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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 19 September 2018



EASR Roundtable 2018: What is the Point of Academic Conferences?

Podcast with **Chris Cotter, Sammy Bishop, Moritz Klenk, Angela Puca and Tom White** (24 September 2018).

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/easr-roundtable-2018-what-is-the-point-of-academic-conferences/>

Christopher Cotter (CC): Welcome to the podcast studio in Bern, Switzerland, on the final day of the [European Association for the Study of Religions Conference](#) on Multiple Religious Identities. I'm Chris Cotter, and I'm joined here for an impromptu roundtable with some of my esteemed colleagues. I'm going to say, let's go round to my right. So I'm Chris, and you should all know me, Listeners, and if you don't, then: what are you doing? I don't know. Who have we got here?

Sammy Bishop (SB): I'm [Sammy Bishop](#). I am a PhD student, based in Edinburgh, and also I'm involved with the Religious Studies Project, sometimes interviewing, sometimes helping out in other respects. And it is great to be here.

Angela Puca (AP): I'm [Angela Puca](#) and I'm also a PhD student, but at Leeds Trinity University. And I don't know why I'm here, (laughter) but I'm happy to . . .

CC: We'll find out, later. And there's a man behind the sound desk there with a beard that is more impressive than mine!

Moritz Klenk (MK): You're so kind! My name is [Moritz Klenk](#) and I'm also a PhD student, here – from Bern. I'm doing a PhD somewhere between Sociology of Religion, epistemology and the academic Study of Religion – or whatever the most recent name of this discipline might be. And also I'm a [podcaster](#). And this is why I have built this studio for this conference. And I'm very happy to see it in such good use.

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CC: And Listeners will really be appreciating the sexy sound quality of everything that has been coming out of this conference! Who's the last individual?

Tom White (TW): And lastly . . .

CC: And least . . .

TW: And least – last and least – [Tom White](#). I'm also a PhD candidate, from the University of Otago – where it is very wintry, in the South Island of New Zealand – mostly looking at religion, law and climate change in Fiji.

CC: So Moritz, you've got us all together here, so I'm going to pass over to you to stir the pot, as it were.

MK: Cheers. So the idea I had in mind, when thinking about making this a reality to come together for a last roundtable at this conference, was actually just . . . I would be interested in some reflections and possible criticism of the conference and what is happening here. Because every one of us, I assume, is getting used to travelling to conferences like these, telling others about his or her research. And so we are This is what we are doing. This is one part of our business. And so we, I think, can take the time to reflect a bit on what we are actually doing here. If it is the discourse we are all looking for, are we so interested in it? Or if not this, then what else do we do here? And to have a conversation. Because, at least – I'm already telling you what I was experiencing – but I think it is the most important thing you can experience, in these kinds of conferences and events, is that you get into conversations sometimes, and they are very fascinating. Sometimes you want to find your way out of them (Laughter).

CC: Claw your own eyes out sometimes . . .

MK: Yes, also that. (Laughter). But a conversation seemed to be the fitting end of that kind of event. So yes, I'm very glad that you all joined me for this and I'd be interested in your opinion about this conference. I'm a bit biased because I'm a local. So, this happens in Bern, so I shouldn't start I guess. But maybe some of you have impressions, ideas?

CC: Well, my immediate reaction is that I have spent so much time podcasting! And I decided that this conference would be a chance for me to film various little bits of video and whatnot – which has

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been a useful experience. I think it's really ramped up the engagement from folk who hadn't been able to be here. But my actual impression of this particular conference has been somewhat limited, because I've been running around so much. I have seen something like, I don't know, ten to fifteen papers.

(5:00) But that's not quite . . . you should normally be expecting to see maybe at least double that. So, perhaps someone who . . . Well, Angela has been probably been the most participatory because the rest of us have been running around doing podcasts.

AP: I've been running around from one paper to another, or from a panel to another – so still running! Yes, this was my first EASR Conference and I really enjoyed it. Maybe the only criticism I have is that all the panels on the same topic were at the same time. So it was really difficult. There were, for example, some time slots where I really wished I had the gift of ubiquity and other timeslots there was really nothing relevant to my research – of course, still interesting panels, but not quite relevant to my research. So I would have liked to attend more panels on my research, which were actually there, but at the same time as others.

MK: But maybe this was also the intention, in a way, to bring together scholars from different research areas and to give them, by this kind of overlap . . . I don't know if that was the intention. I chose to interpret it in that very friendly way. But I think, to give them a chance to look beyond their own work they're doing; to see the broader field of the European Studies of Religion, what people are doing. This is also I think the only chance you will get, because normally you're . . .

CC: That's a fair point, actually, I would say. Because you come to conferences and at the start of this conference I thought, "Oh. Damn. There's about five or six different panels on the 'nones', the 'secular' and all this kind of stuff. I'm going to have to go to those." But, equally, I've kind-of heard all I need to hear, perhaps . . . not all I need to hear. But if I want to approach these scholars, I can approach them; we can have dialogue anyway. But I sort-of felt I was going to have to attend them, because they were there, because I didn't want to miss out on that key snippet. At the end of the day I actually didn't go to that many, because of my podcasting schedule and whatnot. But I sometimes do find at a conference that it's the panels that you go to just because it "sounds vaguely interesting, but isn't quite connected to your research", that you can suddenly find, actually, there's a really good connection. And it opens up a whole new vista, in a way that you aren't ever going to just pick up a journal article that's just not on your topic and read it – much as we would all like to. There's only so many hours in the day! So a conference can do that, that way. Has anyone had that sort of revelation at

this one, that we saw a paper that we didn't really . . . that we went along to because it was in a panel

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with something else, or because there was nothing else in the schedule?

TW: I've ended up going to a lot of education, or the kind-of “role of religion in schools”, “schools as ideological production sites” whereby people are being trained in citizenship, or where schools are “sites of contested religious identities”: the crucifix; the burka. And, without any intention, I've ended up having quite an education in religion-focussed conference – which isn't really my discipline or my key area, but has been quite nice to move into that and become more familiar with that subject area. But, yes, I think there is a point in picking a theme and trying to go deep, rather than doing a random pick-and-mix of entire breadth of the discipline. Because it loses a certain coherency. And that coherency with the education panels, I've really enjoyed.

SB: Just on the topic of themes as well: I was thinking about conference themes, and how this one was “multiple religious identities”. And I don't know how many papers actually speak to that, that I've been to. And then, I was just kind-of wondering . . . sometimes, what the point of having a theme of the conference is. Because everyone knows that, at the EASR, you'll go if you want to present a paper. And sometimes you can mould it to the conference theme, just for the sake of it. Sometimes there just seems like a bit of a facade, I think.

CC: My one bit of input on that . . . well I'm sure I'll end up having a bit more . . . ! So, I've been doing a history project, on the [British Association of the Study of Religions](#). For a number of years, now, we've ended up having a conference theme. But when I went back through the record, the conferences didn't used to have themes. **(10:00)** Back in the day, it was just like sort-of ten old white men gathering in effectively a living room and having a chat. There would be one paper, and that was the conference. It then expanded to two papers, one in the evening and then one the following morning. And that's what the Association was for decades. And then, as things grew and grew, it got bigger. And then they started to have an annual lecture. But there still wasn't a conference theme. And then what seems to have happened at some point in the mid-'90s a couple of years after the annual lecture was established, the annual lecture then became the conference theme. It was like, “We're going to have a keynote. They'll speak on this.” Then it seems to be people try and get everyone to speak around that topic. And I suppose the justification is that it's away for having a relatively coherent conversation – but that never really happens! Conferences might produce a conference volume of key papers. But I think most conferences I go to now would even struggle to find enough coherency for that volume. And it's been proposed at the BASR, recently, that perhaps we just abandon the theme

and say that it's a conference for scholars working in, or on, religion in Britain – and just leave it at
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that. And tell them what the keynotes are. And the keynotes might produce a certain sort of discourse just by their power position as being the keynote speeches. But, yes. It's unclear, now, what the utility is. Any thoughts from the others?

TW: Well I think it also relates to . . . you know, you can only go to so many conferences each year. I mean, I'm in New Zealand so, you know, unless the conference is in New Zealand it's a very expensive exercise going to conferences. So how do you select which ones to go to?

AP: That's a good question.

CC: And maybe that is where the theme comes into play? Because, yes, there'll be a core constituency who'd go to every European Association Conference, right? But for others who don't have that luxury, then having a theme provides a justification.

AP: I don't know whether the theme actually helps you with that, to be honest. (Laughs).

SB: I think if you want to present your research then you'll present your research – never mind the theme.

AP: I guess, once you go to a conference, you will find scholars sort-of in your field that can give you feed-back, that you can network with. So it's not something that a theme will help you with, I feel.

TW: I mean, what are the criteria with which you choose a conference? The exotic location? The location of your family on the travel route? Networking opportunities? Who else is going to be there, and what kind of feedback you might get on your paper? You know, and it's a juggle between all of these different issues, isn't it? Some more honourable and some more profane.

AP: Not always purely professional.

CC: And that's ok, isn't it? It's one of the, I'd say, many perks of an academic life. We can all bitch and moan about all the various stresses and strains. But all the travelling to conferences is one of the perks.

SB: Definitely.

CC: Sometimes it's funded. Sometimes one decides, “Well, I need a holiday, anyway. And that might be a good environment to go to . . .” Mostly I do it based on the sort-of network of scholars. I go to

BASR, now, every single year. And it will continue, because that's become my sort of family. It's a
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much smaller conference. This is my first European one since 2013 – again because of the financial commitment is quite heavy. But I would have come regardless of what the theme was. But then, there are other conferences. Like, there's the [Non-religion and Secularity Research](#) one in a few weeks, and I'll go to that because of the topic. Yes. But that's more to do with network. I don't think I've ever actually gone to a conference because of a specific theme. It's more I've gone . . . I want to go to that organisation's conference, rather than . . .

SB: Although even though I've just been saying that themes are pointless: this years' BASR, I only put in a paper because it did directly relate to my research, and I felt like I probably should!

MK: (15:00) Well, I think the theme of conferences, although not the only criteria, at least invite people to talk about something different or just look at it from a different angle than they are normally doing. And they're normally telling people about their research. And so . . . for applying to get a paper in, you have to, at least . . . I don't know . . . tentatively, put in some reference to the conference theme. And I think it's a good way. It would be better – or sometimes I think it could be better – if people are directly invited to talk about this: “I know this person, I know him or her. He or she might be an expert on this or that. I would like to hear her talk about this, although it might not be the current research project she's working on. But inviting her to say something about that would help to . . . I don't know, stimulate another kind of conversation than just repeating myself.”

CC: Three points: I said I was going to . . . (Laughs). I think we're maybe having two conversations. We shouldn't allow the behaviour of scholars who tend to just go, “Well, I'll fire in whatever paper anyway, and just put a vague allusion to the theme in.” That's what we default to doing. But the ideal, where everyone actually engages with the theme, that's maybe still the ideal to aim for. We shouldn't be conflating behaviours with ideals. Another point is that some of us . . . I've certainly had experience of being at very small conferences that you might more describe as workshops. I've been at one on atheist identities, one on religious indifference, where there's maybe fifteen to twenty-five scholars and it's very intense, very focussed discussion. And those conferences have always produced, for me, the best outputs. So maybe there's a scale thing? The final point is, I've got a friend who is in Business Studies, in marketing. And she was telling me, she was applying for her first conference. And the selection criteria are very different. You have to write your entire paper ahead, submit it, and then they accept it or reject it. And then you come and present a shortened version of your paper. So we're used to presenting a very short vague abstract, and conferences tend to be eager for people to come.

Whereas, if the conference was having thousands more people than they could actually take applying

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then the selection criteria would be quite different, and the coherence of the conference would probably be much higher than it is in our discipline.

MK: I'm not sure if you could actually call that kind of workshop experience you had a conference. Because I think that would just mix up terms, and put it in a better light than conferences deserve, I guess!

CC: (Laughs).

MK: Because at least in my experience – and I go to different conferences in Religious Studies, but also in Sociology – I never find the discourse there. I just find repetition. Never actually something really new or interesting – or just a few papers presented. And this is in kind of a contradiction to the bare fact that there are more and more conferences that you could go to and you should attend – or you're supposed to, if you want to . . . I don't know, work on your career, or something like that. So I find it really challenging to think about what to do at conferences. What is it we are doing, when we are doing conferencing? And I think, more and more, it turns out to be just some occasion you meet each other and talk to each other, yet the papers and the panels are so full of papers and panels in such a short time, that . . .

CC: But is that ok? In the sense that . . . because I've often said that sometimes the papers are the excuse. They're the excuse for the funding, they're the excuse that you give, to justify to yourself for going. And sometimes I've found them You know, I will use a conference paper as a way to force myself to write something that I'd been meaning to write for ages. But then, the valuable things are the things like we're doing right now, or in the coffee breaks, or at an excellent night out dancing to “[The Thriller](#)” with [Steve Sutcliffe](#) and [Giovanni Casadio](#) the other night! (20:00) (Laughter). Those are the things that stay with you, and sort-of humanise the scholarship. But then, also, all the conversations that happen around a conference . . .

SB: In which case, do you think more time should be dedicated to social interactions? Like, you could have . . . take one panel out and just say: “People who want to gather in a room and talk about this topic . . .” – have a round table?

CC: But they wouldn't . . .

MK: If it's too much time between the panels they would not – they would just leave. They would split

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up in very small groups. Friends who haven't seen each other for a long time, and then they leave the venue. And then they are all scattered all round the city. And I think some of the conversations that you have between the panellists – this was something I was thinking about the other day: some of the conversations you have between the panellists are actually gaining from the fact that you have to run off just in a few minutes. So you get to your point very quickly – and hope you find some laughs – and then go on your daily routine, at these conferences! So I think if you're there too long, with a break between, this might not happen.

SB: But if it wasn't a break. If it was, like, “This room can be dedicated to this subject,” then have a conversation about it when you got there.

CC: Would you?

SB: I think I would like to. (Laughs). Don't sound so sceptical!

MK: (Laughs). Well, maybe you shouldn't call it “a room that you go to to have the conversations”, but maybe you can call it a podcasting studio and also have the ability to record!

SB: Yes. If conversation's valuable thing it would be good to facilitate that, you know?

CC: And my facetious thing there is that maybe there are ways that are slightly more innovative than, “Here's a room, go and talk.”

SB: Well that is a basic presentation of it! (Laughs).

CC: But the spirit of it, I think, is probably quite good. More . . . like more barbeques, for example! I'm not saying they all need to be filled with free alcohol and things. But if there was a barbecue every night and all these conversations . . . Well, then, maybe not as many people would come every night. But those are the places where the exciting things happen.

TW: What do we think about the stratification of people at various levels in their academic careers? You know, having a junior scholars' meeting tends to be something a lot of conferences are doing these days. Workshops for post-graduates. There hasn't really been that here. It's generally been far less hierarchically organised. But to some degree, what do you miss out from not having those . . . not having kind-of a post-graduate talking shop, or being a bit more aware of facilitating meetings through the hierarchy - which is still a very kind-of important aspect of university institutions. So should we be

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doing it by topics? Or should we perhaps be doing it by kind of you know career experience? Any thoughts on that?

SB: I think I prefer it by topic. I don't know if that's because in Edinburgh I feel like I have a good post-graduate community, where we can share post-graduate experiences in that way. And obviously it would be good to come across other post-grads from other places but I feel like I would benefit more from meeting people at all levels, within my subject area. And it would be great if some of them were also post-grads at the same level as me. But also people who have more experience and more range, I think.

AP: Yes. I usually prefer people with more experience just because they can teach me something about how to improve my research, and how to do stuff, basically. But of course, even a conversation on a topic with a post-grad can be beneficial as well.

CC: Yes, the more democratising things are the better, as far as I'm concerned. I do like it when you get to rub alongside people right at the top end of the field, and at the bottom end, and where titles don't really matter. I mean, like, last night we were just casually sitting with [Veikko Anttonen](#) and just having a beer, talking. There was no pretence of, you know, "He's *really* important. We should be deferring here."

SB: I mean sometimes you don't realise who they are until afterwards, anyway.

CC: Which is even better as well. There was one thing I remember: Peggy Morgan organised the BASR's 40th Anniversary Conference. She said she insisted on not having name labels, because it means that you go around the conference and you spent the whole time peering at everyone's chests – maybe somewhat inappropriately – trying to see what their name is (25:00). And everyone's looking around for a better person to talk to. They're waiting to catch that name. And apparently the objection was, "But you could be talking to someone really important, and not realise it!" And her justification was, "Well maybe that's the point. If you want to introduce yourself, you introduce yourself. If you want to know someone's name, you ask them their name." A lot of the name badges thing can actually be a way of kind-of spoiling those conversations a little bit, I know.

TW: It does save you from the forgetting of names once you've already been introduced.

AP: And also, especially when you have so many people from different countries. It's really hard to

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catch the name properly, unless you have a tag.

MK: Yes, and also I think it is also kind of a misconception of how networks and networking works. I mean, in a network your value is defined by being a knot and the ties you have. So the name is some kind of a label of this knot. So talking to someone who has a name, or might have a name, also means you get the connections you might be looking for. So if it is for just coming together and talk about research questions, or something you're really interested in topic-wise or something, then this might be a good idea to get rid of badges. But if not, if it is for networking, then it's really helpful . . . I mean, like helping to find people.

CC: Yes. I have seen instances where you spot a name badge, and you don't know what the person looks like, but you do know their research. And then you spot the name badge and it's like: "Yes! Hello! I should speak to you!" Exactly. But that was just feeding into . . . going right back to what Tom was saying: do we want to be coming to this sort of conference and having sitting down just with early career people? Well that's what we're doing right now, isn't it?

MK: Yes it is. And it's not surprising, I think. Because all the others are busy doing business as usual. So podcasting is not something that is not quite usual yet, maybe. Maybe we could also talk about this institution of podcasting studio at conferences, as an opportunity to get together and record some conversations . . . to be proving the real thing we are looking for at these kind of events? But coming back to the question, I think it's sometimes might be the only way to get the input you need. Because from established professors you normally tend to get just the usual thing you find in their books and papers.

TW: I think the point I was driving at – and I'm not sure if there's a difference between, say a European conference and an American conference. My suspicion – completely ungrounded – is that an American conference might have more stratified forums where, as early career researchers, you could meet up. But that's not for sociability. This is the professionalisation of the trade. And there's a lot more to this than simply knowing your topic very well. And perhaps doing workshops where you are kind-of professionalised to a degree, would provide that additional aspect to attending a conference – particularly for early career researchers – than just simply attending topic-based panels would provide. So I think that was kind of where I as ruminating around. But of course there's drawbacks to that as well. Because you are missing out on the more interesting stuff and just learning the CV-building skills. And so on and so forth.

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MK: Just reminding of Paul (*audio unclear*) analysis of “anything goes”, and the critique of the method, and stuff. He showed that the innovative research is not coming from the old established ones, but from those who haven't read the “important books” you should have read at that time, or didn't understand it. And then you innovate the hell out this . . . endeavour we call academia. So that might be the place of being here.

CC: Exactly! Well, we've always seen the Religious Studies Project as a way of . . . you know There are all these existing academic structures there: there's hierarchies, there's conferences, there's journals and everything. (30:00) And we never saw the RSP as a way of supplanting that, but as a way of kind-of democratising things a bit; as a way of humanising scholarship and having conversations, alongside what's going on, and in an alternative fashion; providing ways of accessing research and ideas that are maybe a little bit more irreverent, a little more accessible. And still acknowledging that the other structures are there. But, you know – do we want to be professionalised? Well, to an extent, yes! We have to be . . .

TW: We want to be employed!

CC: We want to be employed, but equally there's a lot going on in the existing structures that is there just because of habit and tradition and authority. And these little ways, these little things that we're doing, will hopefully be ways of challenging that or just forcing it to justify itself. I'm speaking in huge generalities here, but . . . Things shouldn't be done the way that they are done, just because And so, having little things that come in and go: “Mmm?”

MK: Well I don't think that this is actually speaking in huge generalities. I think this is the concrete reality you could experience in these kind of conferences: these connections and power struggles within academia. You can really experience it here. And so I would agree that there might be a reason why we're not professionalising in a way that, I don't know, businesses have to Or get together just for networking purposes only. Because if we are no longer interested in our research topics, then we are no longer researchers!

CC: Exactly. Tom, you may not want to talk about this, but you're just about to go to Honk Kong to a quite different conference. And you were describing, I guess maybe, the perceived differences. And that might be a useful thing to bring in . . . ?

TW: Yes. Well I think the first thing to say is that I haven't been there yet. So these are all kind-of

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anticipations which could be completely grounded in my misunderstandings. But it's a big public law conference in Hong Kong. And something like 39 concurrent panels, so I'm not sure how many delegates that adds up to – but pretty huge. But I was at the [Law and Society Conference in Otago](#) last year and because you've got a lot of lawyers going to these conferences, it's not just academics. It's a far more kind-of mixing of people who apply the trade, and people who research. And there was a slickness to them: everyone was smartly dressed; and PowerPoints ran to time; and often they would be synchronised with the rehearsed script. And it is impressive when people provide a far more slick presentation. I'm not sure if the ideas are any better! [Laughter]. But there was a sense that, you know, corporatisation isn't all bad. And if it's a more efficient and more crisp delivery, and if the PowerPoints aren't failing, and people are IT savvy, and they've been told to reduce their paper to three or four points – because that's what people are able to remember, and you want your papers to be efficacious and to walk away with the key concepts – that aspect of the professionalization, I think, is worthwhile learning from and replicating. Whether the horse will take to water, or whether we'll continue to try and preserve some of the more romantic off-the-cuff presentations that do take place in more Humanities-based subjects, is something . . . I don't know how things will turn out. It will be very interesting to see how the Hong Kong conference differs from this one.

CC: I must say that there's a spectrum of conference presentation, right? You've got the sort-of very slick end and then you've got this off-the-cuff end. And then, somewhere in the middle, you've got the reading of a pre-prepared thing – which I tend to probably do far too often. But the ones that I enjoy are either the ones that are very slick, or the ones that are almost entirely off-the-cuff. You know, they've got an idea and they just turn up (35:00). And they've got a couple of points and they speak around it. And they don't really know where it's going to go before it happens. But it can be great.

SB: You do need a certain amount of confidence in yourself as an academic to be able to do that, I think.

TW: Again I think that comes back to the point of professionalisation. Because it gives you those structures with which to be confident through. I don't think people just emerge confident individuals. They're given the training. And that kind of aspect, I think, is perhaps undervalued, or not explored enough, or not given enough assistance to people in their early careers.

MK: Well, I would be interested in what you think about the formats that actually prepare one to go to these conferences: what other teaching that may be required, to be prepared presenting in front of an

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academic professional crowd. Or is there anything you learn during studies and various programmes and universities? Is there something that is reflected in the courses or the structure of the programmes? And is it also reflected in what is worth doing career-wise. Because I have the impression that, at the end, it counts what you have written. And the papers you published in possibly well-known and established peer-reviewed journals. And the books you published. And among us there are only a few people who already published books. But yes, I think this is what counts. And it does not count to be able to get a straight sentence out in front of a crowd listening to you. And in a way I think, this just is reflected . . .

AP: Somehow it does, because it allows you to network in an academic sense. And that will lead to publications in some cases.

MK: Ok. But this also, just already prepares you for another written publication.

AP: Yes. But I think that with your presentation you will catch the attention on yourself as a researcher and on your research topic. So other people who are interested can contact you even afterwards,

CC: And it's not necessarily just connected to feeding into publications. I suppose, what are academic outputs? They're publications, they're large research projects and everything. But you've got no idea And I've seen some presentations here that I've immediately thought, "I need to contact that person for this other project, down the line." Or sometimes it will be someone else tells you about a paper that they heard, that you weren't at, and that personal recommendation can be enough that you will then look at the conference programme, find out who that person was and then seek them out in some sort of other way.

MK: Well my questions were just related to the idea that we might need a professionalisation of conferences. And this sleek point of presenting, 5 points only . . .

TW: I'm saying it through gritted teeth.

MK: I hope so, yes. Because the reason that we don't have that kind of well, established, elaborate presentation style is because we're not teaching at universities, and it doesn't count that much as writing papers properly. And then to read, to hold a paper, literally, and to read a paper you wrote, that is the thing you do. We have nothing else! I mean, podcast has just started to get a standing in the

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discipline.

CC: Yes. And the podcasts I recorded yesterday evening, for example, with [Carmen Becker](#), went really well in the sense that she had a narrative worked out for her paper. So she had a twenty-minute narrative, which provided an excellent structure for what ended up being a thirty-five-minute podcast. But we did the same content in a much more – I hope, and Listeners can let me know – conversational and accessible way. We got through it all, but the act of it being a conversation was an alternative presentation format, that will hopefully have complemented the presentation (**40:00**). But maybe, just to put the spotlight on Angela: you're relatively new to the conference circuit in a sense, so you might be What preparation did you get before you stepped up to the podium to deliver your first few papers?

AP: Well, actually, I found it quite easy to present in front of people. Because I've been teaching for a few years. And I also do some lecturing. So, yes. And also, well my degrees were in Italy, so at the University of Naples. And there, you have to do a lot of exams – there are presentations but without a PowerPoint. You have to orally answer quite a few questions in a well-structured way. So I think that helped me to organise how I elaborate on my thought and on my research. But yes, maybe the only thing would be to Yes, I spoke to my supervisor, of course, about what would be the main point that I had to address. So it's like a sort of introduction.

CC: That is what I was thinking. From my outside observation you seem to have a very supportive supervisor in [Suzanne Owen](#). I know that I've had very supportive supervisors and now being mentored by [Kim Knott](#) and Steve Sutcliffe, who have sort-of walked me through a lot of these things that might seem quite daunting in an academic career. And I think that, for me, like the first few conferences I went to and everything, having a couple of more established advocates guiding me around, introducing me to people – that really helped.

AP: Sometimes it can also help when you have interests beside academia. For example, in my case, I think that since I've been a singer for quite a few years, I think that helped me. Because when I'm up there it's like being on a stage and you have to perform. So I think that doing . . . even other kinds of activities – besides academia – that can help you be more relaxed in front of people, can also help.

TW: Yes, by comparison, my hobby is long distance running. (Laughter). I don't think that's comparable to the kind of sociability aspect . . .

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AP: I guess the other, for example, might be another . . .

CC: Well the long distance running will help you deal with the long keynote lecture in the warm rooms . . . !

MK: Both are different ways to deal with stage fright. The one can run off easily, the other can perform!

CC: Exactly. But you wanted to say something . . . ?

SB: Yes. Just a couple of things. Because the first EASR was the one in Helsinki two years ago, I think, and I didn't present at that one. And I purposefully went just so I could go to a European conference, suss out the level of things that were happening there. And yes, I had people like Steve Sutcliffe and the whole . . . I think they were referred to as the Edinburgh Mafia at the time, because there was so many of us! And it was really nice just having those people there to introduce me, and not having the pressure to present, but be able to just suss out the situation. And then also, back in Edinburgh, I think in the first year of my PhD, we did a smaller . . . we called it a Post-Grad Colloquium. And that was one where people from all over the Divinity School would present. I can't remember whether it was a five or ten-minute paper. But they tried to organise it in a very professional way. And I think the day before there'd been a different conference at New College, and [Marian Bowman](#) was in Edinburgh and so she came to the Colloquium. So it was quite nice to have a certain level of professionalism there, only have to present for ten minutes. And it was a really good trial run for future presentations.

MK: But isn't it strange that we already fulfil all the requirements of a conference and presenting professionally, even if we're just doing post grad or that kind of meeting and workshops just for us, for our sakes, for our research, just to get into conversation and find other people talking about interesting topics. We could do this in many different ways. We could also just meet for podcasting, for example .Just to bring it up once more! (Laughter). Because I think the format is so different. And this kind of professionalisation . . . of the peer pressure you then feel at these big conferences like EASR, or other conferences. (45:00) It's strange, I think, that we already assume all that professionalism is, in that way that we experience it later. And there is no change. There is no real . . . I don't know. There is no real development in presentation style.

CC: Yes. We could probably come up with a lot of optimistic things that . . . and think, "Well, surely

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we could be doing this networking without endless collaboration, without having to have the big carbon footprint and come to this place and sit through lots of papers?” I don't know how much we would all . . . actually. The existence of the structure acts as gravitational pull, and people make time for it. But, just another anecdote: I think it's maybe over 5 years ago now, that [Russell McCutcheon](#) added me as a Friend on Facebook. And I remember it happening and being “Wow! He's added me as a Friend on Facebook!” And I've still never met him face to face. And, I don't know . . . I think he was aware of the Religious Studies Project and was just purposefully setting out to network and create the network

MK: Yes. We think of Russell T. McCutcheon as the kind of RSP Twitter-bot. Because he reads everything you guys Tweet!

CC: Yes. And he engages. But I've now collaborated with him on a number of publications; I've been to conferences that he has helped organise, even though he didn't end up going there; we'll bounce around Facebook messages and Twitter conversations and I'm now part of his [Culture On The Edge](#) thing. And all of this has happened without ever needing to go to a conference. And there's been a lot of productive collaboration there. And I'm not saying that we all need to start Facebook stalking and adding people that we've never met before. Because that is just weird, and there are issues with that. (Laughter). But there are other ways perhaps than necessarily coming to a physical space and productive scholarly collaboration can happen. We just maybe need to ignore or think outside the large powerful pull that these things have.

SB: And you do need certain ways of making you and your research visible. Because, obviously, you have the platform that Russell was then able to find you on. So it's just ways of making that work, as well.

MK: And the reason I brought this up again is because I think that, with podcasting, we have the kind of medium that gets out conversations in a proper way. And make it possible to quote podcasts, as well. And I think that only a few of those established scholars in the discipline already know how many downloads those podcasts get. If they knew, I think they would realise that their papers in their established and beloved journals never ever will find so many readers than those podcasts find downloads.

CC: We have already, in this conversation, had more impact than probably every other scholar . . . !

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MK: And more listeners than any dissertation ever written!

SB: Yes. And we briefly touched on it earlier. And you were saying that you go to a conference to present only to then write a paper afterwards. Whereas podcasting occupies that in-between space where you can be quoted on it, you don't have to produce this written piece afterwards.

CC: Exactly. We're coming up to 12 O'clock, which is going to be our time for getting out. I'm using my "radio host" thing which Moritz has been railing against the whole time. Moritz, I think, would have us talking for another three hours.

MK: Yes. Definitely. There's no time limit. There's always space in the Internet.

CC: There is always space in the Internet. And this is a point to remember. So hopefully, Listeners, you've enjoyed this conversation. And it's, maybe, given you some food for thought about conferencing and maybe alternative ways that you can augment that. And one way would be to participate in the conversation surrounding this podcast. You could record your own podcast and respond in that way; YouTube - there's all the social media options and website options for writing written responses. Don't be afraid. Just get out there and say it. A lot of people seem to not really like typing written comments on the website.

MK: But then you should definitely establish a way to get audio comments as well. So it's very easy to record them with WhatsApp or voice memo apps on smart phones (**50:00**). So you could send it easily and in a very nice format. And you could include them in the podcasts.

CC: That would be a brilliant idea, Moritz! Thank you for that!

MK: You're welcome.

CC: So, Listeners, thanks for listening. We should all say that I suppose. So, from all five of us here in Switzerland:

All: Thanks for listening!

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