

Progressivism for Souls?

Eighth international workshop of the 'RedGold' ANR Programme

Campus Condorcet, Bâtiment Recherche Sud, Salle 0.018, Monday, June 8, 2026

Programme

10.00: Sergei SHTYRKOV (*Yerevan Centre for International Education & GSRL*)

Undisciplined holiness:

The lives of village holy fools in early post-Soviet Orthodox Christian hagiography

The rapid changes in information and ideological policy during the final years of the Soviet Union led, among other things, to a surge of interest in the fates of Orthodox devotees who lived during the Soviet era. Viewed from today's perspective, it seems that the focus is mainly on the so-called 'new martyrs' — those Christians who fell victim to the Red Army's actions during the Civil War and to the repressions of the Stalin era. Indeed, the canonisation mechanism that took shape during the 1990s 'produced' precisely such saints. But before this mechanism came into operation, the landscape of Orthodox sainthood was fundamentally more diverse, and those considered as candidates for canonisation were people whose lives were full of colourful manifestations of vernacular, primarily peasant piety — village prophets, diviners, necromancers and holy fools. These biographies never became hagiographies, and enthusiasts of this type of sanctity soon ceased to record them. Yet the published materials now reveal much about the lives of charismatic religious leaders of the Soviet era, dwelled far from capital cities' churches and renowned monasteries.

10.30: Marie-Paule HILLE (*EHESS, Paris*)

The miracle as grammar and narrative of sainthood:

The 'window miracle' in the hagiographic culture of the Xidaotang

This paper approaches the miracle not merely as an extraordinary event, but as a narrative device that structures sanctity. It is based on a comparative study of a single miracle — the 'window miracle' — transmitted in three written hagiographical sources and in one oral account within the Islamic tradition of the Xidaotang. The analysis highlights a remarkably stable narrative architecture, suggesting the existence of a shared script of sanctity — that is, a recognisable tradition within the community. Yet within this invariant structure, the variations are meaningful: they do not alter the framework but inflect its significance. These inflections reflect the historical positioning and interpretive perspective of each hagiographer. One major axis of variation concerns symbolic vocabulary. Some versions draw heavily on a Chinese political and cosmological lexicon, staging the saint's authority through imperial idioms. Others — particularly, in the oral interpretation and in certain liturgical details — intensify Islamic references, grounding authority in prophetic history and sacred text. The miracle thus emerges as a space of semantic modulation, bringing into relation different registers of legitimacy. Between imperial cosmology and Islamic theology, between Chinese symbolic repertoire and prophetic memory, a Sufi grammar of sanctity takes shape — capable of sustaining symbolic plurality within structural coherence. The broader

question, then, is how variations within a single tradition generate authority and render the saint legible as legitimate.

11.00 *Coffee Break at the Faculty Club*

11.30: Gianfranco BRIA (*Roma Tre University*)

Narrating neo-Bektashism in post-socialist Albania:

Literature, esotericism and the making of national heritage in Moikom Zeqo's work

This paper examines the literary construction of neo-Bektashism in post-socialist Albania, through the analysis of Moikom Zeqo's *Syri i Tretë* (2001), situating it within broader dynamics of post-communist spiritual reconfiguration. Building on the intersection of literature, esotericism and nationalism, it argues that Zeqo's work represents a paradigmatic case of post-communist religiosity, shaped by the legacy of state atheism and the subsequent re-emergence of religious imaginaries. Rather than approaching Bektashism as a stable doctrinal tradition, the paper focuses on its narrative re-articulation in literary form. Zeqo's text operates as a hybrid epistemic space where scientific discourse, mystical speculation and nationalist rhetoric converge, producing what can be defined as a New Age-inflected reinterpretation of Sufi knowledge. In this framework, Bektashism is recast as both a universal ecumenical system and a specifically Albanian spiritual heritage, generating a productive tension between universalism and particularism.

The paper further argues that this literary neo-Bektashism reflects broader transformations in post-communist Albanian society after 1991. In them, religious knowledge has been profoundly reshaped by processes of secularisation, de-institutionalisation and subsequent re-configuration rather than simple 'de-secularisation'. In this context, literature becomes a privileged medium for reassembling fragmented Bektashi traditions and for articulating new forms of spiritual authority outside and within formal institutions. By analysing Zeqo's narrative strategies and symbolic repertoire, the paper contributes to the understanding of how post-communist spiritualities are not merely revivals of pre-existing traditions but creative reconfigurations that intertwine esotericism, national identity, and post-secular sensibilities. Ultimately, it suggests that neo-Bektashism, as narrated in literary texts, should be understood as both a cultural and political project that participates in the making of contemporary Albanian religious heritage.

12.00: Tommaso PREVIATO (*Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg*)

'Battling the *nafs* by moonlight':

The poetics of night vigils in Liu Zhi's *Wugeng Yue* ('Five lunar phases') and the *Yangzu Quanshu* ('Collected works', of Yang Baoyuan)

This paper examines the poetics of nighttime meditation in two Qing-era (1644–1912) Sino-Muslim texts: (I) *Wugengyueji* ('Verses for the Five Phases of the Moon') by Liu Zhi (ca. 1660–1739) and (II) *Yangzu quanshu* (Collected Works of Yang Baoyuan), attributed to a thirty-fifth-generation master in the Qadiriyya line of transmission and the seventh to carry forward this line in China. Situating these texts within the historical expansion of Sufism in Western China, the paper shows how night vigil poetry served as a medium for self-purification across intersecting mystical traditions. By the time the Qadiriyya was first introduced to China in the 17th century by Khōja 'Abd-Allāh (1574–1689), a distant descendant of Prophet Muhammad, Chinese Muslim scholars were increasingly engaging with Neo-Confucian

universalist rhetorics to gain recognition for their religion and negotiate their place under the expanding Qing empire. Liu Zhi's work best exemplifies this approach, structuring Daoist and Buddhist mystical doctrines within Sufi cosmological frameworks. Most notably, Arabic diagrams accompany his *Wugeng yueji*, with concentric circles illustrating the organic relationship between microcosm and macrocosm. Building on Liu's model, Yang Baoyuan (1780–1873) composed a corpus of nine nocturnal poems following extended study in Mecca.

The paper argues that the corpus adapts the night vigil genre, which originated in 12th-century *Quanzhen* ('Complete Perfection') Daoist circles, for a distinctly Sino-Islamic form. In this new context, night vigils symbolise the manifestation of creation as much as the practitioner's inner transformations, enabling him to embody the 'perfect human' (Ar. *al-insān al-kāmil*) and thereby encompass divine and created reality. Through symbolic correlations linking lunar phases, hexagrams, Arabic letters and their numerological attributions, the poems map a progressive path of self-purification culminating in the unification with the divine. At the same time, the translingual lexicon used to describe these processes reflects the tensions surrounding the poems' composition, as Sufi groups were confronted by internal reformist pressures and the growing influence of transregional Islamic movements. A comparative reading of selected passages illuminates the texts' creative reworking of shared mystical elements and the role of poetics in mediating between Chinese and Islamic epistemologies.

Compiled into a now out-of-print edition from a manuscript discovered in Yang Baoyuan's shrine near Hualong (Tib. Bayan Khar), eastern Qinghai, in the 1990s, the corpus gained wider recognition during the post-Mao Islamic revival. It adapts the night vigil genre, originally developed by monastics of the *Quanzhen* ('Complete Perfection') school of Daoism, into a distinctly Sino-Islamic idiom. In this new context, night vigils came to symbolize both the manifestation of creation and the practitioner's inner transformations, enabling her/him to embody the 'perfect human' (Ar. *al-insān al-kāmil*) and thereby encompass divine and created reality. Through symbolic correlations linking lunar phases, hexagrams, Arabic letters and their numerological attributions, the poems map a progressive path of self-purification culminating in the unification with the divine. At the same time, the translingual lexicon used to describe these inner processes reflects the tensions surrounding the poems' composition, as Sufi groups were confronted by reformist pressures from returning pilgrims and the growing influence of transregional Wahhabi-inspired networks. A comparative reading of selected passages illuminates the texts' creative reworking of shared mystical elements and the role of poetics in mediating between Chinese and Islamic epistemologies.

12.30: *Lunch at the restaurant of INED, on the campus*

14.00: Valeria GAZIZOVA (*University of Heidelberg & GSRL*)

Inscribed cliffs and textual layering:

Competing narratives and afterlives of Oirat Buddhist landscapes in Central Asia

The talk examines Buddhist rock inscriptions and images in Qazaqstan and Qirghizstan, associated with the Oirat expansion (17th–18th cc.) as meeting points between Turkic and Mongol sacred geographies and hagiographic traditions. More than two dozen remnants of Oirat history (ruins, petroglyphs, epigraphic monuments, etc.) are documented across the region, some of which have been incorporated into local Turkic ritual landscapes, being connected

with healing practices, female religiosity or memories of local heroes. Recent archaeological research and popular media, alongside broader historical changes since the late 20th century, have renewed interest in the former Oirat sacred geography in post-Soviet Central Asia, not least among Buddhist converts, new spiritual movements, and cultural tourism initiatives. Focusing on several sites of Buddhist rock art and epigraphs in the historical Zhetisu (or Semirech'e) region, the talk juxtaposes their representations in different oral and written sources: foundation legends, toponymical lore and epic traditions, alongside travelogues and essays by 19th-century explorers. It further traces the Soviet and post-Soviet redefinitions and appropriations of these sites through oral histories, remembered ritual practices, and shifts in material form and use.

14.30 Aleksandr LVOV (*independent researcher, Jerusalem*)

A sainthood with Soviet patina:

The keepers of Jewish learning in the USSR, and their memory

This paper examines the stories of several individuals who managed to preserve Jewish learning and religious practices while remaining in the USSR. The narratives surrounding these figures largely took shape in the post-Soviet period — not only in Russia, but also in Israel and the United States. The hagiographic (or quasi-hagiographic) character of these narratives owes much to their staging of the tension — both real and imagined — between Soviet militant atheism and traditional Jewish life. The narrative cultivation of this tension creates what might be called a Soviet patina of Jewish sainthood, one that endows even ordinary acts of religious practice with an aura of holiness.

15.00: Coffee break at the Faculty Club

15.30: Jeanne KORMINA (*Yerevan Centre for International Education & GSRL*)

Unorthodox hagiography:

Monarchism in Soviet poetry and adventure literature

After the execution of Nicholas II and the royal family in Yekaterinburg in 1918, interpretations of this event followed markedly different trajectories in the Russian émigré community and in the Soviet Union. Among Russian émigrés, a vision of Nicholas as a holy martyr gradually emerged, culminating in his canonization by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia in 1981. Within Russia, however, the story was primarily explored through adventure literature and poetry. It was and further reinforced by a localised heritage-preservation discourse, which positioned the regicide and the associated sites within the framework of cultural/historical heritage. This paper examines the transmission of memory about Nicholas II in literary texts — specifically, adventure narratives and poetry. These unorthodox hagiographies employ the language of local patriotism, appropriating an event of global significance and, with considerable effort, adapting it to the conventions of Soviet literary culture.

16.00: Stéphane A. DUDOIGNON (*CNRS/GSRL, Paris*)

A post-gulag literary spirituality:

Sunni Muslim gnosticism in the Tajik SSR, from WWII to independence

The Rawshandilān ('Clear Hearts') were a literary circle gathering around the poets Mīrzā Laṭīf (1902–1967) and Mullā Sharīf (1906/7–1995) in Kulab, in the south of the Tajik SSR. Created at the turn of the 1950s–60s, it survived prohibitions and, at the end of the Soviet period, assembled up to twenty persons, for 'banquets' (*ziyāfats*) supplied by the circle's protectors

in local economy, especially by directors of local stores and abattoirs. Called by Mullā Sharīf a 'garden of gnosis' (*bāgh-i 'irfān*), its activities consisted of reading and comment of Persian verse, poetic jousting and chats with competition of jokes (*naql u shūkhī*), in a register of satire and fancy inherited from the Emirate of Bukhara, while conveying the teachings of the Naqshbandi and Chishti Sufi rules. Mīrzā Laṭīf kept a distant relationship with the Union of Writers of the Tajik SSR (which admitted him, in 1959, but rarely published his verses). He developed classical genres of Persian gnostic poetry through variations (*tazmīns*) on works by Ḥāfīz, Sa'dī, Jāmī or Bēdil. A theme of his poems is *tawakkul* (resignation to the Divine will), a notion common in Hanafi jurisprudence and Naqshbandi teaching, for justifying acceptance of non-Muslim dominances. The other 'leader' (*ṣāhib*) of the Clear Hearts, Mullā Sharīf, had had two spells in the Gulag (in 1934–44 and 1951–55). Between 1947 and 1951, he studied at the Mīr-i 'Arab Madrasa of Bukhara, and became an informal Imam at the funerary complex of Mīr Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī in Kulab, the region's most important Muslim pilgrimage place. His madrasa background was enriched by Soviet academic readings, notably on the history of Sufism. After the triumph of the 'Red' pro-communist militias (of which Kulab was a cluster) in the Tajikistani civil war of 1992–97, Mīrzā Laṭīf and Mullā Sharīf were rediscovered, sanctified and celebrated nationwide, as embodiments of nationalised Islamic values. The life stories of the two men of God, their ambiguous relationship with the Soviet Tajik officialdom and informal economy, the combined celebration by Mullā Sharīf of the figure of Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī, of martyred leaders of the 'Red' militias and of . . . Lenin himself sheds new light on the 'Soviet *cum* Muslim' — if not communist *cum* Islamic — articulation, as it has been revisited, during the past decade, by historical research still slow to address a literary history largely unknown internationally, despite the local popularity of its authors.