

Borderline places: reflections on religion in contemporary culture

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The 2024 edition of the Davide Zordan Lecture, an annual event organized by ondazione Bruno Kessler's Center for Religious Studies to honor the memory of Davide Zordan, a researcher who died prematurely in 2015, was held on November 26 in Trento.

This year's keynote speaker was [**Daria Pezzoli-Olgati**](#), a professor of science and history of religions at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich.

The scholar discussed religion as a key dimension of contemporary culture and invited the audience to embark on a “walk” through borderlands – in the broadest sense of the term – to discover surprising, marginalized or ignored aspects of an ancient and current phenomenon. We asked her a few questions to explore the issues and to ask her about her experience working with Davide Zordan.

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgati, the speaker of the
2024 Davide Zordan Lecture

In 2004 I worked as a *Visiting Fellow* at the FBK Center for Religious Studies. During this time I began to work on the concept of gender for the study of religions, a topic that had not been explored in my discipline until then, and to work on the relationship between religions and the media. Both fields of research have become the common thread of my work to date. Over the years, cooperation with the Center for Religious Studies intensified. Both Davide Zordan and Stefanie Knauss, now a professor at Villanova University, were working on similar topics. With them we organized talks in Trento and international research projects on visuality, gender and the body. These were very fruitful collaborations that led to the publication of volumes that we felt were significant. I recall for example [*Approaches to the Visual in Religion, Research in Contemporary Religion*](#) (Göttingen 2011) and [*Religion in Cultural Imaginary. Explorations in Visual and Material Practices*](#) (Zurich/Baden-Baden 2015).

- This year, for the *Davide Zordan Lecture*, you addressed the topic of religion in the contemporary world, an issue both highly topical and difficult to deal with.

The religious forms of our time are lived in a differentiated and plural society, marked by high mobility, complexity, and both profound and very rapid transformations. While it is true that the traditional religious institutions in European societies are losing members and influence on the social order, we also found that the search for existential orientation in an extremely complex time is intense and articulate in terms of topics and expressions. Using an open concept of religion, we analyze places and forms of existential search for meaning in various social spheres and discover

religious practices and worldviews in interaction with various social spheres such as politics, the health care system, art or sports. As we explore these religious dimensions, we realize that, while fragmented and showing in sometimes surprising ways, religion is highly varied and widespread. These forms can be an opportunity to rethink how to strengthen democratic societies where different orientations can interact constructively. Of course, religion can also be used to legitimize totalitarian practices. In the face of the ambiguity of religious formations in the contemporary world with their potentials and dangers, the careful academic study of religion, in the various branches of theology and religious sciences, proves to be crucial, both conceptually and historically and culturally.

- With Davide Zordan you shared a great passion for film and media in general. Why does research on religion today need cultural studies to understand how people's religious faith or spiritual search has changed? More specifically, in what sense can cinema be a valuable research tool in this area?

Cinema originated in the late 19th century as an innovative technique to reproduce moving images through an optical illusion. In this sense, the invention of film is the precursor to the audiovisual communication that permeates our society, becoming a dominant language used in all areas of social and individual life. This finding alone explains why the analysis of audiovisual sources is central to the study of religion.¹ Moreover, the history of cinema and the history of religion intersect from the very beginning: the new technique was looking for important, well-known stories that would ennoble this invention. To reach a wide audience, the emerging film industry needed stories capable of thrilling not only the masses of the working class, but all strata of society. The Passion of the Christ proved to be a suitable story for this purpose and became one of the most important narratives since the dawn of cinema. Other biblical narratives were also adapted to film. The close relationship between Revelation and cinematic science fiction since the European 1920s or the influence of the epic of Indian traditions on the development of Bollywood are significant examples. They have led to film genres and strands that are also successful in the contemporary world.

- In conducting your most recent studies on religion in the Alps, what struck you most as a person and as a researcher?

'Alpine cultures are a laboratory for research on religion and have been little studied considering their richness and variety. The lay of the land forms a barrier that makes exchange difficult: the climate, the great differences in altitude, and the dangers of the mountains have always also been an obstacle to the production of livelihood. Yet, thanks to the passes, the mountains have also always been a place of contact and thus a link between different cultures and religions. From the nineteenth century onward, they then became a recreational tourist spot that attracted city dwellers. All these transformations mark the variety of Alpine religious practices and concepts.

On a personal level, the Alps are very important to me: my biography is marked by the regular passage between southern Switzerland, Ticino, and the northern Alps. Mountain trips are an irreplaceable activity for me, also as a counterpoint to the busy work pace of life. It is precisely by practicing alpine sports that I discovered the relevance of religion in these areas.

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