

Mokrý, Matouš; Nemes, Márk

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Religio. 2024, vol. 32, iss. 1, pp. 203-210

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

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-38108>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79951>

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Access Date: 14. 06. 2024

Version: 20240606

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CESAR 2022-2023: Connecting Researchers in Pardubice, Vilnius, and Szeged

MATOUŠ MOKRÝ – MÁRK NEMES¹

The Central European Symposium for the Academic Study of Religion, or CESAR, of which the authors of this text are Steering Board members, was formed in 2021 with the intention of creating an official forum for cross-institutional collaboration between mainly postgraduate scholars involved in religious studies and between their respective departments within the central European region. So far, the network has grown to include seven universities in four countries: Comenius University in Bratislava, Central European University in Vienna, Charles University in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno, the University of Pardubice in Pardubice, Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, and the University of Szeged in Szeged. The organization has forged ties with the Philosophy Departments of The Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Students (DOSZFİTO).

CESAR's first international conference titled *Transformations of Religions in Times of Crises: Spiritual Alienation and Rethinking of Ethics* was held at Pardubice University between 1st and 3rd September 2022. As organizers of the conference, we set three aims for this event. First, to create a platform for young scholars of religious studies to share and discuss their research – in this case, with respect to intersections between various forms of crises and religious life. Second, to strengthen ties and establish new connections between departments of religious studies. Third, to co-opt committed PhD students from the region to further develop the association and work on official recognition from the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR). Towards this goal, another initiative was undertaken, CESAR organizing its own open panel at the 2023 EASR conference in Vilnius between 4th and 8th September 2023. The panel was

¹ The following article was supported by the Hungarian National Eötvös Scholarship's Predoctoral Grant.



titled *Future of the Religious Studies: Theoretical and Methodological Techniques for the New Century* and contained six presentations on diverse cutting-edge approaches to research on religion. Given the overall success of both projects, we decided to organize another international conference in 2023 to continue to fulfil the established goals, this time hosted by the University of Szeged. To reflect upon another crucial theoretical topic in the discipline, we devoted the theme of the conference to the various interplays between religion and the processes of identity building and maintenance, be they social, psychological, or other. The conference, officially titled *Religion and Identity: Intersections of Collective and Private Identity with Religion and Spirituality*, thus took place in the peaceful environs of the southern Hungarian city of Szeged between 20th and 22nd October 2023. The following contribution aims to provide a concise summary of all these three events for a general academic audience.

For our 2022 conference in Pardubice, we received more than thirty applications from seventeen nations. Of these, eighteen papers were accepted, representing eleven nations and thirteen different institutions. These contributions were later divided among eight subsequent thematical panels, to which two keynote lectures were added.

The opening panel titled *Secularization and Politics* started with Péter Boros' (Eötvös Loránd University) captivating paper on Chinese Buddhism and the internal crises in the 19th and the 20th century which led to the redefinition of the place of religion in China. He was followed by Gabriel Paxton (Boston University), who discussed possible interpretations of electoral losses as "crises" in the Christian nationalist right, drawing parallels between the United States and Hungary.

In the second panel *Exclusion of Minorities*, Kristina Mikhalek (Charles University) discussed the issues around conscription in Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. Her contribution focused on the reasons for Tzar Nicholas I's efforts to achieve religious homogeneity and the methods used. The panel's second presenter, Tereza Menšíková (Masaryk University), discussed the ways in which the Indian Dalit community uses popular media to shed light on the negative effects of caste discrimination. The last contributor of the panel, Barbora Šindelářová (University of Pardubice), enlightened the audience on the roots of contemporary discrimination against *Burakumin*, a social group in Japan labeled as "untouchables". Šindelářová's presentation concluded by providing new initiatives for approaching the concept of *kegare* responsible for the inequity, considering local cultural and historical aspects rather than universalizing Western theories.

The first day of the conference concluded with a much-anticipated keynote presentation by András Máté-Tóth, the founder and former head of

the Department of Applied Religious Studies at the University of Szeged. His presentation, *Security and Religion in Today's Central and Eastern Europe: Inspirative Homage to Giddens, Berger, and Inglehart*, introduced us to the issues of the intersections of securitism and religion in central-eastern European contexts while reflecting on related aspects of the current Russian aggression against Ukraine. At the end of the first day, the organizers invited all participants to go on a guided tour of the historical center of the city, led by Jiří Kubeš, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at the University of Pardubice. The short trip provided opportunities to establish closer bonds with fellow-minded researchers and discuss questions that may have been left out during the presentations. While visiting the sights and the castle district of Vilém II. of Pernštejn, the participants were also introduced to the multi-faceted history of Pardubice, gaining insights into its religious crises and shifts between Catholicism, Lutheranism, and the Utraquist tradition.

The second day was opened by the panel *Islam in Transformations*. As its sole active presenter, Lukáš Větrovec (Comenius University) delivered a paper on the highly-debated topic of minority jurisprudence (*fiqhu l-aqalliyat*) in Islam. He discussed how local circumstances and minority heritage (the cultural heritage of Bosnian Muslim communities) can have an impact on the forms of Islamic law. The following panel, *Representations of Muslims and Jews in Movies*, consisted of two presentations: Mehmet Kalkan's (Marmara University, Istanbul) talk about the cinematic representation of strife and coexistence between Jews and Muslims, and Adam Viskup's (Comenius University) contribution about Islamophobia and its connections to collective coping-mechanisms in Hollywood movie production after the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001. The third panel of the day, titled *Theoretical Approaches in the Study of Transformations of Religions*, then started with the presentation by Márk Nemes (University of Szeged), who outlined possible approaches to interpreting the emergence of new religious movements in the United States around the 1960s, aligning the process with the collective phenomena of social alienation and the loss of meaning systems. His lecture was followed by Manuel Stadler (Leipzig University), who drafted the possible theoretical groundings of radical social change in its affective and material dimensions. As the final presenter of the panel, Rita Figus-Illinyi (University of Szeged) then discussed the phenomena of resilience in socio-psychological and philosophical discourse.

With the final session of the day, *Religious Education During Societal Changes*, the attendees considered the influence of external crises on religious upbringing. Starting the papers, Mora Margitta (University of Jewish Studies, Budapest) emphasized the unique conditions under which the

Hasidic-Orthodox Jewish communities from 19th century Western Galicia responded to the initiatives allowing girls to attend advanced religious schooling. By paying special attention to the Beith Yaakov-type schools, she discussed how social factors promoted certain innovations in education even in ultratraditional religious communities. The second presenter, Fadime Yilmaz (University of Szeged), examined how political change towards less secular policies affected the positions of the formerly marginalized religious Imam Hatip Lisesi (IHL) schools in contemporary Turkey. The programme then continued with Hugo Strandberg's (Åbo Akademi University, Turku) keynote presentation *Faith and the General Equivalent*. Strandberg is a well-known educator at the University of Pardubice. Moreover, since he is an expert in German continental philosophy and critical theory, it was no surprise to see that all seats were full during his lecture. In it, he argued that solutions (be they religious, philosophical, or other) to the manifold forms of modern crises must reckon with the feature of capitalism which Marx termed a "general equivalent": a form of value making anything into a possible substitute for anything. The day closed with a high-spirited communal dinner in the historical city center.

The concluding day opened with Attila Miklovicz (University of Pécs), the only contributor to the panel "*New Religious Movements*" *Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic*. His presentation covered the preventive measures that the Church of Scientology faced due to COVID-19 restrictions between 2020 and 2022 and the coping strategies that it implemented. Miklovicz aligned the official strategies of the Church of Scientology with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and notions from utilitarianism and reflected how the local management of Scientology may have approached the official regulations of the church through these concepts. He was followed by Jarken and Yiter Gadi (Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune) in the *Society, Secularization, and the COVID-19 Pandemic* panel, who delivered a well-structured and fascinating case study that covered the relief measures in the Galo tribe during the COVID-19 period. The examples from the Lodu, Karka, Bogum, Karko, and Lobom clans were used to showcase the dynamics and relationships between the communities and their core religious values, while reflecting on how these may materialize as guiding principles in times of internal crisis.

Overall, the Pardubice conference, *Transformations of Religions in Times of Crises*, created a highly productive environment for discussing all kinds of crises and their impact on religions, which is indeed a highly significant topic in religious studies. The event was exceptionally successful in giving voice to both young and senior scholars from diverse countries and academic backgrounds.



In addition to building regional links, the CESAR Steering Board also set a goal to increase the organization's profile in European academia. As a first step, the organization secured an opportunity to organize a panel at the EASR conference in Vilnius. Our panel consisted of six papers. The first of these was a presentation by Márk Nemes (University of Szeged), who presented the initial results of a research project launched in 2022 and focusing on the correlations between demographic changes and religious representation in the Church of Scientology in Hungary. He was followed by Igor Jurekovič (University of Ljubljana) who approached religions as "bodily systems", discussing corporeality from the epistemological perspective of the material turn. In the third presentation, Helmi Halonen and Pasqualina Eckerström (both from the University of Helsinki, Helsinki) thematized contemporary ethical and emotional burdens of religious studies research. They pointed out several important shortcomings in the institutional social support systems for researchers and emphasized the harmful effects of emotional exposure and the dangers of involvement when processing sensitive or emotionally detrimental data (e. g. concerning abuse, exploitation, and harm in religious communities). The next speaker in the session was Indrek Peedu (University of Tartu) with the proposal that the uncritical use of concepts as research tools has become so common in religious studies that authors using them tend to ignore the basic definition of the criteria of *usefulness*. In his view, the uncritical employment of conceptual tools carries the risk of these becoming nothing more than rhetorical devices for rejecting certain subjectively defined and undesirable conceptualizations. The penultimate presenters, Piotr Szymanek (Jagiellonian University, Krakow), Neil Van Leeuwen (Georgia State University, Atlanta), and Jana Nenadalová (Masaryk University), investigated the extraordinary experiences correlating with individual religious backgrounds and beliefs in experiments with virtual reality. Their findings led them to define agency bias as a potentially interpretable "hyperprior" element of threat perception, which may represent a new frontline in the study of spiritual experiences. Lastly, Anton Berg and Katja Valaskivi (both from the University of Helsinki) drew similarly on digital innovation and explored the recognition capacities of image-based search software in relation to religions. Their paper argued that the study of these software tools is relevant from a religious studies perspective, as they exhibit specific patterns at cognitive and cultural levels due to their programming and data processing background and (re)produce specific representational biases when used. In sum, our panel presented a broad and innovative palette of approaches to a variety of religious studies questions, which, we believe, represent likely future initiatives and frontiers in the academic study of religions.

The Szeged conference followed the strategic aims of our association and provided a similarly intense three-day symposium experience for those involved. Fifty-five potential presenters from thirteen states and twenty-nine different institutions sent us their abstracts, from which we selected thirty-seven contributions that best reflected the theme of the conference. With such a high level of interest and high-quality papers, we divided these among nine panels run parallelly two or three at a time in most cases. In addition, we invited two keynote lecturers from some of the pivotal central European religious studies departments. Although logistical and other circumstances enabled only thirty-one scholars to share their papers in the Neo-Romanesque building of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Szeged, the conference was still full of diverse and stimulating discussion. Since it is impossible to cover all contributions, we report here on a limited selection of papers, which, in our opinion, reflect well the richness of the conference.

The first group of panels, presented on the morning of the 20th October, dealt mostly with questions of historical religious identity. The sessions *Identity in Late Antiquity and Medieval Ages*, *Public Image and Societal Identity in the History of Christianity*, and *Clashes of Cultural and Religious Identity* introduced a variety of textual and archaeological approaches to data not only from the West, but also from medieval China and the early days of the colonization of North America. Whereas Ivan Mileković (Central European University) explored how late antique Macedonia constructed its Hellenic identity through cultic topography and practice, Anna Vancsó (Eötvös Loránd University) devoted her talk to the content and discourse analysis of political speeches in post-communist Hungary to show how Christianity has been rhetorically used as a source of national identity. As the only presenter working outside historical research questions, Adéla Petřeková (Masaryk University) discussed the adoption of Pentecostalism among the Romani people. In her view, Pentecostal Christianity offers ways to deconstruct the roots of their exclusion but threatens them with the loss of their ethnic identity, forcing them thus to renegotiate their inherited and newly-acquired identity in novel ways. In the afternoon, all conference attendees gathered to listen to the first keynote speaker, Réka Szilárdi (University of Szeged). Her lecture, *Spirituality in the Age of Festivals: The Hungarian 'Everness' Case Study*, provided important sociological insights into present-day Hungarian alternative spirituality and the role of non-partisan events in its community-building and maintenance. Although the lecture marked the end of the academic part of Friday's program, the attendees were able to continue their previous discussions during the planned visit to the Szeged Synagogue and, later, in the cafes and restaurants of the city.

The second day of the conference was also opened by a keynote lecture. This time, David Václavík (Masaryk University) offered a socio-historical exploration of the transformations of religious landscapes following modernization processes in Visegrad countries. Václavík's lecture, *Secularization and Desecularization in the Context of Central Europe*, represented a clear synthesis of his long-term interests and a fruitful steppingstone for future discussions. The following panels, *Modern and Contemporary Interactions of Cultural Identity and Religion* and *Identity in New and Minority Religiosity*, continued with the focus on issues in current religion. Evrim Can Iflazoğlu (University of Szeged) described the transformation of Alevi group identity from strict adherence to traditional Ocak structures to the more liberal formulations allowing more self-expression in foreign (mostly Western) diasporas. Meanwhile, Krisztina Bodzásné Csényi-Nagy (Eötvös Loránd University) provided qualitative interview analysis of the identity construction processes of Hungarian Wicca, Ásatrú, and Yotengrit practitioners, which highlighted the factors of upbringing and previous interests. As the political features of identity had not yet been sufficiently touched upon at the conference, the final session of the day contained contributions investigating the power dynamics in the construction and maintenance of religious identity. This larger "mega-panel" titled *Intersections of Religiosity and Political Identity* hosted, for example, Tamas Dudlak (Eötvös Loránd University), who used discourse and content analysis of the statements of Orbán and Erdoğan to argue that older secular nationalisms are being replaced with more religiously-based versions in Turkey and Hungary on a larger scale. However, we were reminded that politics matters also in less institutionalized alternative religiosities. For example, Roman Galovič (Charles University) used symbolic anthropological theories to analyze the role of women spiritualist mediums in Victorian England. In his view, the mediums could gain social empowerment precisely because of their suppression of agency, as this passivity provided more familiar cultural scripts via the creation of an anti-structural bricolage of meanings existing in hegemonic patriarchal structures. This and other papers were debated, pondered over, admired, and re-shaped in the communal conference dinner, lasting until the early morning hours.

Overall, Sunday's program maintained the thematic, theoretical, and methodological diversity of the conference. The last slot of parallel panels, consisting of *Transdisciplinary Approaches and Methods towards Religion and Identity*, *Religious and Social Identity within the Church of Jehovah's Witnesses*, and the *Online Panel* (the latter specifically designed for those presenters unable to join in person), included such diverse fields of knowledge as experimental psychology, qualitative sociology, and post-humanist



anthropology. Markéta Muczková (Palacký University Olomouc) informed us about the results of a psychological study conducted on one hundred Czech participants which showed that religiosity did not play a significant role in the formation of attitudes towards the main ethnic minorities of the Czech lands. Meanwhile, Olli-Matti Peltonen (Freedom of Worship – Europe Office, Berlin) elaborated on the neglected topic of the reintegration of disaffiliates from Jehovah’s Witnesses back to the church they had previously left and discussed important themes in their narratives of dis- and re-affiliation. At the same time just a couple rooms away, Yael Dansac (Free University of Brussels) invited us to the megalithic site of Wéris and its use by contemporary animists. Her online presentation analyzed the spiritual practices at the site and highlighted their significant impact on the relationships between the human and non-human (incl. more-than-human) participants. To reflect on the closing conference as well as on the past years of CESAR, all conference attendees were then invited to a roundtable meeting of CESAR members. Here, fruitful discussions foregrounded the need both to strengthen cooperation with other national and transnational academic bodies in religious studies and to go beyond conference organizing to other forms of cooperation as a means of moving the organization forward.

In conclusion, *Religion and Identity* demonstrated the importance of thoroughly reflecting the concept of “identity” in research on religion and confirmed the abilities of young central European scholars to continue organizing academic conferences acclaimed by the global academic community. Taken together, the years 2022 and 2023 truly represented a bountiful start for CESAR. With all these important milestones behind us, let us wish the network both fortitude and good fortune in its future endeavors and invite readers to the next annual CESAR conference. The symposium *Religions in Transformation: Changing the Conditions of (and by) Religiosity*, aiming to explore processes of change *in* and *via* religion, will take place at the Central European University in Vienna between 4th and 6th October 2024.