The **Irish School of Ecumenics** (ISE), a department of the **Confederal School of Religions, Theology, and Ecumenics** at Trinity College Dublin recently has launched a new **Masters programme in Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies**. See: [www.interculturaltheology.ie](http://www.interculturaltheology.ie).

Since these new fields of study and scholarship are currently gaining momentum across Europe, it came natural to introduce a **European Intensive Programme** (IP) module as part of the new Masters to allow European universities and their students to exchange on these novel fields.

During 2010-2012, a series of three such IPs were successfully coordinated under the title “**Translating God(s): Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies**”, so that students of these fields of study across Europe would have the opportunity to come together and engage with questions of Europe’s increasing multicultural and inter-religious identity. In each of these programmes some 60 advanced Masters and PhD students and 20 professors of 18-20 partner universities from across Europe follow a most unique and intense two weeks of cross-cultural learning.

In order to better capture the complexity and experience in these fields across Europe, the programme “travelled” and was carried out at three different places, involving a Western Christian ecumenical school of theology (ISE at TCD in Dublin; 2010), an Islamic theological department (Marmara University, Istanbul; 2011), and an Orthodox theological faculty (Constanta, Romania; 2012). That allowed for foregrounding each time a distinct theme, most relevant to the region and ethos of a particular school.

While the programme was developed by ISE at TCD Dublin in collaboration with the partner universities, the actual delivery of the programme could not have been realized without the generous help and enthusiasm of many academic and administrative staff as well as students from the hosting institutions, who conducted the preparation and contributed so much to the smooth process of the IP as well as the creation of a lively community of learning within these two weeks.

Preparatory Team

Prof. Norbert Hintersteiner (Dublin; overall coordinator), with Dr. Ina Merdjanova (Dublin / Sofia), and Prof. Rahim Acar (Istanbul)

Project Assistant: Egle Zinkute (Dublin)

Preparatory Meeting: Prof. Razvan Ionescu (Constanța), Prof. Norbert Hintersteiner (Dublin), Archbishop Teodosie (Constanța), Dr. Ina Merdjanova (Dublin/Sofia)
Group photos

IP edition 1 (2010), hosted by the Irish School of Ecumenics at Trinity College Dublin

IP edition 2 (2011), hosted by the Theological Faculty at Marmara University in Istanbul
A Window into the IP Learning Experience

While the first IP, hosted in Dublin in June of 2010, introduced students to the new European discourses and fields of intercultural theology, interreligious studies, and comparative / interreligious ethics. The second instalment took place at the İlahiyat Islamic Theological Faculty of Marmara University in Istanbul and had a focus on “Islam and Christianity in Southeast Europe”, but allowing students also to reflect upon the interreligious realities of wider Europe at large. The third IP in 2012 focused on the realities of “Fluid Religion and Orthodoxy” and was hosted by the Orthodox Theological Faculty and Archbishop Teodosie in Constanța, Romania.

To offer a window into the IP experience, a few glimpses from the second IP in Istanbul:

An Intercultural Experience.

Among the most unique and valuable aspects – one begins with the impressive location of the second IP itself: Istanbul city. It was not only the diversity of each other’s backgrounds, both cultural and religious, that the participants got to acquaint first-hand, but also the dense historical and cultural heritage of both Western and Eastern influences in the region. Major topics of research - such as interreligious and intercultural relations, post-secularity, religious education and shared religious sites - were also phenomena present for observation, constituting a fine example of participant-observer approach to the production of knowledge.

The Programme

Scholars and students gathered to explore concerns around Europe’s increasingly multicultural and interreligious identity along the following themes: (1) The Study of Religions in a Changing Europe; (2) Engaging the Other: Interreligious Historical and Comparative Theological Explorations; (3) Shared Religious Spaces; (4) Religion, Politics and Power Struggle.
During the course of two weeks of the IP excellent presentations and regional inputs were shared by some of the best scholars in the field from East, Southeast and West Europe. The opening of the IP benefited from high level academic momentum provided by joined collaboration on the thematic element “The Study of Religions in a Changing Europe” with the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS) bi-annual conference.

Special international guests and speakers of who were many Turkish and SE-European speakers, included Msgr. Mato Zovkić (Sarajevo), İsmail Taspinar (Istanbul), Rahim Acar (Istanbul), Elizabeta Koneska (Macedonia), Talip Kucukcan (Istanbul), Nazife Sişman (İstanbul) Hadi Adanalı (Ankara). Also, from further afield former Austrian EU diplomat Dr. Erhard Busek (Vienna), Prof. Daniel Madigan (Georgetown), Prof. Pim Valkenberg (Baltimore) among others.

**Awareness for Southeast Europe**

The SE-European focus of the second (and the third) IP addressed a gap in the often overlooked complexity of the region, its histories and forms of thought - which tend to go unseen in discussions equipped with Western categories, experiences, and biases. In this sense, the IP challenged participants to examine and build their awareness for the region, through such major constellations of cultural and historical narratives as the Ottoman Period, the Balkan War and Peace processes and the changing fortunes of Christian or Muslim minorities there.

**Stimulus for Postgraduate Researchers**

Each thematic element also included windows designed for the sharing of student participants’ research. These contributions were delivered in parallel presentation sessions, and by virtue of being embedded in topically connected sections of the programme: allowed for further dialogical elaboration of the inputs given at the thematic plenary sessions. This type of intellectual interaction expanded the capacity for direct engagement between established experts in the field, and their junior colleagues - working on some of the most innovative research at present.

Due to the unique facility of the Intensive Programme - students and professors could, and did indeed, find opportunities to continue discussion during intervals and scheduled leisure periods (weekends). From table fellowship during lunchtime, to animate strolls during excursions - conversation was the medium of valuable sharing, expression of ideas, networking and expansion of horizons.

On the basis of feedback gathered throughout the IP, and towards its conclusion - it is true to say that this type of academic facility has been experienced as a vital contribution to postgraduates and junior researchers’ need of directed and open forums of exchange. The learning experience of students, just as of scholars was truly characterized by prospects of continued reflection and independent future collaborations.

The IPs gained additional perspective by collaborating with the international journal of Concilium or the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS), allowing participants windows into larger academic scholarship and networks.

**Interreligious Encounters**

As part of such process of inter-cultural and inter-religious learning, participants visited and experienced some of the greatest mosques and oldest churches of Istanbul. Moreover, personal encounter allowed more nuanced acquaintance with Muslim fellow students’ religious realities; their ongoing negotiations of identity and faith.
Alterity also became a marker, and interpretive lens of the intercultural and inter-religious meeting with representatives of Orthodox Christianities, and the SE-European cultural attitudes. Not the least criteria of the academic critical examination of religion and faith were placed under scrutiny by different experiences of gender and politics.

Participants were also hosted by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Cathedral of St. George of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the (closed) Halki Theological School and Monastery during a daytrip to the island of Heybeliada. Another occasion of rare and privileged access to local sites of communal religious importance - was a visit to a local Synagogue.

It was often the case that closer contact with the various Christian minority communities in Istanbul, including the Catholic church St. Georg in the Galata area, attuned one to the barely yet familiar difficulties of living out such status on daily basis; raising questions about possibilities of articulations such as interreligious dialogue and interculturality.

**Academic Recognition**

Students not only benefited from a truly intense academic programme and rich intercultural and interreligious process, successful participation also guaranteed them 10 ECTS points in their respective study programmes at their home universities.

**The Daily Study Life at the IP**

Lectures and Discussions
Podium discussions

Joint meals
The interreligious experience

Visit at Jewish Synagogue in Üzküdar; 2nd IP in Istanbul (2011)

Encountering the Christian Orthodox Theological Aesthetics; 3rd IP in Constanța (2012)
Encounter with Mufti Yusuf Murat at the old Mosque at 3rd IP in Constanța (2012)
Making new friends across cultures
Benefits and Impact on Institutions, Academic Staff and Students

For the coordinating institution, the School of Religions, Theology, and Ecumenics, this IP has been particularly important, as it was an integral part of its newly launched Masters in Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies at ISE. It not only gave the school and its new programme an “international boost” and publicity. It brought the very theme of the programme to a European display and allowed to enact its very object (the intercultural and interreligious realities across Europe) in a small scale study experience. Something a regular module at one institution alone could never create.

Since these new fields of study and scholarship captured in the IP are currently gaining momentum across Europe, it allowed to provide a platform of exchange and engagement amongst the partner universities on a junior academic level, creating a dynamic bridge to the more professional academic network of the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (www.esitis.org), in which individual scholars of most of the partner institutions also meet and collaborate to advance these novel fields of scholarship. Students and teachers who participated in the IPs are now attending the bi-annual conferences of that society and publish in the society’s peer-reviewed Journal for the Study of Interreligious Dialogue. Some of the results found also entry in the IP publication Thinking the Divine in Interreligious Encounter, edited by Norbert Hintersteiner (Rodopi 2012). Given these excellent intersecting results, some partner institutions are now also pursuing plans to develop an Erasmus Mundus programme application in that area.

The IP was part of an internationalization initiative pursued over the last years at TCD, which lead to a new Global Relations Strategy (GRS), aiming at building on Trinity’s strong international reputation for research, teaching and innovation in its mission to be a university of global consequence. The University seeks to continue and strengthen its participation in European and Global Erasmus programmes, seeking to position Ireland as a leading centre of international education.

The impact on students has already been described above: Besides having earned 10 ECTS towards their respective study programmes, they were indeed given the experience and challenge of cross-cultural and inter-religious learning and, for many of them, testing their abilities to perform on an international level, testing their ideas with their peers and developing their language and communication skills. The feedbacks of students clearly reflect a boost in motivation, increase in perspectives, surprising new insights and experiences through cross-cultural and international outreach. For many, participation in the IP has become a core and at times life changing experience within their study years.

Norbert Hintersteiner

www.tcd.ie/ise