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**Book of abstracts**

# **Wellbeing, Harm, and Religion**

**The fifth annual doctoral conference in  
religious studies**

**September 9-11, Brno, Czech Republic**



## Keynote lecture 1

- **Andrea de Antoni** (Kyoto University): Spirits in the Material World: An Anthropology of Religious Healing, Affective Affordances, and Affective Technologies

In this talk I propose some methodological reflections, to understand experiences of religious healing from the perspective of socio-cultural anthropology, with a focus on spirit possession. While relying on ethnographic data gathered through fieldwork in contemporary Japan and Italy, I suggest that a focus on how spirits emerge through possession and their becomings offers a useful path to comparison and argue for a more emergent and practice-based approach to spirit entities. I suggest a focus on the body moving-in-the-world or, as I prefer, 'feeling with' the world, as central to understand how spirit beings emerge through practice and how such emergence can relate to experiences of healing. In this lecture, I focus especially on two ideas. The first, 'affective affordances,' indicates material affordances that, in the interaction with enskilled bodies, can elicit the particular feelings through which spirit perceptions and realities emerge. The second, 'affective technologies,' points at configurations of practices, actions, or processes that elicit and allow the emergence of specific feelings by opening possibilities for encounters between lived, perceiving bodies and certain affordances. I argue that an analysis of experiences with spirits through this focus on situated bodies 'feeling with' human and non-human actors through practice, can be useful for a novel understanding of spirit emergence and ontogenesis, spirit possession and religious healing.

## Positive religious practice and wellbeing

- **Giuseppe Paternicò** (University of Padua): "A merry heart does good like a medicine: but a broken spirit dries the bones." (Proverbs 17:22). A biographical interpretation of joy: Luther case within the Rhymes by Giosuè Carducci

Christianity, deployed along the historical development of its churches, has not excluded from the proclaimed "good news" specific principles referring to wellbeing and to what could result to be really harmful for society, both for the inner spirit and for the body of people. This is indeed deeply shown throughout the Bible which is the ultimate source for knowledge, constantly aiming at achieving a complete health for believers: spiritual and physical. The biographical experience of a man like Luther, reviewed through the poetic lenses of a composition by Carducci, reveals a practical interpretation of the binomial Bible-health starting from cultivating joy, gladness: a real remedy for a believer's life, yesterday and today.

- **Dominika Šimlová** (Charles University): Sabbath-keeping and Its Positive Effects on Mental Health, Wellbeing and Spirituality

In the field of psychology of religion (and in a range of other disciplines), there are many case studies about the effects of Sabbath-keeping on participants. On the basis of these studies and theological explanations, we can argue that Sabbath-keeping represents a healing praxis amid the rush of our busy contemporary world. In my speech, I firstly introduce the Jewish traditional Sabbath which is on the one hand built upon a set of prohibitions and on the other hand it is celebrated through the agency of more distinct rites and rituals of the day (Kedushat ha-Yom). With regard to the construction of traditional Sabbath, I intend to emphasise the concept of physical and mental rest, stemming from the Torah (Ex 34:21), and the modern notion of joy/delight (Oneg Shabbat) which has roots in Rabbinic literature, particularly in the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Shabbat 118b). Secondly, I would like to rethink the current idealisation of the Jewish traditional Sabbath in terms of the situation of modern Judaism. In the case of the ritual variations of different Jewish communities (Orthodox/Traditional, Reform, Hasidic), I present some of my own ethnographic data concerning Sabbath-keeping that yield important insights on the topic of wellbeing and spirituality. Finally, I compare my own reflections on Jewish ritualisation in various communities with selected results of qualitative studies from the realm of occupational psychology.

## Positive religious practice and wellbeing

- **Wietske Merison** (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): Healing of the Heart: The Role of Qur'ān Recitation in Spiritual Care

The recitation of the Qur'an as a means to alleviate suffering and distress is a practice that can be traced all the way back to the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad. In multiple verses of the Qur'an its healing qualities are described, such as in 17:82: "we send down the Quran as a healing and mercy for the believers". This study provides a theological overview of the healing qualities ascribed to the recitation of the Qur'an. It will explore the relationship that has been made between specific Qur'anic chapters and specific types of comforting and healing, as well as the ways in which the importance of Qur'anic recitation for healing has significantly differed in different cultures, movements and times. Additionally, an overview of scientific studies on the effects of Qur'an recitation on physiological and psychological wellbeing will be incorporated into the research.

## Religion and wellbeing in contemporary Central Europe

- **Silvia Boschetti** (Charles University), **Robin Kopecký** (Charles University), **Lenka Příplatová** (Czech Academy of Sciences): Effect of being religious on wellbeing in a predominantly atheist country: Explorative study on wellbeing, fitness, physical and mental health

Despite a large volume of research on the impact of religion on different aspects of life, there is still a lack of studies from post-communist countries. In the current study, we aimed to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between religion and wellbeing, physical and mental health, education, sexual behavior and biological fitness among the Czech population. We managed to collect responses from 31633 participants and divided the sample into seven categories based on the type of religious belief and denomination (nonbelievers, believers without denomination, Catholics, Evangelicals, Hussites, Buddhists, Jews). We focused on the wellbeing as our main factor, which we define as composed of a number of sub-variables: physical and mental health, economic situation, self-attractiveness and the quality of the romantic relationship. In contrast to previous studies, we found a negative correlation between religiosity and physical and mental health. On the other hand, religiosity was connected to higher fitness, higher self-rated honesty and altruism, and lower sexual activity, which is in accord with the data from the western countries. Our findings suggest that even though Czechs had experienced years of oppression during the Communist regime, religion and religious beliefs still have considerable impact on their quality of life.

## Religion and wellbeing in contemporary Central Europe

- **Michalina Trochimowicz** (University of Białystok): "Alternative medicine" on the religious borderland

An analysis of 'alternative medicine' practices on the borderland between Catholic and Orthodox populations in the Podlasie region of Poland - a region in which a rich variety of magical and pseudo medical practices are still used, including recourse to the help of folk healers. Based upon a survey of a representative sample of residents, the study will examine the degree to which differences in religious affiliation are connected to patterns in such practices. To ensure that the role of religious affiliation is identified, the survey will include questions about cognitive factors and other social factors such as education and economic status, whose role will also be examined. Finally, the data will be examined to determine the influence of the current pandemic upon patterns of engagement in the magical and pseudo medical practices.

- **Attila Miklovicz** (Central European University): "Feel my finger" - Ritual "Assists" in Scientology

In the academic literature focusing on New Religious Movements, particularly on Scientology a recurring topic is the spiritual/physical regimen called "Assist" in Scientology practice.

The basic idea behind this practice is derived from the Creed of Church: "And we of the Church believe – That the spirit can be saved. – And that the spirit alone may save or heal the body." In Scientology a homo sapiens is believed to be composed of three major parts, the body, the mind and the spiritual being who is said to be the conscious controlling unit of this trinity. As explained in the Scientology scriptures when an illness or injury happens to the body the spiritual being "withdraws" from the subject area of the body and fails to exert the healing power mentioned in the Creed. Per the scriptures at the same time what also may occur that the attention of the person fixates on the injury or its particulars and the spiritual being "gets stuck" in that point of time or place. The "Assist" procedures are ritually used by Scientologists who believe it restores the communication of the spirit and the body or body part and/or unsticks the person's attention from the trauma.

After a short introduction to the topic and its academic literature the lecture presents the result of a quantitative and qualitative research made among Hungarian Scientologists about their customs of using these Assists and their personal experiences with them.

## Ritualized harm as a means of gaining benefits

- **Hossein Ghazizadeh** (University of Teheran): Interaction with the body in Shiite ritual literature; a case study of Ashura rituals

According to some Iraqi and Iranian Shiites, sympathy and companionship with the third Imam of the Shiites, Imam Hussein (as) during the so-called Ashura days - according to the Arabic lunar calendar of the tenth of Muharram - is achieved through certain physical actions. Western media are unaware of the Shiite ritual atmosphere. This article tries to express the roots and manifestations of this interaction with the body in Shiites with the approach of Shiite religious sociology and historical studies.

- **Giorgio Scalici** (NOVA University of Lisbon): "They are playing": Controlled violence in Wana funerals, Indonesia

Death breaks the delicate balance inside it and it casts a shadow of insignificance on life and social rules. To avoid being overwhelmed by the emotional wave caused by an unexpected loss and to retrieve the social balance, the Wana people of Morowali organize a sixteen to eighteen days ritual called kayori. In the last two days of the ritual, hundreds of people gather to drink, joke, flirt and sing, generating a playful atmosphere that reaffirm the value of life over the negativity of death of the ritual. This playfulness is supposedly interrupted by explosions of violence, called mandeke, during which women and men hurt themselves and destroy the ritual hut. The first time I saw it, I was shocked and unprepared but what surprised me most was when one of my informers told me: "mereka bermain" (they are playing). The mandeke is an episode of controlled violence that allow the Wana to express their emotional pain in a safe environment and guided by the rule of the community, while the bystanders also play the game pretending to be scared of those people gone wild.

By examining the violent episodes, I want to explore the relationship among controlled violence, play and death, to see how those episodes help the community in managing the emotion related to death, to reinforce the rules of the community in a moment of crisis and transform a negative event in a playful moment.

## Ritualized harm as a means of gaining benefits

- **Madhuvanti Mukherjee** (Vidyasagar University): Documenting Perceptions of and Views toward Ritual Uvulectomy Procedures in the Islamic Hausa Communities of Nigeria

The uvula is a conic projection extending from the back to the middle of the soft palate. It is composed of connective tissue containing a number of racemose glands and muscular fibres.

During the uvulectomy procedure, practitioners (1) place a stick or tongue depressor under the uvula and (2) use a curved, sickle-shaped knife to cut it. Performed routinely at birth, ritual uvulectomy is rooted largely in Islamic tradition.

The objective of this study is to document perceptions of and views toward ritual uvulectomy in Nigerian Hausa communities. Our findings drew from qualitative research conducted in rural and peri-rural regions near Daura and Azare. We, using an interdisciplinary pedagogy, conducted focus-group discussions with parents, adolescents, and physicians. A multi-step questionnaire was then developed and distributed to key stakeholders in Nigerian government, industry, and civil society to discern methods and prevalence of ritual uvulectomy as part of Islamic tradition.

Western literature has emphasized the “undesirable” and “dangerous” nature of Uvulectomy, referencing patients’ increased vulnerability to sepsis, tetanus, and HIV.

We found, however, that Uvulectomy “ensures continuity” and is a “necessary social contribution” for many Hausa. Participants highlighted the role of an Uvulectomy as a purification ritual essential to fulfilling the rites of Islam and enhancing communal health.

A conceptual analysis of our findings as they relate to harm and wellbeing will be presented. We will provide recommendations for (1) enhancing the quality of patient care in Islamic Hausa communities and (2) incorporating ritualized processes into birthing practice and pedagogy.

## Keynote lecture 2

- **Radek Kundt** (Masaryk University): Effects of extreme ritual on physiological and psychological health

Extreme rituals that involve bodily mutilation entail significant physiological (e.g., injury, infection) and psychological (e.g., distress, trauma) risks, yet practitioners often claim that they convey health benefits. Tackling the evolutionary puzzle of extreme rituals and their potential fitness benefits, this talk will report the results from a collaborative investigation of health outcomes of participation in the Kavadi performed by Tamils in Mauritius. Combining ethnographic observations and psychophysiological measurements over a two-month period, we monitored physiological responses of ritual participants and a control group and obtained assessments of perceived health and quality of life. Compared to a control group, performance of this demanding ordeal had no detrimental effects on physiological health but was associated with improvements in psychological well-being. Furthermore, individuals who reported chronic health problems sought more painful levels of engagement which were associated with greater improvements in psychological well-being. We suggest several bottom-up and top-down mechanisms facilitating these effects including self-signaling (i.e., effects of past experience in undertaking pain on the future health self-evaluation) and placebo (i.e., effects of cultural expectations in the ritual healing power).

## Cultural constructions of wellbeing and harm

- **Peter Ondreička** (Charles University): Healing or hurting?: The interpretation of the use of exorcism as a remedy in the second half of 19th century by contemporary media

The second half of the 19th century also witnessed number of supposed possession and exorcism cases. Some of these possessions were recognized by the church representatives who also conducted exorcism. But also in this first group we can see the effort of newspapers to interpret such cases as the illness (both mental or physical disorder) and priests behavior as the superstitions.

Some cases stayed at the level of local community or family. In such cases a variety of popular and folk methods were used to „heal“ the possessed person. The results of such folk exorcism were sometimes fatal. We can never say how many possession cases occurred in the particular period of history because even archival materials probably do not cover all possession and exorcism cases. But by using contemporary newspapers as the main source for our research we can investigate how such „healings“ have been perceived by the newspapers and presented to the public.

In my contribution I will focus mainly on the cases as Wemding (1891), Gis (1893), Montelepre (1893) and Pontea Ema (1893) well represented within contemporary press but I will mention also other case without so much information for deeper analysis. The cases represent both the ritual Christian exorcism and folk exorcism but are connected by the press interpretation of the possession state as the illness. The cases occurred in middle Europe, France and Italy. All examined articles were published in Habsburg monarchy.

## Cultural constructions of wellbeing and harm

- **Daniela Calvo** (Rio de Janeiro State University): Wellbeing and affliction in Candomblé

The aim of this work is to analyse the concept and experience of health/wellbeing and disease/misfortune in Candomblé, one of the religions that developed after the slavery trade and reterritorialized Africa in Brazil.

Based on an ethnographic study, I analyse the afflictions that lead people to search for care in Candomblé, the intersubjective construction of meaning in the healing process, and the conception of health that emerged from experiences and narratives.

The construction of meaning for affliction and the healing process depend on a cosmology based on forces and flows and a conception of the human being as made up of physical and spiritual components and in a mesh of relations (including humans and not-humans).

Health is an imbrication of physical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects and includes the individual project of happiness; it coincides with the concept of axé, the vital force that is at the base of life and that is preserved, put in motion, concentrated and strengthened in rituals and daily cares.

Affliction is expressed in a variety of situations, such as physical and psychological problems, family and social conflicts, accidents, misfortune, work, money and justice problems, stagnant situations. It may involve physical and spiritual actants, personal destiny and relations with humans and spiritual beings.

- **Pawel Chyc** (Adam Mickiewicz University; University of Białystok): Embodied harm and wellbeing. Body and shamanism in Amazonia

The symbolic dimension of the body plays a fundamental role in the indigenous cultures of Amazonia. At the same time, the body is understood in a specific way in native discourse and cosmologies. These cultural ideas about the body strongly influence daily practices and social relationships. In my talk I will focus on shamanism to show how strongly shamanic practices in Amazonia are related to body idioms. I will base my talk on selected ethnographic examples as well as on my own ethnographic research among the Moré from Bolivia. First, I will introduce the key aspects of corporeality that are characteristic of all analyzed examples. Next, I will show how causing disease and its treatment are related to the body and its symbolic aspects. Here, the role of shamanism is crucial, because in Amazonia, the causes of many diseases are attributed to the intentional action of agents. For this reason, the shaman is always an ambivalent character who, acting on the body, can heal it, but also can be a potential cause of diseases.

## Cultural constructions of wellbeing and harm

- **Nicola Pantić** (Central European University): The Healing Grace: Thaumaturgical Healing and Ottoman Sunnism in the Early Modern Period (cca. 1500s-1800s)

Prior to the modern centuries, in most of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East (and broader), daemonic possession was widely believed in and rarely disputed. Madness and severe illness, or epidemics, often interpreted as the mark of invisible assailants, or the consequence of improper behavior, inspired the development of complex and sometimes morbid methods of exorcism. According to Ottoman Sunni tradition, those who were believed capable of receiving, or harvesting and manipulating divine grace, often had the duty to expel the forces of evil from people and places. Beliefs in the efficacy of their rituals inspired a rich tradition of practices which to a significant extent had roots in pre-Islamic traditions and further bore a strong comparative potential with similar practices in Christian Europe. I aim to discuss Muslim apotropaic and prophylactic thaumaturgical practice present in the Middle East and North Africa during the early modern period. The discussion would indicate widespread beliefs in the jinn and their connection with various ailments and diseases. Muslims believed that divine grace, baraka, dispatched the jinn and kept them at bay. Those who were believed to be graced by God were therefore praised as the defenders of the common people against unseen evils. According to popular expectations, they were to heal the injinnated and protect from disease. I discuss their practices, including prayers and invocations, talismanics, and other methods to contend with the unseen. The talk is intended to indicate traces of premodern virology in such rituals. Apotropaic and prophylactic thaumaturgy represented a common element of mainstream Sunnism under the Ottoman rule, and was sanctioned and practiced even by the most prominent of the Muslim scholars and mystics.

## Health and historical transformations of religion

- **Anestis Karasaridis** (Masaryk University): The Antonine Plague in Rome: Designing a Comparative Model of Different Pathogens

The Antonine Plague and the Plague of Cyprian are considered by some scholars to have been major disease outbreaks in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, causing a significant population decline in the Roman Empire. Several authors have argued that the outbreaks led to the ideal conditions for Christianity to become a dominant religion in the Roman Empire. The magnitude of these pandemics was nevertheless questioned by other scholars. One way to advance the discussions surrounding the impact of the pandemics might be to inspect the currently available sources by novel methods and assess whether such an interpretation of the growth of Christianity is realistic at all. Recent adoption of the methods of mathematical and computational modelling by the humanities allows to demonstrate some phenomena related to the Antonine Plague and the Cypriatic Plague. Focusing on the Antonine Plague (ca. 165–189 CE), however, no molecular evidence of its causative agent is available. This makes it difficult to estimate the impact of the Antonine Plague on the population of the Roman Empire, let alone its Christian sub-population. Fortunately, the literary evidence (primarily the writings of Galen and Cassius Dio) indicates features of the disease and the extent of its impact on Roman society. The aim of this paper is to propose a way how to create a compartmental model of the Antonine Plague in the city of Rome between 165 and 189 CE, and compare its output with historical evidence to identify the most plausible cause of this disease outbreak.

## Health and historical transformations of religion

- **Shahin Machinchery** (University of Erfurt): Nattumawlid as the way of healing across eastern Mediterranean and Indian Ocean

This paper discusses about the evolution of a trans-oceanic healing festival, which is exchanged within the trade links of eastern Mediterranean and Malabar coast in 18th century. The festival known as Nattumawlid, is celebrated by the inhabitants of Tanur, a coastal town in Indian state Kerala. The festival gets distinct in religiously inspired celebrations in its healing nature. This 18th century phenomenon has an untold story which is not recorded in the history. This legacy is maintained through oral tradition among the elder generation in the region. In this festival that people recite the epic poems which are written as the praise of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), they perceive it as the way of healing the physical and mental crisis. Apart from the concept of healing this festival is seen as the influence of the ocean on the historical boundaries of a country, it is an opportunity to adapt to the oceans and multicenter landscapes. In this way this festival is forming various ideological circles. This paper frames the interpretation of the transnational culture of Nattumawlid is possible only when discussing the social context of the country itself. The handing over of Nattumawlid, which is depicted in the phrases of international practice and overseas remedy, clearly shows the manner and forms in which Yemen interacts with Malabar. The Indian Ocean has enabled multiculturalism by making oral service and spiritual values available to the community.

## Intersections of religious and secular in wellbeing and harm

- **Klaudia Komar** (University of Białystok): Secularisation and the Cultural Context of Spiritual Practices

Spiritual practices with the capacity to affect mental states - such as prayer, meditation, breathwork and fasting - have been utilized within a religious context in almost every culture and tradition over the past several millennia. Through spiritual or religious practices people can acquire states of calm and gratitude, as well as increasing the sense of well-being and, most importantly, have experiences deemed mystical. However, performing such practices in a secular setting may lead to similar results. I examine the role of the secularisation of these practices in the process of secularisation in general and propose an exploratory, correlational questionnaire-based study to investigate the relationship between changes in how spiritual practices of this type are interpreted and the contexts in which they are placed and broader attitudes towards religion. I hypothesise that the secularisation of spiritual practices serves to deepen tendencies to move away from institutionalised religion.

## Intersections of religious and secular in wellbeing and harm

- **Heba Omar Muhammad Abdulwahid** (Ain Shams University): Religious terrorism and performance art! A study in the neuroscience of religion and performance

The purpose of this shocking title, combining opposite words terror and art in the same sentence, is to draw attention to the profound impact of terrorist acts on audiences including victims. This inescapable impact can be seen significantly different in the light of cognitive and neurological interpretation. How should we study these acts? We used to interpret them as bearers of different critical readings on a conscious level, for example, the semiotic analysis. But I've noted many similarities between performance art - which relies a great deal on neural impacts - and terrorist acts. Both can cross the boundaries of faking to real making depending on the four pillars of performance art during the process of creation :(body, space, audience, and timing ). The idea and practices of applied religious terrorism, don't tend to use mental persuasion and logical argumentation but the deep and immediate response. we are clearly facing not only the cognitive perception of performance art but also the religious experience and its neural aspects. Main points of the research: 1- comparison between terrorist acts and performance art (live and recorded) 2- Integrating religious neuroscience theories ( firstly: religious experience and stimulation by using abbreviated symbols-key stimulus elements- to recreate the previous religious experience, and create the delusion of the sacred in vicious assaults. Secondly: how religion affects the neural process of decision making -brain lobes-and perception of the self) with performance art theories. 3-these assumptions can be applied to Isis operations and the kidnapping of the 20 Egyptian Christians in Libya.

- **Jerry Espinoza-Rivera** (University of Costa Rica): Freud's Judaism and the Aim of Psychoanalysis

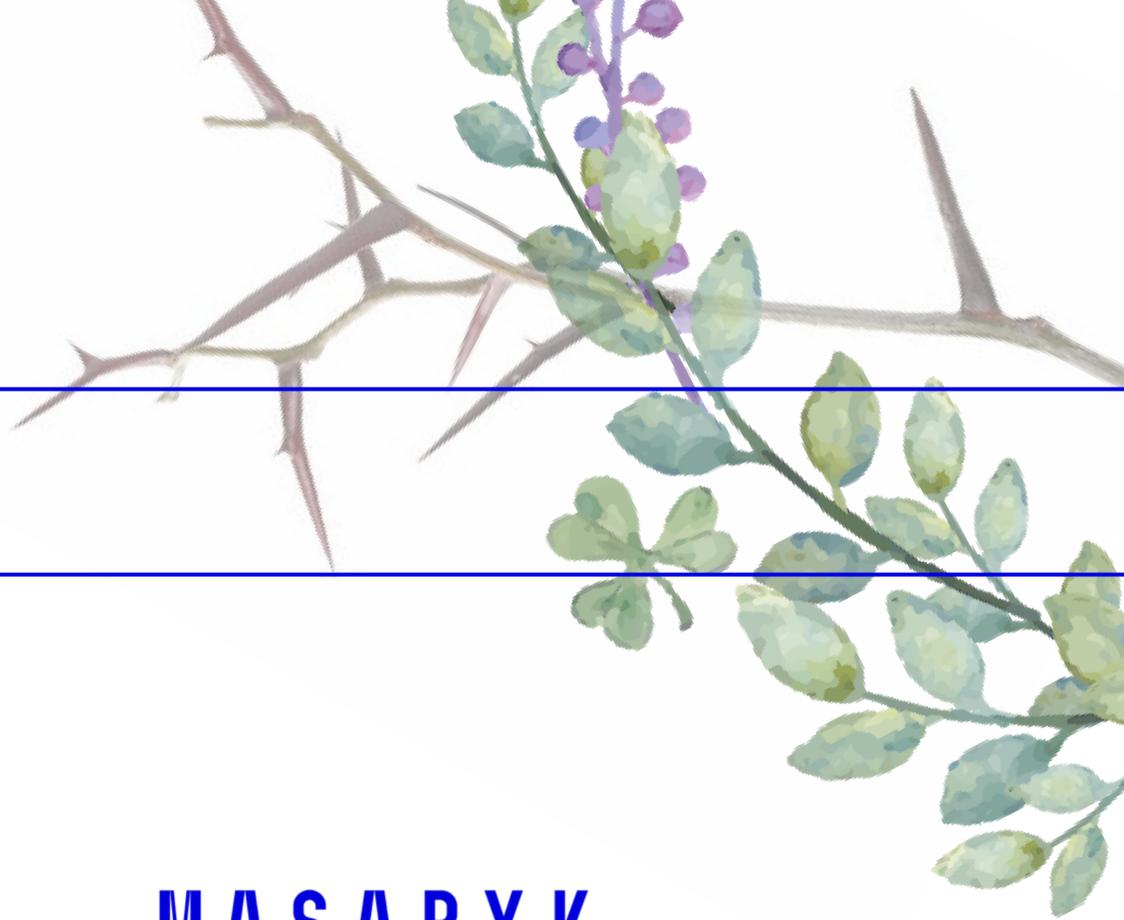
Since his early youth, Sigmund Freud declared himself as a "proud Atheist". However, simultaneously he remarked his Jewish condition and identified himself as a Jew. Freud was not an exceptional case; at the end of the 19th Century numerous Central and Eastern European Jews —including the founder of Zionism Theodor Herzl— moved away from their ancestors' religion but maintained their support to Jewishness at the same time. Moreover, Freud was always interested in the History and Anthropology of Religion; it is not fortuitous that one of his last works was dedicated to Moses and Monotheism. Considering that, this paper attempts to show that Freud's origins influenced not only his Weltanschauung but also his medical interpretation of therapy and healing. The aim of psychoanalysis according to Freud was not only a simple medical cure but a whole experience of self-transformation.

## Keynote lecture 3

- **Michal Pagis** (Bar-Ilan University): Re-enchanting Therapy

In most of human history religion and therapy were intertwined. It is mainly with modernity that psychological therapy evolved into a separate value sphere that is based on a secular, dis-enchanted ethos. Scholars of the therapeutic ethos have claimed that its evident popularity represents a triumph, arguing that the therapeutic replaces religion as the new sacred canopy that offers frames of meaning, technologies of self and forms of authority. This triumph is evident in the growing “psychologization” of contemporary religion, as religious spheres adopt the therapeutic ethos in order to remain relevant. This story of triumph, however, ignores the opposite trajectory, in which psychologists are turning to religious traditions in the hope to find ways to invigorate therapy. This process reveals a growing disappointment from the academic and secular versions of psychology, leading to the attempt to re-enchant therapy. Based on ethnographic research in workshops, retreats and courses oriented to licensed therapists that integrate elements from Buddhist or Jewish traditions into clinical practice, we examine what religion-inspired psychologists find to be missing from their profession, why they need religion in order to change contemporary therapy, and how they adapt religious/spiritual ideas and practices so these could be used in their professional work. We illustrate how the project of re-enchanting therapy positions itself against the hyper-individualistic spirit of contemporary psychology by integrating ethics, morality and community back into the therapeutic framework.

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