



Alumni Interview

Please introduce yourself in a few sentences and tell us what your thesis topic was.

My name is Pierre Sfindules, and I am a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Kiel as well as a junior fellow at the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg. During my studies in Italy, Greece, Great Britain, and Germany I realized again and again that theological ideas never remain confined within national or confessional borders. This became especially clear in my PhD at LMU Munich, where I examined the 19th-century diplomat Christian C. J. Bunsen, who reinterpreted early Christianity in ways that profoundly shaped contemporary European debates.

What inspired you to choose your research topic?

What inspired me most was discovering how strongly 19th-century theology turned to the past in order to imagine the future. In Christian C. J. Bunsen's work I found a striking example: early Christianity was not only reconstructed, but actively used to shape visions of modern society and church. This fascinated me because it revealed theology as a deeply future-oriented discipline.

Was the IEG your first choice or did you consider other institutes as well? Why did you choose the IEG?

The IEG was my first choice because it combines a vibrant interdisciplinary exchange with a remarkable history. Founded after the war to help overcome national and confessional divides, the institute carries a spirit of openness and dialogue that I found very appealing. For me, this atmosphere, together with the international fellowship community, made the IEG the ideal place to pursue my research.

What was your biggest fear before starting the fellowship and how did it play out?

My biggest fear before starting the fellowship was not about the research, but whether I, as a North German, would ever get used to Handkäs and the lively tradition of Fastnacht in Mainz – things not exactly common where I come from. In the end, both became part of the experience – and, more importantly, the warm and open community at the IEG made it very easy to feel at home from the very beginning.

What did a typical day at the IEG look like for you?

A typical day at the IEG started quite simply: breakfast in the kitchen with other fellows, which often already turned into the first academic conversations of the day. Afterwards I would immerse myself in my research, sometimes so deeply that only the view of the Mainz cathedral from the window reminded me of where I was. In the afternoons, a walk down to the Rhine offered the perfect pause before returning to reading, writing, or exchanging ideas with colleagues. It was a rhythm that combined focus with a very special sense of community and place.



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Do you have any recommendations for places that one should visit in Mainz?

I would definitely recommend the Gutenberg Museum. It captures the spirit of Mainz as a place where ideas and media changed the world. Beyond that, the wine festivals are not only a great way to experience local culture, but also to get to know Mainz in a very convivial way. And for something a little less obvious: the Roman aqueduct remains – and the Isis sanctuary in the old town. Both are easy to overlook, but they remind you that Mainz has always been a city shaped by history, layer upon layer.

Did you ever take part in any IEG events or activities that you really enjoyed and why?

I tried to make use of as many opportunities as possible – from lectures and workshops to social events. Each offered its own way of connecting with people and enriching the fellowship experience.

What kind of collaboration or friendship from the IEG do you value the most today?

What I value most are the collaborations that grew into long-term networks. One example is an international conference in Kiel that I have been planning together with a former colleague and mentor from the IEG, in which several other alumni are also involved. But even where direct contact has faded, I still feel accompanied by the research topics of former fellows. Their work continues to resonate with me and often inspires new perspectives. These connections, both personal and intellectual, are one of the most lasting outcomes of my time in Mainz.

Where did your path take you after the IEG?

After my fellowship at the IEG, I continued my academic journey first at the University of Hamburg and then at Kiel, where I am now a postdoctoral researcher and "Habilitand". Shortly afterwards I completed my PhD at LMU Munich. Since then, I have been able to broaden my projects, and in 2025 I was elected as a junior fellow of the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg. Looking back, I see the IEG as an important stepping stone: it not only shaped my research interests, but also taught me a standard of excellence and professionalism that continues to guide my work and makes it easier to connect with broader academic networks. Every step since Mainz has felt like a natural continuation of what began there.

What advice would you give to your former self at the beginning of your time at the IEG?

I would probably tell my former self: don't be afraid of Handkäs – it's simply part of the Mainz initiation ritual. More importantly, embrace the IEG as a place where listening is just as valuable as speaking. Conversations here carry ideas further than you might expect, often in directions you could never plan. And just as Mainz has long stood for dialogue between France and Germany, the IEG was founded to bridge divides and to cultivate exchange. My advice would be: stay curious, listen carefully, and let yourself be shaped by the diversity of perspectives around you. That is the true strength of the fellowship.