

# Who Cares? Society, Religions, and the Concern for the Other

*2<sup>nd</sup> Religion and Society Conference*

Faculty of Theology, University of Malta

## ABSTRACTS

### Junior Scholar Conference

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#### **Julio César Cárdenas Arenas**

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ORCID:

*Who is Worth Caring For? Religious Otherness and Moral Responsibility in Ibn Taymīyah*

The paper examines how medieval Islamic tradition conceptualizes moral responsibility toward the "other" based on the Arabic treatise *Iqtidā' aṣ-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm* by the theologian and jurist Ibn Taymīyah (13th century). The study interprets his reflection on community care not as an ethic of universal empathy, but as a normative construction of religious otherness that delimits practices, identities, and forms of belonging. Using a rhetorical-argumentative methodology that integrates classical rhetoric (Aristotle), contemporary argumentation theory (Perelman and Toulmin), and the foundations of Islamic law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), the study analyzes how Ibn Taymīyah configures categories of belonging, difference, and religious responsibility. The analysis shows that the definition of difference operates not only as exclusion, but also as moral regulation aimed at preserving ethical coherence and collective integrity, thus contributing to current debates on religion, social cohesion, and pluralism.

## Augustine Chen

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*Ultimate Concern and Unconditional Charity: Tillich and Thomas on Care Beyond Vulnerability*

Care is often grounded in shared vulnerability. However, reactive politics, identity defensiveness and performative compassion challenge the notion of vulnerability as the sole normative foundation for care. This is because vulnerability-based approaches tend to locate moral responsibility in contingent or potentially exculpatory factors, e.g. existential anxiety or solidarity in failure. This article clarifies this tension by comparing the theological anthropologies of Paul Tillich and Thomas Aquinas. Whereas Tillich grounds intersubjective concern in mutual exposure to existential insecurity, Aquinas reframes concern as virtue, a stable moral pedagogy arising from participation in the good. Read in dialogue with virtue and care ethics, this comparison argues that care requires not only shared fragility, but an account of moral agency oriented towards the common good. By retrieving theological anthropology as foundational for social responsibility, this article contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on how pluralistic societies can resist reactive polarisation while remaining attentive to shared vulnerability.

Augustine Chen, OP is a Dominican friar in formation for the Catholic priesthood at Blackfriars Studium, Oxford, Augustine Chen is currently pursuing the Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology (STB). His research focuses on theological anthropology, Thomistic philosophy, and twentieth-century theology, with particular attention to how English Dominicans have engaged with and interpreted postmodern philosophical thought.

## **Nicholas Dalli**

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### *Developing an Ethics-oriented History Pedagogy through Inter-Religious Discourse*

Teachers are duty-bound toward a pedagogy of care that foregrounds ethical relations between all stakeholders. History educators, responsible for navigating morally complex historical events, must be cognizant of the empathetic-moralistic affordances of their subject. This study, by utilising the Levantine Crusades as a case study, will highlight historical context, positive Christian and Islamic morals, and present-day pluralistic values as a means of developing inter-religious discourse toward a concern for the other. Students must be exposed to the relevant Christian and Islamic primary sources to develop a multi-perspective, empathetic understanding of the Crusades. Additionally, instances of cross-cultural coexistence and positive religious values should constitute points of moral contrast. These investigations must inspire dialogue about why and how religious discourse can be leveraged for good or ill, and how it benefits all parties to find common ground. This dialogue is a prerequisite to the moral and intellectual rigor demanded in modern, pluralistic societies.

Nicholas Dalli is a history teacher whose Master's in Teaching and Learning with History and Digital Literacy dissertation philosophically evaluates the History Optional Curriculum through a Hegelian–Marxist lens. He has previously read for a BA (Hons.) in History with Philosophy and undertakes occasional work as a Research Support Officer within the Faculty of Education. His research interests centre around history pedagogy, with a particular focus on modernising history teaching to reflect and respond to the digital and socio-moralistic competencies crucial to twenty-first-century education.

## **Anil Davis**

KU Leuven (Belgium)

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*When Discipline is Framed as Care: Religious Justifications of Corporal Punishment in Contemporary Contexts*

This paper examines how corporal punishment of children is framed as an expression of care within certain religious contexts. Drawing on findings from a PRISMA-based scoping review of international studies (2000–2024), the paper analyses how religious beliefs, scriptural interpretations, and congregational norms shape parental attitudes towards physical discipline. The review shows that corporal punishment is often justified through theological language of responsibility, moral formation, and concern for the child's future. At the same time, empirical research increasingly highlights psychological harm and long-term negative outcomes. The paper explores this tension between intention and impact, asking how religious understandings of care are being challenged, reinterpreted, or defended in contemporary societies. By bringing empirical evidence into dialogue with theological reflection, the study contributes to broader discussions on care, vulnerability, and moral responsibility.

Anil Davis is a Research Master's student in Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven (Belgium), specialising in Pastoral and Empirical Theology. His current research examines how religious beliefs shape attitudes towards the corporal punishment of children through a PRISMA-based scoping review. He is preparing to pursue doctoral research at KU Leuven in Pastoral and Empirical Theology. His broader research interests include lived religion, religious authority, parenting, moral formation, and the interaction between theology and everyday decision-making in Christian contexts.

**Paul Draganoff PhD**

University of Vienna

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*Men Who Care. Towards a Theological Framework of Caring Masculinities*

Patriarchal models of hegemonic masculinity are under pressure. “Toxic masculinity” used mostly on social media criticises behaviour and concepts of masculinity that harm others and men themselves. Caring masculinities are within the critical men’s studies the most discussed current counter-concept against hegemonic masculinity building on caring practices of men and the negation of dominance. The aim of the paper is to present these forms of masculinities and to introduce them to a theological-ethical framework. In doing so it will link the characteristics of caring masculinities with the relational theology by feminist theologian Carter Heyward. Based on her concept of power-in-relationship the theological and soteriological significance of antipatriarchal forms of understanding masculinities should be emphasized. The significance lies in advancing theology-informed ethics of care and neighbour-love toward gender-just, plural masculinities that foster interdependence, vulnerability, and social solidarity.

Paul Draganoff is a doctoral candidate and prae doc project assistant in Theological Ethics at the Catholic-Theological Faculty, University of Vienna. He focuses on relationships ethics and his research examines masculinity, relational theology, and Christian relationship ethics with a focus on caring practices and gender justice; he also has psychotherapy training relevant to men’s counseling. He aims to integrate critical men’s studies with theological-ethical frameworks to develop plural, care-oriented masculinities grounded in the primacy of love.

**Yana Fileva** (PhD student)

South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

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*Should I Care: Vision of the Bulgarian New Ageism for a New Society*

Abstract: This paper summarizes the main highlights on the topic "Social Change According to Bulgarian New Age." The focus is on the characteristics of Bulgarian spirituality in the terms, deduced by Western scholars, derived by content analysis. It revealed not only similarities, but also some differences, e. g. the lack of Aquarian Christ and the presence of messianism as a social phenomenon and pagan Christianity. According to sociological analysis, it can be said that Bulgarian New Ageism is vital, although shaped as a "cultic milieu;" and it is capable to expand its moral influence. The collective – the "common" or "communal," which means life and labor in unity, forms an inclusive missionary banner for (a part of) Bulgarian society. The key message is: you should care!

Yana Georgieva Fileva is a PhD student in Sociology at South-West University "Neofit Rilski," Bulgaria. Her research focuses on the sociology of religion, New Religious Movements, and the sociology of medicine. She has presented her work at numerous international and national academic forums, including the 2nd European Conference (2022) and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd World Conferences for Religious Dialogue and Cooperation (2023–2025) at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, North Macedonia. She has also participated in the 6th to 9th Doctoral Scientific Sessions (2022–2025) at her home institution and in the conference Philosophy of Medicine: Approaches and Perspectives (2024) at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She has completed Erasmus+ mobilities in North Macedonia (2024, 2025) and attended the Aurora Capacity Building PhD Academy on Publishing Skills and Science Communication (2025). Her publications are listed on ORCID.

## **Rafaella Figueredo**

Pontifical Lateran University, Rome

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*When Christianity Doesn't Care: A Contextual-Theological Response to Religious Distortion in Contemporary U.S. Society*

In *A Rumor of Angels* (1969), Peter Berger hints that in intellectual discussions on religiosity, the theologian often remains “on the outside of the cocktail party, looking in.” In dialogue with sociology (Berger et al.), this paper aims to explain why theology should be attentive to context and its significance for theological thought. The current American context offers a complex case of religiosity reappearing in unexpected places. When distorted, “Christian values” can fuel political discourse that not only discourages care, but may also generate hatred towards the other. This case serves as a starting point to offer theological criteria that helps us attend to other contexts in which the other must be cared for, bonds must be repaired, and credibility must be restored. Adopting a contextual approach, the theologian not only joins the party, but arrives with their hands full, offering perspectives to carefully respond to instances of religious distortion in fundamentalist expressions.

Rafaella Figueredo is a doctoral student in Theology at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome and researcher for the Theological Network from the Mediterranean (RTMed). Through the lenses of contextual theology, her research centers on dynamics of the contemporary religious experience in the age of pluralism and relativization. In a comparative interpretative framework, her thesis focuses on emerging religious expressions in the current American context, and offers theological criteria to develop the intelligence of faith and credibility in today's world.

**Yousef Khasho (PhD)**

University of Vienna

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*Expanding A Common Word Between Us and You: Including Judaism in Abrahamic Dialogue*

This paper argues for expanding *A Common Word Between Us and You* (2007) to include Judaism through a shared scriptural foundation. While the original document, initiated by Muslim scholars, focused on Muslim-Christian dialogue, it overlooks Judaism despite its central place within the Abrahamic tradition. Using a comparative textual methodology, the study analyses key biblical and Qur'anic passages on love of God and neighbour, mercy, and justice. It also incorporates the historical experience of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim coexistence to demonstrate the practical viability of trilateral dialogue. The paper argues that the interreligious inclusion of Judaism is both theologically grounded and socially urgent, responding to contemporary political conflicts.

Yousef Khasho is a Syrian theologian based in Germany. He serves as Assistant Pastor in the Evangelical Church in Württemberg and is a PhD candidate in New Testament at the University of Vienna. He holds a degree in Computer Engineering from Syria, a degree in Theology from Lebanon, and a Master's in Religious Studies from Ruhr University Bochum. His research interests include New Testament studies, early Church history, World Christianity, and ecumenical and interreligious relations.

## **Sofia Kounavi**

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

### *The Contribution of the Holy Canons of the Orthodox Church to the Development of its Pastoral Care for the 'Other'*

The contribution of the Holy Canons of the Orthodox Church to the exercise of its pastoral care toward the “other” and the stranger is essential, as they provide the institutional and spiritual framework within which the Church expresses its love and care. The Canons, as formulated by the Ecumenical Councils safeguard the unity of faith and the coherence of ecclesial life. Within this stable framework, pastoral care toward the “other” is not exercised arbitrarily, but with discernment, responsibility, and fidelity to the truth of the Church. At the same time, a number of Holy Canons highlight philanthropy, hospitality, and the protection of the vulnerable as fundamental pastoral duties of bishops. Ecclesiastical discipline does not have a punitive character but a therapeutic one, aiming at reconciliation and integration into the ecclesial body. Thus, the Holy Canons do not function as a mechanism of exclusion of the stranger, but as a guarantee that pastoral care will combine truth with love. They ensure Church’s identity while at the same time grounding the possibility of dialogue, hospitality, and ministry toward every human being, recognizing each person as created in the image of God and as a potential member of the ecclesial community.

Sofia Kounavi holds a degree in Theology from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and is currently pursuing a Master’s degree at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, with a specialization in Canon and Ecclesiastical Law. She has served as a Research Associate at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, contributing to a range of academic research initiatives and scholarly projects. In addition to her research activity, she has translated academic texts from English and French into Greek and has worked as an editor of scientific publications in both Greek and English. Her research interests include the interpretation of the holy canons in the contemporary context, the examination of current ecclesiastical issues through the lens of canon law, and the comparative study of questions pertaining to canon and ecclesiastical law.

## **Stefan Patrick Kovac**

Catholic University of Ružomberok

### *Unity of Creation and Division*

This study examines the theological tension between unity and division within the Catholic tradition. Beginning with the biblical confession of divine oneness, it argues that unity is constitutive of creation itself, rooted in the being and will of the one God. Division, by contrast, is understood not as original or ontological but as the historical consequence of sin and alienation. Prophetic texts articulate a vision of reconciled diversity among nations, while the New Testament situates unity within the transformative suffering of Christ and the Pauline doctrine of cosmic recapitulation in Christ. Drawing on the Fathers, Council, and the teachings of popes the paper presents unity as *communio*: a reconciled diversity perfected, not erased, in Christ. Unity thus emerges as both gift and vocation, sacramentally anticipated in the Church and eschatologically fulfilled in God's redemptive plan.

Stefan Patrick Kováč is currently a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University in Ružomberok. A Slovak theologian, he obtained his degree in theology in 2005 from the Roman Catholic Faculty of Theology in Bratislava and was awarded the Licentiate in Theology (ThL) in 2010 from the same faculty at Comenius University. He has published studies in a number of theological journals, including *Acta*, *Theological Journal*, *Theologos*, and *Notitiae Historiae Ecclesiasticae*. He is the author of several monographs, including *Feasts of God 1* and *Feasts of the Lord 2*, which explore the Hebrew roots of Christianity and the liturgical feasts of the Church. Drawing on his missionary experiences in Uganda, Pakistan, and India, he has also published *This Is the Real Africa* and *The Life of a Christian Among Muslims in Asia*. Kováč has presented papers at international theological conferences, including the 18th International Theological Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology in Pécs (2023), where he delivered a lecture on "Conscience and the Law in Romans," and the 19th annual conference "Is (Was) the Church against the true knowledge?" held in Dublin (2025).

**Caterina Luzi (PhD)**

University of Milano–Bicocca

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*Cultivating Empathy in a Religious Museum: An Anthropological Study*

This paper explores how contemporary art in a religious museum context contributes to shaping moral imagination and empathy within a secularized and plural society. My research, conducted at the Museum Catharijne convent in Utrecht, examines the renewed presence of religious and spiritual themes in contemporary artistic practices and their significance in contemporary public discourse. Focusing on the exhibition *In the Name of Love*, which brings together ancient and contemporary works to explore the multiple dimensions of love (devotion, charity, passion, pain) I investigate how artistic storytelling mediates existential and moral questions. From an anthropological perspective, drawing on participant observation and qualitative interviews, I analyse visitors' emotional engagement and interpretative responses, considering both religious and non-religious viewpoints. These experiences reveal how personal encounters with art can open spaces for shared reflection beyond individual belief positions. In this context, the museum emerges as a space where art can cultivate empathy, enabling visitors to encounter otherness and reflect on the ethical implications embedded in visual narratives.

I hold a Master's degree in Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences from the University of Milan-Bicocca, where I am currently a second-year PhD candidate in Intangible Heritage and Sociocultural Innovation. My doctoral research examines the relationship between the sacred and contemporary art, focusing on religious museums as spaces where artistic practice mediates changing forms of religious experience in secular contexts. I am currently a visiting researcher at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Department of Religion and Theology), conducting fieldwork at the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, where I investigate curatorial strategies, artistic practices, and visitors' subjective experiences of spiritually themed artworks.

## **Amal Raj Mariasubriyan**

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*The Vatican's Critical Stance to Rare Earth Minerals Crisis and Extraction Impacts and the Exigency for a More Human and More Responsible Mining*

Very recently, Pope Leo XIV advocates to mining entrepreneurs and industry leaders (January 27, 2026) 'ethical mining.' A few days later, he reflects his closeness with the victims and the loss of 200 miners due to the Rubaya mine disaster in the DRC (February 1, 2026). In order to combat climate change, rare earth elements (REEs) are essential for a transition to a climate-neutral economy because of characteristics of durability, super conductivity and performance. But REEs productions and escalating demands raise serious concerns like health hazards, pollutions, displacement, conflicts and biodiversity loss. The current pope differing from his predecessor concedes the crucial need of critical minerals and endorses the transition to a cleaner energy and mobility. At the other hand Catholic Social Teaching firmly declines the view that nature can be treated merely as a source of financial gain and profit and opposes the unbridled tendency of 'extractivism' which tries to extract the greatest amount of minerals in the shortest possible time. In *Laudato Si'* (2015) Pope Francis spotlights the depletion of natural resources and human endeavours such as overexploitation of natural resources and indicates that overconsumption affects human life and sustainability. Since non-renewable resources are finite and limited, it encourages moderate consumption and maximum reuse (LS, 22). In *Laudate Deum* (2023) he insists again on the urgent need to develop cleaner energy sources and highlights the concept 'responsible extraction' and proper management of natural resources' especially critical raw minerals (LD, 10 & 22). Although late popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis and the current pontiff were promoting responsible resourcing in all its aspects, the Vatican has not yet employed the notion 'responsible mining.' In our opinion, mining as such is not sustainable but could become more responsible. Responsible mining means that we mine with a minimum of environmental, social and cultural impact, create safe and socially acceptable working conditions while respecting at-risk communities.

**Amal Raj Mariasubriyan** is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, and a diocesan priest of the Diocese of Kottar, Tamil Nadu, India. His research is motivated by pastoral concerns and focuses on global and sustainable rare earth mineral (REE) mining practices, environmental impacts, green energy transition, geoethics, and Christian ecological perspectives. The research draws particular attention to the environmental, radiological, and public health consequences of intensive REE extraction along densely populated coastal areas in Kottar.

## Mimoza Paluca

Archdiocese of Malta

*“Is the World Evil, or is Evil in the World?” Reflections for a Pedagogy of Care*

I enter into this dialogue on world, evil and care just after a long(ing) time of thirst for meaning(ful) sense of life and after having encountered different people of different nations, cultures, identities. Thirst is still there. The concept of truth becomes a revelation (Aletheia) and yet looking at today’s world what truly appears evident is: the need of care. A deep need that inhabits every (created) being. Who or what is the object/subject of care? And how can one cultivate a pedagogy of care? How to face the question on care and to exercise and shape the freedom, in everyday life carrying responsibly “my brother”? How to choose to care despite the “evil in the world”? How to remain aware of being both recipients and givers of care? How is it possible to hold on, on that experience that “only an excess of beatitude corresponds to the excess of evil”?

Mimoza Paluca is a Salesian Sister of Don Bosco. She studied Philosophy in Albania, where her intellectual formation was shaped by a growing interest in the human person and the transformative power of authentic care. A decisive turning point in her life and vocation came through an encounter that deepened her understanding of responsibility—not as delegated service, but as personal and relational commitment. She has been living and serving in Malta for the past seven years. Her mission is rooted in formative encounters that both shape and transform her, particularly through her engagement in caring and educational contexts. Her academic and research interests focus on the human person understood holistically. These include the philosophy of care, theological anthropology, youth formation, psychology, and theology, with particular attention to the integration of philosophical and theological perspectives on human development and relationality.

## Adam Widera

Vienna (Austria)

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### *Who Cares? Toward an Evolutionary-Ethical Grounding of Contemporary Care Ethics*

Starting from the guiding question “Why should I care?”, the proposed presentation argues that care should be understood neither as a late cultural product nor exclusively as a norm grounded in religion or moral philosophy, but rather as an evolutionarily sedimented structure of human sociality. Paleontological evidence concerning *Homo sapiens* from ca. 100,000 to 10,000 BCE—such as skeletal remains from Qafzeh or the Upper Paleolithic grave of “Romito 2”—points to individuals with severe injuries or congenital impairments who nevertheless reached an advanced age. These cases are widely interpreted as evidence of long-term care, social integration, and collective responsibility. Methodologically, the presentation integrates paleoanthropological findings with central approaches in evolutionary ethics (cooperation, reciprocity, prosocial emotions), reconstructing care as a selection-relevant practice grounded in vulnerability-based interdependence. In its significance, the presentation advances an evolutionary-ethical grounding of care ethics and reflects on its implications for contemporary humanity: if care is anthropologically foundational, moral responsibility toward vulnerable others appears not optional but constitutive of human social life in pluralistic societies.

Adam Widera studied Catholic theology and chemistry in Freiburg (Germany). Since 2015, he has been teaching Catholic religion, natural sciences (esp. chemistry) and ethics at a secondary college for business administration in Vienna (Austria). Since 2020, he has been working on a doctoral project on synthetic ethics as a bridging discipline between evolutionary and theological ethics (Catholic Theological Faculty of Vienna). He has been a practical school mentor for the subject Chemistry on behalf of the Center for Teacher Education at the University of Vienna since 2023. Research interests: Evolutionary ethics, possibilities for discourse between natural sciences and theological ethics, bioethics, intercultural ethics Last publication: Widera, Adam. 2025. “13. Bioscientific Foundation: Bioscientific Dialogue as Model of Intercultural Dialogue.” *Journal of Moral Theology* 8 (CTEWC Book Series 8): 212–31. <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.151191>.

## Yiming Zhang

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*Jesuit Humanitarian Care Amid Crisis: Father Jacquinot de Besange's Negotiations and the Religious Ethic of Concern for the Vulnerable in Wartime Shanghai*

This paper argues that Jesuit traditions of intercultural mediation, rooted in Ming-Qing ethical equivalences (e.g., Matteo Ricci's alignment of Christianity with Confucian ren), evolved into a religious ethic of care for the vulnerable during Shanghai's 1937 crisis. Father Robert Jacquinot de Besange's negotiations with Japanese, Chinese, French, and Red Cross authorities established a safe zone protecting over 250,000 civilians, including Chinese and Jewish refugees, embodying Catholic compassion in response to human suffering and social fragmentation. Using historical comparative analysis of Jesuit archives (Rome, Vanves, Shanghai) and scholarship (Ristaino; Su Zhiliang), it examines tensions between ecumenical ideals and power asymmetries from imperialism and occupation. The study highlights religion's role in fostering moral imagination, solidarity, and humanitarian action in conflict zones, offering insights for contemporary crises like Ukraine and IsraelPalestine, promoting interreligious cooperation for global ethics. Brief Bio:

Yiming Zhang is a PhD student in Peace Studies at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" and the University of Naples "L'Orientale," within the program "Identities, Memories, Religions, and Peace," supervised by Sabina Pavone. Born in Shanghai during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and later based in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic, he earned a master's degree cum laude in Asian and African Languages and Civilizations from the University of Florence in 2023. His research investigates Jesuit-Chinese convert collaborations in Shanghai's modernization, focusing on power, resistance, intercultural mediation, and peaceful transformation processes.