

# REPORT ON THE 2022 CONFERENCE OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN SYMPOSIUM FOR THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION

Pardubice, September 1–3, 2022.

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Between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2022, an international religious studies Ph.D. conference took place at the University of Pardubice, Czechia. As the organizing association contains numerous young Hungarian researchers and representatives of departments concerned with the academic study of religion, the author of the following article believes, that it is appropriate to inform Hungarian readers about this prestigious event and endorse following the developments of the organizing association, especially as their upcoming conference will be held at the University of Szeged, Hungary.

The Central European Symposium for the Academic Study of Religion (CESAR) is an international Ph.D. association, currently representing seven Central-Eastern European universities: the Comenius University from Slovakia, the Central European University from Austria, the Charles University, the Masaryk University and the University of Pardubice from Czechia, and the Eötvös Loránd University and the University of Szeged, on behalf of Hungary. The initial body of the association was formed in 2021, with the intention of creating an official forum for cross-institutional Ph.D. collaboration between enthusiastic scholars and their respective departments within the CEE region. The formal structure of the association is already expanding, as new institutions – like Leipzig University’s Faculty of Study of Religions – are making steps towards receiving Steering Board membership at CESAR. The organization is also affiliated with the Philosophy Departments of The Association of Hungarian Ph.D. and DLA Students (DOSZFiTO) and aims to establish similar ties with other national and international bodies.

The official debut of CESAR was realized as part of the aforementioned international conference, titled *Transformations of Religions in Times of Crises: Spiritual Alienation and Rethinking of Ethics*. The organizers of the conference set three aims for this event. Firstly, to create a platform for young scholars of religious studies. Secondly, to strengthen the ties and establish new connections between departments of religious studies. Thirdly, to gather committed Ph.D. students from the region to further develop the association and to work forwards an official recognition from the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) by

2024. Towards this last goal, another initiative was taken, as the proposition of CESAR to organize an open panel at the 2023 EASR conference in Vilnius had just been accepted. The open panel, titled *Future of the Religious Studies: Theoretical and Methodological Techniques for the New Century* aims to uncover future perspectives for the academic study of religion, by pointing out new approaches and techniques, through which the discipline can innovate itself and reflect on former findings and theories. With the closing of the applications, the panel received eight submissions, which will be evaluated by the Steering Board members of CESAR.

A similarly elevated interest was present during the initial phases of the 2022 conference in Pardubice, as the organization had received more than thirty initial applications from seventeen nations. Of these, a total sum of eighteen presentations from eleven nations and thirteen different institutions was accepted. These propositions were later divided into seven panels. The organizers selected the highest quality papers with the broadest thematical restrictions possible, which resulted in a great variety of presentations.

The opening panel, titled *Secularization and politics* consisted of two fascinating presentations, delivered by Péter Boros (Eötvös Loránd University), and Gabriel Paxton (Boston University). Péter Boros opened the event with a captivating paper focusing on Chinese Buddhism and on internal crises from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that led to the redefinition of the place of religion in China. He was followed by Gabriel Paxton, discussing historical approaches on the possible interpretations of electoral losses – as “crises” –, drawing parallels between the United States and Hungary, with a specific focus on the electoral losses of former President Donald Trump in 2020 and current Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2002.

The second panel, titled *Exclusion of Minorities* was opened by Kristina Mikhalek (Charles University), who discussed the issues around conscriptions within Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire around the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Her lecture focused on the methods and reasons for achieving religious homogeneity by Tzar Nicholas I in the region. The panel’s second presenter was Tereza Menšíková (Masaryk University), who introduced us to a contemporary issue of socio-political activism: the utilization of new media and online platforms. Her empirical case study elaborated on how the Indian Dalit community uses popular media to shed light on the negative effects of caste discrimination. Her research utilized computational text analysis – a much-needed innovative tool for processing mass amounts of digital data. The last presenter of the *Exclusion of Minorities* panel was Barbora Šindelářová (University of Pardubice), who enlightened the audience about the roots of contemporary discrimination of Burakumin, a social group in Japan, labeled as “untouchables”. Barbora’s presentation concluded by providing new initiatives for approaching the concept of *kegare*, a sort of “ritual impurity”,

considering local cultural and historical aspects, rather than universalizing Western theories.<sup>1</sup>

The first day of the conference ended with a much-anticipated keynote presentation by Professor András Máté-Tóth, the former head of the Department of Applied Religious Studies of the University of Szeged. Professor Máté-Tóth introduced an approach for inspecting the issues of security and religion in the CEE region. During his presentation, titled *Security and Religion in Today's Central and Eastern Europe. Inspirative homage to Giddens, Berger, and Inglehart* he also reflected on the topic of current Russian aggression on Ukraine, emphasizing the importance of the morality of academia in times of crisis and the necessity of speaking out against inhumanity and injustice.

At the end of the first day, the organizers invited all participants to a guided tour in the historic city center of Pardubice, led by Dr. Jiří Kubeš, the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Pardubice. The short trip provided opportunities to establish closer bonds with fellow-minded researchers and to discuss questions and remarks, which may have been left out during conference times. While visiting the sights and the castle district of Vilém II. of Pernštejn, the trip-takers were also introduced to the multi-faceted history of Pardubice, gaining insights into its religious shifts between Catholicism, Lutheranism, and the Utraquist tradition.

On the second day of the conference, four similarly intriguing panels took place. The first of these was *Islam in Transformations*. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen events, the presentation about the religious changes in Iranian society between 1979–2022 was canceled. Nonetheless, the following speaker, Lukáš Větrovec (Comenius University) used the excess amount of time well by bringing a highly debated presentation about minority jurisprudence (*fiqhu l-aqalliyat*) in Islam. He discussed how local circumstances and minority heritage (cultural heritage of Bosnian Muslim communities – may shape the application and forms of Islamic law.

The following panel, *Representation of Muslims and Jews in Movies* consisted of two presentations: Mehmet Kalkan's (Marmara University) speech about the cinematic representation of strife and coexistence between Jews and Muslims and Adam Viskup's (Comenius University) contribution to Islamophobia, and its connections to the collective coping-mechanisms in Hollywood movie production after the 9/11. Although these papers might seem outside of religious studies, each of the presenters has brought unique and novel perspectives on how these topics could be approached with the toolkit of the discipline. For the author of this article, the most intriguing element in both papers was the emphasis on the utilization of selectivism. This mechanism allows the strengthening of established – mostly negative – archetypes,

<sup>1</sup> Let me note that the general attitude of Šindelářová could be a universal guiding principle for any fellow researcher, working in the field of religious studies.

while simultaneously offering a simplified legitimizing morality for the protagonists. This mechanism, paired with René Girard's mimetic strife-theory, and the scapegoat mechanism (among others, Allport, Assmann, Campbell, Burke, and Girard), will most definitely supplement the understanding of collective identity formation and its internal processes in the field of religious studies as well.

The third panel of the day was titled *Theoretical Approaches in the Study of Transformations of Religions*. It started with the presentation of Márk Nemes (University of Szeged), outlining a possible theoretical approach for 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 loss of meaning systems. This paper was followed by Manuel Stadler (Leipzig University), who covered the issues of radical social change in relation to the affective and material dimensions. Through bringing examples, such as the monotheistic reforms attempt of Echnaton, or the religious change during the French Revolution, his argumentation highlighted relations between the affective structures of social compositions and the transformation of the materially symbolized surroundings. The final presenter of the panel was Rita Illinyi-Figus (University of Szeged), who attempted to approach the phenomena of resilience from socio-psychological and philosophical perspectives. As she argued, this topic is regularly discussed in theoretical physics, medicine, psychology, sociology, and political sciences, hence the aforementioned fields' definitions may be of assistance for understanding even complex philosophical cases, like stoicism or ataraxia.

The last panel of the day was titled *Religious Educations During Societal Changes*. Starting the panel, Nora Margitta (Budapest University of Jewish Studies) emphasized the unique conditions and processes of the 19th century Western Galicia and how the Hasidic-Orthodox Jewish communities responded to the initiatives of allowing further religious studies for girls. By paying special attention to the Beith Yaakov-type schools, she discussed how social factors promote certain innovations in education even in traditionalist religious communities. Nora Margitta was followed by Fadime Ylmaz (University of Szeged). Her speech examined how political change may affect formerly marginalized religious educational institutions, i.e. the religious schools founded by Imam Hatip Lisesi (IHL). The graduates of such institutions were traditionally peripheralized until the 2002 electoral victory of the AKP Party in Turkey, after which the IHL schools became the main symbols of the vertical social mobilization of Turkish religious groups. The two presentations of the panel provided great examples of systematic changes and illustrated exceptionally well, how religious education and its status change and fit into societal developments.

The second day ended with Dr. Hugo Strandberg's (Åbo Akademi University) keynote presentation, titled *Faith and the general equivalent*. The Professor is a known educator at the University of Pardubice, primarily because he was a visiting lecturer

at the Centre of Ethics between 2018 and 2021. Moreover, since he is an expert in German continental philosophy and critical theory, it was not surprising that there were not many empty seats during his keynote lecture. The second day closed with a communal dinner in the historical city center.

The third and final day was dedicated to two promising and highly debated panels. Sadly, two of the speakers were not able to present their papers. Nonetheless, the excess time was not wasted, as the remaining presenters had more time to answer the numerous questions and to respond to the remarks and notes about their lectures. Attila Miklovicz (University of Pécs) started the last day, as part of the *New Religious Movements Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic* panel. His presentation covered the coping strategies and preventive measurements, that the Church of Scientology has introduced on international levels between 2019 and 2022. His presentation aligned these strategies with the Nicomachean Ethics and notions from Utilitarianism while reflecting on how the local management of Scientology may have approached the official regulations through these concepts.

The last panel of the conference was titled *Society, secularization and the COVID-19 pandemic*. The last speakers were Jarken and Yiter Gadi (Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics), who joined the conference online. However, the physical distances did not falter the presenters in delivering a well-structured and fascinating case study covering the relief measurements in the Galo tribe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples of 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 also reflecting on how these may materialize as guiding principles in times of internal crisis.

As the conference reached its conclusion with an official closing ceremony, plans and concepts for the events of the next year's event had been already established. As a result of this rigorous planning, it is the author's honour to inform the readers that the 2023 CESAR conference will be hosted by the Department of Applied Religious Studies of the University of Szeged.

The conference will take place there between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 2023. The title of the conference is *Religion and Identity – Intersections of Collective and Private Identity with Religion and Spirituality*. The conference's broader theme offers chances for a liberal interpretation of the intersections of religion and identity, including submissions about collective or personal identities, and religious beliefs as part of these systems. This temporally disconnected issue invites contemporary – as well as historical – case studies and sub-disciplinary approaches, opening up the field of the academic study of religion towards anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology, as well as historical studies of archaeology, liturgical studies, etc. We kindly encourage the readers to apply for the conference and follow the developments of the future of CESAR.