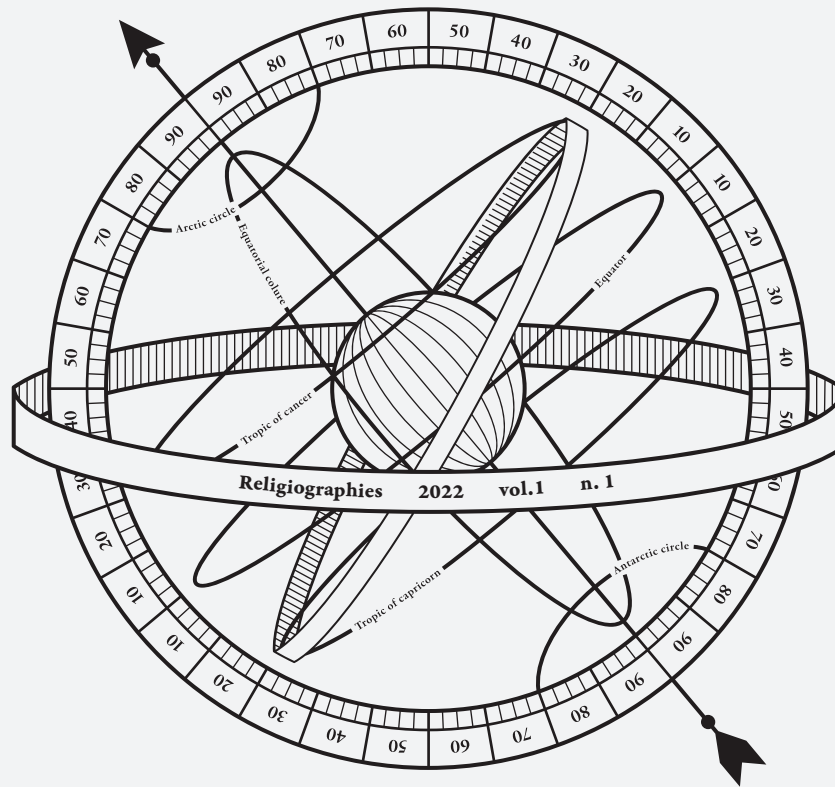


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Holy Sites in the Mediterranean, Sharing and Division”

edited by

Dionigi Albera, Sara Kuehn and Manoël Pénicaud

Editorial:

Introducing Religiographies Francesco Piraino



CENTRO STUDI
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE

fondazione ONLUS
GIORGIO CINI

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International]

To view a copy of this license, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

To cite this:

Francesco Piraino, 2022, "Editorial: Introducing Religioographies," *Religioographies*, vol.1, n.1, pp. 1-13

1

In the first two articles of the statute mention is made of "spiritual tradition" and "encounter of different civilisations" <https://www.cini.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/statuto.pdf>.

2

Vittore Branca, 'Vittorio Cini e l'idea della Fondazione: Continuità di una tradizione,' in *La Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Cinquant'anni di storia*, by Ulrico Agnati (Milano: Electa, 2001), 7–11.

3

Guido Piovene, *Processo dell'Islam alla civiltà occidentale* (Firenze: Giunti, 2018); Stefano Bigliardi, 'Guido Piovene osservatore dell'Islam e del Medio Oriente,' *ArteScienza* V, no. 9 (2018): 51–78.

4

Piovene, *Processo dell'Islam alla civiltà occidentale*, 11.

In this first editorial of *Religioographies*, we will briefly discuss the history of the research centre that sponsors it, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini's Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities, since 1958, and present the journal, describing its aims and scope and why we think it is needed, and finally, we will explain the relevance of this inaugural special issue, "Holy Sites in the Mediterranean, Sharing and Division."

The Institute "Venice and the East"

Describing the Institute for Venice and the East and its development into the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities is a challenging task. In fact, over the years the Institute/Centre has shed its skin several times. This has involved a change not only of name but also of its academic interests, approaches, methods and aims. The directors of this polymorphous Institute/Centre have been experts in Sinology, Byzantinology, Slavistics, the history of religions and, now, social anthropology. Despite this mutability and formal unsettledness, over the more than sixty years of the Institute/Centre's history, we find that its interests have mainly continued to concern spirituality, the encounter with religious and cultural diversity, the search for a humanism, the porosity between the secular and the religious, and the so-called challenges of the contemporary world.

Moreover, even before the creation of the Institute for Venice and the East in 1958, we find these themes in the mission of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini,¹ described by Vittore Branca (1913-2004) as the promotion of "the social and spiritual growth of man, of every man, whom Vittorio felt was a son and a brother."² Branca describes a desire for the truth rooted in Christianity but also tending towards an interest in the other, in the search for a living rather than an affected humanism.

The fact that these themes have been rooted in the Foundation right from its beginnings is confirmed by a revolutionary conference held in 1955: "Islam's Judgment on Western Civilisation."³ Those who attended included the philologist Vittore Branca, the journalist and writer Guido Piovene (1907-1974), the orientalist and historian Giorgio Levi Della Vida (1886-1967), the future father of Italian Islamology, Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988), the jurist Francesco Carnelutti (1879-1965), the mathematician Luigi Fantappiè (1901-1956), the poet Eugenio Montale (1896-1981), the Egyptian intellectual and former minister Taha Husein (1889-1973), the Persian historian and politician Hassan Taqizadeh (1878-1970), the Tunisian historian and former minister Hassan Husni Abdul-Wahab (1884-1968), and Harry St John Bridger Philby (1885-1960), also known as Sheikh Abdullah, a British politician, explorer and Arabist who converted to Islam. The idea at the heart of this conference was very radical for the time but would even be radical today: the Islamic world was asked to criticise the colonial West and question its values, practices and policies. The aim was to lay the foundations for mutual understanding, because as Carnelutti put it, "you have to know each other to love each other, but you also have to love each other to know each other,"⁴ and create a path of joint self-criticism in order to find new points of agreement.

I believe it is no exaggeration to claim that the event at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini's home on the Venetian island of San Giorgio was an embryonic form of post-colonial thinking, especially since it called into question Europe's putative moral and social superiority over other peoples. In fact, as Piovene pointed out, the West needed to free itself from its



Conference Islam's Judgment on Western Civilisation (Convegno Processo dell'Islam alla società occidentale), Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 1955. From the left, Hassan Taqizadeh (in light jacket), Hassan Husni Abdul-Wahab (wearing hat), Maria Nallino, Taha Hussein. Archive of the Institute of History of Art, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia.

superiority complex.⁵ This awareness does not imply the notion of a return to an ideal bygone tradition, as Montale remarked in describing Piovene's argument.

The spirit of criticism and research; our secularism, he [Piovene] says, is not irreligious but is a particular aspect of the modern soul. East and West exist in us as two poles of our personality. People from the East speak of us as southern Italians speak of northern Italians. We are also rebelling, brothers from the East, and do not forget this when you return to your homes. We are rebelling against ourselves and we also have the strength to love our and your rebellion.⁶

In 1954, another conference addressed the relationship between East and West: "Venetian Civilisation in Marco Polo's Century." It was followed in 1956 by the second volume of *La civiltà dell'Oriente*, published under the auspices of the Foundation. The book was edited by Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984), an explorer and leading scholar of Tibet and Buddhism. Again, with the aim of creating new bridges to the East, between 1956 and 1959, the bulletin *Informazioni San Giorgio* was published, first in Italian, Arabic, English and French, and later in English and French only.

The Fondazione Cini's interest in the East and in exchanges between civilisations and spiritualities culminated in 1958 in the creation of the Institute for Venice and the East as an independent section of the Fondazione's Centre for Culture and Civilisation. The Institute was created in line with UNESCO's "East and West" programme, with Venice being seen as the historical hinge between North and South, and East and West.

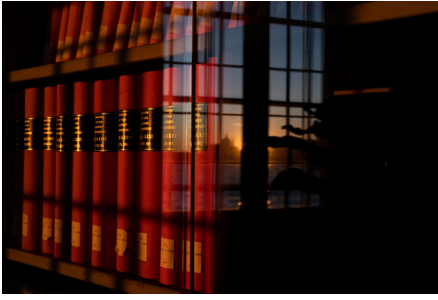
The Institute was endowed with a library that now has over 40,000 books and continues to grow. The most interesting collections include the

5

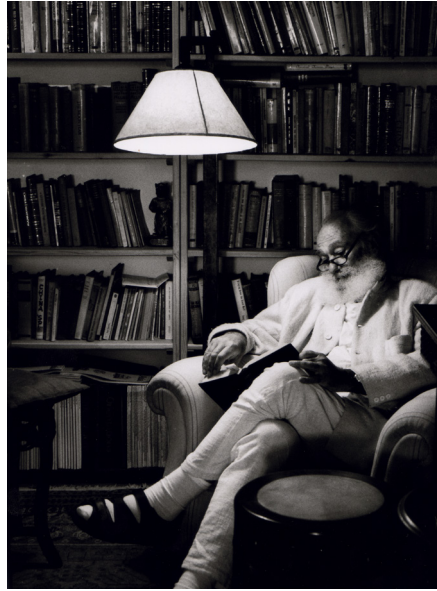
Bigliardi, 'Guido Piovene osservatore dell'Islam e del Medio Oriente,' 68.

6

Eugenio Montale, "Polemica sulla civiltà musulmana fra un egiziano e un amico di Lawrence," in *Corriere della Sera*, 22 September 1955.



Detail of the library of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia. Photograph © Francesco Piraino, December 2019.



Tiziano Terzani. Archive Tiziano Terzani, Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia.



Manga. Katsushika Hokusai. Library of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia.

7

Hans Thomas Hakl, Olimpia Niglio, and Yong Joong Lee, 'Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness,' in *Transcultural Diplomacy and International Law in Heritage Conservation* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 49–62.

8

Etienne Lamotte, *Lo spirito del Buddismo antico* (Venezia, Roma: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1960).

9

Siegfried Lienhard, *Dal sanscrito all'hindi: il nevari* (Venezia, Roma: Venezia Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1962).

10

Annemarie Schimmel, *Aspetti Spirituali Dell'Islam* (Venezia, Roma: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1961).

11

Louis Dumont, *La Civiltà Indiana e Noi Abbozzo Di Sociologia Comparata* (Venezia, Roma: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1965).

valuable acquisition in 1961 of the Beijing Library Rare Books microfilms from the Library of Congress in Washington, the donation by the French Indologist Alain Daniélou of his entire library in 1971, and donations by Ezra Pound-Olga Rudge and Nino Rota in the late 1990s. One more recent major addition is Angela Staude's donation of journalist Tiziano Terzani's library and archive in 2012 and 2014. In 2019, Hans Thomas Hakl signed the deed for the donation of his personal library, consisting of over 40,000 rare books and archival documents in the field of the history of religions and spiritualities. Called "Octagon,"⁷ this library will physically arrive in the Foundation after Hakl's death and, combined with the existing collections, will create one of the best-stocked religious studies libraries in the world (the next special issue of *Religiographies*, edited by Marco Pasi, will focus on Hakl's life and library).

Under the direction of the historian, orientalist and diplomat Giuliano Bertuccioli (1923-2001), the Institute for Venice and the East's initial main interests were India, China and Japan, with a special focus on Buddhism. Relevant texts on history, religion and art were purchased; for example, some beautiful mangas by Katsushika Hokusai, the author famed for works such as *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* and *Views of Mount Fuji*. At this time, several magisterial lectures were given and published by leading authorities, such as Etienne Lamotte (University of Leuven), "The Spirit of Ancient Buddhism,"⁸ Siegfried Lienhard (University of Stockholm), "From Sanskrit to Hindi: Nevari,"⁹ Annemarie Schimmel (University of Frankfurt), "Spiritual Aspects of Islam,"¹⁰ and Louis Dumont, "Indian Civilisation and Us."¹¹ In addition to its scholarly activities, the Institute also staged exhibitions on subjects such as Indian miniatures (1959), Japanese prints of the Ukiyo-E school (1961, held under the auspices of UNESCO), and Islamic miniatures from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries (1962). The Institute also organised the Foundation's travelling



Conference “The Experience of Prayer” (Convegno *L’esperienza della preghiera*), Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia, 1960. In front Padmanabh Jaini, behind Lama Anagarika Govinda. Photographic archive, Institute of History of Art, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia.



Sante Graciotti. Archive Segreteria Generale, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia.

exhibitions to the East: the Indian miniatures exhibition, for example, went to Tehran, Tokyo and Osaka in 1967.

Right from the early days, the Institute adopted a comparative approach, notably in the 1960 conference on “The Experience of Prayer” in religions, chaired by Francesco Carnelutti. Attended by both religious authorities and scholars, this conference also aimed to promote interreligious dialogue. It was held in fact at a time when the ideals of the Second Vatican Council were being elaborated and spread. The *semina Verbi*, or the idea that truth may be present in other religions besides Christianity, became a topic for discussion, summed up in the *Notiziario di San Giorgio* at the time. The “Conference on Prayer” showed a concern with the changing world and what was perceived as secularisation’s challenge to Catholicism’s moral, cognitive and political supremacy. During the conference, on this subject, Vittore Branca posed a very revealing question to the Buddhist participants, aimed at determining whether the attack on religion by the Enlightenment and rationalism had also occurred in the Buddhist context. The ongoing dialogue between the religious and the secular was continued in another major conference organised for the millennium of Mount Athos in 1963, attended by both monks and historians.¹²

In 1964 the Institute went through a period of reorganisation. The Foundation felt a need to focus on the Near East (Byzantine, Slavic and Islamic worlds), on the basis of the region’s historical relationship with the Serenissima Republic of Venice. The new director, philologist and Byzantinist Agostino Pertusi (1918-1979), organised a series of conferences on the relationship between Venice and Eastern Europe and the Near East. Particularly notable events included two conferences and related publications edited by Pertusi: “Venice and the Levant up to the 15th Century”¹³ and “Venice as a Centre of Mediation between East and West (15th-16th Centuries).”¹⁴ In the 1970s and 1980s the focus was on Slavic countries, with conferences and related publications coordinated and edited by Vittore Branca and Sante Graciotti: “Venice and Hungary

12

Irénée Doens, *Manoscritti Ed Edizioni Veneziane Di Opere Liturgiche e Ascetiche Greche e Slave Esposti in Occasione Del Convegno Di Studi Millenario Del Monte Athos* (Venezia: Stamp. di Venezia, 1963).

13

Agostino Pertusi, *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1974).

14

Hans-Georg Beck, Manousos I Manousakas, e Agostino Pertusi, *Venezia, centro di mediazione tra Oriente e Occidente (secoli XV-XVI): aspetti e problemi* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1977).



Alfredo Cadonna (on the right), Lionello Lanciotti with his wife, Avv. Stefano Rosso-Mazzinghi (communication manager) and Carla Bonò (librarian and secretary). Archive of Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia.

15

Vittore Branca, *Venezia e Ungheria nel Rinascimento* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1973).

16

Vittore Branca e Sante Graciotti, *Popolo, nazione e storia nella cultura italiana e ungherese dal 1789 al 1850* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1985).

17

Vittore Branca and Sante Graciotti, *Italia Venezia e Polonia tra Medio Evo e età moderna* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1980).

18

Sante Graciotti, *Il battesimo delle terre russe: bilancio di un millennio* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1991).

19

Sante Graciotti, 'La Fondazione Cini e l'Europa Orientale,' in *La Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Cinquant'anni di Storia*, by Ulrico Agnati (Milano: Electa, 2001), 283.

20

Lionello Lanciotti, *Sviluppi scientifici, prospettive religiose, movimenti rivoluzionari in Cina*, vol. 31 (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1975).

21

Lionello Lanciotti, *La donna nella Cina imperiale e nella Cina repubblicana*, vol. 36 (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1980).

22

Alfredo Cadonna, *Turfan and Tun-huang: the Texts: Encounter of Civilizations on the Silk Route* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 1992).

23

Alfredo Cadonna and Ester Bianchi, *Facets of Tibetan Religious Tradition and Contacts with Neighbouring Cultural Areas* (Firenze: LS Olschki, 2002).

24

<https://www.olschki.it/catalogo/collana/ov>

25

Zygmunt Bauman, 'On Glocalization: Or Globalization for Some, Localization for Some Others,' *Thesis Eleven* 54, no. 1 (1998): 37–49; Roland Robertson, 'Glocalization,' *The International Encyclopedia of*

in the Renaissance,"¹⁵ "People, Nation and History in Italian and Hungarian Culture from 1789 to 1850,"¹⁶ "Venice and Poland in the Middle Ages and Modern Age,"¹⁷ and "The Baptism of Russian Lands: Surveying a Millennium."¹⁸

The Institute's focus on the European East (Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Yugoslavia, all still in the Communist sphere) had a political as well as a cultural value. The Foundation and the Institute become a place of exchanges, encounters, and confrontation. In this sense, the director of the Institute, Sante Graciotti, describes relations with the Russian politicians and intellectuals in terms of "a subtle game, balanced between giving and taking, of unexpected attacks, foiled or suffered, of clever ploys successfully for or against."¹⁹ Graciotti describes a game of chess with intellectual exchanges but also attempts to extract information, with each party trying to show their moral and political superiority. In this case, the East as an expression of "otherness" was certainly not the Slavic or Orthodox world but Communism.

As regards the Far East, from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, the Institute organised two series of meetings dedicated to China, coordinated by Lionello Lanciotti: "Scientific Developments, Religious Perspectives, Revolutionary Movements in China from Marco Polo to the Present Day"²⁰ and "Women in Imperial and Republican China."²¹ The interest in China and the East continued under the direction of Alfredo Cadonna in the 1990s and early 2000s. The various publications of this period included his *Turfan and Tun-Huang. The Texts. Encounter of Civilizations on the Silk Route*,²² and Cadonna and Ester Bianchi (eds), *Facets of Tibetan Religious Tradition and Contacts with Neighbouring Cultural Areas*.²³ These two books were printed in the Institute's series entitled "Orientalia Venetiana," published by Leo S. Olschki (Florence) from 1984 to 2005.²⁴

The Institute's activities were then interrupted until 2017, when the founding of the "Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities" gave rise to a new phase, in which many elements were radically changed, while still keeping faith with the humanist ideals characterising the Institute since its inception.

Renaissance: for a Non-Manifesto of Comparative Research

The re-founding of the Institute, summed up in the new name, reflected the need for a rethink in terms of epistemology, methodology, politics and aesthetics. The world had changed radically since the 1950s, when the name "Venice and the East" enjoyed an immediate shared meaning. Firstly, the geopolitical opposition between Communism and the capitalist-liberal world had ceased to exist, giving way to a fast-changing multipolar world. The Foundation no longer needed to provide a haven for dialogue between liberal Western Europe and Communist Eastern Europe. The change was not only geopolitical. It went deeper and developed into the complex set of phenomena called globalisation, characterised by a new increasing circulation of capital, goods and ideas on a global scale, and also by the accelerated worldwide spread of political and cultural forms engendered by the so-called West. In this respect, the expression "glocalisation" is perhaps more fitting, since it describes both the phenomenon of global influence and the related local adaptations and resistances.²⁵

These epoch-making changes have intensified our interest in the present and have prompted a reassessment of the past, calling into question the previous ethnocentric outlook. Moreover, a growing need was felt

to adopt new epistemologies and methodologies to deal with an increasingly obvious complexity which has shown up the inadequacy of a dichotomy between a “modern West” and a “traditional East.” To underline this global, multi-polar, interdisciplinary and comparative approach, the reference to Venice was removed from the name of the new Centre for Comparative Studies, although it remains implicit. Venice is no longer a yardstick and measure but a starting point, a reference place in an intricate web of historical, political and cultural events. The reference to the East has also disappeared as a term implying the idea of a monolithic East, which, as Edward Said’s studies have shown,²⁶ is inextricably bound up with Eurocentric essentialism, and especially with the moral and political justification of colonialism and thus with the supposedly civilising mission of white Europe over the rest of the world.

The comparative study of religious and cultural phenomena that developed in the early twentieth century²⁷ and was consolidated in the post-war period²⁸ was also deeply affected by social, political and epistemological changes due to globalisation. Some scholars, however, associated or even identified the comparative method with the essentialist, evolutionist and/or Eastern studies paradigm.²⁹ Several of their accusations were well-founded, since for many decades the comparative approach to religion was characterised by the notion that it was necessary to identify universal archetypes, valid in different cultures and historical contexts.³⁰ This approach straddled the line between mystical/esoteric and academic research and had a “heroic” tenor. For some, it was part of a kind of resistance to mechanical, materialistic and quantitative modernity.³¹

The search for universal archetypes, which still fascinates many intellectuals today and may offer interesting perspectives from the point of view of knowledge, involves several issues that need to be examined closely. First of all, the focus on the universal is often accompanied by a certain disregard for philological and historical accuracy, or in some cases by a downright aversion to systematic historiographic research. Indeed, there has even been talk of “armchair anthropology,” a term used to criticise research where the initial preconception determines the results of the research itself, and contact with the subjects/texts studied is minimal. The second problematic aspect concerns the way that the search for the universal may still stray into the misguided attempt to identify an “essence” in religions and peoples, or an element that remains constant in different historical and cultural contexts. This essentialist view has been not only challenged by the social sciences, but rightly condemned, since it can be used to justify various forms of supremacism and nationalism.³²

While these criticisms of comparativism are well-founded and valuable, other criticisms are flawed and unfounded. I am referring to the idea that any form of comparison is impossible because of the specificity and peculiarity of each religious and cultural phenomenon, which should be studied in its uniqueness. According to this “particularist” point of view, we should create as many anthropologies as there are religions, so there would be anthropologies of Islam, of Judaism, of Taoism, and so on.³³ Moreover, this perspective often conceals a vindication of superiority over other phenomena: comparisons are unacceptable, because “others” are not considered to be worthy of comparison.³⁴ This view fails to take into account the intersectionality of human beings, the continuity in their differences and the mutual influences that religions and cultures have produced. In fact, the study of any religious and cultural phenomenon

Anthropology, 2018, 1–8.

26

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

27

Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1930); William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: First Series; The Fundamental Institutions* (A. and C. Black, 1914).

28

Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012); Steven M Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

29

Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959).

30

See as the example Henry Corbin: Jean-Claude Basset, ‘Henry Corbin : Philosophe de La Religion,’ text/html,application/pdf, *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 117 (1985): 17–31, <https://doi.org/10.5169/SEALS-381282>; Daryush Shayaneg, *Henry Corbin: Penseur de l’Islam Spirituel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011).

31

Wouter J Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Steven M Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctt7pds6>

32

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black sun: Aryan cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 2003).

33

James V Spickard, ‘Tribes and Cities: Towards an Islamic Sociology of Religion,’ *Social Compass* 48, no. 1 (2001): 103–16.

34

Robert Segal, ‘In Defense of the Comparative Method,’ *Numen* 48, no. 3 (2001): 339–73.

Naoki Sakai, 'Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism,' in *Postmodernism and Japan*, by Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 93–122.

Wouter J Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Gregory A Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*, 2018, Chap. 1.

Roger Paden, 'Foucault's Anti-Humanism,' *Human Studies* 10 (1987): 123–41.

Stephen W Sawyer and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, *Foucault, Neoliberalism, and Beyond* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Segal, 'In Defense of the Comparative Method.'

Egil Asprem, 'Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,' *Correspondances* 2.1 (2014): 3–33.

Thomas Csordas, *Body, Meaning, Healing* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); John Corrigan, *Feeling Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

Kenneth L. Pike, *Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior* (Amsterdam: Mouton & Co., 1967).

always has a comparative component, whether implicit or explicit.

Another criticism of the comparative study of religions often raised by so-called postmodern intellectuals is the impossibility of universalism,³⁵ a fundamental theme in this field: we only need consider the universalist narratives found in European esotericism, mystical currents, Neoplatonism and contemporary alternative spirituality movements.³⁶ The putative impossibility of universal thinking is based on the distrust of any humanist ideal. In fact, according to some postmodern authors, humanism or universalism are nothing more than ideologies used to conceal subjective or tribal interests and forms of power.³⁷ From this point of view, any universalist discourse is simply "false consciousness," a way of imposing one's own thinking on others and mystifying relations of power. The prime example is the civilising mission of colonialism: its narrative of exporting civilisation to "barbarian" countries covers up violence and exploitation.

The postmodernist vision must be credited with revealing the contradictions of some universalist discourses, but at the same time it introduces rigid analytical limits. Firstly, this form of anti-humanism³⁸ can lead to subjective and individualistic defeatism, whereby it becomes impossible to think positively and constructively about the collective dimension. In fact, society, collectivities and the state become negative players, entities that pursue a biopolitical domination. The underlying danger of this interpretation is that of reducing "caring for self" to the sphere of subjectivity, to a kind of solipsism.³⁹

This inevitably reductive brief excursus on the history of comparativism was required to provide the background to the decision to speak in terms of a "non-manifesto." In fact, unlike a manifesto that coherently describes the meaning of doing comparative research, we have chosen to highlight the heterogeneity of the approaches adopted. In this non-manifesto of comparative studies, we wish to emphasise that comparing does not imply seeking an all-embracing synthesis of the phenomena being studied. It is not a question of searching for a metalanguage capable of summarising different phenomena, but rather of finding an infra-language capable of connecting different perspectives. We do not wish to propose a specific methodology or pre-established terms of comparison to be rigidly applied. Comparison is not right or wrong, but it can be "useful or useless," never conclusive, as Segal has argued.⁴⁰

From this perspective, comparing means developing a certain attention and sensitivity to the porosity between different religious and cultural phenomena, to global phenomena, to the relationship/encounter/confrontation with otherness, and to the phenomenology of the human body and emotions. For example, as Egil Asprem has pointed out, there are various ways to make a comparison: by analogy (different phenomena sharing similar forms) and homology (phenomena sharing a common genealogy).⁴¹ Contemporary anthropology pursues a different route by offering new ways of comparing based on the body and emotions.⁴² Lastly, the absence of a single term of comparison, of an overarching hypothesis guiding our approach to comparing, leaves room for other voices, for the protagonists of our research: it allows "emic" perspectives to emerge more clearly.⁴³

The search for possible universals, strictly in the plural, has not been abandoned, but rather multiplied in its various forms. To avoid the above-mentioned shortcomings of the "old comparativism," the universal can no longer be studied as a set of fixed ideas or archetypes but only as an

ever-imperfect attempt that takes on different forms in different contexts. Studying issues related to universality also means studying how we imagine the other and consequently how we exclude the other: “inclusivism and exclusivism,” “universalism and racism,” are two sides of the same coin. To broaden this horizon, we need to take into account as many dimensions as possible, such as culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

In the first conference organised in collaboration with Mark Sedgwick (Aarhus University) in 2017, we analysed global influences on contemporary Sufism, in particular regarding so-called New Age spirituality, the relationship between political Islam and national interests, and the convergence of Sufism and new cultural forms, such as rap. The conference gave rise to the book *Global Sufism*.⁴⁴

Our conference on “Common and Comparative Esotericisms: Western, Islamic and Jewish” in 2018 involved a comparative analysis of the mutual influences of different religious phenomena, sometimes the result of practical exchanges or fruit of the other’s imagination. For example, in *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions*,⁴⁵ published subsequent to the conference, we showed how Yemenite Jewish poetry was influenced by Sufism, and Christian magic by Jewish magic. A further diverse example in this field was provided by a chapter on the occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1945), who studied, imagined and invented another Islam.

A completely different comparative approach was adopted at the conference “Embodying Scientific Medicine and Religious Healing,” organised jointly with Andrea De Antoni (Kyoto University). In this case, the yardstick was not religious ideas or practices, but the body and the emotions. Comparing in this case means focusing on how the body experiences certain things in different religious contexts. Moreover, this conference explored the porosity between the religious and the secular by studying the practices of possession and exorcism alongside biomedical practices adopted for the purposes of physical and mental well-being.

A different approach again was used in the conference “Contesting in the Name of Religion in Secularised Societies: Between Doctrine and Militancy,” organised in collaboration with Claude Proeschel (EPHE-CNRS) and David Koussens (University of Sherbrooke). In this case the term of comparison between the various religions was a political instrument, namely, conscientious objection. This conference gave rise to the book *Religion, Law and the Politics of Ethical Diversity*.⁴⁶

A conference on conspiracism, conceived in collaboration with Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam) and Egil Asprem (University of Stockholm), combined several comparative approaches in the various papers. Firstly, from a historical point of view, some scholars discussed the presence of conspiracy theories in the context of the Roman Empire, questioning a widespread stereotype that conspiracy is a purely modern phenomenon. Others highlighted the spread and mutation of conspiracy theories, as in the case of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” which in the Japanese context has been modified so greatly that Jews are no longer the presumed assassins but possible heroes. Further topics include recurring psychological elements in various conspiracy theories and the connections between conspiracy and the human and social sciences. Although the conference was cancelled due to *acqua alta* (high water) flooding in November 2019, this did not discourage us: we subsequently worked on the book, now due to be published by Routledge in 2022.



Shaykh Khaled Bentounes studying the map of Hacı Ahmet (1599) at the Marciana library. Bentounes as a guest speaker at the conference “Transnational Sufism in contemporary societies,” Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Francesco Piraino, November 2017.

44

Francesco Piraino and Mark Sedgwick, eds., *Global Sufism. Boundaries, Structures, and Politics* (London: Hurst, 2019).

45

Mark Sedgwick and Francesco Piraino, *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (London: Palgrave, 2021).

46

Claude Proeschel, David Koussens, and Francesco Piraino, *Religion, Law and the Politics of Ethical Diversity: Conscientious Objection and Contestation of Civil Norms* (New York: Routledge, 2021).



Workshop of Japanese Shōdo calligraphy, Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Francesco Piraino, December 2019.



Workshop of Arabic calligraphy with Sadik Haddari, Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Francesco Piraino, December 2018.

47

Karl R Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Karl Popper, *Congetture e confutazioni. Lo sviluppo della conoscenza scientifica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1972).

48

Kathrin Busch, 'Artistic research and the poetics of knowledge,' *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 2, no. 2 (2009): 1.

49

Juha Varto, 'Forward,' in *Artistic Research: Methodology Narrative, Power and the Public*, by Mikka Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), x.

50

Julian Klein, 'What Is Artistic Research?', *Journal for Artistic Research* (2010): 6.

51

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 83.

52

Carlo Ginzburg, 25/10/2020, *Treccani online*, https://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlanter/cultura/Marino_Ginzburg.html

53

These events have been co-organised with Ca' Foscari university of Venice (with the professors Antonella Ghersetti, Bonaventura Ruperti, Silvia Vesco and Andrea Brigaglia) and with the calligraphers Eyas Alshayeb, Saddik Haddari and Norio Nagayama.

The multi-pronged approach to comparison has only been possible because of a genuinely interdisciplinary stance. Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, literary scholars, jurists and linguists have participated in the events organised by the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities. From this perspective, comparing also means building new bridges between disciplines, in the hope of being able to look through various lenses at the complexity that we are faced with.

Comparison can also take us beyond the confines of scientific research in the narrow Popperian sense, delimited by the principles of falsification and verifiability.⁴⁷ Indeed, emotions, perceptions, bodily and aesthetic experiences can have a cognitive value, even though they are difficult to describe in terms of rational coherence. Here I am thinking of art as an aesthetic experience that enables us to feel a "sensory truth,"⁴⁸ which is not imposed through the power of argumentation but allows us to "transform the sensible, the reality of sight, taste, touch and smell, which inevitably implies a change in ideas, understanding and vision."⁴⁹ Art expressed in words or silence remains a physical, sensual, "bodily" form of consciousness.⁵⁰ Thinkers such as Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), on the other hand, are not interested in bodily and emotional dimensions, but have conceptualised artistic experience as a form of ontological augmentation of being.

Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it, and this means that we sublimate (aufheben) the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences in the continuity of our own existence.⁵¹

Regardless of the different conceptualisations of art, we can argue that artistic experience is undoubtedly a valuable tool for scholarly research, enabling us to enhance our "moral imagination," as Carlo Ginzburg puts it, by allowing us to identify with people who are far removed in space, time, and customs. Art not only broadens our horizons but also challenges our beliefs and stereotypes, creating new openings.

When reading books of fiction, we may find ourselves in the shoes of a murderer, a puppet, or an insect. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Collodi's *Pinocchio*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: very distant worlds from our own; but these writings enable us to enter a world that is not our own and this is something that may give us great sustenance.⁵²

Although the language of art is not universal, since aesthetic sensibilities are also constructed socially, we can say that it is undoubtedly trans-cultural and trans-historical. Finally, art enables us to make the invisible visible by giving shape to the transcendent dimension. For these reasons, the Centre has promoted hybrid events in which artists and researchers have engaged in open-ended exchanges. For example, in our workshops on Arabic and Japanese calligraphy, an annual event since 2018, students of Eastern but also of other languages have not only furthered their linguistic and calligraphic skills but have also been involved "hands-on" in exploring how calligraphy can become a ritual and a spiritual experience.⁵³



Cover image of the project Invisible Lines co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme. David B, 2020.

In 2019, with the collaboration of the photographic agency Magnum Photos, the Centre organised a workshop and a magisterial lecture focused on the question of “how to photograph the sacred.” Jonas Bendiksen presented his photographic book *The Last Testament*,⁵⁴ depicting seven men who claim to be reincarnations of Christ, while anthropologist Manoël Pénicaud (CNRS) described the role of photography in religious anthropology, especially in pilgrimages.⁵⁵ The dialogue between photography and research continues with events jointly organised with Magnum, such as a workshop with Alex Majoli (2021) and Sabiha Çimen (2022).

In the “Invisible Lines” project,⁵⁶ co-funded by the Creative Europe programme, we were able to explore the artistic language of comics, graphic novels and illustrations, allowing us to communicate with new audiences. This project, which started in 2020 and is due to run for two years, consists of a series of travelling workshops for young artists, who are asked to “draw the invisible,” from a spiritual-metaphysical, social and geographical perspective. Together with the project partners (the Hamelin cultural association, Central à Vapeur and Baobab Books), we will produce three books, bringing together the works of the young artists, while exhibitions have been held in Bologna, Strasbourg and Tabor.

Religiographies

Religiographies is an open-access, peer-reviewed, scholarly journal dedicated to the field of religious studies and published under the auspices of the Centre for Comparative Studies and Civilisations of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, based on the Island of San Giorgio, Venice.

Religiographies wishes to foster an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to religious phenomena, promoting dialogue between historians, sociologists, anthropologists, literary scholars, philosophers and psychologists. We aim at promoting an anthropological history and at the same time a socio-anthropology with a strong historical emphasis, intending to avoid both socio-anthropological presentism and history that is only focused on ideas and institutions, ignoring materiality, emotions and everyday lives. We encourage deconstructing and challenging categories (including the very word “religion”), not as a theoretical exercise, a proof of concept,



Photographic Workshop with Jonas Bendiksen (Magnum Photos), Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Andrea Pirri, November 2019.



Photographic Workshop with Alex Majoli (Magnum Photos), Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Photograph © Francesco Piraino, November 2021.

⁵⁴ Jonas Bendiksen, *The Last Testament*, (Aperture: London, 2017).

⁵⁵ Dionigi Albera and Manoël Pénicaud, *Coexistences. Lieux Saints Partagés En Europe et En Méditerranée* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2017).

⁵⁶ <https://invisiblelines.eu>

Christine Ferguson, 'Beyond Belief: Literature, Esotericism Studies, and the Challenges of Biographical Reading in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Land of Mist*,' *Aries* 22, no. 2 (3 August 2021): 205–30, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-20211002>; Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Manon Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Christopher Partridge, 'Occulture Is Ordinary,' in *Contemporary Esotericism*, by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 123–43.

Glenn Hughes, *A More Beautiful Question: The Spiritual in Poetry and Art* (University of Missouri Press, 2011).

Malory Nye, 'Religion, Post-Religionism, and Religioning: Religious Studies and Contemporary Cultural Debates1,' *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12, no. 1–4 (2000): 447–76.

Nina Kokkinen, 'Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art,' *Aries* 13, no. 1 (1 January 2013): 7–36, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-01301003>

Klein, 'What Is Artistic Research?'; Boeck, 'What is Artistic Research?', <https://between-science-and-art.com/what-is-artistic-research/>

Klein, 6.

Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* (London: Penguin, 1995), 151.

Klein, 'What Is Artistic Research?', 1.

but as a practice, showing with fieldwork data the porosity and frailty of our categories.

We aim to discuss those topics that are often neglected by the social and human sciences, such as mysticism, esotericism and spirituality, which, in the words of Michel de Certeau, "haunt scientific epistemology."⁵⁷ Our aim is not to create another journal on alternative spiritualities, but to bring these themes back into mainstream discussions of religious and cultural phenomena. Comparing also means exploring identity and religious boundaries: the relationship with the other. In fact, every religious form has to deal with otherness, thematising the boundary between "us" and "them." How is the other perceived? Who is the infidel? How do these boundaries shift according to the political and social context? We are also interested in exploring the porous boundaries between science and religion, beliefs and non-beliefs, and secular and religious.

The intricate relationship between art and spirituality will be another core element of *Religiographies*. Starting from the 2010s there has been a renewed academic interest in the relationship between art/cultural products and religion/spirituality. Several scholars have showed how art played a crucial role in disseminating new religious beliefs and practices.⁵⁸ Some have described an epochal turn, through the concept of "occulture," which implies that esoteric and spiritual narratives and symbols have become ordinary in the cultural production, because of the "spiritual revolution" that began in Western countries in the 1960s.⁵⁹ Some authors have pushed this argument further, arguing that art is replacing religion⁶⁰ or that art is another form of religion(ing),⁶¹ considering artists as spiritual seekers.⁶²

Art will play a pivotal role in *Religiographies*, not only as a research object but also as a research instrument. In fact, within the frame of "heterographies," we intend to give space to other forms of representation, such as photography, literature, comics, video and artwork. These other languages will allow contributors – scholars and artists – to explore dimensions beyond the social sciences frame of objectiveness and coherence. This section, called *Heterographies*, is not strictly scientific: it will not be peer-reviewed, but will receive feedback from the editors and invited commentators.

The "heterographies" will contribute to the growing field of "artistic research" or "art practice-based research."⁶³ In fact, we think that artistic products can offer meaningful insights to the social and human sciences. Artistic knowledge deals less with discursive rationality and more with emotion, sensitivity and the body, constituting an "embodied" and "felt" knowledge.⁶⁴ This embodied and felt knowledge is strictly connected with the capacity of art to produce empathy, transporting the reader to other cultural, historical and ontological realms. As Tolstoy wrote: "The business of art consists precisely in making understandable and accessible that which might be incomprehensible and inaccessible in the form of reasoning."⁶⁵ Finally, artistic knowledge, and we hope our *Heterographies*, will help in exploring the "not-yet-knowing,"⁶⁶ creating new questions and disrupting our prejudices.

Religiographies represents a novelty in terms of both methodology and epistemology. Finally, it will be an open-access online journal on religious studies. It is also truly open access in that it is not only free to read but also free to publish in: authors do not pay fees, as they must for some other so-called "open access" journals that are in fact open only to readers, as the need to pay fees still limits authors' access to publication. We consider the

free accessibility of research outcomes to be of the utmost importance in a period of growing social, economic and cultural divisions and tensions.

About this special issue

This special issue, “Holy Sites in the Mediterranean, Sharing and Division,” edited by Dionig Albera, Manoël Pénicaud and Sara Kuehn, fits particularly well our newly established aims and scope. It is interdisciplinary, gathering scholars from different fields, and concerns the fascinating and challenging topic of shared sacred sites and figures, where the themes of spirituality, alterity and religious and cultural boundaries converge. The authors of this special issue show how the mainstream and opposed narratives of domination versus toleration about shared sacred sites are generally false. In fact, the outcomes of sharing sacred sites are far more complex, implying different strategies, which are often paradoxical in nature, blending oppression and hospitality, rivalry and conviviality.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors Dionigi Albera (CNRS-IDEMEC) and Mark Sedgwick (Aarhus University) and all the editorial board: Stefano Allievi (University of Padua), Egil Asprem (University of Stockholm), Katell Berthelot (CNRS–Aix-Marseille University), Francesco Cerchiaro (KU Leuven), Andrea De Antoni (University of Kyoto), John Eade (University of Roehampton), Diana Espirto Santo (Universidad Católica de Chile), Fabrizio Ferrari (University of Padua), Mattia Fumanti (University of St. Andrews), Valentina Gaddi (Université of Montréal), Giuseppe Giordan (University of Padua), Alberta Giorgi (University of Bergamo), Boaz Huss (Ben Gurion University), Salvatore La Mendola (University of Padua), Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam), Enzo Pace (University of Padua), Stefania Palmisano (University of Turin), Vadim Putzu (Missouri State University), Khalid Razzhali (University of Padua), Antonio Rigopoulos (University of Ca’ Foscari, Venice), Armando Salvatore (University of McGill), Chiara Tommasi (University of Pisa), Fabio Vicini (University of Verona), and the colleagues of the Giorgio Cini Foundation who contributed to realising this project: Elena Bernardinello and Eva Salviato.