

## INTRODUCTION: A DISCIPLINED INTERDISCIPLINARITY

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Interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, or even infra-disciplinary, supra-disciplinary, metadisciplinary: each of these terms can be associated with a slightly different articulation with respect to how to imagine, organize, and implement collaboration between different disciplines. Thus, interdisciplinarity consists in finding a space of intersection between different knowledge streams and practices; transdisciplinarity, in developing a pathway that, from this common area, ends up crossing the whole structure of disciplines in reference to a certain theme; cross-disciplinarity, in establishing structural bridges between different approaches to a certain subject; infra-disciplinarity, in examining diagonally the infrastructure of research, across disciplinary boundaries; supra-disciplinarity, in addressing issues that touch on different approaches to knowledge; and metadisciplinarity, in subsuming the particularities of disciplines within a common abstract epistemological field.

Beyond these appropriate distinctions, however, two points remain firm. First, there can be no form of disciplinary crossover if there is no discipline to begin with. Umberto Eco often reminded deconstructionists that there can be no metaphor without positing a literal meaning. From indiscipline, nothing is born, and certainly not the mutual fertilization of knowledge, which must be precise and in-depth before being mutually enriching and enriched. The second point is equally important: the best way for various forms of interdisciplinary collaboration to flourish is around a precise subject, known and delved

into with an expert's eye, plumbed in all its facets. The "Transversality and Frontier Research" curriculum of the DREST, the Italian National Doctoral Programme in Religious Studies seeks to set this standard. The four studies proposed to the journal "Annali di studi religiosi" by as many doctoral students are collected here. Following this, their content is briefly described, and then an overview, which is itself transversal, is proposed.

The four articles in the section compose a distich, of philosophical and historical atmosphere in the first two, and of anthropological and visual radiance in the second two. The article by Marco Barbieri explores the concept of the Axial Age and its ambiguous nature, tracing its history from Karl Jaspers to contemporary interpretations by historians and sociologists. Barbieri argues that the Axial Age, as presented by Jaspers, combines empirical evidence with a quasi-religious inspiration, enabling both descriptive and normative accounts. The notion of transdisciplinarity is proposed to better understand the Axial Age, emphasizing its potential to reassess theoretical boundaries and highlight the interplay between historiography (*historisch*) and ontology (*geschichtlich*).

Barbieri further discusses the philosophical implications of the Axial Age, utilizing Martin Heidegger's distinction between *historisch* and *geschichtlich* to demonstrate how the Axial Age concept coordinates the ontic and ontological layers of history. The article suggests that the Axial Age, with its mix of empirical and faith-based elements, encourages interdisciplinary collaboration and reflection. This dual nature allows for a unique exploration of humanity's historical and existential dimensions, making the Axial Age a valuable tool for understanding both past and present human conditions.

The article by Nicolò Germano examines the trajectory of modern ethics from Kant to Nietzsche, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of modern ethical thought in relation to nihilism and religion. Germano argues that nihilism is both a condition and a habitat of modernity, influencing its ethical and religious dimensions. By comparing Kant and Nietzsche, the paper underscores the transformative impact of nihilism on modern ethics, emphasizing the agonistic and dynamic character of ethical discourse during this period. The analysis

reveals how modernity grapples with the loss of foundational structures and the search for new ethical frameworks in the face of existential voids.

Germano explores the philosophical implications of this ethical evolution, drawing on Heidegger's concepts to illustrate the tension between ontic and ontological perspectives in modern ethics. The article suggests that the nihilistic backdrop of modernity prompts a re-evaluation of ethical and religious thought, leading to an ongoing quest for meaning and value in a world perceived as fundamentally devoid of intrinsic purpose. This discourse is marked by an oscillation between despair and the possibility of creating new ethical paradigms, reflecting the broader existential challenges faced by humanity in the modern era.

The article by Antonio Pio Di Cosmo explores the cognitive methodologies in visual culture, particularly focusing on sacred images in North Apulia. The study delves into the representation of the Mother of God through the iconographic type "*lectulum Salomonis*," which has been widely accepted in the Capitanata and Terra di Bari regions during the Late Medieval period. This methodology examines visual production for public worship, emphasizing the role of material and immaterial codes that help in persuading the faithful.

Di Cosmo highlights the regional popularity of the Odighètria type and its variations, which are significant in the religious landscape. The research shows the adaptation and optimization of this visual formula to meet the needs of the clergy and the faithful, resulting in a series of local productions that reflect a persistent "Byzantinism." The article provides an innovative heuristic approach, incorporating visual anthropology to decode the construction criteria of these sacred images, ultimately revealing how these images influence and sustain regional devotional practices over time.

The article by Rebecca Sabatini examines the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo as a religious heritage site through a transdisciplinary approach. Sabatini highlights how this method, which integrates various disciplines like anthropology, history, and religious studies, provides a comprehensive understanding of the catacombs. The catacombs, which contain almost two thousand mummified bodies displayed along the walls of five corridors, serve as a case study to illustrate the dynamic

interplay between material and immaterial cultural heritage, religious practices, and socio–political factors that shape such heritage sites.

The article argues that the transdisciplinary approach is crucial for appreciating the catacombs' historical and cultural significance, transcending the limitations of single–discipline studies. Sabatini discusses how the tourist valorization of the catacombs involves a semantic stratification that maintains their historical dimension. This approach reveals the complex relationship between religious practices and cultural heritage, demonstrating how the catacombs function as a site of ongoing social and cultural negotiation. By linking historical, anthropological, and biological studies, Sabatini shows how the Capuchin Catacombs can be understood as a living part of Palermo's cultural and religious identity, continuously reshaped by contemporary and historical forces.

The four articles collectively emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches in the study of complex cultural, historical, and philosophical phenomena. Marco Barbieri's exploration of the Axial Age, Nicolò Germano's analysis of modern ethics from Kant to Nietzsche, Antonio Pio Di Cosmo's examination of sacred images in North Apulia, and Rebecca Sabatini's study of the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo all advocate for a synthesis of diverse academic disciplines to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their subjects. This methodological stance is seen as necessary to address the intricate and multifaceted nature of the topics they explore, whether it be the spiritual and philosophical transformations of the Axial Age, the ethical and nihilistic currents in modern philosophy, the iconographic significance of religious images, or the cultural and religious heritage encapsulated in the Capuchin Catacombs.

A common conceptual development among these articles is their focus on the dynamic interplay between historical context and contemporary relevance. Barbieri and Germano both highlight the enduring influence of philosophical and ethical ideas from historical periods on modern thought and identity, demonstrating how past intellectual frameworks continue to shape current understandings of existence and morality. Similarly, Di Cosmo and Sabatini explore how historical religious practices and cultural artifacts remain significant in present–day cultural and religious contexts. Di Cosmo illustrates this through the

sustained relevance of medieval sacred images, while Sabatini shows it in the ongoing social and cultural significance of the Capuchin Catacombs. Together, these articles underscore the importance of historical continuity and the ongoing evolution of cultural and intellectual traditions, emphasizing that understanding the present requires a deep engagement with the past.

The four intellectual paths exemplified in the articles by Barbieri, Germano, Di Cosmo, and Sabatini are characteristic outcomes of the theoretical, methodological, and empirical climate fostered by DREST, the Italian National PhD Programme in Religious Studies, specifically within the curriculum of “Trasversality and Frontier Research”. This program encourages an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach, integrating various academic disciplines to tackle complex and multifaceted subjects. The emphasis on crossing traditional academic boundaries and engaging with diverse methodologies is evident in the authors’ work, which synthesizes insights from history, anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, and cultural heritage. Their research reflects DREST’s commitment to innovative and comprehensive scholarly inquiry, aiming to address contemporary issues through a deep understanding of historical and cultural contexts.

Moreover, the four articles operate at the frontiers of their respective fields by pushing the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines and exploring new conceptual and methodological territories. Barbieri’s work on the Axial Age challenges conventional historiography by integrating ontological and empirical dimensions, while Germano’s analysis of modern ethics and nihilism bridges philosophical thought from Kant to Nietzsche, highlighting the enduring relevance of historical and philosophical debates in contemporary discourse. Di Cosmo’s study of sacred images in North Apulia employs visual anthropology to reinterpret medieval religious art, while Sabatini’s investigation of the Capuchin Catacombs uses a transdisciplinary lens to understand the complex interplay between cultural heritage and religious practices. Together, these articles exemplify frontier research by addressing unresolved questions, proposing novel frameworks, and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural and intellectual phenomena through interdisciplinary collaboration.