

A Report from the “Ex Nihilo: Zero Conference”, Bologna, Italy, June 18th – 22nd 2017

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Despite the claims of some of the modern thinkers foretelling the impending dawn of the sacred, religions are still far from in decline. Recent years have clearly shown that religion cannot be simply relegated to the so-called “private sphere” and continues to be an important part of public life even though it might have slightly changed its façade. Yet, its connections with other important domains of life run inherently deep and it is precisely the existence of these bonds connecting religion with numerous other spheres that has been proven by the “Ex Nihilo: Zero Conference” which took place in Bologna, Italy on 18th – 22nd June 2017.

The event was organised by the European Academy of Religion [hereafter: EUARE] under the high patronage of the European Parliament and the European Commission in Italy. In addition to this it also received the support of a wide range of academic, non-government, commercial, religious and many other institutions.¹ Finally, not without significance was the fact that the event was held under the auspices of the oldest European university. As indicated by the name, the present conference was planned to mark the beginning of a series of events while its main purpose was to create a “network of networks” – a consortium of scholars originating from various countries and dealing with multiple aspects of religion. It was exactly this diversity of scholarly disciplines represented in the schedule that was recognised as the conference’s main advantage. After all, it is by means of the interdisciplinary approach that the phenomenon of religion can be adequately described.

¹ For the full list visit the web site: <https://www.europeanacademyofreligion.org/partners>.

The Mission

It was quickly revealed that the competent depiction of religion is not just a matter of academic inquiry. One assertion was constantly repeated – namely, that Religious Studies have an important educational mission. In the globalised world, where the representatives of various traditions live side by side, it is only through the proper education of the masses that academics may lessen the effects of the ignorance that may lead to prejudice and violence. On the other hand, it has to be kept in mind that to embark on such an educational mission means exploring the problematic ground of axiology and conflicting theologies of various religious traditions. As was stressed by Alberto Melloni in his opening speech, the role of EUARE should not be perceived as that of a regular partner in the inter-religious dialogue with the latter reserved for various religious institutions and individuals. Instead, its purpose is rather to facilitate that dialogue from the outside.

My personal impression was that a lot could be learned from the cognitive theories of religion according to which religion is, just like science should be, a certain system of explaining the world. Ideally, the modern scholar is one who is humble and aware of the possibility that their views can be easily made obsolete in the face of the progression of science. In other words, the scholar does not have any pretences that their worldview may provide the ultimate explanation of reality and often has to come to terms with other paradigms of equal ontological value. Yet, is such attitude to be adopted by religion as well? After all – and this was aptly noted by Pierre Gisel in his lecture directly following the opening ceremony – religions aspire to universality and try to usurp any final and all-encompassing vision of the world. On the other hand, this particular claim of religious absoluteness is not necessarily shared by each and every *homo religiosus* and these are exactly the people for whom the “academic” model of the inter-religious dialogue could prove useful.

Religion in the Modern World

Undoubtedly, however, this kind of academic dialogue permeated the actual proceedings. The conference accommodated panels presenting different perspectives on religion: philosophical, psychological, sociological, juridical, historical and more. Some of the sessions were divided according to particular



epochs, religious traditions or geographical-cultural circles. In this respect, although most of the panels covered matters pertaining to Christianity and Europe, other religious traditions and regions were also acknowledged.²

In terms of the current matters concerning the *sacrum* in the public sphere, there was much to be learned from the session on the place of religion in the constitutions of particular countries (*The Meaning of “Religion” in the Law of Multicultural Societies*). The juxtaposition of the different cases presented by various nations afforded an overview of the most pressing issues. First of all, national constitutions often refrain from providing explicit and clear cut definitions of religion and rely on an implicit and intuitive meaning of the term, which is the relational conception typical for Christianity and other monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam – i.e. the dominating paradigms in Europe. Accordingly, religion is construed as an alliance between humans and some super-human entity that displays itself and establishes ethical laws in an act of revelation. The drawback of these definitions is that they indirectly handicap non-theistic religious traditions in terms of legalities: whichever system does not meet the criteria of the relational definition is not considered a religion at all. Secondly, many definitions get caught in a kind of *ignotum per ignotius* logical fallacy in trying to elucidate “religion” by deploying other theologically inspired confessional ideas like “sacrum” or “absolute” or by juggling with less theologically burdened yet still obscure terms such as “cult”, “faith” or “belief”. This clearly shows that such legally binding definitions should be coined by people (preferably scholars of religion) whose broad outlook covers a wide variety of phenomena rather than by the functionaries of one particular tradition.³ Thirdly, it is somewhat of a paradox that a given religion, in order to be officially recognised as authentic, has to attain the approval of a secular state. Thus, the transcendental is in submission to the immanent. This connection between state and religion

² For the full program go to: <https://www.europeanacademyofreligion.org/program>. Accessed: July 1st 2017.

³ The matter is additionally complicated in the sense that even in the history of particular religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, many various notions and ideas of religion emerge. Each such tradition is in fact a set of various sets of differing ideas connected by the ties of family resemblance. Somewhat paradoxically, this internal diversity and complexity is what connects various religious traditions. In this regard see: B. Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories*, Oxford 2000, especially p. 71–78. Idem, *A Prototype Approach*, in: *Theories of Religion: a Reader*, eds. S. D. Kunin, J. Miles-Watson, Rutgers University Press 2006, especially p. 269 ff.



is even more interesting in cases where the two ideas played an important role in supporting each other – e.g. Catholicism in Poland or Orthodoxy in Greece. Next, the panel clearly proved that these are not abstract or hypothetical problems as the conceptualisation of religion and what belongs to the category of religion has repercussions in the law. For instance, can an employee demand the right to have a day off for their religious holidays? Does the employer have to agree to such a request? Who is to be referred to in problematic cases? Etc.

Another lengthy session accommodated presentations concerning the use of databases in the study of religion. This included, *inter alia*, the ARDA (Association of Religion Data Archives)⁴ project covering various aspects of religious life: national profiles, religious family trees and general data archive; Index Religiosus International Bibliography of Theology, Church History and Religious Studies⁵ together with the ATLA (American Theological Library Association) Religion Database⁶ are powerful reference bibliographies. Two other examples include *The Ereticopedia project. An online dictionary of heretics, dissidents and inquisitors in the Mediterranean world*⁷ and the *Elyonim veTachtonim. Electronic inventory of angels, demons and ghosts in early rabbinic literature*.⁸ While these databases often simply continue their earlier counterparts which were published in paper form and although technically there is nothing new in them, they prove to be an extremely helpful tool which collates all the necessary information in one place. Moreover, they play an important role in democratising access to this kind of data. On a personal note, I should add that the session was an excellent occasion to share experiences gathered from being involved in such projects. Furthermore, it was heart-warming to see other scholars of religion, in itself a very abstract and transcendent concept, utilise modern technologies so eagerly. It proves that with the acquisition of some basic IT skills, the possibilities of using our specialist knowledge are vast.

⁴ On-line <http://www.thearda.com/> (accessed: July 1st 2017).

⁵ On-line <http://www.brepolis.net/> (accessed: July 1st 2017).

⁶ On-line <https://www.atla.com/> (accessed: July 1st 2017).

⁷ On-line <http://www.eticopedia.org/start-en> (accessed: July 1st 2017).

⁸ On-line <http://elyonimvetachtonim.blogspot.com/> (accessed: July 1st 2017).



Concluding Remarks

While the conference as a whole was a unique and enriching experience, several shortcomings need to be pointed out, only because *il meglio è nemico del bene*, as the Italian proverb goes. The first remark concerns the programme and the overlapping sessions as was the case with the following, thematically convergent panels coinciding on the second day of the conference (Tuesday, June 20th): *In-Between Humans and Gods. The Diversity of the Supernatural Beings in the Ancient Mediterranean Religions; The Role of Technology and Computational Linguistics in the Translation of the Babylonian Talmud in Italian; “And from the daughter of Zion all her beauty is departed” (Lam. 1:6). Reactions, Responses and Reflections on the Fall of Jerusalem from the 1st to the 7th Century A.D.; Critical theory of Religious Texts and the Sources of the Gospel; Polymorphism of God in Ancient and Roman-Hellenistic Judaism; Jewish Studies*. Those interested in just one of these sessions would have eagerly participated in the remaining ones as well and thus it would have been far more sensible to have these panels spread over the conference. What is more, the decision about which panel to attend was seriously hindered by the fact that the programme lacked descriptions of any kind. Some of the panels contained only the titles of particular presentations and while in most cases these headings were self-explanatory and despite the fact that the names of particular attendants had been publicised long before the conference and everybody could have contacted them beforehand, it would have been far more convenient to include at least a short abstract of a given presentation. All the more so, since there was a web site that could have been a proper platform for the publication of such data. In addition to this, some of the sessions contained presentations in various languages, which was not indicated in the programme. Doing so always carries a risk that some people would be incapable of participating. Remaining in the room makes no sense, while going out just before the presenter commences their talk is sometimes taken as impolite. This could have been easily avoided by scheduling linguistically uniform panels. Finally, many events suffered from sometimes quite significant time inconsistencies, even as much as half an hour.

Despite the above-mentioned shortcomings, the event transcended what is expected of an academic conference and included roundtable debates and open lectures directed at a wider audience. It is also worth mentioning the fact that the organisers supplemented the conference with additional cultural events including concerts and guided tours around the city and its particular



districts. They should definitely be commended for providing such enjoyable optional extras. Given these facts, it is not surprising that the conference attracted some significant recognition on social media additionally supported by a very lively Twitter account⁹ and no less vivid Facebook page. Yet, what seems to be rather depressing proof of the impact of the conference was the ever-presence of security guards and *carabinieri* watching over the safety of the participants.

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⁹ On-line https://twitter.com/eu_are (accessed: July 1st 2017).

¹⁰ On-line <http://www.bratniak.krakow.pl/> (accessed: July 1st 2017).

¹¹ On-line <http://www.psc.uj.edu.pl/> (accessed: July 1st 2017).

¹² On-line <http://www.fscire.it/> (accessed: July 1st 2017).

