

THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY FOR INTERCULTURAL THEOLOGY AND INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES (ESITIS)

2024 Conference Announcement and Call for Papers

University of Tartu, Estonia, 8-11 May 2024

Methodologies and Ideologies in Interreligious Engagement

Building Bridges in a Multipolar World

CONFERENCE DESCRIPTION

The 2024 ESITIS Conference plans to explore the radical pluralities at the heart of contemporary interreligious engagement. Its geographical and methodological pluralities provide new generative possibilities for understanding, as voices from the majority world contribute perspectives that reflect local historical trajectories, and as disciplines within the political sciences furnish conceptual tools that complement a focus on texts and rituals in theology and religious studies and the sociology and anthropology of religion. Understanding the role of religion vis à vis governmental and international relations provides new resources for understanding the forces that shape religious life within and between traditions and provides new opportunities to build peaceful relations.

The possibilities furnished by new pluralities are accompanied by challenges. The relatively recent norms for academic research, arguably established in the new German universities of the early nineteenth century, impose limits on interreligious inquiry that often force traditions to articulate their practices and beliefs in forms that are alien to them. The range of permissible participants in dialogue is sometimes constrained by expectations about the acceptable range of intellectual positions and the language and protocols for inquiry that are permitted. Access to publication is often constrained by practices of review that simultaneously affirm innovation yet favour the reproduction of existing dominant approaches. Access to funding, especially that provided by bodies answerable to governmental departments and inter-governmental bodies, is often restricted to projects which explicitly align with interests such as social cohesion, political harmony, and solutions to the problem of extremist religious expression. Religions are often cast in political terms as conflictual, as a source of social problems that require solutions. Projects that seek to understand forms of religious life that do not obviously align with such interests, or challenge them, often struggle to access financial resources, and fruitful projects censor themselves in order to be eligible for funding.

The 2024 ESITIS Conference has the ambitious aim of exploring the interrelations not only between religious traditions, but between multiple pluralities: approaches, methods, and university disciplines in which the study of religion is now located, alongside forms of scholarly activism whose purpose is not only to understand but to transform such relations.

The conference location in Estonia also provides an opportunity to engage vernacular and lived-religions approaches, reflecting research at the University of Tartu. These complement other well-established approaches within ESITIS, including comparative theology, the theology of religions, scriptural reasoning, intercultural theology, and faith-based peacebuilding. Such approaches to vernacular religion may also provide compelling reasons for paying attention to indigenous voices in the majority world and broaden the range of phenomena that invite rigorous analysis and appropriate methodologies. Taken together, these are not merely existing approaches which happen to coexist in the modern university: they have shaped and continue to shape each other in their mutual engagements in society and in local communities. The conference aims to map these plural engagements and show their effects on the understanding of interreligious engagement today.

The conference's keynote lectures will address the changing pluralities of approach, the significance of conflict as a guiding framework for interreligious research, the challenges of conformity to intellectual models that are alien to indigenous researchers, the effects of funding restricted to projects that conform to governmental and funder interests, the contribution of folklorist approaches, and the significance of activism for scholarly engagement with relations between traditions. As well as plenary lectures and short paper sessions devoted to the conference themes, ESITIS will host workshops on strategies for publishing in academic journals and for writing effective proposals to access funding for projects that reflect new approaches to interreligious engagement.

Keynote Speakers

- Wael Hallaq, Columbia University
- Nicholas Adams, University of Birmingham
- Liz Bucar, Northeastern University
- Robert Vosloo, Stellenbosch University
- Anne-Hege Grung, University of Oslo
- Ülo Valk, University of Tartu
- Katja Tolstoj, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

SUBMIT A PROPOSAL

ESITIS welcomes paper proposals according to thematic panels, described below. We particularly welcome the participation of scholars located in the majority world and from the majority world working in European institutions, as well as those forging intellectual tools and developing vernacular/lived religious approaches within local traditions. Please send your proposal of max 300 words, mentioning the thematic section it best fits, to Matthew Robinson (gnet@uni-bonn.de) by **15 March 2024**.

THEMATIC SESSIONS

1. The dominance of conflict as a guiding category

‘Religion, peace, and ...’ What words might fill this blank space? ‘Conflict’ is the first word that will come to mind for many. Why? Religion is often coded in public discourses with conflict-laden language or language that implies tension between religion and society: fundamentalism, radicalization, tolerance, integration. Also in scientific settings, conflict paradigms seem to dominate, from critical attitudes toward tradition as unthinking dogmatism to the classically modern opposition of belief to knowledge or the ever-recurring alleged clashes of faith and science. The purpose of this panel is to problematize and analyse the dominance of conflict as a guiding category for taxonomizing religion in relation to society and scientific inquiry. Papers are invited that engage with this issue via case studies or theoretical reflection from historical, philosophical, cultural-scientific, or theological perspectives: How are “religion” and “religions” being constructed in discourses relating religion and conflict? What is a “religious” bias, and what are the implied or explicit alternatives to such biases (e.g., from “non-religious”, “secular”, “scientific” or other perspectives)? In what ways have religious communities internalized oppositions between religion and society, and what are the effects of these internalizations on their own self-understanding and practice? What normative ideals of the opposite of religious conflict are there (e.g., peace, tolerance, coexistence, or even something like “the reign of God”), how are these formed, and what are their presuppositions and requirements?

2. The challenges of conformity to Western intellectual models

The study of religion and practices of interreligious engagement displays multiple pluralities, methods and approaches which relate to adjacent disciplines and their protocols. The dominance of certain European-Western typologies and models, often adopted a priori as the only possible approaches, permeates the whole fabric of studying religious traditions. Preestablished norms and premises impose limits on interreligious inquiry that often force traditions to articulate their practices and beliefs in forms that are alien to them. In this section we draw attention to these patterns and their power, and explore the ways they were generated, the structures through which they function, and whether a conformity to certain intellectual modalities facilitate or complicate the study and practices of different religious traditions. Core questions include: Which patterns guide our conceptualization of ‘religion’ and ‘tradition’ in (post) modern contexts? What happens to those who refuse to conform to these norms? How far are interreligious and intercultural encounters challenged by ‘outsider’ independent intellectual premises? What academic and activist strategies can inform current debates on these challenges and transform their future?

3. The challenges of funding restrictions and conformity to donor interests

Research in interreligious studies as well as organization of interreligious dialogues are embedded in contexts marked by political, financial, religious and social power structures. Not only the so-called independent researchers, but also those employed at universities and other institutions, are often forced to look for external funding for their research projects. The situation is similar with dialogue activities,

with organizing conferences, seminars and workshops. Some of the key issues we want to discuss are: 1) How are these power structures and particularly financial and economic power influencing both the academic fields of interreligious studies and the landscapes of interreligious dialogues? 2) What are the ethical challenges for researchers in adapting to geopolitics and potential sponsors?

4. The promise of vernacular and lived religions approaches

The authority of institutional religion is waning for many. However, both observations and statistics demonstrate that people continue to be fascinated by religious explanations and interpretations and create themselves new ones: magic and the supernatural have never disappeared. We need to know why and how people are religious in their everyday lives. Leonard Primiano, Marion Bowman and other researchers have advocated ‘vernacular religion’ as a paradigm and a new methodology. Comprehensiveness and openness to various forms of lived religion makes this approach useful not only in contemporary folkloristics (the origin discipline of vernacular religion). Lived religion often differs from professional religionists’ prescripts; the traditions are transmitted in creative and ‘unofficial’ ways. Personalistic responses to events in social, personal, and political life make vernacular religion very contemporary, sometimes ephemeral and local, sometimes echoing global movements and changes. Vernacular religions often contrast with institutional or organized forms of religion and formal institutions like churches, temples, or mosques, coexisting within or outside organized religious practices. They may have material expressions through amulets or rituals and strong connections to nature or history (e.g., ancestors). As vernacular religions evolve, so must the research about them. In the fuzzy field of facts and fictions, ordinary and extraordinary, natural and supernatural, vernacular and scientific knowledge, subjective lifeworlds are carved and transmitted by storytelling practices. *Where are we in the practice and theory of vernacular religion now?*

5. Scholar-activism and relations between traditions

In recent decades, ‘scholar-activism’ (or ‘researcher-practitioner’) has emerged as a critical and reflexive approach across various academic disciplines, ascribing not just a descriptive role to researchers but a transformative one. Especially in the realm of religion, this trend has been received differently across various parts of the world. In Europe, an ongoing dialogue persists regarding the tension between outsider and insider perspectives, particularly within theological traditions. This panel invites contributions that delve into the multifaceted connections of scholar-activism in interreligious research. Contributions should consider the relationship and tensions between descriptive and activist approaches within and outside Europe. Further, contributions that explore the application and recognition of scholar-activism in other related disciplines like applied philosophy, ethics, gender studies, and peace research are welcome. Questions in this panel may include, but are not limited to: *How is scholar-activism understood and practised? How do external and internal perspectives in interreligious research relate to one another? What role do methodologies and ideologies play in the practice of scholar-activists? How does scholar-activism influence relations and dialogue between religious traditions? How is scholar-activism practised in other disciplines, and what can interreligious researchers learn from it?*

WORKSHOPS

- Strategies for publishing in academic journals, with Julianne Funk and Henry Jansen
- Writing effective proposals to access funding for projects on interreligious engagement with Marianne Moyaert

CONFERENCE REGISTRATION

The conference fee – covering attendance, an opening reception, and tea/coffee breaks – is €120 for non-members, €80 for members, and €50 for students. Conference attendees are responsible for their own travel, lodging and meals.

ESITIS Membership

We welcome your membership in ESITIS! As a member, you become part of a dynamic network of international scholars engaged in cutting edge research on religion and society. With the payment of membership dues, you receive the ESITIS journal, *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* twice annually. For more information, please visit our [website](#).

Conference Proceedings

The conference will yield a volume to be published by Brill/ Rodopi or Equinox publishers.

PLEASE SHARE this Call for Proposals on social media and in your professional circles, using the hashtags #ESITIS2024 and #MethodologiesIdeologies!

For more information please visit: <https://www.esitis.org/>