

# RRE UPDATES

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## Interfaith Relations in Pakistan & Chile

*conversations with leading academics in the field*

## 'If You Ever Get to Aarhus'

*we celebrate Flavia Teoc's second book publication*



*Flavia Teoc*

*Rocío Cortés Rodríguez*

*Siddiq Ali Chisti*



04



03



Issue 4

# CONTENTS

## **03** *Old Norse & Skaldic Poetry*

Author and publisher  
Flavia Teoc's editorial

## **04** *'If You Ever Get to Aarhus*

An exclusive interview with  
Flavia on her new book

## INTERVIEW

## **05** *Interfaith in Islamabad*

Siddiq Ali Chisti shares his boundary-  
crossing work and journeys

05



08



## EDITORIAL

## **07** Religious Pluralism & Interfaith Relations in Chile

## INTERVIEW

## **08** *Rocío Cortés Rodríguez*

From an MA RRE in Helsinki to a  
PhD at Notre Dam

07





# Exploring Norse Sagas and Skaldic Poetry

Authored by Flavia Teoc

A year before I enrolled in RRE, I was studying at the University of Roskilde the skaldic poetry composed during the time conversion to Christianity. I remember the manuscript of Codex Wormianus read by the Arnmagnæan Institute, the pages written in Old Norse annotated on the margins with Latin words, whose purpose was to translate the metaphors into the language of the scholars of that time.



***RRE sets you in a privileged position, in front of new possibilities of mapping territories that you believed were already conquered, explored and known***

The joy of this kind of discovery I have experienced later during the RRE program, these paths that create connections and ways of understanding between beliefs and cultures. I completed the book on the language of skaldic poetry during the first year of RRE and presented it a year after my graduation, at the Romanian

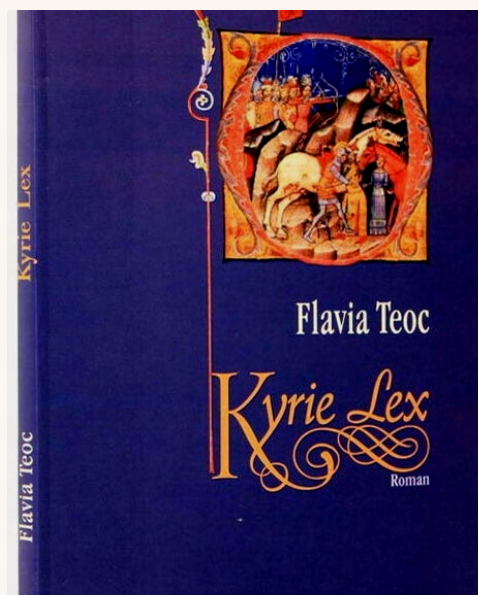
this thin and permeable border between a pagan culture and the Christian understanding of the world, which in the east we call the Sophianic, hence the Sophianic (Christian) perspective as articulated in the skaldic poetry of a Norse saga. I have never stopped working as an explorer of mentalities in various cultures, reflected in the topics of my research: The ember of the hands – memory and transmission through kennings in Haraldsdrápa, Heart is up – seats of memory in skaldic poetry. Battle as a sacred game in skaldic poetry, The wolf of the wounds: Bodies,

Embassy in Copenhagen in the presence of colleagues and professors from RRE. The method I applied in the analysis of kenning metaphors in skaldic poetry I used in the interpretation of the text Perpetua Passio, at the end of

weapons, and animals in skaldic poetry, etc.

After graduating RRE, I taught for a short time a course of creative writing inspired by the writing art of the old skalds, and the oratorical principles of Greco-Latin philosophy. The growing interest I saw prompted me to write a book to help those who want to discover new ways to write in the most extreme forms of plotting. The publishing company I founded helps me, in fact, to always be around amazing books and wonderful authors. I think that a study program like RRE sets you in a privileged position, in front of new possibilities of mapping territories that you believed were already conquered,

the second year of RRE, in an interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics and theology through the textual investigation of Perpetua's text written around 203. The topic of my doctoral thesis dwells on



explored, and known. New methods and new perspectives shed new lights. The only downside to the program is that it ends too quickly, even before you know it. Paraphrasing Kavafis, at the end of the day it gave us the marvellous journey. Without it we wouldn't have set out.



# IF YOU EVER GET TO AARHUS

An Exclusive Interview with Flavia Teoc



Has your book *Kyrie Lex* been translated into other languages? And what stimulated your interest in Old Norse and skaldic poetry?

It has been translated to Danish. Ever since I was a child, I was fascinated by the memory of a battle that took place on a hill in my grandparents' village in 1068. This battle is the subject of the novel *Kyrie Lex*. When I explored the Europe of the year 1000 to recreate the atmosphere of that battle, I discovered the Varangian Guard, a Viking military formation led at the time by Harald Hardrada, the future king of Norway. About him I had read that he led various military campaigns on the southern territories of my country. When I read *King Harald's Saga*, a wonderful literary work that fascinated me immensely, that was the moment when I decided to explore this extraordinary universe: the Viking culture and poetry, through kenning metaphors, a poetic device specific only to skaldic poetry.

Flavia's book *'If You Ever Get to Aarhus'* is due to be published this month of June. We wish her all the very best in it and encourage all in the RRE network to support her amazing work. She runs a [Creative Writing course](#) and is more than happy to collaborate and network with members of the RRE alumni network.

Do you have a tentative title for your forthcoming book? Could you give a blurb about it so we could look out for it when it is out in the market?

The volume is called '*If You Ever Get to Aarhus*' – it's a compilation of a series of short stories in which I tried to explain to myself the experiences that have happened in my life over the past five years.

The RRE network is about creating opportunities of exposure and networking. So please do not be shy to sell yourself. What is the name of the publishing company you founded?

The name of the publishing company is Synapsis - from Greek synopsis, "to join together, tie or bind together, be connected with" - because the intention is to create connections, ways of understanding between Eastern European culture and literature and Scandinavian literature and culture. I recently received support from the Kunstfonden to publish an anthology of Romanian poetry in Danish, a book that will appear at the beginning of next year. But our perspective is quite open. We intend to publish literature from all over the world and to set up several collections: Universitaria, travel literature and children's literature.

# Interfaith in Islamabad

It's 7:30am in Edinburgh and I'm connecting with Siddiq Ali at 11.30pm in Peshawar for this month's RRE news. He's a couple of minutes late, but he finally pops up with a warm, friendly and wonderful smile, wearing a white traditional Shalwaar Qamees – it is Jumu'ah after all – sporting a full beard that my likes would be envious of.

*We have a variety, a very beautiful bouquet of flowers*

The Pakistani vibes play in straight away as I confess my being partial to the Peshwari Naan as a side to a flaming curry any day. Momentarily, I am transported to Peshawar where, in tokenistic fashion, I imagine bright colours,

exuberant tastes and the invigorating appetite-whetting aroma of South Asian street food. Siddiq adds to this vibrant medley with a linguistic cocktail, beaming as he counts on his fingers: Urdu, Pashto, Hindko, Chitrali, Farsi, Punjabi and Arabic - seven languages besides English, he is fully conversant in.

He ups the ante in this overflowing canvas when he says: "we have a variety, a very beautiful bouquet of flowers". It's almost too poetic to feature, but it is direct from the source as Siddiq talks about the plethora of religious sects, ideologies and movements in Pakistan: the Barelvi, Deobandi, Naqshbandi, Ismaili etc. While his family identifies with the Barelvi sect, he has close



friends from the Ismaili tradition, Ahle Hadith, as well as Christians. Although the Christians are a minority – around 2 to 3% in his estimation – they "live in peace



and harmony". Although there may have been contestations within the public space years ago, the state is playing a considerably more constructive role in the maintenance of social cohesion. In Siddiq's analysis, issues arising on the interfaith level are more ascribable to social and cultural problems. And while the sectarian problems are very

much a reality in Pakistan, they are also significantly influenced by broader geopolitical factors creating a challenging reality. At this juncture, we pull the interview back to the RRE. How did Siddiq, a member of faculty at the International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI), come to enrol, and where does the programme feature in his career trajectory?

Siddiq studied in Lund from 2009 to 2011 and found his academic experience with RRE as "new and different". Siddiq's story differs from some of the alumni we have featured. While a significant number would have to navigate around the careers world and face the challenges post-RRE, as an IIUI faculty member, he had a specific need to fill: "knowledge



# Interfaith in Islamabad

about other cultures and how religion works in the post-modern world.” Siddiq did his undergrad in Islamic Studies in Peshawar. He then moved to Islamabad to complete a master programme in Islamic Studies.

In his current academic career, the expertise gained studying the formation, development and contemporary interactions of the Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been instrumental. “I now share this experience and

use the skills acquired from the RRE in a more practical way”, referring to the examples of tangible academic social research on Christian-Muslim relations in Lahore and Muzaffargarh city, where he has

*I now share this experience and use the skills acquired from the RRE in a more practical way*

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Lahore and Muzaffargarh city, where he has supervised some of his MA students. He is able to direct his students to unearth wider social and political factors involved in certain ‘religionised’ confrontations, and through this holistic outlook, to begin exploring potential “conflict solutions”.

The RRE programme equipped Siddiq with important research skills and “how to conduct a free and open research.” He laughs out loud, recalling, words of advice from Prof Samuel Rubenson when he consulted him on choosing his MA thesis on the semantic analysis of Jihad in the Qur’an: “if you have courage, you’ll do it. If you are a coward, then ...” It took him 6 months to write his thesis, and he published it in the al-Bayān Journal of Qur’ān and Hadīth Studies (Brill, Malaysia). Lund’s academic staff

were thrilled: “they were so happy and proud of the fruit, seeing their students getting published.”

Siddiq remains in touch, and it is more than just an academic connection. “I feel at home with them, they were so kind” Siddiq recalls invitations to the homes of Lund RRE staff for dinners. He says, now, some over 10 years on, “I still send them Christmas greetings, and they’re always happy to receive them.” Going back to the Pakistan context, tying the benefit of the MA RRE in Siddiq’s everyday lived reality in-between Peshawar and Islamabad, he highlighted the “impact of post-modern thought on religion, society and religious expression” as a key takeaway. “If I stayed at home, I would not have learned that, due to the effect of the cultural shell of religion on society.”

Siddiq wears two hats: an academic one, and a faith education practitioner leading “a chain of religious seminaries” inherited from his family. He has striven to “introduce new ideas to bring change” in the study and approach to religion in society in Pakistan in the last 5 years but admits it is an arduous process.

Siddiq envisages building and developing an alternative institution separate from the tradition, but which also deals with the local reality in Peshawar. He is considering bringing in and collaborating with different perspectives – within and out with Islam. He has clear aspirations in contributing to interfaith relations and the prospect of him partnering with Rocio in the South American context sounds absolutely fantastic!



# RELIGIOUS PLURALISM & INTERFAITH RELATIONS IN CHILE

Editorial by **Rocío Cortés Rodríguez**



Like most of Latin America, Chile's main religion is Christianity. Roman Catholicism represents 54% of the population, and 14% of Chileans identify with Protestant/ Evangelical Christianity. Christianity in Chile is a mixture of the religion brought by the conquerors and missionaries to the continent, the local culture, and indigenous beliefs. In other words, Colonialism shaped Latin American religiosity. The interaction of Christianity with indigenous and African cosmologies created a unique and inculturated Christianity. Likewise, indigenous and African beliefs interact not only with Latin American Christianity, but it is also present in African and Indigenous communities that still hold the cosmologies of their ancestors.

Currently, the minority religions present in the country that are officially recognized, are: Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Baha'i, and Buddhism. In Chile, according to the results of the 2012 Census, 14,570 peoples identified themselves as believers of indigenous cosmology. We are likely to believe that most of them adhere to the Mapuche beliefs, mainly because they represent 84% of the total indigeno-

us population of the country. In 2009, Unicef pointed out that 10% of the Latin American population is part of some indigenous community. Likewise, it also records names, numbers, and places where 522 aboriginal people live in the region.

“*The interaction of Christianity with indigenous and African cosmologies created a unique and inculturated Christianity*”

In terms of numbers, the most populous groups, in millions, are the Quechua peoples, the Nahuatl, the Aimara, the Maya Yucateco, and Ki'ché. Regarding populations between 500,000 and a million, there are six: the Mapuche, Maya Q'eqchi, Kaqchikel, Mam, Mixteco, and Otomí. The largest indigenous communities in Chile are the Mapuche. In the 2012 Chilean census, 1,714,677 individuals identified themselves as part of an indigenous group. Only 16% of that number is non-Mapuche.

The Mapuche are found on the Pacific coast in the south-central regions of Chile and the South-western area of Argentina. In Chile, the Mapuche community is one of the country's largest indigenous communities, and is considered an ethnic minority. Today they make great efforts to keep their language, beliefs, and culture despite the constant pressure of Chilean society to assimilate them to the national culture. Mapuche religious mythology includes representations of humans in close relationship with nature.

Interfaith relations in Chile are quite peaceful. Religious and multicultural diversity are perceived as positive, and individuals, in general, demonstrate greater freedom when expressing their religious preferences. The Association for Interreligious Dialogue for Human Development (ADIR) was recently founded in 2018 to “promote interreligious dialogue between the different confessions and worldviews existing in Chile and the world.” This organization contributes to making the country's religious pluralism visible as it brings together the principal leaders of the traditions present in our territory.





## Interview with Rocío Cortés Rodríguez

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Rocío is a lecturer at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (PUC-Chile) where she has taken up post this academic year after a successful tenure as postdoctoral fellow at Notre Dame University in Indiana, USA having completed her PhD at the Department.

It was an absolute delight spending a good hour and a half, not only catching up after some eight years, but also exploring our mutual career trajectories post-RRE, and discovering intersecting research and career interests.



Our discussion immediately brought interfaith relations and dynamics to the fore as Rocío outlined her work in interreligious dialogue in Chile. She explained how her teaching of about 60 students about the intricacies of this delicate subject was breaking ground at the Department of Theology at PUC-Chile. Her work includes research with outreach work interspersed with activities such as procuring Halal and Kosher meals for roundtable discussions using Scriptural Reasoning methodology to dialogue with members of different religious communities. Therefore, she facilitates conversations with Sufism within Islam in Chile and with Sunnis, Shia, as well as the established communities of Jews and Christians, and the Mapuche – the largest indigenous group in Chile.

It was a fascinating, thought-provoking, and extremely stimulating conversation showcasing RRE's strength in

producing a cadre of leading-edge researchers who push boundaries in our understandings of profound matters of what it means to be human and a citizen on this earth. Rocío couched the conversation in her move from the US in the aftermath of the postdoc to Chile, outlining how that coincided with Estallido Social Chile – the wave of civil protests which captivated the nation from October 2019 to the current. There was a silver lining cutting across the demands for fundamental rights inequalities and the outright repudiation of socio-economic disparities in Rocío's analysis. Interfaith relations, indigenous peoples' rights, and cosmologies would interlink with liberation theology in Rocío's journey to bring about the sharp insights that the ground-breaking events occurring in Chile not only create a niche for the work/ research she is doing, but also that they precipitate a clear need for broader social

dialogue – something challenging to achieve in a “racist and classist” society like Chile.

Well, that was deep! And even though Rocío framed the readjustment to life again in Chile and musing and laughing about Chileans “complaining about everything”, the sheer magnitude and manifest seriousness of the matter would unravel as we continued. It made me feel – as a Gambian – to want to go and see for myself what was happening on the ground and perhaps be a part of history in the making. Before asking about Black people in Chile, I had to remind myself that this was a conversation about life post-RRE. So back to the script we went.

Rocío completed her MA RRE in 2014 at the Faculty of Theology – a very important element which would be instrumental for her career in Chile – at the University of Helsinki.



She picked up an interest very early on in interfaith relations and wrote her thesis on religious coexistence in Andalus, 10th century Spain. In Chile, Rocio's story is an exemplar of the tenacity, creativity and relentless networking that open doors of career development – especially within the competitive world of academia.

Initially, she found it challenging to be accepted in the more traditionalist Theology Faculty at PUC-Chile with a degree titled the MA in the Religious Roots of Europe. The fact that the degree was conferred from the Faculty of Theology would pay a massive dividend as the Dean convinced the Department of her credentials.

Conversations which began with RRE professor Antti Marjanen in Finland would be pursued over cups of coffee in Chile with influential members of faculty at PUC-Chile, eventually opening up the possibility of the PhD at Notre Dame from 2015 to 2020.

Another theme which is emerging with RRE alumni, and especially those who progress along academic is the exposure to different national contexts as they move from one country to another to pursue research. Rocio's term in the US further enriched her international cultural experience as she recollected really fond memories lecturing and conducting research at Notre Dame, noting the supportive nature of the department and the close relationships she was able to

form with students and staff alike. The RRE became instrumental in this juncture of her career in two ways: first, in her own words, "the academic way of seeing other religions prepared me for the PhD" and second, the MA thesis has given her the expertise and cutting-edge confidence in her teaching because as she says "everything is interconnected" – the themes she teaches in interfaith relations dovetail with the study on religious coexistence.



*the academic way of seeing other religions prepared me for the PhD*

Her aspirations are to become a fully-fledged member of faculty and to publish more. Rocio is also motivated by a distinct call and innate sense of purpose – to "create opportunities for people to meet".

The ground-breaking work she is currently engaging in "Scriptural Reasoning", bringing young people from a pluralistic background of faith and ethnic affiliations is paradigm-shifting in a distinctly classist society where hierarchies of belonging create segregated enclavisations. In her work, combining theory with practice, and research with outreach as well as considering overlooked sources of religion/faith such as the oral traditions and artefacts, Rocio is well poised to push the boundaries of scholarship on not only a national level, but also on a cross-continental global scale. The prospects of comparing interreligious coexistence and interfaith relations in Chile and South America with those in contexts such as Africa and Asia are exciting, and Rocio is open to collaboration.