

Francesca Cadeddu

Introduction: Religion and Diversity

2022 EuArE Annual Conference

With this volume the European Academy of Religion presents the text of the Key-note Lectures that were given during its 2022 Annual Conference, held in Bologna on June 20–23, 2022. The overarching topic of the Conference for that year was “Religion and Diversity”.

The EuArE – and its conferences even more so – gathers a diverse group of scholars, departments, research centres, and publishers, all with a common interest in the study and dissemination of knowledge about religions. They come from a cultural Europe, which extends far beyond the political borders of the EU and which is characterised by religious, ethnic, cultural proximities that could not be even imagined some thirty years ago.

Moreover, the issue of religious diversity has always been part of the scientific work of the hosting institution, *Fondazione per le scienze religiose* (FSCIRE), and the addition of the conjunction between the two words meant to open the topic to the widest possible public in terms of disciplines and perspectives, encouraging theological, philosophical, as well as historical, juridical, and sociological analyses.

Unfortunately, the 2022 Annual Conference took place in the geo-political context of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Scholars were questioning the role the churches played in the lack of dialogue and understanding between the conflicting parties, and they asked themselves, what role the churches played in political rhetoric that supported the conflict. The need of understanding the meaning of diversity within religions, among religions and in the cultures they inhabit seemed, at that point, of the utmost urgency.

The community of scholars gathered at the 2022 Annual Conference responded to this need with strong interest: over 800 people met in the first post-COVID19 conference of the association, describing, analysing, questioning the conference topic. The main areas of interest have ranged from interreligious dialogue and encounter to tolerance; from the impact of the pandemic on socio-juridical settings to the impact of religious practice in non-religious societies and communities; from the definition of religious groups and organisations to the relationship between faith

Francesca Cadeddu is Assistant Professor in Contemporary History at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and affiliated with the *Fondazione per le scienze religiose* (FSCIRE) in Bologna, Italy.

communities and political movements – all of them in different historical and geographical contexts, offering a vast panorama of disciplinary approaches and methodologies.

“Religion and Diversity” was the topic of the 2022 Annual Conference because diversity characterises internal dynamics and external relations of all religious faiths in their different dimensions: texts – in their origins, exegesis, hermeneutics, critical editions; cults – in their anthropology, aesthetics, adaptations; norms – in their sources, implementation, collection; doctrines – with their languages, narratives, transmissions; practices – in their motivation, evolution, connection or antagonism with other societal actors. Religious diversity is a complex system with multiple variants which finds its most visible reasons and outcomes in the way societies transform and represent it in their political, juridical, social systems, but also in the ways that faith communities generate dialogue or conflict within themselves and towards other communities (religious and non-religious).

The choice of lecturers at the EuARe conferences is often guided by the will to highlight European research trends and perspectives on the overarching topic, and the names chosen for the 2022 Annual Conference reflect a specific scientific interest in understanding the different ways in which European religious diversity impacted on European – and Western – history. Diversity is a condition which has produced a process of adjustment where changes occur(ed) across religious and non-religious experiences, generating historiographic, theological and juridical representations of such a diversity.

The three Lectures presented here offer insights on some of the outcomes of this process of adjustment: the role of religious education for today’s European society; the challenges faced by academia in understanding change in religion and theology; the chances that religions may offer in supporting agency and resilience for refugees.

Oddrun Bråten, of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, offered a lecture on *New Social Patterns: Old Educational Structures? Comparative Perspectives on How Diversity Challenges Religious Education in Europe*, describing the issues at stake when religious diversity enters European classrooms and how education can address them. With her lecture, Bråten accepted to combine a review of the last decades of research in Religious Education and diversity from a supra-national point of view, and the need to contextualise it to understand its potentialities when it becomes, as a subject, a tool to present, re-present and sustain diversity – in classrooms as well as in larger society.

Religious Education in Europe is one of the fields where the historical predominance of the Christian churches has been progressively challenged, modified and

shaped by the outcomes of the process of secularisation, along with migration processes (of Christians and non-Christians), and the re-emergence of religious movements and communities in the public space.

In the past thirty years scholarship tried to grasp these historical dynamics and offer new frameworks, curricula, guidelines to second the ever-emerging diversity in school and university classrooms: Bråten highlights the difficulty in identifying explicit evidence of the possible trajectories following research outcomes in terms of support to decision-making and practice, and her point on the often lacking connection between theories of education, religion and Religious Education offers new tracks for empirical studies, while questing the mechanisms of science-for-policy in such a crucial subject (religious literacy) for present-day and future students.

The former Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, David Hempton, presented, with the lecture *From Nonsectarian to Multireligious: An Educational Experiment in Religious Diversity*, how, from the 1950s on, HDS addressed and embraced religious diversity within its academic programmes and scientific lines of inquiry. Hempton's reconstruction of the debates animating the discussion on the diversification of one of the most globally-recognised centres of excellence in the study of theology and religion offers a reading of the intellectual and cultural history of the United States in those same years. The combination of opportunities offered by changes in the curricula, the changes in leadership and the relevance of money (and the funders behind it) produced a mix of choices, always driven by ideals – and sometimes by ideology, that made HDS a multireligious divinity school. The attention paid to the different layers of diversity, including gender and ethnicity – and its necessary combination with the fairness in access (e.g. to education, technology, employment) are the ingredients which allowed such a transformation in a traditionally-liberal-Protestant institution, which proved able to detect new trends in methodologies and categories for studying religion and explore their potentialities both in terms of student enrolment and in knowledge advancement.

Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska, president of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion, connected with the EuARe conference to offer an analysis of the work she conducted in 25 years of professional experience with refugees, especially indicating what is the role of faith in helping refugees re-build their lives, identities, stories. With her lecture, *The Role of Religion in Coping with Refugee Trauma: Agency and Resilience* she guides us through the definition of the refugee trauma and points to the many layers of the refugees' identity that should be considered when analysing such a trauma. Grzymała-Moszczyńska reminds us that religion is part of the life of the person who, at a point of his/her life, is also a refugee, and therefore the presence of religion in his/her life should be considered with a more holistic approach. Indeed, religion could be the reason why the refugee flees the country of residence (oppression, persecution), a cage or a bridge during the

escape route and towards the communities met in the refugees' dislocation, and a tool offering a meaning for life in unstable conditions and in bridging past and present. What is key for the researcher working with refugees and willing to grasp the role of religion in their lives, is methodology: while quantitative methodology helps in taking pictures of some precise moment of the refugees' life, the qualitative approach makes more room for a deeper understanding of the role religion plays in the refugees' resilience and agency – be it contradictory, linear, supportive, or not.

Finally, among the lecturers was also Madlen Krüger, of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research in Heidelberg, who presented a lecture on *The Multi-Dimensional Entanglement of Restrictions on Religious Diversity: A Myanmar Case Study*, unfortunately her text could not be included in this volume¹.

The lectures at the 2022 EuARe Annual conference, along with the many panels and papers presented on the topic of “Religion and Diversity” describe diversity as being both a lens for the scholar to read religion and a dimension from which most of the global communities, societies, institutions and decision-makers cannot escape. Indeed, the European Academy of Religion has always been – and will always be – committed to the promotion of diversity: it is the only way for scholarship to flourish and effectively be at the service of society.

¹ Videos of all EuARe2022 keynote lectures are available on the Youtube Channel of *Fondazione per le scienze religiose*, FscireTV.