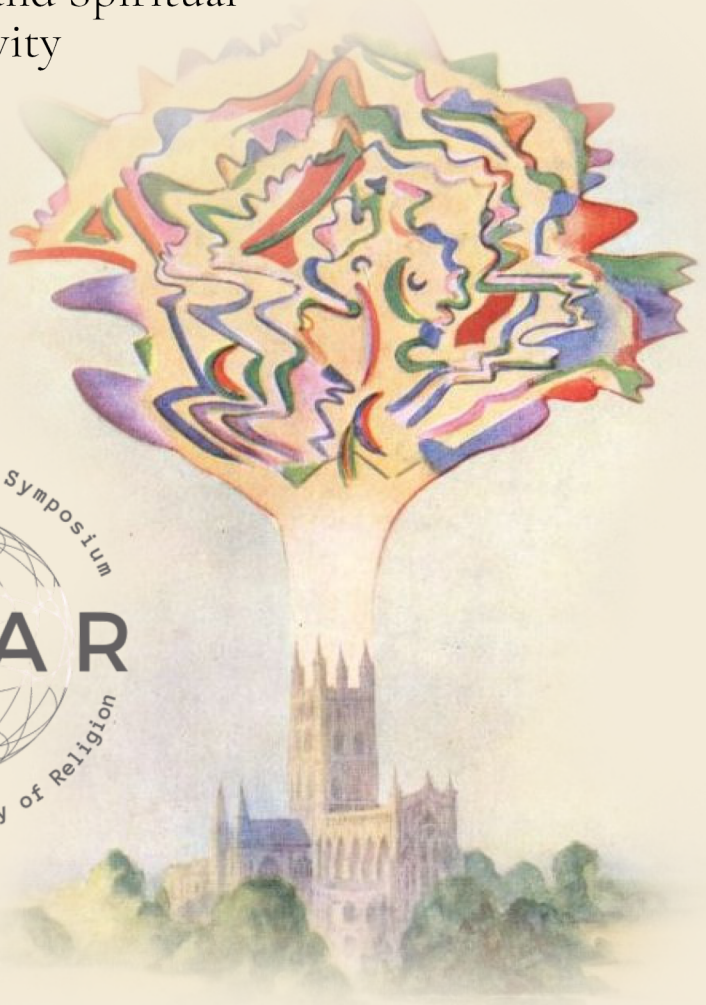


Art of the Sacred

Multidisciplinary Approaches
to Religious and Spiritual
Artistic Activity



BUDAPEST
15-17 MAY 2026

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SCAN TO VIEW
THE FACEBOOK EVENT!



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FOREWORD

Art of the Sacred

Multidisciplinary Approaches to Religious and Spiritual Artistic Activity

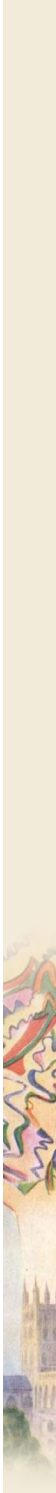
The intersection of art and religious or spiritual activity is an enduring feature of human existence. Religious thinking and praxis act as a mirror through which spiritually inclined individuals and societies may get a better understanding of their surroundings and even discover deeper meanings in the phenomena they experience. Throughout this autopoietic process, art serves as a powerful conduit for the ultimately ineffable meanings to be directly expressed and communicated. Consequently, as scholars of religion continue to draw inspiration from this cornerstone of human experience, there is a need for spaces where the intersections of religion and art can be explored from a multitude of angles. This year's interdisciplinary conference seeks to serve as one such extraordinary environment, where dynamic and often contested relationships between the spheres of art, religion, and spirituality can be discussed across the ages. In such a sphere, theoretical approaches may meet, case studies may bring more thorough understandings, and multi- and transdisciplinary perspectives may offer novel tools to explore the multifaceted connections to the ultimately ineffable.

The Central European Symposium for the Academic Study of Religion's 2026 conference features 40 papers from young and established scholars, across the fields of Art History, Religious Studies, Theology, Cultural Anthropology, Folklore, Sociology of Religion, Social and Political History, Philosophy and Psychology of Religion, Comparative Cultural Studies, Architecture, Musicology, Literature, Theater, Film Studies and many other related specializations. Ultimately, all papers contribute to a growing discussion on how artistic practices have already, can now, or shall approach, interpret, embody, and transform humanity's understanding of the sacred in the future.

The papers accepted by our international Reviewers' Committee have been organized into 10 dedicated thematic sessions. These papers are complemented by keynote presentations from renowned academics from Europe and beyond, delivered by emeritus Professor Eileen Barker and Professor Dyron Daugherty.

With this event, CESAR hopes to provide an inspiring and safe setting where both early-career scholars and established researchers can find appropriate audiences to discuss their research, receive critical feedback, and gain new perspectives and test their theorems in academic environments. Our symposium also strives to provide several informal events where researchers from around the world can build stronger connections and explore further collaboration among the participating institutions. Our affiliated journals, *Religio*, *Sacra*, and the *Hungarian Journal of Religious Studies*, support these endeavors by offering peer-reviewed publication opportunities to a select number of excellent presenters.

At our conference, each presenter will have 20 minutes to deliver their lecture, followed by a 10-minute debate. Five minutes before the end of the presentation, the panel organizer will remind the presenter about the remaining time utilizing an interjection.



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

DAY 1 15th OF MAY

9:00–9:30 **Registration at Villa Hild (mandatory for all participants)**
1121 Budapest, Budakeszi str. 38, Villa Hild Entrance Hall

9:30–10:00 **Opening ceremony**
Villa Hild Conference Room

10:00–12:00	Panel 1	Panel 2
	Beyond the Materiality of the Object – Exploring the Importance of Ritual Embedding Villa Hild Conference Room	Aesthetics, Interpretation & Gender in Contemporary Religious Discourse Villa Hild Seminar Room

12:00–13:00 **Sandwich lunch**
Villa Hild Entrance Hall

13:00–14:30 **Keynote lecture 1 – emer. Prof. Eileen Barker**
Stanislavski or Weber? What's the Difference?
Confessions of an Actress Turned Sociologist of Religion
Villa Hild Conference Room

14:30–15:00 **Coffee break**
Villa Hild Entrance Hall

15:00–17:00	Panel 3	Panel 4
	Framing Contemporary Religion and Art Villa Hild Conference Room	Performative Bodily Movement Culture in Vernacular Religiosity Villa Hild Seminar Room

17:30–19:00 **Conference dinner**
Hotel Tiliana, Etalon Restaurant
1021 Budapest, Hárshegyi street 1-3.

Conference attendees will be guided between the conference venue and the restaurant. The restaurant can be reached in ~7 minutes on foot.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

DAY 2 16th OF MAY

9:00–11:00	Panel 5 Beyond the Image – Visual Markers of Meaning-making Villa Hild Conference Room	Panel 6 Spatial and Ritual Considerations of Buddhist Art Villa Hild Seminar Room
11:00–11:30	Coffee break Villa Hild Entrance Hall	
11:30–13:00	Keynote lecture 2 – Prof. Dyron Daugherty My Art is My Craft: Chasing Religions in the 21st Century Villa Hild Conference Room	
13:00–14:00	Sandwich lunch Villa Hild Entrance Hall	
14:00–16:00	Panel 7 Art from the Ancient World – Theoretical and Interpretational Dilemmas Villa Hild Conference Room	Panel 8 Perspectives for Understanding Occult, Esoteric, and Alternative Praxis Villa Hild Seminar Room
16:00–16:30	Coffee break Villa Hild Entrance Hall	
16:30–18:30	Panel 9 Narrative Approaches to Liturgical Motion Villa Hild Conference Room	Panel 10 Reading and Expressing Religious Ideology Through Art Villa Hild Seminar Room
18:30–19:00	Closing coffee break Villa Hild Entrance Hall	



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

DAY 3 | EXCURSION DAY

17th OF MAY

9:00–9:30 **Gathering at Villa Hild's parking lot**
1121 Budapest, Budakeszi str. 38.

9:30 **Departure for Krishna Valley**
The ride takes ~2.5 hours. Attendees will hear a preliminary introduction to ISKCON's history and recent developments, delivered by Prof. Carole M. Cusack, followed by a short introduction to the Krishna Valley's significance in the religious environment in Hungary by Márk Nemes.

11:30 **Arrival in Krishna Valley**

12:00–13:30 **Guided tour in English**

13:30–14:30 **Group lunch**

14:30–15:00 **Free time**
Attendees are encouraged to explore the ISKCON grounds while maintaining a scholarly, nondisruptive stance. Attendees are kindly asked to return to the gathering point by 15:00 sharp.

15:00 **Departure to Villa Hild**

17:00 **Arrival at Villa Hild**

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 1 15th OF MAY

Panel 1

Beyond the Materiality of the Object
– Exploring the Importance of Ritual Embedding

Date & time: May 15. 10:00–12:00

Venue: Villa Hild Conference Room

Panel chair: Carsten Wilke (CEU)

Panel organizers: Karsten Johannes Schuil (CEU)

10:00–10:30

Karsten J. Schuil
Central European University (AT)

Biblical Jerusalem in Late Medieval Rome: Sacred Objects, Storytelling, and the Pilgrim Writer-Traveler

10:30–11:00

Katalin Suba
Eötvös Loránd University (HU)

The Way to a Heavenly Home: Ritual Movement in Medieval Esztergom

11:00–11:30

Kristina Švábová
Charles University (CZ)

Case Study of Catholic Churches That Became Popular Again in Highly Irreligious Region of Bohemia

11:30–12:00

Laure Montarry
Paris Nanterre University (FR)

Making the Invisible Visible Through Relational Creativity in Anglican Religious Rituals

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 1 15th OF MAY

Panel 2

Aesthetics, Interpretation & Gender in Contemporary Religious Discourse

Date & time: May 15. 10:00–12:00

Venue: Villa Hild Seminar Room

Panel chair: Faludy Judit (KRE)

Panel organizers: Filiz Kahraman (MUNI)

10:00–10:30

Filiz Kahraman
Masaryk University (CZ)

The Therapeutic Aesthetics of the Sacred: Women's Spiritual Empowerment in Digital Sufi Discourse

10:30–11:00

Tereza Jobová
University of Jan Evangelista Purkyně (CZ)

Contemporary Spiritual Art as a Response to the World's Crisis: Women Artists Working with Photography — Magical Thinking in Response to an Uncontrollable World.

11:00–11:30

Audre Gruodyte
Vytautas Magnus University (LT)

The Sacred Beast: Monstrous Femininity in Visual Art

11:30–12:00

Elazar Ben-Lulu
Ariel University (IS)

Lived Religion at the Threshold:
The Trans Pride Mezuzah and the Embodiment of Queer Jewish Space

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 1 15th OF MAY

Panel 3

Framing Contemporary Religion and Art

Date & time: May 15. 15:00–17:00

Venue: Villa Hild Conference Room

Panel chair: Réka Szilárdi (SZTE)

Panel organizers: Sára Heidl (UniVienna)

15:00–15:30 **Tamás Nyirkos**
Ludovika University of Public Service (HU)
Secularization or re-enchantment?
Art as a Secular Religion in the Modern and Postmodern Era.

15:30–16:00 **Rita Figus-Illinyi**
University of Szeged (HU)
Beyond Doctrine: Aesthetic Experience, Living Faith,
and Existential Resilience

16:00–16:30 **Tereza Pop**
University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca (RO)
Psychoanalysis Viewed as a Substitute for Theology
in 20th-century Art History

16:30–17:00 **Nadežda Elezović**
University of Rijeka (HR)
Metaspirituality and the Transformation of the Sacred:
Ritual Form in Contemporary Artistic Practice

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 1 15th OF MAY

Panel 4

Performative Bodily Movement Culture in Vernacular Religiosity

Date & time: May 15. 15:00–17:00

Venue: Villa Hild Seminar Room

Panel chair: Anna Mária Bólya (MMA MMKI)

Panel organizers: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (DE)

15:00–15:30

Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo
University of Debrecen (HU)

Embodying Sayaw ng Pagbati: Habitus, Memory Figures, and the Development of Panata Among Southern Tagalog Practitioners

15:30–16:00

Damaris Werunga
University of Debrecen (HU)

Ritual Performances and Bodily Movement Culture: The Bukusu Funeral Ritual Performances

16:00–16:30

Eleonora Fusi
University of Bologna (IT)

The Ritual Practices and Symbolic Objects of the Giné Faré: Dances Performed to Accompany Weddings and Baptisms

16:30–17:00

Meryem Madili
University of Debrecen (HU)

Sacred efficacy:
Gnawa Healing in Spiritual Rituals and Performances

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 2 16th OF MAY

Panel 5

Beyond the Image – Visual Markers of Meaning-making

Date & time: May 16. 9:00–11:00

Venue: Villa Hild Conference Room

Panel chair: Judit Csorba (Museum of Ethnography)

Panel organizers: Márk Nemes (MMA MMKI; CESNUR)

9:00–9:30

Karolina I. Kaleta
Jagiellonian University (PL)

The Aesthetics of Santa Muerte: Polymorphism, Practice, and the Visual Construction of the Sacred

9:30–10:00

Laura Varga
University of Debrecen (HU)

Anatomy of Perdition: Visual Intimidation and Millennial Anxiety in Early Medieval Art

10:00–10:30

Andrea Bianka Márton
Eötvös Loránd University (HU)

Archiving the Sacred: Religious Paintings in Henrician Inventories and Their Purpose at Court in the Context of the Anglican Reformation

10:30–11:00

Alexandra Okanovic
University of Szeged (HU)

Portrait and Face in Jean-Luc Marion's Thought

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 2 16th OF MAY

Panel 6

Spatial and Ritual Considerations of Buddhist Art

Date & time: May 16. 9:00–11:00

Venue: Villa Hild Seminar Room

Panel chair: Rita Kuzder (TKBF)

Panel organizers: Janka Balázs (ELTE)

9:00–9:30

Mirella Keller

Dharma Gate Buddhist College (HU)

Thousand Faces in a Buddhist Cave: Religious Motifs at Pilu Dong, Anyue

9:30–10:00

Joanna Połec

University of Warsaw (PL)

Bodies, Objects, and Spiritual Practice:
Experiencing Tibetan Buddhism among European Practitioners

10:00–10:30

Judit Béres

The Dharma Gate Buddhist College (HU)

The Dum pa laptse in Amdo

10:30–11:00

Liao Minqian

Eötvös Loránd University (HU)

A Study of the „Nine Altar Sites” in Dunhuang:
Spatial Composition, Ritual Origins, and Connections to the Nuo Tradition

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 2 16th OF MAY

Panel 7

Art from the Ancient World – Theoretical and Interpretational Dilemmas

Date & time: May 16. 14:00–16:00

Venue: Villa Hild Conference Room

Panel chair: Ádám Vér (ELTE)

Panel organizers: Karsten Johannes Schuil (CEU)

14:00–14:30

Csaba T. Szabó
University of Szeged (HU)

Reception of Ancient Gods in Religious Art.
The Curious Case of Mithras in Medieval Art

14:30–15:00

Gunhyuk Lee
Central European University (AT)

Two Liturgical Objects with Donor Inscriptions: Donation
and the Materialization of Sanctity in Late Antique Egypt

15:00–15:30

Chiara Oliveri
University of Padua (IT)

Religious Propaganda in the Achaemenid Empire:
Darius I's Behistun Relief and Mural of Rostam

15:30–16:00

Krisztina Dull
Károli Gáspár University of the Hungarian Reformed Church (HU)

Magi on Walls and on Paper: A Methodological Dilemma

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 2 16th OF MAY

Panel 8

Perspectives for Understanding Occult, Esoteric, and Alternative Praxis

Date & time: May 16. 14:00–16:00

Venue: Villa Hild Seminar Room

Panel chair: László Koppány Csáji (MMA MMKI)

Panel organizers: Márk Nemes (MMA MMKI; CESNUR)

14:00–14:30

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney (AU)

Bodily Rituals and Esoteric Spiritual Transformation:
Art, Performance, and Praxis in the Gurdjieff Work

14:30–15:00

Tancredi Marrone
Masaryk University (CZ)

Occult Bodies in Psychedelic Art

15:00–15:30

Matouš Mokřý
Masaryk University (CZ)

Politicizing Tarot in the Order of Nine Angles

15:30–16:00

Egle Aleknaite-Skarubske
Vytautas Magnus University (LT)

Imagining Pagans in Lithuanian Literature and Theatre

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 2 16th OF MAY

Panel 9

Narrative Approaches to Liturgical Motion

Date & time: May 16. 16:30–18:30

Venue: Villa Hild Conference Room

Panel chair: Miklós István Földvály (ELTE)

Panel organizers: Miklós István Földvály (ELTE)

16:30–17:00 **Bence Alexander Masir**
MTA-ELTE Momentum Research Group of Liturgical History (HU)
Dancing about Theology
– Affective Liturgical Dramaturgy in the Middle Ages

17:00–17:30 **Ábel Stampler**
MTA-ELTE Momentum Research Group of Liturgical History (HU)
Buried Alive:
An Analysis of Initiatory Rites of Medieval Anchorites

17:30–18:00 **Maram Alshawabkeh**
University of Debrecen (HU)
Spinning the Sacred:
The Sufi Sama' as Performance and Embodied Knowledge

18:00–18:30 **Rebeka Erdélyiová**
Newcastle University (UK)
Staging the Sacred:
The Gnostic Mass as Ritual Choreography

DETAILED PROGRAM

DAY 2 16th OF MAY

Panel 10

Reading and Expressing Religious Ideology Through Art

Date & time: May 16. 16:30–18:30

Venue: Villa Hild Seminar Room

Panel chair: Csaba Szabó T. (SZTE)

Panel organizers: Janka Balázs (ELTE)

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 16:30–17:00 | Olívia Gara
Budapest University of Technology and Economics (HU)

Desert tent and the garden of Eden
The Immersive Effect of Decorative Mural Painting
in Flat-ceiling Synagogues of the Dualist Era |
| 17:00–17:30 | Vendel Farkas
Uppsala University (NO)

Helmets, Idols, Petroglyphs – Defining pre-Christian Germanic
Theology Through Non-textual Sources |
| 17:30–18:00 | Magdalena Germek
Academy of Fine Arts and Design, University of Ljubljana (SL)

Sacredness, Art, Anatomy: Visual Readings of the Body |
| 18:00–18:30 | Khalid Mahmood Arif
Riphah International University (PK)

Faith, Technology, and the Sacred: Islamic Ethical
Perspectives on Digital and AI-Generated Art |

ABSTRACTS

PANEL 1

BEYOND THE MATERIALITY OF THE OBJECT EXPLORING THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUAL EMBEDDING

KARSTEN JOHANNES SCHUIL

Biblical Jerusalem in Late Medieval Rome:

Sacred Objects, Storytelling, and the Pilgrim Writer-Traveler

During the late medieval period, it became increasingly difficult to visit the Holy Land due to political and financial obstacles. As a result, Rome, with its many shrines and relics, emerged as a suitable alternative for European pilgrims. Yet it was not only Rome's existing sacred landscape that transformed the city into a 'New Jerusalem'; the religious significance of Jerusalem itself had to be transferred to Rome. This involved reproducing within Rome the holy geography of the Bible and the sites associated with Christ's life on earth. Sacred objects brought from the Holy Land, such as the Scala Sancta, attributed to Saint Helena, played an essential role in this reconfiguration. Drawing on a deep reading of the pilgrim account by Jan van Berchem, this paper argues that it was not simply the presence of sacred objects in Rome that facilitated its emergence as the New Jerusalem. Rather, these accounts demonstrate that the narrative frameworks in which these objects were embedded played an equally essential role. These pilgrims' narratives reveal that the translation of a specific 'merging storytelling' originally associated with the Holy Land played a significant role in the perception of Rome as the New Jerusalem.

KEYWORDS: Pilgrimage; Storytelling; Sacred Objects; Rome; Late medieval period



KATALIN SUBA

The Way to a Heavenly Home: Ritual Movement in Medieval Esztergom

The Porta speciosa of the medieval Cathedral of Esztergom has been extensively studied from traditional art-historical perspectives, yet its liturgical function has remained largely unexplored, partly because the relevant liturgical sources were unavailable until recent decades, and because these sources present processional liturgy in a heavily abbreviated form. Reconstructing ritual movements requires careful cross-referencing across multiple manuscripts and extensive analysis of the cathedral's now-lost medieval spaces. This paper reframes the Porta Speciosa as a liminal space and organic component of ritual practice. Examining processional liturgy across the liturgical year – including ordinary Sunday processions and major feasts – it focuses on the portal's role as a pivotal *statio*. The key evidence is a prayer recited at the portal during entry, which explicitly frames passage through it as entering Jerusalem. By demonstrating how the Porta speciosa gained a crucial dimension of meaning through its ritual context, the paper engages with the notion that architectural monuments cannot be fully understood through formal and iconographic analysis alone but must be examined within the performative practices that animated them.

KEYWORDS: processions, Porta speciosa, Esztergom cathedral, medieval liturgy, medieval architecture

KRISTINA ŠVÁBOVÁ

Case Study of Catholic Churches That Became Popular Again in the Highly Irreligious Region of Bohemia

This contribution aims to show how the boundaries between the profane and the sacred may be blended in highly irreligious places during moments of spiritual need. It will demonstrate with two cases of Bohemian towns in which local councils have agreed with Catholic Church representatives to use the local church as a venue for secular ceremonies. In this way, secular rites organized by clerks and politicians are elevated by the sacred space, thus enabling a fulfilling transcendental experience even for self-reported irreligious people. While not actively involved in religious practice, they do not necessarily lack interest in the sacred, especially during important moments in their lives. The Catholic Church representatives acknowledge this as a possibility to rekindle people's interest in religion, or, in the very least, foster their relationship with a sacral building. In accordance with the theories of re-enchantment and post-secularization, this paper shows a novel way in which the sacred is present and in demand in contemporary societies despite a seemingly low religiosity.

KEYWORDS: re-enchantment, post-secularism, Catholic churches

LAURE MONTARRY

Making the invisible visible through relational creativity in Anglican religious rituals

Gregory Bateson defines art as a means by which humans can access “the grace of God,” with varying degrees of success, thereby compensating for the human species’ shortcomings relative to the animal kingdom. For Bateson, „the problem of grace is that of integrating [...] the different parts of the mind. [...] To attain grace, the reasons of the heart must unite with the reasons of reason.” Thus, Bateson considers human access to grace to be both an intellectual and an emotional process. From this perspective, I will explore the concept of “relational creativity” within the Anglican Christian community in this paper. More specifically, I will examine how the static and kinetic “works of art” produced by the relational creativity inherent in Christian religious practices contribute to the integration of grace, as evoked by Bateson. How do these particular modes of integration, which I will illustrate with a few examples, contribute to the construction of what they call their “faith journey” during their Christian life? I will show that these relational aesthetics have a figurative power in themselves, making the invisible visible, such as the figures of Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

KEYWORDS: Anglicanism, relational creativity, faith construction, invisible, figuration



PANEL 2

AESTHETICS, INTERPRETATION & GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

FILIZ KAHRAMAN

The Therapeutic Aesthetics of the Sacred: Women's Spiritual Empowerment in Digital Sufi Discourse

This paper explores how the sacred is articulated through therapeutic and aesthetic registers in contemporary digital Sufi discourse, primarily addressed to women. Focusing on the online talks of a prominent female Sufi leader in Turkey, it examines how religious meaning is communicated through tone, metaphor, and a direct, intimate form of address. Rather than approaching art as a material or visual practice, the paper understands the “art of the sacred” as an aesthetic mode of communication through which religious meanings become emotionally accessible. Drawing on discourse analysis, it attends to narrative structure, affective language, and recurring metaphors, showing how the sacred is framed as an inner journey oriented toward emotional healing, self-understanding, and personal transformation. The paper further suggests that this therapeutic aesthetic presupposes a particular spiritual subject: women who possess the social, temporal, and emotional resources required for sustained selfwork. In this sense, digitally mediated empowerment appears less as a universally accessible project than as a form of spiritual practice aligned with middleclass modes of self-realization. By situating this case within broader discussions of contemporary women's spirituality, the paper highlights how classed experiences shape the aesthetic articulation of the sacred in digital religious contexts.

KEYWORDS: therapeutic discourse, digital religion, women's spirituality, sacred aesthetics

AUDRE GRUODYTE

The Sacred Beast: Monstrous Femininity in Visual Art

For Girard, the sacred is ambivalent: admired and feared. For Kristeva, abjection coincides with the sacred and determines a specific form of it. Reading Girard's sacred alongside Kristeva's abject introduces the monstrous feminine as this 'specific form of the sacred'. This leads to my main argument that the ambivalence of the sacred can be understood through the visual ambivalence of the monstrous feminine, which transforms the abject into a form of sacred power. This paper examines variations of the vagina dentata motif, focusing on two cases: Sheela-na-gigs and Louise Bourgeois's Maman. A psychoanalytic reading of the vagina dentata reflects unconscious fear of the maternal sphere—the abject. Sheela-na-gigs, grotesque female figures placed on sacred architecture, functioned as apotropaic guardians. Bourgeois's Maman, which depicts the spider as mother, can be read as a contemporary variation on the same maternal ambivalence. Freud notes in his essay on Medusa that what frightens me also holds power to frighten my enemy. Through this ambivalence, the monstrous feminine embodies a visceral meeting point between life and death and becomes sacred. The visual ambivalence of monstrous feminine depicts a process by which the unconscious threat of the abject is re-signified as an object of sacred admiration – the 'admired ugly'.

KEYWORDS: Monstrosity, Sacred, Abjection, Feminine, Girard, Kristeva

TEREZA JOBOVÁ

Contemporary Spiritual Art as a Response to the World's Crisis: Women Artists Working with Photography — Magical Thinking in Response to an Uncontrollable World

This paper examines magical thinking as a contemporary artistic and epistemological response to an uncontrollable and fragmented world, focusing on women artists working with photography. I argue that magical thinking in contemporary photographic practices functions not merely as a regression or escapist spirituality, but as a strategy for re-establishing agency, meaning, and relationality in the face of planetary, political, and existential crises. The paper draws on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, including Jungian depth psychology, theories of re-enchantment (Tarnas), and recent debates on spirituality, ecology, and activism (Nicole, Roszak, Federici). Methodologically, the paper combines theoretical analysis with qualitative case studies of selected women photographers (e.g., Elena Helfrecht, Viktoriia Tymonova, and Viviana Druga). Their practices are analyzed as forms of ritualized image-making that mobilize archetypes, folklore, occult symbolism, and ecological spirituality to negotiate uncertainty and loss of control. I propose that magical thinking in contemporary art can be understood as a mediating practice between conscious and unconscious dimensions, operating through symbols, narratives, and performative rituals embedded in photographic images. Rather than opposing rationality, these practices supplement dominant epistemologies by reintroducing affect, myth, and embodied knowledge. Photography emerges here not only as a documentary medium but as an active agent in producing symbolic and transformative experiences. By narrowing the focus to photographic practices that explicitly engage with ritual, folklore, and ecological spirituality, the paper demonstrates how contemporary women artists rearticulate pre-modern symbolic structures to address present crises. Magical thinking is thus framed as a mode of soft agency and speculative control that responds to uncertainty by constructing alternative imaginaries of relationality, care, and transformation.

KEYWORDS: spirituality, contemporary photography, women artists, ritual, re-enchantment, crisis

ELAZAR BEN-LULU

Lived Religion at the Threshold: The Trans Pride Mezuzah and the Embodiment of Queer Jewish Space

A mezuzah is a prominent Jewish symbol that designates a Jewish dwelling space, a reminder of the Jew's covenant with God. This paper focuses on the Trans Pride Mezuzah (TPM), designed to celebrate trans and nonbinary Jewish homes. This paper explores the motivations behind the creation and use of this unique queer Judaica item, exploring various social interpretations associated with this object and how they contribute to our understanding of gender and religious identity, the body, community, and space. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that the TPM represents and embodies an intersection between the trans-, or nonbinary community, and the renewal of Jewish tradition. The decision of where to hang the mezuzah and the recitation of the prayer blessing reflect movement along the inside-outside axis. This movement encapsulates experiences of social exclusion, the essence of nonheteronormative gender identities, and bodily otherness while also expressing pride, Jewish affiliation, and a sense of belonging. This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of contemporary religiosity and anthropology of material culture in queer contexts, expanding our knowledge in these areas.

KEYWORDS: mezuzah, Trans Pride Mezuzah (TPM), material religion, Judaism

PANEL 3

FRAMING CONTEMPORARY RELIGION AND ART

TAMÁS NYIRKOS

Secularization or Re-enchantment?

Art as a Secular Religion in the Modern and Postmodern Era

Since at least the Romantic movement, art has been described as a substitute for religion in an increasingly secular society. Museums were called the temples of art; a visit to a famous work of art took the form of a pilgrimage; artists were worshipped as semi-divine mediators of the supernatural; and it was sometimes explicitly declared that art had become a religion, even a universal super-religion transcending humanity's religious and cultural divisions. In contrast to this elevated conception of art, in the 20th-century people began to worry about its very possibility in the age of mechanical reproduction, aggravated by the appearance of artificial intelligence in the 21st-century, which some authors describe as the ultimate profanation, while others as the literal divinization (disembodiment and spiritualization) of art. The paper examines key texts on the ambivalent, secular-religious nature of art (Barzun, Benjamin, Debray, Heidegger), exploring the continuities and discontinuities within this genre of art theory.

KEYWORDS: modernism, postmodernism, secular religion, technology

RITA FIGUS-ILLINYI

Beyond Doctrine:

Aesthetic Experience, Living Faith, and Existential Resilience

Aesthetic encounter can be understood as a source of existential resilience when interpreted through Martin Buber's understanding of faith, Henri Bergson's philosophy of religion, and Viktor Frankl's meaning-centered anthropology. Beyond doctrinal approaches to religion, aesthetic experience emerges as a relational and experiential mode of knowing in which presence, perception, and meaning converge. By distinguishing between the two forms of faith, *emuna* (understood as trustful relational fidelity) and *pistis* (associated with doctrinal belief and propositional assent) Buber shows that genuine encounter unfolds in the lived experience of presence rather than in objectifying perception. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson differentiates between closed and open religion and emphasizes the primacy of intuition, highlighting how immediate, nonconceptual experience grants access to reality as vitality and dynamic life. Frankl's logotherapy demonstrates that meaning may be discovered through experiential values, including encounters with beauty, art, and nature. As an embodied and relational event, aesthetic experience can strengthen resilience by restoring coherence, orientation, and transcendence in situations of existential disruption. Artistic and sensory encounters enable the re-experiencing of presence, the re-discovery of meaning, and the renewal of dialogical openness toward the world and others. Aesthetic encounter thus emerges as an experiential space in which spiritual presence, intuition, and meaning-discovery contribute to psychological endurance and existential renewal.

KEYWORDS: aesthetic encounter, existential resilience, dialogical presence, meaning experience

TEREZA POP

Psychoanalysis Viewed as a Substitute for Theology in 20th-century Art History

The religious role of art has been discussed by many art historians and philosophers throughout the 20th-century. Sociological, anthropological, and psychological points of view were taken into account as a means to enhance knowledge regarding this topic. At the same time, theological perspectives were rejected or ignored as they did not meet modern positivist/materialist methodological standards, nor postmodern deconstructive standards. The connection between art and religion was acknowledged and explored, while the connection between art and what had previously been explicitly called God was no longer a matter of discussion. Where theological knowledge stood beforehand, many gaps appeared. Using Philip Rieff's perspective on Western culture, as expressed in *Sacred Order/Social Order: My Life Among the Deathworks*, as a framework, this paper will focus on the various ways in which psychoanalytic concepts were used in 20th-century art history as a substitute for older theological interpretations of art. This shift was presented as an epistemological revolution. Oftentimes, it was a simple substitution of language.

KEYWORDS: psychoanalysis, theology, Philip Rieff, Freud, Arnold Hauser

NADEŽDA ELEZOVIĆ

Metaspirituality and the Transformation of the Sacred: Ritual Form in Contemporary Artistic Practice

This paper explores how contemporary artistic practices reinterpret the sacred through ritual-based forms operating beyond institutional religion. It introduces the concept of metaspirituality to describe artistic practices that draw on ritual structures and spiritual references without aligning with specific theological doctrines or confessional traditions. Rather than representing religious narratives, these practices create participatory and spatial situations structured through repetition, bodily presence, and performative action. In this context, ritual is not understood as liturgical observance but as an artistic strategy that shapes aesthetic and experiential encounters with the sacred. Drawing on ritual theory and recent discussions on art and religion, the paper argues that contemporary art does not simply abandon religious forms. Instead, it transforms them into post-confessional modes of artistic activity that generate what may be described as aesthetic forms of transcendence. The sacred thus appears as an experiential and relational dimension emerging within artistic practice rather than as a theological claim. Through selected examples, the paper demonstrates how ritual form enables contemporary art to negotiate the boundaries between religion and nonreligion, contributing to ongoing debates on the changing status of the sacred in contemporary culture.

KEYWORDS: metaspirituality, spirituality, ritual, sacred, contemporary art

PANEL 4

PERFORMATIVE BODILY MOVEMENT CULTURE IN VERNACULAR RELIGIOSITY

JOSE ANTONIO LORENZO TAMAYO

Embodying Sayaw ng Pagbati: Habitus, Memory Figures, and the Development of Panata Among Southern Tagalog Practitioners

The Philippines, as a predominantly Catholic nation, showcases a rich tapestry of ritual traditions during Holy Week. On Easter Sunday, female dancers in several Southern Tagalog towns perform Sayaw ng Pagbati (Dance of Greeting) before sunrise to express the joy of Christ's resurrection from the dead. This presentation highlights that panata (devotional pledge) serves as the glue that sustains the practice within the dancers' families. Using approaches from Practice and Cultural Memory Theory, the Easter dance is seen as an embodied practice nurtured by both habitus and memory figures. Through a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 dancers across three locales: Ibaan, Batangas; Angono, Rizal; and Parañaque City, to explore their journeys toward becoming practitioners. As a form of panata, Sayaw ng Pagbati is an embodied practice sustained through the process of learning, internalization of the dance's logic, and the tradition's enduring legacy.

KEYWORDS: Sayaw ng Pagbati, pagbati, habitus, memory figures, carriers of practice, Philippines

DAMARIS WERUNGA

Ritual Performances and Bodily Movement Culture: The Bukusu Funeral Ritual Performances

This paper examines the funeral rituals of contemporary Bukusu people from western Kenya that merge indigenous beliefs with Christian practices to honor the deceased, appease spirits, and cleanse the bereaved. The methodology involved qualitative ethnographic observation alongside analysis of secondary literature. Particular attention was given to ritual actions, spatial arrangements, gender roles, and sound art practices. Clan-specific performances include sitting burial postures among the Balunda, ritual shaving, animal sacrifice, and symbolic oratory reflecting belief in life after death. Central to these rites is Efumbo, a mystical drum that invokes ancestral power and accompanies dirges and dances. Findings reveal that Efumbo functions as a conduit between the physical and spiritual realms, facilitating ancestral presence and communal healing. Drumming knowledge is believed to be spiritually inherited, and trance states among barefoot male drummers signify ancestral inspiration, while women remain seated as witnesses. These blended rituals demonstrate continuity, adaptation, and the enduring role of performative art in negotiating death and spirituality.

KEYWORDS: Bukusu funeral rituals, Ancestral veneration, Ritual performance, Efumbo drum, Funerary art and performance.

ELEONORA FUSI

The Ritual Practices and Symbolic Objects of the Giné Faré: Dances Performed to Accompany Weddings and Baptisms

This presentation, titled “The ritual practices and symbolic objects of the giné faré: dances performed to accompany weddings and baptisms,” is the result of ethnographic research conducted through bibliographic analysis, fieldwork in Guinea, and semi-structured interviews. With this contribution, I intend to highlight how objects are transformed into semiophores, charged with sacred and symbolic meaning, and how ritual practice, which is evident in the paper of these dances and music, is mainly dedicated to women and their symbolic transitions. It highlights how the transition from the status of young, unmarried women to that of brides, bound by religious or contractual ties, and in the case of baptism, the transition from a non-believer to a member of a religious community, is marked by ritual practices and symbolic objects. During these ceremonies, objects take on a central role as vectors of religious and normative meaning: the seven needles represent the moral provisions and responsibilities attributed to married couples, indicating harmony, fidelity, and mutual responsibility in marriage; the calabash with salt symbolizes married life as a balance between challenges and joys; rice and cola nuts, on the other hand, denote fertility, respect, and social benevolence, involving the community in the recognition and support of the religious bond. Purification practices, such as washing the bride, strengthen the connection between corporeality and the sacred, transforming the movement and use of objects into a bodily experience of the sacred and the communion. In conclusion, these ritual and symbolic practices play a fundamental role in reinforcing the community’s religious and social values, representing moments of deep connection to both body, faith, and collective identity.

KEYWORDS: : Symbolic Objects, Ritual Practices, Embodied Spirituality, Cultural Transition, Sacred Corporeality

MERYEM MADILI

Sacred Efficacy: Gnawa Healing in Spiritual Rituals and Performances

This paper examines the performing rituals of a spiritual ethnic group called Gnawa in Morocco, who have become a cultural phenomenon influencing many people from all over the world to join their magic. The rituals centered in a long night ceremony called ‘lila’ in which they call the spirits in order to heal the sick through the trance dance, music, and other practices. Through such ceremonies and practices, the Gnawa transform themselves from the socially constructed identities that are the result of centuries of acculturation into Moroccan society, in which they first arrived as enforced migrants; then, through exclusionary practices, they re-embodied themselves as a spiritually constructed people, independent of their social identity in the world as noted by El Hamel. I conducted my fieldwork research in Morocco, Essaouira, in June 2023. I conducted interviews with Gnawa music masters. Using the anthropological and ethnographic methods of research and analysis in order to understand such a complex phenomenon as the Gnawa. I based my methods on the qualitative research.

KEYWORDS: Gnawa, rituals, spiritual healing



PANEL 5

BEYOND THE IMAGE – VISUAL MARKERS OF MEANING-MAKING

KAROLINA I. KALETA

The Aesthetics of Santa Muerte: Polymorphism, Practice, and the Visual Construction of the Sacred

The aim of this paper is to examine the aesthetic dimension of the cult of Santa Muerte, a Mexican folk saint who is highly popular and visually recognizable yet not acknowledged by the Catholic Church and surrounded by social controversy, including associations with drug-related crime. The reflections presented in the paper are based on an analysis of the visual appearance and aesthetics of Santa Muerte figurines and the altars dedicated to her, understood as material and visual manifestations of lived religious practice. The proposed approach is grounded in the assumption that the aesthetics of Santa Muerte do not serve a primarily representational function, but rather a relational one. In contrast to canonical religious iconographies, the figure of Saint Death operates as a polymorphic sacred form, lacking a single authoritative visual model. Her appearance does not stabilize meaning; it remains open to continuous negotiation among tradition, individual intention, and local cultural context. The diversity of forms – ranging from variations in size, color, material, and stylistic conventions – should not be understood as aesthetic incoherence, but rather as evidence that the sacred within this cult is produced through practice rather than through institutionally sanctioned canon. Hybrid visual inspirations (Christian, neo-pagan, folkloric, and pop-cultural), along with the mass production of accessible devotional objects, point to a process of democratization of the sacred, in which it is the devotee's relationship with the saint that assigns meaning to form, rather than form legitimizing the sacred.

KEYWORDS: Mexican folk Catholicism, Santa Muerte, Aesthetics, Altar, Figure

LAURA VARGA

Anatomy of Perdition: Visual Intimidation and Millennial Anxiety in Early Medieval Art

This presentation explores medieval eschatological art, focusing on the figure of the Antichrist and depictions of the Last Judgment. Its central thesis posits that the representation of the Antichrist in medieval iconography is not merely a portrayal of a villain, but rather a visual condensation of the fear surrounding the dissolution of social and spiritual order. Depictions of the Final Judgment served not only as illustrations of biblical events but also as instruments for maintaining social and moral discipline. The paper is based on a comparative analysis of apocalyptic source texts and their visual representations, supplemented by stylistic criticism and psychological observations. After outlining the millennial context, I analyze the depictions of the Antichrist, followed by those of the Last Judgment. The investigation highlights that these visualizations were intended to evoke a sense of the inevitability of the Final Judgment and the urgency of repentance for the medieval viewer. This 'aesthetics of chaos' was a conscious theological construction, reinforcing the credibility of ecclesiastical teachings and ensuring social conformity.

KEYWORDS: Antichrist, Eschatology, Medieval art, Visual exegesis, Iconography



ANDREA BIANKA MÁRTON

Archiving the Sacred:

Religious Paintings in Henrician Inventories and Their Purpose at Court in the Context of the Anglican Reformation

In 16th-century England, the reign of Henry VIII witnessed the formation of a Renaissance royal court that served as a central part of royal self-representation. Alongside ceremony, paintings played a key role in expressing authority, particularly after the break with Rome. This paper examines religious paintings recorded in the complete household inventory of 1547, treating it not merely as a list of objects but as a source that reveals practices of material culture and ideological priorities. The paper combines close reading of entries with careful attention to the purpose of religious paintings, focusing on subject matter, repetition, and display within the royal household. Although the inventory includes a relatively large number of religious works, the range of themes is narrow, with recurring figures such as Saint George, Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene. Some images were likely displayed for diplomatic purposes, especially during visits by Catholic ambassadors, while others conveyed implicit critiques of papal authority or the corruption of the Church. Old Testament scenes and parables, including the Prodigal Son and the stories of David and King Asa, reinforced Henry VIII's religious and political decisions, while raising questions about the extent to which the king consciously shaped his collection.

KEYWORDS: Tudor, Anglican Reformation, sacred imagery, royal iconography, diplomatic display

ALEXANDRA OKANOVIC

Portrait and Face in Jean-Luc Marion's Thought

Through his conceptual distinction between the icon and the idol, Jean-Luc Marion's philosophy identifies two fundamental models of pictorial appearance. In Marion's interpretation, the icon, as a religious image and a mode of appearing, designates an image capable of leading beyond itself, that is, beyond mere representation. It reverses the habitual direction of vision and opens the gaze toward an invisible dimension of the image. The idol, by contrast, remains within the horizon of vision and aesthetic expectation: it does not lead beyond forms and images but fixes the viewer's gaze upon the visible surface. In my presentation, I examine how paintings can be situated within the framework of Marion's thought. I pay particular attention to portraits and pictorial representations of the face, which, in my view, operate in a manner similar to the phenomenological model of the icon: they return the viewer's gaze, unsettle the customary position of the spectator, and thereby reposition the act of seeing itself.

KEYWORDS: phenomenology, aesthetics, Marion, icon and idol, face, portraiture

PANEL 6

SPATIAL AND RITUAL CONSIDERATIONS OF BUDDHIST ART

MIRELLA KELLER

Thousand Faces in a Buddhist Cave:
Religious Motifs at Pilu Dong, Anyue ¹

The aim of this paper is to examine the aesthetic dimension of the cult of Santa Muerte, a The Anyue Buddhist 安岳 sites, which are mainly dated to the Tang (618–907) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, are important sites for the study of Buddhism in Sichuan. One example is the Pilu Dong 毗廬洞 site, where the stone carvings are of significant value in exploring the interaction between Buddhism and folk religion. This paper discusses the major elements of the site, including the figure of Liu Benzun 柳本尊 (d. 907?) and the distinctive features of his representation, the Youju Dong 幽居洞 cave, and the Water-Moon Guanyin (Shuiyue Guanyin 水月觀音) statue, while focusing primarily on the Thousand Buddha Cave (Qianfo Ku 千佛窟). The results are based on field research and on the analysis of images, language, and texts.

KEYWORDS: Sichuan Buddhism, Anyue sites, Pilu Cave, Buddhist art, Thousand Buddhas

JOANNA POŁEĆ

Bodies, Objects, and Spiritual Practice:
Experiencing Tibetan Buddhism Among European Practitioners ²

The material for this presentation was collected during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in India (March 2024, December 2025) and during several Buddhist courses in Europe (Hungary, Germany, Spain, Czech Republic). The project examines the process of entering Buddhism among practitioners shaped by secular-modern European contexts, with particular attention to somatic and embodied dimensions of religious experience. My approach integrates anthropological methodology with competencies developed during my acting training at the National Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków (graduated 2017) and subsequent theatrical practice. This background informs my sensitivity to presence, performativity, and corporeal awareness in ritual contexts. The theoretical framework draws on embodied anthropology, as developed by Thomas Csordas, which conceptualizes the body as a fundamental medium of experience and knowledge, as well as on somaesthetics, formulated by Richard Shusterman. The presentation examines the diverse ways the body manifests in Tibetan Buddhism as practiced by European adepts, focusing on the embodied dimensions of meditation techniques. Special attention is given to foundational practices known as Ngöndro, including the use of both ritual and non-ritual objects and their role and meaning within the practice, approached as forms of training involving bodily disciplines, repetition, posture, gesture, and material engagement.

KEYWORDS: Embodiment, Contemporary Buddhism, Transnational Practices, Somaesthetics, Autoethnography

¹ This research is co-authored by Christoph Anderl, Longyu Zhang, and Mirella Keller, and forms part of the “Sichuan Buddhist Sites: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives” research group activities of Ghent University.

² This research was supported by the Excellence Initiative - Research University” - IDUB UW Program, 2025.



JUDIT BÉRES

The Dum pa laptse in Amdo

This paper aims to present the annual ritual dedicated to the local mountain shrine (Tibetan: la btsas) and its territorial deity (Tibetan: yul lha) in Dum pa village, Amdo (Qinghai, China). The cult of local territorial deities is associated with the ancestral cult and is an important part of Tibetan religious practice, building communal identity and ritual life. The Dum pa laptse, situated on the “back hill” (Tibetan: rgyab ri) of the settlement, is linked to Dum pa'i rgyal po and his retinue, including Me stag Dgra' joms, who appears in local narratives connected to the war in 1725, and the death of a regional ruler. The presented paper is based on qualitative research methods, drawing on local oral legends (Tibetan: ngag rgyun) and written local historical accounts (Tibetan: lo rgyus). Through contextual analysis of these sources, I examine how ritual practices, such as the preparation of arrows, incense offerings (Tibetan: bsang), circumambulation, and communal festivities, strengthen the relationship between the community and its territorial deity.

KEYWORDS: Tibet, ritual, mountain god, shrine

LIAO MINQIAN

A Study of the „Nine Altar Sites” in Dunhuang: Spatial Composition, Ritual Origins, and Connections to the Nuo Tradition ³

This paper reexamines the phrase “nine altar sites” (jiu chu jie tan) in the Dunhuang manuscript P.3270, which has traditionally been interpreted as evidence of Buddhist influence on Nuo exorcistic rites. Through comparative analysis of manuscripts P.3270, P.3149, S.1181, and P.3644, the paper argues that year-end rituals in Dunhuang during the Guiyijun period represent a bidirectional integration of Nuo traditions and Buddhist assemblies across spatial, temporal, and functional dimensions. Evidence from S.1181 records the establishment of altars at nine sites for five days with seven monks at each altar, indicating an institutionalized annual Buddhist assembly. The nine sites correspond to the four city gates, four city corners, and the Central Lodge within Shazhou's city walls, forming a coordinated urban ritual network. This configuration differs from the symbolic spatial model of Esoteric Buddhist mandala altars and instead aligns with Tang dynasty Nuo regulations, emphasizing the four city gates. The findings suggest that Buddhist assemblies adopted the urban spatial framework and exorcistic function of Nuo rites, while Nuo practices incorporated Buddhist terminology and ritual elements, creating a fused ritual landscape in medieval Dunhuang.

KEYWORDS: Dunhuang manuscripts; Nuo exorcism; Nine Altar Sites; Buddhist assembly; Ritual space

³ This research was supported by the China Scholarship Council program and Stipendium Hungaricum (Project ID: 202402890021).

PANEL 7

ART FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD THEORETICAL AND INTERPRETATIONAL DILEMMAS

CSABA SZABÓ T.

Reception of Ancient Gods in Religious Art. The Curious Case of Mithras in Medieval Art ¹

The visual culture of religion in the classical Greco-Roman world formed an integral component of Renaissance and Enlightenment classicism. Only in the past half-century, however, has scholarship devoted sustained attention to the medieval Christian reception of classical polytheistic traditions and their visual vocabulary – a field that offers numerous compelling and multifaceted manifestations. This lecture examines the medieval reception history of one of the most prominent mystery cults of the Roman imperial period, the Roman cult of Mithras, together with the ancient expressions of *varietas* in visual religious forms. Particular attention will be given to the 13th-century frescoes discovered in 2002, which decorate the Aula Gotica of the Basilica dei Santi Quattro Coronati.

KEYWORDS: Mithras, reception of antiquity, Medieval Art, Roman religion, Christian Art

GUNHYUK LEE

Two Liturgical Objects with Donor Inscriptions: Donation and the Materialization of Sanctity in Late Antique Egypt

Documentary evidence verifying donations of food, movable property, and real estate to Christian institutions from Late Antique Egypt is frequently discovered. However, records explicitly confirming the donation of liturgical objects remain exceptionally rare. While hagiographies frequently recount such donations and institutions undoubtedly possessed these objects, establishing their precise chronology or verifying their donor provenance presents a persistent methodological challenge. Addressing these complexities, this paper cross-examines hagiographical narratives, such as the donation of silver plates by Eutropios in the *Miracles of Saint Menas* and the offering of a jeweled cross in John Moschos's *Pratum Spirituale*, against material evidence, specifically the silver processional cross found in the Luxor Treasure (Cairo Museum No. 7201) and the bronze paten inscribed by Eulogia (Bénazeth Cat. No. 311). These two artifacts, bearing inscriptions such as „Thank-offering... for the repose of the soul” or „God’s servant Eulogia,” serve as vital evidence attesting to a material culture of donation often obscured in the archaeological record. This paper argues that donation should be understood as a practice institutionalized through inscriptions and repeated ritual performances within institutional sacred spaces. The paper demonstrates how liturgical tools function as material media mediating donor memory. It raises fundamental questions regarding the social transformation of these objects: does inscription render a vessel ‘more’ sacred, or does it instead privatize it? Crucially, who possessed the privilege of inscribing their name? The presence of a donor’s name likely implies a substantial contribution, distinguishing a select few from what may be termed the ‘silent majority.’ This presentation discusses the tension between personal memorialization and communal sanctity revealed through these inscribed artifacts.

KEYWORDS: Votive offerings; donation; liturgical objects; inscription; Late Antique Egypt; Coptic Christianity

¹ This research was supported by the MTA-SZTE „Momentum” Program and the MTA-SZTE „Momentum” Mithras Research Group

CHIARA OLIVERI

Religious Propaganda in the Achaemenid Empire: Darius I's Behistun Relief and Mural of Rostam

One of the most remarkable factors that connote the relationship ancient civilizations had with religion is the deep embedment of the latter that can be detected in daily life. The immediate consequence of this was a high degree of uniformity of beliefs in each community; and, on this basis, the possibility of instrumentalization of religion for non-religious purposes emerged. These processes are directly reflected in the production of sacred art in antiquity, and both the relief on Behistun mountain and Darius I's tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam, the first and last works of art commissioned by the king who brought the Persian Empire to its peak development, constitute highly representative accessing points to investigate the problem. By analyzing the relationship between visual and textual motifs in the monuments, and the problems of their fruition and target audience, the works are interpreted as two pieces of a comprehensive strategy of imperial propaganda, developed around the central idea of the privileged communication channel with the divine the emperor had access to, and which distinguished him from any other human being.

KEYWORDS: Mazdaism, Propaganda, Ancient Near East, Achaemenid Art, Kingship

KRISZTINA DULL

Magi on Walls and on Paper: A Methodological Dilemma

This presentation argues that academic research benefits from integrating methodologies across disciplines. The positivist tradition has produced highly specialized and rigorous knowledge within both natural and social sciences, and clearly defined methods remain essential. Yet such specialization can also limit our ability to recognize connections across sciences and develop broader insights. Using an example from Renaissance Florence, I aim to demonstrate how combining Panofsky's iconological analysis of an altarpiece with a hermeneutical reading of texts of the same era generates a more nuanced interpretation. The integration of visual and textual analysis not only enriches our understanding of individual works but also clarifies key philosophical concepts of the period. This methodological synthesis enables a more complex historical account than either iconology or hermeneutics could achieve independently. The question of whether methods of different fields should be applied flexibly or upheld through strict methodological orthodoxy is a current dilemma. The fragmentation of scholarship was historically necessary, given the cognitive limits of individual researchers. However, as large language models increasingly participate in research, we have the option of benefiting from cross-disciplinary approaches. It would however demand that we train these models not within a rigid "one question, one method" framework but using an integrative one. My aim is to outline through one example how and why this latter approach could be more beneficial.

KEYWORDS: methodology, Renaissance, iconology, hermeneutics, interdisciplinarity



PANEL 8

PERSPECTIVES FOR UNDERSTANDING OCCULT, ESOTERIC, AND ALTERNATIVE PRAXIS

CAROLE M. CUSACK

Bodily Rituals and Esoteric Spiritual Transformation: Art, Performance, and Praxis in the Gurdjieff Work

G. I. Gurdjieff's (c. 1877-1949) teaching, the Work or the Fourth Way, posits three centers in humans, the intellectual (associated with Gurdjieff's writings as a teaching technique), the emotional or feeling (associated with the Gurdjieff-de Hartmann music as a teaching tool), and the sensory or bodily center (associated with the Movements as a teaching method). Music, literature, and dance are all artistic activities and in the Work they are the gateway to esoteric spiritual (or religious) transformation. The contemplative exercises Gurdjieff taught later in his life explicitly addressed this transformation (the development of a soul or a kesdjan body) and are reflective of his Orthodox Christian background, in which the concept of theosis (humans participating in God's divine nature and becoming like God) is prominent. This paper addresses the centrality of the body and physical ritual activity in the Work, arguing that bodily sensation in the Movements (dances accompanied by music) and contemplation, commonly termed 'inner work' (primarily breathing exercises) are, with self-remembering (which resembles mindfulness), the core activities that Gurdjieff's pupils engage in, ritualizing the body to develop an astral body or soul, which enables humans to survive bodily death.

KEYWORDS: Gurdjieff, inner work, Fourth Way, Esotericism, bodily rituals

TANCREDI MARRONE

Occult Bodies in Psychedelic Art

The use of psychedelics has produced and fostered a rich cultural landscape spanning across multiple fields. The contemporary use of psychedelic or entheogenic substances has led to the production of artistic expressions with recognizable features. DMT, Mescaline, Marijuana, and LSD are often associated with striking visual effects, which have led or inspired many artists to produce and guide their artistic creations. These, in turn, have moreover fostered a plethora of symbolic images which have nourished the culture of psychedelics in association with spiritual practices. The subjects of these works are frequent representations of bodies of various kinds. Frequently, these are new perceptions of the human form, but they can extend to those of various entities associated with the substances. Aliens, trickster spirits, disembodied voices, and energy systems appear frequently as part of peak experiences induced by psychedelic substances. These symbolic representations, I will argue, are either centered on direct experience through altered states of consciousness or inspired by them in the formation of artwork aimed at the psychedelic community. In this presentation, I will provide several examples related to both categories and how these representations directly influence and affect the common imagination, otherwise termed Psychedelic Occultualism of spirituality, occultism, and esotericism within psychedelic culture. Examples are found by drawing on descriptions of the macrocosm and microcosm; the body is also illustrated at the cellular or molecular level, where DNA strands are likened to snakes and variously illustrated Kundalini energies, which, in the contemporary occult and esoteric milieu, are shorthand for life force, forming more complex patterns and shapes. Chakra systems and auras, associated with invisible bodily functions, also appear. Finally, I will argue that these works of art serve as trip reports, using visual representation rather than the written word to express the psychedelic experience.

KEYWORDS: Psychedelics, Visual art, Consciousness, Spirituality, Maps of Meaning

MATOUŠ MOKRÝ

Politicizing Tarot in the Order of Nine Angles¹

Since the 1960s, failures in electoral competition and building mass movements led many extreme-right thinkers to theorize societal change through a dedicated minority. Extreme-right approaches were also reformulated by the Order of Nine Angles (ONA), a Left-Hand Path magical system established around 1983 by British neo-Nazi David Myatt (b. 1950). ONA aims to build an elite that would purify Western civilization of alien elements and direct it toward cosmic expansion. ONA's key texts *Naos* (1990) and *The Sinister Tarot* (1995) attack older versions of tarot for deteriorating the evolution of the West and mankind and praise ONA's own 'sinister tarot' as authentically Western archetypal images that enable an understanding of the individual psyche and the process of history. The paper analyses publications of the ONA's formative period (1976–1998) and contextualizes its discourse on tarot into changing conceptions of societal change within the post-1960s international extreme right and the British esoteric ritual magic. By this contextualization, the paper shows how 'politicizing' the tarot provided the ONA with novel arenas for its macro-historical project and broadened the framework for developing the new elite.

KEYWORDS: Satanism, Left-Hand Path, Order of Nine Angles, right-wing extremism

EGLE ALEKNAITE-SKARUBSKE

Imagining Pagans in Lithuanian Literature and Theatre

Based on analyses of literature and drama works, as well as literature criticism and public discussions of the period, the paper examines images of Baltic paganism constructed in Lithuanian literature and theatre works from the end of the 19th-century to the 21st-century. The paper explores aspects of Paganism (rituals, beliefs, deities, ethics, materiality, religious actors, etc.) presented in literature and theatre works, contexts of their images in the narratives, and the broader political and cultural context of the creation and functioning of the works. The analyzed period encompassed the development of Lithuanian nationalism leading to the establishment of the Republic of Lithuania in 1918, the interwar period, followed by the Soviet occupation, and the reestablishment of state independence in 1990. While academic research on paganism saw some reconceptualization of the religion, writers and playwrights continued to build on ideas and images developed in 19th-century romanticism, ensuring their popularity in popular nationalist imagery, including in the cultural nationalism supported by the Soviet regime. Most works focused on the period of the Baltic Crusades, included explicit or implicit comparisons with Christianity, established the link between religion and nationality, and in this way were used in the politics of religion.

KEYWORDS: Paganism, literature, Lithuania

¹ This research was supported by the „Reconfiguring the commons in conditions of uncertainty: Diplomacy of trust and experimental forms of cooperation and convergent action across divergent worlds” (RECOMUN), realized as specific research no. MUNI/A/1751/2025 at the Department for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University, in 2026.

PANEL 9

NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO LITURGICAL MOTION

BENCE ALEXANDER MASIR

Dancing about Theology

– Affective Liturgical Dramaturgy in the Middle Ages

The problem of incommunicability between the arts is sometimes described with the adage that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” Medieval liturgymakers, however, made this transmedial leap by embodying their spirituality, uniting song, text, and formalized choreography in space with their underlying metaphysical assumptions. Using the Usarium database developed by the MTA-ELTE “Momentum” Research Group of Liturgical History, we can comprehensively examine a vast collection of dramaturgical instructions and discover a twofold development of affectivity, to be illustrated with primary theoretical sources from the period: (1) silent physical actions tend to eventually receive textual accompaniments; (2) texts mentioning certain actions are acted out by the worshippers. The point of convergence is always ceremonial body–mind unity. Medieval Latin Christianity is sometimes depicted as a transcendentalist tradition in contempt of the world and physicality, but here it appears as an embodied religion that seeks to reconcile and unify body and soul, and provides an expressive unity that goes both ways, dance affecting spirit and spirit being performed in dance.

KEYWORDS: affective dramaturgy, ritual, Christianity, performance, embodiment

ÁBEL STAMLER

Buried alive:

An Analysis of Initiatory Rites of Medieval Anchorites ¹

In Catholicism, the privilege of the redeemed in the heavenly homeland is to see the essence of God, while in earthly life, any direct, essential knowledge of God is in doubt. The study of the medieval initiation ceremonies of anchorites or incluses, namely the content and structure of the liturgical ceremony, can lead to interesting results in this matter. At the top of the medieval epistemological hierarchy is contemplation, and at the bottom is sensory perception. Sensory perception is tied to the contingent world, while contemplation is about getting rid of the contingencies of the world. How can we grasp contemplation as the ultimate goal of an ordne that primarily affects the senses? How does the rite use the senses on the path to contemplation? What are the structural and content characteristics of the initiation of the anchorites? What normative goals does the order envisage? Can ritual death mean gaining the privileges of the beati? In my presentation, I will try to find answers to these questions as they are closely related to the issues of medieval epistemology and liturgical theology.

KEYWORDS: anchoritism, initiation, contemplation, sensory perception, visio beatifica

¹ This research was supported by the 2023–2026 Art Scholarship Program of the Hungarian Academy of Arts.

MARAM ALSHAWABKEH

Spinning the Sacred: The Sufi Sama' as Performance and Embodied Knowledge

The Sufi Sama'—a ritual of rhythmic whirling practiced by the Mevlevi order to achieve spiritual ecstasy—acts as a bridge where physical discipline meets metaphysical longing. This presentation moves beyond the standard descriptive accounts of the „whirling dervish” to analyze the ritual through the lenses of Performance Theory and Ritual Theory. I argue that the dervish's rotation is far more than a pious display; it is what Richard Schechner identifies as „restored behavior,” a disciplined, repeated sequence that allows the practitioner to bridge centuries of tradition with a raw, immediate spiritual experience. By applying Marcel Mauss's „techniques of the body,” I examine how a practitioner suppresses the biological impulse of dizziness to transform the self into a semiotic tool for divine communication. Finally, the presentation addresses the uneasy tension between the ritual's „efficacy” as a transformative act and its modern „entertainment” value within the global tourism market. By treating dance as a performative text, this paper highlights how bodily movement remains a primary medium for negotiating identity and heritage in a globalized world.

KEYWORDS: Performance Theory, Embodiment, Sama', Ritual Theory, Sufism

REBEKA ERDÉLYIOVÁ

Staging the Sacred: The Gnostic Mass as Ritual Choreography

This paper examines the Gnostic Mass, a central public rite of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), one of the main organizations associated with Thelema, a modern religious occult movement founded in the early twentieth century, as a form of sacred performance in which religious ideas are expressed through bodily movement, visual symbolism, and sensory experience. Written in 1913 by the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), it is the central and only publicly accessible rite of the O.T.O. Drawing on ethnographic insight informed by my first-hand attendance at the ritual, I argue that the Mass operates not only as a liturgical ceremony, but also as a carefully choreographed artistic event that organizes the movement of both officiants and congregation. Through movement, dress, layout, procession, and altar symbolism, the rite creates a distinct aesthetic experience in which bodies become vehicles of sacred meaning. Special attention is given to the ritual participation of the public, whose responses and choreographed engagement form part of the Mass's wider structure. The paper argues that sacred authority and experience are produced through coordinated bodily action, making the Gnostic Mass legible as both embodied religion and participatory ritual art.

KEYWORDS: Occultism; esotericism; ritual performance; ethnography; Thelema

PANEL 10

READING AND EXPRESSING RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY THROUGH ART

OLÍVIA GARA

Desert Tent and the Garden of Eden – The Immersive Effect of Decorative Mural Painting in Flat-ceiling Synagogues of the Dualist Era

In a significant number of rural synagogues built in Hungary in the 19th and 20th centuries, the interior architecture was often due to financial constraints supplemented with decorative painting featuring sacred and biblical motifs, thereby seemingly expanding the available space. Throughout my presentation, I analyze the interior painting of five flat-ceiling synagogues – Abony, Mátészalka, Sárbogárd, Keszthely, Berettyóújfalu – and its effect on spatial perception. By examining ceiling paintings, I identify local Jewish origins of the motifs using historical pattern books. In my analysis, I also discuss painting techniques, the use of colors and materials, and their role in creating spatial illusions. I argue that mural painting, complementing architecture, has a central function in the shaping of spatial perception, and this effect can only be achieved if the mural painter and the architect reconstruct together the conceptual ornamentation, complementing the missing details. Only by retaining mural painting, fine art, decorative art, and the building's architectural values can they be preserved, as mural painting makes simple architectural spaces unique. A significant number of the aforementioned synagogues are in such poor condition that the decorative paintings in their interiors could only be preserved through documentation, in the hope of a possible reconstruction.

KEYWORDS: synagogue, mural painting, cultural heritage, spatial perception, optical illusion

VENDEL FARKAS

Helmets, Idols, Petroglyphs – Defining pre-Christian Germanic Theology Through Non-textual Sources

Art is often portrayed as a field less tangible than the textual world, resistant to definitive interpretations. Research on Germanic Paganism illustrates this well: scholars often complain about the availability of information, not because it is scarce, but because much of it is visual in nature. This is exactly why the use of art theory and hermeneutics is essential; without them, we risk becoming methodologically helpless despite the abundance of material. The Edda, the primary mythological source for Germanic Paganism, has long been questioned concerning its authenticity. Yet in light of current archaeological findings, it is entirely reasonable to trace many of its narratives and symbols back to pre-Christian traditions. By applying hermeneutical methods, we can embark on an academic journey to not only identify pre-Christian visual equivalents to these later recorded myths, but also to explore the ritual and doctrinal developments that unfolded over the centuries. In my lecture, after outlining the methodological framework, I will demonstrate how such work could be done through three case studies: (a) the developments of the Odinic cult; (b) the Baldur dilemma; and (c) perspectives on animistic imagination.

KEYWORDS: visual sources, Germanic Paganism, hermeneutics



MAGDALENA GERMEK

Sacredness, Art, Anatomy: Visual Readings of the Body ¹

This paper examines how the sacred and the anatomical intersect and shape one another. Although 16th-century anatomy is often understood as a turn toward empirical investigation, many visual strategies suggest that older, sacralized ways of seeing the body persisted. Medieval death culture (with its vanitas motifs, danse macabre, and ars moriendi) survives in early anatomical imagery as a subtle yet enduring layer that sustains a moralized, contemplative mode of viewing. The paper presents selected examples of late medieval death imagery and early anatomical illustrations by Berengario da Carpi and Andreas Vesalius. It shows how contemplative skeletons, theatrical dissections, and Christ-like anatomical figures generate hybrid interpretive modes that combine observation, affective response, and devotional elements. At the same time, anatomical ways of seeing migrate into artworks addressing sacred subjects. Works such as Michelangelo's Pietà, Holbein's Dead Christ, and Franz von Stuck's Pietà indicate that anatomical representation can shape sacred themes and the visual theology of suffering and incarnation. Methodologically, the paper brings together visual epistemology and close image analysis to show that, in the period of rising anatomical empiricism, the sacred does not vanish but becomes embedded in more implicit visual structures.

KEYWORDS: sacred art, anatomical illustrations, visual epistemology

KHALID MAHMOOD ARIF

Faith, Technology, and the Sacred: Islamic Ethical Perspectives on Digital and AI-Generated Art

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed contemporary artistic production, including forms of visual and textual art increasingly used in religious and spiritual contexts. This paper examines AI-generated sacred art, specifically artworks produced by generative models trained on religious symbols, iconography, calligraphy, and narrative motifs. It argues that while AI lacks spiritual intention or consciousness, its artistic outputs serve as powerful symbolic mediations that reshape how the sacred is imagined, experienced, and communicated in late modern societies. The central argument of this paper is that AI-generated sacred art represents not merely a technological innovation but a reconfiguration of religious creativity that challenges established understandings of authorship, intentionality, and transcendence within religious artistic traditions. Methodologically, the paper employs a qualitative, interpretive approach drawn from the academic study of religions, combining comparative visual analysis of selected AI-generated artworks with conceptual analysis of religious aesthetics and ethics. Islamic ethical thought is used as a focused case study, placed in dialogue with broader scholarly discussions on the sacred, representation, and moral agency in art. The analysis demonstrates that the use of generative AI in sacred artistic activity raises critical ethical questions concerning responsibility, stewardship, imitation, and the boundaries between human creativity and technological mediation. By narrowing its scope to visual and textual AI-generated sacred art, the paper offers a focused contribution suitable for a twenty-minute presentation. It concludes that religious ethical frameworks, particularly within Islamic thought, provide valuable resources for critically engaging AI-assisted sacred art without rejecting technological creativity, thereby enriching multidisciplinary conversations on religion, art, and digital innovation.

KEYWORDS: AI, Sacred Art, Religious Aesthetics, Islamic Ethics, Authorship and Creativity, Technology and Religion

¹ This research is the result of the research program P5-0452, Visual Literacy at the University of Ljubljana, Academy of Fine Arts and Design, co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

The same advice applies to those who plan to arrive in Budapest using train or bus service. Guests are advised to be mindful of their arrival station, which can be the [Eastern](#) or [Western](#) Railway Station or the [Népliget Bus Station](#). Guests may reach Deák Ferenc Square and Széll Kálmán Square from both stations easily, using the metro lines and trams. To plan your exact route, we recommend using the BKK planner: <https://go.bkk.hu/>

Be advised: public transport in Budapest can only be used with a valid ticket. Regarding the wide range of ticket types, see: <https://bkk.hu/en/tickets-and-passes/prices/>

The conference venue can also be reached using taxi services ([Uber](#), [Bolt](#), [Főtaxi](#)). Guests are advised to book these fares before arriving in Budapest or online while here, as prices may be significantly higher when hailing a taxi on the street. Guests are also advised not to enter any taxi not affiliated with the listed companies. Furthermore, guests are advised that taxi fares in Budapest are generally higher than in other European capitals.

The conference venue features open parking for those who plan to arrive by car. If any attendee wishes to reserve a parking space for the duration of the conference days, we advise messaging rendezveny@mma-mmki.hu (cc to cesarplatform@gmail.com) and specifying the planned arrival and plate number. Please note that the reservable spaces are limited.

Moreover, guests are advised that parking on the streets in Budapest requires a valid parking ticket for the duration of their stay. For purchasing a ticket, reviewing the designated fee zones, see: <https://bkk.hu/en/travel-information/parking/parking-on-the-premises-of-budapest/>

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

RULES & REGULATIONS

As a cultural heritage site, Villa Hild has strict rules regarding smoking (of any kind, including vapes, e-cigs, etc), with only one designated outdoor smoking area. Smoking inside the building (of any kind) and in undesignated spaces is strictly prohibited and may trigger the installed smoke alarm system.

The conference venue is pet-friendly; guests are kindly requested to keep their companions on a leash and ensure they exhibit exemplary social conduct before attending the event.

The conference venue is also accommodating to those with mobility impairments. Guests can request assistance in this regard by emailing to both of the following email addresses: cesarplatform@gmail.com and rendezveny@mma-mmki.hu.

The conference sessions are well equipped with dedicated widescreen TVs, speakers, presenters, and presenter laptops. If any speaker wishes to use their own laptop, their request can be accommodated. However, presenters are responsible for arranging any additional technical equipment, particularly if they wish to use Apple and McIntosh products (such as Mac-Books). TVs are equipped with HDMI 2 cables. Each session will have a dedicated on-site staff member who will assist presenters in preparing the technical background for their papers.

Participants will be requested to register each day upon arrival at the conference venue. Guests are also advised that the conference will be photographed and that certain sessions, such as the keynote lectures, will be recorded for archival and social media sharing. Participants are encouraged to take photos of the sessions, the venue, and any parts of the conference, except in places of worship on the final day's group trip, where specific photography rules may apply. These will be shared before entering such places.

Those who arrive on Day 1 (May 15th) at the conference or depart on Day 3 (May 17th excursion) can request to store their luggage for the duration of the sessions/program at the conference venue. Please be advised that such requests can only be accommodated if designated in time by messaging to rendezveny@mma-mmki.hu (cc to cesarplatform@gmail.com).

Presenters are responsible for arranging their own accommodation in Budapest. There are several options near the conference venue, all within a wide price range. The closest and most convenient option is [Hotel Tiliانا](#), about 7 minutes away from the venue on foot. Other, more affordable options include [Hotel Beatrix](#) and [Panzio Keszi](#). In both cases, guests are advised to purchase public transport tickets, which allow them to use buses, trams, and metros within the limits of Budapest. Both noted accommodations are 1-2 stops away from the conference venue. Additionally, there are even more options in the city center. We recommend exploring them on [Booking.com](#), as Airbnb currently faces district-level restrictions in Budapest, which make its service less reliable.

The conference, as noted in the open call, is free of charge to attend. Extracurricular activities on Day 3 are covered by the host. However, guests are advised to note that the group dinner on Day 1 is paid for individually, based on orders. In general, most locations in Budapest facilitate cashless transactions; nevertheless, presenters are recommended to carry a nominal amount of cash (either EUR or HUF). The nearest ATM en route to the conference venue is located at [Budagyöngye Mall](#), where attendees may also procure other necessary items. Additionally, the mall contains a [pharmacy](#), should it be required.

ORGANIZERS

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