

INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 2024 OF “ANNALI DI STUDI RELIGIOSI”

MASSIMO LEONE

I. An overview

The 2024 issue of the journal “Annali di studi religiosi” by the Center for Religious Studies at the Bruno Kessler Foundation (FBK–ISR) presents a rich interdisciplinary exploration of various themes at the intersection of religion, ethics, and contemporary social issues. The journal reflects a commitment to examining complex and nuanced topics through diverse academic lenses, fostering a multidisciplinary dialogue that integrates philosophical, theological, anthropological, juridical, and socio-political perspectives.

The articles in this issue, in particular, address several overarching themes. First, “Embodiment and Disembodiment”, explored through the lenses of sexuality, respect in urban spaces, and the dualism of body and soul, examining how physical presence and absence shape personal and collective identities. Second, “Cultural and Spiritual Identity”, with articles on Tengrism in Kazakhstan and Ignatian spiritual exercises reflecting on how traditional and modern elements of spirituality interact and respond to contemporary challenges like digitalization and globalization. Third, “Ethics and Medical Humanities”, involving the discussion of palliative care and the re-emergence of the soul in medical ethics and highlighting the importance of integrating spiritual care into healthcare, so as to emphasize holistic approaches to end-of-life

issues. Fourth, “Religious and Social Justice”, with a focus on human trafficking, religious minorities, and the concept of a “Christian nation” in addressing critical issues of dehumanization, autonomy, and the role of religion in public policy.

The journal as a whole clearly exemplifies the interdisciplinary nature of FBK–ISR’s research, merging insights from different fields to address contemporary societal challenges. By incorporating diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks, the articles provide a comprehensive understanding of complex issues. This interdisciplinary approach is vital in religious studies, where phenomena often transcend simple categorizations and require multifaceted analyses. The journal remains closely connected to pressing social realities, tackling thorny issues such as human trafficking, ethical dilemmas in healthcare, and the political implications of religious identities. By addressing these topics, the journal contributes to broader societal debates, offering scholarly insights that can inform public policy and ethical practices. The focus on social justice and human rights underscores the journal’s commitment to making a tangible impact on contemporary social issues.

Indeed, studying human values, including religious values, at a Foundation primarily focused on technology, like the Bruno Kessler Foundation, is crucial. It ensures that technological advancements are aligned with humanistic principles and ethical considerations. Understanding the human at the center of technology development helps developers create solutions that are not only innovative but also respectful of human dignity, cultural diversity, and ethical standards. This integration fosters a more holistic approach to technology, ensuring it serves the broader goals of societal well-being and human flourishing.

By integrating these themes and approaches, the journal and FBK–ISR demonstrate the importance of interdisciplinary research in addressing the complex, multifaceted challenges of the modern world. Such work highlights how scholarly inquiry into religion and ethics can contribute to a deeper understanding of humanity, guiding both technological and social progress.

2. The sections

Here follows a concise description of the sections and their contents.

The first section, entitled "Embodiment and Disembodiment in Religion and Ethics" as Boris Rähme opportunely points out in its preface, is based on papers from two academic panels. They both refer to the central theme of FBK–ISR 2023 research year, devoted to "Embodiment and Disembodiment in Religion and Ethics". Here follows a short description of the papers of the section, followed by some considerations on their transversal qualities.

The article by Paolo Costa, titled *Embodiment, Disembodiment, and Overembodiment: Merleau–Ponty, Foucault, and Augustine on the Significance of Sexuality in Human Life*, explores the role of the body in shaping personal identity through the lens of human sexuality. Costa uses Merleau–Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to highlight the embodied experience of sexuality, contrasts this with Foucault's examination of sexual ethics in early Christianity, and then delves into the dialogue between Foucault and Augustine in the context of *The History of Sexuality*. The study aims to elucidate the contemporary value attached to sexual intimacy and its implications for understanding modern "axiophany" as a type of "hierophany".

The article by Valeria Fabretti, titled *Room for Otherness: Body, Space, and Materiality in the Investigation of Respect within Multi–Religious Cities and Spaces*, probes the concept of mutual respect in diverse urban environments. Fabretti proposes an agential, embodied, and spatialized interpretation of respect, examining how respectful interactions emerge from the interplay between individual performances and the spatial characteristics of urban settings. The paper suggests exploratory hypotheses for empirical research to understand how respect is enacted in multi–religious cities, aiming to contribute to the design of inclusive urban spaces that foster respectful coexistence among different religious and non–religious groups.

The article by Lucia Galvagni, *Disembodied Souls and Embodied Selves? The Return of the Soul in Medicine and of the Body in Spirituality*, reflects on the renewed attention to the soul in bioethics and the significance of the body in contemporary spirituality. Galvagni examines the

dualism of body and soul in historical and modern contexts, discussing the implications of this dualism in medical ethics, healthcare, and spiritual practices. The study highlights the importance of integrating ethical, philosophical, and religious perspectives to better understand the intertwined roles of the soul and body in human existence.

The article by Sara Hejazi, titled *Tengri Calling: Decolonizing Cultural Narratives in Contemporary Kazakhstan*, explores the revival of Tengrism as a cultural and spiritual response to the modern challenges of digitalization and globalization in Kazakhstan. Hejazi discusses how Tengrism, rooted in ancient spiritual beliefs, serves as an identity marker for urban Kazakhs, balancing traditional and modern elements. The study emphasizes Tengrism's role in promoting ecological engagement and sustainability while addressing post-colonial narratives and the quest for authenticity in the face of external cultural influences.

The article by Debora Tonelli, titled "*With My Whole Being*": *The Experience of Ignatian Journey. A Provocation for Spiritual Imagination*, explores the role of spiritual imagination in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, drawing analogies with immersive technological experiences. Tonelli discusses how these exercises, devoid of technological mediation, aim to transform individuals through self-knowledge and encounters with God. The study raises questions about the reality and authenticity of experiences mediated by technology compared to traditional spiritual practices.

The article by Shannon Craigo-Snell, titled *Acting Out and Acting In: Analyzing Digital and Virtual Liturgy*, investigates how liturgical practices express and shape Christian faith in digital contexts. Craigo-Snell outlines six functions of human action in worship — rehearsal, recognition, regulation, remembrance, resistance, and rejoicing — and assesses their effectiveness in digital and virtual settings. The study finds that digital platforms facilitate acting out faith through recognition and resistance, allowing for intimate and inclusive worship experiences. However, acting in through rehearsal, regulation, and remembrance poses challenges due to the need for physical presence and embodied interaction, which are difficult to replicate digitally. The article emphasizes the complexity of digital liturgy and the necessity for theological and practical adaptations in the evolving landscape of worship.

The papers collectively embody the approach to the study of religion and ethics of the Center for Religious Studies at the Bruno Kessler Foundation by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives and addressing contemporary issues through rigorous analysis. Paolo Costa's exploration of embodiment and sexuality through Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Augustine's lenses showcases the depth of philosophical inquiry, linking historical discourse with modern implications. Valeria Fabretti's investigation into mutual respect in multi-religious urban settings highlights the importance of spatial and material considerations in fostering coexistence, reflecting the center's commitment to empirical and social research. Lucia Galvagni's examination of the soul in bioethics and spirituality bridges ancient philosophical debates with current medical and ethical considerations, emphasizing the continued relevance of spiritual care in modern healthcare. Sara Hejazi's analysis of Tengrism's revival in Kazakhstan as a post-colonial identity marker demonstrates the integration of cultural, religious, and political dynamics, showing how traditional beliefs are reinterpreted in contemporary contexts. Debora Tonelli's comparison of Ignatian spiritual exercises with digital immersive experiences underscores the innovative ways technology intersects with spiritual practices, reflecting the curriculum's focus on new frontiers in religious studies. Shannon Craigo-Snell's evaluation of digital liturgy's impact on worship practices illustrates the nuanced understanding of how technology reshapes religious experiences, aligning with the center's emphasis on addressing modern challenges.

The second section, entitled "A Disciplined Interdisciplinarity", prefaced by Massimo Leone, and stemming from research activity conducted at FBK-ISR in the frame of the DREST national doctoral programme in Religious Studies, contains four key articles that embody the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary ethos of such doctoral programme, partnered by FBK-ISR since its inception. In particular, Marco Barbieri's article explores the Axial Age and its philosophical implications through the works of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, highlighting the blend of empirical and faith-based elements in understanding historical and existential dimensions; Nicolò Germano's article examines the evolution of modern ethics from Kant to Nietzsche,

emphasizing the impact of nihilism on ethical and religious thought, and the ongoing quest for meaning in a world perceived as devoid of intrinsic purpose; Antonio Pio Di Cosmo's research on sacred images in North Apulia employs visual anthropology to decode the iconographic significance of the "*lectulum Salomonis*" type in medieval religious art, emphasizing the role of visual production in public worship and regional devotional practices; and Rebecca Sabatini's study of the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo adopts a transdisciplinary approach, integrating anthropology, history, and religious studies to understand the dynamic interplay between material and immaterial cultural heritage. The four articles are organized in two pairs, the first underscoring the importance of historical context and philosophical inquiry in contemporary ethical and existential debates, while the second highlighting the relevance of historical and cultural artifacts in contemporary contexts, demonstrating the importance of interdisciplinary research in understanding and preserving cultural heritage.

The third section, entitled "Theology and Philosophy in Dialogue: Between Threshold, Imagination and Emic Dimension" contains articles that are rather theological in tone. It is aptly introduced by Debora Tonelli, who underscores the importance of dialogue between theology and philosophy, addressing fundamental questions of ethical, social, and political action, and the criteria for understanding these questions. Such dialogue is rooted in the recognition of Christian theology as a fundamental aspect of Western culture and its ongoing relevance in questioning human choices, values, and the ultimate meaning of life. Theology, even before becoming a doctrinal framework, prompts reflection on the relationship between humans and God, while philosophical rationality ensures that this reflection remains free from ideological dogmatism. This section includes five essays that explore various dimensions of this dialogue, examining how theology influences the emic dimension and how rational and theological understandings can coexist and enrich each other.

In particular, the article by Salvatore Rindone, titled *The Veiled Threshold: A Narrative Interpretation of the Temple in Christian Revelation*, examines the symbolic significance of the veil in the Jerusalem Temple, tracing its theological implications from the Old

Testament to the New Testament. Rindone explores the concept of the threshold, distinguishing it from a boundary, and uses it to analyze the biblical narratives of Moses and the Temple. The veil represents the separation between humanity and the divine in the Old Testament, a barrier that signifies the unapproachable holiness of God. However, in the New Testament, particularly at the moment of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, the veil is torn, symbolizing the removal of this barrier and the new access to God granted through Jesus. This act transforms the threshold into a passageway, inviting believers to cross into a closer relationship with the divine. Rindone's study highlights the theological shift from separation to communion, illustrating how the concept of the threshold evolves from exclusion to inclusion in Christian theology.

The article by Vincenzo Serpe, entitled *The Threshold between Human Rational Research and Revelation in Thomas Aquinas' Summa Contra Gentiles* examines Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* to highlight the philosopher's role as a "thinker on the threshold" between rational thought and divine revelation. Focusing particularly on the second book of the *Summa*, Serpe discusses how Aquinas navigates the complex interplay between philosophy and theology, using non-Christian sources such as Averroes, Avicenna, and Maimonides to enrich his theological arguments. The article delves into Aquinas' handling of the "creation versus eternity of the world"–debate, illustrating his method of engaging rational arguments while maintaining theological convictions rooted in Christian faith. Serpe presents Aquinas as a researcher who balances reason and revelation, contributing significantly to both philosophical and theological discourse by standing on the threshold of these two domains.

The article by Pierangelo Bianco, *Ecumenical Theology from the Emic*, investigates the development of ecumenical theology, focusing on the dialogues and intersections between different Christian traditions. Bianco traces the historical and theological roots of ecumenism, highlighting key moments and figures that have shaped the movement. The paper examines the challenges and opportunities presented by ecumenical dialogue, emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding and respect among diverse Christian communities. Bianco argues that ecumenical theology enriches the broader Christian tradition by

fostering a spirit of unity and cooperation, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith.

The article by Debora Tonelli, titled *The Biblical Imaginary in Political Thought: The Example of Consensus*, explores the concept of consensus as a fundamental element in social, political, and personal relationships through the lens of biblical narratives, particularly Exodus 19: 1–8. Tonelli argues that the biblical text has historically inspired various social and political revolutions, from the Afro–American struggle for emancipation to decolonial theology, by highlighting the central role of consent in these movements. The article examines how biblical stories provide a framework for understanding political and social consensus, engaging with Spinoza’s interpretation to demonstrate the lasting influence of biblical thought beyond religious contexts. By analyzing the Exodus narrative, Tonelli shows how the biblical concept of covenant, which requires the people’s consent, has informed modern ideas of democracy and social contracts, emphasizing the importance of mutual agreement and shared values in forming cohesive and just societies.

The article by Stefan Silber, *Towards a Postcolonial Theology of Nonviolence*, presents such theology as a form of resistance against the ongoing impacts of coloniality. Silber engages with postcolonial criticism, arguing that nonviolence should not be seen as a deterrent to decolonization but as an essential step toward liberation. By drawing on the thoughts of influential figures like Gandhi and Said, Silber outlines a theology that rejects all forms of violence, including structural and epistemic, and emphasizes the importance of autonomy and self-expression for colonized peoples. The paper advocates for a Christian theology that is attentive to the wounds of colonialism and seeks to transform itself through the inclusion of marginalized voices and experiences, aiming to develop a more just and nonviolent religious practice.

The fourth section, on “Religious Minorities”, addresses a core theme of research at FBK–ISR. As Silvio Ferrari convincingly points out in the introduction, such attention seeks to obviate the lack of specific legal and research frameworks dedicated to the rights of religious minorities, highlighting the need for dedicated platforms for discussion

and analysis. Current international and domestic laws often inadequately address the unique needs of religious minorities, treating them similarly to other types of minorities. The section therefore explores the distinctiveness of religious minorities, emphasizing their basis in a comprehensive and normative worldview often rooted in divine revelation, which sets them apart from ethnic, linguistic, and national minorities. The section examines various forms of autonomy — such as institutional, territorial, and organizational — highlighting the complexities and overlaps among different types. Overall, the section advocates for a nuanced approach that recognizes the specific historical and legal contexts of different religious minorities to better address their unique challenges and autonomy needs.

In particular, the article by Ilaria Valenzi, *The Legal Concept of Autonomy*, explores the intersection of autonomy and minority status, particularly focusing on religious minorities. It aims to identify how autonomy serves as an instrument for the protection of religious minorities within legal pluralism without compromising fundamental rights. The discussion extends to the recognition of minorities in international law, emphasizing the necessity of collective rights alongside individual freedoms. The text delves into the multifaceted nature of autonomy, addressing its implications in both private and public law. Autonomy, in this context, is considered a relational concept, crucial for understanding the internal and external pluralities of contemporary constitutional systems. The paper also examines specific cases, such as the recognition of Shari'a law within European jurisdictions, to highlight the complexities and legal challenges in reconciling religious autonomy with state laws. It concludes by proposing that the notion of autonomy, aligned with legal pluralism, is essential for safeguarding minority rights in increasingly diverse societies.

The article by Kyriaki Topidi, *Minority Cultural Governance through Autonomy Arrangements*, examines cultural autonomy, discussing how this concept is pivotal for protecting the rights and identities of cultural minorities. The paper outlines the legal frameworks and mechanisms that support cultural autonomy, particularly within the European context. Topidi emphasizes the role of cultural autonomy in preserving the distinctiveness of minority groups, enabling them to maintain their

language, traditions, and customs within a broader national framework. The paper highlights various models of cultural autonomy, analyzing their effectiveness in different socio-political environments. The discussion includes case studies that illustrate both the successes and challenges of implementing cultural autonomy. Topidi concludes by advocating for a nuanced approach to it, one that balances the need for minority protection with the principles of national unity and social cohesion.

The article by Mattia Zeba, *Rationales, Categories, Solutions, and Constraints in the Management of Linguistic Diversity*, investigates the transition of minority rights advocacy from a focus on linguistic to religious identities. The paper tracks historical and legal developments that have influenced this shift, examining the role of international human rights instruments in this process. Zeba argues that while linguistic rights have been relatively well-established, religious rights continue to face significant challenges. The article explores the implications of this transition for minority groups, particularly in terms of legal recognition and protection. It also analyzes the intersections between language and religion, demonstrating how these elements often overlap in minority identity formation. Zeba concludes by stressing the importance of an integrated approach to minority rights that considers both linguistic and religious dimensions, advocating for policies that recognize and protect the complex identities of minority groups.

Rossella Bottoni's article, *Autonomy and Promotion of Religious Minorities' Rights*, delves into the relationship between minority autonomy and state policies aimed at promoting minority cultures. The paper argues that autonomy is not just about granting rights but also involves active promotion and support from the state to ensure the survival and flourishing of minority cultures. Bottoni examines various models of autonomy and promotion, particularly in the context of European legal systems. The discussion includes an analysis of how different states implement policies that balance autonomy with integration, highlighting best practices and potential pitfalls. Bottoni emphasizes the need for a dynamic and responsive approach to minority rights, one that adapts to changing social and political contexts. The article concludes by recommending specific policy measures that can enhance the effectiveness of minority autonomy and promotion.

Roberto Toniatti's paper, *Religious and Belief Identities*, delves into the European paradigm of the secular state and its approach to managing religious and belief identities. It outlines the historical and legal evolution of secularism in Europe, emphasizing the state's neutrality towards religion. The paper discusses the coexistence and conflict between religious and non-religious identities, advocating for a balanced and inclusive approach that respects fundamental rights. Toniatti argues that the secular state is best equipped to host and protect diverse religious and belief identities within a framework of pluralism and neutrality.

The last element in the section, a conversation between the already mentioned section authors Ferrari and Toniatti, consists of a series of questions and answers regarding the legal and social implications of religious autonomy. It covers topics such as the definition and legal foundations of religious autonomy and the challenges in its implementation. The dialogue discusses different legal systems' approaches to balancing religious freedom with state laws, the role of international law in protecting religious minorities, and the potential for legal pluralism to support diverse religious identities within a unified legal framework.

The fifth and last thematic section of the issue, entitled "Mortali: vivere nonostante" ["Mortals: Living nevertheless"] explores the profound impact of illness on individuals' lives, highlighting how it reshapes their sense of self, their physical and existential experiences, and their relationships with others. In the preface, Galvagni discusses the concept of "living nonetheless," emphasizing the continuous negotiation of space, time, and freedom that illness necessitates. She delves into the emotional and social dynamics that emerge in the context of disease, such as alienation from one's body, the significance of compassionate caregiving, and the quest for meaning in suffering. The text also references Piergiorgio Cattani's reflections on mortality and healing, suggesting that true healing involves reconciling with life's inherent challenges and limitations through relational and introspective processes.

The two articles in the section deepen the themes introduced in the preface. In Loreta Rocchetti's article, in particular, (*La vita: un viaggio di cui prendersi cura* ["Life: A Journey to Take Good Care of"], the narrative emphasizes life's journey and the importance of care, particularly in

the context of facing mortality. Rocchetti draws parallels between the stages of grief outlined by Elisabeth Kübler–Ross and the mythological story of Iphigenia, illustrating how individuals process impending death through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The text underscores the significance of empathy, love, and community in navigating the end–of–life journey. By reflecting on the experiences of patients and caregivers, Rocchetti advocates for a compassionate approach that honors the emotional and existential dimensions of dying, encouraging a broader societal recognition of these themes.

The second article, by Giada Lonati, (*Le cure palliative incontrano Ifigenia* [“Palliative Care Meets Ifigenia”]), traces the origins and philosophy of modern palliative care, rooted in the compassionate legacy of Cicely Saunders. Lonati emphasizes that palliative care addresses the holistic suffering of individuals nearing the end of life, incorporating physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. The text highlights the importance of effective communication and the role of advance care planning in respecting patients’ autonomy and preferences. Lonati reflects on the challenges faced by healthcare providers in discussing palliative care, advocating for a cultural shift towards recognizing and embracing mortality. The narrative also stresses the need for a community–based approach to end–of–life care, fostering resilience and hope amidst life’s final stages.

The 2024 issue of the “Annali” also contains a final miscellaneous section, containing two articles and a review. Paolo Costa’s review of Ludger H. Viefhues–Bailey’s book *No Separation: Christians, Secular Democracy, and Sex* examines the intersection of political Christianity and secular democracy. In particular, the review discusses Viefhues–Bailey’s argument that contemporary political movements in Germany, France, and the United States use Christian traditions to assert control and influence democratic processes. The reviewed book highlights the complex relationship between democracy and sexual politics, suggesting that identity and belonging in democratic societies are influenced by underlying sexual and libidinal dynamics. Viefhues–Bailey’s analysis underscores the need for a democratic ethos based on mutual care and equality rather than exclusionary practices.

As regards the two articles in the section, Elena Cuomo’s work, *Indifference towards Dehumanization*, addresses the political and

philosophical implications of human trafficking, particularly the trafficking of women. Cuomo argues that the dehumanization of trafficked women reflects a broader crisis in Western democracies, where biopower, visual hypercontrol, and commodification of human relationships erode fundamental human rights. The text uses the metaphor of blindness to describe societal indifference to the suffering of trafficked women, likening their plight to a form of modern slavery. Cuomo calls for a renewed philosophical engagement to address these issues, emphasizing the need to see and react to the dehumanization within our societies.

Nicola Manghi's article *Una 'nazione cristiana?* ["*A Christian Nation?*"], examines the sovereignty of Tuvalu in light of its recent constitutional revision, which enshrined the nation's Christian identity and restricted human rights influences. This revision is contextualized as part of Tuvalu's response to existential threats from rising sea levels, seeking to maintain sovereignty potentially through a "digital nation." The article delves into the historical and political backdrop of Tuvalu, highlighting the dichotomy between the traditional island communities ("*fenua*") and the central state, perceived as colonial. A key focus is a 2003 court case where a missionary's expulsion from Nanumaga highlighted the conflict between local traditions and state laws, underscoring the influence of the London Missionary Society's 1861 arrival, which deeply impacted Tuvalu's cultural and religious landscape. Manghi argues that understanding Tuvalu's contemporary decolonial claims requires acknowledging these historical dynamics and their influence on national identity and governance.

3. Concluding remarks

The intellectual environment of FBK–ISR and its partners is a vibrant hub of scholarly inquiry that rigorously engages with the most pressing and nuanced aspects of religion and ethics. The interdisciplinary approach of the journal "Annali di studi religiosi" exemplifies this vibrancy, as it seamlessly integrates philosophical, theological, anthropological, juridical, and sociopolitical perspectives to address contemporary societal challenges. The articles in the journal eschew dogmatism and

bigotry, focusing instead on understanding religion and ethics as sets of human values rather than mere identity markers. This dynamic and inclusive intellectual space is characterized by its commitment to examining complex issues such as embodiment and disembodiment, cultural and spiritual identities, ethics in healthcare, and religious and social justice. The journal's proximity to real-world issues underscores its relevance, offering insights that inform public policy and ethical practices, thereby making a tangible impact on society.

The Center for Religious Studies at the Bruno Kessler Foundation (FBK-ISR) plays a crucial role in this vibrant scholarly community. Its research fosters an environment where interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches thrive, encouraging scholars to tackle the multifaceted nature of religious and ethical questions. This ethos is reflected in the diverse research outputs, which span historical, cultural, and contemporary analyses. Moreover, the study of human values, including religious values, within a foundation primarily focused on technology, highlights the essential role of humanities in technological development. By understanding the human at the center of technological innovation, FBK-ISR helps ensure that advancements are not only innovative but also ethically sound and culturally respectful. This integration is vital for fostering technology that serves the broader goals of societal well-being and human flourishing, ensuring that technological progress remains aligned with humanistic principles.