

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

Erfurt, Forschungsneubau “Weltbeziehungen” (Campus), 15-17 November 2023

The KFG “Religion and urbanity: reciprocal formations” (DFG, FOR 2779) attempts at bringing historical findings and conceptual developments together that help to better understand and model the reciprocal formation of urbanity and religion. For instance, the notions of “urban religion” as an analytical lens onto religious change under the impact of urbanisation and of “citification” of religion have been offered, the latter as a concept focusing analysis onto the strategic and functional adaptation of religious practices and beliefs to urban contexts.

In general, religion has been theorized with a view either to individual experiences of contingency (in particular with regard to “modern” society) or with a view to strengthening solidarity, guaranteeing pro-social behaviour, and societal cohesion (in particular with regard to stratified societies and archaic states). Both lines of thinking have to be reconsidered when religion is to be conceptualised within urban contexts and the well-known and -researched ambivalences of urban space and life.

For this conference, we take our inspiration from the observation of a number of constitutive tensions observed for urbanity that we propose to summarize as “urban **ambivalences**”. The concept of ambivalence – in difference to diffusionism, historical dialectics, development, or progress – takes a synchronic stance and observes tensions and contradictions. It stresses conflict and constitutive ambiguity, bi-polar orders, bi-valence at any given moment. The opposition in a religious or urban ambivalence is neither dissolved in good and bad religion, good and bad urbanity. Nor are such ambivalences seen as ephemeral and transitory. As a consequence, metamorphosis of such ambivalences is not about gaining in mono-valence, one-to-one, or reduction of complexity. When using such a concept in a research approach, complexity is predicted as a condition for survival of a city or religion rather than a critical state. This is a deeply normative methodological decision by the researcher.

For the **urban**, the oppositions producing the ambivalences have been identified very differently, for example, as a tension between the high contact density in urban space and the compulsion to individualise (Georg Simmel). Ambivalence is produced by the necessity of competition and of communication (Robert Park). It might be produced by a tension between culturalization – the furthering of aesthetics, art, and entertainment on the one hand and economisation on the other

hand (R. Sennett). Should one stress diversity or equivalence as an urbanite (R. Sennett, see Meier, Steets, Frers 2018)? There is a constitutive tension between formal and informal economy in successful urbanisation (López 2020: "dual urbanism"). Spatially, urban agents are torn between *topophilia* and *heterophilia*, between focusing and relating to one's current location and what is associated with it on the one hand and the interest in connectivity beyond the city boundaries, in the exotic and including the world in one's city (Bloomfield 2006). In a similar manner, on the social level, inclusion is in opposition to exclusion that is, between local rootedness, on the one hand, and the wish to extend networks and to travel, on the other; in other words, an "inclination towards similarity", which is accompanied by an interest in standardisation and administrability, is in tension with "inclination towards diversity", which focuses on complex division of labour and creativity. The complexity of urbanity from connotations of moral order, the necessity of politeness or friendliness and class consciousness for peaceful coexistence, the differentiation and diversity of the inhabitants and their life practices caused by densification processes, as well as their view beyond their own city, can be seen as constitutive of the ambivalences of the urban as a field of constitutive tensions that can be examined in terms of actors, positions, strategies and phenomena.

**Religion** can likewise be described by ambivalence. Topologically and spatially relevant ambivalences of religion have been described, for instance, by Jonathan Z. Smith with the conceptual pair of locative and utopian (Smith 1978, 1987), redefined-by Thomas Tweed (Tweed 2006; cf. also Tweed 2011) as dwelling and crossing, implied by Jeppe Jensen's distinction between "i-religion" and "e-religion" (Jensen 2014), as well as by Jörg Rüpke via the constitutive interplay of (human) religious and divine agency in processes of traditionalization and de-traditionalization/individualization (Rüpke 2016, 2021). With regard to the research enterprise initiated by the KFG, further development of concepts of religion that allow for the complexity of and the interferences among such ambivalences and with urban ambivalences would be important for an adequate historical reconstruction. Even synchronously in individual actors' conceptions, both urbanity or religion are internally complex and charged with tension, and do not interact as two monoliths.

Aiming at sharpening and perfecting a heuristic grid for the study of the mutual formation of religion and urbanity (Christ et al. 2022), the focus of the conference lies with concepts of religion that address material, socio-spatial, temporal, and power-related issues with a view on religious complexity in general and religious ambivalences in particular. The ultimate aim is to better grasp the entanglement between religion and urbanity and the ways urban and religious practices and ideas can change through the interferences of these internal tensions.