

PONTIFICAL UNIVERSITY OF THE HOLY CROSS
Rome, Italy



in collaboration with

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA
Washington, DC



Research Seminar

Creativity and Innovation in Religion

January 29-31, 2025
Rome

PROGRAM AND ABSTRACTS

BACKGROUND

This Research Seminar is part of a project funded by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross and titled “*De thesauro suo nova et vetera* (Mt 13,52). A cross-disciplinary inquiry into human creativity” through an internal grant program (<https://www.pusc.it/research-project/creativity>). The project began in the A.Y. 2023-2024 with a planning grant, which facilitated the organization of a first seminar in January 2024 titled *Creativity: Innovation, Transmission, and Motivation in Animals, Humans, and Societies*. This seminar featured five invited speakers who are experts in various disciplines: <https://www.pusc.it/node/7759>.

The overarching objective of the project is to conduct an interdisciplinary inquiry into creativity, focusing on recent developments in the macro-fields of cultural evolution and human progress. The inquiry will explore dichotomies such as individual/social, transmission/innovation, necessity/desire, and chance/motivation. The project is designed to encompass a wide range of disciplines, including the natural and human sciences (biology, ethology, neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, economics, etc.), as well as philosophy, religious studies, and theology.

The Research Seminars are pivotal to the development of this research. Their primary goal is to facilitate interaction among team members and external experts, contributing to the creation of an empirically-based, interdisciplinary conceptual framework on creativity as a fundamental human characteristic.

RESEARCH SEMINAR *CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN RELIGION*, Rome, Jan. 29-31, 2025

This seminar is organized in collaboration with, and is co-funded by, the Catholic University of America through a Templeton Religion Trust grant awarded to Brandon Vaidyanathan. The seminar aims to explore the role of creativity and innovation in religions. By bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines—sociology, theology, history of religion, and psychology—the seminar will foster a comprehensive examination of how creative processes shape religious beliefs, rituals, and institutions.

Over the course of three days, invited speakers will present insights from their respective fields, discussing how creativity and innovation are defined and how these processes contribute to the development and transformation of religious traditions and beliefs. Each presentation will be followed by discussions, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and encouraging participants to draw connections across different academic perspectives.

The insights gained from this conversation will contribute to a deeper understanding of how religion adapts and transforms in response to changing cultural, social, and intellectual landscapes (and *vice versa*).

INVITED SPEAKERS

1. **Emily Reed BURDETT** (University of Nottingham, UK; Psychology)
2. **Stefania PALMISANO** (University of Turin, Italy; Sociology)
3. **Claudio TAGLIAPIETRA** (Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome; Theology)
4. **Todd THRASH** (William & Mary University, Virginia, USA; Psychology)

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

- Ivan COLAGÈ (Pontifical University of the Holy Cross [PUSC], Rome; Project PI; Philosophy)
- Stefano OLIVA (Unicusano and PUSC; Project co-PI; Philosophy)
- Brandon VAIDYANATHAN (Catholic University of America; Meeting co-organizer; Sociology)
- Elena COLOMBETTI (PUSC; Project Team Member; Philosophy)
- Sabrina DI FORTE (PUSC; Project Team Member; Philosophy)
- Paul O’CALLAGHAN (PUSC; Project Team Member; Theology)
- Giuseppe TANZELLA-NITTI (PUSC; Project Team Member; Theology)
- Vicente TUR PALAU (Catholic University of Valencia, Guest Scholar; Theology)
- Peter VARGA (University of Oxford, Guest Scholar; Psychology)

Speakers and participants are kindly invited to attend all sessions.

Venue:

Casa Bonus Pastor, Via Aurelia, 208 – 00165, Rome

MEETING SCHEDULE

Wed. Jan. 29

13:00 *Lunch at the meeting venue*

14:45 **Welcome, presentation and introduction**

15:15 *Contemporary spiritualities as sacred creativity*
Stefania PALMISANO

16:00 **Discussion**

16:30 *Coffee break*

17:00 *The role of creativity and innovation in religious and spiritual practice: A psychological perspective*
Emily BURDETT

17:45 **Discussion**

18:15 End of session

20:00 *Dinner at the meeting venue*

Thu. Jan. 30

9:00 *Creativity and Innovation in Theology*
Claudio TAGLIAPIETRA

9:45 **Discussion**

10:15 *Coffee break*

11:00 *Inspiration: The nexus of religion, creativity, and human thriving*
Todd M. THRASH

11:45 **Discussion**

12:30 End of session

13:00 *Lunch at the meeting venue*

14:45 **Transfer to the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross**
(close to Piazza Navona) – Meeting point at the entrance of the *Bonus Pastor*

15:30 Tour of the University

16:30 **General Discussion** (Room A103) – *Key Questions* (**Note 1**, p. 4)

18:30 Walk in the city center

20:00 *Dinner out*

Fri. Jan. 31

9.15 **WORKSHOP**
RELIGION AND INNOVATION
(**Note 2**, p. 4)

(Coffee break in between)

12:30 **Conclusions and wrap up**

13:15 *Lunch at the meeting venue*

Talk's abstracts follow from p. 5 on

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SPEAKERS

- Presentations are expected to last **40 minutes**.
- PowerPoint presentations are encouraged.
- Speakers should be mindful that the audience will include scholars from various disciplines, so it is advisable to define technical terms and use accessible language.
- Not all the participants are English native speakers: speaking slowly and clearly will be certainly appreciated.

Note 1. *Key Questions*

We shared the following key questions with the speakers when we invited them. Likely, some of these questions will be touched by their talks. However, we would also like these questions will be the reference ones for the **General Discussion** session on the afternoon of Thu. Jan 30. In this occasion, not only speakers, but also other participants are encouraged to share their brief answers to some of the following questions.

Key questions:

1. How would you define “creativity” and “innovation” from the viewpoint of your field of study? What insights have you gained from your research? How can “creativity” and “innovation” be distinguished in spite of their close link?
2. How do creative expressions manifest within religious practices, and what role do they play in shaping religious identities and communities?
3. In what ways has historical innovation within religious traditions influenced contemporary practices, and what lessons can be drawn from these historical examples?
4. What psychological mechanisms underpin the relationship between creativity and religious experience, and how do they contribute to the formation and transformation of beliefs?
5. What role does creativity play in the dialogue between tradition and modernity within contemporary religious movements?

Note 2. Workshop on “*Religion and Innovation*”

During this workshop, invited speakers and participants will discuss the following questions in view of developing future research endeavors and projects focused on understanding the role of innovation in religion. The discussion will be guided using the problem-solving method of Design Thinking and will be coordinated by Brandon Vaidyanathan.

Workshop’s questions:

- A. What important gaps/lacunae in current research in your field could be addressed by new research focused on innovation in religion?
- B. What are the most important research questions on that topic that should be considered as funding priorities in the next future?
- C. What methodologies and approaches would be needed to address those questions?

ABSTRACTS

(in order of presentation)

Contemporary spiritualities as sacred creativity

Stefania PALMISANO

(University of Torino)

Hitherto little research has been done on the creative dimension of religion. Although the topic enjoys a long philosophical tradition, it is only in the last couple of decades that academic interest has begun interpreting it systematically (Sawyer 2006; Gaut 2010). Yet we live in a world which is increasingly characterised by a drive towards incessant innovation. In the fields of marketing, mass-media communication, technology, industry, popular culture and design, the basic demand is constant seeking after what is new. “Creativity” is a key word which has been totally absorbed into everyday language. It is common today to talk about creative craftsmanship, creative writing and creative cooking, activities which are promoted to art when they are modified by an adjective which has consolidated social legitimation.

In this context, the scarcity of research into the link between creativity and the sacred dimension weighs heavily, especially in relation to globalisation processes on the one hand and, on the other, religious pluralism; two topics which have rendered complex societies fertile terrain for investigating innovative impulses deriving from contemporary experience of the sacred (Nelson 1971). From this perspective religion offers us a privileged perspective from which to investigate creativity because of the nexus which it establishes with the dimension of the sacred.

According to the ancient, religious and subsequently Romantic, interpretation, creativity is inspiration deriving from a supernatural, divine sphere, to which a few gifted individuals have intuitive access. The distinguishing characteristic of sacred experience is the capacity of the religious field to re-elaborate and re-assemble creatively symbols which govern the social, cultural and institutional orders of society. Two basic mechanisms by means of which this creative enthusiasm of sacred experience comes about socially are the invention of tradition and syncretism. These two universal dynamics inform every religious tradition (Droogers 2012) and validate anti-essentialist criticism of the very concept of tradition (Shaw and Stewart 1994): indeed, all traditions are the result of historical transformation processes, hybridisation and contamination which do not have easily discerned borders (Gilroy 1993). Both invention and syncretism cast doubt on the notion of “purity”, that is to say the idea – historically an ideology, among other things, supporting conservative, fundamentalist positions – of a religious tradition which is culturally independent of influences, loans and changes (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Maroney 2006). The study of sacred creativity opens up an unexplored field of observation of the contemporary religious scenario, taking into account the multiplication of new religious movements and the appearance of contemporary, heterogeneous forms of spirituality. In this scenario the sacred appears as an unexpected source of (counter)cultural meanings and innovation. To get an idea of the wide variety of creative solutions to which this contemporary experience of the sacred leads, I present some case studies of contemporary spirituality in Italy. Moving from my empirical research (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021), I describe the dynamics of sacred creativity and innovation in three kinds of groups and communities: those connected with ecology, those with wellbeing and those with mystery.

References

- Droogers, André. 2012. *Play and Power in Religion*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Gaut, Berys. 2010. The Philosophy of Creativity. *Philosophy Compass* 5 (12): 1034–1046.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Maroney, Eric. 2006. *Religious Syncretism*. London: SCM Press.
- Nelson, Geoffrey. 1971. *Cults, New Religions and Religious Creativity*. London: Routledge.
- Sawyer, Keith. 2006. *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shaw, Rosalind, and Charles Stewart. 1994. Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism. In *Syncretism/ Antisyncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, eds. Charles Stewart, and Rosalind Shaw, 1–26. London: Routledge.

Author's publications

- Palmisano, S. and N. Pannofino *Contemporary Spiritualities: Enchanted Worlds of Nature, Wellbeing and Mystery in Italy*, Routledge, London, 2021.
- Palmisano, S. and N. Pannofino *Religione sotto Spirito. Viaggio nelle nuove spiritualità*, Mondadori, Milano, 2021.
- Palmisano, S. and N. Pannofino, *Invention of Tradition and Syncretism in Contemporary Religions. Sacred Creativity*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017.

*The role of creativity and innovation in religious and spiritual practice:
A psychological perspective*

Emily BURDETT

(University of Nottingham)

The degree to which humans engage in creativity, and the variety displayed within individuals as well as across cultures and generations, is truly astounding. We see ingenuity in art, literature, technology, bodily ornamentation, science, problem-solving and even in how we worship and engage with God. My talk will focus on psychological and cognitive mechanisms and the developmental origins of creativity and innovation. I will highlight and bring together my research on children's conceptual development of God, their participation in religion and also my work on children's capacities for innovation and creativity. I use developmental work to inform how our psychological and cognitive capacities develop and constrain adult capacities for religious thinking and also innovative capacities.

My definition of creativity and innovation comes from both psychology and from the interdisciplinary work examining cumulative cultural evolution. I use the definition of creativity by Marc Runco and Jeremy Pina (2013), two famous psychologists who study creativity. They say, 'creativity is tied to creation and construction. To create is to bring something new into existence. Yet there is more: Creativity is not just productivity; it is the capacity to produce ideas or works that are original and effective. Originality is in turn defined in terms of novelty, unconventionality, or uniqueness, and effectiveness defined as appropriateness or fit. Creative capacities are sometimes used to solve problems, and when this is the case the effectiveness is apparent in that the problem is solved.' I define innovation based on the definition used by Simon Reader and Kevin Laland (2003) that describes innovation as 'the introduction of a new or modified learned behaviour not previously found in the population'. This definition encompasses other species and not just humans. However, our species' remarkable achievements are first and foremost down to the fact that we pool our knowledge and build upon it, in other words, our ability for cumulative cultural evolution. The absence of complex culture in other animals is not down to a lack of creativity. Rather it is their inability to transmit cultural knowledge with sufficient accuracy, and to understand the importance and meaning making behind the imitation and repetition of particular innovative advances.

Our species are truly unique in our capacity for innovation and social learning (imitation). Imitation and innovation are known as the dual engines of cultural learning and progress. In the talk, I will showcase some of the psychological mechanisms responsible for our keen ability to learn socially (including our tendency to imitate faithfully and to pay attention to particular cues and characteristics of our teachers). I will then describe how innovative capacities develop slowly over development and describe how these capacities can be nurtured. Finally, I will describe how another capacity, our ability to teach, enables particularly complex or abstract ideas to be transmitted and learned. This capacity is important for the transmission of theological concepts and doctrine.

My talk will pivot at this point to describe developmental work on how our cognitive tendencies to imitate and socially learn from others also apply to how humans engage in religious activities and these are used to connect with others and the Divine. I will describe various empirical studies to show, for example, how ritual binds groups together and reinforces religious concepts and identities.

As an example of a modern way in which communities are adapting religious practices and creating identities, I will describe my current work with families who are Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR). I will share insights how these families are adapting old traditions, creating new rituals, developing communities and transmitting their beliefs and practices. I will also describe some of my work in robotics and how robots are being used in various religious practices in different religious communities.

I will end the talk with ideas for future directions and how I see the role of creativity and innovation in religion and religious movements.

References

- Burdett, E. R. R., Dean, L. G., & Ronfard, S. (2017). A diverse and flexible teaching toolkit facilitates the human capacity for cumulative culture. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 9, 807-818, DOI 10.1007/s13164-017-0345-4
- Hastings, O. (2016). Not a lonely crowd? Social connectedness, religious service attendance, and the spiritual but not religious. *Social Science Research*, 57, 63-79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.01.006>
- Puzio, A. (2023). Robot, let us pray! Can and should robots have religious functions? An ethical exploration of religious robots. *AI and Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-023-01812-z>

Creativity and Innovation in Theology

Claudio TAGLIAPIETRA

(Pontifical University of the Holy Cross)

The relationship between creativity and theology has often been perceived as uneasy, similar to the tension between creativity and science. In both domains, novelty is met with caution, as heterodoxy challenges established frameworks. Yet theology, by its very nature, cannot be entirely estranged from novelty. Capelle-Dumont emphasizes that theology was born from fundamentally new conceptions of the "new": the New Testament, the Good News (*Euangelion*), the New Covenant. Here, "new" denotes fulfillment, definitive revelation, and an ongoing, dialogical renewal in history. Christians are called to be "new creatures" who live a "new life" in Christ.

I examine the possibility and conditions for "doing theology creatively" without severing it from tradition. This inquiry requires exploring the phenomenology and theology of creative action within the theological discipline. I distinguish between "creative theology" and "doing theology creatively," underscoring that creativity does not necessarily equate to innovation. According to Reiter-Palmon (2020), creativity involves novel and meaningful ideas, while innovation is the successful implementation of such ideas. Thus, theologians can be creative by offering new perspectives and innovative when these ideas are capable to successfully reshape theological understanding.

The discussion follows a structured approach:

1. Presenting a general framework for understanding theological creative processes (Section 1).
2. Analyzing the evolution of theological problems over time, including transformations, obsolescence, expansion, latency, and adaptability (Section 2).
3. Investigating areas where, according to the Christian doctrine, the Spirit generates theological novelty: scriptural inspiration, prophetic inspiration, and charismatic inspiration (Sections 3–6).

Theological innovation emerges not as a rupture from tradition but as an unfolding of divine revelation within the Church. This process exemplifies "creative continuity," where the deposit of faith is rearticulated in response to historical challenges. New doctrines do not create unprecedented truths but explicate what is implicit in revelation. Thus, innovation respects the transcendent core of faith while embracing diverse cultural embodiments.

Plato's *Ion* offers a useful metaphor: the rhapsode, inspired by a divine force, transcends routine imitation and introduces something new within a living tradition. This notion of inspiration parallels theological creativity, where God inspires human agents—sacred writers, prophets, founders—to transmit divine truths. Yet theologians, like rhapsodes, must interpret and communicate these truths within the life of the Church.

The theologian's role, however, involves tension: translating divine creativity into systematic theology risks reducing prophecy to routine categories. The Italian word *traduzione* (translation) shares its root both with *tradizione* (tradition) and *tradimento* (betrayal), emphasizing that theological innovation may be seen as a "betrayal" of tradition to foster doctrinal growth. Rahner's reflections on the charismatic element in the Church and Christ's warning that "no prophet is accepted in their hometown" (Lk 4:24) underscore the difficulty prophets and theologians face in their mission.

Innovative theologians resemble Plato's rhapsodes—"divine and not merely technical" (*theion einai, kai me technikon*). Their work blends science and faith, transforming divine inspiration into doctrinal articulation. Yet, even when striving to avoid being mere "repeaters of Church doctrine" (Lonergan, 1972: 330–331), innovative theologians are often perceived as transgressors. However, if their innovation is authentic, it will ultimately be absorbed into the living tradition, where the Spirit will continue to inspire new insights.

Thus, theological creativity and innovation are indispensable for the Church's renewal, demonstrating that the Spirit's action remains ever-active and life-giving within the tradition.

References

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Inspiration: The nexus of religion, creativity, and human thriving

Todd M. THRASH

(William & Mary University)

The concept of inspiration has been of perennial interest to scholars across disciplines. I define inspiration as an epistemic-motivational process in which an individual (a) becomes aware of new or better possibilities and (b) is compelled to express, actualize, or embody these new possibilities. My talk will consist of four parts:

I. Inspiration in culture. I begin by reviewing conceptualizations of inspiration in the humanities, where the concept originated. I give particular attention to the role of inspiration in the writing and reception of scripture and poetry. I include conceptualizations of inspiration in non-western cultures.

II. The science of inspiration. Next I review the scientific literature on inspiration, with particular emphasis on the psychology of inspiration. I review theory and research on fundamental issues such as assessment, construct validity, and typology. I discuss findings linking inspiration to the enhancement of creativity, productivity, and wellbeing, as well as evidence of the role of inspiration in cultural transmission (of ideas) and contagion (of inspiration). Inspiration is also popular in applied research literatures related to social media, marketing, and tourism.

III. The science of inspiration-in-culture. Next I construct meta-theory for the study of inspiration by revisiting the role of inspiration in culture, this time viewing it through a scientific lens. Specifically, I argue that inspiration is best understood as a pro-cultural motivation (rather than a personal, social, or prosocial motivation) and possibly a genetically evolved adaptation designed to catalyze cultural evolution. By compelling the creation and curation of cumulative culture, the group and species are better adapted to local and changing environments.

IV. Implications. Finally, I discuss broader implications. In particular, the creation and curation of cultural value has been attributed by some to divine revelation and by others to blind evolutionary processes. Inspiration is arguably the key psychological process *in both accounts*, thus opening a door to interdisciplinary discussion. Moreover, the creation and curation of cultural value afford opportunities for individual and cultural thriving that demand a broader perspective on what it means to be well. Psychological wellbeing encompasses not only the hedonic wellbeing of the primitive creature and the eudaimonic wellbeing of the social creature, but also the self-transcendent wellbeing of the cultural creature—the prophet, the poet, and the lesser known among us who, from time to time, come alive upon finding our cultural voice.

References

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