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Anja Kirsch, Andrea Rota and Jens Schlieter

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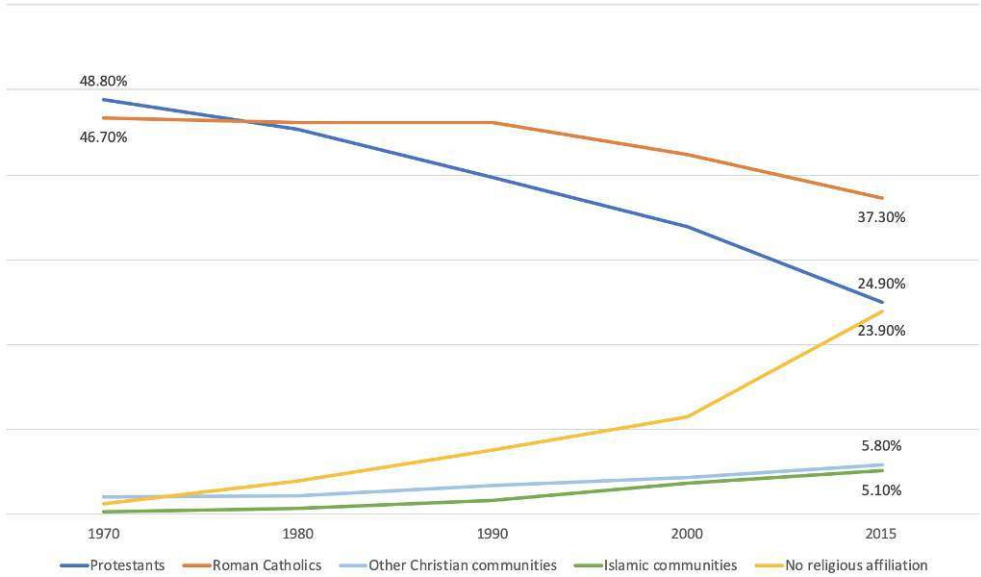
The conference

1 From June 17 to 21, 2018, the Institute for the Science of Religion at the University of Bern, Switzerland, together with the Swiss Society for the Study of Religions organized and hosted the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR). The conference was entitled »Multiple Religious Identities – Individuals, Communities, Traditions« and provided more than five hundred scholars of religion from forty-three countries with a forum to present their academic findings and network with colleagues from all continents. The choice of the conference topic reflected the growing public interest in the increasing diversity of the European religious landscape. The Swiss case provides a clear example of such a trend:

Figure 1: Religious affiliation in Switzerland 1970–2015*



2 Since 1970, when 98 percent of Swiss residents still professed themselves to be Catholic or Protestant, these churches have lost about one third of their members. At the same time, smaller Christian communities such as Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Pietist denominations are growing, as are, albeit for different reasons, Christian Orthodox and Islamic religious communities. But the most obvious change is the persistent growth of the »nones«, of people who declare no religious affiliation. While it is well known that statistics of belonging cannot give a full picture of religious practices, attitudes, and beliefs—for example, alternative religiosity and communities that do not have formal memberships are absent from the official statistics—recent qualitative studies have broadly confirmed the overall fact of a substantial religious change, resulting, as it seems, in further pluralization and diversification.

3 These contemporary dynamics of change were not, however, the only reason to propose the concept of multiple religious identities as the overarching theme of the conference. New ways of mapping, dissecting, and categorizing the history of religion, from antiquity to the modern age, are emerging in the study of religions, and new critical discussions about the discipline's concepts and instruments stimulate theoretical innovation. These ongoing debates call for reflection on multiple identities and multiple identification processes at the level of individuals, communities, and whole traditions. As empirical realities, religions are never homogenous. From the multitude of beliefs, objects, feelings, discourses, and practices of everyday lived religion to major historical disputes that have led to the formation of different schools or movements to conflict-laden divisions at the intersection of religion and politics, an extraordinary variety of contexts and content constitute the ubiquitous constant of religions across centuries and cultures, from early civilizations to twenty-first-century immigrant societies, across Europe and beyond. The multiplicity of ways in which individuals form relationships with religious traditions and the plural modes of how religious codes are appropriated add further complexity to this picture.

4 To address the multifaceted idea of multiple religious identities, six keynote speakers were invited to provide an input at the conference, drawing on their particular expertise. The choice of the keynotes took various factors into account. First, the speakers had to work in diverse research fields to cover, as much as possible, a variety

of approaches, epochs, and geographical contexts; second, they had to come from different European countries to attest to the vitality of the study of religions across the continent; finally, consideration was given to gender distribution in order to ensure an equal representation of male and female speakers. The following scholars (in alphabetical order) held a keynote in Bern:

- Milda Ališauskienė, professor of sociology at Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania, spoke on the »Diversification of Religious Identities in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Baltic States«.
- Grace Davie, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, held a keynote entitled »Multiple Religious Identities: Realities and Reflections«.
- Eugen Ciurtin, senior researcher at the Institute for the History of Religions of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest, presented »A Comparative History of Saṃsāra in Early India: In and out of the Vortex of Transmigration«.
- Jörg Rüpke, professor of comparative religion at the University of Erfurt in Germany, addressed the topic of »Urbanity and Multiple Religious Identities in Antiquity«.
- Reinhard Schulze, professor of Islamic studies at the University of Bern in Switzerland, discussed »The Ambiguity of the Religious Self in Pre- and Postnational Social Worlds: Examples from Seventeenth-Century Morocco and Twentieth-Century Germany«.
- Dorothea Weltecke, professor of history at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, elaborated on »Religious Demarcation, Border Violation and Deviance Discourses in Medieval Religious Groups«.

5 All the keynote speeches filled the university's auditorium. They provided important insights on the conference's topic and stimulated discussion among the scholars in attendance. An international conference should not, however, only be an occasion reserved for more or less experienced researchers but also an opportunity for students to get acquainted with an essential side of academic work and to experience the study of religions »in the making«.

The conference as a learning environment

6 Participating in an international event can be challenging for students, in particular if the purpose of such participation remains ill-defined. To provide orientation and integrate a group of students in the conference's life in a meaningful way, the authors of these introductory remarks—who were also members of the conference's program and organization teams—jointly lead a seminar for master's students at the University of Bern and the University of Basel entitled »Multiple Religious Identities: Turning an Academic Question into an International Conference« during the semester preceding the event. The seminar aimed to introduce and discuss the concept of multiple religious identities to facilitate the students' active participation in the conference—indeed, such active participation was an integral requirement of the seminar. However, in addition to theoretical reflection on religious diversity and multiple religious belonging, the seminar also had more practical goals. On the one hand, we wanted to give students a first-hand look at the inner workings and challenges of organizing an international conference—most of the students attending the seminar were later employed as members of the conference staff. On the other hand, we wanted to provide them with the necessary factual and methodological knowledge and competences to engage in discussions with the scholars coming to Bern, notably with the keynote speakers.

Conducting, editing, and publishing an interview with a keynote speaker was an explicit goal of the seminar. The learning outcomes of the seminar were defined as follows:

7 On successful completion of this course, students will be able to ...

- demonstrate an orientational knowledge of basic secondary literature on multiple religious identities, sketch different research approaches, and interrelate these approaches;
- roughly sketch the spectrum of research themes and current debates in the study of religions at the European level;
- develop appropriate questions for an expert interview and conduct this interview independently in English;
- reflect on the notion of religion with regard to current approaches on religious identity formation;
- formulate research questions based on their prior knowledge and own interests.

8 The conference seminar was a great opportunity for coteaching and experimenting with different methods such as study groups, project work, and conference excursions; furthermore, it provided an ideal setting for group learning, which included enhancing practical skills related to the conference's organization and transferrable competences like presentation techniques, rhetorical skills, and knowledge management.

9 In the first part of the course, participants had the opportunity to read and discuss selected texts by the keynote speakers. According to their interests, students met in groups to prepare semistructured interview guides. To this end, the second part of the seminar provided a crash course in conducting expert interviews. In the final part, the teachers individually coached each group on refining their questions and revising the general structure of their interview guide. During the conference, the students autonomously planned and conducted the interviews in groups of two or three. As part of the seminar evaluation, they transcribed and edited the interview. For publication, the seminar teachers reviewed and copyedited the interviews together with the students; Anthony Mahler helped with language editing. Finally, the keynote speakers reviewed the finalized transcripts.

10 In conclusion, the students were able to realize and publish the interviews in this special issue thanks to the keynote speakers, who enthusiastically agreed to discuss their perspectives on multiple religious identities, and to the editors of the *Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft*.

NOTES

***.** Data: Swiss Federal Statistical Office, harmonized dataset, 1970–2015.

AUTHORS

ANJA KIRSCH

University of Basel
Anja.Kirsch@unibas.ch

ANDREA ROTA

University of Bern
Andrea.Rota@relwi.unibe.ch

JENS SCHLIETER

University of Bern
Jens.Schlieter@relwi.unibe.ch