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Religio. 2024, vol. 32, iss. 2, pp. 353-356

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-38673>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80722>

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Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20241118

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The ISORECEA Conference “Religious Diversity and Social Cohesion in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond”, Tirana, April 25 – 27, 2024

ZUZANA BÁRTOVÁ

Tirana, the capital of Albania, hosted the 16th conference of the International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association (ISORECEA) organised in cooperation with University College Bedër and COST Action “Connecting Theory and Practical Issues of Migration and Religious Diversity” (COREnet). The conference, entitled “Religious Diversity and Social Cohesion in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond”, ran from April 25 to 27, 2024 and was attended by more than a hundred and twenty scholars from central and eastern Europe (CEE) and beyond. Albania welcomed this bi-annual conference for the first time, confirming the growing importance of the ISORECEA.

The call for papers for the conference focused on religious diversity, emphasising its repercussions on society and the obstacles it presents. It delved into the local constellations of religious diversity in the CEE region in contrast to other geopolitical locations. Additionally, it examined the role of religion in fostering social unity and the religious aspect of socio-political division.

As the conference was a joint effort by different institutions, it consisted of three plenary sessions with keynote lectures, six COREnet sessions, and eighteen parallel sessions, spread over three days. Different presenters covered a variety of theoretical angles to analyse religion. The first keynote speaker, Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska, the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Cracow, proposed a psychological approach to media representations of refugees. Her lecture highlighted the determinants of negative attitudes towards refugees in contrast to narratives showcasing their resilience in response to adversity. Diverse actors including scholars, non-governmental organisations, policymakers, and religious groups play a role in shaping public perceptions of refugees and leveraging them to ad-



Religio 32/2, 2024, 353-356.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-38673>

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vance their interests. She recommended engaging refugees as collaborative partners in research endeavours.

In the second keynote address, sociologist Marian Burchardt, Leipzig University, examined how religion is visible or invisible within architectural structures like the interconfessional House of One in Berlin, the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris amidst the fire incident, and the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba. The author argued that different regulations and bottom-up initiatives influence this visibility and participate in the fabrication of religious differences.

In the third keynote speech, Johann Hafner, the University of Potsdam, drew parallels between religion and a rainbow while examining the intersections of religion with the secular domain. Thinking about a religious spectre would offer the potential for a clear delimitation of religion and the ascription of religious identity to individuals who might not acknowledge it. By embracing the theory of functional differentiation, he argued that religion is poised to gradually dissipate within the fabric of society in the future.

One of the COREnet panels brought together researchers working on religious entrepreneurship and economic issues. Laura Diaconu, Elena Toader and Mihai Bogdan Petrișor, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, studied this intersection involving Romanian students enrolled in economic departments and affiliated to Catholicism and Orthodoxy. They examined how religious beliefs motivate students to initiate entrepreneurial endeavours. Marco Galić, the Institute for Balkan Studies, analysed various enterprises established by Seventh Day Adventists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and highlighted the correlation between their economic pursuits and religious affiliation. Davide Nicola Carnevale, University of Ferrara, in his research on immigrant Georgian women living in Italy, focused on their agency and leadership roles within the economic and religious spheres.

The first parallel session selected for review here, entitled “Polarizing Religion”, introduced scholarship on the role of religion in societal conflicts. Marjan Smrke, the University of Ljubljana, discussed how the abuse of women by the Slovenian Catholic artist Rupnik had only weak consequences for the Catholic Church in Slovenia. Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić and Dinka Marinović Jerolimov, Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, and Siniša Zrinščak, the University of Zagreb, also explored the issue of abuse within the Catholic Church. Through their research of newspaper articles, they concluded that different cases failed to escalate into scandals due to factors like the communist legacy, the patriarchal structures of society, and the willingness to conceal such misconduct. Željko Pavić and Krunoslav Vukelić, the University of Osijek, concentrated on the quantitative study of

the polarisation of Croatian society. Despite the increase in liberalism within society, there has been a rise in political polarisation attributed to divisions among the elites. Similarly, Irena Borowik, the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, scrutinised the discourses of two Polish Catholic newspapers and their role in societal polarisation and their potential efforts to bridge these divides. The panel concluded with Valdis Tēraudkalns, the University of Latvia, presenting a paper on the Orthodox Church in Latvia and its manoeuvring between the Russian patriarchate, Russian political parties, and Latvian political leadership regarding security issues.

The second parallel session focused on religious diversity and social cohesion. Miroslav Tižik, Slovak Academy of Sciences, used comparative data from EVS encompassing sixteen nations and identified different world-view types prevalent in various countries irrespective of geographical variations. Rita Hegedűs and Anna Vancsó, Corvinus University of Budapest, discussed the controversial debate on denominational census data in Hungary, triggered by an important 40% non-response rate and revealed through media content analysis. Miklós Gyorgyovich, Károli Gáspár University, addressed the significance of Christian culture in Hungary amidst decreasing institutional religiosity. Dávid Kollár, Budapest Metropolitan University, provided an analysis of religiosity in Hungary in the context of social stratification using the Weberian approach. The panel concluded with a presentation by Márton Csanády, Budapest Metropolitan University, on Protestant denominations in Hungarian censuses throughout different periods.

The third parallel session on experiencing religion was limited to two speakers. Sára Eszter Heidl, the University of Erfurt, presented her newly-crafted concept of religionesque experience based on her empirical research into a mindfulness festival in Hungary. Zuzana Bártoová, the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, challenged the religious/spiritual divide in case studies of Buddhist practitioners (from France and Czechia) and those referring to mindfulness meditation (Slovakia), refusing to perceive their activities as spiritual. These emic stances towards both common sense and scientific concepts of religion and spirituality demonstrate the enduring relevance of the concept of religion, provided that its definition is adjusted to religious transformations.

At the conference's conclusion, the attendees partook in a guided city excursion led by local organisers, who imparted insightful knowledge regarding the city's architectural landscape and Albanian socio-political environment. Aligning with the central theme of the conference, the tour encompassed a stop at Ethem Bey Mosque, the Orthodox Cathedral, and the Catholic Cathedral and was accompanied by brief elucidations on each religious community and the dynamics of inter-faith relations by local



religious authorities. The conference drew to a close on the following day with a visit to the captivating Berat city, a designated UNESCO World Heritage site, marking the end of a successful event.