

## **President's report - Brno Conference**

First of all, I would like to express on behalf of our Association a warm thanks to the Czech Society for the Study of Religions and to the Department for the Study of Religions of Masaryk University for hosting the 8th annual Meeting of the EASR.

The Czech Society for the Study of Religions was established in 1990 in the context of political and social change which took place in satellite states of the former USSR. If we are today in Brno, it is due to the scholars of this city who have been very active and instrumental in creating the academic discipline of the Study of Religions. Let me quote from the home page of the Society, which documents the ambition of a group of scholars at Brno, dissatisfied with the situation of study and research about religions in the eighties, to create a Society in order to "develop methodology and prepare foundations for a fundamentally different, ideologically unbiased research of religions." At that time, of course, Czech and Slovak academics worked together to form the society of the Study of Religions. In 1993, at the time of the foundation of two independent republics, the Czech Society became an independent organisation with Bretislav Horyna as its elected president. Now David Voklavic, the head of Department for the Study of Religions in the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University in Brno, is the president. The Society is affiliated to the IAHR and to the EASR and has made it possible for the 8th Meeting to reflect on the programmatic topic of "Time of Decline, Time of Hope: Scientific, Cultural and Political Engagement of the Study of Religions".

The Department for the Study of Religions of Masaryk University was founded in 1991 and has introduced the Academic Study of Religions as the first and up to now only institution in the Czech Republic with a full academic study programme and research activities in our discipline. The Department is also the seat for the Czech Society for the Study of Religions which has established many international relations and co-operations.

It is an opportunity for the scholars from other European countries to be able to exchange with the academics from this part of Europe whose history and political past offer different starting points and premises for the Study of Religions.

At the last meeting in Bremen, there was a change in the composition of the Executive Committee. Marco Pasi as treasurer, Eugen Ciurtin as Publication Officer and Katja Triplett, as Internet Officer have joined us and we wish them a warm welcome. Having new members also means that we took leave from others and we would very much like to express our thanks to outgoing Committee Members, Helena Helve as vice-president, Michael Pye as Internet officer, and Giovanni Casadio as Publication officer. Our Secretary Kim Knott, symbolising continuity, has remained in her function as General Secretary. I would like to express a very special "thank you" to her. Without her commitment and constant work, the Association would not be what it is today. We are happy that she has accepted to work for the EASR for another round. The remaining offices of Vice-president, Deputy General Secretary and Deputy Treasurer, have been accepted by Hubert Seiwert, James Cox and Willem Hofstee. I have been honoured to be elected as president as successor to our colleague Giulia Gasparro who has been the president of the EASR since 2001. I would like to

profit from this opportunity to express, on behalf of the Association, our gratitude for her contribution to the History of Religions and her devoted encouragement to make EASR successful. She has proposed to host the next conference of EASR in Messina on the topic of European History of Religions.

Our General Secretary will give a detailed report on the activities of our Society during this year. However, let me briefly mention the proposition for a working group inside the EASR on the topic of Religion and Education made by Tim Jensen and Wanda Alberts. In the context of multireligious countries, the question of education about or in religion is a present day challenge for our societies and an important issue to reflect upon.

When the European Association was first launched with preliminary sessions in 2000, there were voices questioning the necessity of creating yet another Association. If today we look back at these 8 years of the EASR, we may well say it was worth it. The presence of religion no less than its absence, its histories and problems confront our countries and societies with many questions and challenges; the coming together of scholars, researchers and students of religion from the various European countries has turned out to be a fruitful and rewarding effort.

The titles of the different panels proposed this year show the important topics colleagues and researchers are facing and investigating, such as: Methodology and approaches in the Study of Religions, Central and Eastern European Countries and their place in European Research, Academic studies and contemporary religious situation in Europe, Religion and the public sphere, Religions in contact, Textual studies, Rethinking religion in India, Western esotericism and political temptations, Second order traditions, question of identity, question of genetics, and Religion and education. There is certainly an emphasis on contemporary contexts and perspectives. Yet, the study of the history of religions will continue to play its important part in helping to understand our present day academic confrontation with religions.

*Maya Burger*

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