



Assessing the study of religious change in Central-Eastern Europe

Conference of the eponymous Visegrad Fund project hosted by Charles University in Prague

Prague – September 21-23, 2023

Hotel Olšanka, Táborská 23/1000,

Praha 3, 13000

This conference aims at understanding the conditions and the implications of the differences in knowledge production in the social scientific study of religious change in Central-Eastern Europe, arising from the socio-historical specificities of the region. It attempts to assess the hierarchies of knowledge involved in this field of research from two perspectives. On the one hand, we wish to examine the epistemological, conceptual, and methodological factors underlying the divergent approaches to and understandings of recent religious phenomena in Central-Eastern European and in Western academic institutions. On the other hand, we wish to explore the intellectual trajectories that guide scholars of religion in their conceptual and methodological choices.

This region presents distinctive features that make it a particularly fruitful laboratory for the study of religious change. These societies, often qualified as “post-socialist”, have attracted scholarly attention as compelling examples of social rupture and transformation. If the interconnection of the idea of “transition” with the label “post-socialism” has been put into question (Hann, Humphrey & Verdery 2002; Cervinkova 2012; Müller 2019), Central-Eastern Europe is still perceived, both in social scientific and common-sense thinking, along the East-West divide determined by the history of the region. In this perspective, the conceptual, methodological, and epistemological challenges involved in the study of religion in this area not only justify an intensified focus on the Visegrad countries and their surroundings, but also point to the issue of multiple hierarchies of knowledge production and their potential intersectionality.

On the organizational level, institutional and financial support for potential intellectual exchange radiates from the centers located beyond Central-Eastern Europe. Major contributions rely on support provided by research institutions outside the region, such as the Max Planck Institute in Halle and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. The force of gravity of these institutes implies structural inequalities: Western European countries dominate the field which places local institutions in a subaltern position. On the scientific level, there are methodological constraints that stem from different epistemological traditions. State atheism imposed a gap that lasted decades in the study of religion in this region in two major ways. For obvious political reasons, the region was inaccessible to foreign researchers. Due to the theoretical and ideological restrictions directed against religion, and strictly delineated topical areas of study, native scholarship focused on folklore and so-called “folk religion” (Lubańska and Ładykowska 2013).

In turn, these differences have had a persistent effect on the choice of research questions, case studies, interpretative frames, and so on, between local and Western scholars. This can be illustrated by the example of scholarly literature on Pagan revival. While the data mustered in the diverse studies on

Western forms of Neopaganism is vertiginously rich, this field of study as a whole remains fragmented and few attempts have yet been made to theorize this phenomenon and to introduce a comparative perspective (e.g. York 2003; Pizza and Lewis 2009; Rountree 2015, 2017). This may be due to the singularity of Western forms of Neopaganism and contemporary spirituality in general, which imposes immediately the methodological constraint of “observant participation” upon the researcher (Salomonsen 2004) and encourages what may be called a “religionist approach” (Davidsen 2012), disposed to convey the internal concerns of these religious movements, as well as the consideration of the lived-through experience of their participants. In contrast, relying mainly on textual sources, the methodological approaches developed in the study of Neopaganism in the Central-Eastern European region strongly differ from those of Western scholars.

The dissemination of the research results of Western and local scholars has undoubtedly had an unequal scope, and one may wonder about the mechanisms at play in this state of affairs. An inadvertent consequence of the conditions structuring the patterns of anthropological, and more generally, social scientific output are hierarchies of knowledge production that have been discussed already for some time, but with relatively little resonance (e.g. Buchowski 2004, 2012; Hann 2005; Pasieka 2014). Thus, the issue of religious and spiritual revival invites a renewed problematization of other older conceptual dichotomies.

The persistence of the East-West divide translates into a variety of practices and dispositions that put the scholars from the “post-socialist” East into a subaltern position. While the artificially constructed temporal and spatial categorizations that frame social scientific research and theorizing about and in Central-Eastern Europe (Chari & Verdery 2009; Lubaś 2017) may be questioned, their enduring relationship to power and ideologies makes the nexus of dominance, subjugation, and resistance, identified by post-colonial critique, a sensitive issue for the scientific study of these societies. The challenge of the study of new religious phenomena in Central-Eastern Europe is thus to find adequate research methods, conceptual tools, and theoretical frameworks that both consider local specificities and shed light on mechanisms of orientalization in the production of knowledge. By inviting participants to reflect on these issues, we hope to initiate what can be called a conceptual and epistemological decolonization and deorientalization in the study of religion in this region.

Organizers: Zuzana Bártová, Agata Ładykowska and Viola Teisenhoffer (Institute of Sociological Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague)

Program

Thursday 21 September

15:30-16:00 Welcome of participants

16:00-16:15 Opening words by Jakub Grygar, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Charles University

16:15-18:00 Roundtable moderated by Zuzana Bártová, Agata Ładykowska and Viola Teisenhoffer

19:00 Dinner (restaurant TBD)

Friday 22 September

9.30 –11.00 Keynote lecture by Michał Buchowski (Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań) – *Persistent Hierarchies and Unavoidable Dilemmas in Anthropological Practices*

11:00 – 11:20 Coffee break

11:00 – 11:45 *Religious change through the phenomenon of Christian popular music* – Kinga Povedák (MTA-SZTE Convivence Religious Pluralism Research Group)

12:05 – 12:50 *Populism and sexuality: what is its religious nexus in Central and Eastern Europe?* – Juraj Buzalka (Institute of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava)

12:50 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 14:45 *Anthropology of religion and the study of religious change in post-socialist Transylvania, Romania* – Tünde Komáromi (Department for Media and Communication Studies, Institute of Social and Communication Sciences, Károli Gáspár University of the reformed Church in Hungary)

14:45 – 15:30 *Religious Variation and Social Boundaries. A North-Macedonian Case* – Marcin Lubaś (Jagiellonian University)

15:30 – 16:00 Coffee break

16:00 – 16:45 *Pagan Slavic identity and the conflict in Ukraine: a case study* – Giuseppe Maiello (Faculty of Economic Studies, Department of Marketing Communications, University of Finance and Administration in Prague)

16:45 – 17:30 *Research on religiosity and spirituality in Czech social work since 1990: Do we have more than data and information?* – Jan Kaňák (University of West Bohemia, Plzeň, CZ Department of Sociology and Social Work)

Saturday 23 September

09:30 – 10:15 *'East' and 'West' in the Jewish revival in Hungary* – Richárd Papp (Department of Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University)

10:15 – 11:00 *Negotiating 'tradition' in Jewish Slovakia* – Katarína Očková, (Institute of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava)

11:00 – 11:20 Coffee break

11:20 – 12:05 *Collective experience in the context of alternative spirituality* – Danijela Jerotijević (Institute of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava)

12:05 – 12:50 *From objectivity to the lived experience of religion* – Bea Vidacs (Independent scholar)

12:50 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 15:30 Final discussion and conclusions moderated by Zuzana Bártová, Agata Ładykowska and Viola Teisenhoffer