Moral Cities: Religious Belonging and Cohabitation in Urban Spaces. Report from the 2017 German Anthropological Association conference

Miriam Kurz 08. 11. 2017 Allgemeines, Christentum, Islam, Religionen & Politik, Religionswissenschaft, Sufismus

How do religious subjects, groups, practices and ideas shape and affect the urban spaces of cities like Berlin and Istanbul? How do religious actors establish relations of belonging? How do they constitute themselves as social, moral, and individual subjects? What happens to religious buildings and devotional objects when they are abandoned and/or appropriated by different religious and/or secular actors? How can we study these phenomena from an anthropological perspective? Under the moderation of Hansjörg Dilger (Freie Universität Berlin), the plenary session "Moral Cities: Religious Belonging and Cohabitation in Urban Spaces" explored the complex entanglements of religion and urban space at the 2017 German Anthropological Association conference which took place at Freie Universität Berlin from October 4-7 and focused on the overall topic of "Belonging: Affective, Moral, and Political Practices in an Interconnected World." The four panelists – Birgit Meyer (Utrecht University), Werner Schiffauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina), and Omar Kasmani and Dominik Mattes (both Freie Universität Berlin) – focused each on specific aspects of the plenary session and highlighted the multiple ways in which urban space is shaped by religion – and how it simultaneously transforms religious ideas, practices, and materialities in a globalizing world.

Plenary session "Moral Cities" at the 2017 German Anthropological Association conference at Freie Universität Berlin © Timur Kiselev.

Starting from materiality – objects and matters

Birgit Meyer's input proposed a way to study the presence and transformation of religion in urban spaces, and the pluriformity of religion in secular Europe, marked by the co-habitation of various religious traditions, practices, and materialities. Meyer, who is professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University, suggests embarking on such explorations from the materiality of religion, which means to take architecture, images, statues and other objects as points of departure and explore their relations with people, practices, and religious ideas. Instead of focusing on questions of transcendence in the study of religion, starting from people's practices and from materials and objects poses a fruitful methodological approach. Practices and materialities constitute graspable objects of study and at the same time provide a connection to the 'beyond' that is articulated and formed through religious ideas. The 'beyond' which often features importantly in the horizons of religious subjects always requires practices and materiality to become meaningful.

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The conversion of a Catholic church into a mosque: Birgit Meyer on studying (previously) Christian materialities © Timur Kiselev.

While currently much research is centered around the topics of Islam and refugees, Meyer proposes to take a closer look at Christian materialities in urban spaces. Particularly interesting are cases of Christian material objects which are not used for their original purposes anymore, but put into new contexts. The 'conversion' of church buildings into mosques, dance studios and libraries and the recycling of Christian devotional objects by artists are such examples. The closure and conversion of churches has become a common phenomenon in Western European secular countries such as the Netherlands or Germany today.

But what happens to a church when it is no longer used by Christian practitioners? When it is designated to serve a new purpose? What happens to the mosque or the library when it is situated within a former church building? How does this re-appropriation of space shape people's relations to the building? How can we understand profanized religious objects, like Catholic statues turned into an artwork, as materializations of the secular? And how do people who see such artworks in an exhibition contextualize them and relate to them? Following these lines of inquiry into religious materialities can provide a window into pluriform religious entanglements in the city, as Meyer argues and as research conducted within the framework of the project "Religious Matters in an Entangled World" at Utrecht University, Netherlands suggests, which is headed by her.

Matters in this endeavor are not reduced to physical objects, though, but extend to matters of debate, conflict, and tension. In this sense, court cases and discussions that arise are also entry points to the study of religion within the approach Meyer proposes and can reveal the competitive relationships between religious communities in a setting. As Birgit Meyer reported from an exhibition of artistically arranged Christian devotional objects which were displayed in the Het Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands (Video "Sculptuur: Verspijkerd en verzaagd"), visitors commented in the exhibition guestbook that this artistic recycling of Catholic objects would not be possible with Islamic objects, referring to public controversies over the Muhammad cartoons etc. The comments implied that Muslim sentiments would not allow for such a treatment of religious objects, while Catholic sentiments did. This can be taken as an example of how discussions over objects locate Islam and Christianity as well as their adherents in a situation of competition within both urban and discursive spaces over moral and societal status and power. Attending to debates arising from religious and profanized objects reveals the complex entanglements of various religious traditions, groups, individuals, and ideas and allows to analyze the latter's situatedness within power structures, public discourses, and processes of 'heritagization.'

Religious, political, and class materialities – Transformation processes in urban Istanbul and Turkey's political landscape

Anthropologist Werner Schiffauer, professor emeritus of Comparative Cultural and Social Anthropology at Europa-Universität Viadrina, explored the dynamic relationships and developments between Islamic groups and movements, the Turkish state, urban space and class distinction in Istanbul over the past decades. His contribution highlighted how the transformation of the religious landscape in urban Istanbul is interlinked with the emergence of new religious materialities in the form of gated communities of the 'Islamic bourgeoisie,' VIP mosques, and how the transformation of the religious landscape is also interlinked with the transformation of the political landscape and state institutions. Pointing out developments which happened over the past 40 years in Turkey and manifested in Istanbul's urban landscape, he showed how religion gained a different presence in the Turkish metropolis.

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Werner Schiffauer (l.) and chair Hansjörg Dilger (r.) in discussion with the audience and their fellow panelists © Timur Kiselev.

When 'hegemonic laicism,' as Schiffauer terms it, prevailed during the 1980s in Turkey, Islam was practiced in mosques and private apartments in urban Istanbul. The 1980s and 90s saw a significant increase in Istanbul's inhabitants and a demographic change: An influx of migrants from Turkey's less developed parts to the urban area of Istanbul expanded the city's limits and transformed the presence of Islam in the city. The new inhabitants from rural areas began to create solutions for their religious needs in Istanbul and contributed to a transformation of the city's religious, spatial, and socio-political landscape. A new reform movement with a social-religious agenda evolved which did not rely on (laical) state structures, but mostly on self-organization. Two popular heads of this broader movement (which split into various parties) were Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the current president of Turkey) and Necmettin Erbakan (founder of the political 'National Salvation Party' out of the Milli Görüş movement). Adherents of the movement transformed the way Islam was organized in Istanbul both on the scale of neighborhood areas and in terms of the political landscape with the foundation of the National Salvation Party, for example. With time, carriers of this social-religious agenda made their way into state institutions like ministries and the army and transformed not only the spatial, but also the political set-up. The visibility of Islam in Istanbul increased under the agency of these religious and socio-political actors.

The 2000s were marked by the emergence of Muslim capitalist entrepreneurs and a Muslim entrepreneurial class, which brought about major changes in Istanbul's urban space and its Islamic landscape: Adherents of this emerging class constructed gated communities and 'VIP mosques'. This phenomenon offers interesting material entry points in Meyer's sense to the study of class and religion in urban space: The walls which separate wealthy Muslims from their poorer fellows in neighboring residential areas, the new mosques sponsored by Muslim businessmen, as well as the related controversies (arising 'matters') about the compatibility of a luxurious lifestyle, class segregated housing, and high-end and expensive designer fashion for covered women with Islamic values and principles.

The closer analysis of the developments sketched out by Schiffauer allows to study how practices of place-making by religious, economic, and political subjects transform both the presence and appearance of Islam in urban landscape, social and class structures, state institutions, and the status of religion and religious actors within the political system.

Looking at practices: Place-making and moral mapping among faith communities of migrated subjects in urban Berlin

The contribution of anthropologists Kasmani and Mattes started from the practices of religious subjects in Berlin who established (or struggle to establish) spaces for their communities in the city. Omar Kasmani and Dominik Mattes who are part of the Collaborative Research Centre "Affective Societies" at Freie Universität Berlin with their joint research project "Embodied Emotions and Religious Belonging in Migratory Settings: Sufi Centres and (New) Pentecostal Churches in Berlin" presented insights into their fieldwork and showed how practices of religious place-making involve the crafting of local and transnational moral worlds, grounding oneself in the city, situating the city morally in the world and challenging urban non-visibility. Kasmani's and Mattes' material highlights a different facet of the entanglement of religion and urban space. It provides insight into how subjects create their own moral maps of the city and connect them to alternative utopias. It thus shows how religious subjects (especially in conditions of marginalization and disadvantage) transform the urban landscape in the moral, affective and imaginative realm, besides practices of material place-making such as renting a community center.

Panelists Dominik Mattes (l.) and Omar Kasmani (r.) conduct their research at the Collaborative Research Centre "Affective Societies" at Freie Universität Berlin © Timur Kiselev.

Rechtsradikalismus
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Religionsfreiheit
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Religionsphänomenologie
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Spiritualität
Säkularisierung
Verschwörungsmythen
Verschwörungstheorien
Weltanschauung Zeugen Jehovas

Kasmani illustrated how the Sufi practice of *dhikr*, a ritualized practice of remembering and invoking Allah which involves a strong engagement of the body through voice and movement, was central to the constitution of the Sufi circle he does his research with as a spiritual group. After the contract for their community center had not been renewed, the group of young men who constituted the Sufi circle were left without a central, physical gathering space. The joint practice of *dhikr*, which they from then on conducted in varying private homes, was the central element that held the group together and constituted it as a Sufi circle. *Dhikr* thus constituted a space through practice and allowed the members to continue to form affective relations of belonging while their group had no publicly visible space in Berlin.
As Kasmani showed, affective performances like *dhikr* are also integral to how a moral life in Berlin is imagined by the Sufi group members who are all young men in their twenties. Their hoca or sheikh mapped the city of Berlin as a sinful and morally polluted space. He set up a landscape of dirt and impurity in his sermons. The 'dirt of everyday life' pervades the city: In the street, there is mud, in the shops, there is sin, on TV and in the cinema, there is sin, at school, sin. To survive in this polluted environment as moral subjects, the Sufi practitioners should engage in *dhikr* to clean themselves from the dirt, to purge themselves of the moral impurity of the city. The practice of *dhikr* can thus be understood as a way of moral belonging, self-fashioning, and as a way of establishing moral space in a city mapped as space of impurity.

A similar moral mapping of the city was undertaken by the pastor of the neo-Pentecostal church of West-African migrants where Mattes conducts his fieldwork. Berlin occupies a central role in the pastor's affect-charged sermons and prayers, and he also constructs the city of Berlin as a space of moral impurity: Pornography is everywhere in Berlin, he says. The morally precarious state of the city is an imperative for him to effect a moral transformation of the city. "We are responsible for the city!" Mattes cites the pastor. "The spirit of the Lord will seek the hearts of men in the city." He pursues the spiritual protection and transformation of the city. The neo-Pentecostal church also invested in place-making in material ways: After years of searching, the church members were able to rent a community center and establish a physical space for their congregation. While the presence of the church itself is not very visible in the street, the community members increase their visibility and engagement in place-making through distributing religious flyers in the streets.

The practices of Kasmani's and Mattes' interlocutors highlight how religious place-making in the city does not only take place materially (as Schiffauer's examples of gated communities and the erection of new mosques show), but also morally and spiritually. Particularly when religious subjects and communities have a lesser ability to assert themselves materially, e.g. due to their marginalized, disadvantaged and partly precarious status as migrants or asylum seekers, the spiritual, moral, and transcendental dimensions of place-making and belonging can become increasingly important. Space is created and appropriated through the joint practice of *dhikr*, through praying for the city and its inhabitants, through the moral mapping of city space. In these ways, subjects form relations of belonging in translocal and transtemporal ways and constitute themselves as moral subjects. They do not only establish relations of belonging within the urban space of Berlin, but also pursue practices of belonging beyond the city, e.g. to home towns and connected centers of their faith communities in other parts of the world, and to the anticipated space of the hereafter.

Conclusion

Hansjörg Dilger (middle) moderating the discussion following the inputs of the four panelists © Timur Kiselev.

The plenary session with these different inputs provided insights into the various ways in which the religious and the urban shape each other, how religion, sociopolitical order and class structures are intertwined, and how various religious actors navigate these dimensions materially and discursively. It shed light on ways in which place-making is pursued in particular societal, political, and always power-infused contexts, and how we as anthropologists and religious studies scholars can approach such phenomena in our research.

What seems important when analyzing such material, discursive, and moral practices of place-making in urban space as well as debates and contestations over religious materialities and practices is to attend to the entanglement of these

phenomena with the distribution of power and capital in different forms. Materialities which on the one hand stand for religious belonging and place-making by subjects or groups can on the other hand represent marginality and poverty in the wider societal context. Communities that have secure financing, institutional support, and/or resources among their community members (financial, educational, etc.) might develop and follow different strategies from communities in socially and politically disadvantaged positions. The constitution of moral capital through moral mapping, the drawing of boundaries, and the insistence on urban moral pollution (but also through the insistence on the terroristic or anti-liberal nature of a group), for instance, need to be read in the wider context of power negotiations on different levels. An investigation of the local, societal, and global standing of communities helps to contextualize their place-making strategies and is particularly important given today's entangled world and relations of competition among various religious groups, communities, ideas and narratives.

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dhikr, Materialität, Migration, Moral Cities, Pentekostalismus, Pfingstbewegung, Säkularität.

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