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**European Association for the Study of Religions conference 2023,  
September 4-8, Vilnius**

*Religio*. 2024, vol. 32, iss. 1, pp. 229-232

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-38106>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79957>

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Access Date: 14. 06. 2024

Version: 20240606

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## *European Association for the Study of Religions conference 2023, September 4–8, Vilnius*

ANDREJ KAPCÁR

One of the most important conferences on religions, that of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), already in its 20<sup>th</sup> year, took place between September 4 – 8, 2023, in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Organized by the Lithuanian Society for the Study of Religion and Vilnius University, this huge event accommodated more than 600 active participants from all around the world. The chosen theme was the relationship between religion and technology, seen by the organizers as an often neglected topic deserving of more academic interest, particularly in light of the increased integration of religious movements into the modern, digital world.

The annual EASR conference, undoubtedly one of the biggest and most important international conferences on the study of religions, included some 600 participants, even after numerous cancellations, with total attendance in excess of 1,000 people. With an audience so numerous, the theme of Religion vi-a-vis technology was well chosen, as it accommodated the interests of researchers from a wide range of research fields. Lectures included insights from many different areas, ranging from historical and literary research, through anthropology and media studies, to cognitive studies and the natural sciences.

The conference itself was spread over five days, during which 10 sessions of lectures were presented. Each session consisted of up to 15 parallel panels, and each panel consisted of at least 3 presentations. It was therefore impossible to attend all lectures of individual interest, and compromises had to be made. Each of the conference days also included one keynote lecture, which did not strategically overlap any of the panels and as such was easily accessible for everyone interested. The imposing building of the Radisson Blue Hotel Lietuva, located in the heart of the city, was chosen as the venue for the event and was easily accessed, either on foot, or by public transport.



*Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 32/1, 2024, 229-232.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-38106>

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The keynote lectures, the “headliners” of the conference, took place in the largest room of the venue, the appropriately named Alpha room. Each day a different expert in their respective field presented the unique (and to the delight of the audience, sometimes humorous, or eccentric) results of their own research.

On the first day, the keynote lecture, titled “Technology Before and After Monotheism,” was given by Bronislaw Szerszynski, a Professor of Sociology at Lancaster University, United Kingdom. Szerszynski took us on a sensory journey, through an original blend of dramatic narrative and surreal visuals, which brought this presentation almost into the realm of an artistic, audiovisual experience. In his performance of the spoken voice, music and animation, he aimed to present humanity’s changing relationship to technology in a mythological form, as it might be told in the future by an unknown being.

The keynote lecture of the second day, titled “Memory Machines: Material Frontiers of Religion, Conversion, and Violence in Viking-Age Scandinavia,” was given by Neil Price, a Professor of Archaeology at Uppsala University, Sweden and a leading expert on the study of the Viking Age. His presentation focused on the funerary material culture of the so-called Viking Age of Scandinavia, c. 750-1050 CE, during a time of complex social, political and religious transformations in society. The mortuary practices were presented as technological mechanisms for perpetuating the social memory of the time.

The third keynote lecture, titled “Novel Fields and Technological Spaces in Digital Religion Research: Digital Hinduism and Video Games”, presented by Xenia Zeiler, a Professor of South Asian Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland, addressed the increasingly popular question of digital religions. The lecture itself consisted of two major parts – the former focusing on the importance of digital spaces in reconstructing contemporary Hindu beliefs and practices, while the latter delved deeper into the phenomena of (Indian) video games as an innovative medium for potentially applying novel approaches to digital religion research.

On the fourth day, the keynote lecture, titled “Blowing it up at Burning Man. Religion, Technology and Ritual in the Age of Authenticity”, was presented by François Gauthier, a Professor of Religious Studies at the Department of Social Sciences of the Université de Fribourg, Switzerland. As the title suggests, Gauthier’s socio-anthropological research focused on the iconic cultural event held annually in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, the Burning Man festival. Even though not explicitly a religious event, the religious/spiritual dimension of the festival is vastly present throughout its duration in a non-dogmatic, individualistic way. To deal with this atypical research situation, Gauthier suggested (in his own words) a radically dif-

ferent perspective, one that does not define religion as a differentiated sphere, but rather applies the approach of Marcel Mauss, and understands religion as a fundamental and inseparable part of social phenomena.

On the fifth day the keynote speaker was Jana Valtrová, an Assistant Professor at the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, with the topic “Technologies of Cross-Cultural (Mis)Communication: Medieval Euro-Asian Encounters and “a religion””. Her presentation focused on the effects of cross-cultural (mis)communication during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, between European and Asian cultures. On the basis of letters from Franciscan and Dominican missionaries describing their interactions with the expanding Mongol empire, important images of the “religions of Others” were presented. The task of promoting Christianity was often challenged by different natural, social, and cultural conditions, to which the friars had to adapt *ad hoc*, leading to unique (and often humorous) (mis)communications and misunderstandings between the affected parties.

In contrast to the keynote lectures, it was only possible to attend a very limited number of session and panel lectures; therefore, writing a general summary of these many varied presentations is impossible. Nevertheless, I can say that the quality of the panel lectures I attended was exceptional, and that, by extrapolation, the quality of many of the other panel presentations was almost certainly very good. Furthermore, the offer of presentations to choose from was enormous, these possibly covering every aspect of research involving both technology and religion, be it from the perspectives of, among others, ecology, transcultural communication, cultural heritage, all the major religions and religious movements, new age movements, politics, sociology, art, psychology, and contemporary societal issues. In addition, the benefit of getting to know researchers from all around the world who might be approaching the topic of your interest from a different perspective and presenting possibly new insights was the proverbial ‘icing on the cake’.

In spite of the huge scale of the conference, the organizational team consisting of tens of researchers, students and volunteers ensured that the event ran smoothly in almost all respects – from the registration of participants on the first day, through the provision of coffee breaks and refreshments and the distribution of promotional materials, to such details as navigating attendees to the rooms with the lectures. Whenever technical glitches occurred – the inevitable problems encountered at any major conference – they were resolved both speedily and efficiently. Overall, the organization of EASR 2023 was truly excellent.

During short breaks, a variety of beverages as well as fruit and finger-foods were provided. The lunches were rich in choice, offering vegetarian,



vegan and non-vegan (which is slowly becoming a rarity at this kind of events) options in buffet form. Lunch breaks, in particular, became a favorite time for networking, as well as for both professional and casual conversation.

On the first day of the conference, a reception was held at the Old City Hall, after which the meeting continued in the more informal atmosphere of the many bars and restaurants in the city center. On the third day, a conference dinner and networking party took place at Vilnius' iconic pub/cultural center known as Kablys (The Hook), where, besides the complementary drinks and sweet/savory snacks, we enjoyed a lecture about the historical and artistic background of the building, and its importance in the development of the city. The evening concluded with a concert and, later, a dance party, where many of the attendees proved that they are not just professional researchers, but also avid dancers.

Celebrating its 20-year jubilee, the conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (2023) was a well-organized event showcasing a very large number of interesting lectures and presentations from a wide range of researchers, these representing many research fields in contemporary academic discourse. Participants from around the globe got the chance to present their findings, as well as engage in discussions with their peers from different institutions. An event of this scale offers not only a fertile space for academic inspiration, but also, and foremost, an opportunity to build new professional relationships with colleagues from all over the world, potentially culminating in common research projects in the future.