

Discourses of the beyond, between peaks and abysses

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An interview with the director of the Center for Religious Studies on the recently published FBK Press volume.

Writing reality is always very difficult. To descend into its abysses and ascend its peaks, to probe its opposite poles in order to weigh its contradictions, is the **not easy goal set by the volume published by FBK Press**, *I discorsi dell'oltre: fascino e pericoli della polarizzazione* (The Discourses of the Beyond: Fascination and Dangers of Polarization) edited by **Massimo Leone**, Director of the Bruno Kessler Foundation's [Center for Religious Studies](#), and available [Open access](#).

Within the work, the collection of essays proposes attention to a key concept that reverberates almost imperatively: **de-polarizing as synonymous with de-powering** extremes through processes of resistance and cultural coalition. Reflections that emerge clearly in **researcher Sara Hejazi's** essay *Depolarization in Religion and Ethics*: "[...] Establishing common and shared goals among diverse groups to encourage cooperation toward a common purpose; this can happen if we become accustomed to thinking of ourselves more and more as a species, rather than as a nation, ethnic group, or individuals." Overall, from the perspective of a positive balance between progress and spirituality, the authors keep the multiplicity of discourses together through deep reasoning about **the sense of ethics** (and bioethics) **today** as a strength against individualistic behavior and delusional group beliefs (which **Eugenia Lancellotta** well describes in her contribution to the work). This volume, for those who will read it, presents itself as an **invitation to better understand the dynamics of contemporary polarizations** and try to take (or at least imagine) different paths in favor of cultural and social discussion. Starting from these concise reflections, we asked editor Massimo Leone to explain some questions about the nature and meaning of the work:

How did the idea for the essay come about and what were the goals that you and the authors originally set for yourselves?

At the beginning of my journey as director of ISR, I was asked to advance a broad research plan. From this goal, the first idea I had, shared with my research group, was to assign for each one of

the three-year plan a **dialectical pair** to better understand contemporary Religion and Ethics. In 2022, we chose to deal with the **polarization-depolarization pair**. We have seen that in so many cultures there is a trend to explore the extreme limits of ethics and spirituality and, consequently, to polarize them in the sociocultural dimension of the term. So, I think one of our basic tasks as scholars of contemporary religious phenomena is to probe depolarization strategies to avoid the most extreme effects: conflict and violence.

Speaking of extremes, today's Western societies seem to be moving toward strengthening them (for example, in politics, culture, national identity, and religions). Do you think it is possible to de-polarize our mindset, or is it too late?

We are a species prone to turn its ability to construct extraordinary world images into an abyss, leading them into a symbolic explosion where the need for harmony and contact between human beings no longer matters. **Religions are a perfect example of this human mechanism**, and so are technology and (recently) digitization. Technological evolution increases the possibility of **ideological conflicts and extremism**, but these same tools that interact with everyday forms of language and writing are the same ones that help us deflate conflicts faster than in the past. Human beings will not be able to change themselves, but they can foster constructive rather than destructive behavior. Therefore, **in no field should we be indifferent to technological processes**, and FBK with its cutting-edge research centers is a good example of this; for on the use of technology (like writing and language) may depend a greater or lesser gradient of polarization in contemporary society.

Subjects of study and research such as Religious Studies, History, Anthropology, how do you think they can act concretely in depowering these extremes?

Rigorous study and disciplined research, using not only a methodological framework but also an epistemological and comparative one, introduce **elements of reasoning into the circulation of ideas**, resulting – at least I believe – in great help to the daily debates that affect the community. So the operation that the Social Sciences can do is to invite the community **to distance itself from these “polarizing” dynamics**, which express a widespread malaise that is the child of a conflictuality that reveals a profound (more or less latent) lack of places for discussion. I think it is very important for Religion and Ethics to be in contact with the local communities. As in our case, at Fondazione Bruno Kessler, we realize more and more how crucial it is to be close to the Trentino community and, at the same time, to know how to distance ourselves in order to convey the plurality of positions and perspectives.

The capacity of an essay lies in the multiplicity, in the infinite fracture, in the intersection of opposing forces that establish opposing centers of stillness.” I borrow Carlos Williams’ words to ask you whether you think this essay invites a unified perspective on the topic of depolarization or, in line with the idea of the American poet and essayist, proposes fragmented points of view. What is the result achieved?

I think this is a book that puts forward points of view and perspectives that well connote our center of studies, where researchers from different (sociological, historical, philosophical, semiotic, ethical, psychological) backgrounds cohabit. But in this variety, while exposed to the climate of the Foundation and the Center for Religious Studies, they are accustomed to a continuous process of **self-reflexivity** (on the world, on religion, on ethics, on current and very difficult issues). Ours has been a constant exercise of research and writing but also, precisely, self-reflection on the social issue of polarization, based on **qualitative and quantitative data**. And then we exploited, I think successfully, the **advantage of the humanities, social sciences and religious studies**: providing answers which match questions. Or rather: providing answers and **turning each answer** into a new question, contributing to an increasingly comprehensive understanding of cultural, social, religious and historical phenomena.

Contributors to the essay: Paolo Costa, Valeria Fabretti, Lucia Galvagni, Sara Hejazi, Eugenia Lancellotta, Enrico Piergiacomi, Boris Rähme, Alberto Romele, Debora Tonelli. Edited by Massimo Leone (FBK Press, 2023).

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