

Urbanity: History, Concept, Uses

Annual Conference of "Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations" (FOR 2779)

16-18 November 2022 (Weimar)

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (Calvino, 1974, p. 165)

Just as Italo Calvino's Marco Polo trusts human beings to develop "who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno," we investigate how people in cities made life livable, how they gave it permanence and spatial form. For Calvino, cities are like dreams, because both are built of desires and fears. Wittingly or unwittingly, Calvino thus places himself in an older tradition of attempting to define the city: for a city consists not only of a collection of built structures but also of its dominant ways of life, as well as of the ideas, perceptions and aspirations of its inhabitants and visitors. With this thought, we are right in the midst of the topic of urbanity – and its different forms over time and place (Rau, 2020a).

Looking at the urban within a large geographical and historical framework, members of the research group "Religion and Urbanity" have observed a great diversity of urban life, both on a material level and on the level of the subjective experience (Rau & Rüpke, 2022). They have also noted the amplitude of factors contributing to the shaping of the urban, its changes and its varying perceptions: ecological factors and atmospheres are essential, as are monumental and changing sceneries, variable and multi layered spaces, ideas, aspirations and attitudes, as well as narratives and city images. Moreover, the subjective character of urbanity invites to name audiences and differentiate actors: the nature of urban experiences are shaped by the identity of individuals and groups, their ethnic, social and religious background, their dreams, agenda and values. A Christ believer in antique Ephesus, an abbot in the medieval German-speaking town of Kempten and a contemporary Shia Muslim community in Kolkata each would report differently about their urban experience. Thus, urbanity as a unique way of "being in the world" (Werlen, 2022) in the context of the city, can only be understood as a complex, intertwined and changing set of threads. To this set, religion contributes, just as being constantly informed by it.

The conference looks at the concept of urbanity and its possible variations. How do we live (together) in dense urban spaces? How has urbanity been defined so far, how can we contribute to better grasp and describe it? The first session of the conference – "Retrospectives" – looks back at the multiple definitions of urbanity by practices and concepts and in different regions and historical periods, as well as in the more recent historiography. Here, the aim is to recapitulate the reflections and theoretical tools

identified in the research group's discussions on urbanity on a larger scale (Rau, 2020b): We will return in particular to the concepts of *heterarchy*, *cospatiality* and *spatialisation*, keeping in mind the essential role of religion, or the reciprocal formation of religion and urbanity more generally. How useful are these concepts in grasping urbanity/urbanities? How can we enrich/improve this methodological resource?

The second session of the conference – “Authors’ Workshop” – summarises the preliminary discussions on cities and urbanities, as they were engaged during the preparatory workshops “[Typologising Cities](#)” (May 2022) and “[Metamorphoses of Urbanities](#)” (June 2022). A selection of topic and case studies from these events will stimulate round table discussions focusing on the differentiation of cities and urbanities: which grid of criteria and parameters are useful in qualifying the experience of urbanity? How does religious phenomena such as religious pluralism or secularisation contribute to the shaping/changing of the urban?

Call for Contributions!

Finally, the third session (part 1 and 2) of the conference offers the opportunity to look at urbanity through the lens of selected case studies and themes. We invite contributors to present their research results on urbanity in the form of a case study in archaeology, history, sociology, ethnology, cultural studies, philosophy and/or linguistics. Addressed cities can be mapped on a large geographical and historical scale encompassing urban centres from the antiquity until today, and from Europe to South Asia. Our earlier discussions pointed out the potential of the non-locality of urbanity, with striking examples of urban experiences outside the city, such as in the Roman villa, the Buddhist *Samgharāma* (monastery) or the theatre of a small contemporary town (Rüpke, 2021). Therefore, we explicitly invite papers on small towns, and possibly examples of non-local urbanity/urbanities, in addition to Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Mumbai and other urban centres with extra regional outreach.

The papers will address one or several of the following themes:

- Historical terminology, and taxonomy referring to the urban character of a place in various regions and periods (*urbanitas*, settlement, city, Urbanität, urban-ness, etc.). Non-European terminologies are particularly welcome.
- City branding and ideas, image building, urban narratives and their producers/actors, city competition. This theme is mainly concerned with a rather ‘top-down’ dialectic of the city.
- “Right to the City” (Henri Lefebvre), urban experience as captured and transmitted via atmospheres, attitudes and aspirations (‘triple A’ of the “Metamorphoses” workshop), practices, actors, perceptions. This theme engages with a more ‘bottom-up’ approach to the city.
- Temporalities, or rather the plurality, complexity and overlay of temporalities. Looking at the times of the city, this theme focuses on the parallelism and overlay of different temporal systems (as how, for example, a religious

temporality interferes with or over-/underscores ecological, economic or political rhythms).

- Spatialities, or rather the plurality, complexity, overlay of spaces, and *Cospatiality*. Beyond bordered or shared spaces, the papers of this theme will discuss the overlay of various material and imagined spaces.
- Religion(s) and their interconnection with the urban. How does religion contribute to the experience of the urban, and how do its urban settings influence urbanity? How to articulate urbanity with religious pluralism, religious governance or secularization?

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