

Turning to India in a post-secular perspective: Impulses of the IAHR conference in Krakow 2025

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Editorial

At the last quinquennial conference of the IAHR (International Association of History of Religions) in Poland, prof. Amarjiva Lochan assumed office as the new vice president, alongside prof. Milda Ališauskienė, and prof. Satoko Fujiwara as president. This move may reflect a deliberate ‘turning East’. That this was not only a ‘geographical’ move towards international representativity, could be observed and felt in many ways.

The choice of the venue, and the presence of many scholars from central and Eastern Europe reinforced this move, likewise, of scholars from Japan and Korea. The ‘genius loci’ of Polish academic traditions, could be observed and felt. The conference excursions underlined the self-conscious connection to the cultural and religious traditions of Poland. The strong presence of scholars from eastern and south-eastern Europe, Baltic and Ukrainian scholars, but also from scholars of south Eastern Europe, as Romania, contributed to this shift in emphasis, and cultural contexts. (Russian scholars were unfortunately largely missing, due to the circumstances.) Indian scholars, like others from the ‘Global South’, were somewhat under-represented.

The two movements, towards India and East Asia, and towards Eastern Europe, complemented each other. The reception of Indian religious thought in realms of European culture, and especially here, came into view. (It corrected the narrow identification of ‘European’ cultures with ‘the West’.)

The turn to the cultures and religions of India, and of East Asia, and studies of developments in realms of European cultures, were connected in some presentations. Receptions in Eastern Europe were presented. This indicated recognition of the role of Indian (Hindu and Buddhist) thought for the transformation of the religious field in European, and Europe-descended cultures. (The contributions of these traditions in Latin America, as described by sociologists of religion in Latin America, as by Frank Usarski and Cristian G. Parker, would have been interesting here too, also with regard to Spiritualism, and to African traditions.)

It could also be observed, that the call for strict separation of -emic and -etic perspectives, with the call to strictly ‘external’ approaches to the field of religion(s), proclaimed at the opening, was soon subverted, by the inclusion of ‘participant’ perspectives.

This indicates shifts in the field of study of religions and their history. One feature is the inclusion of religious and spiritual world views, cosmologies and anthropologies, into the theoretical approaches to the analysis of phenomena of religion. In several presentations, the subjective position of the speaker could be discerned, which was often not secular – rather post-secular in some cases – nor materialistic, with perceptible ‘resonance’ effects in some cases.

The inclusion of Hinduism, esp. through Yoga, and of Buddhism, likewise with an emphasis on meditation, to the development of the field of religion and spirituality in European and American cultures, emerged as field, whose study may contribute to the understanding of the religious and spiritual re-orientations, which emerge from the ongoing process of secularisation, in post-secular contexts. Considering that these movements are not merely ‘discursive’, but are grounded in ‘traditions’, and communities of practice, learning, teaching and sharing, indicates that this is relevant to sociological research.

The effects of secularisation, require consideration in this regard, with their loss of cultural memory, of knowledge of meaning of the symbolic ‘life-world’, decline of institutions for transmission of religious theory, of shared rituals, of community, and value systems, and social coherence, based on shared convictions. (Some approaches to study of religion reflect this, in deliberate disregard for the doctrinal basis, impairing an understanding of the phenomena.)

As to the retrieval of the spiritual and religious dimensions of cultures, the inclusion of the Indian influences, going on since the late 18th century, after the earlier encounters with India in Hellenistic and Greco-Roman Antiquity, influencing Christian spirituality, may contribute to the tracing of new lineages of tradition, ‘de-othering’ them with regard to European and American cultures. The dialogues between cultures, in mutual reception, merit recognition, also in Sociology of Religion.

The IAHR conference in Krakow gave fruitful impulses towards a ‘multi-polar’ perception of the field of religious history, which may be continued.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.