BASR bulletin

British Association for the Study of Religions



149: November 2026

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The British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) was founded in 1954. It is a member association of the International Association for the History of Religions (founded 1950) and of the European Association for the Study of Religions (founded 2001). The object of BASR is to promote the academic study of religion/s, understood as the historical, social, theoretical, critical and comparative study of religion/s through the interdisciplinary collaboration of all scholars whose research is defined in this way. BASR is not a forum for confessional, apologetic, or similar concerns. BASR pursues its aims principally through an annual conference and general meeting, a regular Bulletin, and a Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions. Membership of BASR is open to all scholars normally resident in the United Kingdom.

All correspondence concerning the BASR should be sent to the secretary.

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editorial

Welcome to the November 2026 edition of the BASR Bulletin!

Since the May issue, we've had a wonderful conference at Dublin City University with the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religion and CenSAMM, and we have some BASR committee news. We have a new President Elect, who shadows the current President for a year before taking over, and a new Secretary – congratulations, Steffi Sinclair and Theo Wildcroft!

This means I'm now stepping off the committee, which had been a source of sustenance during my academic life, especially when I was the sole religious studies scholar at Leeds Trinity University (apart from when I was split between there and Chester 2013-2016). I first joined the committee in 2013 as the editor of DISKUS, which became JBASR. Then, from 2021 to 2026, I did two terms as Secretary.

Serving on the BASR committee and participating in the annual conference made me feel less isolated. The conferences are also great fun where we can relax (for the most part) and share our research and test our wild and creative ideas. The past year has seen many changes affecting the BASR. Several of us, including myself, had either taken severance or were made redundant from our academic posts as the humanities in higher education continues to shrink. One of the great frustrations during my time on the committee was the feeling of powerlessness at not being about to help the many excellent ECRs into academic posts. I saw as one of the roles of being the editor of JBASR was to support ECRs in getting their first articles published. It was where my own first article appeared (on the Mi'kmaq powwow) after I'd presented the paper at the BASR 2009 conference in Bangor, Wales.

There are now quite a few independent scholars in the BASR, from those who hadn't pursued an academic career to those who were never given the chance, and now those who have had to leave prematurely due to economic and structural changes. The rhetoric against a Humanities education (as 'worthless') and disproportionate support for STEM type subjects in the drive toward high-end career outcomes has in the end left a shortage of those with 'soft skills', needed even in a STEM environment, and discontent among many graduates when they didn't get the careers they were 'promised'. BASR participation in AHA (Arts and Humanities Alliance) and British Academy meetings are more important than ever to keep the academic study of religion alive. Efforts in making links with those involved in school-based religious education have also been important – we are enormously grateful for Steffi Sinclair's work on this. Generative AI is another concern. Every journal editor is seeing an increased workload to double-check everything that comes in (I have taken on editing another journal). It is also getting more difficult to get peer reviewers. This type of activity in not recognised in university workload models and everyone is swamped and stressed as universities keep their staff in panic-mode. I'd been burned-out for many years, and it's taking a while to recover.

The BASR does its best in these circumstances and our conferences remain well-attended and vibrant. We are so grateful for our members' continued support and participation – hope to see you in Sheffield next September!

Suzanne Owen
Independent Scholar

connect

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BASR_RELIGION

Image credits:

Cover - Wrestling at the foot of the cross, 2024, Susie Triffitt. Fountain's Church, Bradford.

Pages 4 - Marion Bowman at BASR/ISASR 2026, Susie Triffitt.

Pages 10-11 - Burnout and the Precipice, Susie Triffitt.

Pages 12 - 15 - Various from BASR/ISASR 2026, Susie Triffitt.

Page 16 - BASR/ISASR, Erin Clark.

Page 17 - Colleagues take their seats for the opening event at the Romanian Athenaeum (EASR 2026), Steven Sutcliffe.

Page 17 - EASR 2026 'Religions 360' logo, https://religions360.eu.

Page 19 - Garry W. Trompf opens the day with a 'bakers' dozen' of colleagues 1977 to 1996, Steven Sutcliffe.

Page 20 - Sydney Studies in Religion Experience panel (Chris Hartney, Kenny Selamatan, Carole Cusack), Steven Sutcliffe.

news, etc

BASR ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2027, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

We are pleased to announce that next year's annual BASR conference will be held at the University of Sheffield, and will consider 'Religion in the Making'. 'Religion in the Making' explores religious and religion-like phenomena at their point of emergence, before they solidify into stable, institutional forms. The conference sits at the intersection of interdisciplinary conversations concerned on the one hand with materiality, space and design and on the other, with speculative traditions that operate through anticipation. The conference welcomes contributions from religious studies, architecture, design research, STS, geography, anthropology, as well as adjacent fields. We're particularly interested in work that crosses these boundaries. Conference themes include (but are not limited to):

- Critical religion;
- Space and place;
- AI, transhumanist and techno-eschatologies;
- Invented and hyperreal religions;
- Vernacular religion;
- Epistemes, ontologies and temporalities;
- Utopias, cities, landscapes and imaginaries;
- New religiosities.

The conference will include lightning panels for MA and research students to present their work.

STATEMENT RELATING TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

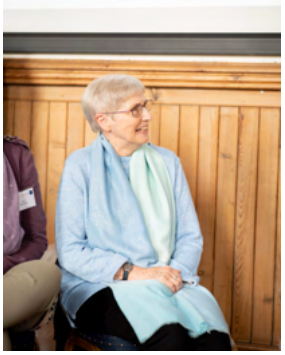
Pressures on the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences in universities across the nations generally, and to Religious Studies in particular over the past couple of years, have concerned us all. The recent news of further cuts at the University of Edinburgh caused further alarm. The School of Divinity has released a statement which provides some important context to what is happening at Edinburgh, reassuring us that programmes will continue to "contribute important insights to debates on history, meaning, belief, values, culture and society. These skills are increasingly needed in a world that requires critical, ethical and interpretive understanding. Together, they represent a period of renewal and future-focused development for the subject." However, the overall picture for ourselves and for colleagues in cognate disciplines remains challenging and we look forward to working with our partners and friends to remain resilient.

Paul-François Tremlett
Open University
BASR President

HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP - BASR: MARION BOWMAN

At this year's annual conference, the BASR committee were unanimously delighted to award life membership to Marion Bowman in recognition of her outstanding contribution to both the BASR and the academic study of religion. She was nominated by Paul-François Tremlett and Suzanne Owen, and her award was announced at the AGM following her keynote lecture on 'Re-placing Religion: Locating the Spiritual in the 21st Century'.

Marion's research is both groundbreaking and holds significant influence across the study of religion and the



everyday. As a pioneer in the study of vernacular religion, Marion's work has challenged and encouraged us to think about the complex and unexpected ways religion appears in objects, things, spaces, places – amongst many others! In addition to her research and impact, Marion has been closely involved in a range of academic networks, including her presidency of the British Association for the Study of Religions, and is a longstanding member of our research community.

The exciting nature of Marion's work is matched only by her energy and enthusiasm for the field; many members of the BASR have benefitted from her knowledge and support as a colleague, educator, and supervisor – myself included. Her life membership is both well-earned and richly deserved. Thank you, Marion!

Aled Thomas
University of Leeds
BASR Treasurer

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD - ASDS: DOUGLAS J DAVIES

It has been a pleasant surprise to receive this Lifetime Achievement Award by the Association for the Study of Death and Society (ASDS) having been involved with it from its inception. ASDS is valuable as a mixed disciplinary group with its international journal - *Mortality, its Death, Dying and Disposal* conferences every two years, and supportive online networks. Together, these catch issues often missed by the main disciplinary organizations. This is especially important now that death and its varied entailments increasingly assume significance across many agendas. Personally speaking, it is good to see folk rising through their postgraduate degrees into positions of further endeavour within and beyond their scholarly interest in death. More personally still, what does this award signal to me? Time to retire? Not quite. But 'lifetime' certainly prompts me to reflect on so many ventures, events, people, talks, conversations and books, and not least on the vital quality of collegiality and mutuality in an era when institutions tighten their bureaucratic processes. 'Lifetime' is enormous in its implications, causing me to ponder what each decade has contributed to and challenged in my life. Now, for the moment, aging and its transformative dynamics of embodiment partly occupy me in an ongoing matrix of vanity and wisdom.

Douglas J Davies
Durham University

BASR AND INFORM COLLABORATION

The BASR has had an on-going relationship with Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (Inform) for decades. We have enjoyed collaborating on conference organisation as well as supporting the dissemination of research with panels and individual papers. At both the 2026 BASR AGM and 2026 Inform AGM, members voted to formally recognise the partnership. In practice, this has led to an Inform position on the BASR Committee as well as a BASR representative on Inform's Board of Governors. Moving forward, we plan to continue the partnership through further collaborations on research, conferences and advocacy pieces. Equally, Inform will support the jBASR and maintain a commitment to ECR's, aligning further with BASR's commitment to the field. As a result of the above, BASR welcomes Dr Edward Graham-Hyde (Inform Governor and Treasurer) as a member of BASR's committee. In equal measure, Inform are delighted to welcome Dr Theo Wildcroft (Secretary) as a Governor.

If you are interested in knowing more about Inform, please visit inform.ac – additionally, you'll be very welcome to attend Inform's forthcoming day conference on *New Religiosity and the Pursuit of Wellbeing: From Biohacking to Ayhuasca.* This will be on Saturday 13th March, 2027 at King's College London. Further details on the website.

Edward Graham-Hyde
Salvation Army/University of Leeds

BASR Annual General Meeting
15.45-17.00
20 August 2026
Dublin City University

British Association for the Study of Religions
Registered Charity Number 801567
(Affiliated to the IAHR and EASR)

1. Welcome

2. Apologies

Steven Sutcliffe, Chris Cotter, Graham Harvey, Molly Kady, Elizabeth Harris, Alastair Lockhart, Eileen Barker, Vivianne Crowley, Denise Cush, David Robertson, Peggy Morgan, Stephen Gregg, George Chryssides, James Crossley.

3. Minutes of the previous AGM (published in BASR Bulletin 147)

3.a. Matters arising

Confirmation of a nomination for life membership to be presented at the next AGM.

4. President's Report (PFT) – BASR Presidential Address, BASR 2026

Thanks go to ISASR colleagues, Dublin City University and CenSAMM, for all they have done to make this conference happen. Next year we will be in Sheffield, and the conference will be called 'Religion in the Making', dates to be confirmed. A recap of the BASR's main work over the last 2 years:

- JBASR now published with Equinox, allowing for better visibility and lower workload. All members are automatically subscribed. We also have the bi-annual BASR Bulletin to publish anything from book or conference reviews to think-pieces.
- The BASR website is fresher and more robust, and there are more changes to come to ease the process of subscription.
- Our ethics guidance now includes suggestions regarding the climate footprint of research.
- We are working to make the roles and responsibilities of BASR officers clearer so that our activities have greater focus.
- We have been advocating for the field by protesting closures at Cardiff, Exeter, Nottingham and Lancaster,working with the Arts and Humanities Alliance and alongside the British Academy, and mapping 'cold spots' in the provision of religious studies and the SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy) disciplines more generally in the nations, by financially supporting the SHAPE conference at the British Academy in March.
- We have been acting as an HE advisor to the Religious Education Council offering expertise on GCSE reform and to the Task and Finish Group that was established to build consensus among stakeholders for a National Curriculum for RE in schools. A public consultation on the draft national curriculum will begin next month and the BASR will be alongside TRS-UK, NATRE, AULRE and other associations, in these discussions. Just over 16,000 students took religious studies at A-level this year. While this figure represents a continuing decline from the peak of 2016, numbers have remained stable around the 16,000 mark since 2023. Meanwhile, over 528,000 students took A-levels in cognate SHAPE subjects, representing continuing high levels of interest in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at A-level since 2021.

- We provided financial support for a series of online workshops on public engagement and science communication in Religious Studies, organised by the Religious Studies Media and Information Service in Germany in cooperation with the British NGO Inform.

In the future, we need to address the resurgence of nativism and racism across our media, often mobilised through religion. One of the things we can do, whatever our research is about, is to try to improve the public conversation about religion and re-assert the value of evidence-based communication that reaches out not for clicks or the grift but seeks to enable mutual flourishing. The carbon footprint of being an academic also needs to be discussed, and we need to do something about it.

Finally, your voice matters. The BASR is here to listen, offer support and to help amplify the work that you do. Help us to make the BASR more effective by reaching out with your ideas and suggestions.

5. Secretary's Report (SO)

We have been working on reconciling the membership list and the email list - please update if you signed up with your student email address, and if you know who the member 'wombat' might be, let us know? We had a very active WhatsApp group chat at the IAHR and we will consider ways to formalize this going forward. The secretary's other work has been concerned with the same meetings as the President and Teaching and Learning Officer.

I have been on this committee since 2014, and now, on the occasion of leaving the both committee and HE, but staying in academic work, I will have the opportunity to help bring Equinox Publishing into the Sheffield conference.

6. Treasurer's Report (AT) (See below for full accounts)

In addition, we'd like to thank CenSAMM once again, for their support, which makes this conference possible. In the future, we aim to revamp the membership and registration processes, improve GDPR security and automate Gift Aid submissions – all via changes to the BASR website. Finally, please check if you are paying the correct new rate for membership if you're on direct debit it should be - £40 waged or £20 low income.

7. Committee Reports

7.a. JBASR (SO)

The move to Equinox has gone well, but there have been some transition issues. Submissions for the journal largely arise out of the conference proceedings, so last year's journal was less productive, as we only had a small, online conference, given that it was an IAHR year. We need new people to join the editorial committee – members need to be prepared to peer review, especially on interdisciplinary content. Do get in touch if you're interested. But most importantly – get in touch to suggest papers from this conference, even if off theme, that you think deserve to be prepared for publication.

We ask for abstracts by end of October, submission deadline to be confirmed, but will be in Spring 2027.

7.b. BASR Bulletin (TRW)

Erin Clark will be taking over as Bulletin editor. Please support her by submitting your contributions on time. Remember, the Bulletin is yours – it is filled with your conference reports, book reports, lists of recent publications and think pieces. The deadline for the November issue is the end of October, the deadline for the May issue is the end of April.

7.c. Social Media and Website (ST)

Please follow us on Instagram, where we are increasing our activity. Tag us in any photos or posts and do get in touch if there's something you have to share (not your events and calls for papers). Our presence on BlueSky is mostly dormant, but feel free to tag us there, but we have a brand new LinkedIn, so please join our network.

7.d. TPGR/ECR Representative (VS)

There is an informal WhatsApp group for PGR/ECRs, and we're aiming for increased opportunities for both at conferences. Supervisors of PhD candidates have been known to subsidise year 1 of their BASR membership – this is just a suggestion (from TRW).

7.e. Teaching and Learning & the T&L Fellowship Award (SS)

Our engagement with schools and with educational policy concerning RE in schools is vital to the future of our discipline; the possibility of a national curriculum for RE in England is a once in a generational opportunity. In July, the Secretary of State has agreed that we have the consensus needed from stakeholders to move forward. The next few months will be crucial as the public consultation is due to open in September. It is very important to stand together to ensure academic input into the consultation (as politicians tend predominantly to talk to leaders of faith groups). Northern Ireland is currently also undergoing an important consultation to reform their core syllabus for RE, following the Supreme Court judgement in November. There are also ongoing discussions with the RE Council in England and Wales preparing for reform of GCSE and A-Level exam specs. Many thanks to everyone who has supported the process so far. REPU (Religious Education Policy Unit for NATRE and the Religious Education Council) are planning a presence at both Labour and Conservative party conference. Please get in touch with REPU (see the recent info sent out on the BASR mailing list) to indicate that you are willing to contact your MP to invite them to talk to their reps at the party conferences. REPU will provide you with a letter and briefing document you can send to your MP. We need to support the campaign for bursaries for RE teacher training and draw MPs attention to the importance of the quality of teaching – including the need of subject-specialist training for RE teachers.

We need to network with and support RE teachers (both subject-specialist and not). Supported by the Culham St Gabriel's Trust, AULRE (Association for University Lecturers in Religious Education) is hosting a webinar series that brings together university lecturers and school teachers (see: AULRE Termly Webinars - RE:ONLINE) to explore key themes in the study of religion and education, providing opportunities for reflection and subject-specialist professional development. The BASR and TRS-UK have offered to contribute to this seminar series. We need to encourage students to choose RS at university - TRS-UK is relaunching its video competition inviting undergraduate students to record a short video (up to 60 secs) explaining what draws them to the subject and why it matters to them. Watch your emails for more info.

Every year the BASR award a T+L fellowship in recognition of their outstanding contribution to the student learning experience in the study of religion. This year's winner is Dr Bethan Oake.

Bettina Schmidt asks if we can have more members' webinars, following on from the popular webinar with Debrah Weston (REPU) in December.

8. Elections of President Elect and Secretary

Steffi Sinclair is confirmed as President Elect (proposed by Steve Sutcliffe + Bettina Schmidt). The President Elect serves one year shadowing the current president and a further 3 years as President.
Theo Wildcroft is confirmed as Secretary (proposed by Aled Thomas + Paul-Francois Tremlett) The Secretary serves 3 years and can serve for 2 terms. It is noted that the post of Treasurer has no stated limit.

9. BASR Conference 2027

Will be held at the University of Sheffield. Exact dates TBC, in early September.

10. Date and location of next AGM

TBC- but at the next conference in Sheffield.

Registered Charity No: 801567

BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS
ACCOUNTS as at 15 AUGUST 2026

Inland Revenue Ref: XN79047

	Notes	2025-26	2024-25
Balance at 16 August 2025		17945	21364

RECEIPTS

	Notes	2025-26	2024-25
Subscriptions	i	**4961**	*4385*
Bank Interest	ii	**0**	*0*
Bulletin Ads	iii	**350**	*0*
2024 Conference Receipts	ix	**5000**	*0*
2025 Conference Receipts		**0**	*0*
2026 Conference Receipts		**0**	*0*
Total		**10311**	*4385*
Balance at 15 August 2026		**14839**	*17945*

PAYMENTS

	Notes	2025-26	2024-25
RSP		**0**	*-1000*
Committee Expenses	iv	**-1423**	*-1448*
Society Subs	v	**-1321**	*-1028*
Insurance		**0**	*-445*
Journal	vi	**-3119**	*0*
IAHR Conference	vii	**-1000**	*0*
Teaching Fellowship		**0**	*-300*
Misc		**-51**	*-24*
Archive		**0**	*-638*
Website	viii	**-615**	*-303*
Sponsorships		**-1300**	*0*
2024 Conference Expenses		**0**	*-1685*
2025 Conference Expenses		**0**	*-933*
2026 Conference Expenses		**-4589**	*0*
Total		**-13417**	*-7804*

BALANCE SHEET as at 15 August 2026

Cash Funds: Bank Accounts

	2025-26	2024-25
Lloyds Current	9735	*14783*
CAF Gold	0	*0*
PayPal	5079	*3137*
Petty Cash	25	*25*
Total	14839	*17945*

FINANCIAL SUMMARY UP TO 15 AUGUST 2026

		2025-26
Balance as at 16th August 2025		**17945**
Total Receipts		10311
Total Payments		-13417
Net Receipts/Payments		**-3106**
Balance as at 15th August 2025	x	**14839**

Conference		2026	2025
Total Receipts		0	0
Total Payments		*-4589*	0
Defecit/Surplus	xi	*-4589*	0

NOTES TO ACCOUNTS

i 19 members joined (or rejoined) in the past year, with another 7 in progress. Most people are paying some new subscripton rates, but some still don't. PayPal has automatically updated but direct debit payments need to be done manually by the member.We will continue chasing them in the coming year. We currently have 181 paying members, and 15 life members. 2024/25 was 183.

ii Lloyd's have typically given a very small amount of interest in previous years, but not this year. Treasurer to investigate.

iii Bloomsbury advertisement in the 2025 online conference programme.

iv Committee expenses were claimed for BASR official work, including representation at SHAPE, REC, and consultation for the national RE curriculum.

v Payments have been made to REC, EASR, TRS-UK and IAHR. There are two EASR payments represented (24/25 and 25/26)

vi Payments to Equinox for the new version of JBASR. This will likely decrease next year as we cancel previous Bluehost subscription.

vii Remaining BASR bursaries for the 2025 IAHR conference.

viii Money paid to Phil Wildcroft for work on revamping the BASR website is represented.

ix Grant received from the Hibbert Trust for the 2024 conference at Leeds.

x Accounts currently stand at £14839

Affiliated to the International Association for the History of Religions and the European Association for the Study of Religions

Burnout and the Precipice

Susie Triffitt

"It is about capacity, not capability". Six months ago, I starred at the screen of my laptop. I felt like I had finally fallen off some existential precipice. I had spent the previous hour discussing my burnout with ChatGPT. I generally avoid AI, but I was at a complete loss. I wanted a solution, a quick one so I could get back to my work. "It is about capacity, not capability" was comforting but not actionable. I genuinely didn't have time for all the other advice from the chatbot or my family: "Take a month off… go on holiday… cut down your commitments". No one had told me that I would feel so awful after submitting my doctorate.



In so many ways, I represent a classic example of a burnt-out Early Career Researcher. I finished my doctorate in the allotted three years – something which is hard even without spending 13-months doing fieldwork. I submitted my thesis two days into my Junior Research Fellowship at Oxford, so one thing down, I went into my new project immediately without a holiday. After a few months in Oxford, I headed back to the field to spend 6-months working across 4 soup kitchens in Bradford. I spent the first 6-months of my JRF navigating a predictably difficult long-distance relationship between Oxford and Cambridge, and then Bradford, which also predictably ended a couple of months into my fieldwork. I was so exhausted – physically, mentally and emotionally that I spent half of my new fieldwork project battling stomach problems. Friends, family and my therapist just became accustomed to being greeted with "Hey, I'm exhausted, I'm sorry".

But I also know I am a lucky one. I told a close friend in academia that I had never felt so burnt out. He told me that this was a "champagne problem" – I have a job. A great job. He's right but he's also not right. Why am I not allowed to be burnt out? What does it say of the academic world right now, that my experience is entirely normal, and actually, I am a lucky one? My lovely, lovely friends may have had more sleep than me, but their current career paths are paved with precarity. As is mine, but it's just a few steps down the yellow-brick road. The fact any of us have a job right now, makes us the lucky ones at whatever stage of our career, but it also

means that our daily lives are most often insane and constructed to be unproductive and uncreative because we're exhausted. Thomas Edison famously said that genius is "1% inspiration and 99% perspiration". Thomas – I think you're an idiot. This is just not true. Isn't genius actually 1% inspiration, 49% good sleep, food and friendship, and 50% perspiration"? Our best ideas happen when we are rested enough to think in clean sentences. Our best fieldwork relationships arise when we are awake enough to laugh with our interlocutors, or see small details, alive enough to continue a conversation, instead of run home for a nap.

There's an irony here. I wrote the first draft of this short article 7-months ago. I was so burnt out then that it wasn't publishable. I think I probably had a bit of a breakdown, verbally vomiting my moment onto a word document. My kind editor told me to leave it be. Since then, I've had more insights about this because I've also had more sleep. I've realised that the high majority of academics I know are highly sensitive people. We are the 15/20% of the population evolutionary wired to notice tiny details so that we can stop the clan from being attacked. The highly sensitive person feels too much. They are affected by little things and affected more by big things. We are good at our research because we see little things and think too much about them, but this tendency also means that even without an insane workload and career precarity, we are already exhausted from processing the world so deeply and being constantly overstimulated. There needs to be time for the darkened room, for the "no" and for unanswered emails.

There also needs to be time and energy for the life beyond our laptops and classrooms. Part of me always feels I have no right to be tired when I see close colleagues juggling academic schedules and their children. They dip out of late-afternoon seminars which have been scheduled so that unattached bachelors can head off to the pub afterwards. When I arrive for an early morning at 7 or 8am, they have already been working for a couple of hours. When they need to apply for a new role, their hair gets visibly greyer as they attempt at all costs to get jobs so that they don't have to move their families, or travel miles away from them. I have no right to complain, but I want to complain more for them because I am in awe of them. I actually do not understand what superhuman power means that they are still standing upright.



I know I'm lucky and I love my job. I love nerding out about random bits of theology or anthropology, and I love spending time in the soup kitchen. I know I'm lucky to have a job. What can I ask for? What can change? Maybe a few small things. Maybe a few of us can make "mutually assured rest" pacts with our colleagues or friends. Maybe we can schedule post-seminar drinks at places where families can attend together? Maybe we can pre-warn doctoral students that they will feel worse after submitting than before? Or remind ourselves that work is not the be all or end all? Or, maybe just the small reminder that "It's capacity, not capability". You are awesome. It doesn't matter how much you've published this year or how precarious your future job is, right now, here, you are awesome.

Close your computer, turn over your phone, eat something good, hug someone, laugh and know you are capable. Know truly that you are not alone, and you are allowed to feel burnt out. Step away from the precipice.

conferences





BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS/IRISH SOCIETY FOR THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGIONS JOINT CONFERENCE 2026. AUGUST 19-21. DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY, IRELAND.

This year's BASR conference was in partnership with the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions (ISASR) and was sponsored by the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (CenSAMM). This rich partnership resulted in the conference being generously hosted by ISASR at Dublin City University, All Hallows Campus on the theme 'Futures and Frontiers'. The theme allowed plenty of scope for discussion, and over the course of twenty-four panels the topic was unpicked from almost every angle, both catastrophic and hopeful. But, against the background of AI's growing prominence and rising threats against Religious Studies in the university sector, there was also an underlying question: what is the future of Religious Studies, and how do we ensure the discipline continues to evolve on the frontier of academic study?

This report is written by the grateful recipients of the BASR bursary (pictured).

After a warm welcome from the organising committees of both the BASR and ISASR, Wednesday's first panel considered how established boundaries within Religious Studies can obscure phenomena that do not fit comfortably within conventional categories. Theo Wildcroft and Aled Thomas approached boundaries from within the discipline, examining discourses of harm across Yoga and New Religious Movement studies. They questioned both the separation of these fields and entrenched emic/etic divisions, highlighting how such boundaries can obscure shared processes and experiences of harm. Together, the papers demonstrated that rethinking boundaries involves not only reconsidering what counts as "religious", but also examining the disciplinary categories through which scholars interpret religion and related phenomena.

In the same time slot, in panel three we saw three papers on Jehovah's Witnesses that, taken together, examined the movement through the lenses of violence, growth, and gender. Richard Putman's "Watchtower Apocalypticism and Anticolonialism in Southern Africa" explored the underexamined relationship between violence, colonial power, and Witness communities in the region, considering how histories of violence intersected with the structures and legacies of colonialism and how Watchtower apocalyptic thought shaped the experiences of Witnesses in anticolonial contexts. Donald Jacobs's "Jehovah's Witnesses, Secularisation, and Growth" turned

to the metrics used to measure the movement's expansion, relating growth trends to preaching activity and raising broader questions about evangelisation, secularisation, and religious participation, while offering a valuable quantitative perspective on the movement's changing fortunes. The panel closed with Lindy Lovett's "Hidden Hierarchies: Gender, Spiritual Status, and Belonging among Jehovah's Witness Women", which used the concept of "shepherding" to highlight the often-unrecognised labour women undertake in sustaining the emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing of their congregations, even as formal authority and institutional power remain largely in male hands. Her paper drew attention to the gap between the labour that sustains religious communities and the authority through which it is formally acknowledged, offering an important perspective on women's belonging, spiritual status, and agency within the organisation.

The second session of the day saw an important and timely roundtable on the subject of teaching and AI, chaired by Joseph Powell. On the panel were Aled Thomas from University of Leeds, Joseph Webster from Cambridge University, Stefanie Sinclair from the Open University, and Hazel O'Brien from South East Technological University, each offering valuable insights shaped by their own teaching experiences. Together they discussed the ongoing implications – both ethically and practically – of the use of GenAI within higher education, noting both the potential opportunities it presents and the challenges that it raises for academic integrity and learning. Core discussions included considering how, if at all, academics can design assessment styles that can help to avoid AI misuse in student work, and if and how it could (if it should!) be utilised as an effective tool within teaching and learning. The conversation overall highlighted the need for continued dialogue in academia as we continue to navigate these rapidly shifting technological landscapes.

The first day of the conference closed with a remarkable keynote lecture on vernacular religion from Professor Marion Bowman, who located contemporary spirituality within processes of placemaking and remaking. Professor Bowman explored how the memorialisation of places like



Loch Lomond through commemorative benches, ribbons, and plaques signifies new expressions of mourning, how a revitalised interest in Anglican cathedrals has resulted from the heritigisation of spirituality-and, conversely, the spiritualisation of heritage-allowing for the development of emergent spiritualities, and how restoried sites and routes across Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway have gained renewed spiritual significance. The ways in which these places are made meaningful, represented, reevaluated, become inclusive (and contested), as well as how people narrate and renarrate themselves in relation to them, she argued, are central to understanding how spirituality is being created, experienced and interpreted in the twenty-first century. As Professor Bowman concluded, "places manifest the things that define us." Following a lively and engaging Q&A, the day ended with a drink's reception sponsored by DCU, where attendees were treated to live Irish folk music played by two talented DCU students!

The conference's second day began with "Jehovah's Witnesses: Futures and Frontiers", chaired by J. Webster, brought together three papers that looked at the movement's boundaries and its eschatological outlook. George D. Chryssides opened with "Blurred Boundaries: Stakeholders in the Study of Jehovah's Witnesses", which examined those who identify as ex-JW yet remain engaged with Witness updates, including some who have built careers around their ex-JW status, and in doing

so complicated the line between insider, outsider, and stakeholder in the field. Mathew N. Schmalz followed with "Identifying Gog of Magog: Futures and Frontiers in Watchtower Prophetic Speculation", a fantastic overview of the depths of Witness theology, including interpretations of Gog of Magog and the king of the north. The panel closed with Jason J. E. Wright's "Consistent Eschatology: Fixed Futures among the Jehovah's Witnesses", another excellent exploration of Witness theology that complemented Schmalz's paper by considering how the movement's vision of the future is understood and sustained. Together, the papers offered a rich picture of how Witness belief, identity, and scholarship are shaped by questions of what lies ahead and where the boundaries of the community lie. This panel explored the interesting intersection of JW theology, exit and making sense of prophecy when prophecy changes. The Q&A section sparked engaging conversations between the speakers and the audience. The panel overall engaged in some of the deeper aspects of JW prophecy theology and exit patterns.





In the following break-out session, 'Populism, Free Speech, and Digital Culture' examined the narratives and debates that shape contemporary online spaces. The panel opened with a paper by Jonathan Abernethy-Barkley, who explored the ways individuals aligned with conspiritual movements often use conversion-style narratives and language of "awakening" that echo religious concepts of revelation and transformation. His paper demonstrated how these populist and spiritual frameworks circulate through digital environments and inform insurgent forms of activism. The second paper, presented by Nicole Graham, examined the intersection of religion and comedy through the online discourse surrounding comedian Fern Brady's tour poster, banned following a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority. Described by Brady as a "satirical recreation" of the seventeenth-century painting The Lactation of St Bernard, the poster provided a compelling case study through which to explore who is permitted to joke about religion in contemporary society and who can censor such expressions, particularly in digital contexts. The final paper by Bethan Oake explored online discourses surrounding sex, sexuality, and gender in the contemporary revival of the 1980s Satanic Panic. She highlighted the persistence of narratives of "good" and "bad" forms of womanhood, and how these frameworks continue to be weaponised against cis-and-trans women and girls, and against homosexuality. Considering the circulation of these narratives within the growing online "manosphere", the paper raised important questions about the ongoing demonisation marginalised identities and the potential consequences for digital culture in the years ahead.

While the three papers addressed distinct topics, they all left the attendees thinking deeply about the power of narratives that circulate in online spaces, and how such narratives might shape digital culture in the future.

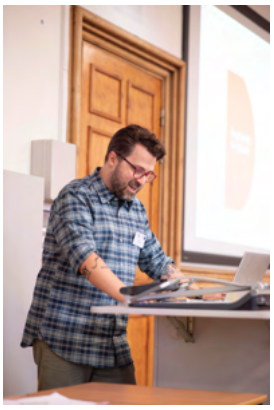
Furthermore, as literally exemplified through the panel entitled 'History, Religion, and Geography', the conference was underpinned by the consideration of religiosity in different modalities and physical settings. Suzanne Owen's consideration of Scottish Druidry and Celtic mythology, Milan Reith's discussion of the politics of exposure using British Freemasonry of the 1980's as a case study, and Erin Clark's reclamation of narratives of early working-class LDS converts in England worked in conjunction to provide an insightful, multi-faceted and interdisciplinary panel. The specific geo-historical undertone to many papers highlighted the

continued insights that arise when scholars reflect on the ways in which religiosity manifests in different global contexts and timeframes. The collaborative nature of the conference's organisation with the ISASR also provided a literal reminder of this fact.

As always, the BASR AGM provided a space for the organisational committee and general members alike to discuss any arising matters, upcoming events and any other appropriate business. The newest President Elect by unanimous vote was announced to be Dr Stefanie Sinclair, the BASR's 'Teaching and Learning Representative.' As both a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies and Head of Religious Studies at the Open University, Dr Sinclair will undoubtedly bring indispensable insight to the role. After a significant amount of time in service to the BASR, Dr Suzanne Owen stepped away from her role as Secretary. As current President Paul-François Tremlett remarked on the multiplicity of ways in which Dr Owen has made his "job significantly easier," those in attendance reflected on the invaluable inputs that Dr Owen has continuously brought to the organisation.









By unanimous vote, the role of Secretary has been embraced by Dr Theo Wildcroft. Dr Wildcroft's assumption of the role of Secretary led to the appointment of Erin Clark (University of Leeds/INFORM) as the BASR's Bulletin Editor. Lastly, the annual appointment of a BASR 'Teaching & Learning Fellowship' was awarded to Dr Bethan Oake for her outstanding contribution to the student learning experience in the study of religion. Since being awarded her doctorate last year, Dr Oake has made invaluable contributions towards the student experience at the University of Leeds.

In early September 2027, the BASR's annual conference will be held at the University of Sheffield and will be centred around the theme 'Religion in the Making.' This theme is intended to explore a variety of religious phenomena at respective points of emergence. Additionally, at this Sheffield conference there will also be capacity for 'lightning panels' for current MA and research students to present their work.

Following an invigorating conference dinner the evening before, the first session on day three was a launch for the recently published edited volume Secularism, Race, and the Politics of Islamophobia (2025). The launch opened with the editor, Sharmin Sadequee, situating the book within present scholarship, which she argues has not adequately apprehended how secularism functions as a disciplinary mechanism that is critical in the racialised (re)production of Islamophobia. This edited volume thus takes on the challenge of addressing this gap. Sadequee's introductory note was followed by presentations by two of the contributors to the volume, Alain Gabon and Dustin J. Byrd. Gabon's presentation focused on French Islamophobia and varying state attempts to manufacture an Islam amenable to French governance, such as through the 2020 Charter of the Principles of Islam de France and the 2021 Interior Minister's dissolution decree of the Coordination Against Racism and Islamophobia (CRI). Byrd's presentation drew on Habermas to propose a stronger commitment by western European and North American countries to an intentional democratic willed-community (Willensgemeinschaft) as the basis of citizenry instead of an ethnic-based community (Volksgemeinschaft), which has been gaining

more traction as Muslims make up greater numbers in the West. The Q&A discussion afterwards was a collective thinking-through of the limits of liberal accommodation, and the consequences of these limits.

In a parallel panel session 'Millenarianism and Apocalypse: Contemporary Reflections', speakers considered the various challenges of how apocalyptic and millenarian belief can be categorised, exploring millenarianism instead as a lived, negotiated practice. Focusing on Christadelphianism, Justin J. Meggit's paper discussed the notion of the 'littoral' – the shifting, liminal boundary-zone where believers sustain their apocalyptic expectations without adapting doctrine. Anna-Sophia M.Roy's paper also considered the fluidity of boundaries, critically examining the traditional distinctions between the categories of pre-and-post millenarianism. Drawing on the example of the New Apostolic Reformation, Roy argues that strict distinctions between catastrophic and progressive millenarian ideologies should be re-considered, as they are able at times to overlap in practice. Finally, turning to the Brethren of Gamrie and the Jehovah's Witnesses, Joseph Webster's paper explored the question of how anthropology can respond to multiple competing eschatologies within the study of millenarianism.





In the following panel 'At the Boundaries of 'Religion', the boundaries of religion were explored through two rather different but complementary perspectives. Phillip Antilla considered contemporary pilgrimage through the idea of 'home', arguing that home need not simply be a fixed location but can emerge as an embodied experience through pilgrimage and encounters with place. Andrew Dean approached the boundary from the perspective of atheist pet bereavement, exploring how non-believers can imagine deceased animals at the Rainbow Bridge ('animal heaven') while continuing to understand themselves as atheists. Rather than resolving the tension between supernatural imagination and secular-materialist belief, these imagined encounters could allow both to coexist. Together, the papers highlighted the difficulty of drawing firm boundaries around 'religion'. Experiences of home, place, grief and imagination can move across categories of religious and non-religious experience, suggesting that these boundaries may be considerably more porous in lived experience than conventional labels imply.

This year's BASR conference proved to be both a thoroughly enjoyable and academically rigorous event, highlighting some of the most intriguing offerings from the current landscape of religious studies and beyond. In light of conversations brought up in Dr Owen's editorial, this year's event truly exemplified the ability for conferences to not only provide details of intriguing research projects, but also to construct a supportive space for academics to establish connections. In an ever-changing and uncertain academic landscape, this year's BASR bursary holders (all of whom are either PGRs and ECRs) consider themselves incredibly fortunate to have been selected to participate and would like to once again express their gratitude for this opportunity.

Erin Clark – University of Leeds/INFORM
Andrew Dean – Leeds Trinity University
Elizabeth Eastwood Dewing – University of Leeds
Anika Kabani – University of Oxford
Lindy Rey Lovett – University of Chester
Bethan Oake – University of Leeds
Anna-Sophia Roy – University of Leeds
Zoe Zielke – University of Cambridge

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS 2026 CONFERENCE. SEPTEMBER 20-25. UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST, ROMANIA.



This was the twenty-second conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions and the second time in Bucharest; the first was in 2006, twenty years ago. (I recommend you take a look at the list of EASR conferences since the inaugural event in Cambridge, England, in 2001: Past conferences – EASR) This was the tenth EASR conference I have attended and it was a particularly large and imposing event with over 700 papers accepted from fifty seven different countries. Organising this across multiple venues, including an impressive opening event in the Romanian Athenaeum and a fine closing banquet at Aria, the rooftop restaurant at the National Theatre, represented an enormous effort by the conference team led by Professor Eugen Ciurtin of the Institute for the History of Religions at the Romanian Academy. As EASR President Marco Pasi and General Secretary Jenny Butler explained the title, 'we will be drawing on the 360 degree, open perspective that makes the study of religion the exciting enterprise it has always been'. In a short report it is difficult to do justice to the breadth and granularity of the content. I will first describe the overarching structure before making some inevitably selective remarks based on my own pathway through this impressive event.

Following executive committee meetings of the EASR and IAHR (because this was designated a IAHR regional conference), the conference began on Sunday evening with an inaugural session and welcome reception in the Romanian Athenaeum. We were given a warm welcome to Bucharest from Professor Ciurtin and colleagues followed by the first keynote of the conference, by Emeritus Professor Gregory D. Alles (McDaniel College, Maryland), with the title 'Slow Translation and the Study of Religions: Promise and Perils'. Due to technical difficulties Greg was not able to show slides but he made a compelling and often moving argument for the value of the slow work of scholarship in terms of careful translation moving to and fro across different languages and views of reality. In the UK there is a 'slow food' movement and Greg's keynote made me think of this: the best kind of scholarship - careful, contextualised, seasoned - is like eating good honest food whose provenance you know, rather than getting quick, expensive kicks of flavour from unknown sources. Greg's keynote was followed by a wonderful selection of live orchestral music by the renowned Romanian composer George Enescu (1881-1955).

Monday to Thursday consisted of four full days of papers, roundtables and keynotes. The schedule extended up to Friday lunchtime and so, unlike some EASR conferences, there was no half day in midweek. Sightseeing or time off required skipping sessions. I can see the argument both ways. No break means more efficient content in a streamlined and thus cost-effective package since the cost of attending is increasingly an issue especially for early career scholars. On the other hand, the need to take 'breathers' from an intense schedule may foster the centrifugal tendency of the large conference format. It is a delicate balancing act.

Navigating the schedule took a little practice but once you downloaded the pdfs of the different genres of presentation – closed panels, open panels, individual papers, roundtables and book discussions – it was simple enough to use these to flesh out the timetable online. Thus there was no book of abstracts per se. (As an aside, it will be important to collate the documents to preserve a record of the event since knowing the history of our field is now a pressing concern). I was struck by the number of roundtables at Bucharest – eighteen – and I wondered if this represents an expanding genre. There are good reasons: with skilled moderation, the format

encourages real debate and exchange between panel and audience and is an attractive opportunity for scholars at all career stages who may not have the time to prepare a traditional abstract months in advance, yet have pertinent arguments 'in embryo' well worth an early airing in public. Five interesting films were also shown – a genre worth exploring – but unfortunately mostly occupied the final slot of the day at 1830.

Among other trends I was struck by the amount of material from Esoteric Studies, whether 'western' or more broadly conceived to include studies of ancient magic and Paganism, including an interesting roundtable on 'Traditionalist Perennialism and Eastern Orthodoxy'. I was also interested in the panel stream on 'Religion and Nature Religions in the (Post-) Secular North' which had crossover with this penumbra yet was more rooted in popular practices. There was a good amount of papers on Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe and numerous interesting methodological panels including Social Ontology, Art-related Methodologies, and Steps in Theorising Religion. I gave a paper in the latter (on Bourdieu's model of reflexivity for the study of religion) and I was pleased to see the EASR committee authorise a new working party in Bucharest on the topic of Theorising Religion\s. Amongst the roundtables were 'Buddhism in Europe' and 'Women Pioneers in the Study of Religion'. I also managed to attend the roundtable on Critical Religion which showcased contributors to the recent volume edited by Alex Henley called A Practical Guide to Critical Religion (2026). A final mention goes to 'German-speaking Religionswissenschaft in International Perspective', a roundtable which gathered a large audience and brought together non-German speaking colleagues to comment on a recent volume, Religionswissenschaft: Aktuelle Annäherungen ('The Study of Religion: Current Approaches'), edited by Michael Stausberg and Katarina Wilkens.

As mentioned above, this is only a tiny snapshot from a complex multi-stream. To get an idea of the full picture I recommend you browse here: Programme — Religions 360° I was impressed by the quality of the five keynotes, all but one of which I attended: Keynote Speakers — Religions 360° I mentioned above the opening keynote by Greg Alles; the quality of his argument did not diminish in the daily keynotes to follow. Almut-Barbara Renger (Basel/Free University of Berlin) gave an excellent overview of the current state of the study of mindfulness with a focus on how floating concepts served its smooth dissemination across different cultures. I was particularly struck by the keynote by Jens Schlieter (University of Bern), 'The Carnism School: Animal Sacrifice, Vegetarianism and the Justification of Violence in the Study of Religion', an exposé of an implicit ideology in the study of religion which served to justify meat-eating as the dietary norm across so many societies. Jens finished his keynote with a flourish by urging us to enjoy our lunches but with the caveat that, if we were 'carnists', we should only eat meat we'd personally slaughtered. Ouch.

Thank you Eugen and colleagues for curating an amazing event. See you next year in Amsterdam for the twenty-third installment.

Steven Sutcliffe
University of Sydney/Open University

Religions 360°

50 YEARS OF STUDIES IN RELIGION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY: A ONE-DAY CONFERENCE. 27 OCTOBER.

This conference marked the 50th anniversary of one of the internationally outstanding departments for the study of religion of the post-1960s period. Organised by Professor Carole Cusack with the help of Dr Ray Radford, and with the support of Dr Mo Quirk, Dr Chris Hartney and a network of impressive current and recent students at Honours and Doctorate level - a sure sign of a vibrant department – this was an absorbing and often moving day engaging with a half-century of teaching and research against the grain of the techno-bureaucratic

'University of Excellence' (Readings 1996).

As might be expected, the figure of Eric J. Sharpe (1933-2000) loomed large (Cusack 2026). Appointed foundation professor of the new department in Sydney in 1977, set up in separation from the existing Board of Studies in Divinity to mark the increasing secularity and pluralism of Australian society, Sharpe assembled an impressive team of colleagues many of whom were mentioned during the day. Sharpe was born in England and his appointment prior to Sydney was at the University of Lancaster alongside Ninian Smart and John Hinnells in an equally pioneering Religious Studies department. His move to Sydney created a link between Australia and England, and the UK more broadly, which proved fruitful over the years not only in terms of that particular relationship but multilaterally since Sharpe was a moving force both in the 1975 Quinquennial Congress of the IAHR in Lancaster and in the 1985 Quinquennial in his adopted Sydney. This, in particular, was an important moment in the internationalisation of IAHR beyond its European heartlands and it remains a poignant event for the study of religion in the Antipodes since the 2020 Congress in Aotearoa New Zealand was cancelled due to Covid-19. The dull yet demanding administrative labour of conference organisation is crucial but because it yields no direct research or teaching income it all too easily disappears from the historical record. Yet it perpetuates the institutional foundation without which the international study of religion would disappear.



The conference was opened by Dr Chris Hartney as Head of Discipline. Proceedings proper began with personal and intellectual recollections by Emeritus Professor Garry W. Trompf of the first twelve appointees in the Studies in Religion department between 1977 and 1996. Under the title 'A Department for the Study of Religion: Every University Should Have One', Garry recalled the strengths and interests of this 'bakers' dozen' and clarified their academic impact both in the Department and in the University at large.

The day continued with a panel on 'The Sydney Studies in Religion Experience', framed by academics Dr Chris Hartney and Professor Carole Cusack but led by the eloquence of current Honours student Kenny Selamatan who transferred to Studies in Religion after a disappointing experience in Philosophy and never looked back. Kenny also spoke to the ethos of community between students and staff which was evident on the day in terms of student participation. Carole reminded the audience that the university, founded in 1850, unlike its model institutions in Cambridge and Oxford required no religious test for matriculation and recognised no established religion. This anticipated late twentieth century secularisation/pluralisation of religions, a situation which Studies in Religion reflected institutionally when it opened in 1977.

The first of two Zoom contributions followed. Live from Tokyo, President of the IAHR, Professor Satoko Fujiwara, spoke to the title 'Between Region and Institution: Australia, the IAHR, and the Changing Normativities of Religious Studies'. Satoko's two framing questions were: what constitutes a scholarly 'region' – is it geography, or intellectual co-operation? And, what counts as normativity in the Study of Religion and who gets to draw the boundaries? First, Satoko examined the 1985 IAHR Congress in Sydney – the first such regional event - to tease out questions of normativity which she explored further via a

comparative case study of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) and the South and South East Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion (SSEASR). Satoko argued that what counted as normative – hence to be controlled for in our methods - varied according to sociocultural context. Careful contextualisation was essential but without losing sight of the need to continue to develop the scientific mandate on which the IAHR and its member societies rests.

After lunch we heard, again via Zoom, from Professor Will Sweetman at the University of Otago under the title 'The Ends of the Study of Religion in New Zealand'. This was an incisive paper which argued that the recent success of the department in Otago was based on three institutional developments: the separation of the Study of Religion from Theology and its subsequent move to Social Sciences; its return of a budget surplus to the university via research grant success (mostly strategically via the Templeton Foundation); and the intellectual capital of the methodological consilience it sought across the human, natural and social sciences. Will's presentation was followed by Dr Victoria Barker from the University of Leicester, a Sydney Studies in Religion graduate and former staff member, who spoke on 'Taking the Ontological Turn in Studies in Religion'. From a post-positivist philosophy of religion perspective, Victoria argued for the value of 'flat ontologies' and the 'new materialism' as methodological tools useful in the Study of Religion. One audience member responded to her suggestion that a core 'problem' of the field, that 'religion' is semantically overloaded, was in fact a core 'strength', in that only Studies in Religion/Study of Religion/Religious Studies amongst the human/social/natural sciences has such a disciplinary memory: it is in our DNA.



The third and final session consisted of two presentations by former University of Edinburgh colleagues: Dr Steven Sutcliffe and Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies James Cox. Sutcliffe argued the desirability to positively reconstruct the Study of Religion as a centripetal force after the deconstruction in the late 1990s on of the category and the academic field set up to study it, while warning, via a UK case study, of powerful forces arranged against such a positive enterprise. To complete the day, James Cox gave a granular analysis of the influence of the thought of the Scottish missionary, A.G. Hogg (1875-1954), on Eric Sharpe's intellectual and methodological development, in the process teasing out the nuanced relationship between the innately comparative structure of missiological thought and the epistemology of the emergent science of religion.

The day closed with the launch of Spirit of the Antipodes: Religion and the Study of Religion in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Cusack, Doherty, Hartney and Radford 2026), a far-reaching compendium of themes and approaches which makes a notable, and so far unique, regional contribution to the international historiography of the field. Steven Sutcliffe provided some orienting remarks about the content of the volume, and suggestions as to its value for scholars around the globe.

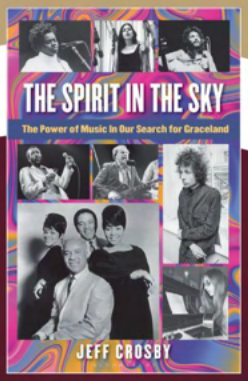
This was a fine event of local, regional and international import. Carole Cusack and her team deserve warmest thanks from the IAHR community. Eric Sharpe would be proud.

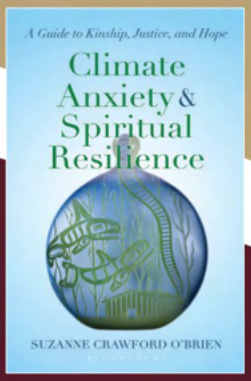
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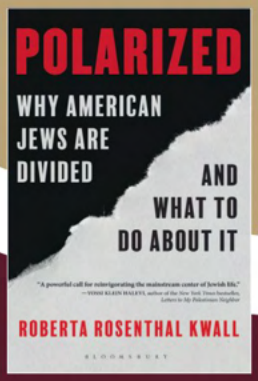
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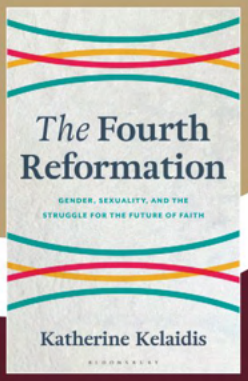
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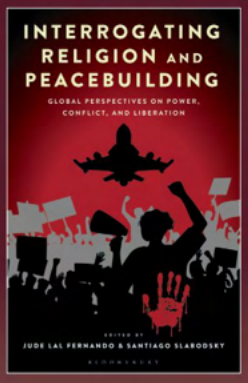




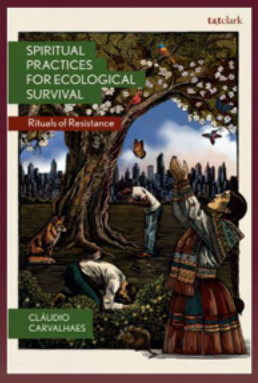


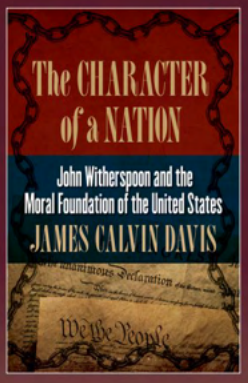


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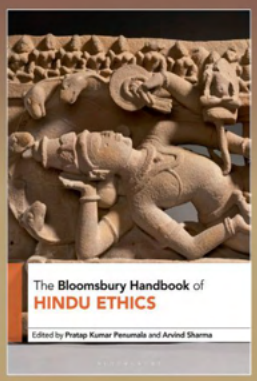


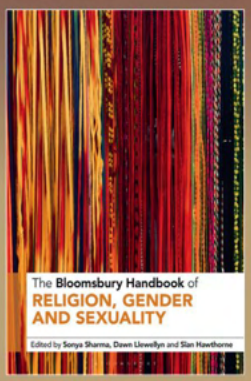


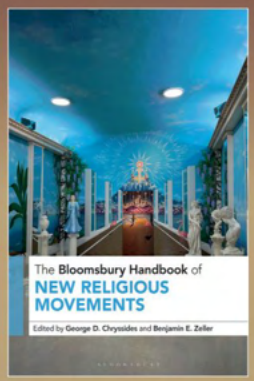


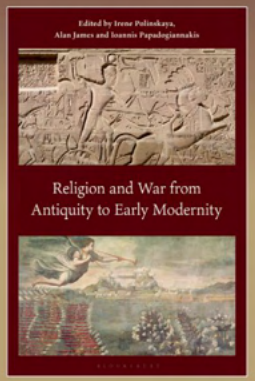


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reviews

STURM, T. AND CROME, A. (EDS) (2026). THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK OF APOCALYPTICISM AND MILLENNIALISM. LONDON: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC. HBK £98. 506PP. ISBN 9781350421615

In their introduction the editors explain that their aim with this Handbook has been not to provide a 'comprehensive summation' (p.10), but to take the study of apocalypticism and millennialism further and redefine its epistemic boundaries. The chapters which follow are grouped into four sections, Traditions, Theories, Themes and Temporalities, each with a brief introduction. Rather than covering each section in turn, this review identifies some general issues and topics and shows how the chapters relate to them.

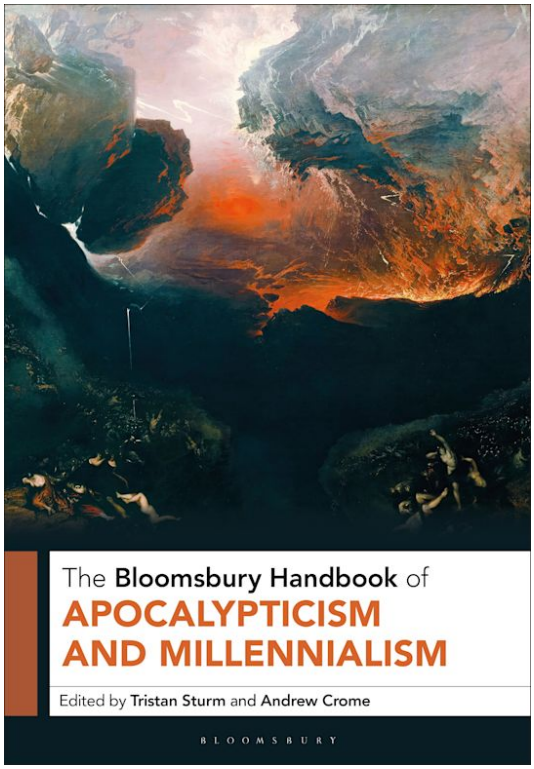
Definitions and classifications are discussed at several points, in particular in Chapter 22 in which Lorenzo DiTomasso offers a 'baseline definition' of millenarianism in its academic application - 'the belief by a religious, political or social movement or group in the expected transformation of society, whereafter 'all things will be changed'' (p.344). By contrast, he suggests, apocalypticism is a worldview 'defined by a unique set of axioms about the nature of space, time and human existence'' (p.339). In Chapter 17, Sarah Harvey and Suzanne Newcombe suggest that the relationship between gender and millenarianism in contemporary minority religions may be analysed in terms of four (possibly overlapping) categories, those with gender normative beliefs and practices, those with novel beliefs and practices around sex, sexuality and gender, those with female leaders and those with a belief in the divine feminine. In Chapter 24 Michael Barkun identifies a new category of millennialism which might be added to the types Catherine Wessinger lists in the glossary in her Oxford Handbook of Millennialism (2010). This is 'pre-emptive millennialism', which has three types – perfect communities, catalytic acts, and millennial creation.

The historical development of millennial and apocalyptic discourses is another focus. The first three chapters survey Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions respectively. Chapter 4 Africa by Asonzeh Ukah begins with a brief discussion of ancient Egypt, but focuses mainly on the modern era, drawing attention for example to the debate over 'whether millennial impulses discerned in African religious movements, Christian and non-Christian, are indigenously inspired or informed by external sources' (p.70). Chapters on China, Japan and Russia also mostly discuss relatively recent developments. For instance, in his chapter on Russia, Viktor Shnirelman looks at the growing importance of the belief that Russia is the Katechon, the 'restrainer' (identified in Paul 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7), who is holding back the Antichrist, associated with the West.

Some chapters discuss specific movements or groups of movements. Aspects of the cargo cult phenomenon, such as the extent to which 'cargoism' has had millenarian and eschatological features, are explored in Chapter 8 by Garry Trompf. Chapter 11 by Alastair Lockhart and Eileen Barker focuses on a number of New Religious Movements which have distinctive or pronounced apocalyptic or millennial aspects, examining issues of controversy and violence, healing, social change, responses to prophetic failure, and technology and extraterrestrials. Extraterrestrials play 'a central role as saviours and as agents of millenarian transformation' (p.300) in the UFO

religions discussed in Chapter 20 by Robert Flaherty. As he explains, these religions may rework material from biblical eschatology, so that for example 'the evacuation of a chosen remnant of humanity in ET spaceships prior to nuclear conflagration' is 'a rationalization of the [dispensational premillennialist] rapture myth' (p.304).

Several chapters focus on ways of theorising apocalypticism and millenarianism. In Chapter 9 Lee Quinby discusses Michel Foucault and the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's analyses of the theological influences on modern state sovereignty. They can, she suggests, be used to challenge the 'Jacksonian apocalypse-enthused nationalism' apparent in for example the rhetoric of Donald Trump (p.148). In Chapter 10 Thomas Lynch compares and contrasts the Nazi jurist Karl Schmitt's belief that the apocalypse represents a threat that must be contained, with the sociologist of religion, Jacob Taubes' idea that 'the essence of apocalypticism is freedom' (p.156). In Chapter 13, Robert Folger and Jenny Stürmer explore a range of discussions of the 'post-apocalypse', suggesting that it might not necessarily mean 'catastrophe and destruction' (p.196), but enduring "the contradictions, tensions and failings of a disappointing present' (p.197).



Another focus is the wider cultural context of end-times discourses. Chapter 12 by Lorenzo Ferrari examines the reception by academics, radicals and novelists of the work of the historian Norman Cohn, in particular his very influential The Pursuit of the Millennium Revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the Middle Ages (1957). In Chapter 14 Andrew Crome looks at popular culture, and the appeal of millennial and apocalyptic themes for producers and audiences, the ways in which media themselves shape their expression, and the impact of commercial considerations such as the need to produce absorbing games. In their chapter on Archaeology (21) David Anderson and Maarten Blaauw suggest that archaeology can be used 'to both explain and critically engage with the present while imagining the future' (p.330), focusing in particular on the popular archaeology of the author and journalist Graham Hancock and his book Fingerprints of the Gods: A Quest for the Beginning and the End (1995). For Hancock the apocalypse has happened once and will happen again if we do not change our ways. In imagining how we might do so, the authors suggest that Hancock (and others like him) 'create space for re-enchantment and subjective life' (p.331). Poetry may do this too. In Chapter 15 Michael Dunn explores the visions of Donne, Milton, Blake and T.S. Eliot, contrasting them with the work of Fanny Choi (b.1989, whose second poetry collection is The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On (2022). She is, Dunn explains, one of a handful of poets trying to move beyond what he calls the 'uniquely universalistic, white, male and Christian aspects that dog apocalypse' (p.231).

Other chapters explore examples of the economic and political impact of millenarian and apocalyptic thinking. In Chapter 16 Steven Skrimshire discusses the 'bible-toting [oil] driller' of the 19th century industrial spike' (p.242), and the 20th century 'nuclear spike', concluding that millennialism has driven climate change as well as being a mode of interpreting it. In Chapter 23 Crawford Gribbin explains that dispensational premillennialists and postmillennialists traditionally rejected political involvement, but that this is no longer the case. This suggests to him that 'anthropologists and

ethnographers need to think more about changes over time and space' (p.368). Chapter 18 by Sean Durbin focuses on dispensational premillennialist understandings of large-scale violence as revealing God's activity in the world, discussing the 20th century world wars, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and the growing impact of Christian Zionist ideas since the early 1970s. The millennial conspiracism evident in the 'crossover of wellness, spirituality, QAnon and Covid-19 theories' (p.289) which developed in the early 2020s is discussed in Chapter 19 by Susannah Crockford. This reinterprets present-day crises as part of a cosmic war 'between good and evil', and reassures believers that 'they are among the righteous, building a new era that will bring peace and harmony' (p.298).

Finally one of the editors, Tristan Sturm, explores some critiques of and challenges to the neoliberal capitalist system which is responsible for the climate crisis. Nailing his flag to the mast, he outlines 'six foundational principles' which he suggests constitute 'a provocation for the construction of radical apocalyptic politics in the Anthropocene' (p.392).

To sum up, this Handbook ranges widely over a variety of historical and contemporary expressions of millennialism and apocalypticism, developing our understanding of particular traditions, exploring general questions and issues and suggesting new approaches as well as areas for future research. Anyone with an interest in the subject will find it a valuable resource.

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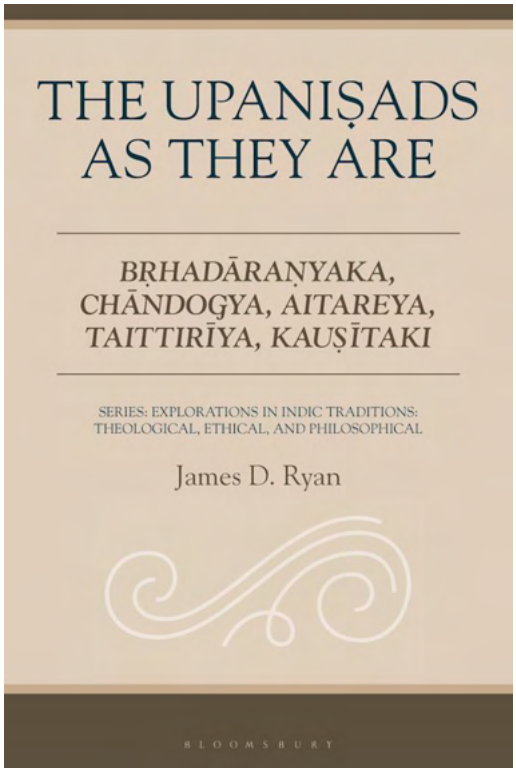
RYAN, JAMES D. (2026): THE UPANIṢADS AS THEY ARE: BṚHADĀRAṆYAKA, CHĀNDOGYA, AITAREYA, TAITTIRĪYA, KAUṢĪTAKI. NEW YORK: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC. HBK £76.50; 216 PP. ISBN: 9798765158975.

The title of this book is presumably intertextually related to that of A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swāmī Prabhupāda's The Bhagavad-Gita as it is, a widely distributed translation of and commentary on the Bhagavadgītā which presents the text not in its original sense, but through the very specific and much later interpretive framework of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. James Ryan attempts to reclaim the "as it is" phrase and reapply it ("as they are") in an honest sense, since the main thrust of his book's argument is to show that (and how) perceptions of these five Upaniṣads – the earliest in the genre – have been distorted by the much later interpretive framework of Vedānta, specifically in Bādarāyaṇa's Brahmasūtras and in the commentarial works of the great medieval philosopher-theologians Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Ryan convincingly shows that "these early Upaniṣads do not promote any central theme … but are a congeries of collected wisdom" (p. 181), and that "the neat coherence that the later Vedāntins wished to impose on these Upaniṣads is simply not there" (p. 189).

Ryan begins by highlighting a 1917 article by the American Indologist Franklin Edgerton which made essentially the same argument as this book, and also a recent source by Signe Cohen which seems nonetheless to repeat the canard that the Upaniṣadic genre promulgates one basic view – the view that knowledge of the identity of ātman (approximately, the individual soul) and brahman (approximately, the para-cosmic absolute) confers liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The recent repetition of this canard must carry the burden of justifying the book, but on the whole I do not think it can. Cohen is a careful scholar who will certainly be convinced of this book's central claim before she reads it, and so will anyone else who has spent much time with the Upaniṣadic texts. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any reader advanced enough for this book who does not already agree with its conclusions. The statements of Cohen that serve as Ryan's launch-pad are unguarded generalisations that do not merit such an extended response; still less do they deserve to be extrapolated into constituting "the traditional scholarly point of view" (p. 190). Nonetheless, it is salutary to be reminded how diverse and mysterious these Upaniṣads are. The view that knowing the identity of ātman and brahman confers liberation is certainly present in these texts, as Ryan

shows; but although it is one of their most potent ideas as far as Hindu history is concerned, it is just one view among many.

In between its introduction and conclusion the book contains a chapter on each of the titular Upaniṣads in the titular order, the length of each chapter being approximately in proportion to that of the Upaniṣad it discusses. Ryan argues – again following Edgerton, and again slightly redundantly – that much of the material found in the Upaniṣads presents variants of the kinds of thinking on show in the Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka texts that chronologically precede them within the Vedic corpus. Ryan shows that many of the Upaniṣadic teachings attribute soteriological potency to the performance of certain rituals or to the realisation of various truths about various entities of which ātman and brahman are only two, and that these two often appear without relation to each other.



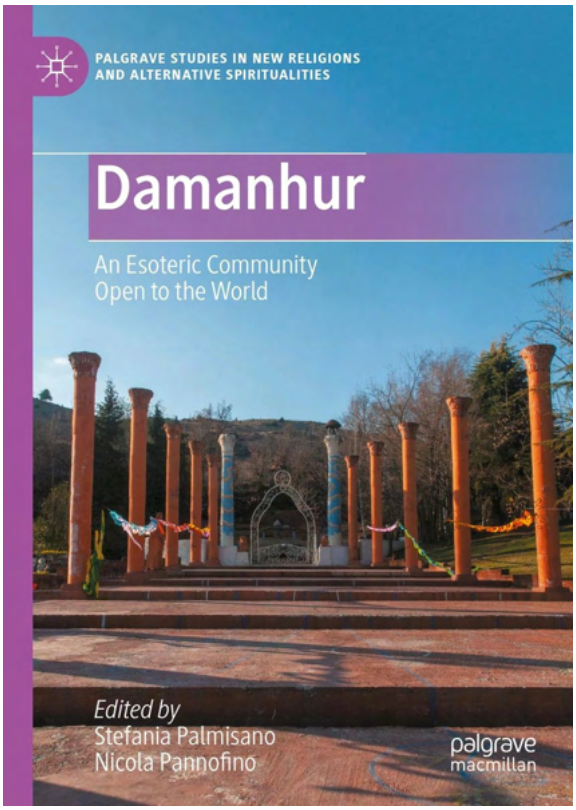
That the Upaniṣadic texts were later misrepresented in the interests of systemisation is hardly surprising in light of their internal diversity, and retrospective misrepresentative systemisation is in any case a salient feature of many religious traditions, as Ryan admits (pp. 24, 44). But Ryan argues for an alternative approach whereby the juxtaposition of multiple cosmogonies and soteriologies is evidence of "an ancient wisdom present in the 'Vedic mindset' that is wisely heedless of singular understandings, proudly displaying contradictions as though these might in fact be at the heart of the eternal secret" (p. 18). This way of describing the world is also called "polygonal" (p. 13) and "kaleidoscopic" (p. 16), and according to Ryan it is an extension of the henotheism visible in the early Vedic texts. It is in accord with this tendency that singular understandings are sometimes said in the Upaniṣads to be "one-legged". But although Ryan occasionally essentialises this polyvocal tendency as a feature of Indian culture, it seems to be at odds with the systemising efforts of the medieval Indian philosophers. And although Ryan celebrates diversity and difference, he may also be imposing a system of his own in using the word "liberation" by default to describe the telos of the Upaniṣadic teachings. The word is an open one, but the issue merits further discussion.

In his final sentence Ryan refers to the book as "this rambling narrative" (p. 193), and this is a fair description. The same arguments are made repeatedly, in connection with each of the Upaniṣads discussed, and some of the same endnotes are repeated on several occasions (e.g., p. 32 n. 38 = p. 78 n. 5 = p. 85 n. 102). It is almost as if the separate chapters were designed to operate independently of one another, rather than in series as a book; and the effect is odd, as is the overall lack of explanatory signposting. The book contains valuable discussions on many specific points (see, e.g., the discussion of the term "woven on / woven into" on p. 121), but it seems to operate at some remove from the ongoing scholarly conversation; for example, Brian Black's 2007 book on "priests, kings, and women in the early Upaniṣads" is not mentioned, and Ryan discusses the texts' ideas as if they float above and beyond any social or pedagogical context. Overall, I would recommend Edgerton's article more than I would recommend this book: see "Sources of the Filosofy [sic] of the Upaniṣads", Journal of the American Oriental Society 36 (1917), pp. 197–204.

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PALMISANO, S AND PANNOFINO, N. (EDS) (2023) DAMANHUR: AN ESOTERIC COMMUNITY OPEN TO THE WORLD. CHAM: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN. HBK £117.39; 304PP. ISBN 978-3-031-10137-3

In 2019 as a speaker at the CESNUR (Centre for the Study of New Religions, Torino) conference I was privileged to visit Damanhur, an intentional community founded in the mid-1970s by Oberto Airaudi in the Piedmont region of northern Italy. The Damanhur citizens' created religion references deities from Egyptian and Greek mythologies, while sacred trees and great stones recall Celtic traditions. The most famous aspect of the site, the vast underground Temples of Humankind built more than 70 metres below the surface, were built without planning permission but are now recognised as immensely valuable to global human heritage. Part I of the book "History and Organization," opens with Luigi Berzano's "A Technocity Utopia," that argues that Damanhur is a nascent state based on a common way of life that has its roots in the occult life of 1970s Turin, "the city of magic" (p. 25). Next is Anna Lo Presti and Monica Gilli's "The Community by Numbers," that uses data from two censuses of Damanhur residents (excluding children) in 2017 to sketch the contours of the community. Damanhurians live in nuclei, which are often quite large groups of people, regularly move between these residences, and are geographically in "the municipalities of Vidracco, Baldisserro, Lugnacco, Vistrorio and Cuceglio" (p. 48). More than 50% of current members joined the community in the years from 1984–1989 and from 1993–2001. Younger people are around 20% of the group, and those over 70 are a small percentage, with the average age being 43. The third chapter is Monia Ciravegna's "Ubi Societas, Ibi Ius: The Legal System," a study of Damanhur's legal system. Initially Airaudi and five others were in charge, but in 1981 the first Constitution and elected government emerged. Over time, the Constitution has developed and the economy of Damanhur has become more complex. In 1992 Italian authorities discovered the underground Temple of Man, which was commenced in 1978. This had legal consequences as there was no planning permission, and the community at Airaudi were sued. The authors discuss Damanhurian citizenship and the spirituality of the group, its status as a religion, and an intentional community. This is followed by Luca Ozzano's "The Complex Politics of a Spiritually Oriented Intentional Community" which locates Damanhur in a broader framework of charismatic leaders, intentional communities, and ways that such societies interact with their host cultures. Next is editor Pannofino's "A Bridge Between Inside and Outside: The Economy" which notes the environmental concerns of ecovillages and the specific economic nature of Damanhur, with its "complementary currency" (p. 116) the credito, and practices such as the production and consumption of organic food. Pannofino shows that economic needs involve the community in innovations and promotions of the local region with non-members, and is also honest about economic difficulties faced by Damanhur. The last chapter in this part is Massimo Introvigne's "The School: A 'Unique' Education?" This examines home-schooling, the Italian context, and how the Damanhur School became attractive to non-Damanhurians.



Part II, "Culture and Spirituality," opens with editor Palmisano's "Esotericism and Matter:

Damanhur's Post- Falco Spirituality." Palmisano examines Damanhur's vision to transform the planet, and discusses "the changes introduced into the community's spiritual-magical-esoteric programme in 2018 by Falco's closest followers, the 'Wise Members', whose task it was to carry the programme forward after his death and to lead the 'School of Meditation'" (p. 153). Airaudi's reputation as an extra-terrestrial time-traveller, Damanhur as a New Atlantis, and the opening up of the community to the outside world are all considered. This is followed by Monica Gilli's "The Tourism Supply System" which examines the growth of tourism to Damanhur in the wake of the discovery of the subterranean temples. The Welcome Office was established in 1993, and spiritual tourists are a source of new members for Damanhur. There is a Facebook presence in Italian and English, and limited accommodation onsite. People can visit, stay, complete courses, and can participate in the ritual life of the community.

Next is the great chapter by Giovanna Rech, "Heritagisation of Temples of Humankind." The Temples are extensive and sacred places for Damanhurians, but also attractive to outsiders. Rech records her visits to the Temples, analyses the role of sacred structures in religion, and also examines the heritagisation of the sites. This is something that is by and large driven by the interest from tourists, scholars and other outsiders. Chapter 11, "Leaving the City of Light: Two Deconversion Paths" by Mario Cardono and Marco Castagnetto, discusses deconversion from new religious movements and contains case studies of twenty Damanhurians who have exited the community. Next is Elena Zapponi's "Women, Gender, Androgynous and Hierarchies in Damanhur" which argues the founding of Damanhur was masculinist, but in the 1980s the Goddess became central and social and community roles were reallocated as a result. Chapter 13, Maria Immacolata Macioti's "Oberto Airaudi and the Community: Before-During-After," is a biographical sketch of Damanhur's founder.

Damanhur is a fascinating and challenging community, a remarkable place to visit, and a beautiful and impressive artistic achievement for humanity (Temples of Humankind). I was profoundly changed by visiting there. This edited volume is a solid introduction to this strange and esoteric spiritual community, and is highly recommended. Scholars and students of new religions will be intrigued, as will interested non-specialists who are interested in seekership and alternative lifeways. Every library should have a copy.

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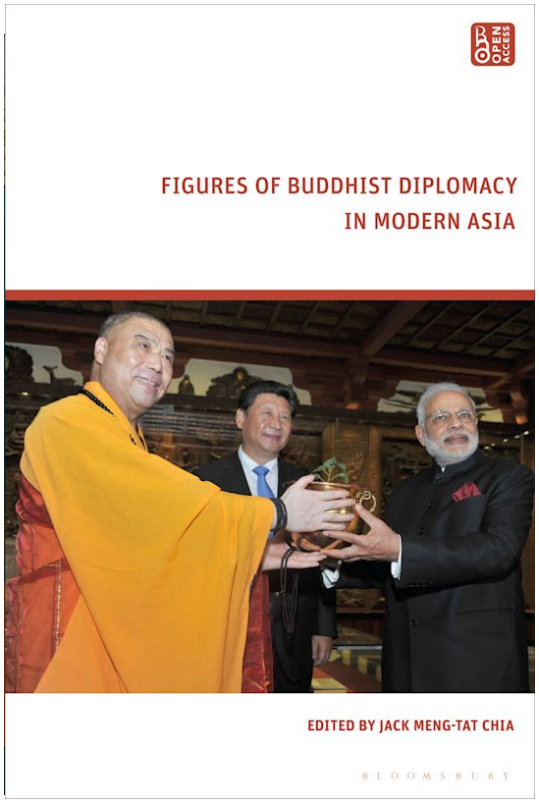
MENG-TAT CHIA, J. ED. (2026) FIGURES OF BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY IN MODERN ASIA. LONDON: BLOOMSBURY. HBK £59.50;290PP. ISBN: HB: 978-1-3505-3012-6

The term 'Buddhist Diplomacy' is ambivalent. On the one hand, it could mean diplomacy that employs Buddhist values and concepts within international relations. On the other, it could refer to the utilisation of Buddhism as 'soft power' on a regional or global stage. Although there are exceptions, this collection emphasizes the latter. The editor, Jack Meng-Tat Chia (University of Singapore), defines the concept as, 'the use of Buddhism as a cultural and political instrument, encompassing the strategic deployment of Buddhist symbols and objects by Buddhists, non-Buddhists and state actors to advance both formal and informal state objectives'. He adds that the book 'aspires to open new avenues for academic inquiry and catalyse further research into the complex interplay between religion and international relations in the modern world' (p. 4).

Meng-Tat Chia is right that 'Buddhist diplomacy', defined in this way, is often overlooked in religious studies. Investigations into Engaged Buddhism have often side-tracked it, as have studies into Buddhism and violence. This book succeeds filling this lacuna through 22 examples, in 22 chapters, of 'figures' in Asia who have utilised Buddhism in their international dealings. Not all of them are Buddhist and the list is not exhaustive, as the editor admits. There are more chapters on China and India, for instance, than on the Theravada Buddhist world. Each chapter is 7-10 pages long, is well-referenced and has a similar format, often beginning with a vignette from the life of the

person concerned. The chapters are divided into two sections: (1) Monastics and Laity; (2) Politicians and Royalty.

The third chapter, by Yoshiko Ashiwa, for instance, focusses on Nichidatsu Fujii (1885-1985), the Japanese monk within Nichiren Buddhism, who founded Nipponzan Myohoji, the organisation that has peppered the world with peace pagodas. Ashiwa demonstrates that the prelude to the pagodas, was missionary work in China, meetings with Gandhi in India, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The chapter ably examines the first meaning of 'Buddhist diplomacy' mentioned above – diplomacy that uses Buddhist values.



Chapter Six, written by Weikai Dong, narrates the life of Zhao Puchu (1907-2000), a lay Buddhist leader in the People's Republic of China, and close friend of the Communist Party. A politician, diplomat and, from 1980-2000, President of the government-backed Buddhist Association of China (BAC), he was central to Buddhism becoming part of China's cultural diplomacy after Mao. As Dong explains, he fostered good relationships between China and South Korea, Singapore, Cambodia and Thailand, and participated in the conferences of multilateral organisations such as Religions for Peace, utilising Buddhism to represent China as a beneficent partner in the promotion of regional solidarity.

Chapters 8 and 9 concentrate on the Indian subcontinent. The first, written by Bhaswati Sarmah, highlights the role of a Buddhist monk, statesman and diplomat who was born in Ladakh - Ngawang Lobzang Thupstan Chognor, the 19th Kushok Bakula Rinpoche (1918-2003). Friendship with Nehru brought him into politics and, from there, he was able to influence the Indian government's welcome of refugees from Tibet after 1959 and attend international conferences on disarmament and arms control during the Cold War. He was also pivotal in bringing Buddhism back to Mongolia, serving as an ambassador of India to the country for over a decade. Sarmah stresses that this had a lasting effect on Mongolia and also on India's foreign policy. Chapter 9, written by Sanjoy Barua Chowdhury, focusses on the Bangladeshi Buddhist monk, Dharmasen Mahāthēro (1928-2020 – lay name Roshdhar Barua), whose life was devoted to uniting, safeguarding and promoting the Buddhist community in Bangladesh. He was influential in promoting peace between India and Bangladesh, and sought reconciliation after communal violence in his country.

Chapter 11, by Sara Ann Swenson, critically examines the role of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022), anti-war advocate and populariser of mindfulness, as someone who 'made Buddhist diplomacy and practical innovation as natural as breathing' (p. 122). Chapter 14, written by David L. Wank, has particular significance to contemporary politics. It focusses on the Chinese monk, Yinshun (b. 1974). The opening vignette is Yinshun's presence at the 'Prayer Ceremony for World Peace and South China Sea Buddhism Forum, Phnom Penh,' held in October 2022 (p. 157). Yinshun, Swenson argues, embodies the soft power that China seeks to exert as part of its One Belt, One Road Initiative, through which China represents itself as uniquely able to connect diverse Buddhist cultures across Asia.

The chapters in the second, shorter section of the book move beyond Buddhist actors into a world of political competition, within which

Buddhism is instrumentalised in battles for soft power and influence. In effect, the section continues the themes that underlie Chapter 11. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) comes first. Raymond Lam presents him as not only sympathetic to Buddhism but also as an advocate of Buddhism as a force that could unite India, China and the rest of Asia. It was a laudable vision, Lam argues, but, with controversy over the presence of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in India and anti-caste conversions to Buddhism, it was never realised, giving way to soft power competition between India and China over Buddhism. The competition between India and China is developed in the later chapters on Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping. Chapter 20, written by David Geary, investigates how Modi has utilised Buddhism as a tool of cultural diplomacy to advance India's international interests. In order to represent India as the centre of world Buddhism, he has quoted Buddhist values in his speeches, funded the conservation of Buddhist sites in Myanmar and Nepal, supported the Nalanda University initiative and hosted international Buddhist conferences in New Delhi. As Geary rightly stresses, however, his support for Buddhism has not extended to the Dalit Buddhists in his own country.
The on Xi Jinping (b. 1953), written by Chien-peng Chung, demonstrates how Xi has promoted Buddhism domestically as part of Chinese culture and has used it 'as a tool for power projection globally' (p. 234), particularly in connection with the One Belt, One Road initiative. He has sought to project China as a guardian of Buddhism and to encourage a Buddhist way of life. Chien-peng cites China's building of an international airport in Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, his formation of a World Buddhist Forum in 2006 and his funding of the restoration of Buddhist sites in Pakistan. Competition with India over the guardianship of Buddhism is the hidden text.

In addition to these figures, readers also find in these pages Taixu, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Ranil Wickremesinghe, amongst others. I enjoyed reading this collection and consider it to be an important contribution to religious studies. It has been meticulously edited. The contributors were chosen because of their expertise but, significantly, include postgraduate research students as well as those at professorial levels. Readers are nevertheless in safe hands with them. Specialists in Theravada Buddhism might see the focus on India, China and Japan as imbalanced. Those concerned that women's histories should be represented will notice that only one of the 'figures' is a woman - Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand in Chapter 19. This imbalance could have been addressed through the inclusion of Aung San Suu Kyi (b. 1945) and/or Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1916-2000) of Sri Lanka, whose use of Buddhism in politics stoked ethnic tensions. However, Meng-Tat Chia does not claim that his collection is exhaustive. Rather, it opens the door for future studies, setting an excellent precedent.

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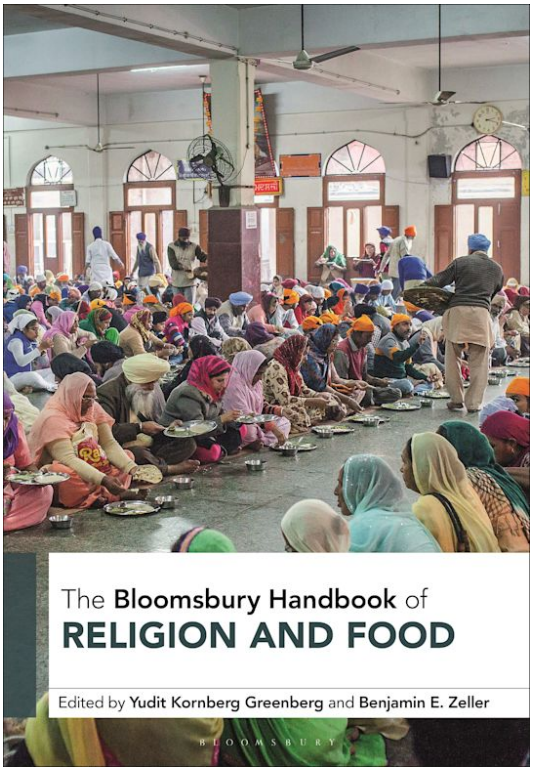
GREENBERG, Y.K. AND ZELLER, B.E. (EDS.) (2026) THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK OF FOOD AND RELIGION. LONDON: BLOOMSBURY. HBK £126;544PP. ISBN 9781350530751. EBK £100.80. ISBN 9781350530768.

Food is integral to religion, yet it is so commonplace that it is often taken for granted and overlooked in the academic literature. The Bloomsbury Handbook of Food and Religion is therefore a much-needed volume. The essays in this volume explore the many complex and significant intersections between foodways and religion. The book is divided into four sections: Religion and the Food Cycle; Food, Ritual and Practice; Food and Ethics; and Food Identity, Religious Community. Each chapter's title begins with a single word such as "Farming," "Slaughtering", "Interpreting", "Sharing" and so on. These terms give a flavour of the significance of food for religion and religion for food. These terms also indicate that religion impacts on all aspects of foodways: production, distribution, preparation and consumption.

The authors of the essays come from diverse academic backgrounds with very varied approaches to the topic of food and religion. Not only are there essays that discuss the major

religious traditions, but it is good to see chapters on lesser discussed traditions such as Candomblé, Jainism and African Religions. However, if I have one disappointment with this collection it is that there are no contributions on New Religious Movements, Shinto or Taoism.

Whilst there are a couple of essays that provide overviews of various aspects of the intersections between food and religion, most of the chapters are fascinating case studies. There is a good balance between chapters that are primarily historical and those that are focused on contemporary examples. The authors utilise a wide range of methodological approaches from textual analysis to autoethnography.



As well as the themes that are indicated by the titles of the four sections, a number of other significant themes can be identified throughout the volume. For example, a number of authors point out that both eating and religion are inherently embodied activities (see chapter 23 "Living") Some chapters also point out that within some traditions it is believed that there is a direct correlation between what we eat and our spiritual health (see Chapter 25 "Ingesting"). Consequently, it is no surprise that food and eating in religious traditions is often hedged by various proscriptions and prescriptions. What to eat and what not to eat is often fraught with religious and spiritual meaning. In particular vegetarianism is discussed in a number of chapters, particularly in relation to the South Asian Traditions (see Chapter 15 "Consuming"; Chapter 16 "Abstaining"; Chapter 17 "Interpreting").

Unsurprisingly, gender is also a theme that many authors refer to. For example, Chapter 21 "Dieting" discusses the correlation between Christian notions of sin, particularly gluttony, and women. This theological association between sin and women is mirrored in ostensibly secular slimming discourses. Chapter 5 "Contaminating" is an ethnographic study which explores ambivalent attitudes towards women preparing food in the kitchens of Tibetan monasteries. On the one hand women's labour is needed to prepare the food, but on the other hand their presence is perceived as potentially threatening to the male monastic lifestyle. Furthermore, as a number of authors note, women are frequently responsible for the preservation of traditional foodways.

A number of authors comment how the terminology of food and eating, are often utilised as metaphors for religious ideas. The most obvious being the concept of nourishment – which on a literal level refers to the food that physically sustains us, but on a metaphorical level can refer to more spiritual sustenance. I am surprised that there is not actually a chapter with the sub-heading "Nourishing". Hunger and thirst can metaphorically refer to spiritual yearning. (see Chapter 19: "Savouring").

Another significant theme explored in a number of chapters is food security and justice. Clearly, there are many people around the world who do not have sufficient nourishment, and many religious traditions play an active role in addressing the food requirements of vulnerable individuals and groups. For example, Chapter 2 "Gathering" is an ethnographic study of the Gainsville Catholic Worker. This is an organisation, inspired by the Catholic doctrines of personalism and mercy, which provides food for the homeless and workers in the gig economy who are unable to feed themselves and their families adequately.

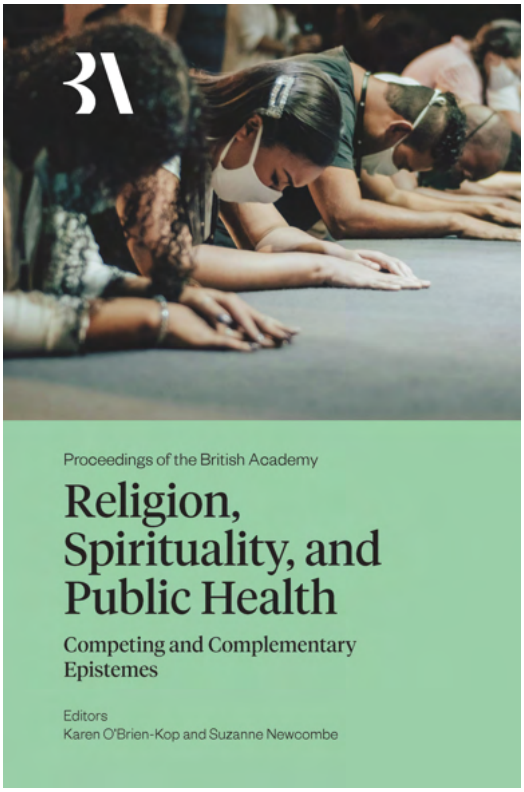
As the editors observe in their introduction this

volume can be considered as 'analogous to a lavish dinner buffet and to a kitchen pantry" (p.16). There is something for everyone in the diverse chapters of this Handbook. It will be of interest to religious studies scholars and students who are curious about the role of food in religious life. It will also be of interest to scholars in food studies who are concerned with how religious beliefs and practices impact on all aspects of foodways. All the chapters are accessible for undergraduate level students but are also relevant to postgraduates and experienced researchers.

I also think that this Handbook is analogous to an amuse bouche. These chapters can be considered as tasty bites that introduce the important, complex and multifarious intersections between foodways and religious traditions. I hope that this volume will stimulate an appetite for much more teaching, scholarship, research and publications about food and religion.

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O'BRIEN-KOP, K., NEWCOMBE, S. (EDS.) (2025). RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH: COMPETING AND COMPLEMNTARY EPISTEMES. PROCEEDINGS OF THE BRITISH ACADEMY. LIVERPOOL: LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS. HBK £72;282PP. ISBN 9781836245643.



The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a conjunctural event that exposed a broader crisis of meaning and authority. As an unprecedented global disruption, it revealed the limitations of a purely secular biomedical approach to understanding and responding to uncertainty. As scholars of religion have long observed, periods of crisis often lead individuals and communities to seek meaning, reassurance, and guidance through religion, spirituality and, in this case, 'alternative' healing practices. Against this backdrop, Karen O'Brien-Kop and Suzanne Newcombe's edited volume explores how the pandemic was experienced across different global contexts. They argue that the pandemic precipitated an 'epistemological crisis' (p. 4), raising fundamental questions about what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose forms of expertise are recognised during a global health emergency.

As its title suggests, the volume examines the epistemological foundations of religio-cultural and health practices and their negotiation across diverse cultural and geographical contexts during the pandemic. Through ten case studies, the contributors explore the relationship between secular biomedicine and culturally embedded forms of healing in which religion and spirituality are not separate from healthcare but intertwined with it. In doing so, the collection contributes to broader debates about knowledge production in a global context where Enlightenment-derived assumptions about science, rationality, and expertise are increasingly under scrutiny. The book highlights the plurality of health epistemologies that shaped people's responses to COVID-19 and challenges the idea that biomedicine is the only valid framework for understanding health crises.
The book comprises thirteen chapters organised into five sections. An introductory chapter establishes key conceptual distinctions, particularly between epistemology, as the theory of knowledge, and episteme, as culturally situated practices of knowing (p. 5). O'Brien-Kop's subsequent theoretical chapter develops this framework by examining religion and health as embodied rationalities, moving beyond mind-body dualisms to argue that both medical and

religious beliefs are grounded in lived experience and practice.

The case studies span a wide range of geographical contexts, including Greece, India, Iran, Brazil, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. Together they explore how biomedical, religious, spiritual, and culturally embedded healing practices intersected during the pandemic. Some chapters highlight tensions between competing truth claims, public health policies, and alternative understandings of illness. Others demonstrate more pragmatic forms of coexistence between biomedical and non-biomedical approaches. Particularly compelling contributions include Sujatha's discussion of Ayurveda in Tamil Nadu, which contrasts Ayurvedic and biomedical assumptions about knowledge and cognition; Ebrahimnejad's analysis of pandemic governance in Iran; and chapters examining Afro-Brazilian, Pentecostal, and Korean healing practices. The final section shifts attention towards the potential complementarity of different epistemic frameworks, exploring topics such as placebo medicine, Daoist meditation in psychedelic therapy, and yoga therapy for Long COVID.

A major strength of the volume lies in its treatment of religious and spiritual practices as epistemes in their own right, rather than as supplementary responses to biomedical knowledge. By foregrounding lived experience and embodied forms of knowing, the contributors demonstrate how individuals and communities draw upon multiple rationalities when navigating illness, uncertainty, and wellbeing. The collection is especially valuable in bringing marginalised forms of knowledge into conversation with dominant biomedical models without reducing them to objects of belief or cultural curiosity. In this respect, the book offers an important corrective to approaches that privilege scientific expertise while overlooking other ways in which people make sense of health and suffering.

Nonetheless, the volume occasionally takes categories such as 'religion' and 'spirituality' for granted, thereby reproducing some of the assumptions it seeks to challenge. While many of the case studies demonstrate that religious, spiritual, and medical domains are deeply entangled in many cultural contexts, the collection pays limited attention to the genealogy of these categories themselves. Similarly, although the editors position the volume within broader decolonial conversations, this engagement remains relatively superficial, focusing primarily on the inclusion of marginalised knowledges rather than critically examining how concepts such as religion, spirituality, and health inherit assumptions from Western modernity. A deeper engagement with decolonial critiques would have strengthened the book's theoretical contribution.

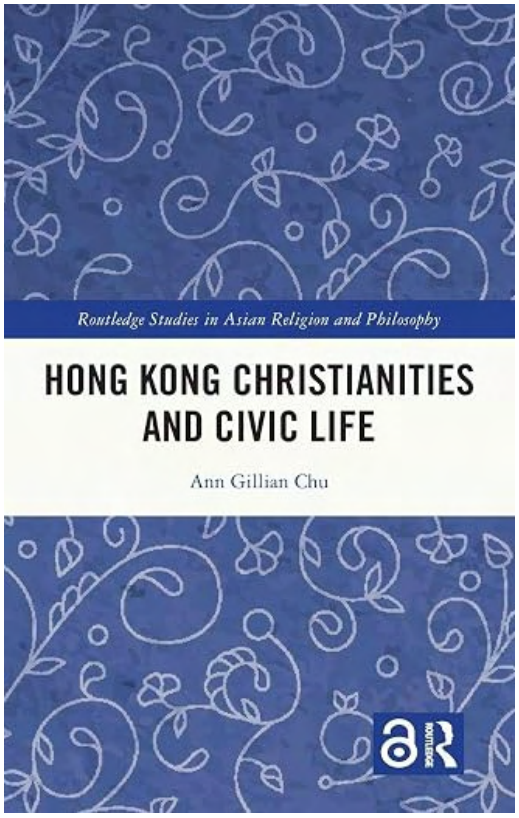
These reservations notwithstanding, *Religion, Spirituality, and Public Health* constitutes a timely and significant contribution to contemporary debates on health, religion, and knowledge. By moving beyond instrumental discussions of non-biomedical therapies and focusing instead on competing and complementary epistemologies, it offers a valuable framework for understanding how diverse communities negotiate uncertainty and expertise in times of crisis. In an increasingly polarised world marked by competing truth claims, the volume highlights the importance of taking seriously different ways of knowing while creating space for meaningful dialogue across epistemic divides.

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CHU, A. (2026). HONG KONG CHRISTIANITIES AND CIVIC LIFE. LONDON: ROUTLEDGE. HBK £171.99;212PP. ISBN: 9781041192466.

Chu's field research for Hong Kong Christianities and Civic Life was conducted in Hong Kong at a time of particular political and cultural contention, from the Umbrella Movement of 2014 following the Chinese government's steps to further limit suffrage, through to the anti-eLAB protests against the introduction of new extradition laws between Hong Kong and China in 2019-20. Drawing on Nancy Ammerman's notion of lived religion, Chu attends to what she calls the "lived theologies" (p. 4) of ordinary Hong Kong Christians, arguing that they need a new language to articulate their engagement with the civic sphere.

There are several features of this volume worth foregrounding: first, the focus on Hong Kong is significant in and of itself, given the almost wholesale absorption of Hong Kong studies by Chinese studies; second, the historical overview of Hong Kong's turbulent history of riots and protests is a helpful corrective to the stereotype of Hong Kong as a peaceful haven of unfettered consumption (pp. 11-46); third, Chu's disturbance of the tendency to equate pro-democracy voices with Christianity, and her attentiveness to pro-Beijing elements among Hong Kong's Christians provides important balance (pp. 47-97) and fourth, Chu's attempt to grapple with the complex legacies and reverberations of colonisation, communism and democracy on the religious and secular imaginaries, and language, of Hong Kongers. In this review I will expand a little on the last point above before concluding with some final thoughts on what I think is missing from this volume.



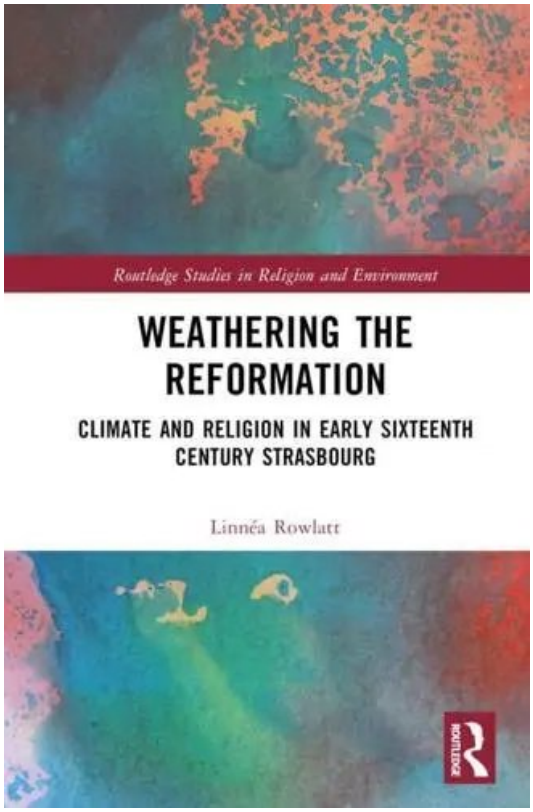
Chu begins with positionality and reflexivity, situating herself as a Hong Konger, an "insider" (p. 2) in a territory that, at least since the 1997 handover, has existed precariously between two externally framed visions of the future, namely capitalism and communism. Chu also identifies as "Chinese" but enjoyed a "Western" education and professes to be an evangelical Christian. She paraphrases Chiang Mon-lin who said how "in America, he liked to use China's ruler to measure things, but when he returned to China, he used his American ruler; sometimes, it is a mixed measurement, neither Chinese nor Western and both Chinese and Western or, rather, moving between the two" (p. 3). The slippages between Western and American – like the implication of fluidity – is revealing, as are the later moves to replace with fluidity with solidity by arguing that Hong Kong Christians should abandon the language of democracy and rights and replace it with one of "incarnational humanism" so that they can "explore their thoughts, values, stances, and theologies using a language that has its core values in line with their faith" (p. 6). Chu positions this as a "reaction against universal values and ideals" while acknowledging that "incarnational humanism" itself is implicated in Western Christianity and the Renaissance (p. 202). Perhaps Chu's struggles here reflect those of Hong Kong itself, and the search for something authentic and stable amidst the competing gravities of global capitalism, Chinese communism and the legacies of British colonialism.

Finally, a few words on what is alluded to throughout this book but which is never really made flesh: how Hong Kong Christians talked to and debated with each other during this period of turbulence about matters of civic import. Chu describes "problems in communication" (p. 87) where "PECs [pro-establishment Christians] and PDCs [pro-democracy Christians] talk over each other" (p. 185), "setting up others as straw men" (p. 187) and where assumptions are made, including "that the other has no mental capacity to process complex ideas or that their beliefs are out of ill will" (p. 202). Chapter 4 addresses 'Christians Who Propose a Third Way' and includes the revealing sentence "But what about PTW [propose a third way]? We are also talked over, as both PECs and PDCs see us as traitors" (p. 185). I would have liked Chu's fieldwork to give us a rich, ethnographic sense of these charged interactions and encounters, and the difficulties Hong Kongers faced and no doubt still face in trying to construct a shared language with which to engage in civic life.

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ROWLATT, L. (2024). WEATHERING THE REFORMATION: CLIMATE AND RELIGION IN EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY STRASBOURG. LONDON: ROUTLEDGE. 210PP. HBK £171.99. ISBN: 978-1-032-20139-9.

This impressive and highly original book assumes a "reciprocal relationship" (p. ix) between climate and religion. Zeroing in on the Alsace – the Upper Rhine Valley between the Vosges and the Black Forest – Rowlatt introduces the climate record for the period 1473-1540 (p. 12) and the principal religious cultures of the region via the "later sermons of Roman Catholic preacher Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg, the new views introduced by radical religious preacher Clemens Zyegler, and the peasant authors of the XII Artikels, and [the Lutheran] Wolfgang Capito's exegesis of the first book of Genesis (p. 15). The years in question include several periods of severe climate stress and the turbulence of the Reformation, during which a new representation of nature emerged. As such, Rowlatt asks, "what role (if any) did the weather play in social and cultural turbulence in Alsace …? Were there similarities or differences in representations of the natural world among … Catholic, radical, and Evangelical theologians? If so, what were they and did they contribute to change in the approach … to the natural world?" (p. 14). In the course of this research, Rowlatt engages with Weber's framing of the Reformation in terms of "disenchantment", and Lynn White Jr.'s claims about Christianity and anthropocentrism.



Rowlatt deploys a "hybrid and interactive model of socio-economic metabolism" (p. 2) to explain the complex, recursive relationships between climate and religion. The model assumes "the autonomous activity" (p. 6) of nature and culture. Yet, their simultaneous entanglement means accounting for multiple nodes of causation and a dynamic indeterminacy of outcomes. Rowlatt is not saying that climate stress caused the Reformation (in the same way that Weber was not saying that the Reformation caused capitalism). Rather, through attending to the historical record of a relatively discrete locality – the Alsace – the book addresses a wider moment of rapid and profound social and cultural change through a local lens, to assess the complex interplay of religion with climate. Rowlatt underscores important issues regarding her sources. For example, "regular weather measurements are largely unavailable before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (p. 31), meaning proxy data on crop yields, wine harvests, radiocarbon data as well as local chronicles, is relied upon. Issues pertain to the cultural record as well; for example, reading Geiler's sermons is one thing. Assuming those sermons constitute a reliable representation of the expectations, values and indeed moral world of their audiences, is another thing altogether. Similarly, assuming Geiler (or Zyegler or Capito) can be taken to be representative of particular articulations of theology-nature is, as Rowlatt makes clear, also problematic.

Chapter 2 introduces Geiler's understanding of the natural world, and the idea of a strict hierarchy of beings that mirrored the structure of the medieval society of the time, in which "inferior beings (humans) chose a superior with whom to exchange pacts of obligation and protection" (p. 101). Thus, addressing periods of climate stress (e.g. famine) meant, for example, calling upon God through prayer or the ringing of bells, on the assumption of God's power over nature. The interruption of these socio-cosmic orders by events such as droughts and floods were framed in terms of the diabolic. A rational and orderly system of relationships could only be restored through humans delivering on their obligations to God (and the local Lord).

Chapter 3 introduces Zyegler's understanding of

nature alongside that of the collective author of the XII Artikels in the context of a "growing cultural schism between peasants and elites" (p. 123). Successive famines through 1511-1517 and the 1525 Peasants War coincided broadly with the spread of Luther's ideas through the region. According to Rowlatt, the "strongest indication that the Catholic representation of nature [had] lost interpretive authority" (p. 142) was the growing tendency to refuse to participate in "apotropaic ritual behaviour" (p. 99), and the emergence of nature as something to be worked or farmed. Agriculture and the agricultural community assumed an alternative vision of the Christian world. Nature was not to be appeased through ritual acts. Rather, it was to be subject to the rational and orderly and indeed salvific work of agriculture, in a picture of society in which some (but by no means all) social hierarchies had been levelled.

Chapter 4 introduces Capito's understanding of nature. The setting is Strasbourg where, for a time, Catholic, humanist, evangelical, radical and spiritualist Christianities co-existed (p. 154). However, a succession of harsh winters and the drought of 1540 again placed the rural and urban populations of the region under sever climate stress. In his exegesis of Genesis, Capito argued that Scripture was "the sole interpretive filter … to understanding natural events" (p. 165), going on to claim that that "when humans plow, log, fish, or mine, they are fulfilling God's command to exert dominion over the earth" (p. 166).

Rowlatt concludes with the following: "I have demonstrated the strength of two hypotheses: first, that the unreliable weather conditions … exerted such severe economic stress on Alsatians that the bad weather contributed to their enthusiastic acceptance of theological developments we now refer to as the Protestant Reformation …. My second hypothesis focuses more closely on the new Christian representation of nature which emerged as part of the Reformed theologies … I posit that the weather-related social turmoil of the period was the fertile ground from which Evangelical views emerged which explicitly declared the world to be devoid of any intrinsic value" (p. 187), except in relation to human salvation.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from Rowlatt's work is that the natural world is not simply a neutral container or stage in or upon which human struggles unfold. Rather, nature is, to borrow from Henri Lefebvre, a "force of production" in its own right, with its own capacities for agency. Finally, what of Weber and Lynn White Jr.? Rowlatt contests Weber's framing of pre-Reformation Europe as steeped in an "irrational, magic-riddled miasma of late medieval Catholicism" (p. 195). Geiler's theology was internally consistent (that is, rational) even if it made unwarranted assumptions about cause and effect, such as the ringing of bells against bad weather. By contrast, Rowlatt states that Lynn White Jr.'s claims about Christianity and anthropocentrism "finds strong support in my research" (p. 196).

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2025 'Long-Term Ethnology and the Shadowy Impact of the Researcher', in Linda Woodhead, Louisa Cadman, and Nicole Graham (eds), *Messy Methods in Researching Religion* (Oxford, 2025; online edn, Oxford Academic, 7 Apr. 2025)

Carole M Cusack

2026 'Invented Religions', in George D. Chryssides and Benjamin E. Zeller (eds), *The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements,* second edition. London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2026, pp. 171-183.

with Bernard Doherty, Christopher H. Hartney, and Raymond Radford (eds), *The Spirit of the Antipodes: Religion and the Study of Religion in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand,* Australian Theological Press, 2026.

with Raymond Radford, 'The Study of UFOlogy in Australia: The Final Frontier', in Carole M. Cusack, Bernard Doherty, Christopher H. Hartney, and Raymond Radford (eds), *The Spirit of the Antipodes: Religion and the Study of Religion in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand,* ATF Press, 2026, pp. 561-579.

with Bernard Doherty, Christopher H. Hartney, and Raymond Radford, 'Introduction: Religion and the Study of Religion in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand', in Carole M. Cusack, Bernard Doherty, Christopher H. Hartney, and Raymond Radford (eds), *The Spirit of the Antipodes: Religion and the Study of Religion in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand,* ATF Press, 2026, pp. xvii-xxv.

'The Study of Esotericism in the Antipodes', in Carole M. Cusack, Bernard Doherty, Christopher H. Hartney, and Raymond Radford (eds), *The Spirit of the Antipodes: Religion and the Study of Religion in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand,* ATF Press, 2026, pp. 385-414.

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Paul Hedges

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Michael T Miller

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Moojan Momen

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Steven J. Sutcliffe

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Paul Weller

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"When religion and politics travel in the same cart, the riders believe nothing can stand in their way. Their movement becomes headlong—faster and faster and faster. They put aside all thought of obstacles and forget that a precipice does not show itself to the man in a blind rush until it’s too late."

(F P. Herbert, 1965. *Dune.* p. 248)