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Religion and Urbanity

A contemporary city is usually seen as a civil, secular and profane space that contrasts with its religious and ritualised rural counterpart. However, the bonds between urban space and the phenomenon of religion were of great importance historically, and still today remain active in our ways of living city life. In the text that follows, Jörg Rüpke, a German university lecturer, vice-director of the Max Weber Centre, a religious studies specialist, and author of various publications on these topics, explains that 'the relationship between city and religion is one full of tension'.

City and religion must be considered together. This is certainly no truism. Phenomena that can plausibly be conceived of as religious actions or symbols were present long before there was any form of urban settlement. Religion preceded urbanisation, whether in East Asia, South and West Asia, Africa or the American double continent. Likewise, religion is not the first thing that comes to mind when we speak about cities. Noise and density, labour and leisure, slums and services – the many often-polarised associations fit better into stories of secularisation than religiosity. This image of industrial cities has been painted and disseminated by numerous contemporary observers, religious people, town planners and academic observers alike (R. A. Orsi 1999: 41). Such an image is still influential in many forms of the media and various discussions. A lot of religious innovations in cities – from the building of parish churches and organised spiritual welfare, through awakening movements, the Salvation Army and the YMCA, to specifically urban forms of assembly rooms and rituals, to name only a few examples in the Western world – developed in reaction to this image. However, urban planning and academic research have needed time to rediscover cities as places of immigration and immigrants' religious practices in order to find anew that religion was an important aspect of the urban.

Evidently, the relationship between city and religion is one full of tension. This is already true in very early religious texts. The 'Tower of Babel' (Gen 11.1-9) is a symbol for the city as well as for the hubris of its inhabitants. The conglomeration of actors, their cooperation and their architecture would otherwise, it was feared, allow people to reach heaven. In the Jewish Bible and its Christian interpretation, the city is frequently a suspicious place, a place of sin and godlessness. God can be found in the desert, in solitude, at Mount Sinai. This West Asian and then European tradition finds its equivalent in South Asia: Buddha finds his enlightenment under a tree, outside the city. It is the village that offers the ideal image of social community and the religious division of labour. Monasteries are set up in the countryside – albeit close enough to cities to allow the exchange of alms and donations on the one hand and spiritual guidance and prayer on the other.

The tension is not restricted to religion. Urban consciousness cannot be detached from notions about its opposite. It is characteristic of urbanity to think of oneself as different than others, different from an opposite, from the non-urban, from the 'rural'. At the same time, this opposite can serve as a counter-image. Imagining life in the countryside is wishful thinking, is the imagination of an idyll. It is a critique of the city. When Rome, probably the first city in history to have a million inhabitants, wanted to be ruled by a truly pious and incorruptible ruler, it had to tear Cincinnatus from the fields, from the plough, to the consulate – as Roman historiography has it.

Such thinking in opposites has had consequences for religion. In the Hellenistic world, the clear spatial separation and economic relationship of exploitation by city inhabitants and rulers was deliberately obfuscated by a *polis* ideology. With a restricted minority of people enjoying full citizenship, the unity of this minority, regardless of their status of living and working in the city or countryside, was stressed. Urban money and knowhow were built into temples in the countryside and along the territorial borders, and rituals or processions brought smaller or larger numbers of townspeople into these places. The model of citizenship and (increasingly theoretical) voting rights (and rites) was



Pieter Bruegel,
The Tower of Babel,
c. 1563

transferred to the Roman city, too. Amid the noise of what was probably the largest construction site on earth at the time, Augustan poets dreamt of the sheep and cattle that used to graze on this very place. In the first century CE, Seneca the Younger, the politician and philosopher, suggested that a quiet place in the forests allows for a much better experience of the divine than urban temple architecture.

After all, living in the city was and is not a walk in the park. Viewed from below, city life can look so attractive with all the promises of security and a livelihood. Security first. Walls all the way round is probably the most pervasive historic image of cities, from ancient Mesopotamia to India and the Mediterranean world, and from Chinese river valleys to medieval Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and Peruvian Cuzco. The promise of security was sustainable only when the walls had gates

and roads and thus the necessary connections and exchange with the world beyond the city. This material security provided by walls fed the image even where the actual cities could do without walls, for instance at the centre of large and stable empires. After all, for many who had urban aspirations (or in other words: had dreams that longed for the city, as no other place would allow their fulfilment), it was not megalomania, as in the narrative of the Tower of Babel, but mere survival that was at stake. The price accepted was and is high. The ambivalence of man-made cities and the way of life actually prevailing there was and is rapidly seen and felt. The city is 'heaven and hell' at the same time; it is a place of innovation, but also a place of social and ecological crises; a place of security, but also of health threats and violence. In all of that, religion is not only an observer, but an important actor.

RELIGION

But what is religion? If one wants to understand religion in the city, one needs to find a suitable way of defining it. Religion is best seen as a collective term for religious practices, ideas and institutions that serve communication with superhuman addressees, with deceased humans, with spirits or with gods. In the light of the fact that communication and its contents are attributing existence and power to these superhuman addressees and relevance to the speakers' (and their audiences') situation, religious action also becomes a resource: a resource for power as well as for critique.

As a cultural technique of this kind, religion itself is space-relevant. Religious practices are spatial practices in two respects: on the one hand, they appropriate space or construct it. Spaces for prayers, hymns, dances, processions and performances of sacrifices or theatre plays temporarily become ritual spaces. In the longer run, however, spaces can be sacralised by the use of other means – flagpoles, steles, panels, walls or even more extensive architecture, whether for occasional remembrance and re-use for religious purposes or even exclusively and permanently. These mark spaces for meetings that can compete with other actors or purposes, in particular when space is scarce, as it always is within the boundaries of 'cities'.

But religious practices also have a second side. They relate, beyond the respective concrete space and even beyond a city, to 'transcendent' addressees, to their spatial associations with other places or with inaccessible, virtual places: heavens or underworlds. Religion is always about the here and now, but also – to very different degrees in the course of history – about the beyond the here and now, about our neighbour, about the others, about the world beyond the wall, and even the world beyond the world.

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As a space-constituting and space-transcending practice, religion has become relevant to urbanization processes – presumably not always, but in random, historical processes. Meso-American temple pyramids in the centre of their cities are as much a testimony to this as are cathedrals, mosques, and the urban riversides of the Ganges. Sometimes religious spaces formed crystallisation points for urbanisation, sometimes they added lustre to existing market settlements. In many areas and epochs they defined the outline and the outer appearance of cities, and provided iconic elements for coinage and urban branding.

Evidently, religion as a space-dependent practice cannot have remained unaffected by this. It must have repeatedly been changed as urbanised religion by urban factors, domination, cultural techniques, and internal and external interdependencies. It is to this side of the religion-and-urbanity-coin that I would like to draw attention.

THE ONGOING URBAN REINVENTION
OF RELIGION

For millennia, religion from its most immanent to its most transcendent forms has served as a means to stabilise or even establish the relations of power, from sacred kings (A. Strathern 2019) to shamans (P. Jackson 2016), and from the early empires to the rulers of the 21st century. Continuing this function in the densely built environment of cities demands visibility, impressive and lasting visibility. The *monumentalisation* of religion is a widespread phenomenon, now seen in Moscow, Bangkok, Istanbul, and Mecca as in many other places in the past and present. Against a background of rather dim divine figures and more diffused notions of the divine – found in objects as well as in ancestors – monumental sanctuaries not only made the religious use of space permanent: they also defined divine characters, codified them as gods or saints related to specific places, and easily elaborated on their stories, creating images and thus an ever more stable net of material icons, names, and narratives. Such a stable form of complex poly-theisms (whether based on gods or saints) was hard to imagine in many pre-urban societies and often flies in the face of more elaborate transcendental concepts of the divine.

Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, 1927

European thinkers of the age of massive urban growth from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries stressed the demands of the new environment on the personalities of those living in cities. Urban life demanded and created new forms of subjectivisation. The individual was shaped by the many social circles of which he (as the male writers put it) was a member and needed to develop a certain distance in social encounters (G. Simmel 1917), a new type of *individualisation* able to deal with the fluidity of the environment and always able to imagine the significance of chance encounters (M. Russo 2016: 67-164). In religious terms, the subject lost its connection to its ancestors and its own (and their) place of abode (J. Rüpke 2018: 234-247). Religious practices such as prayer, meditation or asceticism helped to develop a new kind of urban self, a process already visible in the ancient circum-Mediterranean cities, as much as in other pre-modern cultures across the world (J. Rüpke 2013, 2019; M. Fuchs et al. 2019).

If urbanisation lastingly changed both ends of the axis of religious communication, it had even more consequences for the means employed between them. Early on, the challenge of administering urban crowds and complexities, and of amassing, storing, and distributing supplies, for instance, created

systems of notation, and writing in a broader sense. Relationships and the transfer of property as employed in many acts of religious communication were influenced and developed by them. Dedicated objects could be lastingly and visibly marked by the names of donors and recipients. Complex prayers could be developed in the form of curses that were readable to the powers invoked, but invisible to all others, especially the persons targeted. The *scripturalisation* of religion goes further, however. The production of texts not only allowed for more precise and repeatable prayers and hymns, but also for the systematisation of ritual practices, for the piecemeal ascription of meaning to such practices, and ultimately for a systematic reflection on the character of the addressees, resulting in what is called theology. Genealogies and historical narratives create sharp (and often polemical) identities and claims. Medieval and early modern books of secret rituals made for a virtualisation of religious practices that is a precursor of today's internet religion. Calendars and maps result from the same process, religion being slightly more prominent in the systematisation of time than in the systematisation of space, where it is more strongly challenged by urban administrations.

All such activities demand specialists. The sheer number of people in the same

Unknown author, c. 1370



place, the many different types of exchange, and the necessary (and possible) specialisation in the hubs produced a division of labour that had repercussions on religious traditions. Supported by, and contributing to, the processes mentioned above, *professionalisation* was not only developed in religious contexts, too, but particularly in them. Producing cakes for offerings or for *pūjā*, selling services as a diviner, caring for the soul, administering a sanctuary – religious specialists and priest-hoods are/became part of urban forms of religious action along lines of gender, social status, education, and wealth that were easily exported beyond the walls.

These specialists often supported a consistent development that seems to be natural from today's point of view, though only at first sight: the *institutionalisation* of organised religions in the plural. From the start, and even more so today, cities were places of high tensions. Support from unseen powers was not only claimed by those in power, often rivalling visible power and its unseen but visualised resources. Religious action could likewise serve the many smaller processes of group formation, whether in small or extended families, in neighbourhoods or in networks across cities. Shared religious practices and places helped very much to produce and define such groups (É. Rebillard, J. Rüpke 2015), and even produce ethnicity where unrelated individuals had just come

together (R. Brubaker 2004; J. Nagel 1994). Such groups, whether imagined or existing, could stabilise religious options developed in the course of individualisation (J. Rüpke 2014; J. Rüpke 2016). Religious actions and ideas might be used as a resource for the homogenisation of inhabitants as well as for the stabilisation of differences between the people living in a city.

If 'religions' are one pervasive legacy of the urban history of religion, the *globalisation* of religion in the form of 'world religions' or the universalisation of religion is another, to at least the same degree. If cities are not just an amassment of people, but are hubs of internal *and* external flows (J. Robinson, A. J. Scott, P. J. Taylor 2016: 5), the discourses that define urbanness, self-reflexive urbanity, always include references to and comparison with other cities. In such discourses and inter-urban networks, the spatial dimension of religion as practices focusing on the immanent or transcendent Beyond plays out. References to other cities or places as well as references that go beyond any localities, to no-places like heavens or netherworlds, bolster the independence of religious agents. They certainly help to build up resilience against urban mischief and even persecution. In these respects, the city is not only a prerequisite, but also the topic of religious discourses. But even here, religion reaches beyond intellectual discourses. Religion and city are something that is being 'done'.

This brings us full circle to the very beginning. Despite or because of its close entanglement, the city does not always feature prominently in religious practices and discourses. Quite often, the rural theme of urban discourses is entangled with anti-urban discourses from religion. 'Nature' promises salvation. This may well be. The man-made global ecological crisis is very much an urban-made one, to its own detriment. Urbanness needs its opposite: the very core of urbanity is threatened by pan-urbanisation. Religion is as much a factor in this as an antidote to it.

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