

ESiTis

Methodologies and Ideologies in Interreligious Engagement Building Bridges in a Multipolar World

University of Tartu, Estonia
8-11 May 2024



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Short location guide

The auditoriums in use for this event are the following:

AULA, aud. 128, 139 and 230.

All auditoriums are located in the main building of Tartu University, located at **Ülikooli 18.**

Coffee breaks happen at Cafe Ülikooli, located at **Ülikooli 20,** which is next to the venue.

Dear friends and colleagues!

A warm welcome to the IX conference of the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS) at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

Finding places

All keynote lectures and short paper sessions will take place in the main building of the University (Ülikooli 18).

All coffee breaks (and reception on the 8th of May) will take place at the Ülikooli Kohvik cafe (Ülikooli 20), building next to the main building.

You need to take care of your own lunches and dinners. There are many options available nearby. You may try to look also at the webpage <https://www.paevapraad.ee/tartu> – there are many dishes of the day (including prices) in different cafes and restaurants. Unfortunately, only in Estonian, but you can practice guessing the meanings with a little help from a local friend (or use Google Translate, DeepL, etc.).

The recreational event will take place on the 10th of May. If you have not registered, please do it ASAP (at the registration desk) or later by contacting local organizers.

If you choose the **barge trip**, please be aware that it may be slightly cooler on the water than on the streets! However, the barge also has blankets, etc, in case you get cold. If you choose the **city excursion**, be aware that you may need to walk a little bit up and down! Registration starts at 14.00 on the 8th of May and will also be open during the next mornings. Let us know if you need any help!

Programme Update

It is possible that after we went into press, there may have been some last-minute changes and cancellations. We will make necessary announcements during plenary sessions, and there will be information at the registration desk.

Technical support for all presenters

In all short paper sessions it is possible to use a computer and make a powerpoint presentation. However, it's your responsibility to make sure that your file is downloaded and ready on time. In every room there will be a student assistant to help with the computer.

Free Wi-Fi is available almost everywhere in the centre of Tartu. In the buildings of the university, using eduroam is recommended.

Leaving the conference

For those of you who will travel home from Tartu Airport, it is most convenient to use a taxi (maybe you can share it with somebody!).

For those of you who are leaving from Tallinn: it is strongly advised that you buy your bus or train ticket online (or from the bus or train station) to ensure your seat. All LuxExpress buses stop at the airport. It takes slightly more than 2 hours to reach Tallinn Airport. The airport is small, and usually, you don't need to be there more than one or two hours earlier.

Publication opportunities

Some of the papers presented at the conference will be printed in forthcoming publications (e.g., journals: *Interreligious Studies* and *Intercultural Theology*, or *Dialog*). Information on submission and selection will be given later. Presentation of a paper at the conference does not guarantee publication.

It is my sincere belief that this conference shall be a great platform where all of you will endeavour to foster a richer conversation about the present issues in the study of religion and theology. And while deep into academic discussions, don't forget to notice that spring is coming to Tartu!

Prof. Dr. Anne Kull
Vice-President of the ESITIS,
Local organizer of the conference

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



Nicholas Adams
Professor of Philosophical Theology
University of Birmingham

The author of studies of Hegel and Habermas, his primary interest is on the relationship of philosophy and theology in the European traditions, with a focus on philosophical problems in interreligious engagement. He has been a leading practitioner of scriptural reasoning for the last 25 years, with particular interest in its capacity to resist instrumentalization.



Liz Bucar
Expert in Religious Ethics
Professor of Religion
Northeastern University of Boston

Her research and writing covers a wide range of topics—from sexual reassignment surgery to the politics of religious clothing—but generally focuses on how a deeper understanding religious difference can change our sense of what is right and good. She is the author of four books, including the prize-winning *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation* (Harvard 2022) and *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress* (Harvard, 2017). Her public scholarship has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Teen Vogue*. Bucar is Director of *Sacred Writes: Public Scholarship on Religion*, a grant-funded project that provides support, resources, and networks for scholars of religion committed to translating the significance of their research to a broader audience.



Anne Hege Grung
Professor of Interreligious Studies
Faculty of Theology
University of Oslo

Her main areas of research includes conceptualization and critique of interreligious dialogue including feminist perspectives, Christian-Muslim relations, plural chaplaincy and spiritual care. Among her publications are *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings. Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran and the Hadith* (2015), “Interreligious Dialogue in the Squeeze between Diplomacy and Contextual Practices” (2017), “Negotiating gender justice between state, religion and NGOs: A Lebanese case” (2018) *Complexities of Spiritual Care in Plural Societies. Education, Praxis and Concepts* (2022). Grung has been president of ESITIS (2017-2022) and is presently dean of research at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo.



Paul Hedges
Associate Professor of Interreligious Studies
Nanyang Technological University

He has worked with a range of stakeholder groups outside academia, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth (MCCY, Singapore), the Anglican Communion Network for Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON), the Dialogue Society (UK), Netflix, and the BBC. He is co-editor of *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*, editor-in-chief of the Occasional Paper series *Interreligious Relations*, and sits on the editorial board of a number of other journal and book series. He researches, teaches, and publishes in such areas as interreligious studies, theory and method in the study of religion, contemporary global religious ideologies, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and decolonising academia. He has published fourteen books and over ninety papers. Recent books include *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (University of California Press 2021), *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (Bloomsbury 2021), and *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Brill 2017). He has a fifteenth book forthcoming: *Christian Polytheism? Polydox Theologies of Multi-devotional and Decolonial Praxis* (Routledge 2024).



Ülo Valk
Professor of Estonian
and Comparative Folklore
University of Tartu

His publications include the monograph *The Black Gentleman: Manifestations of the Devil in Estonian Folk Religion* (Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2001), and co-edited volumes *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (Equinox, 2012), *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas* (Finnish Literature Society, 2018), and *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authority, Expressing Beliefs* (Equinox 2022). He edits the journal *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* (Brill).



Robert Vosloo
Professor of Systematic theology
Faculty of Theology
Stellenbosch University

He is currently the chairperson of the department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, as well as the editor-in-chief of the Stellenbosch Theological Journal. His most recent academic books are *Reading Bonhoeffer in South Africa After the Transition to Democracy: Selected Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2020, with Nico Koopman) and *Reforming Memory: Essays on South African Church and Theological History* (Stellenbosch, Sun Media, 2017). His research interests include historical memory, 20th century South African church and theological history, philosophical and theological discourses on hospitality and recognition, and the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 2023 Robert spent a semester as fellow at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies. Since September 2017 he also writes a weekly column for an Afrikaans newspaper. Robert is married to Julie Claassens, a professor in Old Testament at Stellenbosch University, and has three children, Jana (28), Roux (27), and Suzanne (11).

May 8th, Wednesday

14:00 – 16:00

Registration

Ülikooli 18, the main building of the university

16:00 – 16:30

Opening, Greetings

Anti Selart (Dean of Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Tartu), **Yaser Ellethy** (President of the ESITIS), **Roland Karo** (Head of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies), **Anne Kull** (Vice-President of the ESITIS, Local Organizer)

AULA

16:30 – 17:00

The dominance of conflict as a guiding category

Keynote 1: **Nicholas Adams** (University of Birmingham)
Funding and Beards: challenges to interreligious engagement
Moderator: Yaser Ellethy

AULA

17:00 – 17:45

Discussion

AULA

18:00 – 21:00

Reception

Cafe Ülikooli

May 9th, Thursday

9:00 – 9:30

The challenges of conformity to Western intellectual models

Keynote 2: **Robert Vosloo** (Stellenbosch University)

Religious Traditions, Intellectual Postures, and Incompleteness: In Search of a Responsible Hermeneutic of Tradition for Interreligious Engagement

Moderators: Gé Speelman, Matthew Robinson

AULA

9:30 – 10:15

Discussion

10:15 – 10:45

Coffee break

Cafe Ülikooli

10:45 – 12:45

Short Paper Sessions

Session 1: **The Dominance of conflict as a guiding category**

Manda Adrian (University of Bonn), “Religious Freedom in Indonesia”

Evakordor Diengdoh (University of Tartu), “Conflict as a guiding category: Khasi Religion or Khasi culture?”

Miriam Schneider (VU Amsterdam), “Declarations and their contribution to the wider field of interreligious Dialogue”

Daan F. Oostveen (Utrecht University), “Methodologies and Ideologies of Interreligious Engagement”

aud. 128

[continues on turn]

Session 2: **The challenges of conformity to Western intellectual models**

Rasika Abeysinghe (Sri Lanka) “Disentangling Buddhism from Culture: Conflict and Relationship with Christianity over the years in Sri Lanka” ([online](#))

Atko Rimmel (University of Tartu) “Overcoming the dichotomy between religion and secularity: concepts and strategies”

Hannah Visser (VU Amsterdam), “Accountability and the Evaluation of Interfaith initiatives: Toward a Learning Approach to Evaluation”

Carol-Teodor Peterfi (University of Tartu), “Harnessing Faith: The Role of Churches in Weapons of Mass Destruction Nonproliferation”
[aud. 139](#)

13:00 – 14:30

Lunch

14:30 – 15:30

ESITIS General Assembly

[aud. 139](#)

15:30 – 16:00

Coffee break

[Cafe Ülikooli](#)

16:00 – 16:30

The challenges of borrowing and appropriations

Keynote 3: **Elizabeth Bucar** (Northeastern University)

Is Appropriation a Useful Category for Religious Studies?

Moderator: Nicholas Adams

AULA

16:30 – 17:15

Discussion

May 10th, Friday

9:00 – 9:30

The promise of vernacular and lived religions approaches

Keynote 4: **Ülo Valk** (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Vernacular Perspective in Folkloristics and Personal Experience

Narratives of the Supernatural

Moderator: Anne Kull

AULA

9:30 – 10:15

Discussion

10:15 – 10:45

Coffee break

Ülikooli Cafe

10:45 – 12:45

Paper Sessions

Session 3: The promise of vernacular and lived religions approaches

Jane Orton (Independent scholar, the UK), “Talking About Tigers: the Sundarbans Forest Tiger and the People who Live in its Shadow”

Elo Süld (University of Tartu, Head of the Asia Centre), “Jinn and Islamic religious authority: a case analysis from Java island, Indonesia”

Anita Stasulane (Daugavpils University, Latvia) “Dynamics of Lived Religion in Refugees’ Narratives”

aud. 139

Session 4: **The promise of vernacular and lived religions approaches**

Chimi Baobao “Taking a Train to Beijing and Flying to the US“: The Transference of Misfortune in the Eastern Minyang Community”

Margaret Lyngdoh (University of Tartu) “On the Viability of the Methodological Approach of “Vernacular Religion” from the Context of Indigenous Northeast India”

Lodewyk Barkhuizen (University of Tartu) “Looking to the Future in a Practice that Favours the Past: Exploring South African “traditional” healing practices and Christianity”

Elena Romashko (University of Göttingen), “Matter, Ethics and Ritual in the Transformations within the post-Chernobyl Orthodoxy”

aud. 128

Session 5: **Scholar-activism and relations between traditions**

Joseph O’Neil (Trinity College Dublin) “A Critical Assessment of the Roman Catholic Church and World Council of Churches Approach to Interreligious Dialogue”

Sybille Fritsch-Oppermann (Clausthal University of Technology) “Catharsis and Greater Jihad as Inner Purification and Wise Measure and Dimension in Human Co-existence”

Linus Glenhaber (University of Bonn), “The Social Gospel and the Social Question: An Intercultural Comparison of American and German Approaches to Social Ethics at the Start of the 20th Century, with a Focus on Francis Greenwood Peabody and August Tholuck”

Charles Ryu (United Methodist, the USA) “Liturgical Process as Container of Conrescence for Experiential Truth Claims: Curating an Interfaith Vigil at a Peacemaking Rall”

aud. 230

[continues on turn]

12:45 – 14:15

Lunch

14:15 – 14:45

The challenges of funding restrictions and conformity to donor interests

Keynote 5: **Anne Hege Grung** (University of Oslo, Norway)

The Geopolitics of Interreligious Dialogue

Moderator: Henry Jansen

AULA

14:45 – 15:30

Discussion

15:30 – 15:45

Coffee break

Cafe Ülikooli

Recreational options:

a) 16:30-18:30

The barge trip with Jõmmu

More information can be found at: <https://www.lodi.ee/en>

Start: Lodjakoda, Ujula 98 (ca 25 min. walk or by taxi)

b) 16:00-18:00

A walking tour in Tartu with Katrin Alekand

Start: Ülikooli 18

May 11th, Saturday

9:00 – 9:30

Scholar-activism and relations between traditions

Keynote 6 **Paul Hedges** (Nanyang Technological University)

The Scholar-Activist as Educator Amidst Religious and Non-Religious Diversity

Moderator: Julianne Funk

AULA

9:30 – 10:15

Discussion

10:15 – 10:45

Coffee break

Cafe Ülikooli

10:45 – 11:45

Workshop Strategies for publishing

Julianne Funk and Henry Jansen

aud. 128

11:45 – 12:30

The Next Generation: Highlights from/of the conference and thoughts for the future

Rahel Toomik, Igor Ahmedov, Lodewyk Barkhuizen, Jason S. Cordova

aud. 128

Conference closing

An optional guided tour at the Estonian National Museum (www.erm.ee/en)

Registration needed before or during the conference (guided tour is free, but the ticket to the museum needs to be bought)

Abstracts

Funding and Beards: challenges to interreligious engagement

Nicholas Adams

In 2001 the myth of religious violence received new life and interreligious engagement received a renewed civil commission. It embraced a role to promote dialogue and peace-making, both within communities and across national boundaries. State interests generated new grant-funded initiatives, networks, even endowed research centres. At the same time, politics departments began slowly to reverse their neglect of religion as topic of serious study, often coding religion as simultaneously exotic and violent. Religion becomes both problem and, through interreligious engagement, solution. Men with impressive 'religious' beards become emblematic of both poison and cure. In this ecology of research and activism, recent studies raise urgent questions about the fate of local minority communities. They are under double pressure: first from local majority communities to conform to 'civilised' discourse (while remaining exotic: a centuries-old racist trope) and second from distant-state-funded 'dialogue washing', whose effects are felt locally. These align to nudge minority communities into intellectual and political compliance. With a focus on racism and sexism, this lecture surveys some of this recent literature and seeks to identify alternative intellectual paths for navigating the plurality and instrumentality of interreligious engagement.

Is appropriation a useful category for religious studies?

Liz Bucar

Liz Bucar unpacks the ethical dilemmas of a messy form of cultural appropriation: the borrowing of religious doctrines, rituals, and dress for political, economic, and therapeutic reasons. Does borrowing from another's religion harm believers? Who can consent to such borrowings? Religion is an especially vexing arena for appropriation debates because faiths overlap and imitate each other and because diversity within religious traditions scramble our sense of who is an insider and who is not. Bucar argues that understanding why some religious borrowing cause harm—even profound offense—and why others are benign helps us understand the utility—and limit—of the category of appropriation to religious studies.

The geopolitics of interreligious dialogue: Power structures and ethical challenges

Anne Hege Grung

Research in interreligious studies as well as organization of interreligious dialogues are embedded in contexts marked by political, financial, religious and social power structures. 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? In this keynote lecture, Grung will explore some of the established interreligious dialogue organizations in Europe, North America and the Middle East regarding their financial and political strategies. Building mutual trust is pivotal in interreligious dialogues, and scholarly activity requires transparency and accountability in both research and teaching. Financial bounds as well as political embeddedness may potentially be a threat to these values of trust, transparency and accountability. Based on her analyses of the dialogue organizations, Grung will suggest some ethical and scholarly dilemmas related to the scholarly engagement with what may be called “the geopolitics of interreligious dialogue” for further discussion.

The Scholar-Activist as Educator Amidst Religious and Non-Religious Diversity

Paul Hedges

The term scholar-activist, or researcher-practitioner, is increasingly employed in various fields. Within Interreligious Studies there has been debate as to whether it is primarily something for practitioners or an area of scholarly study. Of course, for many within the field this may see the division as somewhat artificial, but it is assuredly real in pragmatic terms. Inspired by writing from the Latinx criminologist Xavier Perez and the educationalist Michael Apple, as well as Paulo Freire's work, this paper looks at a different context for activism that challenges the binary of scholar and practitioner. This considers education itself as a form of activism and a potentially emancipatory practice. In other words, how we teach, how we engage students, and how we write may be part of the practice of scholar-activism. Set within a context of resistance to the hegemony of neoliberal regimes in disciplining our ways of being, as well as wider patterns of prejudice in societies, the paper relates to academic life and skills that nurture and resist. A key focus will be on how interreligious studies scholars may be engaged in this, with an interest in both religious and non-religious traditions.

Vernacular Perspective in Folkloristics and Personal Experience Narratives of the Supernatural

Ülo Valk

The disenchantment of the Western world as a systematic project has caused a major reassessment of the position of religion and its conceptual boundaries. Whereas the institutionally established and theologically guarded forms of religion were less affected by the discursive shift towards modernisation, more radical changes occurred at its margins. The supernatural realm of spirits, ghosts, and magic did not have a proper place in an enlightened culture. The supernatural appeared superstitious from the religious perspective and delusional in scientific thought. However, folklorists and creative writers worked hard to save the fairies and the related narrative traditions by turning them into cultural heritage as a realm of literary imagination. Fairy-tale collections and gothic literature from the 19th and 20th centuries redefined spirits and other supernatural entities as fictional characters of cultural entertainment.

However, enculturation of the supernatural has had its limits. Even in secular societies, such as Estonia today, many people report supernatural experiences that they find difficult to explain. Personal narratives about encountering ghosts, angels, and aliens or sensing the presence of something mysterious reveal a lively private tradition of storytelling and vernacular theorizing. The vernacular turn in folkloristics focusing on individual experiences and lived realities has prepared the ground for new approaches in studying supernatural encounters as 'culturally loaded imaginative events' (David Hufford). What does it mean? How can we make sense of the supernatural in a secular society? Do the spirits and ghosts encountered today represent the same tradition that was documented by the 19th century folklorists? What has changed? The lecture addresses these questions from a folkloristic point of view.

Religious Traditions, Intellectual Postures and Incompleteness: In Search of a Responsible Hermeneutic of Tradition for Interreligious Engagement

Robert Vosloo

One of the aspects governing interreligious and intercultural engagements is an implicit, and often also explicit, understanding of tradition. Therefore the need to interrogate the notion of tradition as such (and several scholars have indeed made this the focus of their work). Some theorists challenge how the concept of tradition has been ignored in modern ethical, political and religious thought (Edward Shils, Alasdair MacIntyre). Others, in turn, helpfully distinguish between traditionalism and tradition, describing traditionalism as the dead faith of the living and tradition as the living faith of the dead (cf. Jaroslav Pelikan). However, it is often the case that the operative understanding of tradition is one that sees it as some kind of ahistorical and fully coherent whole without tensions, ambiguity, and mystery. Such a view of tradition is often blind to how its logic and rhetoric favors intellectual postures and patters that are in service – as the African American theologian Willie Jennings has pointed out – of a type of colonial desire associated with the trope of “white self-sufficient men” guided by control, possession and mastery. Over against such a polished view of tradition, this paper explores how a more unstable, fragmentary and “timeful” performance of tradition – one marked by what the African social anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh calls “incompleteness” – points to a more generative and productive hermeneutic for interreligious engagement in our multipolar world.



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