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### **Ambivalences of Religion: The Constitutive Tensions Within Religion in Urban Space**

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Anders Klostergard-Petersen (Aarhus)

#### **Urban Religion Moving Beyond Urbanity: From Urban Ethnic to Kosmos Trans-Ethnic Types of Religion**

I want to engage in the discussion with Greg Woolf's recent book on humans as city apes. True as this may be, I think the argument skews the causality involved in the transitions from mid-scale to high-scale and extreme-scale forms of religion. However, I do not want to leave the discussion at the theoretical and model level of argument only. I would like to include some empirical cases such as Isis religion and early Christ religion.

Anne Murphy (Vancouver)

#### **Naming sameness: The ambivalence of religious difference and identity in early modern South Asia**

Ambivalence is a definitive aspect of the city as a location for religious subjectivities and communitarian formations, allowing for both radical othering and accommodation/integration. The latter is what we usually think of as the "urbane," the quintessentially urban -- but it cannot be denied that cities too are sites of radical conflict and exclusion. This is an abiding ambivalence, one that persists across space and time. Do the contact and intersection available in the city always make available both of these dynamics? Is there a way to discern a pattern, a predictable conditioning, that determines the direction of such dynamics? How can this pattern be named? This set of questions in general terms brings us to a fundamental issue that the concept note for the conference brings up: the definition of religion. This paper seeks to look at the two common dimensions of definitions of religion -- the personal subjective definition that dominates in psychological and phenomenological definitions of religion, and the social dimension that has dominated in sociological definitions -- to consider their intersection in the location of the city. This question is addressed here in the context of discussion of early modern religiosities in what is now north India/Pakistan, which offer multiple examples of shared social spaces and technologies of selfhood that offer the possibility of accommodation that is promised by urbanity, but at the same time are accompanied by exclusions. It will be argued that it is our inability to name "sameness" or shared religiosity in intellectually rigorous terms that has only allowed difference to remain, both in scholarly terms and in the world of lived experience.

Birgit Meyer (Utrecht)

#### **Madina: thinking the religion-urbanity nexus from the interstice**

The main focus of my paper is the multi-religious and multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Madina, Accra (Ghana), which I have studied together with a larger research team over the past 5 years (<https://religiousmatters.nl/new-the-madina-project/>). I would like to highlight some of the lessons learned through this collective endeavour for identifying a specific deployment of the religion and urbanity nexus. Located on Ga traditional land, Madina got urbanized with the influx of Northern Muslims who were resettled in the area in the late 1950s and grew exponentially with the implementation of Structural Adjustment policies in the 1980s that prompted people to leave rural areas (Ntewusu). Today Madina has about 140,000 inhabitants. It is an area in which Muslims, who form the majority of its population in the otherwise strongly Pentecostalized South of Ghana, Christians and traditionalists negotiate their relations with their religious and ethnic others. As a cosmopolitan place par excellence, new goods, images and ideas from all over the world touch ground in Madina and are appropriated by its inhabitants into new styles.

While they publicly express their religious identities in a marked material and bodily manner, they deploy a pragmatics of co-existence geared towards (albeit “unfriendly”) tolerance (Fosu-Ankrah), conflict avoidance and certain mutual appropriations.

As a shared space, Madina is a world in which urban religiosities are developed and deployed, yet also reach their limits as no religious tradition can impose a closed imaginary on Madina as a whole. Taking as a starting point Madina’s plural religious configuration as an entangled whole, in this paper I will explore coexistence from a relational viewpoint, thereby rejecting to essentialize Christianity, Islam and “African Traditional Religion” as fixed and bounded traditions and instead seeing them as mutually constitutive in urban space. The methodological and conceptual anchor point of this paper is the urban interstice (Zwischenraum) in which connections and relations are shaped by Madina’s diverse inhabitants. My central proposition is that the figure of the interstice, as a key urban feature, is of central relevance for getting hold of the “ambivalences” (conference outline) that shape religion in urban space in one way or another.

Elisa Iori (Erfurt)

### **Material Ambivalences in early Buddhism**

The teaching of the Buddha was undoubtedly the greatest revolution in Early India. It was not only a drastic novelty within Indian religious thought, but also played a co-constitutive role in the development of the writing system, the earliest cities, and the rise of the first empire in Indian history. However, the Buddha was only one of many ascetics who, at the dawn of the second urbanization phase (around the mid-1st millennium BCE), proposed an alternative religious thought to that of the Brahmanical orthodoxy. What exactly was his trump card is still somewhat unclear. It is a fact that while many of the other movements eventually disappeared, Buddhism survived and successfully spread throughout South Asia.

Considering the constitutive role that the material and the spatial have on religion, this contribution aims to reflect on the ambivalences that lie in the blurry indeterminacy of the vocabulary and locations of early Buddhist architecture in early South Asia (3rd-2nd centuries BCE chaitya halls) and put them in dialogue with the unsolved spatial and conceptual rural-urban tension that characterized Buddhist thought.

More specifically, I would like to understand whether and how the ambivalence in materiality and visibility of early Buddhism monument could be conceived as a source of urban changes in Early Indian cities.

Emilliano Urciuoli (Bologna)

### **Locative, Utopian... and Urban:**

#### **Ancient Christian Martyrdom as Urban Religious Insight into Incongruity**

In his well-known topological taxonomy of religious soteriologies Jonathan Z. Smith uses the word “rectification” in two senses: A) rectification of a breach in the legality of the cosmos as the ultimate purpose of religious worldviews of stability and sanctification; B) rectification of a situation as the tactical attempt at forcing a potentially disastrous historical situation into alignment with a cosmological agenda. The two rectifications look the same but they aren’t. The latter differs from the former in that it aims at achieving intelligibility rather than removing the outrage; moreover, it also allows to the possibility of rectifying the model itself (and not only the data) in the light of the troublesome experience. JZS makes clear that while rectification A is inherent to the soteriology of so-called locative maps of the cosmos, rectification B does not belong to the utopian domain of religious cartography because utopian maps are not made for rectifying but rather for reversing. In fact, it pertains to “yet another map”. We can call it ‘incongruous map’ because incongruity is the “ordeal” both natives and scholars have to “undergo” once acknowledged that territory and map fail to overlap (Smith 1978, 309).

Cities, past and present, are ordinary playgrounds of everyday incongruities. They are places where locative/imperial maps get frustrated and go crazy (sometimes thereby turning fundamentalist and fascist) and utopian/subversive maps face the heavily spatialized pressure of historical continuity and daily triviality. Whereas planners and prophets despair of filling gaps, urban religion thrives on incongruities. Since its conceptual debut in Robert Orsi’s *Gods of the City* (1999), scholarly literature on urban religion has

made the steppingstone of incongruity into the keystone of religious entrepreneurship and creativity facing all kinds of inapplicable (cosmological, soteriological, and ecological) blueprints for religious imagination and action. At the bottom of several phenomena I have called “citification of religion” there is an incongruity that is neither fixed nor explained away but rather played with, and whose rectification does not aim to operate either in terms of restoration/repetition of the past or as future fulfillment (Smith 1982, 101).

The paper will survey the urban production of ancient Christian martyrdom texts to search for incongruities and the related tactics of rectifications. The assumption is that, in-between the extremes of what’s most locative (e.g., Cyprian’s martyrdom) and most utopian (e.g., the Scillitan martyrs’ martyrdom) in Christian dying-for-god performances, there should exist an urban capacity for incongruity. The urban continually generates gaps between ‘how the world ought to be and how it actually is’ that afford unanticipated solutions and provide new avenues for thought.

Irene Becci (Leusanne)

**Urban nature between enchantment and valuation under the current circumstances of climate change**  
With my contribution I reflect on the ambivalent relation of urban dwellers to nature as located between enchantment and valuation under the current circumstances of climate change. Following Graeber’s (2001) reflections, we can see that in many Western cities nature is valued as good and ethical, while it becomes also the object of economic valuations for institutions and structural regulations. Through the combination of valuation practices at a macro-institutional level, and enchantment at a local and grassroots level, “urban nature” is endowed with contradictory meanings. While David Thurffell and colleagues found that secular urban dwellers walk to forests to find there a “physical, emotional, and cognitive dimension of the experience of transcendence” (Thurffell et al., 2019, p. 207), I shall present the findings of a study made in Switzerland between 2015 and 2021 about urban environmentalists seeking such experiences locally. According to Giovanni Filoramo (Filoramo, 2022), the idea of nature as animated and filled with sacred places is a way to re-enchant a world that “modernity” has disenchanting. Such sacralization practices also concern time as urban nature opens up a particular time dimension, one that stands in contrast to the urban context. Unlike the streets, houses and other constructions surrounding it, urban nature has its own time, changing its appearance according to the seasons, and thereby connecting to a cosmic time. Urban nature modifies the urban time experience as frenetic, limited and to be optimized. Through its cyclicity, urban nature provides a changing backdrop for religious or spiritual practices allowing awe and enchantment. People’s experiences of natural spaces in urban contexts are mediated not only by “view”, but also by what they smell, hear, taste, and touch. Knott argues that the body plays a “foundational role ... for our experience and representation of space” (Knott, 2005: 156), while other scholars have highlighted how the “sensorium” is a historical, cultural and social construct. It is with this in mind that urban nature (parks, and trees in particular) can be seen as the symbolic recipient of a utopian imaginary for urban dwellers where various religious experiences and spiritual practices are possible.

Jörg Rüpke (Erfurt)

**Religious ambivalences in the dimension of spatiality, temporality, materiality, and sociality**  
If one understands religion as a cluster of communication, sacralization, and reflexion as three fields of practice and world relations, one can consider for model-building purposes how this practice of “religion,” revolving around the transcending ascription of actor-character, has changed and could change the interaction with others in the four dimensions of spatiality, temporality, materiality, and sociality. The contribution will propose to model religion in these four dimensions and explore the ambivalences constitutive for each of them.

Katharina Waldner (Erfurt)

**The ambivalence of empire and the trauma of (religious) intellectuals**

Roman rule in the first two centuries was described and experienced in highly ambivalent ways: there was enslavement and displacement of conquered "barbarians," torture and violence, but also a sense of belonging and universal flourishing for "all nations". This kind of ambivalence gave rise to new religious discourses, practices, and institutions-including so-called "Christianity." In recent years, scholars such as Michael J. Thate or Maia Kotrosits have started to read the texts commonly referred to as "early Christian literature" not as evidence for an early „Christian Identity“ but rather as responses to trauma and loss related to the experience of diaspora and colonial violence. Starting from these insights, this paper will explore the religious narratives and discourses of intellectuals of the first and second century in a new way: It will be asked if the new (urban) philosophical religiosities of e.g. Aelius Aristides or Apuleius but also of the authors of so called „Jewish“ or „Christian“ texts maybe read in the same way: as reactions to the ambivalence of imperial power.

Martin Fuchs (Erfurt)

**Ambivalence as condition and opportunity:  
Dharavi and the relationality of social space**

Conditions for those living in urban 'slums' (in case of Mumbai more than 50% of its population) appear as inherently ambivalent, if not outright precarious. While living conditions have been evolving, the social (and physical) space people inhabit remains contingent on its positionality vis-à-vis socially dominant and 'unstained' urban sectors and actors.

The paper looks at the topographical and political in-between status of Dharavi and the demarcation of its one million residents. In particular, the paper looks at autonomy as the reverse of social distancing; at the strains that exist between marginalization and aspirations; at the contrast between governance and interferences from the outside and informal internal self-governance; and at the opposition between assertion and top-down (political) decisions. The paper asks whether, and if so how, these ambivalences are reflected in, or paralleled by, the way religious activities are organized and performed by the people of Dharavi, and are being echoed in the attitudes that inform these activities.

Marian Burchardt (Leipzig)

**Religion, Ambivalence and Urban Insecurity in Cape Town's Urban Fringes**

In my paper, I take up the question of religion's ambivalence with regard to collective understandings of security and insecurity. There is a wide-ranging literature on these issues in sociology and anthropology. Sociologists such as Inglehart et al. have stressed the role of religion for humans' abilities to manage so-called "existential insecurities" whereas Riesebrodt (2010) emphasized liturgical practices as ways of gaining access to divine powers so as to ward off adversities. Anthropologists have studied spiritual insecurities (e.g. A. Ashforth) as outcomes of social transformations and social crisis. None of these literatures and theoretical approaches have systematically engaged with urban space and cities as sites of ambivalence.

In this paper, I contribute to such an approach by exploring the multiple links between Pentecostalism and the production of security in Cape Town's isiXhosa-speaking townships and trace the ways in which Pentecostal churches have become embroiled with Cape Town's criminal economies, illegality and violence. In these marginalized urban spaces that are territories of relegation and infrastructural exclusion, Pentecostal pastors compete with other spiritual specialists that lay claims on spiritual protection just as with the state's law enforcement agencies over the meanings of crime and violence and legitimate ways to counter them. Through an ethnographic discussion of religious involvements with urban space, crime and security I seek to develop conceptual elements for the study of urban religion that foreground and privilege ambivalences and tensions over the well-known, sometimes functionalist notions of religion as solace, tranquilizer and protecting.

Robert Yelle (München)

**Civil Religion and the Ambivalence of the Church-State Relation: A Constitutive Tension for Secularism**

According to a number of influential accounts, in ancient times the religion of the city was identical with its politics. In *The Ancient City*, Fustel de Coulanges claimed that “every city had its national religion. A city was like a little church, all complete, which had its gods, its dogmas, and its worship.” The gods of the city were its founders, kings, and ancestral heroes, become totems or idols. To be a citizen meant to participate in the rituals of the city, including its sacrifices and feasts. What disturbed this original, organic unity of religion and politics--meaning the business of the polis or city--was partly the advent of Christianity, which brought a new, and sharper, divide between heaven and earth. Modernity has inherited an ambivalent legacy from this dual past. On the one hand, the Christian “Two Kingdoms” doctrine and the institutionalization of church-state relations in the Middle Ages continue to inform contemporary understandings of secularism, which is often defined as the doctrine that religion and politics are and must remain distinct. On the other hand, anti-Christian strains in early modernity invoked the superiority of the pagan model, which by consolidating authority lent religious legitimacy to the political order and avoided sedition. Thomas Hobbes defined a “church” (ecclesia) in such a way as to identify this completely with the state. Hobbes’s “civil theology” was the direct ancestor of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “civil religion,” and the latter, together with Fustel de Coulanges, informed Émile Durkheim’s argument that religion is the glue that holds society together. Strikingly, Durkheim’s definition of religion identified this almost completely with both church and society, blurring if not entirely erasing the boundaries between these communities. Such formulations did not, however, achieve a final resolution of the problem, given both 1) that secularism continues to redraw, with very limited and provisional success, the line between church and state, or religion and politics; and 2) that modernity is often faulted for its supposed lack of a civil religion that would be adequate to support its legitimacy. My contribution will explore how the scholarly and public debates regarding both religion and secularism reflect this underlying set of ambivalences.

Volkhard Krech (Bochum)

**The Religious Semiotization of Physical Space**

Religious space is not simply given but constitutes as religiously meaningful physical space. However, physically determined space is also not simply given but socio-culturally constituted. The contribution offers some semiotic reflections on how religiously constituted and physically determined space are mutually dependent. A closer look shows that metaphor has a special significance for the constitution of religious space. Together with different levels of meaning that can overlay the physically determined space, metaphorical polysemy is one of the reasons for the ambivalence and controversy of physical space and its meaning. The contribution relates general semiotic and metaphorological considerations to the case of establishing a *śīmā*, that is, the demarcation of boundaries for building a Buddhist monastery.