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# Profiles of Centres for Religious Studies Involved in the ROAR Conference

## Introduction: Building Bridges

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When the ROAR conference was organised, an essential part of the scientific work – cooperation among students across European universities – took place. The process of making connections and forming ideas while cooperating on various topics is sometimes an underestimated activity during a student's life at university. However, it is hard to create a relevant and valuable project by oneself separated from the others with no opportunity to share the work process or accepting feedback. This is even more true in an academic setting, which is based on cooperation and sharing knowledge and paths carved by others. Therefore, as a form of making the cooperation visible, we introduce profiles of three centres for religious studies that contributed to the conference and made it accessible to students worldwide in an online form. So as the environmental conditions force us to close ourselves into our social bubbles, such events created by the conjoint forces of others are needed more than ever.

It is unfortunately very rare for students from various universities to work together on one common project. Nonetheless, it can be already said that the work of the organisers was fruitful. Apart from holding a successful conference and publishing some of the papers presented in this issue, a new student alliance has been formed. Its outcomes will be presented during 2021 in the form of a follow-up conference with more of the department's involvement. Hopefully, more projects like this one will emerge, and more bridges between our bubbles will be built.

## Department for the Study of Religions at the Masaryk University in Brno

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The Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University is one of the leading departments in Europe. It provides BA, MA, and PhD study programmes and has a strong research focus, reflected in encouraging students to acquire scientific skills in research spanning from historiographical methodologies to sociological, anthropological, and cognitive-psychological methodologies. The students have the opportunity to find their focal point of interest and to develop around it.

On an institutionalised level, the research focus manifests in the formation of two research centres – LEVYNA (Laboratory for Experimental Research of Religion) and CEDRR (Center for Digital Research of Religion). LEVYNA is an interdisciplinary research center seeking to understand both universal and cross-cultural variables in religious traditions utilising laboratory and field experimental methods. CEDRR is an interdisciplinary research centre applying computational methods in research into religion, hosting the Generative Historiography of Religion Project (GEHIR), the Dissident Networks Project (DISSINET), the Cultural Evolution of Moralizing Religions in the Ancient Mediterranean (CEMRAM), as well as several other research endeavours. These institutions are open to the involvement of PhD students, thus enabling them to make use of their expertise and to develop it further.

Besides the research focus, our department is also making an active effort to make its students understand the applied value of religious studies and its importance outside the university realm. Students have the opportunity to acquire skills in applying religious studies in spheres of non-government, tourism, etc.

An active connection with the lived and alive side of religion is maintained by undertaking excursions to religious sites and communities around Brno as well as the whole Czech Republic (and neighbouring countries). Further cultivation of religious studies-imagination is possible through a host of extracurricular student-organised activities, such as biweekly debates club, movies club, or ReliŘeči (a mini conference-like platform designed for the cultivation of presentation skills and sharing of student papers). These activities can always be accompanied by a CEEPUS or ERASMUS+ stay at other European departments dedicated to the study of religions – currently in Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Poland.

We are not a vast community and that enables us to keep close bonds and relationships among students and also with the lecturers. Once in a time, we all like to go and grab a beer together.

### **Center for Religious Studies at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest**

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Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) is one of the oldest academic institutes in Hungary; in 2020, it celebrated its 385th anniversary. It has many faculties (e.g., Humanities, Sciences, Social Sciences), and thousands of students gain acceptance each year.

The Faculty of Humanities (BTK) is the biggest at ELTE and one of the biggest in Central Europe as well. ELTE BTK has 18 institutes and 71 departments offering 47 Bachelor's, 61 Master's and 75 PhD programs of 4 doctoral schools. It is located on historical Treffort campus, where students are able to get their education in classic but modernised buildings. In order

to provide high-level education, many conferences are held at ELTE BTK each year, and multiple research groups are conducting research as well (for example, the prestigious *Lendület* research program has many groups at BTK and other faculties). Furthermore, students are also encouraged to apply to the Erasmus program, where they are able to travel abroad to study at one of the partnered universities.

The Center for Religious Studies at ELTE provides a comprehensive view of world's religions and their history. The students may apply to the minor program at Bachelor's level, and they are able to continue their religious studies at Master's and PhD level as well. During this program the students have the chance to gain multidisciplinary knowledge in their chosen field, and attend many field trips (e.g., visits to various Christian, Jew, and Muslim services, also Krishna-conscious rituals). The Center for Religious Studies hosts the History of Liturgy study group where the students can join to study the historical changes of Christian liturgy.

### **Studying at the Center for Religious Studies (CRS) at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest/Vienna**

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Religion is one of the most difficult terms to properly define. For the Ancient Romans, the Latin word *religio/religionis*, from which our modern expression derives, referred collectively to ritual, worship, reverence, obligation, rite, sanctity, rule, etc. Perhaps due to the complexity of the word, ancient linguists could not agree on its etymological origin. In one version, *religio* could be the combination of three grammatical elements; the prefix “re-”, which indicates intensity; the verb “ligare”, which means to bind or to tie; and the suffix “-io”, which entails an action. According to this etymological description, *religio* could mean something on the lines of “the action by which man is strongly bound to the divine”. For the Romans, who famously considered themselves to be the most religious of all peoples, this strong bond was present in every aspect of daily life: rituals, historical events, natural events, social relations, war and peace, among others.

However, this bond between human and divine has changed with time. In contemporary western society, for example, very few would conceive of *religion* as wide and encompassing as the Ancient Romans did. However, despite the “secular nature” of twenty-first century society, one can argue that religion has never left. Not only are some of the major public debates today still influenced by religion – such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, or the environmental crisis –, new religious movements have also started to occupy some of the spaces of institutionalised religions in personal care and community life. Furthermore, some of the most impactful contemporary international events, such as the ongoing Syrian civil war, are still influenced by long-lasting religious rivalries

and ideas. Modern society might arguably be categorised as a secular one, but, as for the Romans, religion is still present in much of our daily lives.

The Center for Religious Studies (CRS) at the Central European University (CEU) provides students an opportunity to consider the role that religion plays in both past and contemporary societies through the lens of a wide array of academic fields and intellectual perspectives. The CRS encourages and supports students in the research of religious phenomena while also offering foundational courses on the study of religion. Their purpose is to deepen the student's awareness and familiarity with modern academic religious studies concepts and vernacular. At the same time it uses a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to familiarise students with contemporary academia's latest methodologies and debates. Currently available to students from 10 different departments and units at CEU, Religious Studies supports student research in areas such as history, political science, gender studies, medieval studies, international relations, sociology, nationalism studies, philosophy, cultural heritage, and public policy. This, together with CEU's multicultural faculty and student body, results in a vibrant, dynamic and open environment for intellectual discussion and scholarly work.

Through its events and research projects, CRS also strives to create more opportunities for students to engage with contemporary international academia. The annual PhD conference offers new and experienced researchers from all over the world to share their research and network with peers who have a shared interest in the study of religion. Organised and designed by doctoral students, the annual PhD conference has brought together researchers with interests as varied as religion and the state, debates and disagreements among religious movements, religion as a form of resistance, sacred locations and geography, and ritual and well-being. As a research center, the CRS also regularly hosts lectures from international leading figures in the field of Religious Studies, with a focus on cross and multiple-disciplinary approaches.<sup>1</sup>

In the second chapter of the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes what the universal peace at the end of times would be like, in which all peoples would "beat their swords into plowshares", and later in chapter 10 he condemned the injustices against the weak and the oppressed. Religious movements, both major

<sup>1</sup> For more information see some of CRS's prestigious guest lectures and lecture series here at <https://religion.ceu.edu/videos>. CRS is currently hosting two research projects:

***Meant to Be: Resuscitating the Metaphysics of Teleology:*** The chief goal of this project is to foster intelligent debate on philosophical issues concerning science, religion, and their conflicts and connections. These can be related to goal-directedness, or teleology, a central topic in philosophy for thousands of years, but today rarely discussed. Run by principal investigator Daniel Kodaj, research assistant Tamás Paár, and co-investigators László Bernáth and Martin Pickup, activities include a public seminar series, two international conferences, two edited volumes, and an online materials and bibliography that will be available online at the project website [www.teloi.org](http://www.teloi.org).

***Striking from the Margins Project II: From Disintegration to Reconstitution of State and Religion in the Middle East: A continuation of Phase I (2017–2019):*** This project seeks to bring to light a nuanced and dynamic understanding of the transformations of religion in relation to state and social structures, most specifically in Syria and Iraq, over the past three decades. This project, run by Professors Nadia Al-Bagdadi and Aziz Al-Azmeh, includes several international conferences, publications, and a public lecture series. For more information, please consult the CRS website for more details at <https://religion.ceu.edu/sfm>.

and smaller, have striven to live for these noble ideals: that people should be treated fairly and with dignity, while all of us should struggle for peace both at a personal and social level. However, we have also seen how religious rhetoric can be used in the opposite direction: to promote conflict and justify injustice; we can sadly see this in many political and social movements. The questions related to the role that religion plays in our contemporary world has become fundamentally relevant to understand and improve our societies. We hope to see you at the CRS and join us in our academic efforts to build societies that uphold the ideals freedom and the respect of human rights and dignity.

