

**Blurring Boundaries:  
Diffusing and Creating Urban Religion beyond Urban Space**

**International Conference within the framework of  
KFG 2779 “Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formation”**

**Schloss Ettersburg, Weimar, Germany**

**23-26 November 2021**

The Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies (Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe/KFG) “Religion and Urbanity: reciprocal formations” investigates the historical contribution of religion to urbanization and the long-term co-constitution and co-evolution of religion and the urban. The Centre inquires what role religion has played for urbanity, how urbanity has changed religion, and how they continually influence one another. By focusing on religion, the goal is to gain insight into the formation of human settlements and thereby to describe different paths of urbanization and their inter-relationships with the development of religion (Rau, Rüpke 2020).

A series of conferences explores selected phenomena or concepts in order to lay the ground for further research. Thus, basic concepts of urbanity and religion, heterarchy, co-spatiality, religion in proto-urban phases, neighbourhood religion, death in the city or ‘guides to urbanity’ have been explored. The conference planned for autumn 2021 is intended to explore possible directions of research and suitable sources for a further focus of the group’s work, namely the existence of religious phenomena associated with or produced in urban space but diffused beyond and crafted outside it. It prepares this field of analysis by delving into the conceptual and historical problems of such an inquiry.

#### Aims of the conference

This conference is an invitation to think “urban religion” as a processual category that captures attempts to blur as well as to stress any topographical boundary between supposedly rural and urban religious traditions. We are not looking for fixing origins to given territorial habitats or confining survivals to certain spatial determinants (thus engaging in the production of urbanity and rurality ourselves). Instead, we are interested in observing and interpreting the ongoing traffic of religious signs, carriers, practices, and institutions across a more or less externally demarcated city border, thus testing their changes under different socio-spatial conditions. Again, it is the substantiation of such changes through sources stretched over considerable periods or serial data, rather than the analysis of phenomena that could be localised here or there, that form the focus of this conference.

Within the wide range of possible movements, in this exploratory conference our focus is on the direction of diffusion out of cities and towns directly into their hinterlands. Within the framework of our research group, we are interested in questions as:

- Which religious phenomena are diffused outside of the city?
- How are they marked or perceived or “unseen” as urban?
- Who are the agents of diffusion? How do they relate to the rest of rural societies?
- Under what conditions is religious change induced beyond such agents?
- How is change conceptualised, perhaps explicitly justified in spatial terms, that is, how is it renegotiated as either urban or rural?
- How does such rurality in religious terms produce repercussions in urban religion?
- How do such processes produce (our) sources and their legibility?

## Background

How can we approach this field, if we are aware of the tendency of spatial research to analytically presuppose clear-cut borderlines and thus reify what is as much a dynamic zone of flows as a construct of certain discourses and practices (Steiner, Rau 2013)? We propose to start from the concept of “urban religion” as developed in recent anthropological research on contemporary metropolises and substantively modified by our own work. In our understanding of the concept, urban religion does not indicate a place-bound and permanent state of affairs. It designates an interaction between religion and urbanity that allows for very different spaces qualified as urban as necessary condition for the phenomena observed, rather than a topographically delineated city as a research field or a near exclusive analytical lens. Such urbanity is “understood as a form of relation, not as a state or condition, that can only be localised *in* the city. The urban character of a settlement of any size is not something that exists *per se* but only through ascription of meaning, comparison (with other settlements), and processes of negotiation (which are never free from power)” (Rau 2020). Likewise, urban religion is a *processual category* that works to make changes of religion and urbanity legible in a certain city and, in some instances, suggests extending the investigation of this interplay both across cities within an inter-urban network or via larger urbanisation processes (Rüpke 2020) and beyond the urban/rural divide.

Such boundary-crossing and –blurring dynamics are easy to illustrate. Religious practices and ideas that could be observed in cities and are even bound together with discourses (and practices) about the urban-ness of the place and its inhabitants, can have very different origins and histories. In periods and areas of urban growth, many people would be recent migrants (or even permanent commuters) to cities, some of which happen to take along religious traditions of doing or thinking that might be slowly or quickly adapted to, and re-functionalised in, the urban settlement. The opposite direction of cultural diffusion is equally attested, though less thoroughly investigated and certainly under-theorized. Urban imaginaries, values, practices could be transported beyond the city walls, taken over by rural

elites, or elaborated by urbanites who have withdrawn to the countryside, as many monasteries and monastic traditions attest; larger formations of institutionalized religious traditions might help to transport or limit such movements blurring or reinforcing spatial distinctions. Often diffused via the hierarchies of urban networks and in inter-city relations, urban innovations in religious affairs spread also between cities and their larger hinterlands by taking new forms, catering for other publics, serving different functions.

It is precisely the “rural” as a spatial construct opposed to the urban (and inversely bolstering the “urban” as a spatial concept created by urbanity), as well as places defined as “rural” by such discourses and social and material assemblages, that we propose to use as a lens into religious flows originating in cities. Keeping in mind the processual perspective opened by the concept of urban religion, the focus on *change* of religious forms, semantics and pragmatics allows to deal with the complexities of the hybrid situation produced by the back and forth of such flows. Even beyond continuous urban space, religious practices, concepts and imaginations can negotiate the dividing line of rurality and urbanity, can question or strengthen rurality, establish or ridicule urbanity. Seemingly originally urban phenomena moved into what is construed as the non-urban, i.e., rural or wild (and many other shades, starting from the sub-urban), might migrate back into urban contexts. In an age of “pan-urbanisation” cultural pressures to follow urban models might be heightened and stimulated across the land as well as invite the import of “rural religion” to the city. Even in a globalized countryside religion might be used for local constructions of the global as either urban or rural and can be employed in what might be called a counter-ruralisation of urban space.

We invite contributors to either pursue regional case studies or focus on certain phenomena across larger regions. In both cases we ask them to explicitly engage in conceptual reflections and, wherever possible, cross-cultural or cross-temporal comparison.

Case studies might stem from across global history; Euro-Mediterranean and South Asian cases will form a core of comparative material. Phenomena treated might include monastic settlements, missionary or educational activities and other flows of people, construction of genders and others, legislation or other forms of the diffusion of norms, the role of material objects, ritual change.

## Technical issues

Papers will be precirculated (2 weeks before the conference), in order to allow a maximum of discussion.

Travel costs incurred will be refunded according to the Thüringer Reisekostengesetz.

## Selected bibliography

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