

# The Academic Program

## Introduction

Topics and titles of the quinquennial World Congresses of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) are as much inspirations as compromises. In order to enlist the interests of a national association and the local organizers, to win the approval of the Executive Committee for the nomination, and to elicit a sufficient number of speakers, proposals and participants, the theme has to take into account vested interests and ongoing research, national and regional agendas and international concerns, existing strengths and current debates. At the same time, World Congresses have to prove that they are more than just a market for young talents and a mirror image of research as it is being pursued in the hundreds of institutions of IAHR members worldwide – which would already be a worthy aim to promote! Despite their usual breadth – intended to enable as many researchers as possible to be part of the intense debates and encounters concentrated within one week – previous conference themes have highlighted crucial issues, focused on particular objects and methods in research and provoked new research. The self-reflection of the discipline as a whole, made up of quite different traditions of research and subjected to widely different regional political and cultural influences, but nevertheless striving for a recognizable identity, has been enormously promoted by these debates.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of the XXI IAHR Congress “Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present”, must be situated within different discursive and institutional contexts and related to recent developments. In what follows, we would like to outline our theme as an invitation to participate, to intervene, and to promote debates. Being a compromise in the sense described above, this is not so much an acknowledgment of specific schools of thought or declaration of theoretical allegiances, but a mapping of a field, a field divided into four plots of arable ground.

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<sup>1</sup> For the discussions at Mexico City in 1995, see e.g. International Association for the History of Religions 2000. The Congress topics of Rome 1990, Durban 2000, and Toronto 2010 in particular invited such reflections. For a full list of the Congress themes see [www.iahr.dk/pastcon.php](http://www.iahr.dk/pastcon.php).

## Congress theme

The chosen Congress theme “Dynamics of Religion” plays a vital part in a number of research projects in the field of German Religious Studies, such as the Käte-Hamburger-Kolleg’s “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” at the Ruhr University in Bochum; the Collaborative Research Centre 619 “Ritual Dynamics” at the University of Heidelberg; the Research Training Group “Religious Nonconformism and Cultural Dynamics” at the University of Leipzig; or the Humanities Centre for Advanced Study 1013 “Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective” at the Max Weber Center, Erfurt University. The topic is also one of significant importance at other seminar for Religious Studies, at the universities of Bayreuth, Bremen, Frankfurt, Hannover, Marburg, Munich, Munster or Potsdam, for example.

Religion is a human, historical, social and cultural phenomenon. As such, religious ideas, practices, discourses, institutions, and social expressions are constantly in processes of change. The Congress addressed the processes of change, the dynamics of religions past, present, and future, on several interconnected levels of analysis and theory, namely that of the individual, community and society, practices and discourses, beliefs, and narrations.

These were addressed within four areas:

### **Religious communities in society: Adaptation and transformation**

Embedded within complex cultures, characterized by social change and intercultural exchange, religious communities constantly adapt to their changing environments, developing practices, discourses, and institutions conceptualized as “religion”. These concepts are subject to social and cultural influences. They also shape political and economic environments. Religious traditions are invented and re-invented, imperceptibly transformed, violently reformed or emphatically defended. How, then, do religious communities and institutions adapt to cultural change? How do they affect social change? Does interreligious contact and dialogue lead to religious change? How do religious communities react to the possibilities and threats of new media? Does globalization transform public religions? To what extent do states and public law affect religions?

## Practices and discourses: Innovation and tradition

Founding figures, schisms and revivals characterize the dynamics of religion in past and present. Institutions develop or are dissolved. This, again, poses questions: How are religious traditions established, standardized and canonized? What are the mechanisms and agents of religious innovation? How do religious traditions repel religious change? How is sacred time and space established? Does religious individualization lead to innovation? What are the mechanisms of transformation and innovation of rituals and other practices? Do rituals create and perpetuate religious traditions? Are new religious movements or esoteric currents innovative? Does fundamentalism protect religious traditions? Does the internet lead to religious innovation? What are the dynamics of gender traditions?

## The individual: Religiosity, spiritualities and individualization

Individuals, too, are agents of change. Privatization, patchwork religiosity and religious deviance are not restricted to the present. Can “religiosity” or “spirituality”, popular in many contemporary self-descriptions, be used as descriptive terms of our meta-language? Under what circumstances do individuals obey or deny religious traditions? How and why do individuals converse, or gradually change their religious convictions and affiliations? How can plural religious identities or patchwork religiosities be explained, what effects do they have on religious traditions? How important are religious experiences in religions? What are individual reasons for religious deviance? How do religions control the individual? Is the privatization of religion a modern phenomenon? Do biographic developments explain individual religiosity?

## Methodology: Representations and interpretations

Religious change is registered and narrated by outsiders and insiders. Emic representations influence academic interpretations. Scholarly paradigms and theories are therefore as dynamic as their object. Which master narratives about religious change need to be revised? Are all religious traditions invented? What is the current status of the secularization debate? Is there some scientific value in old paradigms of religious change (e.g. decline, fall, rise, axial age)? How can theories of cultural and religious evolution be applied in historical sciences?

How do new approaches in historiography conceptualize religious change (e.g. entangled or transcultural history, postcolonial history, discourse analysis)?

## Philosophy and structure of the program

The XXI IAHR Congress addressed these issues in various formats. Not only did we invite papers to be presented individually or in organized panels, we also included four daily keynote presentations which were to discuss one of the areas outlined above from a different angle and different field of religious studies. In this way, we hoped to not only draw the participants in the Congress together in various lectures, but to allow all participants to either explore the entire breadth of the Congress theme – religious communities in society, practices and discourses, the individual and methodology – or to focus on one of the topics and explore it from the various angles of the different sub-fields of religious studies.

The 2015 Congress was opened by the keynote and Gary Lease Memorial Lecture in the Theater Erfurt on August 23, 2015. The venue was opened especially for this occasion, which almost 650 participants attended. The opening keynote by Hubert Seiwert was followed by a reception for all participants.

The program was structured in such a way as to allow a maximum number of participants to participate in as many sessions as their field of research provided. The daily schedule therefore provided three time slots of 1.5 to 2 hours each with up to 38 parallel sessions, each consisting of three to five papers. The organizers' reckoned with twenty minutes plus ten minutes discussion per paper, a point which was stressed especially where individually submitted papers were put together in a common session, though a slightly different format may have been adapted in some organized sessions by the sessions, organizers and chairs. The panel/session part of the program was complemented by the so-called Open Session format, which deviated from the paper presentation format to include Round Table discussions, film and poster sessions and review sessions – a variety of formats submitted formlessly to the Program Committee as Open Sessions.

Additionally, the above mentioned four parallel keynotes were presented every day between 11:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. to thematically ground the topic of the Congress (see more below).

Since the Congress was hosted by the University of Erfurt and all venues were on campus, the schedule included a lunch break of only one hour in which participants were free to visit the cafeteria or one of the cafés on campus or take the tram back to town for a quick lunch. An overview over convenient

restaurants, bars, bakeries and convenient stores was compiled beforehand and left for perusal at the Congress hotel desks and at the Congress secretariat.

The Academic Program concluded at 5:30 p.m. each day, planning in ample time for business meetings and receptions in the evening hours. We opted for an earlier beginning and earlier end of the Academic Program in order to allow for enough time after the Congress program concluded for dinner, either following the academic program or following further commitments in the evening hours. Receptions were hosted by the German Association for Religious Studies, the British and Irish Association for the Study of Religions (in honor of Brian Bocking), Equinox publishers (in honor of the NVMEN series launch) and the Women Scholars Network.

The traditional tour day on Wednesday offered various tours of Erfurt and Thuringia which highlighted the long and varied religious history of city and region. On offer were tours highlighting the Jewish history of Erfurt, Martin Luther, Johann Sebastian Bach and Weimar Classicism.

All participants were invited to the Congress barbeque on Wednesday evening, another opportunity for Congress attendees to meet and mingle. The barbeque was met with great enthusiasm and provided a nice break at “half-time” of the academic program.

On Saturday, August 29, the Congress concluded with a keynote lecture by Ingvild S. Gilhus, followed by the General Assembly of the IAHR at the Alte Heizkraftwerk Erfurt.

## Plenary Session Speakers

To thematically ground the Congress, the organizers invited a number of distinguished international scholars to address the four thematic Congress areas in the entire width and depth of the field of religious studies. The aim was to address all four areas every day, so that, including Opening and Closing Keynote Speakers, eighteen scholars were invited to address “Dynamics of Religion” at the 2015 Congress. These were:

- Peter Beyer – Forms of Religious Communities in Global Society: Tradition, Invention, and Transformation
- Vasudha Dalmia – Homogenizing Hinduism: A Watershed
- Cristiana Facchini – Representing Judaism: Narrating, Visualizing, Performing, and Feeling a Religion
- Ingvild S. Gilhus – Bodies, Texts and Otherness: Religious Change in Antiquity and Today

- Wouter Hanegraaff – Fantastic Religion: Esoteric Fictionality and the Invention of Tradition
- Jeppe Sinding Jensen – No Human is an Island: Natures, Norms and Narratives
- Kim Knott – Inside out? The (In)visibility of Religious Communities in Contemporary Societies
- Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz – Of Yellow Teaching and Black Faith: Entangled Knowledge Cultures and the Creation of Religious Traditions
- Suzanne Marchand – Herodotus, Historian of World Religions: How the Reception-History of the “Father of Lies” Can Help Move the Conversation beyond “Orientalism”
- Sylvia Marcos – Transformation and Revitalization: Mesoamerican Religious Traditions
- Martin Mulso – Global Intellectual History and the Dynamics of Religion
- Kalpana Ram – Religion, Human Agency and Change: The Importance of Intermediary Experiences
- Hubert Seiwert – Dynamics of Religion and Cultural Evolution
- Susumu Shimazono – Religion and Public Space in Contemporary Japan: The Reactivation of State Shinto and Buddhism as Public Religion
- Dianne Marie Stewart – From Syncretism to Social Belonging: Retheorizing Tradition and Innovation in African Heritage Religious Cultures of the Caribbean and the Americas
- Abdulkader Tayob – The Biographical Trajectories of Political Islam
- Gerald West – Religion Intersecting De-nationalisation and Re-nationalisation in Post-Apartheid South Africa
- Xiaoyun Zheng – On the Management Mode of Chinese Theravada Buddhism

Several of these papers of the Congress’ keynote speakers are published in this volume, “Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present” by de Gruyter, due in Fall 2016. They are also part of an Open Access publication (along with the abstracts of all papers included in the Congress program), also by de Gruyter.

## Related academic sessions

The XXI Quinquennial IAHR Congress was preceded by a pre-conference of the Society of Ancient Mediterranean Religions (SAMR) and an AESToR NET workshop.

The SAMR invited participants to a two-day pre-conference (August 22–23, 2015) titled “Religions on the Ground”. A major development in the study of ancient religion over the past few decades has been the growing emphasis on the social, material, and experiential realities of non-elites. This development has affected both the sorts of questions scholars are asking, and the sorts of data on which they draw to formulate their answers. Rather than focusing on the philosophical or theological concerns of elite texts, scholars have sought to bring a wider body of evidence to bear on understanding and interpreting the lived experience of religion.

In keeping with the society’s broad interests in religions of the Mediterranean basin over the great chronological expanse from prehistory to late antiquity, the Society issued a call for papers for contributions from scholars in the fields of Classics, Ancient History, Religious Studies, Archaeology, Near Eastern Studies, and Egyptology. While not excluding textual evidence, the organizers sought proposals that incorporated archaeology, history of art, ritual and/or liturgical studies, and other sub-fields that provide a window into the religious practices of the time. Particular preference was given to proposals that engage a question from a cross-disciplinary perspective or that highlight important theoretical or methodological issues. Especially welcome were transdisciplinary papers which synthesize a variety of textual, archaeological, and art historical and/or material culture sources to reach new insights into ancient Mediterranean religions. The Society explicitly invited scholars from all phases of their careers to submit proposals.

Papers at the SAMR pre-conference were delivered by:

- Amy Yandek, Philadelphia, PA: Domestic Religion and Elite Identity in the Terrace Houses of Roman Ephesos
- Sissel Undheim, Bergen: Securing Theusebius’ Salvation: The Motif of the “Virgin Crown” in a Late Antique Latin Epitaph
- Mattias Brand, Leiden: Beyond Religious Boundaries? The Everyday Interactions of Manichaeans
- Jörg Rüpke, Erfurt: Response
- Amelia Robertson Brown, Brisbane: Like Frogs Around a Pond: Maritime Religion in Ancient Greek Culture
- András Patay-Horváth, Budapest: The Cult of Artemis at Olympia and the Earliest History of the Sanctuary
- Georgia Petridou, Erfurt: Healing Visions: Eye-shaped Votives and the Mysteries
- Esther Eidinow, Nottingham: Response

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The Aesthetics of Religion Research Network (AESToR NET) invited participants to their kick-off workshop August 22 to 23, titled “The Sensory Sacred – Aesthetic as a Connective Concept for the Study of Religion – Positions and Future Plans”.

After an introduction of the first network-funded publication “The Sensory Sacred: Aesthetics as a Connective Concept for the Study of Religion” by Katharina Wilkens and Anne Koch, papers were presented by Jay Johnston, Sydney and Fred Cummins, Dublin, which were then discussed under various aspects during the workshop.

The network is one of the DVRW-affiliated research groups (“Arbeitskreis”).