

European Centers of Religion and Politics
European Academy of Religion
June 23 2020 at 1 pm (EST)

The Center for Religious Studies of Fondazione Bruno Kessler

1. Introducing the Centre

Founded in 1975, the Center for Religious Studies (ISR) is a non faith-based research center of Fondazione Bruno Kessler (FBK). Building on more than 40 years' experience in research and development in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), FBK's 2018-2027 Strategy is guided by the ideas of humancentric Artificial Intelligence and mainstreaming of social sciences and humanities (SSH) research into AI development and governance. FBK-ISR contributes to the research and innovation activities of FBK with its Strategic Plan 2019-2021 and its mission statement on religion and innovation, which was adopted in 2016 and articulated in our 2019 Position Paper *Religion and Innovation: Calibrating Research Approaches and Suggesting Strategies for a Fruitful Interaction*. Following this mission, the Center aims at advancing the critical understanding of the multi-faceted relationship between religion and innovation in contemporary societies, and at improving the interaction among religion and social and cultural innovation as well as innovation in science and technology. According to this framework, the ISR currently collaborates with other centers within the Foundation in order to better understand the anthropological, philosophical, legal, social and political implications of the digital revolution and AI, and investigate solutions to emerging problems. Researchers' expertise vis-à-vis the relationship between religion/spirituality and various forms of innovation allows them to contribute to FBK's work through their research and action research on value and values. On the one hand, the ISR focuses on the value of innovation; on the other hand, it also explores the value conflicts associated with the development of AI and with an increasing diversity of religions, cultures, belief systems and lifestyles in the digital society.

To download our Booklet: https://isr.fbk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Booklet_ISR_eng-1.pdf

To download our Position Paper: <https://isr.fbk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Position-Paper.pdf>

To download our Strategic Plan 2019-2021: https://isr.fbk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020_02_04_Strategic_Plan_ISR_prima-parte-2.pdf

2. Past and ongoing activities

To consult our past action-research projects, see our Booklet.

In terms of education, FBK's international PhD program – run in collaboration with top universities worldwide – supports talented researchers who wish to conduct their PhD studies at the Foundation. Currently, the ISR has 3 PhD students trained according to our multidisciplinary vision and working on research topics related to the Center's mission.

In terms of public impacts, the ISR follows FBK's commitment to sustaining research and innovation projects that can spur social, economic and cultural growth at the local, national and international levels. Therefore, the Center is involved in several tasks and schemes that have impacts in the public sphere. For instance, the British Council has conducted research on UK and US citizens' perspectives on the relation between religious freedoms and innovation adopting as key

reference our Position Paper. Moreover, we have recently submitted our response to European Commission's consultation on the *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence - A European Approach to Excellence and Trust*.

3. Upcoming projects

Upcoming action-research projects for 2020-2021:

- *Arguing Religion*: The aim of this research project is to improve our understanding of argumentation-based responses to religious disagreements. Building on past and ongoing ISR research in the fields of secularity, post-secularity, and argumentation theory, the project addresses a range of questions about the various forms of religious disagreements and the meaning and goal of “arguing religion”.
- *Critically Connected*: The project focuses on social representations and digital cultures spread among young people and on their attitudes towards diversity (be it based on religion, ethnicity, gender, disability etc.). Adopting the action-research methodology, the project particularly investigates the adolescents' approach to media content and hostile forms of communication addressed to minority groups, such as hate speech, and intervenes to provide them with correct information, media literacy and guided reflection on some controversial issues related to plural and inclusive societies.
- *Freedom of Religion or Belief*: This project aims to study, promote and protect religious freedom and freedom of belief at the regional, national and international levels. Building on the co-production alongside the Universities of Cambridge and Luxembourg and subsequent publication of the 2017 Annual Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, commissioned by the European Parliament Intergroup, the project aims at contributing to the activities of the European Union, the OSCE, the G20 Interfaith Forum and the European Consortium for Church and State Research. The project includes activities aimed at the production of an interactive web-based atlas mapping the rights of religious or belief minorities in Europe (Atlas of religious or belief minorities rights). The project also includes research on legal pluralism, the family, marriage, and LGBTQ+ rights, and research on religious diplomacy and policies on migrants based on the template of operation Mediterranean Hope.
- *Migrant Trajectories and Policies*: The project, developed in collaboration with Save the Children Italia, is aimed at investigating the integration challenges of migrant minors of first and second/third generations. It also intends to experiment, through pilot actions, formal, informal and non-formal education solutions able to address these challenges. The study reserves a particular attention to minors' cultural and religious background, while listening to their own voices and expectations in order to promote forms of participatory social innovation.
- *Religion and Digital Technologies*: Religions are historically mutable phenomena. They change and develop in dialogue with their social, political, economic, cultural and technological environments. In recent years, social science research on religion has provided us with a growing body of evidence that the uptake of digital technologies by communities of faith or belief and by individual believers is having an impact on how religion is practiced, organized and communicated. So far, this research has focused mainly on social media technologies and their use by religious actors. In collaboration with FBK-ICT, the goal of the action-research project “Religion and Digital Technologies” is not only to contribute to this established line of research but to extend its scope so as to cover digital technologies which have so far attracted little attention from researchers. Apart from social media and their impact on religion, the project also investigates the interactions between religion, artificial intelligence, and virtual/augmented reality technologies.
- *Religion and Violence*: The project examines the relationship between religion and violence, by looking at religion not as an independent and decontextualized variable, but as deeply

interlinked with politics, society, culture, the economy and ethics. The Religion and Violence Project capitalizes on the outcomes of the two “Exiting Violence” Conferences, held in Trento in 2017 and in Washington DC in 2018, in collaboration with Reset Dialogue and Georgetown University, respectively.

- *Religion, Ethics and Medicine*: Combining theoretical exploration and action research, this project assesses the impact of patients’ ethical and religious beliefs on medical practices and realities, as well as the ways in which novel medical approaches can affect faith, religious practice and spirituality. Bio-medicine, neurosciences, and the identification of ethically-sustainable approaches and interventions that can promote the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities are core concerns of this research project. The project includes actions related to Transhumanism, enhancement, AI and neuroscience with Université catholique de Lille and Georgetown University, Languages, communication and narratives in medicine and healthcare with University Vita-Salute San Raffaele, Milan, the BABEL project on Balancing Best Interests in Healthcare, Ethics and Law with the Wellcom Trust and the University of Bristol, and Global Faith Based Health Systems with Georgetown University.
- *Spirituality and Lifestyles*: Spirituality is the part of the religious life that has been traditionally associated with self-cultivation and self-transformation. The research project “Spirituality and Life Styles” aims to investigate today’s innovative social practices that follow in the footsteps of those religious anthropotechnics (i.e., mental and physical exercises, special training, varieties of asceticism) which were originally meant to bring about fuller and more authentic habits and frames of mind. In line with the modern affirmation of ordinary life, the research focus is on mundane matters such as nutrition, walking, sexuality, play, etc. The project will focus in particular on nutrition (The moral of the table) and the mountain (Resonant mountains).

Points to discuss:

- 1) How to foster academic cooperation and students’ exchange among us?

Our asset:

the research and action expertise on religion and innovation in general and religion and AI innovation in particular.

Our feature:

the multi-disciplinarity, to which other centers could contribute by exchanging and sharing researchers and assets, and the competence with grant writing, if we were to join forces in externally funded collaborative projects.

- 2) How to strengthen our outreach communication strategy based on your experience in your center

We experienced that short videos with good graphics can be a great tool to convey our projects. We could think of a joint series (eg of interviews) on topics of common interest, provided we can agree on a clear, federating frame for our group.

- 3) Agreement on activities for the upcoming year until the next European Academy conference

Preparation of joint collaborative project proposals for external funding.