 

Conference co-organized by the

Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies and the

Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre of Excellence for Urban Network Evolutions

Urban religion in late antiquity

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The Lived Religion approach to premodern religion, as developed at the Max Weber Center, has highlighted the importance of different types of self-world-relations as defined by local spatial and social contexts, specified through materiality and communication and framed by social imaginaries and knowledge. These contexts reach from domestic to imperial and global contexts. One of the most important on this scale is the urban, which has proven to be of paramount importance for the past century and today’s world, in which for the first time a majority of humans live in cities. The collaboration with the Center for Urban Network Evolutions at Aarhus University and the Social Geography at Jena University and the “International Year of Global Understanding” (Benno Werlen) have allowed a group of researchers across these institutions to address this field and to further research on it within the framework of “Attraction – repulsion – indifference: Comparative cultural research in self-world-relationships” at Erfurt.

*Religion and the City – the City and Religion*

The urban can be seen as the product of specific economic and social developments in the aftermath of the Neolithic revolution, embedded in cultural schemes of interpretation comprising religious ones. For the individual actor it presents an enormously complex environment of constraints and affordances. Previous sacralisations and contemporary religious practices are part of that, reaching out beyond the situation into the transcendental or at least “vertical” and thus implementing far or even “global” horizons into the complexities of the local. Thus, religious actions, communications, and identities offer tools to carve out social spaces and to make or at least modify urban space. Neither is religion specifically urban or the city specifically religious, but historically, in many periods and cultures, the shape and development (including growth as much as decline) of cities – and even more: the different urban spaces created by individuals and different social groups within such built environments – and the shape and development of religious practices and ideas have significantly influenced each other. By stressing the “vertical” (or transcendent) character of human-divine-relationships in the – in evolutionary terms – rather recent phenomenon of urban religion, we can further ask about the role of religion in mediating between the local and the global, that is its interference with cities’ attempts to create lasting horizons and control access to them.

The role of religion in creating spatial, temporal and social order in cities has been an important topic in research from ceremonial centres and cities of Meso- and South America to Near Eastern and ancient Mediterranean, but also Chinese, Indian and medieval European cities. A growing number of inhabitants and the increased density of interaction seem to have prompted (and enabled) processes of institutionalisation and the formulation of norms. Referring to non-human agents beyond the human agents in a situation contributed to organise economic exchange and redistribution. Furthermore, it has been functional in defining property rights as well as rights of political participation. *Vice versa*, citizenship could regulate access to gods, for example “synagogue” and “ekklesia” refer first of all to voting assemblies. Historical research has reconstructed such functions for many instances and recent sociological research, above all research on migration, has consequently inquired into processes of inclusion and exclusion, tolerance and competition caused or experienced by immigrating minorities proffering different or identical religious identities.

Rarely and never comparatively, however, has the interrelationship of city, religion and the global be investigated with a view to other social differences of gender and age, social position and literacy, rural and trans-regional relationships. How is religion used by different agents to appropriate (and that is to say, also craft) urban space? How do religious practices and imaginaries produce a transcending global that is different from other projections of the trans-urban? How does this specific religious agency shape and change urban space over time? And how does the urban context change different or even competing practices of religious communication and the ensuing forms of sacralization? These are questions that need to be tackled. In a historical perspective these processes have hardly been investigated. It is not a harmonizing view but a rather conflicting one of socially embedded agents that need to come to grips with their city, to endure and also to sustain, fight or transcend it, which is at the heart of our approach. We do not suppose an easy evolutionary path but rather assume high variability in the relationship of developments in religious practices in cities and the development of cities being confronted with and building on agents using religious practices in different phases of the history of religion. Thus we will go well beyond approaches that are focusing on competition of religious groups in claiming public space for instance or approaches that are interested above all in the role of religion for minorities (immigrants for example) joining the urban fabric as sketched above.

*The Focus of the Conference*

Within the wider framework of a larger comparative approach we intend to now focus on these processes in the historical context of the advanced imperial and late antique broader Mediterranean space (2nd century CE–8th century CE). Thus, it is not the periods of extraordinary growth or the early or classical monumentalization of cities like Athens, Antioch, Rome or even Constantinople, which are the object of our conference, but the periods of sustained change and ever new appropriation by ever different agents within clearly articulated and monumentalized built environments.

It is individuals’ making urban space and the processes of groupings following on or directed against such built environments and social interaction as informed by them that should become centre-stage. We are looking for archaeological evidence not only of new structures, but of rebuilding, ignoring or actively avoiding spaces, of creating coherent or dis-coherent urban spaces by patterns of movements or marking in religious terms. We are looking for textual evidence for such strategies, but also for imaginations of urban spaces, for ritual practices, religious narratives or norms of re-interpreting and transcending them by relocating the urban in global horizons, whether formulated as universal norms or global geographies. We are as much interested in the mutual constitution as in the mutual critique of the urban and the religious in a global horizon.

We invite scholars whose work is bordering on these questions or might be fruitfully related to them, asking them for contributions that focus on specific bodies of evidence and attempts to theorize them. The papers should be pre-circulated two weeks in advance as we hope that they will be the cornerstones of a volume mapping the field. During the conference, they should be only summarized in a few minutes to allow for intensive discussion. At a later stage in the preparation of this conference we will invite young and senior scholars to join the discussion and to contribute posters or short papers on the mutual constitution or the interaction of urban and religious developments past and present as outlined above.

*Organisation*

The conference room and accommodation will be provided in the Augustinerkloster in the historical centre of Erfurt. All travel expenses will be refunded according to the Thüringer Reisekostengesetz.

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