting, and relating within the interconnected social worlds of antiquity. This panel invites papers that engage with one or more of the following questions, while also welcoming related approaches that speak to the broader aims of the panel:

- What impact does authorship have on our understanding of magical texts or artefacts? Does this impact the way in which we can analyse the motivations behind creation?
- What evidence allows us to identify different levels of literacy or scribal training?
- Can we detect more intimate relationships between the commissioner of a piece and the creator? Does the relationship have to be one between a professional and client or can we see more informal networks?
- Can we detect workshop practices, shared templates, or the circulation of formulaic traditions?
- How do access to materials and depositional spaces shape our understanding of magical practice?
- In what ways were magical practices embedded in broader economies of knowledge and exchange?
- How did magical knowledge circulate across regions, languages, and communities?
- How do magical objects interact with existing ritual landscapes?

Papers presented in the panel will be considered for publication in a planned edited volume or special issue.

Jessie Pons, Center for Religious Studies, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

### **Metaphor and Materiality: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Religion**

Over the past three or four decades, there has been a growing interest in the comparative study of religion to include non-textual sources such as architecture, bodies, images and rituals. This research perspective, often described as the ‘material turn’ or ‘material religion’, has generated a substantial body of scholarship. By contrast, the notion of “metaphor” has received far less systematic attention, despite its clear relevance for the study of religion. Until recently, there has been no systematic analysis of metaphors in religious contexts with a broad comparative framework.

Since 2022, a large interdisciplinary group of scholars at the Collaborative Research Center “Metaphors of Religion,” located at the Center for Religious Studies (CERES), Ruhr Universität Bochum, has been addressing this gap. In addition to textual sources, the project investigates the mechanisms of non-textual metaphoric communication. Under the working term “material metaphors,” we examine metaphors in images, architecture and even performances, thereby expanding our understanding of both material aspects of religion and the role of metaphors in religious communication.

We proceed from the assumption that metaphors are a central means of generating and maintaining religious meaning as they allow to address what is typically understood - from religious perspective - to be ineffable and impossible to describe. In this sense, metaphors function as bridges between immanence and transcendence, a distinction that lies at the core of religious communication in general.

Sára E. Heidl – University of Vienna  
Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki – University of Szeged

*Spiritual, nonordinary, transformative –  
New interpretations of religious experiences*

New methodologies bring new interpretations to the field of religious experience. By lifting the experience out of the 'religious' wrapping, psycho(patho)logical, social, cultural, and even neurological interpretations of experiences similar to religious ones have been conceptualized, revised, and reimagined over the past century. The terminology and methods used to examine these experiences are constantly changing and under debate. These methodologies open up religious experience to a much broader interpretive frame, ranging from theological to neurological perspectives and from qualitative to quantitative methods. This broader framework is essential because contemporary societies are continuously shaped by the processes of globalisation, marketisation, and pluralism; thus, religious beliefs and affiliations are also in flux. Therefore, research into such experiences — religious, spiritual, transcendent, supernatural, nonordinary, transformative, anomalous, religionesque and so on — is particularly topical and urgent. This panel welcomes papers addressing the current state of religious experience research, with a particular emphasis on the theoretical, terminological, and methodological challenges of the present and future.

Igor Mikeshin - University of Helsinki

*What makes a religious persecution and how to research it?*

Despite the ideologies of secularization and post-secularization, religious persecution is still a reality nowadays. Different minority religious groups are routinely harassed, intimidated, prosecuted, and even violently exterminated in various parts of the world. Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and Eritrea, Yazidis in Iraq and Syria, Falun Gong in China, Muslims in Myanmar, Bahá'ís in Iran, and many more cases all over the globe call for a thorough study of religious, theological, ideological, and practical reasons and mechanisms of persecution. This panel calls for papers that focus on various multidisciplinary approaches to religious persecutions nowadays and in recent history. The examples of such approaches could be many.

The analysis of current cases of persecution around the globe. Which religious group is persecuted? What legal and practical mechanisms are used? What theological and ideological reasons are used? Which social institutions, such as the government institutions, law enforcement, judicial system, religious bodies, or the populace, are involved and in what way? What is the historical, legal, political, and cultural context of the persecution? Is there a response from international organizations, and is it sufficient?

The narrative of persecution used in a political agenda. For example, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (formerly?) of the Moscow Patriarchate seemingly persecuted by the authorities as a negotiation point during the war in Ukraine; the claims of religious persecution during the state-imposed restrictions put on religious organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic; the ethnic and religious aspect in persecutions, such as of Rohingya people in Myanmar or Uyghurs in China.

Recent history of religious persecution. The waves of religious persecution during the Communist period in the Soviet Union. Persecution of certain religious groups in Nazi Germany. Religious

persecution in North Korea or traditionally Muslim countries. Freedom of religion and its problems during the 20th century in the United States.

What makes a religious persecution? Political, ethnic, or racial violence framed as religious. The politicization of heresy and blasphemy. Religious persecution or prosecution of a real threat, such as an extremist, dangerous, or potentially violent radical group framed as a minority religion. Legal mechanisms, violent mobs, and everything in between.

Resilience and resistance to religious persecution. Theology and politics of martyrdom. Eschatological expectations of persecution, persecution as a fulfillment of prophecies, persecution as evidence of righteousness. Legal resistance to persecutions, court cases, and political battles. Protests, campaigns, and social media. Armed resistance to persecution or non-violence and pacifism.

Contributions on these or similar topics related to religious persecution are welcomed from scholars in history, the study of religion, theology, political science, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines, preferably using a combination of methods, theories, and approaches.

Martin Pehal – Charles University

Alessandro Testa – Charles University

***The Eventification of Religion:  
New Insights, Theories, and Problems***

Based on their own work on forms of festive public rituality secular, religious, and “religionesque” (Pehal 2024, Testa 2014, 2023), the panels’ chairs invite contributors to further explore and expand the growing scholarship on the “eventification” of religion. The intent is to open up a forum for discussing new evidence and case studies as well as offering new theoretical and interpretative tools to better understand this dynamic cluster of fascinating phenomena.

In the past few years, an array of new concepts and theories have proliferated to describe and analyse these kindred phenomena that fall within the broader category of public rituality. Major contributions have been made especially by Paul Bramadat et al. (2021), who write that “eventization’ of religion [...] is the transformation of a traditional religious ritual into an open-air spectacle with enough emotional and aesthetic power to appeal to multiple audiences”; by Sára-Eszter Heidl (2025), who describes “event religion” as a “phenomenon which creates a temporary community through shared activities [...] endowing the place, time, and symbols present with religionesque experience”; or by Luc Sala (2015), for whom “eventification” and “festivalization” refer to “isolated intensifying experiences” that have the power of “changing the cultural landscape”.

The chairs encourage prospective panelists to propose conventional papers or else to explore the possibility of creative, performative presentations, with the aim of reflexively “eventifying” the panel itself within the broader framework of the EASR 2026 event.

**WORKS CITED**

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Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson – Vilnius University

Kristina Garalytė – Vilnius University

Deimantas Valančiūnas – Vilnius University

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

The panel is set to explore the formation and spread of alternative orientalist religiosity during late Soviet period and its transformation during early post-Soviet period as well as ideas and worldview of their participants, their relationship with other religious communities and with the dominant political system. The object of the panel is various alternative religious and spiritual groups (Vaishnavas, Buddhists, yoga practitioners, etc.) that ground their beliefs and values in ideas stemming from the East. The adjective “orientalist” in this panel serves not as a geographical location but rather as an indication to the collection of various practices, phantasies and myths, that have been transplanted and adopted to new cultural context (Said 1979).

The panel invites various papers, focusing on the research of alternative orientalist religiosity during late Soviet period and its transformation during early post-Soviet period: reconstruction and documentation of the recent history and continuing living practices of the alternative orientalist religious movements in various countries; the interplay between religion, society and politics (relationship of alternative orientalist religious communities with the dominant political system and other religious groups); transformations of alternative orientalist religious ideas and movements in the early post-Soviet period in diverse countries in the broader context of sociopolitical change, etc.

Benjamin M.J. De Vos, Ghent University

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

This panel, organized by the Belgian Association for the Study of Religions (BABEL), invites contributions that critically explore the conceptual and historical nuances of **fluid religious identities**, with particular attention to the notion of **conversion**. In line with the overarching theme *Religions 360°*, we are especially interested in contributions that examine the **non-binary and entangled dynamics** of religious and philosophical expressions of conversion over time.

We welcome papers that critically discuss these dynamics within the **History of Religions**, exploring how scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries approached religious identity (and “fluidity”) and conversion, and how these historical perspectives can inform critical reflection today. We encourage contributions that challenge traditional models of conversion, moving beyond

assumptions of a clear-cut transition from one religious identity to another. For example, how did prior Jewish or Christian practices, beliefs, or social affiliations persist, interact, or remain entangled within processes of religious and philosophical transformation? How have subsequent historical studies reconsidered these patterns?

By foregrounding **(dis)continuity, ambiguity, and hybridity**, this panel seeks to **reassess religious belonging, transformation, and identity**.

**We welcome contributions that:**

- Offer historical case studies of fluid or hybrid religious identities
- Critically interrogate the concept of conversion or transformation
- Engage with theoretical or methodological debates in the History of Religions
- Reflect on the relevance of historical perspectives for contemporary scholarship

Katarina Plank – Karlstad University

Dave Vliegthart – Maastricht University

### **Secular-Religious and Globalized Recon figurations in 21<sup>st</sup> -Century Western Spirituality**

*Why and how are “secular” and “religious” beliefs, practices, and authorities from different global traditions increasingly entangled and reconfigured in 21<sup>st</sup>-century western spirituality?*

Moving beyond static (Western) distinctions such as the “secular vs religious,” “East vs West,” “North vs South,” and “modern vs postmodern,” this panel approaches 21<sup>st</sup>-century spirituality as a dynamic field in which beliefs and practices from different cultural and socio-historical backgrounds are increasingly reconfigured through global circulations of people and traditions. Rather than treating categories such as the ones above as stable cultural containers, it explores them as dynamic concepts shaped by multiple, intersecting histories of translation, appropriation, and legitimation. It explores, for instance, why and how pre-modern Asian traditions such as mindfulness, yoga, and tai chi are reframed in terms of physical and mental health and well-being within contemporary Euro-American contexts. Such secular-religious and globalized re-configurations in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western spirituality are producing new sources of meaning that are challenging conventional (Western) boundaries between, among others, tradition and post/modernity, faith and reason, the sacred and the profane, and transcendence and immanence.

Emiliano Russo – Sapienza University of Rome

Alessandra Vitullo – Sapienza University of Rome

### ***Reframing Digital Religion Studies: Classical Theories and New Perspectives on the Post-Secular Sacred***

Over the past three decades, the digital turn has profoundly reshaped the field of religious studies, compelling scholars to revisit foundational categories such as time, space, body, and materiality through the lens of digital mediation. The emergence of digital religion scholarship challenges long standing assumptions about where and how the sacred manifests, moving beyond the simplistic dichotomy between “online” and “offline” religiosity.

However, due to the strong interdisciplinarity of digital religion studies—drawing on communication studies, theology, sociology, the history of religions, and anthropology—the connection with classical analytical frameworks and methodologies from the study of religion has at times remained implicit or insufficiently explored. As a result, the continuity between classical religious sciences and contemporary research on digitally mediated religious practices is not always made explicit.

This panel aims to restore and foreground this continuity by bringing classical theories and methods from the study of religion into direct dialogue with digital religion research. In particular, it seeks to:

- engage classical theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to examine how the sacred is reshaped within digital environments;
- address the methodological challenges and conceptual tensions that arise when traditional approaches are applied to digitally mediated religious practices;
- propose innovative reinterpretations of classical frameworks for analyzing religious phenomena in digital contexts;
- critically engage with existing literature in digital religion studies, exploring the limits, ambiguities, and potentials of its current categories;
- highlight cross-disciplinary perspectives that enrich our understanding of religious expression, experience, and mediation in the digital age.

Reframing digital religion studies means situating digital religion within the broader discipline of religious science, not as a separate or isolated field, but as a continuation and transformation of its classical questions and methods. In doing so, this panel seeks to assess how much of the “old” persists within the “new” manifestations of religion in digital spaces.

Ruth Illman – University of Helsinki

Anne Birgitta Pessi – University of Helsinki

Ritva Palmén – University of Helsinki

Teemu Pauha – University of Helsinki

***Sense of Safety in Religio us Communities:  
Embodiment, Emotions, and Existential Perspectives***

How is a sense of safety created, experienced, contested and claimed in diverse religious spaces today? This is an increasingly acute and pivotal question today, in relation to the ongoing political and social turmoil all over the world.

Security, safety, and the sense of safety have emerged as defining concerns across disciplines over the past decade. The dimension of space plays a crucial part in these analyses, approached as physical places as well as social spaces and interpersonal connections. Scholars of theology and the humanities have contributed to this evolving research by demonstrating that safety is not merely political, structural or psychological, but also deeply existential. A sense of safety emerges as an emotional, embodied experience of recognition and justice that spurs hope in individuals, groups and societies.

Recognising that the sense of safety is a fluid and context-sensitive phenomenon, this panel invites the contributing scholars to explore and critically examine how religious environments can both foster and undermine a sense of safety. We welcome papers building on conceptual research, historical investigations and ethnographic case studies addressing how religious settings and

localities promote or erode a sense of safety, recognition and a sense of belonging. Also, papers on other emotions and affects-related phenomena, related to safety, are welcomed.

Core themes and questions related to the sense of safety in religious spaces to be addressed in the panel include for example:

- The concepts of safety versus security versus sense of safety
- Embodiment and materiality
- Architecture, art and spatial design
- Emotional safety; psychological safety
- Sensory dimensions
- Bodily practices and rituals
- Existential interpretations and perspectives
- Marginality and uneven power positions
- New spiritual geographies
- Physical and/or virtual space
- Intra- and intergroup dynamics
- Social dimensions of safety
- Spatial methodologies
- Politics of belonging; recognition
- Religion, emotions, affects

By foregrounding site-specific case studies and methodological approaches - from phenomenology and ethnography to spatial theory - this panel seeks to illuminate and enhance the scholarly understanding of how a sense of safety is created, challenged and changed in both mainstream and emergent religious spaces, past and present.

The panel is arranged by researchers from the research project “Contested Constructions of Sense of Safety in Religious Spaces” (CoCo), a four-year research project currently carried out at the University of Helsinki. We welcome contributions that expand the thematic scope - whether focused on different religious traditions, diverse geographical contexts, or innovative theoretical or methodological approaches to analysing the sense of safety in religious spaces.

This panel will also serve as a possible starting point or a thematic journal issue for an international journal or an edited volume on religion, safety, sense of safety based on contributions presented at the conference.

Alexandra Bergholm – University of Helsinki

Terhi Utriainen – University of Helsinki

Pasqualina Eckerström – University of Helsinki

Roosa Haimila – University of Helsinki

***Art-Related Methodologies in the Study of Religion:  
Intersections and Collaborations***

Research – including the study of religion – can engage with art in various ways: not only as an object of study, but also as a methodological tool and a collaborative partner. Artistic practices, artworks, and audiences can shape research by serving as a subject of analysis, a medium for collecting and presenting data, a discursive field that intersects with religion (or secularity), or by fulfilling other roles. Artists themselves can also assume diverse roles within research projects, from co-creators to critical interlocutors. Such collaborations offer rich opportunities for innovation but

also pose challenges, including negotiating disciplinary boundaries and balancing analytical rigor with creative expression.

This session invites scholars to reflect on the possibilities and limits of integrating art-related methodologies into the study of religion. How can artistic forms, such as visual arts, music, literature, theatre, dance, or performance, inform the study of religion? What benefits and tensions arise when research incorporates activist art, outsider art, public installations, or private aesthetic practices, particularly in highlighting religion as a social issue or engaging with societal inequalities and power dynamics? How do these collaborations reshape our analytical frameworks and ethical considerations? We welcome papers that address the diverse ways of engaging with art from different perspectives, including case studies, innovative or experimental research designs, as well as more theoretical contributions.

Stefanie Burkhardt, University of Hamburg  
Claudia Jahnel, University of Hamburg  
Kristina Göthling-Zimpel, University of Hamburg  
Sarah Ntondele, University of Hamburg

**Religion and Literature:**  
*Exploring Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature and Religion*

Literary texts have long formed part of the implicit working material of the study of religions, yet they have rarely been reflected upon systematically as a distinct theoretical and methodological approach. This open panel takes this observation as its point of departure and explores literature not merely as a source of religious ideas, narratives, and practices, but as an epistemic space in which religion is negotiated, transformed, and newly imagined. Literature thus functions as a laboratory of religious meaning-making, an arena of aesthetic knowledge production, and a medium of social and cultural negotiation. Engaging with current debates on narrativity, fictionality, materiality, and affect, the panel focuses on literary texts from different genres, periods, and contexts.

Guiding questions include: What theoretical impulses can literary studies offer to the study of religions? How can literary texts be methodologically integrated into religious studies without reducing them to mere “illustrations” of religious content? And to what extent do literary techniques—such as metaphor, shifts in perspective, designs of narrative time and order—open up new approaches to understanding religion as a dynamic and relational phenomenon?

Beyond its thematic focus, the panel is explicitly conceived as a space for exchange and networking. It aims to bring together scholars from different European contexts who work, or wish to work, at the intersection of religion and literature. The open panel format is intended not only to make ongoing

research projects visible, but also to lay the foundation for a long-term European networking platform. Such a platform would foster interdisciplinary dialogue, enable methodological synergies, and facilitate future collaborations.

By combining theoretical reflection, methodological openness, and social practice, the panel approaches literature not only as an object of analysis, but as a connective medium for research in the study of religions.

Wanda Alberts, Leibniz Universität Hannover  
Jørn Borup, Aarhus University

### **Decolonisation and the study of religion**

In recent years, decolonial critique within the humanities has also challenged the academic study of religion. Colonial framings continue to exert influence, with Eurocentrism still shaping theories, methods, and institutional infrastructures. Postcolonial theories have criticised the unequal power structures of our field, questioning the relevance of universalising culturally particular concepts ('religion'), theories ('evolution', 'secularisation'), categories ('world religions') and methods (textualization, neutrality ideals). The decolonial turn builds on this critique but takes it a step further. Although decolonial approaches have not yet achieved the status of a coherent 'theory', a range of decolonial voices question the very rationale behind the scientific study (of religion), advocating participatory intervention and activist engagement.

This panel will critically examine contemporary decolonial critique, addressing questions such as: What does decolonial critique offer to the study of religion? How does it differ from postcolonial critique? In what ways does its emphasis on race and identities (rather than on postcolonial notions of 'culture') reshape the field? How does a focus on racism, hegemony, privilege and identity politics contribute to new and more productive insights? How are the categories of 'religion'/religious' and 'secular'/secularity' used in debates on the decolonial critique of the study of religion, especially given that the discipline has traditionally defined itself through the very distinction between religious vs. secular? What reactions within the Study of Religion have there been to criticisms of the colonial and Eurocentric legacy of secular scholarship? And how does this relate to current claims to integrate religious approaches, considering that the distinction from religious positions has traditionally been one of the discipline's key features of self-definition? To what extent can the decolonial principle of 'nothing about us, without us' be applied to research agendas in the field, given the traditional emphasis on etic and meta-level perspectives in the study of religion? How do scholars in the study of religion relate to ideas like participatory intervention and activist scholarship as possible responses to decolonial critique?

Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger, Aarhus University

### ***The Construction of Sacred Places in Contemporary Time***

Within the history of religions, it's common to investigate historically grounded sacred sites, since they often constitute a focal point and a marker of identity for a given religion throughout its history. This applies, for instance, to places in Jerusalem, the Kaaba in Mecca, St Peter's Basilica in Rome, and cities along the Ganges River as classical examples. Yet one may also think of saintly graves, particular holy springs, and similar sites that have served as centres of pilgrimage over many years.

This panel, however, does not seek to examine the classical sacred sites, but rather those that have emerged in the present, and the significance they hold either for established religions or for new religious or spiritual groups. This panel invites papers that, on the basis of one or more empirical case studies and/or the use of theory, wish to discuss: (1) what, or whether, there are particular characteristic features of these new sacred sites in comparison with the established ones; and (2) whether older, established sites have acquired new meanings or attract different groups of people than was previously the case?

Markus A. Davidsen, Leiden University  
Mattias Brand, University of Fribourg / University of Basel  
EASR Working Group Theory and Theorizing Religion (in formation).

### *Steps in Theorizing Religion*

Having a scholarly conversation about religion and religious practices with colleagues throughout the world requires us to have a shared “theoretical language”. Capital-T Theory used to provide such a shared language, but following decades of critique, scholars and students have grown cautious of theory, often limiting themselves to empirical description or theoretical deconstruction while avoiding generalization and original theory construction (Storm 2021).

This panel explores an alternative. We advocate promoting the process of *theorizing*, i.e. the active practice of creating and refining concepts and theories. Through theorizing we can develop and maintain a new shared theoretical language, and thereby contribute to keeping the study of religion together as a discipline with shared research problems and key terminology that transcends our many various specializations.

Drawing inspiration from existing publications on theorizing in the study of religion (e.g., Engler and Gardiner 2022; Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2007; Strenski 2003) and in sociology (Swedberg 2016), this panel examines theorizing as a learnable research practice with various “steps”. Drawing loosely on Richard Swedberg’s framework for the theorizing process (2016) we invite contributions addressing any of these steps, with particular emphasis on *modeling* and *explanation*.

- **Observation**: What role does deep empirical engagement play before theory formation?
- **Naming and concept formation** : Which processes guide scholars in identifying and naming phenomena in the study of religion? How do we move from empirical observation to conceptualizing theoretical object? Which role does metaphors and analogies play?
- **Building out the theory (modeling)** : How do scholars develop conceptual models using tools such as typologies and various models (including spectrum, matrixes, tier models, and field models)? What role do comparisons and structural similarities play in theory construction? How can we incorporate process and mechanism into our theoretical models? How can modeling help us connect new theories to existing theories?
- **Explanation**: What constitutes a compelling explanation in our field? How do we move from description to interpretive or causal accounts? How can explanations help bridge or connect the ontological levels of the cognitive and the cultural-social? What can we learn from disciplines with robust traditions of formal modeling? How might we adapt modeling practices to the distinctive concerns of the study of religion?

We invite proposals addressing these themes from diverse perspectives, methodologies, and historical contexts. Submissions should include a 250-word abstract, brief bio, and contact details. Please contact us before the **20<sup>th</sup> of March**.

We welcome contributions from scholars across disciplines and career stages.

Valeria Fabretti, Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trento  
Boris Rähme, Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trento

***Religion, Backlash Against Diversity, and Distorted Public Discourse:  
Theoretical and Methodological Challenges for Religious Studies***

In many contemporary societies, public debates are increasingly shaped by backlash against diversity related to gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and other intersecting identities. Anti-discrimination initiatives and policies are questioned or delegitimized, while public communication is often distorted through simplification, polarization, and strategic manipulation. Religion figures prominently in these developments, not only as an object of debate but also as a source of authority, identity, and contestation.

This open panel asks how such dynamics challenge the field of religious studies, both conceptually and methodologically. The panel starts from the assumption that religious actors, discourses, and imaginaries are deeply entangled with broader struggles over diversity, social cohesion, and power. The central aim is to explore which theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and forms of interdisciplinarity are particularly suited to understanding these entanglements.

The panel invites contributions that engage with at least one of the following three interrelated analytical fields.

First, how can religious studies account for the positioning of religious groups and actors within contemporary diversity controversies? We are especially interested in approaches that analyse the relationship between internal narratives and imaginaries articulated by religious communities, on the one hand, and widespread social representations and stereotypes circulating in political and media discourse, on the other. Papers may explore gaps, frictions, or strategic convergences between these levels, drawing on discourse analysis, sociology of religion, anthropology, media studies, or related fields.

Second, how can we conceptualize and empirically assess the effects of diversity backlash on religious minorities and on coexistence in multi-religious societies?

Contributions may examine processes such as exclusion, stigmatization, securitization, or legal and institutional reforms, as well as their implications for everyday religious life.

Methodological reflections on researching vulnerability, power asymmetries, and intersectionality are particularly welcome. Third, which forms of resistance, counter-discourse, or alternative practice can be identified, and how can they be studied? Possible contributions include analyses of expert engagement in public debates, the role of religious professionals and institutions in challenging false or distorted narratives, and the promotion or implementation of encounters, shared practices, and dialogical spaces. Papers may also reflect critically on the role of scholars and researchers themselves and on the boundaries between academic analysis, public intervention, and normative positioning.

The panel explicitly encourages interdisciplinary dialogue. Contributions drawing on political theory, gender studies, postcolonial studies, legal studies, communication and media studies, or critical social theory are welcome, particularly where they help sharpen the analytical tools of religious studies. Empirical case studies, comparative perspectives, and theoretical or methodological reflections are equally encouraged.

By bringing these approaches together, the panel seeks to clarify how religious studies can better analyse contemporary struggles over diversity, and how the field can respond to challenges that affect both religious coexistence and the legitimacy of scholarly expertise.

*Call for abstracts.* We invite papers from scholars at all career stages. Please submit an abstract of at least 500 and at most 1,000 words. Contributions may focus on any geographical

context or religious tradition. Submissions that explicitly reflect on theoretical and methodological choices, as well as on the interdisciplinary positioning of religious studies, are especially encouraged.

Maria Chiara Giorda – Roma Tre University

Giuseppe Tateo – Roma Tre University

### *Orthodox Christian Presence in Italy (16th–21st Centuries)*

This panel examines the dynamic Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christian presence in Italy from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, charting its transformation from early modern diplomatic enclaves to vibrant migrant faith communities. We welcome contributions from history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and allied fields addressing core themes: religious diplomacy between Orthodox patriarchates and the Italian state; adaptation and contestation of Orthodox architecture and liturgical spaces within Catholic hegemony; Oriental Orthodox communities navigating postcolonial legacies; pastoral missions of Eastern European migrant churches; and Orthodox networks' engagement with communist regimes evident in covert diplomacy, refugee support, and post-1989 resurgence.

The panel's broad chronological scope spans from Venetian-Ottoman Levantine trade fostering Greek-Orthodox merchant enclaves (16th-18th c.) to 19th-century Russian noble pilgrimages shaping urban sacred topography; from Cold War exiles from the socialist bloc countries maintaining liturgical life in Italian cities to the analysis of historical and contemporary monastic life. Contemporary cases could probe Romanian Orthodoxy in the light of the recently signed agreement (Intesa) with the state, Ukrainian communities dealing with the full scale invasion, or architectural hybridity in purpose-built or repurposed churches.

Bridging longue durée history with ethnography, it reframes Orthodoxy not as marginal exoticism but as an enduring counterpoint to Catholic dominance, casting light on material cultures, diplomatic power negotiations, and the textures of lived religion across centuries. It invites explorations of how Orthodox communities have negotiated visibility and autonomy in Italy's religious landscape, from subtle liturgical adaptations in shared sacred spaces to assertions of identity amid migration-driven superdiversity.

Martin Thomas Riexinger, Aarhus University

### *Descolasian perspectives on Islam*

The quadripartite model of ontologies (totemism, animism, analogism, naturalism) formulated French anthropologist Philippe Descola in *Par-delà nature et culture* (2005) has received increasing attention in the study of religion, in particular when it comes to research on animism and the worldview to which he refers as analogism. The worldview which in his account is dominating in most agrarian societies is according to him by a harmonious hierarchy of existants referring to each other. The hierarchical order of society is imagined as reflecting the hierarchical order of the world. Other researchers have, however, alerted to the fact that in post-axial contexts, the idea of the world as system of references persists, while the world is no longer imagined as harmonious (negative analogism) or that a fracture between the harmony of the world and the injustice human society is deplored.

In Islamic studies Descolas' model has hitherto not attracted much attention, although the intellectual history of Islam provides ample material that would deserve attention and could contribute to the refinement of key concepts. To name some possible topics: The cosmic order in the Qur'ān (fractured analogism?), *jinn* as animistic remains (?), 'negative analogism' in early ascetic sufism, theories of correspondence in later sufism, contemporary responses to secularism based on naturalist ontology as 'protest analogism'.

Contributions with different disciplinary and methodological background (philological/historical, art history/ material culture, anthropology) which analyze phenomena in an Islamic context with a Descolas based approach are welcome in this panel, but also papers that challenge the value and tenability of the model.

Atko Remmel – University of Tartu  
Sofia Nikitaki – KU Leuven

### *(Non)Religion and Language*

Contemporary academic debates on religion frequently revolve around secularization, pluralization, lived and post-institutional religiosity, often examined through measures such as institutional affiliation and participation, self-identification and belief statements, or broader indicators of meaning-making and moral orientations. However, processes of secularization and/or religious change affect not only how people believe or behave, but also how they speak about what matters to them and about the world around them. Those (non)religious vocabularies – or lack thereof – are shaped by globalization, mediatization, and other processes: similar ideas or experiences may be articulated through very different terminologies across generational, social, and historical contexts.

This panel invites papers that examine how people discuss (non)religious – or, more broadly, existential – matters, and explore what insights can be gained from analyzing language use related to (non)religion, spirituality, and/or other lifestyles and worldviews. Possible contributions may focus on everyday language use, interviews and ethnographic material, historical or media discourses (including digital contexts), or theoretical and methodological reflections on studying and interpreting (non)religious language. By foregrounding language use, the panel aims to explore how broader processes such as secularization, pluralization, and globalization are reflected, negotiated, contested, and rendered meaningful through linguistic practices.

Giuseppe Maiello – University of Finance and Administration in Prague  
Nicola Maria Camerlengo

### *Vampirism 360°: Genealogies, Practices, and Heritage of Vampiric Phenomena*

This panel conceptualizes vampirism as a historically layered and analytically significant category within the study of religion and ritual. It addresses three principal themes: historical-comparative perspectives, ritual practices and mediation, and contemporary folklore and heritage. The panel places its primary analytical focus on ritual practices and shamanic comparisons. Rather than privileging modern, literary, or popular-cultural frameworks, the panel foregrounds structural,

functional, and semantic continuities spanning the ancient Mediterranean, medieval and early modern Europe, and contemporary vernacular contexts.

Contributions are sought that examine figures such as *lamiai*, *empusai*, and *striges*, as well as emic notions such as *vrykolakas*, *strigoi*, *tenac*, etc. Analyses should examine how these terms articulate local cosmologies, moral grammars, and anxieties about death, embodiment, and post-mortem agency. By clarifying the relationship between the analytical category “vampirism” and region-specific emic designations, the panel seeks to avoid conceptual flattening and to highlight the diversity of revenant traditions within the Euro-Mediterranean sphere. Although the primary focus is European for reasons of comparability, contributions addressing non-European analogues, such as *jiangshi* or *aswang*, will be considered if they advance the panel’s comparative objectives.

A second axis examines ritual practices and forms of mediation associated with revenant beliefs. The panel invites studies of apotropaic repertoires, mortuary interventions, and communal strategies for managing apparent threats of return. Special emphasis is placed on intersections between vampirism and shamanic or ecstatic traditions, understood not only through altered states but via convergent concerns such as soul-loss, ritual specialists, and techniques for negotiating boundaries between the living and the dead; here corporeal permeability denotes bodily porosity in relation to beliefs about spirit intrusion, post-mortem agency and ritual practices that open or seal the body. Contributors are encouraged to mobilise conceptual models ranging from Eliade and post-Eliadian critiques to contemporary scholarship on possession, trance, and ritual efficacy. In this context, “boundary-work” is used in the sociological sense: the culturally specific symbolic, ritual, and social labour through which communities demarcate transitions and manage dangerous or ambiguous beings.

The third axis investigates the contemporary mobilization of vampiric pasts. The panel invites analyses of how vernacular belief systems—conceived both as emic cosmologies and as subjects of scholarly reconstruction—are reinterpreted within heritage politics, tourism economies, and processes of local identity formation. Relevant case studies may address museum displays, heritage management, the commodification of memory through vampire tourism, and debates about authenticity at sites associated with vampiric narratives. Particular attention is given to the intersections and divergences among scholarly, popular, and commercial discourses in shaping place based identities and negotiating tensions between historical reconstruction and contemporary cultural production.

To ensure analytical clarity, submissions that treat Vlad Țepeș or Erzsébet Báthory as primary evidence of popular vampiric belief are excluded. By assembling comparative case studies and theoretical reflections across these three axes—with ritual practices and shamanic comparisons foregrounded—the panel seeks to demonstrate the value of vampirism as a lens to understand ritual practice, memory, and the contested uses of the past, while facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue across religious studies, folklore, anthropology, and heritage studies.

Tancredi Marrone, Masaryk University, Brno

***Deal with the Devil:  
Religion, Spirituality, and Crime***

This panel will explore the overlapping and controversial areas of religiosity, spirituality, and criminality. This will include expressions of violence as much as other antinomian behaviour; salvation and deliverance are found in the most unlikely of places. Numerous cults have been associated with unlawful behavior, whether willfully committed or perceived from the outside.

Moreover, there are criminal organizations that rely on their faith and on worship to favor protection, with unorthodox cults emerging consequently. At the same time, individuals or smaller groups rely on the authority provided by their spiritual philosophies, which can be used with the objective of perpetrating unlawful, antisocial, and predatory behaviors. The symbolism that emerges, social cues, and authority have also influenced the wider public in contexts ranging from artistic to ceremonial. Cinematic, musical, literary, and numerous other forms of artistic expression draw heavily on this form of criminal spirituality to convey antinomian emotions to the spectator and, in retrospect, to influence the underworlds from which they were drawn.

nders Norge - Uppsala University / Aarhus University

Anton Runesson - Uppsala University

Kaj Århem - Uppsala University

### *Exploring Immanentist Religious Worlds, Past and Present*

Alan Strathern and Marshall Sahlins recently proposed the axiological distinction between immanentism and transcendentalism as a theoretical framework for revisiting classical issues in the history of religion and the anthropology of non-naturalist ontologies. Strathern is primarily concerned with the evolving relation between religion and politics in world history, while Sahlins directs attention to immanentist cultures past and present. Both consider the axial revolution (c. 800 – 200 BCE) a major ontological shift from immanentism to axial – and later post-axial – transcendentalism, while insisting that the transition was never complete; immanentism persists as an ontological undercurrent within transcendentalist traditions and remains prevalent in many indigenous cultures, folk traditions, and popular religions worldwide.

This panel examines immanentist religious traditions across historical and ethnographic settings. Immanentism provides a productive framework for understanding cosmologies in which divinity is immanent to the cosmos – present in beings, objects, and landscapes – and in which the flourishing of life stands at the centre of religious practice. As an analytical perspective, it unsettles enduring dichotomies between human and non-human, nature and culture, and matter and meaning, foregrounding continuity, relationality, and material presence.

At the same time, the study of immanentism raises a methodological question: how are such worlds best approached without translating them into analytical vocabularies shaped by transcendentalist assumptions? The panel therefore seeks to explore the diversity of immanentist forms while assessing the usefulness of immanentism as a comparative category.

We invite papers on immanentist worlds and religious phenomena – including, but not limited to, shamanism, spirit possession, sacrifice, and forms of sacred or divine kingship – drawing on historical sources, ethnography, or interdisciplinary approaches. Comparative contributions are especially welcome. The panel aims to clarify the analytical purchase of immanentism for the comparative study of religion.

Ramona Jelinek-Menke, University of Bonn

### **Spiritual Abuse: Why the Study of Religion Matters for Safer Societies**

Manipulation and abuse are structurally embedded across various areas of society, including religious contexts. In recent years, an increasing number of cases from a wide range of religious communities and movements worldwide have gained public and scholarly attention. In recent debates—especially within theology, psychology, criminology, and the public—the concept of spiritual abuse has been adopted to describe forms of abuse associated with religious beliefs, practices, and institutions. The concept thus claims both to differentiate additional dimensions of abuse—beyond, for example, sexual or economic abuse—and to identify what renders abuse in religious contexts distinct from abuse in other social settings. Against this background, the panel investigates how the concept of spiritual abuse can be translated into analytical frameworks of the comparative study of religion, and what specific forms of expertise the study of religion can contribute to broader societal debates on harm, violence, and safety.

Peter Nynäs – Åbo Akademi University

### ***Contemporary expressions of art and religion in the context of social exclusion of sexually and gender diverse people***

Social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon that disengages people from vital resources, spanning cultural, political, legal and social dimensions, and sexual and gender diverse people have often been the subject of social exclusion. In this context, religion can play an ambiguous role, sometimes exacerbating exclusion and violence and sometimes providing empowerment against exclusionary structures.

However, the arts often constitute vital 'third spaces' in the struggle against social exclusion, foster a sense of belonging and provide a platform for resistance. Community theatre, documentary films, poetry, experimental writing, visual arts and graffiti, for example, provide avenues through which marginalised individuals and groups can express themselves, gain validation and challenge dominant narratives. This creates spaces for agency, voice and dialogue across societal divides, offering coping mechanisms for daily exclusion and combating its structural and symbolic violence. Simultaneously it transforms religious resources, providing new narratives and practices, and expressions of these.

This workshop will investigate these dynamics between contemporary art, social exclusion and religion. The latter is here understood in an inclusive sense as including also secular, non-religious and spiritual positions. We invite contributions on concrete examples of this relationship with a focus on sexual and gender diverse people. How do the arts provide people facing exclusion with positive self-narratives that offer restoration? How do the arts provide alternative interpretations for combating religiously motivated exclusion? How do they legitimise agency and identity at the margins of institutional religion? How do they encourage engagement with, or opposition to, religion when fighting lived exclusion, using also religious resources in the process?

Renata Salvarani, Università Europea di Roma  
aniela Dumbravă, Institute for the History of Religions, Romanian Academy

### *Ecumenism & History of Religions*

Historical-religious studies focus on ecumenism as a subject of investigation, developing, on the one hand, a solid historiographical tradition which, within the history of Christianity, spans all eras, from the early centuries to colonial and post-colonial phenomena, leading to the analysis of contemporary religious forms. Conversely, relations, ecumenical movements and forms of dialogue between different Christian churches have frequently been supported and endorsed by the study of the history of religions, as well as the data and references utilised in ecclesial and cultural action. In particular, since the Second Vatican Council, a significant connection has been established between ecumenism and historical religious studies, with methodological implications for science.

Interreligious contexts and different forms of dialogue between Christianity and other religions, as well as comparative analyses of religious traditions, have further contributed to the emergence of differences and similarities in approaches between the various churches and Christian groups. This has also favoured the clarification of specific methodological and epistemological criteria.

The very definition of ecumenism has been the subject of in-depth reflection and analysis. Prominent historians have been directly involved in ecumenical processes or have played an active role in the ecclesiastical sphere. This phenomenon has had a significant impact on the evolution of the human sciences since the Second World War. For example, the concepts of alterity and "the Other"—drawn from philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, and Paul Ricoeur—have become foundational to post-Vatican II ecumenism. Rather than viewing other churches as deficient versions of one's own, ecumenical theology now recognizes the radical otherness of dialogue partners as sources of mutual enrichment. This philosophical turn underpins key developments like receptive ecumenism (asking "what can we learn from our ecclesial others?") and the shift from identity-based to difference-based dialogue, where encounter with the irreducibly different other becomes a path to deeper self understanding and Christian unity. As a distinctive feature, the Roman Colloquiums on the Philosophy of Religion promoted by Enrico Castelli (1961-1975) constitute an epistemological laboratory in which the problem of otherness is deeply intertwined with ecumenism. Castelli conceived these meetings—which brought together philosophers (such as Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans-Georg Gadamer) with theologians of the Council such as Yves Congar, Henri-Marie de Lubac, and Karl Rahner—as a response to the "solipsism" of modern philosophy, seeking a "common sense" as a meeting ground with the other and with the divine. The very dialogical form of the Colloquiums embodied the anti-solipsistic stance: not academic conferences, but spaces for encounter between different traditions, in parallel with the ecumenical turn of Vatican II.

Dialogue as a methodological approach and the hermeneutics of alterity: in the contemporary context, there exists a multitude of methodological frontiers for ecumenism, including, but not limited to, receptive ecumenism (which is being called into question with regard to its fundamental question: 'what can we learn from the other ecclesial?'), grassroots ecumenism, empirical theology, decolonial approaches, the epistemology of disagreement, and synodality as common discernment. It is evident that the fundamental theme pertains to alterity, that is, the manner in which one encounters the other without reducing them to a mere replica of oneself, thereby transforming the process of reception into a dynamic and transformative action. The following question is posed: does this phenomenon manifest itself in the practice of contemporary ecumenism? How have historical-religious analyses and ecumenical efforts contributed to the development of methodological tools in the social sciences? What methodological developments

have occurred in disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy of religion, sociology, and political studies? The panel aims to analyze these reflections “outside” the historical and historical religious sphere. The objective of this panel is to highlight how studies on ecumenism have contributed to defining the historical modalities of *living together*, *living apart* within global societies, the dialectics between universalism and particularism, the historical processes of defining the “other”, the understanding of the concept of “alterity” and the processes of inculturation and exculturation.

In addition to the questions and topics for reflection raised in the above presentation, the following aspects are also of interest:

- critical methodologies and definitions;
- definitions and methodological use of the concept of religious group;
- historiographical approaches to the theme of “alterity”;
- ecumenism between social identities and religious identities;
- perceptions and definitions of differences (theological, linguistic, socio-cultural, etc.);
- historical studies on liturgies considered as a place where religious differences emerge and are composed;
- cities and multi-level urban spaces shared by different religious groups;
- archaeology and ecumenism.

Titus Hjelm, University of Helsinki  
Zeinab Karimi, University of Helsinki  
Tuomas Äystö, University of Helsinki

### **Religious Literacy in Action**

Over the past few decades, religious literacy has emerged as a major topic of discussion in the study of religion. In addition, educational institutions, policy frameworks, and civil society organizations have increasingly adopted the language of religious literacy to promote tolerance, reduce prejudice, and strengthen social cohesion. Yet despite its widespread adoption, the concept remains mainly normative, and its suggested implications lack empirical evidence. There is a persistent lack of clarity regarding the conceptual boundaries of religious literacy, its pedagogical applications, epistemological underpinnings, and tangible outcomes in lived contexts.

This panel invites papers that critically engage with key questions surrounding religious literacy: Definition, underlying assumptions, practical applications, and possible outcomes. We welcome both conceptual and empirical examinations of religious literacy. The panel aims to facilitate a collective exchange of knowledge and dialogue on the complexities and challenges surrounding this increasingly influential concept.

Ibrahim Bachir Abdoulaye, University of Bayreuth  
Paula Schrode, University of Bayreuth

### **Beyond Religious Diplomacy: Transnational Spaces and Local Renegotiations of Religion**

With reference to Turkey, many authors (e.g. Mehmet Özkan, 2014; Ayhan Kaya and Amina Drhimeur, 2023) refer to “religious diplomacy” as an approach to foreign politics. Here, we adopt this term as a heuristic concept to discuss and compare settings in which governments engage

openly with religious fields abroad. Building on the concept of “religious engineering” (Spies/Schrode, 2020), this panel seeks to look beyond political agendas, focusing instead on religious dynamics and contingencies on the ground. How do local configurations shape the practices of religious diplomacy? How do legal frameworks, materialities, and questions of authority matter? How does religious diplomacy reconfigure religious fields?

Contributions from all geographical and religious contexts that allow for engagement with these research questions are invited. *Keywords:* religious diplomacy, religious engineering, transnational spaces.

Lina Aschenbrenner, Universität der Bundeswehr München

Sophie Moser, Universität der Bundeswehr München

Robert Langer, Universität der Bundeswehr München

### **Materialities of Religion in the Classroom: Tools, Methods, and Perspectives**

In contemporary scholarship, engagement with cultural and religious materialities—long an inherent part of the study of religion—appears more important than ever. Materialities are more than a crucial part of individuals’ lives: they form extensions of the experiencing body and constitute key means through which social and cultural environments are perceived. Teaching and studying religion within the broader framework of social and cultural studies therefore entails training in the critical assessment of materialities.

Moving beyond the question of why we teach materialities of religion, this panel aims to create a space for discussing the practicalities of such teaching: teaching *methods* and *tools*, whether in the form of a course syllabus or teaching plan, specific guidelines for fieldwork, or concrete exemplary approaches to teaching particular materialities. Moreover, the panel seeks to open up a broader discussion on *perspectives*: on what to teach in the classroom. What should the conceptual pillars of teaching the materialities of religion be? What are the key ideas students should take away with them? What do we want them to take away, and what do they need to take away, in order to develop a critical religious studies perspective both inside and outside the classroom?

The panel is conceived as a space for the exchange of ideas among those who teach, or wish to teach, the materialities of religion. Contributions that address tools, methods, and perspectives on teaching materialities of religion are welcome.

Jenna Kuronen, University of Helsinki

Terhi Hannola, University of Helsinki

### **Study of Religion Approaches to Human-Animal Studies**

In conferences on theology and the study of religions, the responses of various religious traditions to ecological crises have received increasing attention. However, the role of intensive animal agriculture in these crises – and particularly the human-caused suffering of non-human animals – has often been overlooked. Furthermore, the connection between worldviews and these issues has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Both religious and non-religious actors may offer solutions to ecological crises, yet they often also uphold problematic structures, such as the notion of human exceptionalism over other animal species. However, in addition to worldviews and religion-like

meanings, also other factors have an influence on how we relate to other animals and what is our understanding of desirable, multispecies coexistence. For instance, the environment we grow up in and practices we engage, such as eating habits or volunteering in animal protection, have an impact to our worldviews.

We welcome presentation proposals from diverse perspectives that address non-human animals and human-animal relations within various religious and non-religious worldviews. We are also hoping to receive proposals examining practices that shape our worldviews concerning other animals. In addition, our aim is to discuss the role, specialties and benefits of study of religion within the interdisciplinary field of human-animal studies.

The themes of presentation can cover, but are not limited to, following themes:

- beliefs and understandings of animals
- meanings attached to human-animal relations
- considerations of animal perspectives
- ethics of eating and killing animals

Matteo Bollini, DREST - Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia

Rebecca Sabatini, Università di Torino - Fondazione Bruno Kessler

***Does the Study of Religion Need (some) Discipline?  
Studying and Teaching in a Less-Than-Disciplined World***

The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen the academic study of religion undertaking a sustained process of redefinition. The decline of major "paradigms" and the critiques levelled at the theoretical foundations of Religious Studies have left scholars with more perplexities than certainties.

Meanwhile, long-standing disciplinary divisions and the relative stability they afforded have been unsettled. Contemporary research is increasingly encouraged to operate at the boundaries of disciplines and to move beyond narrow specializations to enhance effectiveness, practical relevance, and collaborative potential, qualities often perceived as lacking in more traditional models of scholarship. These transformations raise crucial epistemological and practical questions: what forms of knowledge are gained, and what may be lost, in the reshaping of academic knowledge production about religion? The panel welcomes theoretical and empirical contributions on topics ranging from the pursuit of the difficult equilibrium between insularity and loss of specificity to the epistemic and organizational challenges raised by transdisciplinary research. The panel aims to explore how incentives toward overcoming disciplinary boundaries are concretely experienced and how these dynamics reshape research practices, theoretical commitments, and the intellectual formation of future scholars of religion. In particular, we are interested in papers that productively engage with these issues through concrete case studies, addressing how both inter- and transdisciplinary approaches can improve our current understanding of religious phenomena.

Joanna Gruszewska, Institute of Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University, Kraków  
Jacek Skup, Institute of Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University, Kraków  
Jarosław Zapart, Institute of Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University, Kraków

*The Use, Reuse, and Abuse of Buddhism in Identity and Heritage Discourses  
of the Late Modern and Contemporary South Asia*

Our panel invites critical examinations of the use of Buddhism in constructing discourses and narratives on identities, heritage, and politics in post-1857 South Asia. It focuses on uncovering how discourses incorporate Buddhist-based ideas, practices, art, and literary works and employ them to achieve social, cultural, political, and/or ideological aims. We seek to reveal how discourses produce or reshape subjects and identities; how they emerge from or are affected by cultural, social, and political agendas and how they relate to and encourage power structures of dependency and resistance; how they assign duties, values, and privileges to individuals, groups, and institutions; finally, how they accommodate Buddhism into modernity by rewriting history and re-claiming Buddhist legacies. We think that explaining the “religious” ingredient of these discourses is an indispensable part of their analysis, but by no means a sufficient one. Fully validating our approach demands the inclusion of methodologies from a broad range of both humanities and social sciences. Therefore, we invite case studies with a rooting in discourse-centered theories that encourage inclusive inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches from religious and cultural studies, sociology of religion, anthropology, political, media sciences and beyond. Methodologies applied by panel organizers that suggest avenues of inquiry include, e.g., the approach of Brubaker and Cooper (2000) challenging “identity” as a unified and fixed concept; Craig Martin’s (2022) views on the entanglement of discourses with ideologies; Laclau & Mouffe theory of discourses creating subjects as inherently political; McMahan’s (2007) understanding of Buddhist modernism, or the reuse of Buddhist ideas in the remix+/- model developed by Walker (2025).

Niccolò Brandodoro, Sapienza University of Rome  
Maria Fallica, Sapienza University of Rome

**Christian Theatre in Early Modern Europe.  
Cultural Transformations, Pedagogical Strategies, Theological Renewal**

In the early modern period, the theatre became an important medium for articulating Christian thought, sometimes contesting, others affirming, yet others reforming traditional theological categories. From the sixteenth century onward, drama did not merely adapt ancient models; rather, it functioned as a site in which doctrines of grace, conversion, authority, and Scripture were explored, embodied, and reconfigured. This ambivalent process generated new cultural configurations, and theatrical practice contributed directly to religious reforms and confessional identities.

The panel aims to unravel the extent to which the anthropological and soteriological confessional debates that divided early modern Europe following the sixteenth-century Reformations reshaped the value and role of theatre. Theatre emerged as a space where different theological positions could be enacted, negotiated, and contested through the dialogue, confrontation, and interplay of theatrical masks.

The panel aims to identify and articulate different configurations of the relationship between Christianity and theatrical practices through key case studies from the modern era. These include, but are not limited to, 1) the Italian “sacre rappresentazioni”, 2) the Erasmian perspective that conceived Scripture as a divine comedy enacted by Christ for humanity; 3) Marguerite of Navarre’s theological dramas; 4) the Jesuits’ pedagogical theatre rooted in the Spiritual Exercises, and 5) seventeenth-century debates in France surrounding Jansenism and its theology of grace, which influenced the development of theatre in Racine.

By tracing these diverse reactions and configurations, the panel seeks to show how the relationship between theatre and Christianity evolved in early modern Europe, highlighting continuities, ruptures, and the negotiation of doctrinal, ethical, and aesthetic concerns. Contributions are welcomed from scholars in the history of Christianity, early modern history, literature, philosophy, art history, and the performing arts, fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue on how theatre functioned as a medium for religious, pedagogical and cultural innovation.

Kristina Eiviler, University of Zurich  
Katja Valaskivi, University of Helsinki  
Beth Singler, University of Zurich, Switzerland

### **AI, Robots, and Religion in the Asia- Pacific: Rethinking Agency, Presence, and the Other-than-Human**

This panel explores the entanglements of AI, robotics, and religion in the Asia-Pacific, with particular attention to Japan and China, whilst welcoming contributions from across the wider region. By shifting analytical focus away from Euro-American contexts, the panel foregrounds de-centered and de-westernized perspectives on how religious life is being reshaped through emerging technologies and digital media.

The academic study of religion has long demonstrated that religion is inseparable from material forms and media technologies (Mauss, 1935; Geertz, 1973; Ong, 1982). From ritual objects, sacred images, writing and print to broadcast media, ChatBots, and TikTok – technologies have always mediated relations between humans and the other-than-human. Contemporary developments in AI and robotics, commonly described as “autonomous agents” that “speak,” “listen,” “understand,” and interact with users, bring into the forefront fundamental questions of the nature of the human and non-human agency (Gell, 1998; Latour, 2005), other-than-human presence (Harvey, 2005), and religious authority (Cheong, 2013). This panel explores how emerging technologies and digital media act as bearers of religious imagination and presence in the Asia-Pacific region. For example, in which distinctive cosmologies, cultural imaginaries, and religious histories are entanglements of emerging technologies, digital media, and religions embedded? How do robots and AI systems participate in religious worlds as social, moral, and spiritual actors? How does digital media mitigate the sacred presence in Asia and the Pacific? This panel approaches emerging technologies not simply as technical systems, but as discursive and imaginative formations. Religion is understood as continually constituted through discourse, practice, and representation rather than given in advance (Asad, 1993). Thus, we welcome contributions addressing, but not limited to, the following topics and approaches:

#### *Lived religion and ritual practice*

- Ethnographic case studies of AI, robots, and digital media in everyday religious practice;

- Ritual use of robots, automated systems, or AI-driven interfaces in temples, churches, shrines, and other religious settings;
- Embodied, sensory, and affective dimensions of interacting with emerging technologies (AI and robots).

*Agency, presence, and the other-than-human*

- Reconfigurations of human, non-human, and other-than-human agency in religious contexts under the impact of emerging technologies and digital media;
- AI, robots, and digital systems as mediators or manifestations of divine, ancestral, or spiritual presence;
- Ontological questions of animacy, personhood, and relationality in Asia-Pacific religious traditions.

*Media, mediation, and representation*

- AI-generated sermons, scriptures, images, or religious guidance;
- Digital media, social platforms, and algorithmic systems in religious communication and outreach;
- Mediation of the sacred through audio-visual, interactive, and immersive technologies, also including film, video, and graphic novels.

*Cultural imaginaries and discourses*

- Religious metaphors and vocabularies in AI and robotics discourse in Asia-Pacific regions;
- Eschatological, utopian, or apocalyptic imaginaries surrounding emerging technologies in Asia-Pacific region;
- Comparative perspectives on technological futures within Asia-Pacific religious worlds.

We particularly encourage empirically grounded contributions that explore lived religion (Primiano, 1995) across everyday and digital contexts, drawing on perspectives from religious studies, anthropology, media studies, Asian and Asia-Pacific Studies, sociology, theology, philosophy, history, and related fields.

Zhenguo Lai (賴振國), Lumbini Buddhist University

**Kōan and Zen Pathology:  
Institutional Pedagogy, Post-Satori Cultivation, and Religious Risk Management**

Studies of Zen Buddhism often emphasize sudden awakening (satori) as the defining moment of religious transformation, treating enlightenment as the terminus of practice. Far less attention has been given to what follows awakening—particularly to the pathologies, instabilities, and systemic risks that emerge in sustained post-satori practice. This paper addresses a significant gap in Zen scholarship by examining so-called Zen pathologies (zenbyō) through the lens of post-satori training, institutional pedagogy, and the management of religious risk within monastic contexts.

The absence of sustained scholarly attention to post-awakening pathology obscures a fundamental dimension of Zen institutional life: how monasteries and training systems identify,

interpret, and remediate religious complications following initial insight. This gap is significant precisely because many traditions invest considerable effort over centuries developing sophisticated diagnostic and corrective frameworks—a commitment that suggests awakening is not terminal but generative, inaugurating new phases of practice that require institutional scaffolding, expert oversight, and systematic correction.

The paper draws primarily on the diagnostic and pedagogical innovations of Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769), arguably the most systematic theorist of Zen pathology in the Rinzai tradition. Through close analysis of Zen instructional writings, monastic training records, and diagnostic discourses, combined with phenomenological attention to practice, the study reveals how awakening in Zen was never conceived as self-sufficient. Rather, it functioned as a fragile turning point demanding sustained cultivation, intensive supervision, and deliberate remediation.

The central argument is that post-awakening difficulties—including fixation on initial insight, somatic imbalance, emotional instability, performative certainty, and distorted ethical conduct—were not treated as peripheral anomalies or individual failings. Instead, they were understood as structural risks inherent to intensive Zen practice itself and were systematically addressed through institutionalized corrective mechanisms: graded kōan curricula calibrated to test and deepen insight; rigorous interview systems (dokusan) functioning as diagnostic tools; embodied disciplines designed to integrate realization into lived experience; and explicit diagnostic discourses articulating deviation, imbalance, and remediation.

The innovation lies in reconceptualizing Zen pathology not as a marginal medical or psychological phenomenon, but as a religious-technical concept embedded within sophisticated pedagogical systems. This framework reveals how religious traditions develop internal technologies to manage the risks generated by their own transformative practices—a dynamic often rendered invisible by romanticized or event-centered accounts of spiritual awakening.

The paper integrates multiple evidentiary sources: Hakuin's own diagnostic writings on zenbyō; classical Rinzai training manuals and kōan curricula; dokusan dialogues as records of pastoral intervention and risk assessment; and comparative analysis with other Buddhist traditions' approaches to post-awakening complications.

The study contributes across several registers. For Buddhist Studies, it challenges the "sudden awakening model" that has dominated both popular and scholarly discourse, redirecting attention to the protracted, institutionally-mediated work of post-satori consolidation. For Religious Studies more broadly, it provides conceptual and empirical resources for understanding how religious institutions develop quality-control mechanisms, institutional authority, disciplinary procedures, and risk management systems—dynamics crucial to institutional religious life yet often overlooked in phenomenologically-oriented scholarship. For comparative religion, it demonstrates that sophisticated diagnostic frameworks for religious pathology emerged in Buddhist contexts well before modern psychology, offering alternative conceptual vocabularies for theorizing religious experience, dysfunction, and restoration. For contemporary Zen communities, the paper offers historical grounding for systematic post-awakening training and legitimacy for diagnostic frameworks grounded in classical sources.

By foregrounding post-satori pathology as a legitimate scholarly concern and tracing how Zen institutions developed technologies to address it, this study illuminates dimensions of religious life often rendered invisible by models privileging singular transformative moments. It demonstrates that spiritual maturation in Zen requires not merely a moment of breakthrough but sustained institutional support, systematic correction, and lifelong cultivation—understanding awakening not as an endpoint but as the beginning of a far more demanding and subtle journey.

Tiziano Bielli, University of Lucerne  
Stefania Palmisano, University of Turin

### **Contributing to Shaping Diverse Societies: The Civic Engagement of Religious Organisations in European Countries**

In the European scenario religions can be a source of both social cohesion and conflict. In this panel, we welcome contributions pertaining activities of civic engagement of religious organisations in European countries, investigated from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Organisations such as churches, mosques and temples continue to engage in a wide range of social areas such as feeding the needy, supporting the helpless, offering support and generally working for the ‘common good’, interpreted in different – and at times conflicting – ways. By providing support beyond their own group to potentially all, religious organisations respond in a resilient manner to social crises and strive to make lasting changes in society and politics. Critically examining what kind of contribution religious organisations want to make to European societies is vital not only for academics, but even more so for policymakers, politicians and ordinary citizens.

In the light of this, the panel aims to comparatively discuss religious organisations civic engagement and their rationales for social activism. What exactly are the reasons that some religious organisations engage socially while others attend to their own group only? And what kind of tangible outcomes does their civic engagement yield? Here, we will also be interested in exploring the relationship – more or less conflictual – between the civically engaged activities of religious organizations and the socio-political system in which they operate. Such activities may challenge the context in which they are embedded and thus be ‘revolutionary’, or they may accept the status quo without attempting to change it radically.

By civic engagement, we understand individual or collective actions, implemented in public arenas in concert with other people or organisations, with the purpose of contributing to the shaping of lives of individuals and communities. In this regard, civic engagement can range from informal neighbourhood support to political demonstrations against social injustice. The panel invites qualitative and quantitative case studies studying motivations and effects of religious civic engagement. Methodological and theoretical considerations are welcome to critically reflect to scope and concepts of this field of research.

László Fosztó, Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, Cluj-Napoca  
Kinga Povedák, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Szeged

### **Embodied Lived Religion: Faith, Practice, and Everyday Life in Roma Communities**

When Thomas Csordas introduced the paradigm of ‘embodiment’ in the early 1990s, he aimed to shift attention from the body as an object of cultural inscription to the body as the pre-reflective ground of perception, experience, and religious practice. Revisiting this concept is timely today, both empirically and theoretically, as new approaches—such as lived religion, affect theory, material religion, and studies of religious infrastructures—invite a reassessment of its analytical strengths and limitations. Our panel seeks to explore how embodied religious experience is shaped by changing social, political, and mediated environments in globalized, post-socialist, and minoritized contexts, with particular attention to cases from Roma communities. In this panel, we foreground embodied experience, examining how religious knowledge, belonging, healing, and

moral authority are produced and negotiated in the everyday worship of Roma communities across ecclesial and congregational contexts.

We welcome submissions that engage (but are not limited to) the following themes:

How embodiment is central to Roma religious praxis and is enacted through corporeal and sensory modalities: sounding bodies (singing, prayer, rhythm, and dance), gesture, touch, and the sensory affordances of ritual spaces and objects.

How the political economy of religious institutions impacts local Roma communities, shapes the expressive forms of everyday religiosity, and interacts with embodied religious faith and practice.

How the healing and therapeutic effects of embodied religious practices have manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic and in post-pandemic contexts.

How mediated representations and embodied forms of religion are intertwined, and how they interact to shape contemporary religious experience in local Roma communities.

Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Jörg von Alvensleben, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

### **Doing Theology in Antiquity: Practices, Genres and Contexts**

To engage in theological reflection, writing and discourse is a core dimension of intellectual religion in Antiquity. Without taking it into account, we cannot achieve a comprehensive understanding of ancient religion. The panel invites enquiry into how we can study ancient theology as historians of religions and how this study enlarges the present-day horizon of our discipline. We understand theology as a complex of epistemic practices developed and performed by actors who speak and write about the divine and its relationship with the world and mankind in distinct socio-historical contexts whose cults and religious *imaginaire* in turn create and transport conceptions of the divine in a continuum that reaches from implicit to explicit representations. As players in these contexts, ancient theologians engage with contemporary conceptions of the divine and leave their mark on the religious landscape of their day and beyond, as they take part in religious conflicts, use theology to cope with shifts in the religious landscape or craft terminologies and conceptual schemes that partly endure to this day. Focusing on a broad time frame, from the Presocratics to Late Antiquity, we will explore a range of questions to understand how theology worked as a socio-cultural practice in ancient contexts: How can we theorise theology from a history of religions perspective (e.g., discussing notions of implicit versus explicit theology)? What epistemic practices and genres do theologians use in Antiquity (e.g., dialogues, aphorisms, commentaries, systematic treatises, poetry), and what are the aims and specific constraints linked with them? How is theology related to cultic settings and how do ancient intellectuals use theology to transform or reinforce religious practices or boundaries? To what extent do actors outside the philosophical schools or networks of ecclesiastical theologians engage in theological discourses, either as consumers or perhaps even as active producers of theology? Building on the answers to these questions, we will then discuss how the results can be extended to the study of religions beyond Antiquity.

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

The Scandinavian and Baltic countries share important historical developments and cultural features. With the exception of Lithuania, all have historically been dominated by Lutheran state Churches, but all are today highly secularized, even compared to most other Western countries. In the last couple of decades, however, we have begun to see a renegotiation of the role of religion in society all over the West to an extent that has made some scholars speak of a post-secular condition. Important factors are immigration, which has made especially the Scandinavian countries into some of the most multi-religious in the world, and an economic development where state and municipal welfare commitments are put under increasing pressure, which opens a space for civil society organizations – not least religious congregations – to take on larger roles in building trust, security, and social cohesion, often in cooperation with municipalities and state bodies. This situation generates some confusion regarding boundaries between the state and civil society in general, and between the secular state and religious congregations, in particular. Qualified and up-to-date knowledge about the rapidly changing religious civil society is therefore in high demand among decision-makers and civil servants.

Another cultural characteristic of the region is that nature and outdoor activities are held in high regard, and that environmental questions, as well as topics concerning physical and mental health, are generally considered important. However, there are also important differences, which make comparison and exchange between researchers in the region particularly fruitful. The Baltic countries have a recent history of national liberation, followed by joining EU and NATO, which makes the issue of national identity for such small ethnic populations topical in civil society and political discourse. Because of the cultural importance of nature, discourse concerning national identity is often connected with environmental protection on local and national levels, but not to the same extent with global environmental challenges and climate change.

The relationship with nature is connected with national identity in the Scandinavian countries too, but in somewhat different ways. National identity issues are generally less accentuated, especially in Sweden, which has no living memory of war and occupation. Instead, global environmental issues are high on the agenda. This is noticeable, for instance, in Sweden's former state Church, which is very outspoken on environmental and climate issues. This may be contrasted with the situation on the Eastern side of the Baltic Sea, where environmental issues have become topical for religious groups only recently.

The Scandinavian Churches share a history of colonial oppression against indigenous populations. The ongoing reconciliation process with the Sami people is often connected with environmental issues. This is an area where local environmental protection is connected to national/ethnic identity in Scandinavia in a way that is somewhat reminiscent of the situation in the Baltic states.

The Baltic and Scandinavian countries also share many important environmental concerns, due to our geographical vicinity and similarities in climate and economic structure. These issues include forestry, mining, Arctic fossil fuel extraction (and the geopolitical issues connected to that), and the ongoing ecological collapse of the Baltic Sea.

How we relate to our natural environment is increasingly becoming an existential issue, both because land-use has effects on climate and environment and because a higher degree of regional self-sufficiency may be crucial for our ability to face crises and wars also in the shorter term. Religious congregations are, in most societies, an important part of cultural resilience in times of crisis. There are thus important overlaps between the changing roles of religion in civil society and

the challenges related to a transition to a sustainable economy and culture. The purpose of this panel is to shed light on these overlaps from various angles.

Moumita Dhar, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi

**Interpreting Religious Visuals and Literary Narratives:  
Mobility, Interaction, and Shifting Perspectives**

This panel examines the ways in which religious visuals and literary narratives are characterized, interpreted, reinterpreted, and changed as they traverse environments influenced by institutions, ideology, migration, communication, and transportation. Religious meanings change as stories move across geographical locations, cultural contexts, and historical moments shaped by shifting communication and transportation methods rather than being fixed within texts or visuals. Contributions that explore the ways in which religious visuals and literary traditions such as myths, scriptures, petroglyphs, inscriptions, images, paintings, monuments, ritual objects, architectural forms, and digitally mediated narratives acquire new meanings as they travel through networks of pilgrimages, trade routes, imperial expansions, diasporic movements, and media environments are encouraged by the panel. As narratives move, they encounter diverse audiences, interpretive frameworks, and aesthetic sensibilities, resulting in reinterpretation, translation, adaptation, syncretism, or contestation. Special emphasis is placed on the connection between interpretive change and material mobility. How are memory, authority, and devotional practices altered by migration, relocation, and advancement? What effects do the transitions have on how religious narratives are received and how legitimate they are? How do texts and visuals work together to support or contradict prevailing religious interpretations? The panel promotes discussion among academics from various fields, including media studies, anthropology, archaeology, art history, and religious studies, by emphasizing interpretation in both literary and visual domains. It presents different viewpoints on religion as a dynamic area of meaning that is constantly being reshaped by human experience, movement, and mediation. *Keywords:* Visuals, Literature, Narratives, Interpretation, Mobility, Shifting Perspectives.

Kerem Görkem Arslan, University of Strasbourg, Interdisciplinary Network of Pagan Studies (INOPS)

Samim Akgönül, University of Strasbourg, INOPS

**Pagan Studies: (Re)Enchanting the Old Ways**

Contemporary Paganism serves as a sophisticated analytical prism through which the reconstruction, negotiation, and legitimation of religious traditions can be scrutinized under the specific pressures of late modernity. Positioned at the complex crossroads of heritage production, spiritual experimentation, and the assertion of ancestral or indigenous continuity, Pagan movements inherently challenge the conventional taxonomies within the study of religion. Consequently, Pagan Studies functions as more than a mere empirical sub-field; it constitutes a critical lens through which broader inquiries into the nature of tradition, modernity, and religious identity are actively re-evaluated.

Arising from a robust dialogue between folklore, anthropology, sociology, and political science, Pagan Studies has evolved into a resolutely interdisciplinary domain defined by methodological pluralism and theoretical reflexivity. This panel, convened under the Interdisciplinary Network of Pagan Studies (INOPS), aims to further calibrate the field as one defined not by a static object of inquiry, but by a shared set of analytical preoccupations. We place particular emphasis on the ways in which Pagan identities intersect with discourses of ethnicity, gender, ecology, and indigeneity, alongside their deep-seated genealogical entanglements with Western esotericism and broader indigenous traditions.

Rather than soliciting purely descriptive accounts, the panel foregrounds the critical interrogation of methodological frameworks specific to the comparative study of contemporary Paganisms. We invite contributions that navigate the challenges of interdisciplinary research and engage with the conceptual boundaries between Paganism, esotericism, and indigenous religions.

In particular, we welcome papers that address:

- **Methodological Reconstructions:** Analytical approaches to the reinvention of ritual and custom, with a focus on the reflexive negotiation of authenticity, lineage, and historical continuity.
- **Legitimacy and the Public Sphere:** The processes of recognition and visibility through which Pagan actors navigate religious, secular, and heritage-oriented public arenas.
- **Intersectional Configurations:** The lived experiences and social positioning of Pagan practitioners, examining how identity is mediated through gender, ethnicity, ecological commitment, and political belonging.

By synthesizing empirically grounded research with rigorous theoretical insight, this panel seeks to cultivate a sustained dialogue within the INOPS network and to consolidate Pagan Studies as a vital, comparative, and critical discipline within the contemporary study of religion.

Lidia Guzy, University College Cork, Ireland  
Stefano Beggiora, Ca'Foscari University, Italy  
Uwe Skoda, Aarhus University

### **From South Asia to Latin America: The Veneration of Mother Earth as Eco-Cosmology and Political Dynamic**

This open panel discusses the cross-cultural veneration of Mother Earth as eco-cosmological ontology and political dynamic spanning from South Asia to Latin America. In South Asia, vernacular and regional goddesses represent the foundation of Hindu religious traditions (see Wilke/Michaels/Vogelsanger 1994) and symbolise the veneration of Mother Earth. They are called *Devi* (goddess) or also *Ma* (mother). The *devi* or *ma* is omnipotent and associated with the idea of *shakti*, an Indian theory of religious power (see Wadley 1975). This power concept is of an ambivalent character as the goddess has a creative and destructive power at the same time. In indigenous Adivasi India the local goddesses show themselves in an aniconic form: as stones, as quarries, as eruptions of the earth, as waterfalls, rivers or as other natural phenomena displaying an eco-cosmological worldview (Guzy/Skoda/Beggiora 2024). But also within urban sacred places the worship of the goddess has an important impact on the life of her believers (see: Kinsley 1985; Wilke/Michaels/Vogelsanger 1994;; Bakker/Entwistle 1983).

In Latin America, the veneration of Pacha Mama, Mother Earth (Madre Tierra) deriving from indigenous Andean context emerges as a new political and environmental ontology of sacred Rights of Nature marking a landmark of alternative sustainability and wellbeing models being implemented as critique of the hypocritical western model of progress and universal wellbeing.

The panel invites papers addressing the polyvalent roles of goddesses worship as the veneration of Mother Earth and their socio-political dynamic in South Asia and Latin America.

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Ullrich R. Kleinhempel, University of the Free State | University of Münster

#### **Religion and Film: Films as Medium of Aesthetics of Religion**

The presentation of religion in film can be regarded as a form of cultural reception of religion in its specific forms and traditions in society. This may be distinguished from documentary films on religions, and from religious films in the service of promoting specific religions. Films may present a religion, or specific spirituality based on it, on the level of content, in systematic and historical aspects, of symbolism, and of aesthetics. They can provide experiential access to the realm of a specific religion, atmospherically and aesthetically, and incite a viewer to delve into this semiotic realm, to attain deepened understanding. Theoretically, such films can fulfill a role in the approach of 'Aesthetics of Religion', by providing access to the modes of perception, experience, feeling, imagery, and symbolism, even aesthetics and values, of a specific religion. Examples of such films have attained international recognition and prizes. Examples are: 'Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?' (1989), a South Korean film, written and produced by Bae Yong-kyun, professor in Seoul, and long-time practitioner of Zen. More recently, 'The Island (Остров) (2006), directed by Pavel Lungin and written by Dmitry Sobolev, depicts motifs and the spirituality of Russian Orthodox mystical tradition of Hesychasm, several levels. Its analysis serves as introduction to the 'Aesthetics of Religion' in the medium of film, on several levels. The success and appreciation of such films, may be attributed to the specific functions they fulfill in this regard. The panel invites contributions on this realm.

Evelina Juchnevičiūtė, Vytautas Magnus University  
Milda Ališauskienė, Vytautas Magnus University  
Rosita Garškaitė-Antonowicz, Vytautas Magnus University  
Gražina Bielousova, Vytautas Magnus University

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

In recent decades, many liberal democracies around the world have experienced a resurgence of religion and its increased prominence in the public sphere. This resurgence of religion has led to a re-evaluation of the long-held belief that modernisation and secularisation are inevitably intertwined, and has stimulated debates surrounding various social, moral and ethical issues, including women's rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, and the status of minority religions. In essence, religion has begun to engage in political contestations and to challenge established power structures.

While the motivations behind these developments vary, religious social actors often reject the secular principles that have traditionally dominated theories of political development. Instead, they promote alternative confessional frameworks, programmes and policy directions. The politicisation of religion refers to instances where religion is invoked in political discourse, while the religionisation of politics refers to religion's influence on political decision-making. These processes can shape public opinion and political decisions, challenging established power structures and liberal democratic assumptions about secular governance, pluralism, democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law.

This session invites papers that explore the different patterns of these processes and their implications for established power structures.

Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban, Institute for the History of Religions, Romanian Academy, Bucharest

### **Angels across Faiths and Cultures: Old Questions, New Approaches**

Intermediary figures between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, angels are not only objects of faith specific to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, but also a transversal theme in the comparative history of religions. The sumptuous diversity of the angelic world has been studied from multiple perspectives regarding its genesis, development, and religious function. Angels (and all the categories of supernatural beings that are their counterparts) constitute a vast territory of intersections, mutations and multiple stratifications that have cultural echoes until modernity, when the power of attraction of celestial beings has resisted attempts at demythologizing: the frightening being of the angel in Rilke's *Elegies*, the *Angelus Novus* from Klee's drawings and the "angel of history" that strangely permeates Benjamin's fragmentary reflections. For research in the history of religions, angels remain essential figures, whether we are discussing their appearance in Judaism, the Qumran manuscripts, the dynamics of Christology and angelology within Christianity, or the angelologies originating in the Quran, as reflected in recent valuable contributions (David Hamidović, *L'insoutenable divinité des anges. Essai historique*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2018; *Inventer les anges de l'Antiquité à Byzance : conception, représentation, perception*, éd. par Delphine Lauritzen, Travaux et mémoires 25/2, Paris 2021; *Les Anges et leurs représentations*, éd. par Laure Darcq, Jean-Baptiste Edart et Élisabeth Pinto-Mathieu, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2025). However, there are still themes that require renewed attention and

methodological diversity. This panel will explore a large variety of issues from theories regarding the genesis of the angelic figure within Judaism to the permanence of the angel as a hermeneutic figure in modernity, passing through the themes of angelic hierarchy, of angels of nations in apocalyptic literature and early Christianity, of angelophanies in the Abrahamic religions and angelic iconography, of magical practices and various forms of worship addressed to angels.

Ionuț Daniel Băncilă, Institute for the History of Religions, Romanian Academy, Bucharest

### **Towards Orthodox Christianity 360: History of Religions and Orthodox Christianities**

As „lived religion,” Orthodox Christianity, in all its expressions, whose complexity exceeds strictly national categories, is constantly shaped by and is itself shaping the political, social and cultural milieu which it inhabits. This contributes to a plethora of forms, variants and versions of Orthodox Christianity, constantly challenging the abilities of its hierarchical leadership to contain them in the traditional doctrinal, liturgical and ethical confines, or even pushing innovative redescriptions of „Tradition” itself. Topics as diverse as the public image of Orthodox Christianity, its strategies in managing a wide range of secularities, as well as internal critique, its functionalization of spirituality and popular piety, its engaging in the juridical policies and economic market, its social and demographic setting, and not the least, its instrumentalization of a wide range of political regimes, fall under the critical scrutiny religio-historical approach. The aim of the Panel is to bring into discussion the specificity of a religio-historical approach to Orthodox Christianity. The discussion of concrete examples (e.g. the profile of the Erfurt School of the Study of Orthodox Christianity), or perspectives (e.g. materiality of religions, geography of religions, ritual theory, European/Global religious history), as well as important historical processes (e.g. confessionalization, instances of fringe Orthodoxy, and Orthodox occulture) and gaps still to be covered, are herewith warmly encouraged.

Gabriela Cursaru, Vlad Șovărel & Ștefan Lungu,  
Institute for the History of Religions, Romanian Academy, Bucharest

### **A Bucharest School of History of Religions? Religion in 150 Years of Romanian Humanities, from B.P. Hasdeu and Moses Gaster to Andrei Pleșu and Andrei Oișteanu**

A ‘Romanian School of History of religions’, or more properly its further locative Bucharest variety, has first become indicative for scholars of religions on a pan-European map together with the organization and the widespread responses to the first ever Congress for History of Religions held in Eastern Europe in the history of the discipline: 6<sup>th</sup> EASR & IAHR Special Conference initiated and organized in Bucharest by the Romanian Association for the History of Religions on 20-23 September 2006. Just one year before Romania’s accession to European Union, a cultural direction widely embraced by Romanians since before 1848, that 2006 Congress fulfilled a dream of generations of Romanian-born scholars, past and present, who endeavoured, with themes, methods and results as different as in any other European culture, to define religion as the utmost scope of their humanistic work. In reports, articles, reviews, and interviews of many a sort, notably also in Austria, Belgium, Italy, or Switzerland, not only in hundreds of mainstream media instances in Romania, an assortment of individuals, with or without proper guidance, have started to publicly

coin what was only a feeble foresight in the 1980s, when a certain Bucharest-born now Chicago professor Eliade received a Bucharest-educated now Chicago assistant and direct disciple Culianu: a Romanian School – or again, better: a Bucharest School – for History of religions. As important as the passage from one to two may be in humans, two are not already forming a school, neither in history of religions, nor in any aspects of the human animal.

On the contrary, as sediments and overlapping, the wide cultural history of a ‘School’ should perhaps first underline its very character: it is a *school*, viz. an *institution*, or in any case something purely collective, beyond the limits of one single generation or one single luminary, and specifically not afar from institutional awareness, institutional construction, institutional transgenerational life, and institutional effects on the major events in an academic, cultural and public national history and possibly beyond. All this in order to become recognizable.

In Romania this was not the case, at least not the case before the foundation of the Institute for the History of Religions of the Romanian Academy in January/June 2008. Nothing of sort resisted from the singular, ineffective, discontinued and sabotaged efforts of Romanian scholars of religions before WWI. Nothing from Eliade and his peers in the (non-, then fully) fascist interwar and nothing during the long, more sombre string of four dictatorships which *ubi alia* destroyed the elementary idea of proper schools in the humanities, from 1938 to 1989. How is then intellectually workable to speak – as well as to admit and adopt what others spoke – about such a Romanian/Bucharest School, in a discipline which requires a tremendous amount of preparation and manifold resources in order to produce its effects and present its identity, integrity, and character?

How to speak about (the pretention of) a School, when all Romanian-born scholars of religion know so well – or should instruct themselves according to simple facts, obnubilated as they at times may look – that one towering, global, distant, and dead scholar as Eliade was in 1990 left in Romania not at all a School, but only parochial mimetics seduced mainly by the many mirages of his personal mythologies punctuated by strategic, heavy, and fatal forgetting. He simply left nothing from what a School would certainly require: he not even left his own Bucharest archive of unpublished manuscripts for a Bucharest public domain; he left no major trace of his own Indology and history-of-religions personal library; more impersonally, there were after Eliade in the early 1990s no living scholars in a subtle concatenation with preeminent scholars of the past, local or otherwise – ‘disciples’; nothing from a program of research, viz. an architecture of requirements, a design of tasks to be fulfilled and a model in attacking those urgencies in fulfilling those central knowledge tasks; no institutions like periodicals, specialized academic series, prized libraries with at least 1,000 monographs on each historic religions of Europe and Asia, no society of scholars, no local and international reunion of scholars (to say nothing about large international gatherings), and (some will say: especially): no public or private posts and positions in History of religions – nothing. Everything had back then to be built or rebuild from scratch, or more significantly: to be built with a vision *not deriving from commandments of a scholarly past*, because that would have implied as precondition the functioning of *a proper School generating and perpetuating such vision*, supported by connected actions involving more than one scholar (a School is always distinct from a single scholar, no matter how unique his/her type).

Should then all, in Romania and in Europe at least, fully abandon such idea of a Bucharest School as a verifiable entity endowed with a coherent scholarly program and style? Or rather should one desire and expect the construction of such a School *now*, from the ensemble of post-1989 developments in Bucharest? It goes without saying, ‘Bucharest’ as School of History of religions cannot and would not be understood with lesser criteria than we absorbed and refine our common past through the similar Schools of History of religions in say Geneva, Rome, Paris, or Cambridge. Arguably located mostly or by far only in Bucharest – and even in downtown Bucharest only in distinct neighbourhoods – such a School for History of religions as topical knowledge task in the

humanities is full of grand absences and intermittent presences. Knowing the first 200 scholars of Bucharest contributing to such collective construction from the 1848 to day, elaborating on the works of IHR's researchers editing and interpreting many of their predecessors since 2008, and of RAHR scholars editing and interpreting many of their predecessors since 1996, this open panel proposes a compact and coherent discussion on what a small, peripheral, post-imperial scientific culture could and could not bring to its matrix and to the world.

We would thus like to analyse anew, in a better global scholarly context and from new sources and vistas, especially the works of Moses Gaster (1856-1939), Mircea Eliade (1907-1986 – but only with firm unpublished sources, leaving aside all repetitive and abusive vulgate), Ioan Petru Culianu (1950-1991, *ditto*) and Arion Roşu (1924-2007), up to the scholarly works of Andrei Pleşu and Andrei Oişteanu (both born in 1948 and once colleagues/friends of Culianu), the two senior founders of the Institute for the History of Religions of the Romanian Academy in the same Bucharest.

Scholars from all intellectual traditions willing to contribute are welcome. As far as we know, the topic has never received specialized and/or collective scrutiny, despite a surfeit of local mentions at times, ranging from nationalistic overtones to juvenile enthusiasms of future diaspora and other dispersions. All types of verdicts and conclusions should test the fictitious or solid character of such a School, with all due critical acumen, openness and fairness. Instead of monumentalizing some more parochial stances, the panel (and ongoing public discussion around this very Congress) will try to offer steady and viable conclusions, however *modest*.

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### **Antiquity: one, two, or none?**

When Friedrich Schlegel published his groundbreaking *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (Heidelberg 1808), together with some early professional Indologists and comparative religion scholars he precisely promoted a *Begründung der Altert[h]umskunde*, a program and subtitle already excised from the early French translation (1837) and then from articles, books, encyclopaedias, university curricula, departments, divisions of fields or disciplines within the humanities and all public intellectual life worldwide. As Indian, the Indian Antiquity remained something else than an Antiquity: a subaltern *geography*, not a foundational time-*forte*, producing an incongruent alliance of a cultural space (derogatory) with a cultural time (dominant). This defiance strongly persisted for the next two centuries and even nowadays (!) remains graspable in understanding the antiquities (Antiquity: *two*) as Classics and Oriental/Asian Studies | Études classiques et orientales etc., forgetting episodes when some of the best of our forefathers, as Louis de La Vallée-Poussin and Franz Cumont, offered together, for the same students once in Gand, classes of Sanskrit and Greek, and this *not* as 'Indo-European' linguistic material, but as a genuine support for a tentative unified Antiquity. In retrospective, *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* is a quarrel of some Ancients with a few Moderns, looking increasingly parochial in a fuller history of humanity if not thoroughly compared with the heritage of Antiquity as elaborated, filtered and unified in Indic traditions from the 14<sup>th</sup> century up to the same 17<sup>th</sup> century (Nicholson 2010). Even if Joseph Desguignes finally identified Sandracottos as Candragupta Maurya at a time when precritical Immanuel Kant taught the geography of Tibet, the study of Asia, first and foremost the study of religions in Asia, and chiefly the study of Asian Buddhism as the single major agency in making Asia Asiatic (Silk 2007, Skilling 2009), a unity endowed through Buddhism with an Asian Antiquity, a faultily divide still largely persists. When Edgar Quinet famously coined *La*

*Renaissance orientale* (Paris 1840), despite wide-reaching echoes for more than a century up to Raymond Schwab and his best reader E.W. Said, then to Wilhelm Halbfass, the scholarly world eventually learned this ‘Oriental Renaissance’ – albeit extraordinaire in scope, endeavour, and acumen – failed altogether. Numerous scholars of note misjudged it from the start (typically including a certain Eliade: in his definitive [Yoga of 1954](#)) for the reason that they all forgot: a successful Renaissance requires an accredited Antiquity and remains strictly impossible without it. Two centuries of professional Indology (at least since Eugène Burnouf and Christian Lassen [in 1826](#)) best provided an Antiquity, yet Indologists for a very long time also failed to convince their peer classicists that Indian Antiquity is as foundational, as classic and as central as any. Hence the need to build a unified Altertumskunde through a new Altertumswissenschaft (Antiquity: *one*) (more in Ciurtin [2008](#), [2015](#), [2017-2018-2019](#)). In this setting, such macro-problems may be considered the natural sequel of choosing the theme of the 6<sup>th</sup> EASR | IAHR Special Conference in Bucharest as *Religious History of Europe and Asia* – twenty years later.

This open panel would like to address these and related questions which ostensibly cover the whole historical gamut of the academic study of religions in all its varieties, fields, languages, methods, and insights. Participants may opt for a large indeed assortment of topics, which would include, but are not in any way limited to:

1. Case studies of specific instances of communication between South Asia and the Mediterranean world (and possibly the religious cultures in between) which may prove the homogeneousness of a unified Antiquity as practiced and perceived by its agents (an example from December 2025: Sidebotham, Ast, Bergmann, Bhandare, Rądkowska, Strauch, Popławski, Castro on [Indians in Roman Berenike](#)).
2. Analysis of the three decades of the Gāndhārī Revolution, bursting of manuscript, epigraphic, literary, religious, social and political revelations, as the most substantial recent discovery for a (South) Asian/Buddhist/unified Antiquity.
3. Demographic, statistical, and material comparisons of ‘Classical’ Antiquity and (South) Asian Antiquity before CE and their worth in defining a unified Antiquity (e.g. Pāṭaliputra, Magadhan capital of the Nanda and Maurya empires, “may have been the largest city of the ancient world”, [Bronkhorst 2011: 12](#)).
4. Early theories and instances – reciprocal and/or comparative – of classifying the ‘barbarian’ as the limit of Antiquity. Their subsequent role in preserving the ‘purity’ of Classical Antiquity during the colonial era *vs.* the impact of the discovery of Sanskrit in Europe.
5. General classification of religions in (South) Asian and European Antiquity and the impact the category of monotheism has on generating and/or preserving a mono-Antiquity.
6. The historico-religious category of transmigration and its potential function in defining a unified Antiquity.
7. Merits, limits, and strategies of improving the theories of an ‘Axial Age’ as a half-successful explanation, half-fiasco of comprehending a unified Antiquity.
8. Case studies of scholars, from the Schlegels to very contemporary research projects, aiming at the envisioning of a single, unified, global Antiquity, irrespective of their starting point (India, Greece, *et c.*), methods, or results.

Finally, if the answer to the grand question *Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?* ([Le Goff 2014](#)) (still) is affirmative, this discussion would benefit from contributions exploring how all ‘ages’ following the closure of an Antiquity progressively convert into ‘middle’ ages (with ‘medieval’ becoming as quasi-void as its obsolete ternary Christian model) as well as from investigations on

the ongoing fusion or abolition of all 'premodern' periodization as simply *premodern* (Antiquity: *none*) – and now close to full irrelevance for the all-pervading presentism of LLMs and AI.