

**CESNUR:
THE CENTER FOR STUDIES ON NEW RELIGIONS**

An interview with Dr. Massimo Introvigne



CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, was established in 1988 in Torino, Italy by a group of religious scholars from leading universities in Europe and the Americas. The Italian scholar Massimo Introvigne launched the idea of CESNUR and has remained its managing director ever since.

CESNUR's original aim was to offer a professional association to scholars specialized in religious minorities, new religious movements, contemporary esoteric, spiritual and gnostic schools, and the new religious consciousness in general. In the 1990s, however, it became apparent that inaccurate information was being disseminated to the media and the public powers by activists associated with the international anti-cult movement. Some new religious movements also disseminated unreliable or partisan information. CESNUR became more pro-active and started supplying information on a regular basis, opening public centers and organizing conferences and seminars for the general public in a variety of countries. Today CESNUR is a network of scholars in various countries, devoted to promote scholarly research in the field of new religious consciousness, to spread reliable and responsible information, and to expose the very real problems associated with some movements, while at the same time defending everywhere the principles of religious liberty. While established in 1988 by scholars who were mostly Roman Catholic, CESNUR has had from its very beginning boards of directors that included scholars of a variety of religious persuasions. It is independent from any Church, denomination or religious movement. CESNUR International was recognized as a public, non-profit entity in 1996 by the Italian authorities. Its most well-known activity is its yearly conference, organized every year in a different university and country. These annual conferences have emerged as the largest international gathering of scholars of new religions movements. Its two websites, cesnur.org and cesnur.com, attract every year several million visitors.

Dr. Introvigne, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: How did you first become interested in the study of new religions?

Introvigne: I may date back the prehistory of this interest to 1964, when a leading Italian publisher, Rizzoli, published an encyclopedia known as *The Great Religions of the World*. You could go to the nearest kiosk and buy weekly installments for a sum roughly similar to \$ 0.75, then buy the covers and bind the installments in six richly decorated volumes. I decided I wanted to collect these installments – and I still keep the volumes in my library today, with their bright red covers. Although I now realize that they included several mistakes, the photographs are still great to look at. I was, at that time, nine years old.

Why exactly should an otherwise normal boy of nine spare some money to buy, in addition to his usual comics, the installments of *The Great Religions of the World*? I think I acquired an interest in ‘strange’ religions from the travel accounts of my mother, an almost compulsive traveler who came back from exotic places, from Peru to Polynesia, with artifacts whose meaning often seemed to have something to do with religion. I also read novels by authors such as Emilio Salgari (1862-1911), a novelist who largely defined Italy’s popular culture for several generations, and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). I had read all their novels dealing with India before I was ten. The age was perhaps an excuse for not realizing that they were not the best guides to Hinduism and other Eastern religions.

A later book I remember as very influential on me was a novel for teenagers by Luigi Ugolini (1891-1980), *The Island Nobody Found* (1950), which featured Haiti and the mysterious world of voodoo. I borrowed this book from my junior high school’s library at age eleven, and only recently managed to find a copy for the CESNUR library. With surprise, in re-reading it after almost fifty years, I realized that the author’s picture of voodoo as barbaric and dangerous was not intended at all to make it look fascinating. But the novel was well-written, and I found voodoo quite interesting without seeing all the implications.

The second crucial event for seriously considering the study of religion was my attendance between 1970-1973 in an intellectually stimulating high school, the Social Institute (Istituto Sociale), the Jesuit high school of Turin. This was the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church, and Jesuits came in all shapes and doctrinal variations. The presence in the same milieu of both conservative and liberal Jesuits, including the future Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini (1927-2012), created a lively debate. It benefited both me and other pupils. Some of them eventually went on to become well-known Italian politicians.

Equally stimulating were, a few years later, another Jesuit institution, Rome’s Gregorian University, where I earned my B.A. in Philosophy in 1975, and the well-known Capranica College, often referred to as ‘the breeding ground of Catholic bishops’. In fact, many of my friends there *did* become bishops, but the college was starting opening its doors to laymen like me too, wishing to stay there while studying at the Gregorian. The latter institution was not only about Catholicism: a Chinese Jesuit offered, and I attended, some of the finest courses on

Chinese religions I ever came across.

My interests were not confined to religion. While at the Gregorian, taking advantage of the intricate interrelations between the Italian and Vatican academic systems, I had already enrolled in the Law School of the University of Turin, where I became a Dr. Juris in 1979. My dissertation on the American philosopher John Rawls (1922-2002) eventually became my first published book and the first book on Rawls published in a language other than English. My mentor was professor Enrico di Robilant (1924-2012), a colorful larger-than-life character: a refined gentleman, a scion of an old Turin family, and a daredevil mountaineer. He was also a fine scholar of philosophy and sociology, who introduced me to the notion of the social construction of reality, including legal reality. It should be noted that at that time the University of Turin, as did most Italian universities, did not include a School of Sociology. The basic principles of social science were taught in a variety of other schools – including Political Science and Law.

Rawls got me interested in the United States, and on the interaction between religion, politics, and society there. Following a family tradition, I also spent my summers during both high school and college traveling around the world and visiting, in addition to many states of the U.S., Eastern Europe, the Middle East, India and North Africa, getting again in touch – although of course not very deeply – with a number of different religions, as well as with Soviet-style state atheism.

Towards the end of my college years I came to an important conclusion, which was to become crucial for my future life – and for CESNUR. I decided that within the Italian academic system there was simply no room in the 1970s for a career devoted to studying contemporary religions different from Roman Catholicism. I didn't want to give up the study of religions, but I also needed to make a living. I decided to become an attorney, devoting however a substantial amount of time (roughly half, and later more than half) to religious studies, funding this interest from the income of what I hoped would be a decent legal career. This worked quite well, and in the next decade and beyond would allow me to donate to CESNUR whatever was necessary to make its ends meet.

WRSP: How does your background as an attorney influence your approach to studying new religions?

Introvigne: First of all, my final choice of intellectual property law as my preferred legal field offered the renewed opportunity for traveling around the world, often joining visits to clients of my legal practice and others to religious groups and scholars in the same countries. Second, as the so called cult wars developed around the world, including in Italy, courtrooms became no less important than classrooms for defining, or criticizing, concepts such as 'cult' or 'brainwashing', and having a background as an attorney certainly helped me understanding what was going on. When dealing with lawyers, I was not, like other scholars of religion, simply an outsider but I was an insider-outsider. My field of law, intellectual property, was different from criminal law or human rights law, but I had a clear understanding of how the courtroom logic worked, which was not necessarily true for other scholars.

WRSP: What was it that first led you to consider founding the organization that became CESNUR?

Introvigne: When I started studying religions other than Catholicism, Judaism, or mainline Protestantism (the three main religious traditions in Italy, where there was also a small Eastern Orthodox presence), the only other folks interested in minority religions were Roman Catholic counter-cultists who dealt principally with the Jehovah's Witnesses, who had been phenomenally successful in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. They were, of course, not called counter-cultists at that time. I myself introduced the distinction between a Christian counter-cult and a secular anti-cult movement in 1990. In 1993, I proposed it to an international audience in an article I was asked to write by the Danish Lutheran counter-cultist, Johannes Aagaard (1928-2007), who had heard me talking about it at conferences.

I was an active Roman Catholic, and didn't have any initial trouble in co-operating with the counter-cultists. In fact, I was one of the founders in 1985 of what is still the largest Italian Catholic counter-cult organization, GRIS (acronym of Group for Research and Information on Sects, although the name was later changed to Group for Socio-Religious Research and Information), and was among those who legally incorporated it in 1987. It soon came out, however, that the approach I intended to adopt in studying minority religions was different from what the counter-cultists wanted to do. I was taught in college that one has to let any group at first speak for itself. When I asked an old leader of the Catholic campaigns against Jehovah's Witnesses, an otherwise kind and good man, how many active Witnesses he had interviewed he responded 'none', neither did he intend to do this in the future. This was, to put it mildly, a serious methodological problem. When I noticed that something called the brainwashing theory, which I immediately disliked, was penetrating from the secular anti-cult into the Catholic counter-cult movement, I decided that I should look elsewhere for a more congenial company.

A significant event was my discovery of the Mormon History Association (MHA), an international association devoted to the study of Mormonism, led by somewhat liberal Mormons and also including non-Mormons. I discovered that such an organization existed in 1986 by perusing journals in several Salt Lake City bookstores during a visit I made there in connection with my legal business. Happily, in 1987, the MHA was meeting, for the first time in its history, in Europe, in Oxford, and I decided to attend the conference. There, I met Jean-François Mayer, a Swiss historian of religions, and Michael W. Homer from Salt Lake City, who, just as I did, was dividing his time between working as an attorney and studying issues related both to Mormonism and other minority religions, particularly Spiritualism.

The Oxford conference was the start of long-lasting friendships and scholarly co-operations with both Mayer and Homer. The latter was much more than an amateur historian and in fact went on to become president of the Utah State Historical Society. I also met important figures of the Mormon history community such as Leonard J. Arrington (1917-1999), perhaps the most important Mormon historian of the twentieth century, who I interviewed several times in the following years and who was very generous with his suggestions and encouragement. Just as I was interested in new religious movements, at least one new religious movement did take an

interest in my first endeavors. The Unification Church invited me to some of its events (I always paid my travel and accommodation expenses, as I would keep doing in the future), and the information I gathered in the process resulted in my first small monographic book about a NRM, *Reverend Moon and the Unification Church*, which later had French and English editions.

Mayer had experienced similar problems in Switzerland in trying to co-operate with the Christian counter-cult community, and shared a dislike of brainwashing theories and anti-cultism. We decided we needed a new organization of our own, and CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, was born in 1988. I approached a friendly Italian Catholic Bishop, monsignor Giuseppe Casale – soon to become famous as the most liberal Italian Bishop in political matters. He agreed to contribute some money and to host the new organization in his dioceses: first Vallo della Lucania and then Foggia, where he was transferred in late 1988. With his help, we organized the first CESNUR conference in Vallo della Lucania in 1988. The attendance did not exceed a dozen, and only three persons (myself, Mayer, and an Italian Roman Catholic priest, Father Ernesto Zucchini) presented papers.

Undaunted, we went on and proceeded both to legally incorporate CESNUR and to call a second conference in Foggia for the same year 1988. In the meantime, Mayer had attended several international conferences and, enlisting also the help of Michael Homer, we were able to bring to Foggia – and to CESNUR – the two most famous international scholars in the field of new religious movements, Eileen Barker and J. Gordon Melton. We started learning about their respective organizations, INFORM and ISAR, became their disciples and friends, and tried to do something similar in Italy. Although not comparable to Melton's at that time, I had assembled a decent collection of books and ephemera on religious minorities, and started organizing it with the aim of transferring it out of my home as the nucleus of a future public library. And, although we had neither the resources nor the prestige of INFORM, we were also interested in providing reliable information about controversial minorities.

These aims started appearing more realistic when, in 1989 and 1990, I published two volumes, for a total of some 900 pages, which were the first Italian encyclopedic works about, respectively, new religious movements and what I proposed to call new magical movements, *The New Religions* and *The Magician's Hat*. The books sold quite well, and I used the royalties to hire a secretary, who welcomed visitors to my library in Turin and supplied some information. She was based in a room of my home, and that situation created family problems when a second child, a daughter, joined my first son in 1993 (two additional children would be born in later years). I then moved the library to an external office, and that move allowed the hiring, in addition to the secretary, of a scholar in residence. The first such scholar was Veronica Roldán, a sociologist from Argentina who I had met at the CESNUR conference we organized in 1994 in Recife, Brazil. She then moved to an academic career in Rome, and we hired PierLuigi Zoccatelli, an independent scholar of esotericism, who came from Verona in 1996 and was a crucially important addition to CESNUR.

CESNUR became more well-known with the creation of a website, in 1997, and the launch in the same year of a collection of short books on religious movements and denominations with the Turin Catholic publisher Elledici. This collection went on to include forty-two titles, which

sold in excess of 140,000 copies and were written by well-known international scholars including – besides Mayer and Homer – Melton, Karel Dobbelaere, Antoine Faivre, Jim Santucci, Mikael Rothstein, Susan Palmer, Margit Warburg, Jane Williams-Hogan, Constance Jones, and several others. By the end of the 1990s, the large majority of scholarly books available in Italian on new religious movements were published by CESNUR. A near monopoly had been established in the field, more for a lack of competition than in pursuance of a deliberate project.

WRSP: How would you describe CESNUR'S organizational mission?

Introvigne: Our primary purpose, unlike INFORM, was not to answer queries coming from law enforcement, media, and concerned families. Our aim was always more research-oriented. We wanted to sponsor scholarly research, organize conferences, publish books, and maintain a library about new religious movements and minority religions in general. However, over the years, politicians, law enforcement, mainline clergy and the media (much less individuals concerned with a relative having joined a NRM, although this happened at times) also started looking at CESNUR as a source of reliable information, and we answer a number of these requests every day.

WRSP: CESNUR'S mission has evolved over time. How would you describe that evolution?

Introvigne: In 2001, something crucial happened, not only for United States: 9/11, which in Italy as elsewhere diverted public resources and funding from the study of NRMs to the study of radical Islam. Unlike in France or the U.K., most scholars of Islam in Italy were very reluctant to study contemporary phenomena, preferring the safer waters of the first Moslem centuries. We had mapped Italian Islam, including its most radical brand, for our monumental *Encyclopedia of religions in Italy*, whose first edition had been published a few weeks before 9/11, and regarded several Islamic groups as new religious movements within Islam. We decided, to some extent, to play by the new rules, and produced several books and educational events about groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Al Qa'ida (and much later, ISIS), in addition to general studies of the relationship between religion and violence.

In 2003, something which for CESNUR was, in a way, not less important than 9/11 happened with the publication of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. This generated an enormous interest about secret societies and esoteric groups. We were fortunate in having at CESNUR PierLuigi Zoccatelli, a world-renowned expert of obscure esoteric organizations. On the other hand, I had a long-lasting interest in popular culture and supernatural fiction (including comics), and was able to document, including by organizing exhibitions in several Italian cities, how folk conspiracy theories went from dime novels and comics to Dan Brown and beyond. Research on the secret societies mentioned in Dan Brown's novels attracted unprecedented crowds to CESNUR events, and landed my book on the Illuminati and the Priory of Sion, courtesy of Dan Brown, in the Italian bestseller list.

The Da Vinci Code represented a unique opportunity that will probably never repeat itself, but the co-operation of CESNUR with the leading international scholars of esoterica (including

Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff, Jean-Pierre Laurant, and Marco Pasi) remains an established feature of the Center, and started well before Dan Brown. In addition, and thanks to our co-operation with Rodney Stark, Larry Iannaccone, and other sociologists of the so called 'religious economy' persuasion, we started collecting data on secularization and on the meaning and future of religious pluralism in general. Some of our research was no longer directly correlated to NRMs, as evidenced by the project we completed in 2008, funded by an Italian bank, on Chinese immigrants to Turin, their daily life, and their religion.

Thanks to funding available for social research by the Region of Sicily, we produced several books about religion in the island, including two well-reviewed surveys about how reliable are statistics of those attending regularly Catholic Mass and about different brands of atheism in Sicily. The work in Sicily also led CESNUR to engage in quantitative and qualitative research about Catholicism, including on the tragic phenomenon of pedophile priests and the reactions they generated. In 2013, we became quite well-known, not only in Italy, for two surveys on what we called the 'Francis effect', i.e. the positive impact of the new Pope in generating a new interest in the Catholic Church among the lapsed Catholics and the unchurched. Apart from specialized publications, these surveys were mentioned by several hundred daily newspapers and other media throughout the world.

Unfortunately, with the Italian economic crisis the Sicilian funds dried out. But new opportunities of research opened. We were always interested in the relationships between new religious movements and the visual arts. The cooperation with Marco Pasi and other scholars of esotericism led to the realization that some comparatively small movements, such as the Theosophical Society, had a disproportionate influence on the genesis and evolution of modern art. In the 2010s, we devoted considerable energies to projects in this field. They are important, and part of a mainstreaming of sort of the study of new religious movements. Just as the 'old' religions, they have their own art and contribute to a larger patrimony of visual culture.

WRSP: Were there any decisive moments in the evolution of CESNUR that influenced its direction and development?

Introvigne: I have mentioned 9/11 and the publication of *The Da Vinci Code* as significant external events. There were also significant events within CESNUR's own micro-history. Perhaps the most significant was the launch in 2001 of the already mentioned *Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy*. What we had learned from years of fruitful interaction with the Italian media was that Italy lacked a reliable map of religious minorities in general, not only new religious movements. Italy, in particular, was home to the richest variety of Pentecostal bodies (and had the largest Pentecostal community) in Europe, but nobody had mapped this phenomenon, which concentrated particularly around Naples and in Sicily. Immigrant ethnic Christian churches and Islamic movements also remained largely unmapped. We started collecting data on all religious bodies existing in Italy, and eventually published in 2001 the first edition of the 1,000-page *Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy* (the second edition would follow in 2006, and the third in 2013). It became the single most reviewed non-fiction book in Italy in that year.

We also have a companion online edition, which is updated weekly and receives every year

several million visitors, despite being in the Italian language only.

WRSP: How would you describe CESNUR'S relationship with the new religions and cult-watching groups that participate in CESNUR conferences?

Introvigne: Starting with those hostile to 'cults', the prominence in the Italian and, to some extent, European media CESNUR acquired in the 1990s did not go unnoticed in the anti-cult community. Although our publication of a book in 1996 criticizing the French official report on cults of the same year triggered a strong reaction, with French academics associated with CESNUR interviewed by policemen who rang their bell at six in the morning, sooner or later this would probably have happened at any rate. Anti-CESNUR criticism became a specific variety of anti-cultism, although it happened mostly on the Internet and was picked up by offline media only outside Italy: very rarely, if ever, Italian mainline journalists took any interest in these campaigns.

Ironically, while the anti-CESNUR Web sites insisted in depicting us as 'cult apologists', by the end of the 1990s we were largely moving to other areas, although we still crossed swords occasionally with the remaining champions of the brainwashing theory. And as late as the last two years, draft anti-cult laws based on brainwashing have been introduced in Argentina and Israel, eliciting a strong reaction by CESNUR.

On the other hand, we have witnessed during the years a differentiation process within the anti-cult community. Some more moderate groups have been willing to invite CESNUR to their conferences and have been invited by us in turn, and a fruitful dialogue has followed with personalities such as Michael Langone in the U.S. or Mike Kropveld in Canada. Others remain entrenched in old-fashioned brainwashing theories and reject any dialogue. And a lunatic fringe persuaded that CESNUR is part of a sinister Jewish-Masonic-Satanic conspiracy still maintains a presence, at least online.

When they come to our conferences, these 'moderate' anti-cultists find themselves interacting with members of NRMs, who are also welcome there. Some of them have scholarly credentials and present papers. Others are offered opportunities to respond to critical papers about their movements. In general, we have a friendly relations with NRMs, with the exception of a small number of them that either do not tolerate any criticism or try to impose their agenda on scholars.

WRSP: CESNUR has a distinctly international focus. Based on your experience, what are the new groups and emerging trends to which scholars should pay the most attention?

Introvigne: We have read in recent years articles claiming that new religious movements are a thing of the past. They are based on data showing that the most famous NRMs of the cult wars era such as ISKCON, the Unification Church, the Family, or Scientology are not gaining members and some are actually shrinking. Although for Scientology statistics are a matter of considerable controversy, and the Unification movement has produced some fascinating splinter groups after the death of Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012), this may be true but in general this

point of view ignores that there is a Darwinian struggle for life among NRMs. Some die, some are born, some come to prominence every day. There is no lack of new movements, but sometimes there is a lack of scholars studying them. One reason is that some NRMs that grew in recent years are not structured like the usual suspects of the late 20th century. They may claim not to be new religious movements at all but philosophical or inter-religious organizations.

I am currently engaged with Gordon Melton and others in a study of Bnei Baruch, an Israeli-based movement with some 150,000 members worldwide, with 2 millions following more or less regularly its Web sites. It is one of several groups disseminating Kabbalah to a larger audience – another movement in this family is the Kabbalah Center, well-known because it attracted Madonna. Now, when I and Gordon Melton interviewed the founder of Bnei Baruch, Dr Michael Laitman, he was particularly keen in insisting that his movement is not religious and teaches Kabbalah as a form of wisdom appropriate for persons of all religions. This makes its structure somewhat different from, say, the Unification Church. Yet, when Israeli scholars call Bnei Baruch the largest NRM in Israel they also have their good reasons to come to this conclusion.

I mentioned Madonna. Another high profile singer, Lady Gaga, attended the courses imparted by Marina Abramovic, the internationally famous artist, who has started a sort of religious movement of her own – which, again, claims not to be a religious movement. This is another field that will become increasingly important in the future: the interaction between contemporary art and the birth of new spiritual movements.

And of course there are also new ‘classical’ NRMs and remakes of the old cult wars. In different European countries a tantric yoga movement with some 20,000 members internationally, based in Romania and called MISA (Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute) right now is at the center of incidents quite typical of the old ‘cult wars’, including all the old rhetorics of brainwashing and totalitarian control. It is true that MISA is very much about esoteric sexual techniques, enlightenment through sexuality, and a celebration of nudity and lovemaking, and there is nothing exciting the anti-cultists more than sexual transgression by some NRMs.

As Mark Twain said about his own death, the announcement of the death of the NRMs is very much premature.

WRSP: In your opinion, what is the best explanation for the distinct differences among nations in social/cultural and legal responses to new religions within their borders?

Introvigne: In 2011, quite surprisingly since previously this position had been held by diplomats or politicians rather than by scholars, I was called to serve as the Representative of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions. Besides making for a long business card, the year at the OSCE offered the opportunity for considering religious liberty from a larger political and international perspective, going beyond the new

religious movements and extending in particular to persecutions and assassinations of Christians in some African and Asian countries. I served at the OSCE in the year of the Lithuanian presidency, and this offered a welcome opportunity to explore Baltic new religious and esoteric movements, a subject CESNUR had already started studying in the previous years, with two conferences held respectively in Vilnius and Riga (Tallinn would follow suit in 2015).

Taking advantage of my OSCE experience, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed me in 2012 as chairperson of the newly instituted Observatory of Religious Liberty. CESNUR has been involved in some of its initiatives, and I believe that considering the problems created by anti-cultism within the framework of a general hostility to religious minorities, old and new, in several world regions is a promising field for our future studies. Also in 2012, I joined the faculty of the Pontifical Salesian University in Turin as a professor of Sociology of religious movements and Sociology of religion, and the interaction with students coming from several different countries and continents offered new opportunities, particularly for looking at new religious movements in Africa and Asia.

All this made me aware that sociologists need history in order to understand the different regional and national attitudes to NRMs. How the national legal and cultural traditions understand secularity and church-state relationship is crucial. In France, for instance, the separation of church and state was always intended as aimed at protecting the state from the (Catholic) church. In the U.S., on the other hand, separation was aimed at protecting the churches from the state. This explains the different attitudes towards NRMs as well.

WRSP: As you look back on CESNUR'S history, what do you think CESNUR'S most significant contributions to scholarship on new religions have been?

Introvigne: I would mention three. The distinction between a secular anti-cult and a religious counter-cult movement. The notion of new magical movements, similar to NRMs but with a doctrinal content coming from magic and esotericism. And a model for understanding a neglected part of the NRMs scenario, Satanism and Satanism scares, with Satanism and anti-Satanism reinforcing each other, now fully detailed in my 2016 book in English *Satanism: A Social History* (Brill). More recently, although we have not invented nor initiated the movement aimed at studying the (considerable) influence of NRMs on modern art, we have certainly contributed to it, inter alia with the special issue of the journal *Nova Religio* of May 2016 on these themes, guest-edited with me and with articles by various scholars, of whom some had cooperated with CESNUR. We have also contributed to an international encyclopedic mapping of religious minorities with our encyclopedia and Web site. Melton does it for the U.S. from many years, and of course there is your own Web site, but this kind of encyclopedic work is not done in many countries.

WRSP: As you think ahead and plan for CESNUR'S future, what challenges and changes to CESNUR are most likely and important?

Introvigne: We should continue to be open to change, as the NRMs of the 2010s are not the same as the NRMs of the 1990s, and probably in the 2020s we will see yet something new. In

general, I would say that these changes are reflected in CESNUR yearly conferences, which continue to be an important opportunity for scholars of different countries to meet and interact. The practice of changing venue every year, seeking the cooperation of local universities all over the world, including outside of Europe and North America (Brazil, Taiwan, Morocco, South Korea, with Israel and Argentina planned for the future), created new friendships with scholars we previously did not know. But it is also worth noting that a core group of NRMs scholars attended almost all CESNUR conferences since their beginning in 1988.

Three years ago, working with French and Belgian scholars, we started co-organizing, in addition to the Summer yearly conferences of CESNUR, Spring two-day seminars devoted to a single movement or issue at the University of Antwerp. The first three seminars dealt with Scientology, Christian Science, and Jehovah's Witnesses. They were even more successful than we expected, and attracted scholars from U.S., Canada, and Australia, in addition to several European countries. We need more ad hoc seminars. For smaller movements, there are perhaps not enough scholars to organize a two-day seminar, but half-day smaller seminars or roundtables may gather the available scholarship on lesser known groups.

I believe that CESNUR cannot keep doing business as usual only. As the scenario around us changes, we should consider new initiatives. Perhaps an online journal. Perhaps exhibitions of art produced by NRMs or events giving more room to movies, theater, poetry, music. Perhaps a more proactive use of the social networks. Certainly more cooperation with organizations specialized in parallel fields, as we do with ESSWE, the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. And we want to become part of something David Bromley has constantly called for, dialogue between the sociology of NRMs, the larger field of the sociology of religion, and other fields of social sciences. In my own academic courses, for example, I have encouraged my students in the last years to explore the relationships between the sociology of religion and both the sociology of the arts and the newly established field of the sociology of time.

Things change. Although the first cellular phone was sold in 1983, I bought my own in 1991 only, and none of the participants at the first three CESNUR conferences had one such phone. CESNUR was founded by scholars with no cellular phones, no laptop computers, no E-mail. My children would hardly believe that a world without cell phones and E-mail ever existed, but this was the world, or at least our world, when CESNUR was born. This give us pause to consider the enormous changes in the last decades, which have obviously affected also how religious movements develop and how we see and study religion. New changes are ahead. We should be ready for them.

On the other hand, we do believe that research on NRMs, anti-cult and counter-cult movements, esotericism, minority religions, and religious pluralism will remain a needed task. Those who deny that there is a future for the study of NRMs tend to ignore hundreds of new movements, which have never been the subject of reliable scholarly studies. They may also ignore that studying NRMs has been for all these years, and happily remains, a lot of fun.

Dr. Introvigne, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Massimo Introvigne was born in Rome in July 14, 1955. He earned a BA in Philosophy from Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and a Dr. Juris degree from the University of Turin. In 1988, he founded CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, of which he has been managing director to this date. He has divided his life between being an attorney specialized in intellectual property with Europe's largest law firm in this field and a professor of Sociology of religion in various universities, currently at Pontifical Salesian University in Torino, Italy. In 2011, he served as the Representative for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In 2012, he was appointed chairperson of the Observatory of religious liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dr Introvigne is the author of sixty books in Italian, English, French, and Spanish, and of more than a hundred peer reviewed articles and chapters in the fields of sociology of religion, new religious movements, and Western esotericism.

WRSP Interviewer:

Dr. David G. Bromley