

# The Congress Directors' General Report on the XXI IAHR World Congress

The XXI World Congress of the IAHR was hosted by the German Association for the Study of Religions (*Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft e.V., DVRW*).<sup>1</sup> As every IAHR world congress, it is embedded in a specific regional context – in regard to the discursive patterns of our discipline, which is that of the German *Religionswissenschaft* and its European neighbors, as well as in regard to the specific religious environment. As the regional context is a European one, the specific task – but also specific chance – was to reflect on the impact of this environment on the general theory of religion and, in particular, the ‘discussions and allegations of a (real or imagined) Eurocentric bias of the IAHR’ (cf. Jensen 2010, 64). Like their predecessors in Toronto, Tokyo or Durban, the organizers decided to present the congress venue in terms of regional models of religion, making use of emblematic imagery such as the medieval cathedral of Erfurt on its logo (see [www.iahr2015.org](http://www.iahr2015.org)). This was meant to be a starting point for trans-regional comparisons and theoretical debates, avoiding stereotypical images of the ‘world religions’ type (see Masuzawa 2005; Bochsinger, Rüpke 2015).

The situational context of the European history of religions can be characterized by a plurality of religions in antiquity, including Christian, Jewish and Muslim presence since late antiquity and the Middle Ages respectively. This has been accompanied by esoteric traditions rooted in late antiquity, being re-constructed since early modern times. The European history of religions also encompasses strong secular strands in the intellectual history since antiquity and especially since the time of enlightenment, ongoing processes of secularization and religious individualization and a great variety of new religious ideas and movements from all parts of the world since the eighteenth century. Contrary to global theories of religious resurgence, in most European countries (except some countries in the eastern parts of Europe) there is little or no evidence for any de-secularization on the individual, institutional or state level. Nevertheless, the political situations, especially state-church relations, and the situation in regard to religious education (see below) still differ greatly from country to country.

In Germany, the history of religions has been particularly characterized by the development of a system of privileged confessions since the sixteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Until 2005: *Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte*, i.e. German Association for the History of Religions.

ry (initially incorporating the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran churches), surrounded by a plurality of non-privileged and often persecuted religious *sects*. Instead of a single state-church, it created the idea of a 'neutral' state with close relations on equal terms to a limited number of religious institutions. This confessional way of organizing state-church-relations survived processes of secularization and religious pluralization after the time of enlightenment and still has a profound impact on the perception of religion in Germany, although it does not correspond to the current religious affiliation of the population. Whereas (out of a total population of 80 million) 24.6 million people (c. 31%) are members of the Roman Catholic church and 23.9 million members (c. 30%) of the Protestant *Landeskirchen* (REMID 2014), the group of the 'non-confessionals' comprises a comparable number of estimated 24 million people (c. 30%). Especially in Eastern Germany (i.e., the regional states previously forming the German Democratic Republic), church membership is the lowest in Europe – and probably in the world. In the federal state of Thuringia, with its capital Erfurt for instance, the number of non-confessionals amounts to 68% (with 8% Catholics, 24% Protestants). The situation is similar in the big cities in North and West Germany, especially in Berlin and Hamburg. Even in regional states with high rates of church membership (in particular: the southern states Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg), a majority of church members is fairly distanced from the respective confessions.

Nevertheless, the traditional system of church-state-relations with its specific 'confessional' character still has a profound influence on public institutions. The strictly confessional model of religious instruction in public schools can serve as an example, being the only school subject explicitly anchored in the German constitution (*Grundgesetz, Artikel 7.3*).<sup>2</sup> On the academic level, this system leads to the perpetuation of confessional faculties of theology, namely Protestant or Roman Catholic.<sup>3</sup>

Facing the challenges of religious pluralization, Germany still sticks to these traditions. Therefore, presently the German state tries to develop additional cen-

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<sup>2</sup> In regard to the general situation of Religion Education in Europe and the (possible or actual) contribution of *Religionswissenschaft / the Study of Religions* see the Numen special issue 2008, 121 – 236, ed. by Wanda Alberts and Tim Jensen; cf. Alberts 2008; in regard to Switzerland and Germany see Frank and Bochsinger 2008; see also Alberts 2007, Frank 2010, Frank 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Following suggestions of the German *Wissenschaftsrat* [Wissenschaftsrat 2010] there are presently great efforts on the federal as well as regional level to enhance this model of confessional theology – as well as confessional RE in public schools – by an Islamic variant. As a critical comment to this development, which also affects traditional academic structures in German Oriental studies, see Stroumsa 2010.

ters for 'Islamische Studien' (which is in fact meant to be *Islamic Theology*), implicitly forcing the German Muslims to create a common representative organization in a quasi 'confessional' way. In the case of Judaism, the *Hochschule für Jüdische Studien* was founded in 1979 as a private, state-recognized institution of higher learning, financed by the local and federal governments (in addition, in 1999 the *Abraham Geiger Kolleg* was founded at the University of Potsdam as an academic seminary for rabbis and cantors, co-financed by public and private institutions).

As a result of these contextual conditions, German *Religionswissenschaft* has developed a strong contra-identity against confessional theologies from its beginnings in the nineteenth century. Even scholars trained in theology like Nathan Söderblom from Sweden, being the first chair for 'Religionswissenschaft' in Germany from 1912 to 1914 in Leipzig, or the Marburg theologians Rudolf Otto and Friedrich Heiler, or later Gustav Mensching in Bonn, defined 'Religionswissenschaft' as non-confessional and non-dogmatic. They agreed on this point with non-theologians like Friedrich Max Müller, who – because of his German origin and publications – is usually held to be the founder of *Religionswissenschaft*, and also Joachim Wach or Walter Baetke (both Leipzig) in the first decades of the twentieth century.

As a further consequence of this long-term competitive environment, since the 1970s and 1980s, the leading strands of German speaking *Religionswissenschaft* discovered the 'cultural turn' for their discipline, carrying forward Clifford Geertz' perception of religion as a cultural symbol system and – at the same time – drawing from non-religious classics such as Max Weber or Émile Durkheim. This 'turn' was specifically directed against the older tradition of German, Dutch and Scandinavian 'Phenomenology of Religion' (*Religionsphänomenologie*), now seen as 'theological' despite its non-confessional self-conception. Today, this position has been mainstreamed within German *Religionswissenschaft*, defining itself as a secular or cultural discipline. It is now the standard model in nearly all German speaking universities, as far as they provide courses of studies in *Religionswissenschaft* on undergraduate or graduate level (see DVRW 2014). It also prepared a widening of the principal subjects: Whereas in traditional university settings, the discipline was specialized on 'non-Christian' (or at least: non-state church) topics, usually focusing on non-European strands of the History of Religions (*Religionsgeschichte*), it now added a systematic approach towards *Europäische Religionsgeschichte* (history of European religions) on the one hand, and *religiöse Gegenwartskultur* (contemporary religion) – be it in Europe or in other continents – on the other.

In more recent decades, German speaking *Religionswissenschaft* also contributed to other theoretical fields, such as aesthetical perspectives, ritual theory

or cognitive studies. The present dynamics of German *Religionswissenschaft* are well mirrored in the *Arbeitskreise* of the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft*: History of Religions in Asia; Contemporary Religions in Asia; Aesthetics of Religion; Islam, Religions and Politic; and Modern Mass Media.

At the same time, the dimension of *interreligious or interconfessional dialogue* was relegated from the disciplinary level (being at the very center of interest of earlier scholars like Friedrich Heiler or Rudolf Otto) to the level of a subject to be studied from an academic outsider or meta-position. Nevertheless, some representatives do not follow this model, but prefer the tradition of German *Religionsphänomenologie* or try to adopt to Anglo-American models of a non-confessional, pluralistic theology. Regarding the specific German situation sketched above, it is worth noticing that nearly all such scholars belong to Faculties of Theology. Other members of these faculties consequently follow the 'cultural turn' – or they make a clear-cut distinction between their contributions to a secular *Religionswissenschaft* on the one hand, *mission studies, ecumenical or intercultural theology* on the other (e.g. *Fachgruppe Religionswissenschaft und Missionswissenschaft* 2005).

With this sketch of the German situation, we hope to provide some basic information about the host country and its academic setting, but also take it as a case study for situating the dynamics of religion in a context of research: The German case might serve as an example in order to show how the study of religions – even in a situation of transnational studies and global networking – is still intertwined with specific national, or societal frameworks, be it those of the USA or Canada, China or Japan, South Africa or Nigeria, Brazil or Mexico. Even in the neighboring European countries the situation may be very different. Far from being comprehensive, we would like to give just some examples:

Although there is an intensive common academic discourse, even in the other German-speaking countries the religious context is partly different: Whereas the situation in Austria (the *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Religionswissenschaft* being the IAHR member organization) is characterized by a strong majority of Roman Catholics in combination with a long tradition of tolerance towards religious minorities, going back to the eighteenth century, in Switzerland (the *Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Religionswissenschaft/Société Suisse pour la science des religions* being the IAHR member organization) the experience of the confessional wars led to a rather secular framing of the constitutional law. Nevertheless, Switzerland is still characterized by an internal variety of cantons, some of them with a strong Roman-Catholic or Protestant (Evangelic-reformed) imprint, others widely secularized.

Looking beyond these countries, the situation in the United Kingdom (the *British Association for the Study of Religions* being the national IAHR member or-

ganization) seems to be much less 'confessional' on the everyday as well as the academic level; at the same time we feel that there is a similar imperative for a distinct professional identity of the academic study of religions. On the other hand, the dividing line between *phenomenology of religion* and *cultural turn* seems less distinct than in Germany – perhaps due to the influence of Ninian Smart's modernized version of the phenomenology of religion approach. In France, the situation is again different, as there is no comparable conceptualization, combining the research fields of *histoire des religions* and *sociologie des religions*, both including leading European scholars, in a common academic discipline (the *Société Ernest-Renan: Société Française d'Histoire des Religions* being the national IAHR member organization). In French-speaking Switzerland however, the term 'Science des religions' has developed as a common notion, intertwining historians and sociologists/anthropologists of religion, e.g. in the French naming of the IAHR member association *Société Suisse pour la science des religions*. In the Czech Republic (the *Czech Society for the Study of Religion*, founded in 1990 as the IAHR national member) the academic study of religions has greatly developed in recent years as an academic discipline in a widely secular context (comparable to Eastern Germany), whereas in Poland, with the *Polish Society for the Study of Religions* as member organization, the contextual situation again is different, being characterized – inter alia – by a strong presence of the Roman Catholic church. In Italy, or in Scandinavia, as well as in other European countries, the situation also differs widely from the examples sketched above.

Apart from these differences in relation to the historical developments and institutional settings, all European countries face a growing presence of new religious movements, transnational organizations, individualized forms of religion and spirituality, revitalization of 'old' religious traditions, different forms of religious neo-conservatism, and also a considerable degree of secularization. The annual conferences of the *European Association for the Study of Religions*, with their strong focus on Western esotericism, ancient and modern paganism, religion and migration, as well as on comparative issues, are a mirror of these developments, which are, to a great extent, independent from national or societal ramifications. The authors of this contribution are convinced that Europe is not an 'exceptional case' in this regard, but that these are current topics under discussion all around the world. Looking back at the different local/national/continental contexts including its past and present power relations may help to situate the multiple *dynamics of religion* in a common worldwide discourse of our discipline, the academic study of religions.

## The Call for Bids to Hold the 2015 IAHR Congress

The Call for Bids to host the XXI Quinquennial IAHR World Congress in 2015 was published in October 2009 in the IAHR e-Bulletin Supplement November 2009. The IAHR Executive Committee decided at its annual meeting in Messina, September 12–13, 2009 to publish the call for the 2015 Congress to all member associations and societies. The deadline for submissions was May 1, 2010; however, it was extended at the Toronto 2010 Congress to April 1, 2011.

The German Association for the Study of Religion (DVRW) decided to submit its proposal to the IAHR to host the XXI World Congress at a German university. After issuing an internal call for bids, three universities submitted proposals: the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, the Universität Erfurt and the Universität Potsdam.

Though all internal bids were equally strong, making a decision hard, the DVRW decided to support the Erfurt bid, which was submitted in the fall of 2010. The University of Erfurt was committed to hosting the Congress on their campus, while the City of Erfurt and state of Thuringia supported the bid by providing the services of a booking agency free of charge. The Erfurt bid was accepted by the DVRW at their executive committee meeting January 29/30, 2011. Though the decision was not unanimous – underlining the strength of the bids of both Bochum and Potsdam – the majority of the executive committee held that Erfurt had the necessary international academic network along with the academic and practical expertise to organize the Congress. It was also easy to reach by train and plane for all possible participants, as well as providing an interesting and varied cultural and historical landscape with its rich medieval history, Weimar classicism and, more recent, Socialist past. The case was also made that the rather small size of city and university would provide short ways, a higher degree of socializing and a denser Congress atmosphere in general.

The Erfurt bid was submitted by Christoph Bochinger, Bayreuth (president of the DVRW) and Jörg Rüpke, Erfurt (speaker of the Research School 'Religion' in Erfurt) on March 22, 2011. The bid was signed by Christoph Bochinger, Bayreuth, Jörg Rüpke, Martin Fuchs, Vasilios Makrides, Martin Mulsow, Anselm Schubert, Wolfgang Spickermann and Katharina Waldner (all Erfurt).

The bid made a strong case for Erfurt as host of the IAHR Congress, stressing the historical importance of the region for medieval and Christian reformation history and as a valuable location for scholars of religions, as it is situated at the crossroads of western and former socialist societies. Though the host institution is located in a relatively small city, as are other leading departments for the study of religions in Germany (e.g. Marburg, Heidelberg, Bayreuth), the host institution made the case that the institutional staff cooperating within the Re-

search School 'Religion' (RSR) has considerable experience in organizing national and international congresses of varying sizes, including the DVRW biannual meeting with around 300 participants in 2003 to the DAV Annual Meeting in 2012 with 1,000 participants, for which Jörg Rüpke acted as head of the organizing committee. The University of Erfurt supported the bid by creating a position for the prospective Congress Coordinator for five years, i. e., throughout the planning process and execution of the IAHR Congress (the position has been held by Elisabeth Begemann).

The Erfurt bid also included further information regarding the venue, travel incentives, points of interest for visitors, hotels (incl. prospective hotel costs), recreational activities in Erfurt, as well as the necessary infrastructure for a Congress of the potential size. It also included a first suggestion for a Congress theme, a first budget outline and preliminary schedule of activities as well as potential dates for the XXI IAHR Congress.

The IAHR Executive Committee unanimously accepted the joint proposal of DVRW and Erfurt at their annual meeting in Thimphu, Butan, July 3, 2011.

## Organizational Structure and Congress Theme

After the Erfurt bid was accepted by the IAHR, the steering committee overseeing the bid was transformed into the Organizing Committee, chaired by Jörg Rüpke and Tim Jensen as IAHR General Secretary, as well as Mar Marcos as IAHR Deputy General Secretary. Other members were Christoph Bochinger, Bayreuth, Wanda Alberts, Hannover, Martin Fuchs, Erfurt, Vasilios Makrides, Erfurt, Hubert Seiwert, Leipzig, Katja Triplett, Göttingen, and Katharina Waldner, Erfurt. The IAHR XXI World Congress Organizing Committee was supported by Elisabeth Begemann, Erfurt (Congress coordinator) and Bernd-Christian Otto, Erfurt.

The Organizing Committee decided on 'Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present' as theme for the upcoming IAHR Congress. A preliminary subdivision of the theme was included, outlining five areas to be addressed: adaptation, innovation, individual appropriation, traditionalism, and representation. These were later reformulated to 'Religious Communities in Society: Adaptation and Transformation', 'Practices and discourses: Innovation and tradition', 'The individual: Religiosity, spiritualities and individualization' and 'Methodology: Representations and Interpretations' (see above). The Call for Papers and Panels was issued in March 2013.

In a next step, the organizing committee deliberated about possible members for the Academic Program Committee. It was the intention of the Organizing Committee from the beginning to provide for valuable program elements of high

academic standards. They therefore opted for peer review of all incoming program proposals. Members of the Academic Program Committee were chosen accordingly. Their task was to evaluate submissions and accept or reject them for the Congress program based on the academic merit of the proposal alone, as all submissions were anonymized upon receipt. Scholars invited to the Academic Program Committee would therefore have to be internationally renowned scholars, experts in their various fields, and committed to the furthering of religious studies. In order to be able to provide knowledgeable feedback to the widely varying submissions organizers expected, a total of eighteen scholars were asked to act on the Academic Program Committee. They provided invaluable help during the planning process and the development of the XXI IAHR Congress program, evaluating a total of 1,655 individual papers, 1,102 of which were submitted as part of organized panels. Most of the submissions were of an academic standard that rendered papers acceptable for inclusion in the Congress program. Some were sent back to proposers for revision with the readers' comments. Only 156 papers had to be rejected outright, with no further possibility for revision.

The peer review process proceeded in two steps: first, the incoming proposal was anonymized and assigned a number by the Congress coordinator, then sent out for review to the appropriate member of the Program Committee. Their evaluation was included in the comprehensive Congress database, which was then, in regular intervals, sent out to the chairs of the Program Committee, Christoph Bochsinger and Mar Marcos. Both chairs had a fixed list of reviewers whose evaluation they were to either confirm or, in cases of indecisive votes, overturn when the necessity of redress arose, now also in knowledge of the proposer. Only very few evaluations were overturned; this happened, for example, in some instances in which the chairs of the Program Committee saw the merit of a given proposal not in the traditional panel form, but rather in the format of an open session, i.e., a format which allows for more discussion, away from the regular format of reading papers.

The review process was therefore twofold: a double-blind peer-review in the first instance, and the possibility of non-blind peer review in the second.

Prior to the evaluation process, the organizers had approached the lifelong members of the IAHR and asked them to act on the Advisory Committee of the XXI IAHR Congress in cases of dispute. We are happy to say that only once was there need to approach the Advisory Committee in this function, and this instance was not in the context of a disputed submission, but an instance in which the IAHR Congress was clearly meant to be used as a forum for 'confessional, apologetical or other similar concerns', contrary to the stated objective of the association. We extend our thanks to the Advisory Committee for the help rendered in this case!



After issuing the Call for Panels, Papers and Posters, the Organizing Committee installed a September 15, 2014 deadline for organized panels, a December 15, 2014 deadline for individual papers and posters. Applications were accepted beginning August 1, 2013 via the IAHR Congress website ([www.iahr2015.org](http://www.iahr2015.org)). However, the September deadline was extended to merge with the December deadline, as the number of submissions was still low in September. The by far largest part of proposals was received in the two weeks before the December deadline.

In evaluating the proposals, the Academic Program Committee and the Congress coordinator made good use of a password-protected cloud storage folder which enabled all parties to upload anonymized submissions, reviews and suggestions in large amounts, a much easier way of communication decisions than via e-mail. To ensure the safety of the data uploaded into the cloud, not only was the folder password-protected, but all submissions were also deleted after the reviewers' evaluations had been included in the Congress data base from the cloud folder.

All evaluations were finalized and communicated to the submitting parties by January 31, 2015. Those whose papers and panels had been accepted for presentation at the IAHR Congress were then asked to register for the Congress by May 15, 2015. This early deadline allowed for ample time to develop the final program before the Congress and for participants to plan their trip to Erfurt early on, which was especially important for participants coming from countries with visa restrictions.

## Finances

The XXI IAHR Congress was predominantly financed by the participants' fees. However, it was a major concern of the organizers to keep the Congress fee as low as possible in order to allow as many scholars as possible, from all stages of their academic careers and from economically well-off as well as economically challenged countries, to attend the 2015 meeting.

The initial Congress fee was set at € 150.00. Registration for this 'early bird' fee was possible until March 15, 2015. Regular registration at € 180.00 was possible until May 15, 2015, the date at which all active participants in the Congress program were to be registered to be included in the Congress program. Late registration for € 200.00 was possible until June 30, when registration closed, though some daily (€ 80.00) and weekly passes (€ 230.00) were available on site. The fee also incorporated a 'green fee' of € 30.00 per person, which was

agreed upon between the myclimate foundation and the organizers, to even out the carbon footprint of the Congress.

The Congress fee was structured in this way to encourage participants to register early on for the lower fee, thus for the organizers to be able to also develop the final program early on. This procedure was only partially successful, as most active participants registered on the last day possible, though a good half of all participants made use of the pre-March fee.

The Congress was also sponsored by various institutions and individuals, for which we are grateful. To mention is, of course, the University of Erfurt, which provided the necessary infrastructure free of charge, including the venue and a number of full- to part-time positions. Further means were granted by the German Research Foundation (DFG), which sponsored the Congress with € 34,000.00 within the framework of its Research Funding: International Scientific Events program. Another grant was given by the Ernst-Abbe-Stiftung, Jena (€ 20,000.00). We extend our heartfelt thanks to both institutions.

The Congress was initially sponsored by the DVRW, which bore all travelling and advertising costs of the first two years, until other means of financing the Congress were available. To this were added Congress helper stipends which aided students willing to support the Congress as official helpers to travel to and from Erfurt.

The state of Thuringia generously sponsored the rent for the opening venue, the Theater Erfurt, where both opening keynote and welcome reception were held on Sunday, August 23.

Individual keynotes were sponsored by the family of the late colleague Gary Lease (1940–2008), the *European Association for the Study of Religions* (EASR) and the *Japan Federation of Societies for the Study of Religions* (JFSSR).

Last, but not least, the IAHR contributed a large sum explicitly to be used for travel grants which allowed colleagues from all over the world to attend the Congress in Erfurt.

At the end of the Congress, the organizers are happy to say that all financial obligations have been met and that a slight surplus not only secures the Open Access publication of the Congress proceedings, but allowed for further travel grants to be paid out.

## Congress Attendance and Participation

With an eye to the past two Congresses in Tokyo and Toronto, the organizers calculated for 2015 with a participation of around 800 scholars in Erfurt. The Call for Panels, Papers and Posters was issued early on and distributed widely, mak-

ing use both of traditional ad media (flyers and presence of organizers at various conferences) and multiple e-lists. The Call was also, of course, included in a number of IAHR e-Bulletins. As planning for the 2015 Congress began early on, signs that word spread could be readily observed. The first proposal was received well before the CfP was issued in March 2013, sent in, as others were, per e-mail before the registration form on our website went online in August 2013.

Submissions via the portal were then, however, initially slow, despite the interest in the Congress. Only 133 proposals for panels with convened papers as well as individual papers or poster came in before the September 15, 2014 deadline, which made it a necessary decision to extend the deadline for organized panels to merge with the deadline for individual papers in December. And indeed, most submissions were made in the two weeks, and especially the weekend, preceding the deadline of Monday, December 15, 2014. Of the 722 proposals (convened panels and individual papers/posters), 237 were received on the last possible day, 554 within the last week. This amounted to a total number of 1,655 paper proposals that were received and reviewed by the Program Committee, 1,442 of which were accepted for the final program.

In planning the Congress, organizers had reckoned on a number of 800 participants, the means between a possible low attendance of only 600 and a high attendance of 1,000. To receive a number of more than 1,600 proposals for the IAHR Congress was unexpected and satisfying, though initially overwhelming. However, not all prospective participants with accepted papers or panels made it to the Congress, having to withdraw for various reasons, be they personal, professional or financial.

But still, the final count of registered participants pre-Congress was 1,370 persons registered, 125 of which cancelled on short notice (i.e., before August 12, 2015). Happily, the number of last-minute cancellations remained exceedingly low, only 29 colleagues needing to withdraw for various reasons in the week before or during the Congress. Another eighty colleagues attended the Congress spontaneously for at least one day, purchasing daily or weekly passes on site.

## Congress Venue

The XXI IAHR World Congress took place on the campus of the University of Erfurt. Space and infrastructure was provided by the University free of charge for use during the Congress. This included all available seminar rooms in multiple buildings as well as the cafeteria, the gym and the grounds, where a tent was erected for larger sessions and the Congress barbecue Wednesday evening.

The number of participants demanded that almost all seminar rooms were in perpetual use during the entire Congress week. However, it also demanded that extra space was found, as the daily plenary keynote addresses made it likely that not enough space could be provided in the lecture theaters on campus, the largest one of which seats 195.

The situation was worsened by the fact that the main lecture theatre, the Auditorium Maximum, was closed in February 2015 due to safety considerations, after an electrical outlet caught fire. The damage could, unfortunately, not be repaired until the beginning of the Congress, which is why the building was not to be used to ensure the safety of our participants. The organizers looked for alternatives, instead, and found two suitable ones and one which did, unfortunately, not work out.

The University gym could be blocked by the Congress and turned into a lecture hall seating 500 for the Congress. Though extra technical equipment had to be rented to provide for the appropriate sound and visual conditions, the gym provided a good alternative and was almost perpetually in use. The Congress also rented the lecture theater of the Helios Clinic across the street from the University campus. Though somewhat further off than all other venues, this venue also helped in deflecting overcrowding during the sessions.

A third measure was to put up a tent at the entrance to the campus. Though the tent was used on Monday, organizers had to concede defeat on Tuesday, as high winds and the nearby street made it impossible to ensure that speakers would be heard and understood. Though the tent remained standing throughout the Congress week, it did not provide a good alternative for sessions or keynote addresses.

While the Opening keynote had always been planned to take place in the Theater Erfurt, the same cannot be said for the Closing keynote and General Assembly. For this, we had counted on using the auditorium. Since that was, post-February, no longer an option, it became necessary to look around for alternatives. We were lucky to find a good alternative in the Alte Heizkraftwerk, which is not only right across the street from the site of the Opening night venue, thus being easy of access and providing a neat framework to the Congress, but also provided a nice contrast again to the opening venue, as the Kraftwerk is an old, almost derelict former power station, that is now used for cultural events in Erfurt. As luck would have it, the Achava festival took place in Erfurt at this time, wherefore the Kraftwerk was fully equipped with stage, chairs, technical and sound equipment, and ready for our use. An agreement with the festival's coordinator was quickly reached and we are grateful to them for allowing us use of the Kraftwerk at that time.

The overriding principle in planning for the IAHR Congress was that the venue be easy of access and that all roads be as short as possible. Since the University of Erfurt is rather small with only 5,500 students, all buildings are conveniently grouped together on campus. Participants could thus reach their sessions easily and with time to spare during the 30 minute breaks in the program. The cafeteria and various cafés on campus also provided nourishment during the program hours. The comparatively small (but historically rich) venue at Erfurt was felt to be a good setting for an IAHR congress, enabling easy communication and short distances. The Erfurt Congress was, in the history of the IAHR, one of the largest Congresses to be held.

## Financial Support to Attend the Congress

The XXI IAHR World Congress granted a number of Travel Grants to attend the meeting in Erfurt of up to € 1,000.00. Eligibility for a travel grant was given under the following conditions:<sup>4</sup>

1. The applicant was to be a paid up member of a national or regional association which is a member or an affiliate to the IAHR.
2. The applicant must have shown evidence of having sought funding from other available institutions or associations, such as the applicant's home university or national funding organization.
3. The applicant had to submit an abbreviated CV.
4. The applicant must have been included in the Congress program with a paper, as panel organizer or the like, fully approved by the Program Committee.
5. The applicant had to be registered as participant to the XXI IAHR World Congress (though this point was waived in a few cases, as the financial situation in these cases was such that attendance to the Congress was only possible with a travel grant; paying the Congress fee in advance would have been an exceeding hardship. However, once notice of the travel grant had been given, registration for the Congress had to be made before May 15 to remain eligible for the grant).
6. The applicant, if a student, was to present a letter of recommendation either from an official within the respective national association or from a senior scholar.

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<sup>4</sup> Full guidelines to be found under <http://www.iahr2015.org/iahr-registration/1698.html>

At the XXI IAHR Congress, we were happy to award 47 travel grants to colleagues from all over the globe. This was largely possible due to the generous contributions by the IAHR, the DFG and the Ernst-Abbe-Stiftung, which paid not only for the grants, but also allowed us to invite distinguished scholars as keynotes to Erfurt, as well as providing all Congress participants with a weekly pass for public transportation, easing the strain of having to pay for trips between the various hotels in the inner city and university campus, where the Congress was held, for all participants. This option was, as far as we can tell, made good use of.

Travel grants at the IAHR Congress amounted to a sum of € 34,720.76. They were granted for travel and housing costs. The Congress fee was not waived.

The Congress received 65 applications for travel grants. They were viewed and evaluated by a Travel Grant Committee which consisted of three members of the Organizing Committee, and subject to the final decision of the Organizing Committee. The criteria for evaluation were, apart from the above mentioned points, the academic value of their presentations at the IAHR Congress and such 'soft' criteria as economic situations in home nations, currency value, involvement in Religious Studies associations etc. As the Congress is meant to provide the opportunity to further the Study of Religions – in this context, on the international level – it was important to support those applicants who dedicate their professional lives to furthering the study of religions in their respective nations or regions and giving them the opportunity to meet fellow scholars who might aid them in this undertaking.

All grants were given up to and not exceeding a certain sum. We are very happy to say that quite a number of awardees were very careful with the money that was granted to them, and remained under the sum they were awarded.

The full list of travel grant awardees will of course be made available to the hosts of the XXII IAHR World Congress.

## Green Congress

The XXI IAHR Congress organizers cooperated with the myclimate foundation to offset the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions produced by the Congress, especially as regards short- and long-distance travel and waste material produced in the course of the Congress. The 'green fee' was calculated by the foundation and paid by the DVRW and the Congress, amounting to € 30.00 per person. This was a point which we felt strongly about, understanding our responsibility not only to the field of religious studies, but also to society at large and the future.

For this reason, both Session Guide and Abstract Book were only provided electronically, for download on the Congress website in all formats (PC, laptop, tablet or smart phone). We were also glad to provide participants with the Congress app, which was sponsored by the publishing house de Gruyter. It not only provided information on the program and the venue, but made quick updates possible, which became vital especially in the few cases in which a venue needed to be changed (such as the tent as lecture theatre) or presentations were cancelled.

We also encouraged our participants to make use of public transportation as much as possible, i. e., not only to use the Congress ticket allowing use of trams and buses free of charge for participants during the Congress week, but also, beforehand, encouraging our guests to come by train, if somehow possible. As the city of Erfurt is, in its center, relatively small and compact and all Congress hotels (as well as some of the budget accommodations we recommended) were located there, and the distance between train station, hotels and city center on the one hand and campus on the other is not great, taking the tram or the bus up to the Congress site or even walking there (especially along the river Gera, a picturesque route through various parks, which some of our guests made ample use of) was an easy and convenient way to move about during Congress week.

In order to minimize waste material and avoid masses of empty plastic water bottles, we organized for a water bar to be available during the Congress week, which was quite well received. We provided all participants with multiuse, durable cups emblazoned with the Congress logo for this use, which they were welcome to take home with them as a Congress souvenir.

However, the Congress did not offer free coffee breaks. Our reasoning was the following: while we did want to provide participants with the necessary refreshments, experience has shown that providing coffee in the necessary amounts to supply 900+ participants each day with coffee during various coffee breaks throughout a regular Congress day would amount to enormous amounts having to be brewed, as an optimal amount would be almost impossible to find – no matter how carefully calculated –, daily acceptance of the amount on offer would vary strongly, leaving either too little or too much coffee, which would then have to be poured out, undrunk. This was quite in contradiction to our stated aim of planning and executing the Congress as environmentally friendly as possible. Since the growing of coffee in huge plantations far from Europe leaves an measurable carbon footprint (in terms of the Congress: close to 30 kg CO<sub>2</sub> per day for two coffee breaks), we opted against offering free coffee. We ensured instead that all cafés on Campus, which would normally have had restricted hours during the semester break, remained open during all Congress hours, providing coffee, tea and other refreshments on demand, not producing great amounts of

extra beverages which would then have to be disposed of, unused. This was accepted by most participants, though some complaints regarding the lack of free coffee were also voiced. The fee was accordingly lower.

Since we also sought to minimize waste and printed material for the Congress, we did not provide Congress bags and discouraged advertising in printed formats. We offered ad placement instead in our online formats, in the Session Guide and Abstract Book with links embedded in the ads that would direct users to the advertisers' pages directly. This was supplemented by offline ads included in the app. Though many publishers asked for printed material to be placed in Congress bags initially, this being the 'regular' format, many were happy to make use of the format offered and placed ads, with embedded links, in our online program guides. Overall, this offer was well-received, beyond the circle of publishers and projects which were present at the Congress and participated in the Book Exhibit.

Although we cannot, of course, claim to have been an entirely green Congress, we do believe that our efforts before, during and after the Congress contributed somewhat to alleviate the stress on the environment produced by an event of this size and can only encourage others to consider similar measures for their own conferences.

## Congress Survey

A Congress survey among participants was conducted by the organizers well after the event. The timing was somewhat unfortunate, as we had intended to send out the survey much sooner; however, due to the multiple commitments of the organizers at their universities and in their research projects, preparing and sending out the survey was held up.

Participation in the survey was c. 20% (N=278). Most participants declared themselves satisfied (42%) or very satisfied (23%) with the Congress. The predominant reason for attendance was, of course, to present research (48%), while networking (37%) was another important reason for attending.

The academic program was overall declared to have been satisfying (48%) or very satisfying (18%). Especially the keynotes, which were meant to be, by the organizers, the 'anchors' to the Congress' overall topic, were deemed to be fitting for the IAHR Congress (92%), with 89% deeming the chosen topics as also fitting of the World Congress. Their presentations were overall judged to have been of high quality (70%).

Regarding the selection process, most found the review process helpful (41%) or very helpful (20%), with less than 2% stating they would have prefer-



red a program without peer review. The overall quality of sessions or panels was judged by 92% to be satisfactory or mostly satisfactory.

Regarding the social media and the Congress app, there is definite room for improvement, as only 7% made regular use of the Congress' Facebook and Twitter pages, and only 18% used the Congress app. A possible reason for this is that the Congress app was finished only just in time for the Congress, so many may not have been aware of it. While we had planned a much earlier release date, the number of sessions to be included in the app slowed us down again. We therefore urge the organizers of future Congresses to plan with ample time to spare in developing their Congress app.

In planning the Congress, we were aware that the lack of a printed program book would be a possible point of criticism. Therefore we communicated early on, via our website, that the full program book would only be available online, while also making sure that our guests would be provided with free campus WiFi. Indeed, the lack of a printed program was regularly commented on, with 54% stating that they would have preferred the program to have been provided in the regular, printed format. However, with 46% stating that they were happy without a printed program, we would like to encourage future Congress organizers to consider alternative, environmentally friendly ways to publish the program.

The majority of Congress attendees also agreed with the incorporated green fee (24% agree, 44% fully agree), which is another feature that can safely be recommended by us for future Congresses.

Our reasons for not providing coffee and other refreshments during breaks in the program have already been stated above (see the previous chapter). Almost half of the Congress participants agree with this policy (48%), without knowing our reasoning behind it (we are afraid we did not communicate them before the Congress, which, admittedly, was an oversight in preparing our guests for the event). When asked if participants would accept a higher fee to provide for catering during the breaks, 58% responded with 'no'.

The other major issue that was raised both during the Congress and in the comments of the survey, and which is reflected in the survey, regards the Congress' policy of asking participants to send their presentations in early. While we do understand that many continue to work on their presentations until the very last minute, this measure was put into place (and communicated over various channels) to keep the notebooks used during the Congress running throughout the entire week. Many participants were angered by this policy; our relaxing it on the second day of the Congress, however, immediately led to some of the hardware being infected with viruses. To have them ready and running the next day, the tech team worked late into the night to restore the notebooks to

a useable state. The policy was certainly not put into place to inconvenience our participants, but on the contrary, to have both our notebooks and their memory devices safe and functional and to allow a smooth running of the program. Despite repeated communications on this matter, the measure was not widely accepted. In retrospect, a more relaxed handling of this aspect would have seemed advisable, though it would have to have come at the cost of a larger tech team, which, in turn, would have raised the Congress fee for all participants.

Overall, most participants in the survey declared themselves happy and satisfied with the Congress (42% plus 23% very satisfied), the staff (34% plus 41% very satisfied) and organizers (40% plus 25% very satisfied).

The findings of the survey will of course be made available to future Congress organizers to aid them in their planning process.

We thank all participants in the survey for their trouble!

## Publications

Publications by the Congress organizers include the official Congress website, the Abstract Book (412 pp.) and Session Guide (28 pp.), both of which are available for download on the Congress website. The 2015 Congress being conscious of its responsibility to the environment, only very few copies were printed out and were available for sale (for a small fee) in the Congress secretariat during the Congress week. Despite the low fee less than ten copies of the Abstract Book were sold.

A hardcopy volume of the keynote presentations at the XXI IAHR World Congress is published in the fall 2016. An Open Access publication will not only include the keynote presentations, but also the abstracts of all papers delivered at the Congress in August.

Other papers presented at the IAHR Congress are under preparation in various journals and collective volumes, though the organizers are currently not aware of the preparation of a publication dedicated to a specific section or panel presented at the IAHR Congress.

## Acknowledgments

Before and during the Congress, we received much support from various institutions, departments and individuals, which must not remain without mention.

We are grateful to acknowledge the German Associations for the Study of Religions (DVRW), not only for supporting us financially from the word 'go' and

bearing all initial costs until other sources of funding could be made available for the Congress, but for the support and faith they showed to Erfurt to plan and organize the IAHR Congress and to faithfully mirror the width and depth of Religious Studies in Germany.

The German Research Foundation (DFG) supported us with a generous grant which enabled us to invite leading scholars in the field of Religious Studies from all over the globe to participate in the Congress. Much thanks to Eyke Dung, who coordinated our application and was always ready to help out with advice and aid.

The same thanks must be extended to the Ernst Abbe Stiftung in Jena, which is dedicated to support science, research, innovation and social projects in Thuringia. In supporting the XXI IAHR Congress, they contributed significantly to furthering Thuringia and Thuringian universities as centers for humanities and Religious Studies, especially, for which we are grateful.

The IAHR itself made available a significant sum of money to allow scholars from all over the world to attend the Congress. But our thanks to the IAHR extends beyond the financial to the much valued and always readily rendered advice whenever and wherever it was sought. In the planning process, it was immensely helpful for us to meet with the IAHR Executive Committee at regular intervals to present the current stage of planning and to work out the next steps to be taken, with the approval and input of the IAHR.

Many thanks to the *European Association for the Study of Religions* (EASR) and the *Japan Federation of Societies for the Study of Religions* (JFSSR), who both offered sponsorships for keynote speakers at the IAHR Congress. The EASR sponsored the keynote lecture by Kim Knott, while the JFSSR took on the sponsorship of Susumu Shimazono. We are grateful to both associations for the support they gave as member associations to the IAHR, underlining the significance of World Congresses of this kind.

Our heartfelt gratitude also goes to the family of our late colleague Gary Lease, who sponsored the Opening Keynote and Gary Lease Memorial Lecture with a significant contribution, which not only paid the travelling costs of the keynote speaker in full, but which also aided in covering the further costs of the Opening Keynote and Gary Lease Memorial Lecture.

The State of Thuringia made possible the opening and renting of the Theater Erfurt as venue for the opening ceremony, keynote and reception. We are very grateful to them for their support and ongoing interest in the Congress.

A further German sponsor wishing to remain anonymous supplied a significant grant which was to be used to aid in paying for the needs of the Congress helpers, marking them out and thus making them easily identifiable to all participants by providing the Congress with the trade-mark light-blue helper shirts.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution by Prof. Dr. Andreas Barner, president of the German Stifterverband, for his personal sponsoring of the Congress at a very early stage and by the Teekampagne, which kept our Congress helpers alert during their hours of work.

Last, but not least, we are happy and thankful to mention Thuringia Tourism, which cooperated with us from the very beginning to provide not only the platform, but also the means to register papers, panels and participants and provide them with hotels, tours and all other kinds of touristic services they may have required. Ms. Boegel and her team were tireless in their support to our Congress, adapting to our needs and demands and rendering invaluable aid.

The Congress could not have taken place in Erfurt without the continued support of the university itself. Both the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies and the Department of Religious Studies supported us with uncounted hours of manpower, especially in the last months before and during the Congress, in which the 'normal' operation of the Center came almost to naught, all units being busy with preparations for the Congress.

The president and chancellor of the university provided us with the necessary infrastructure and framework for the Congress and were always ready to help and to advise in all matters which went beyond the organizers' ability to solve.

The Registrar's Office provided the Congress with the necessary space for the event and was always available to help in cases of unforeseen problems, such as the closing of the Auditorium Maximum, to come up with possible and doable solutions.

All our ad material was carefully prepared and adapted to our needs by the Communications office. Their meticulous attention to detail and their creative input greatly eased the task of providing our prospective participants with attractive and informative material. They were also happy to jump in and coordinate messaging via the social media sites and the app during the Congress, for which, also, we are immensely grateful.

The Financial department helped, and continues to help, with all matters financial concerning the Congress. Little did we know at the beginning what this would entail, but we are truly grateful to the effort and to the many solutions found, despite multiple obstacles due to legal restrictions and international monies flow.

The Facilities Management did invaluable work before, during, and after the Congress, being always ready to answer to any call, long before announced or at short notice, not only preparing the campus for our guests, but to help with the largest delivery as well as with the smallest detail to be fixed.

The same gratitude is extended to the Media Center, which was available throughout the Congress week to make sure that the university-based media used during the Congress worked efficiently and that all sessions were provided with the media they needed.

Finally, campus security went beyond their call to make sure that all participants would be safe and well during the IAHR Congress, being available day and night and aiding wherever help was needed.

The IAHR Executive, President Rosalind I.J. Hackett and General Secretary Tim Jensen, were always available for advice and gave invaluable input at various stages of the planning process.

The greatest burden in developing the Academic Program, and with that, the heart of the IAHR Congress, was laid upon the Academic Program Committee. They performed admirably in reviewing the hundreds of proposals we received, providing reviews, suggestions for revisions and many, many helpful comments which aided in finally putting together a program that was worthy of a World Congress of Religious Studies.

Finally, we extend our gratitude and thanks to the Congress secretariat and the more than one hundred helpers who were on site to make sure that the Congress was executed to the satisfaction of, if not all, than almost all participants, working relentlessly and long hours to make sure that the Congress would be a success for both participants and the IAHR itself.

## Media

Regarding the cooperation with the media at the XXI IAHR Congress, much of what has been stated by the organizers at the last Congress in Toronto can be reiterated here: though we worked with our Communications office early on to alert the media to the Congress taking place in Erfurt, interest in the event itself remained somewhat low.

A news release issued by the Communications office was picked up by a number of newspapers, both regional and national, though follow-up information was only published in two cases. Three TV spots highlighting the Congress were aired on regional TV (MDR), focusing respectively on the field of Religious Studies in general and the Opening Ceremony at the Theater Erfurt, and on prominent colleagues in the field and their research. The major obstacle here seemed to be the depth of the field itself, which made it harder for journalists to find the general focus which would provide the interest for their audiences. Though there were quite a few papers and sessions at the Congress which bore directly on current news, e.g. the rise of the IS and martyrdom, it seems

it was felt that a Congress of Religious Studies did not offer much of general interest to media audiences. Of the three press passes issued, none was requested by a larger German news outlet, and only one was picked up.

However, newspapers did make use of the opportunity for phone interviews to support further information on the Congress during the Congress week.

The social media outlets, both Facebook and Twitter, were used predominantly by Congress participants themselves and did not, as far as we can tell, add to further interest in the Congress beyond the circle of colleagues already active in the field of Religious Studies.

## **Congress Website**

The Congress website, [www.iahr2015.org](http://www.iahr2015.org), will be active for the next two years. Further information regarding the Congress, such as the notification of the Open Access publication due in the fall of 2016 will be posted there when available.

The Congress organizers also made use of social media during the preparation for and the running of the XXI IAHR World Congress. Both Facebook and Twitter accounts (FB: International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) 2015; Twitter: @iahr\_congress) are still active and will be used for further information regarding the 2015 Congress.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The quality of the papers, the novelty of the results and the relevance for our understanding of the changing face of religion in past and present as discernible from the discussion have made the XXI World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions a huge success. We are happy to be able to present the many results of the Congress in a permanent as well as freely accessible form. We would like to thank again all those involved in the organization as well as all participants. In this moment, special thanks go to Elisabeth Bege-  
mann, who has been the backbone of the actual running of the Congress in all its phases, before as well as after.

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