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*Religio*. 2024, vol. 32, iss. 2, pp. 363-373

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

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-38845>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80724>

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Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20241118

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## *Report on the Center for Studies on New Religions' 2024 conference, held in Bordeaux, France, from 12 to 15 June, 2024*

MÁRK NEMES

When it comes to studying new religious movements, one organization stands out as the foremost authority in continental Europe. Established in 1988, the Center for Studies on New Religions (*Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni*) – or as most know it, CESNUR – is an international academic network of new religions scholars, actively shaping research trajectories and public discussion about minority religiosity. Additionally, this association provides a stable and credible platform for scholars from various fields to engage with representatives of new religions, cultivating new research initiatives and professional connections while assisting them in addressing more complex issues within alternative and emergent religious movements.

Besides its globally recognized library in Torino, Italy – containing one of the biggest collections of new religions studies with more than 72.000 titles – CESNUR is most known for its yearly conferences, which have been held in various countries since 1988. In 2024, this thematized academic forum was held at Université Bordeaux Montaigne in France. The three-day symposium, organized on the grounds of Europe's second-biggest campus, was visited by a diverse range of attendees, including leading scholars of the field, aspiring new researchers, young university students, representatives of public authorities, journalists, as well as delegates from several new religious movements and even associates from known anti-cult organizations. The author of this article had the privilege<sup>1</sup> of being part of this colorful palette as a young scholar and presenter and had a chance to attend several of the organized sessions.

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<sup>1</sup> In attending the conference, the author was financially supported by the Laura and Lorenz Reibling Family Foundation (LLRFF).



The 2024 conference was exceptional for a variety of reasons. First of these was the tragic – and at that time relatively recent – passing of CESNUR’s former director, PierLuigi Zoccatelli (1965-2024). He played a crucial role in organizing the Bordeaux conference, and his absence was deeply felt. The fact that his position is (at the writing of this article) still vacant at CESNUR underscores the importance of his personality and his role in maintaining such a large international organization. In his memory, the organizing committee dedicated this event to him.



Opening of the CESNUR 2024 conference  
Source: Márk Nemes, 12. 6. 2024.

Another element that made the conference unique was its location. France – a nation known for *laïcité*, a uniquely strong position in separating church and state – was a bold choice for organizing a conference discussing new religious movements. Bringing topics to a popular university campus that previously created heated public debate in France – such as the Family Federation (formerly known as Unification Church), Jehovah’s Witnesses, or the Church of Scientology – indeed brought some challenges for the organizers. Bernadette Rigal-Cellard (University of Bordeaux Montaigne, Bordeaux, France), the host of the conference, reflected on these during her opening speech. She mentioned that the ‘cultic narrative’ is still considered a dominant paradigm in France, fueling the state-sponsorship of anti-cultic and ‘cult watch’ organizations. However, she underlined that Université Bordeaux Montaigne has always protected its scholars and students from such influences and did not allow any external forces to interfere or disturb the academic work or the planning of this event. Strong support for this well-planned conference also came from the students’ side. An impressive number of young university students and

alumni voluntarily offered their time and effort to bring this event to fruition and to assist in the acclimatization of visiting lecturers and guest delegates coming from all over the world.

Lastly, the third element that made this conference unique was its theme, “The Contribution of Minority Religions to Society”. Instead of focusing on conventional themes known from religious studies<sup>2</sup> – such as crisis, pluralism, re/disenchantment, traditionalism, innovation, etc. – this year’s event targeted a never explicitly examined direction with ‘contribution’. Focusing instead on the positive societal effects of alternative religiosity allowed the speakers and attendees to further dissect the familiar minority-majority dichotomy of smaller movements and culture-encompassing greater religions. Gaining an even deeper understanding of how new and minority religions may contribute to the greater society – where they are mostly peripheralized – recontextualized several already-known subjects in almost every thematic panel during the three days of the conference.

With the conclusion of Bernadette Rigal-Cellard and the Organizing Committee’s opening speech, the conference officially started with a keynote lecture by Eileen Barker, who arrived a slightly later due to a series of misfortunes, including her being misdirected by airport staff and missing a flight. Upon her arrival, Barker delivered a fantastic overview of the numerous possible types of social contribution, including the challenging of legal definitions of religion, the reshuffling of prioritized loyalties to the state or (religious) conscience, the strengthening of foundational human rights, and many more. She explicitly noted the positive effects of exploring alternative medical treatments, the benefits of secondary social safety nets manifesting as NRM<sup>3</sup>-affiliate welfare programs, and the innovative forms of education and artistic expression and production – even social activism or environmentalism –, all associated with various new religious movements.

Her keynote presentation was followed by yet another excellent contribution, this by J. Gordon Melton (Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA). Melton raised a similarly intriguing subject as the first lecturer in his panel titled “Asian New Religions’ Contributions to Society”. His lecture focused on interpretations of the Golden Mother mythical figure in East-Asian-born American communities – particularly in New York by the late 1950s. Melton underscored how this mythical figure turned out to be a common

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2 These topics were the subjects of previous CESNUR conferences. For further information, see CESNUR, Center for Studies on New Religions [online], “Past Conferences (from May 1997)”, <<https://www.cesnur.org/conferenze.htm>>, [13. 7. 2024].

3 New religious movements.

denominator for the era's East Asian immigrants and how the deity functioned as a cultural, cross-generational bonding agent, maintaining Taiwanese cultural heritage in an alien sociocultural environment. The second lecturer on the panel was Massimo Introvigne, the founder of CESNUR. His presentation consisted of a careful yet thorough examination of Ti Ji Men's global peace advocacy – dissecting the multi-layered usage of the “Bell of World Peace and the dragon dance”. In both instances, he based his statements upon a theoretical framework, inherited from PierLuigi Zoccatelli, which he referred to as the “esoteric paradigm”. The third presentation of this session changed from a conventional lecture structure to a brief introduction and a pre-determined Q&A session between two speakers. Here, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard took the role of the questioner. At the same time, Canh Quang Tran from Cao Dai's Overseas Mission responded to the given subjects concerning Cao Dai's practice, worldview, and social contributions. Bae Kyuhan (Daejin University, Pocheon City, South Korea) followed this unconventional Q&A session with a brief overview of the Korean Daesoon Jinrihoe movement, during which he introduced us to a survey conducted in Korea, focused on the types of social contributions Koreans deemed beneficial and the forms of activism Daesoon Jinrihoe conducts. The fifth presenter was Benjamin Penny (Australian National University, Canberra, Australia), who embarked upon yet another intriguing historical-linguistical exploration, dissecting the multi-layered character of Wangchan Laozu – a revered figure in the Weixin Shengjiao movement. His lecture was later complemented by Fiona Hsin-Fang Chang's (Weixin Shengjiao College, Nantou, Taiwan) paper, who further elaborated on how Wangchan Laozu is depicted in Weixin Shengjiao practices.

It is customary at CESNUR conferences to provide an opportunity for members of new religious movements to present their own interpretations and personal perspectives on current issues in a controlled setting. A prime example of this was the panel “Storming Zion Revisited: Militarized Raids and the Resurgence of Brainwashing Theory – Emic and Etic Perspectives”, which further examined the phenomenon of excessive power and the use of deterrent on subjects labeled as ‘cults’. In this panel, Susan Palmer (Concordia University, Montreal, Canada), Alessandro Amicarelli (Attorney, London, UK), and Massimo Introvigne represented the scholarly side. At the same time, Maria Vardé (University of Buenos Aires, Argentina), Diana Cacciali (Institute of Applied Arts, Bahía Blanca, Argentina), Camelia Marin (Soteria International, Copenhagen, Denmark), Martin Krajča (Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia) offered emic narratives and personal recollections on the effects of state and armed force overreactions. Each lecture and testimony underscored similar problems

connected to militarized raids on minority communities. The personal recollections highlighted that new and alternative religious community members' accounts were never considered in these instances. Moreover, these lectures and personal recollections indicated that individual accounts were rejected based on concepts that have long been discredited, such as Margaret Singer's brainwashing theory. Lastly, the two perspectives arrived at a meeting point, underlining that state officials tend to consider their actions appropriate, while the supposed 'cult' members typically express feelings of harm after such transgressions. The conclusion connected the panel's subject to the tragic events at Waco in 1993. Furthermore, the personal accounts contemporized this still-lingering problem and highlighted the possible fallacies of utilizing excessive power in delicate situations.

The first day ended with three simultaneous panels: one discussing North American religious and social trends, one taking a deep dive into Tai Ji Men's legal struggles, and one about "New Old" religious contributions to society. Of these, the author of the article attended the first one. Titled "North American Contributions – and Concerns", this last session opened with Dyron Daugherty's contribution (Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, USA) about the historical background behind the extreme polarization of contemporary religious US society. Daugherty stressed that the root of current turbulence leads back to the 1960s, when religious activism with greater political ferment (such as the Campus Christian Crusade) increased the distance between the Christian right and left. The so-called 'Evangelical boom' – with figures such as Billy Graham – created distinct demarcation lines in American society, along which political standpoints were also declared. Daugherty's paper pointed out that in the US, the religious population is now more likely to be divided along political lines than religious ones. One development of this shift was further explored by the second presenter, Edward Irons (The Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion, Hong Kong). In his paper, Irons asked the question of whether scholars could (or should) consider active conspiracy networks as religious movements. In this endeavor, his exemplum was the American QAnon movement. Irons outlined several exciting parallels to religiosity, such as the common occurrence of myths, a shared materiality, an internal social structure complementing the wider society, and even distinct channels of authority; however, in the end, he concluded that QAnon still lacks several substantive elements that would allow it to be fully classified as a form of proto-religion.

This third panel also allowed time for the Info-Cult representative Sam Downs (Info-Cult, Montreal, Canada) to introduce a parallel and not necessarily positive interpretation of new religions' contributions to society.

Downs's paper shifted the focus from a movement-based or societal perspective in order to highlight Info-Cult's active role in Canada in establishing ex-member support groups and creating safe-space therapeutic communities for individuals transitioning out of what anti-cultic literature refers to as "high-control" religious groups. The afternoon concluded with Marie Gayte-Lebrun's lecture (University of Toulon, France) about the Catholic spiritual – and, at the same time, economic – revival in America's underdeveloped Rust Belt. Her case study examined how Steubenville (Ohio) has been revitalized through the active involvement of Catholic families and how their religious-based work has strengthened the social safety net and helped in the battle against radical depopulation, crime, and deep poverty. Following Gayte-Lebrun's lecture, the participants were free to explore the beautiful evening city of Bordeaux and prepare for the second day with the help of delicious French cuisine.

The second day opened with a plenary discussion about the "Jehovah's Witness test". The panel consisted of Emily B. Baran (Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, USA), George D. Chrystides (York St John University, UK), and Zoe Knox (University of Leicester, UK), who introduced the audience to an ongoing project's early results, which aimed to refine several aspects of how the field views the Witness community.

After a brief coffee break, a second session discussed the Unification Church's situation in Japan. Massimo Introvigne outlined the current situation, connecting the defamation campaign against the Unification Church and the assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe, after which the audience heard four emic accounts from representatives of the Family Federation (a.k.a. the Unification Church). Tatsuki Nakayama (International Lawyer, Japan) and Norishige Kondo (Deputy Director of the Legal Affairs Department, Japan) outlined the legal contexts of the ongoing dissolution process of the Church in Japan. At the same time, Moriko Hori (Vice President and the National President of WFWP) and Suzuko Hirschmann (Unification Church member) provided personal inputs and stories on how the dissolution process affects the movement and its membership in Japan. The panel closed with Michael Balcomb's (President of Family Federation Europe and Middle East) conclusion, who underlined the effects of the societal stigma created by the incident in Japan, emphasizing that these are detectable even in European environments.

During the second day's lunch break – besides the traditional networking and connection-building – the International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR, of which CENUR is a part) also held its annual meeting. In addition to the usual Board members, the meeting was attended by a wide range of young researchers – including the author. Here, the

Board took time to introduce the ISSNR's current aims in revitalizing their periodical, the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*. Moreover, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard expressed her and the Board's motivation to expand the Editorial team for the journal further in order to accelerate an otherwise lengthy publishing process. Rigal-Cellard also outlined a direction for the journal: to serve as a 'close second' or even contender for the currently leading *Nova Religio*, but with the aim of cultivating a more researcher-oriented evaluation and publishing process.

After the lunch break, the following panel discussion focused on a newly-published book from Donald Westbrook (San José State University, San José, California, USA), titled *Anticultism in France: Scientology, Religious Freedom, and the Future of New and Minority Religions*.<sup>4</sup> The author, accompanied by four panelists – Attila Miklovicz (Ph.D. candidate, University of Pécs, Hungary), Massimo Introvigne, Eric Roux (European Office of the Church of Scientology, Brussels, Belgium) and Bernadette Rigal-Cellard – delivered a thorough introduction to Scientology's situation and social acceptance in France and Europe. While Westbrook focused on the historical milestones of Scientology's European history, Miklovicz posited parallels with previous and ongoing events in Hungarian contexts. Complementing these, Introvigne offered valuable insights into how current French legislation has changed and how specific politically connected movements – such as FECRIS and MIVILUDES – may have gained stronger positions in a social environment where moral panics may still occur about certain new religious movements. These last statements were underlined by Roux, who took a step further and stated that recent laws in France have steadily reduced the space for the existence of new and minority religions, including Scientology.

The second conference day concluded with three parallel panels, similarly to the first day. The first of these examined Jehovah's Witnesses' contributions to civil societies. At the same time, the other two focused on a Sunni-derivative new religious movement called the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light and various other spiritual movements' notable social contributions. Of these, the author attended the first session, titled "Jehovah's Witnesses' Active Participation in Civil Societies: Value for Society Resulting from Efforts to Establish Rights Based on Freedom of Conscience". The panel opened with Samuel Mancuso's (La Sapienza University, Rome, Italy) paper about the complications, challenges, and successes in defending Jehovah's Witnesses' patient autonomy in refusing to receive blood samples during medical procedures. Mancuso emphasized

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4 This title is one of the most recent additions to the successful series of *Cambridge Elements in New Religious Movements*.



that besides avoiding the moral complications for Jehovah's Witnesses in receiving blood from others, alternative patient blood management may offer similar – if not safer – solutions for Witnesses in previously blood-transfusion-involved medical procedures. The second speaker, Shane Brady (Attorney, Barrister, London, United Kingdom), introduced the audience to the lengthy history of legal battles fought by Witnesses for freedom of conscience (conscientious objection to military or armed service), freedom of expression, association, and religion (fights to maintain the standing and door-to-door proselytization system); and the right to self-determination (reconnecting the subject to the aforementioned blood question). The third lecturer, Reginald Akuoko Duah (University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana), discussed the arduous task taken up by Ghanaian Witnesses in translating, preserving, and modernizing fourteen different local language variants and dialects in Ghana. Duah outlined the significance of regional factors that further complicate this project, such as the inconsistencies in Ghanaian general education, the varying levels of mother tongue literacy among children and adults, and the lack of general technical equipment, standardized methods, and a standard corpus in studying languages. In his interpretation, the New World translation of the Bible – utilized by Witnesses – may help Ghanaians overcome several of these challenges. The panel concluded with George D. Chrystides's input, who enlightened listeners about the structure of the UK Witness organization and its unique elderly-care facilities called Jah-Jireh Homes. Chrystides pointed out that such a network of social homes could lower the pressure on the state welfare system while providing a more efficient, financially viable, and familiar – therefore more trustworthy for the involved – solution for elderly Witness care.

The third and final conference day was filled with numerous exciting sessions. During the morning, four sessions took place. The first discussed Esotericism worldwide with lectures about Gurdjieff, theosophy, spiritism, and SORRAT. In contrast, the second parallel panel examined the variety of new religions in Korean society, including Daehan Buddhism Cheontaejong and Choendogyo – a pantheistic-shamanic modern Korean religion – and many more. The last two parallel panels discussed Islamic debates on new religiosity and Witness identities in connection to affiliation and disaffiliation processes. The author attended – and presented in – this latter session, titled “Jehovah's Witnesses: Adoption or Re-adoption of Religious Identities as a Tool of Empowerment”. The session started with Márk Nemes's (Hungarian Academy of Arts, Research Institute of Art Theory and Methodology, Budapest, Hungary) lecture dissecting the methods through which Hungarian Witnesses cope with and process – and to some extent overcome – cross-generational traumata inherited through the

wounded collective identity – a typical trait of Eastern-Central European societies. His lecture was followed by Edward Graham-Hyde (University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK), who sent his contribution via a video recording due to unforeseen difficulties in attending the event personally. He introduced the audience to anthropological small sample research, seeking psychological and narrative marks during four Witness affiliation processes. In each case, Graham-Hyde noted that the success of affiliation correlated with a sense of personal empowerment, described with terms such as “belonging,” “verification,” “purpose,” “tranquility”, and an increased sense of “safety”. The last presenter of this panel was Ollimatti Peltonen (European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Selters, Germany), who examined an alternative channel of affiliation: the reaffiliation process after leaving the movement. Although he stressed that his project was not yet concluded, his early findings coincided with both Nemes’s and Graham-Hyde’s conclusions. Pointing out the complex background behind the various means of disaffiliation (silent disaffiliation, active disassociation, and Witness disfellowship), he also noted that each method of leaving the fold is a gradual process and should be examined as such, using a multi-disciplinary angle.

Following the morning sessions, the afternoon plenary panel discussed the social outreach initiatives of La Luz del Mundo. With the incarceration of its prophet, Naasón Joaquín García, and rising social tensions – especially after the Houston LLDM church shooting in 2021 – the subject of this panel created great interest among the attending researchers. Rosita Šoryté (European Federation for Freedom of Belief, Rome and Turin, Italy) and Donald Westbrook – assisted by Massimo Introvigne and J. Gordon Melton as panelists – offered academic inputs on the issues connected to the societal image of LLDM, discussing how this picture is currently being reshaped through La Luz del Mundo’s social outreach campaigns. On this latter subject, Delfino Guillen (Educator LLDM, Houston, Texas, USA) and Bigvai Estrada offered a more comprehensive and detailed overview, listing the types of health improvement programs implemented by LLDM since the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, they reflected on the mindfulness elements of La Luz del Mundo’s social activity, pointing out the daily gratitude practices, the various cultivated forms of artistic expression for the involved, and the strong sense of belonging within the movement – each offering a way out of social alienation for the involved.

The third day’s afternoon contained four sessions for the attendees, dissecting the Unification Church’s social contributions, native religiosity and paganism in Lithuania, conflicts and controversies, and various alternative movements’ benefactions in Macedonia, Romania, and Czechia. From this colorful palette, the author visited the second one, entitled

“Contributions of New Religious Movements to Society in Lithuania”, where Milda Ališauskienė (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania) enlightened the audience on how particular new religions – such as ISKCON, Romuva and the AR (Visaginas Church) – contributed to outlining some of the cornerstones of religious freedom in a post-communist society, such as Lithuania was in the early 1990s. The second lecturer, Eglė Aleknaitė (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania), thoroughly examined the status and societal image of Romuva as an inherently Lithuanian ‘ecological religion.’ Stepping up against Catholicism and using verbally anti-Soviet notions, Aleknaitė underlined the importance of reinvented and emergent native religious movements in maintaining – and to some extent reenchanting – a localized national culture in a rapidly globalizing world. The final presenter of the panel, Audrius Beinorius (Vilnius University, Lithuania), offered a thorough historical overview of the Lithuanian Roerich Society from the 1930s to the 1990s, contextualizing it within broader theosophical contexts and pointing out that under Soviet oppression, this movement remained as a grassroots-level organization, until its reestablishment in 1989.

The last plenary panel of the 2024 conference focused on a reasonably under-researched subject. Chaired by Alessandro Amicarelli, the closing panel titled “Next Year Under the South African Sky: African Prophecy, African Spirituality, and CESNUR 2025” contained three emic voices and two scholarly inputs, each discussing the South African Revelation Spiritual Home movement. First, Massimo Introvigne introduced the audience to the movement’s history and current situation in South Africa. He was followed by Tshidiso Gama and Palesa Hloele from the African Hidden Voices Research Institute (Johannesburg, South Africa), who elaborated on the differences between the character of the prophet and the spiritual guide in indigenous spirituality. Hloele also clarified the Revelation Spiritual Home’s position on the categories of religion and spirituality and why the movement prefers to refer to itself as “African Indigenous Spirituality”. During her timeslot, the fourth panelist, Thembi Tulwana (Revelation Spiritual Home, Johannesburg, South Africa), informed the audience about the details of the Revelation Spiritual Home’s myths and how their existential-ontological narratives define the way they view the movement and its leaders as spiritual guides. Lastly, Rosita Šorytė concluded the plenary discussion with additional notes about religious liberty concerns in South Africa, pinpointing the influences of moral panics around charismatic religious leaders after the tragic deaths in the Good News International Church. In her closing words, she stressed that these sorrowful events have the capacity to cement a disapproving and

suspicious public standpoint against minority religiosity, which can only further escalate societal tensions and unnecessary internal stress.

The 'academic portion' of the conference concluded with a powerful reminder about the sensitivity of religion, particularly new- and emergent ones. It highlighted the potential for irreparable alterations and damages that scholarly misinterpretation, public misjudgment, and excessive state regulation and overreaction can cause. Bernadette Rigal-Cellard's closing address allowed the participants to contemplate this notion while slowly winding down from the rigour of academic enquiry and preparing for the fourth day's group excursions. During this tour, the remaining participants visited the Côte de Jor Buddhist community in Dordogne-Périgord, where they received a guided tour. After this, the group pressed on to see the prehistorical excavations in the village of la Madeleine and the completely preserved *Homo neanderthalensis* skeleton in le Moustiers. In addition, in Moustiers, participants were provided entry to the Dhagpo Kagyu Ling community. The final attraction of the day was the world heritage site of the Lascaux IV Cave, where the guests were able to take photographs of the replicas seen on the walls of the cave.

This three-plus-one-day intellectual exchange at Université Bordeaux Montaigne was a unique and invaluable experience for every participant. Such events are rare by design, ensuring that some of the greatest experts in the field attend them and actively contribute to shaping the scholarship. Because of this, the author of the article is immensely grateful that he was able to experience debate and erudition at the highest level in this context of new religions studies and looks forward with great anticipation to the 2025 conference, which – if the 'rumors' are true – will take place in Johannesburg, South Africa.