

Report from the Visegrad Fund workshop in Bratislava

Viktória Kováčová

(Comenius University, Bratislava)

On the 23rd and 24th of March 2023, the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of Comenius University (FSEV UK) in Bratislava hosted an interesting and enriching hybrid workshop. It was organized on the occasion of a Visegrad Fund project entitled “Assessing the study of religious change in Central-Eastern Europe: New fields in the study of religious change in Central-Eastern Europe”. During the two days, junior and senior researchers discussed issues related to religion and spirituality, as well as religious changes and processes in V4 countries. The primary goals of the project were to “strengthen cooperation between scholars in the field of religion in the V4 [countries], to make current research in this field of study visible, and to support social dialogue on religious changes in [the given] regions” (FSV UK 2023). The primary goal of the organizers of the workshop was to create a safe environment where young researchers could receive constructive feedback and potential suggestions for improvement, which could then strengthen their experience and interest in their given field of study. This event was one of the three main planned events of the project, of which the main partners are: Charles University’s Faculty of Social Sciences (FSV UK) and the University of Pardubice’s Faculty of Arts from the Czech Republic; the MTA-SZTE Coexistence Religious Pluralism Research Group from Hungary; the Polish Academy of Sciences’

Institute of Archeology and Ethnology; and Comenius University in Bratislava’s Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences (FSEV UK), in partnership with the Slovak Association of Social Anthropology (SASA), in Slovakia. In addition to experienced researchers (e.g., Peter Maňo, who spoke about *Ritual Exegesis among Mauritian Hindus*,¹ and Adam Viskup, who lectured about *The Acculturation of Zen Buddhism in Europe*), the opportunity to present the obtained data was also given to several students from various universities in the V4.

Attila Miklovicz (University of Pécs) and Márk Nemes (University of Szeged) were among the first speakers. Both students spoke about the Church of Scientology in Hungary – Attila about the first three decades and Márk about new developments and perspectives in the last decade. Both of them consider the collection of András Máté-Tóth and Gábor Dániel Nagy (2011), *Alternative Religion: Scientology in Hungary*, as still one of the most reliable and objective sources for analyzing the new religious movement’s presence and activity in their country.

Mark’s contribution revisited some of the authors’ original questions and findings, supplementing them with a new set of data. His research, conducted in 2022 within the Hungarian Church of Scientology, outlined some internal changes and developments within the movement – with a special focus on religious activities, social attitudes, and changes in internal values in light of the demographic changes noted. He also paid close attention to

¹ Available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2042418>

the impact of developments in the Hungarian social, political, and legal atmosphere during this period. He then concluded his lecture by presenting some perspectives on the presence and activity of the movement in Hungary, and by posing many questions and challenges that need to be addressed in the future.

Attila presented us with an overview of the history of the Church of Scientology as a relatively new religious movement of the 20th and 21st centuries which has been widely researched and publicly known. He highlighted how it had spread to Central and Eastern Europe shortly before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Today, Hungary is the hub of Scientology activities in Central and Eastern Europe. He noted that Máté-Tóth and Nagy (2011) classify Scientology as an “alternative religion”, noting that, in the early years of Ancient Rome, Christianity could also have been considered an alternative religion.

The first day of the workshop ended with a roundtable discussion regarding the approaches to the ethnographic study of religion and the relationship between the observation and participation of the researchers. Senior researchers shared their field experiences with younger ones and inquired about their recollections and approaches from past fieldwork.

On the second day, lectures were delivered by six students: Piotr Winiarczyk from the University of Warsaw, Viktória Kováčová from Comenius University in Bratislava, and four other Hungarian students (Muhammad Amirul Haqqi from the University of Szeged, and three from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest: Lais Trajano Mendes, Endre Kovács, and Andjela Djuric).

Muhammad Amirul presented on the Wicca, one of the fastest growing New Religious Movements (NRM) of the 21st century, with a particular focus on the practices of LGBTQ+ people in Hungary who practice Wicca according to the Berkano tradition. He provided workshop participants with a deeper understanding of how the traditional Wiccan binary (God and Goddess) changes according to the sexual orientation of individuals and how these individuals innovate their altars, reinterpret traditional Wiccan worldview and religious practice to form a more personal and intimate religious bond. His original hypothesis was that LGBTQ+ Wiccans use the adjective *Wicca* to represent a universalistic yet individualistic belief. His research shows that the subjects in the research sample rediscover and reinterpret their Wiccan beliefs for their own good so that they can become the best version of themselves.

Lais Trajano brought the workshop participants closer to the situation of *Brazilian-Hungarian immigration flows and new religious practices in Hungary*, which are well portrayed in *the case of the Umbanda temple in Budapest*, which was established in 2020. Trajano described research that she was conducting in a local religious group of approximately 40 members, founded by a Brazilian of Hungarian origin. According to her, this temple currently attracts not only Brazilian immigrants but also local Hungarians. She explored how Brazilian national identity is created and portrayed in this temple, focusing more closely on temple activities that seem relevant to understanding how local group values are created. She pointed to the well-established diplomatic relations between

Hungary and Brazil, which are based on mutual migration flows. In this context, “typical” activities associated with Brazilian national identities have gained popularity in Budapest in the last two decades.

Kovács spoke about *Right-wing ideologies in spirituality before and after the regime change in Hungary*. In his research, he explored the connections between new religious movements and changes in conservative and right-wing thinking in Hungary, specifically since the end of the socialist regime. He focused on the role of Buddhism in Hungary, especially the denomination that, before and shortly after the transition to democracy, became a breeding ground for right-wing ideology supported by spiritual arguments. He argued that although these right-wing ideas have been partially overshadowed by the influx of New Age ideas imported from “the West”, some elements of them are still dominant in what he calls the Hungarian “spiritual field”. Relying on ethnographic data collected in various spiritual communities and a brief overview of their origins, he lectured on how they are related to shifts in far-right ideologies, i.e., to their legacy, their demise, and their transformation.

Djuric and Kováčová’s research mapped the situation of some spiritual groups and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Djuric focused on *Family Constellation Work (FCW)* – an extended alternative therapeutic method – in relation to *the virtual space* in her country, while Kováčová focused on *Alternative Spirituality* in Slovakia.

Djuric discussed how nowadays the FCW is mostly intended to repair conflicts within the nuclear and extended families

through ritualized group activities. In the frame of workshops led by “facilitators”, participants are invited to represent each other’s kin and shed light on how they relate to each other according to specific spatial configurations. Selected participants act as “representatives”, taking on the role of the client’s family members, and the facilitator reorganizes their position in space during the course of the session, which is perceived as the restoration of order in the family system. Although the use of physical space obviously plays a crucial role in this practice, due to the COVID-19 pandemic it had to be transposed to the virtual space. During her fieldwork among therapists-in-training in educational gestalt groups, which coincided with the pandemic, she observed that this forceful transition did not affect the effectiveness of family constellation work. In the absence of physical space, words are the only means left in this online context, and she proposed to examine the use of what practitioners call “healing sentences”. Since these utterances seem to replace movement in space and to verbally reorganize relationships, she aimed to reflect upon the question as to whether they can be considered a ritual use of language.

Kováčová focused on how members of the researched community, which practices alternative spirituality, live and think in, for example, the field of health and environmentalism. Her research sample consisted of 10 people (5 men and 5 women) who are part of this community, which is closely connected with the natural environment of the Tatra Mountains in Slovakia. According to her, most informants prefer alternative forms of medicine, such as Ayurveda, and reject the

prevailing biomedical health system associated with the pharmaceutical industry. This attitude was also manifested during the coronavirus pandemic, when most of them refused to be vaccinated and preferred instead to build up their own immunity, as well as to recover from the disease. They tended to search for a deeper, spiritual cause and meaning behind their health problems. Furthermore, the research sample showed a widespread positive attitude towards environmentalism, which is manifested in the lifestyle of the informants. They perceived the planet as their home or as a living organism, so they consider their ecological activities a part of their spirituality, in line with their spiritual values and goals.

On the other hand, Piotr spoke about *Religion in a secular place of remembrance: The Chapel of Reconciliation and the Berlin Wall Memorial*. He claimed that the area where the chapel is located is clearly marked in space, which, according to him, creates the impression that the two parts of the Berlin Wall memorial (secular and religious) are clearly separated from each other. However, in his presentation he showed how they work together, creating the Berlin Wall memorial as a place where secular and religious influences intertwine.

All the presenters and students named above can be found in the full program of the workshop, which is available on the SASA website.² To maintain contact between online and in-person participants using the MS Teams platform, all of them were filmed using web cameras. The first student lectures started at 10:00 a.m.,

and, with lunch and coffee breaks, lasted both days until approximately 5:00 p.m. The programme also included lectures by senior researchers, who shared valuable tips and advice about academic publishing, conferences, and valorizing research with the students.

During the workshop, a *call for papers* was announced with the following list of topics and areas:

- New Religious Movements
- Contemporary spiritualities (New Age, Neopaganism, Neo-shamanism, etc.)
- Emergent practices within established religious contexts
- New rituals
- Alternative therapies
- Personal development
- Ecology and religion/spirituality,
- Religious appropriations of cultural heritage
- “Conspiritalities³

Ultimately, it can be said that a comprehensive discussion of religion and spirituality from the perspective of social science research was undertaken over the course of two marvellous days.

References and resources:

Below are the abstracts from the fieldwork of V4 student researchers named in the text above:

I.) *The Church of Scientology in Hungary: The first three decades*. Attila Miklovicz (Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Pécs)

² Available online at <https://antropologia.sk/visegrad-workshop-program/>

³ The synthesis of the concepts of *conspiracy theories & spirituality* (Ward & Voas 2011).

II.) *New developments and perspectives on the Hungarian Church of Scientology in the past decade* – Márk Nemes (Márnási Bartók György Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Szeged)

III.) *Religion at a secular site of memorialization: The Chapel of Reconciliation and the Berlin Wall Memorial.* Piotr Winiarczyk (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences / Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw)

IV.) *Family constellation work and virtual space: Lessons of fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic.* Andjela Djuric (Cultural Anthropology MA program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

V.) *Alternative spirituality in times of pandemic.* Viktória Kováčová (Institute of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Economical Sciences, Comenius University [UK] in Bratislava)

VI.) *Challenging the binary principle: Contemporary LGBTQ+ Wiccan practice in the Berkano Wicca tradition in Hungary.* Muhammad Amirul Haqqi (György Márnási Bartók Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Szeged, Hungary)

VII.) *Brazil-Hungary immigration flows and new religious practices in Hungary: The case of an Umbanda temple in Budapest.* Lais Trajano Mendes (Cultural Anthropology MA program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

VIII.) *Right-wing ideologies in spirituality before and after the regime change in Hungary.* Endre Kovács (Interdisciplinary Social Research PhD program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

FSV UK (Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University) contributors. 2023. *PROJECT TITLE: Assessing the study of religious change in Central-Eastern Europe.* <https://iss.fsv.cuni.cz/en/research/funding/research-projects/assessing-study-religious-change-central-eastern-europe>.

Máté-Tóth, Attila and Nagy, Gábor, Dániel. 2011. *Alternatív vallás: Szcientológia Magyarországon.* Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Ward, Charlotte and Voas, David. 2011. “The Emergence of Conspirituality.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26 (1): 103–121. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2011.539846>.