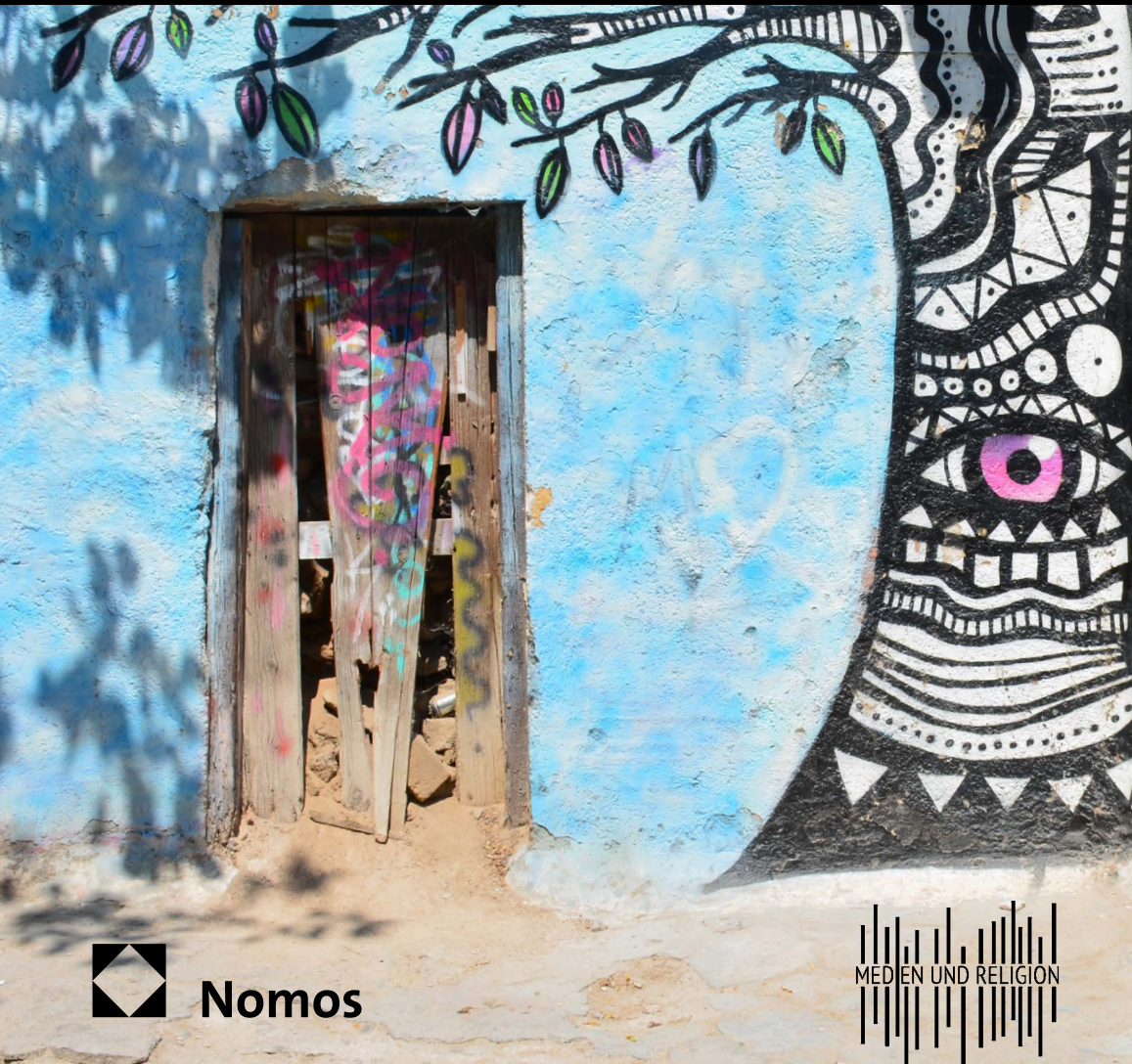


Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

Shared Places

On Religion and Space



Nomos



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© Cover image: Mural by LOAF in Plaka, Athens 2019. Photograph by the author.

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1 Space in Researching Religion

[...] quando le idee sono incerte, i sentimenti confusi, le parole insufficienti, le cronologie messe in discussione, e il tempo si avvolge come un pitone che si inghiotte da solo, ci resta ancora la geografia.¹

This book aims to reflect on space and place as fundamental terms for researching religion as a cultural phenomenon. It arises from a vivid interest in place and space as key concepts in the study of religion and their relevance both for research projects and for academic teaching. It offers a cross-disciplinary reading of selected dimensions of the interaction between space, place and religion and provides theoretical tools that are applied in depth to case studies from the history of religion in Europe and contemporary society. The sources selected for this volume exemplify a range of possible relationships between space and religion. The case studies consider spatial practices where mutual influence, negotiation processes or contested approaches originate from the contact between religious and other worldviews and orientations.

1.1 Exploring shared places in a challenging time

As I am writing these lines, we are experiencing a turbulent and uncertain time characterised by a global climate catastrophe, wars and relentless violence, and the spread of totalitarianism. These developments follow close on the heels of a pandemic. Thinking about space and place in the midst of such enormous challenges reinforces the relevance of these categories – unfortu-

1 From Francesca Melandri's novel *Piedi freddi* 2024, 21: »[...] when ideas are insecure, sentiments confused, words insufficient, chronologies questioned, and time winds itself up like a python swallowing itself, we are still left with geography.« Translation by the author.

nately in a negative way. Climate change reminds us every day that life relies on the physical, material resources of the Earth. The planet we inhabit is a territory, a spatial ground on which individual biographies, cultures and societies unfold. Since the balance of sustainability has been lost, (human) life as we know it may now be jeopardised. Although the infection waves hit different countries and people in different ways and the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic varied from place to place, nonetheless, everywhere was affected and it continues to impact both societal and individual relationships. The restrictions that sought to limit transmission principally aimed at transforming and dramatically reducing our access to public places. During lockdowns, people were expected to stay at home and to transform private places into offices, schools, lecture halls, gyms, sacred, or funerary spaces. Analogical and digital rooms were blurred. For many months social interaction was restricted to the small surface areas of flats and houses, with access to public space mediated mainly by virtual media. Public space was, and in some cases still is being, regulated by specific rules: social distancing and hygiene measures have long-lasting influence and re-shape relationships between the individual and the collective. The necessity of wearing masks and keeping distance from one another has reconfigured the presence of the human body in (public) space and has consequently highlighted the physical, spatial boundaries between individuals by means of material things and practices. During the pandemic, the space we needed for interpersonal exchanges had to be enlarged. By way of example, for indoor meetings within a university, at certain times, nine square metre distances were required to separate each student. Furthermore, national borders within Europe, which had previously been rendered invisible, were closed and became both visible and impassable once more.

Wars show in an unequivocally dramatic way the relevance of space and place and the impact that the denial of spatial sovereignty can have on individuals, families, national communities and transnational relationships. The multilayered significance of spatiality in a plural democracy is most evident in the worst-case scenario of its denial. Under the violence of military intervention, destruction and annihilation, places change their configuration and function: underground stations are turned into shelters against attacks, streets into battlefields, clubs into collective sleeping rooms, forests into mass graves. The individual and collective orientation in and through place is collapsed, public space is destroyed, national borders are questioned. Cities

are erased from maps. The sky and the sea, as transnational spaces, are subjected to strong regulations. The virtual space is torn apart by cyber-attacks and sanctions limiting interactions of various kinds. War causes an imposing reconfiguration of analogical and digital places that disrupts all aspects of life by practices of violence. These events, widely covered and debated in extensive media coverage, illustrate the relevance of space and place as basic concepts, thrown into sharp relief by adverse developments and highly contested practices.

In the face of these hostile events, in the search for hope and to overcome indifference or depression – this book has been written. It is an invitation to sharpen our gaze upon spatial practices in society that negotiate, construct or enforce how we live together, with a particular focus on the role of religious practices. This book argues that spatiality is highly significant for understanding religion as a complex communication process that may contribute to develop further ideas to strengthen collaborative attitudes. Through a series of case studies, it deepens our understanding of spatial practices that may foster plurality and promote interactions between diverse worldviews, or, at least, open up debates where differences may be negotiated. Overall, this study aims to explore religion by analysing the common ground we inhabit as a shared place.

1.2 A book as an imaginary journey

This book is written for students, scholars and a broader audience interested in a spatial approach to religion and culture. The text, based on the interplay between conceptual approaches to space and place and selected case studies, offers an imaginary journey in different stages. In the next chapter, *Religion in Place*, the approach to the concept of »religion« is discussed. Influenced by a cultural studies approach, this chapter emphasises the significance of spatial practices for understanding religion as a cultural phenomenon that is always located in a particular place, embedded in a particular context. In the third chapter, *Place and Space as Travelling Concepts through Time*, we focus on selected visual sources in the transition from the Middle Ages to early modern Europe, when approaches to cosmology, cartography and geography underwent significant changes. The selected images crys-

tallise concepts of space that are dynamic, moulded according to religious worldviews, different forms of knowledge and the direct observation of the earthly territory. The selected examples illustrate how, in this period of the European history of religion, space became a contested subject, and a matter of scientific exploration. This religious-historical approach to the concepts of space and place aims at paving the way for Chapter 4, *Place and Space as Travelling Concepts through Disciplines*, that offers an overview of influential spatial theories from different disciplines that are particularly relevant for analysing religion in place. Specifically, this book argues that the interaction between places and religious plurality can be investigated in a number of steps: first, by considering spatial practices that take place in everyday life, second by analysing activities of planning and design and, third, by reconstructing the production, challenges and transformations of meaning arising in spatial arrangements. In researching religion, space is considered to be a process in which the human body plays a central role.

After the discussion of influential theories, this book leads the reader to places where religion is performed in shared spatial practices. Religious practices in the Alps, cemeteries, urban buildings, and museums are scrutinised as social places where different religious and other orientations interact and mutually influence one another.

Chapter 5, *Appropriating Liminal Places*, provides examples of spatial practices in the Alps, and addresses the relationship between landscapes and religious symbols. Chapter 6, *Remembering Places*, focuses on the interrelation between spatiality, the body and materiality in funerary sites, while Chapter 7, *Accommodating Plurality*, is dedicated to urban multireligious architecture that brings together different religious communities and rituals. Chapter 8, *Places of Encounter*, scrutinises museums, places that today undertake a prominent role in representing religious identities and differences. By designing exhibitions in which religious artefacts play a central role, they offer places of educational and performative engagement with religious pluralism in contemporary society.

Each of these chapters is structured in a similar way. First, a contemporary example introduces the chosen place and outlines its relevance for addressing shared spatial practices. Second, the chosen place is discussed with a particular focus on its development over time, in a diachronic perspective. The discovery of the Alps, the foundation of modern cemeteries, the diffusion

of urban architecture responding to the specific needs of mobile, plural and diverse societies, and the emergence of modern museums. How does each place negotiate the complex interplay between religious symbol systems, practices, and communities? This initial contextualisation lays the foundation for the analyses of the selected case studies from different places and/or times, building up a picture of the complex interplay between place, space and religion. This itinerary through concepts and case studies ends in Chapter 9, *Religion Takes Place*, where the main results of this exploration are recapitulated.

In the following pages, I invite the reader to join me as we take an imaginary journey that connects diverse approaches to space, place, and religion. This virtual travel links together different places where the coexistence and the mutual influence between different religious traditions, worldviews, communities, and practices can be analysed and reconstructed. The selection of stops covers crucial debates and contributions for understanding the relevance of space and place as a fundamental, shared dimension of society. As always, when one is travelling, only certain places may be visited and others passed by. The places we explore in this book are selected from research I have undertaken over the last decade and mirrors stages of my academic and biographical itineraries through different European countries.

1.3 Locating the starting point

Seeing religion through the lenses of spatiality offers an approach to researching religious traditions, communities, practices, symbol systems, and exchanges that is embedded in specific socio-historical contexts. As we will draw out further in this book, such a perspective is based on an approach to religion that pays particular attention to representation and meaning-making processes within a wider cultural setting. The influence of cultural studies and cultural analysis in researching religion from a spatial perspective stimulates self-reflection on the position we take-up while undertaking research.

It is not only the phenomena that we analyse which are located, but also academic discourses and scientific perspectives are equally embedded in a specific context. Therefore, this volume mirrors the position I am taking in approaching religion and spatiality on many levels. First, I discovered the

fundamental significance of space whilst working in the field of religion and visibility for many years. Therefore, visual communication plays a crucial role in this study, both in the theoretical frame and in the case studies discussed. Some examples I analyse formed part of previous research projects focusing on images and visual practices. In this book, they are revisited in light of their significance in constructing and shaping places.

Second, I grew up and still live in the southern part of Switzerland, a border area characterised by exchanges between different cultures. This biographical location implies lived experience of crossing linguistic borders, becoming accustomed to different national and political systems, being familiar with different cultural conventions and habits and, academically, considering publications from different scholarly traditions. This has, of course, positive and negative effects. On the one hand, the possibility of bringing different academic traditions into dialogue is clearly enriching and innovative. Nevertheless, engaging with a wide range of academic approaches and disciplines to spatiality has its own limits. I am not aiming for an exhaustive overview of all the specific discourses across the different traditions. Instead, I will discuss concepts and approaches that are useful to address space and place in researching religion, those studies which my readers may find most relevant, acknowledging that the scholarly production in spatiality is almost boundless.

Being located in a multilingual context, I decided to write in English, although my mother tongue is Italian and I work mainly in German at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. Although I am not a native speaker, I chose the contemporary *lingua franca* of academia because it facilitates an intellectual exchange that overcomes language barriers. Consequently, English serves here as a bridge to engage in a dialogue with different approaches, without aiming for coverage of the entire academic debate on spatiality in the fields and traditions I have access to.

This volume introduces the reader to places where different religious and other forms of orientation are mediated and negotiated. It explores the relationship between religion and spatiality as social practices that may assume different shapes in different eras, cultures, and societies. I discuss public places accessible to many different people and communities. This trip will take us to visit places in Europe, past and present, and on spatial practices that foster societal cohesion and open up a dimension where plurality and manifold identities are moulded and negotiated.

2 Religion in Place

*Sul muro grafito
che adombra i sedili rari
l'arco del cielo appare
finito.
[...]*¹

2.1 Questioning graffiti in Athens

During my last visit to Athens in 2019 I was impressed by the widespread presence and expressive power of graffiti in various districts of the city. There was a variegated collection of works in a range of genres, styles and sizes scattered across the Greek capital. Some were works of art funded by public institutions. Most of them, however, were made by individuals and groups reclaiming public space as a place for visually representing opinions, responding to the precarious socio-political situation, and questioning passersby.² The graffiti transform the city of Athens, using walls, abandoned houses, derelict buildings, doors, or gates as an urban canvas. Onto these urban canvases (mostly) anonymous voices and gazes are materialised and visualised by incisive, vitriolic, disillusioned, or poetic stencils, slogans, or murals.³

1 »Above the graffiti-covered wall / shading a few benches / the vault of heaven seems / ended.« From Eugenio Montales *Ossi di Seppia* (1920–1927) in Montale 1977, 69. English translation by William Arrowsmith (Montale 1992, 83).

2 For a general introduction to street art and graffiti see Ross 2016.

3 Using mixed forms, the different genres express various approaches to street art as a political means of expression. Stencils, slogans, or murals are produced using different techniques. Stencils enable rapid reproduction of the same motifs, whilst murals require more elaborate planning and equipment, such as scaffolding, see Zaimakis 2015; Theodosis /



Fig. 1: Mural by LOAF in Plaka, Athens, August 2019.

Figure 1 depicts a mural in a narrow passageway next to Stratonos Street, in the ancient neighbourhood of Plaka, just below the polished remains of the Acropolis. The walls of this small square are covered with eyes in a graphic black and white design. The eyes emerge from or merge into a tree (depending on the direction one is looking at the mural). On the tree-trunk there is an eye highlighted by a pink iris. On the left-hand side, the eye-tree stretches out its mostly bare branches, except for a scattering of green and pink leaves shading a broken door. The background is powder blue, almost the same colour as the cloudless sky on the bright summer day when I took this picture. Other smaller graffiti are painted in different places in the passageway. They illustrate the dynamics that are typical for this form of temporary visu-

Karathanasis 2008. On the significance of street art in the Greek context see Alexandrakis 2016, 289: »Cedar Lewisohn (2008) explains that street art constitutes a subgenre of graffiti that challenges one's experience of urban space. Street artists use stencils, murals, and even one-liners to provide critical social and political commentary. Here, street art challenges the normative »regime of visibility« (Ranciere 2004, 22) ultimately calling into question the underlying formations of space, variously construed. Alitico graffiti can be considered a style of street art. By depicting the effects of governing through crisis management, my interlocutors created surfaces that challenged the normative principles coming to enact neoliberal subjects.«

al expression. New graffiti are often in dialogue with what has been painted before, which may be changed, completed, or erased, and then repainted.

The graffiti in this small alleyway in Plaka is impressive. It is a glaring presence in the heart of a city renowned to visitors as the cradle of European culture. Since I was a high school student, fascinated by ancient Greek language, literature, and culture I have been familiar with the myths and legends linked to this very place. The graffiti, the decaying buildings, the ruins of the Acropolis with its view over the vast urban settlement below, together challenge the expectations of a visitor to Athens, anticipating an historic, archaeological site. Yet the graffiti often allude to narratives from classical culture or Greece's cultural heritage, merging them with topics arising from the country's contemporary political, financial, and social crisis. Walking across this old district, questions such as these arise: What kind of place is Plaka? What does this mural refer to? What does it communicate? And how does it transform this place?

This work of street art is comprised of two principal iconographic elements: the eyes and the tree. Although the tree is sturdy, it only has a few green and pink leaves springing up from its branches on the left side. Depicted in this place, the tree may echo the olive tree of Athena, planted on the Acropolis by the goddess in her successful contest against Poseidon for supremacy over the city. Historically, such a scene was represented in the west pediment of the Parthenon.⁴ Eyes are a recurring visual element in graffiti spread all over the city.⁵ In this context, the eyes may refer to seeing as a crucial performance in a time of austerity. Different ways of looking may be associated with the eyes, as the eyes form a multilayered image as a result of the interaction between the viewer, the viewer's imagination and the material representation.⁶ The eyes, in this place, can refer to seeing, a metaphor for facing a situation that has become unbearable for many people living in Greece, or to (sight-)seeing, which is what tourists are doing in Athens, or to (indifferent) seeing as the attitude of many Europeans towards Greece. Furthermore, the eyes may refer to amulets used as a protection against the evil eye. Viewed in this way, the eyes may function as an apotropaic symbol to ward off the harmful political and economic situation.⁷

4 A reproduction of the west pediment is provided in Valavanis 2013, 148.

5 See e.g. the work *Access Control* by iNO; Alderman 2014.

6 Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgati 2018, particularly 8–30.

7 For an introduction to the evil eye in contemporary Greece see Roussou 2014.



Fig. 2: Mural by Barba Dee, Athens, August 2019.

The comparison with other murals may open up further horizons for interpreting this work of street art. For instance, a comparison between figure 1 and figure 2 strengthens a socio-critical reading. The huge glasses in figure 2 emphasise the short-sightedness of people travelling to Athens from outside, since it addresses the viewer in English. The question »Can't you see it?« beneath huge eyewear addresses tourists visiting the ancient Greek heritage site without realising that it is metaphorically burning, like the entire city that is being destroyed (fig. 2). This graffiti by Barba Dee represents seeing in the context of a sharp critique of the state, church organisations and the wider European political establishment.⁸ The colours red, yellow and black may allude to the German flag, hinting at the prominent role of Germany, within the European Union, in responding to the Greek debt crisis, and the creation of a tripartite committee (comprised of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund), in setting the terms of the debt-repayment and austerity measures imposed on Greece in 2010.

8 For an overview of the oeuvre by Barba Dee (b. 1991) see <https://barbadee.bigcartel.com> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

The murals are polysemic: different meanings can arise from the encounter between a graffiti and a viewer, depending on his or her biographical, cultural, or socio-political background.⁹

The mural in Plaka, with which this introductory chapter began, was painted by LOAF (LoveAgainstFear). LOAF uses a different style to Barba Dee, based on neat lines. In LOAF's graffiti, eyes are omnipresent.¹⁰ LOAF's murals do not explicitly express a political message. Nevertheless, being part of the community of street artists in Athens and choosing to paint graffiti in urban places is itself a political performance.¹¹ It is an appropriation of public space as a means of expressing a point of view that is neglected by the establishment.¹² Walking the fine line between illegal activity and assertive artistic statement, the graffiti shape Athens as a contested place in contemporary Europe.¹³ They visualise protest and resistance against social collapse, they convey political programmes, or they just express desperation and anger. LOAF's eyes may also be interpreted as self-reflexive, which would highlight the impact of murals as a performance transforming urban space, visualising ideas, materialising utopia, and expressing feelings about living in Greece. The choice of colours, shapes, and writing make marginalised perspectives

9 Evans 2016, Brighenti 2016.

10 <https://www.isupportstreetart.com/artist/loaf-gr/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

11 Leventis 2013, 1: »A new form of public art, street art could claim a legitimate part in the forming and transforming of urban identities in both their visual and their spatial interactions.« See also Alexandrakis 2016, 273–274: »Here I consider this form of graffiti – a public manifestation of dissent and reflection – as one mode of political response to the material and symbolic violence of what is arguably among the most coercive exercises of neoliberal governmentality, at least in the developed regions of the world. It constitutes a response distinctive of, if not confined to, individuals on the periphery of the social mainstream.«

12 Zaimakis 2015, 373–396.

13 Tsoumas 2011 and Leventis 2013. See also Bruce (2019, 4): »Public art is a form of communication wherein creativity, affect, relationality, spatial context, and disagreements are crucial to the production process. Public art must intervene in and grapple with the public and public spaces in explicit ways, making it an ideal context in which to consider the possibility of democratic culture. Graffiti is often the neglected stepchild of public art. Routinely framed by municipal officials as vandalism and anti-aesthetic, its history as a form of youth communication in contexts of abandonment and its transnational networks, competition culture, and heterogeneous makeup make it particularly well suited to an analysis of spaces for encounter.«

visible. Graffiti's ephemeral designs express contested positions and points of views and locate them in space.

I have chosen LOAF's graffiti in Plaka to introduce our study on the interaction between religion and spatiality for many reasons. First, this mural and the walls it is painted on are in a physical place one can visit and experience by standing bodily in front of this work of street art. The proposed readings offered above are tentative, in view of the polysemic nature of a mural. As a result meaning may be framed as a process of negotiation that takes place in multiple reception processes and, therefore, is never fixed or concluded.¹⁴ Reception processes of graffiti are particularly dynamic because they are ephemeral artworks and can be transformed by different hands at any time. Their interpretation is always located and generated in an encounter between the work of art and a viewer who may in turn become an artist and alter the mural. The location of this visual expression of subversion highlights the link between visuality, materiality and space. The approach to spatiality presented in this book arises from the interaction of these key concepts in the study of religion.

Second, the mural and its various transformations can be tracked on social media and on the Internet.¹⁵ Murals may be presented in blogs and other platforms created by single users or institutions as well as on websites dedicated to street art in Athens, published for various motives, ranging from interest groups for promoting the political and cultural value of graffiti, to more touristy advertising for urban adventures.¹⁶ The entanglement between place as a physical extension you may walk in and visit or experience by means of electronic devices is a significant aspect of spatiality. The

14 Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgati 2018 and Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgati 2015.

15 As one example among many see <https://www.isupportstreetart.com/artist/loaf-gr/> (accessed on 6 August 2025) and the artist's accounts on social media. YouTube plays a crucial role as video clips enable the artist to present not only the finished murals but also the process of painting as a subversive performance. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wYf0nxZ3Rg&t=3s> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f7DrOS9CMw> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

16 See e.g. <https://athensaf.eu/athensaf-athens-street-art-festival-loaf/>, https://www.tripadvisor.com/Articles-I924ARpPPppc-Street_art_tour_athens_greece.html or <https://www.alternativeathens.com/tours/street-art-tour/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

multiple digital spaces where one may experience a graffiti means the experience of looking cannot be limited to any one place and time. The location on Stratonos Street is reiterated and enlarged in its virtual reproductions. This draws attention to place as a multilayered dimension of human experience. It encompasses physical places, their reproduction in digital media, but also in photography, art, maps, and mental images.

The spatial extension that results from the interplay between digital and analogue media is a significant aspect of the transformation of places in time. This also impacts on the role that places have in shaping history. This aspect is particularly meaningful for research in cultural studies. Meaning-making processes like those I was involved in whilst looking at the murals in Athens are spatial practices. As we will explore further in the following chapters, places are not static but are constantly realised and transformed, they happen in time. The selected works of street art emphasise the complexity and relevance of spatiality in dealing with culture. The mural in Plaka highlights the dynamics of a place and the challenges we deal with when undertaking research in this field.

2.2 »Religion«, a multifaceted term

Following an approach that emphasises the dynamics of place and the transformations that – literally – take place in space, the inclusion of the term »religion« may appear to be out of place or even contradictory. The concept of »religion« may seem, at first glance, to suggest an aspect of culture that can be neatly distinguished from others and simply defined. Yet, the term »religion« incorporates manifold connotations and layers of meaning that have sedimented and crystallised in the course of history, first in Europe and then worldwide. Consequently, the meaning of the term »religion« varies, depending on the specific cultural and societal setting, the languages and power constellations in which it is situated. Within a cultural studies approach to religion, attentive to fluid and ductile social interactions, the term »religion« emerges like an erratic boulder in a landscape.¹⁷

17 For an introduction to the debate surrounding »religion« in the study of religion see e. g. Bergunder 2012.

There are innumerable challenges that arise in dealing with »religion« and with the specific history of this ancient term; therefore, in this chapter, I will only address a few aspects that are particularly relevant for understanding place and space. The history of the term »religion« is very complex, not least because it has crossed (and blurred) many linguistic, socio-cultural, and political borders. From the Latin origins of *religio* to the many adaptations of the term in Romance languages to the variegated translations and adaptation in other linguistic families, the connotations, values, and norms linked to »religion« cover a very broad range.¹⁸

In addition, religion is a common word used in everyday communication. From an emic perspective, religion may be engaged with as a self-description of religious institutions, groups or individuals. Or it can function as an othering category to address religious worldviews, practices, or traditions one may consider as »other«. Furthermore, religion is a term that recurs in many social spheres such as media, politics, and economics, as well as in legal and health systems, in the arts, architecture, in the entertainment industry, or in fashion. In all those fields, religion can assume different meanings, can be used in a positive sense, referring to practices and beliefs that contribute to societal cohesion, as an essential part of the cultural heritage or, the other way around, as a denial of complexity, a legitimization of violence, or a source of conflicts that must be overcome in a plural society.

In all these cases, religion is constructed differently.¹⁹ The boundaries of what is considered as religion and what is rather categorised as custom or habit are variable and depend upon the contexts and the different agendas, values, and norms connected to a particular understanding of the concept. Finally, in scholarly usage, »religion« is a category that mirrors, on the one hand, the history of the term with all the different emic usages and connotations as well as the manifold social constructions. Moreover, in addition to these layers of meaning, »religion« is located at the crossroads of many theoretical approaches and disciplines.²⁰

When considering the role of religion for exploring places, all these different layers of meaning and their mutual influence are relevant. A place can

18 Antes 1978; Pollack 1995; Kollmar-Paulenz 2012; see also Kippenberg 1997, 263–265 and Ahn 1997.

19 Smith 1998 and Barker 1995.

20 For an overview of different approaches see e.g. Conolly 1999 and Woodhead 2011.



Fig. 3: Monastiraki Square, Athens, August 2019, view towards the south of Plaka and the Acropolis.

be considered religious in an emic perspective: in this case, a certain space is seen as religiously significant by individuals, by groups and institutions that use it for their own purposes. Or it is acknowledged as a religious space belonging to other religious traditions. Moreover, to analyse places, the various constructions of religion in different social spheres are crucial. From this perspective, places and approaches to religion mutually influence one another. I would like to illustrate the relevance and the interactions between emic perspectives and the social constructions of religion by looking at the example described above, namely the place where LOAF's mural is located.

The photograph reproduced as figure 3 is taken from Monastiraki Square, looking towards the northern slope of the Acropolis Hill and Plaka. The building in the foreground is the former Ottoman mosque Tzisdarakis, built by the governor Mustafa Agha and completed in 1759. Today it hosts a section of the Museum of Greek Folk Art. In the interior, the architectural elements of the mosque such as the mihrab and the gallery are preserved and clearly recognisable. To the right of the mosque there is the Greek-Orthodox Church of Panagia Grigorousa, Agioi Taxiarches and Agios Fanourios. It was built in 1922 in the same location as a former Byzantine church dating

from the 11th–12th century, which was destroyed during the Ottoman period. Between the mosque and the Church of Panagia Grigoroussa some columns of Hadrian's Library are still visible, surviving from the Roman era, and completed in 132 C.E. After its destruction in 267 C.E., Christian churches were erected in the same area and then demolished. Subsequently, Ottoman administrative buildings shared the same fate. Above this, on the Acropolis Hill, the Erechtheion and the northern side of the Parthenon dominate the district.²¹

These brief notes about a small portion of Athens in which several thousand years can be captured in a single frame illustrate the multilayered meanings associated today with »religion«. This multivalent term can be used to describe diverse traditions and functions over the course of history, merging emic perspectives – including othering processes – and social constructions. Diverse aspects that this multifaceted term relates to were established, negotiated and destroyed in this very place. Sacred buildings from different traditions and denominations sometimes coexist, sometimes are demolished or modified in their function. The Acropolis is no longer a religious building from an emic perspective. Nevertheless, the restored archaeological *mise-en-scene* of the ancient site maintains a strong normative connotation: it locates narratives about the beginning of democracy, of political self-determination, or of western civilisation. The catalogue of the Acropolis Museum states:

The civilisation that flowered in Greece during antiquity holds a special position on the cultural map of the world. The material and spiritual achievements, the values and the ideas which were born in this small corner of Europe have influenced nearly all of humanity.²²

The accurately restored remains on the Acropolis can also be interpreted as an architectural enactment of a direct link between ancient and modern Greece, since all the footprints of Christian, Ottoman, and Venetian buildings which subsequently stood on the hill but which were erased in the course of history were deliberately not reconstructed. This enabled a clean and direct vision onto a glorious ancient past that is paramount for the contemporary

21 For a more detailed description of Monastiraki Square and Plaka see e.g. Schneider / Höcker 2011, 125–128.

22 Eleftheratou 2017, 12.

understanding of (classical) Greece.²³ The Acropolis is one of the most representative, almost mandatory, stop-overs for tourist trips to Europe.

The Museum of Greek Folk Art, which is a part of the Museum of Modern Greek Culture, is dedicated to presenting Greek cultural heritage, even if the former function of the building as a mosque can still be recognised in architectural terms. Only the Greek-Orthodox church in this picture is still used as a sacred building. For somebody socialised within this denomination, this place is dedicated to religious practice and refers to divine dimensions within a Christian-Orthodox worldview. For others, the Church of Panagia Grigoroussa may refer to the dominant religious denomination of the country and to contemporary Greek society. For some of the street-art artists, the same building may allude to the political role of the Greek-Orthodox Church which they consider is a part of the establishment that, in their view, is ruining the country.

In this place, the relationship between different social constructions of »religion«, particularly within different political positions, cultural heritage policies and the tourism industry, are intertwined on many levels. How is it possible to address this complexity with an appropriate concept of religion?

In this volume, the approach to religion is guided by two aims: first, it has to provide a theoretical frame for comparison between the diverse roles of »religion« in shaping places. Second, it should enable the analysis of specific places at specific times, encompassing the particularity of a cultural setting with its various emic perspectives and social constructions of religion.

Thus, for analysing religion in place, rather than proposing a single, all-encompassing definition aimed at sharply dividing what is »religion« from what is not, I propose instead to develop a concept of religion by connecting selected aspects. In this context, a concept is considered as a heuristic tool, allowing one to frame questions and address dimensions of a complex phenomenon that is appropriate to the specific research question.²⁴

23 For a detailed reconstruction of the diverse religious constructions within the Parthenon over the millennia see Ousterhout 2005.

24 Bal 2002, 22; Pezzoli-Olgiaiti 2024c.

2.3 Religion as a communication system

Religion is considered as a symbol system in which multiple media and modes of communication interact.²⁵ From such a perspective space is a powerful medium of religion: architectural design, urban planning, landscape marking or digital places can be crucial media of symbolic communication. Other aspects of a concept of religion focusing on symbolic communication and practices of representation shaping meaning-making processes are also closely connected to spatial practices.²⁶ Religion as a symbol system conveys comprehensive worldviews with both descriptive and normative significance. In religious images of the world, the boundaries between transcendence and immanence, between controllable and uncontrollable, between what belongs to this world and what belongs to other dimensions are traced, negotiated, and articulated.²⁷

Resulting from a practice of representation, religious worldviews always arise from the interplay between material images and mental ideas, which are realised in a place. A medieval visual representation of a Christian cosmos, for instance, proposes a comprehensive cosmology including life on Earth, Paradise, Hell, and Purgatory and therefore outlines spatial spheres beyond the limits of human experience.²⁸ The representation of otherworldly realms is set in relationship with the viewers who look at them: cosmological representations depict the whole space of creation, the interrelation between the different places and their moral connotation. It is not a mere description of the universe, rather the depiction is associated with behaviour and judgement. Or, to give another example, the wall of a cemetery demarcates the boundaries between the community of living people and the domain of the dead, dividing neatly the space of the city from the inner space of the cemetery. In a religious worldview the cemetery evokes transcendent places where the dead may reside. The cemetery is a liminal place between death and life, between the present life and other forms of afterlife existence.²⁹

25 Stolz 2001a, 80–120; Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgiati 2018.

26 Du Gay / Hall / Janes / Mackay / Negus 1997; Hall / Eavns / Nixon 2013; du Gay 1997.

27 Geertz 1973; Stolz 2001b, 1–21; Kippenberg / von Stuckrad 2003, 32–36.

28 As a first introduction see e.g. Pezzoli-Olgiati 2014.

29 See e.g. Mäder / Saviello / Scolari 2020.

In both cases different media transport the image of the world: architectural layouts, material things, visual representation, texts and prayers, song and music all of them may be involved in these complex practices of communication. Both examples illustrate the efficacy of spatial practices in shaping the interaction between the present world and transcendent places. The material representation and the mental imaginations they inspire are based on underlying images of the world that describe the place the believers inhabit and, at the same time, regulate their behaviour.

2.4 Shaping processes of belonging and exclusion

Religious worldviews, and the practices and variegated forms of communication that constitute them, play a crucial role in defining processes of belonging and exclusion and thus in delimiting identities of organisations, communities, groups, or individuals.³⁰ These multilayered and often fluid negotiations of identities are correlated with power structures and performed in places. For instance, the presence of denominations and religious traditions in a city and the politics in organising the coexistence of diverse religious identities is mirrored in urban planning in terms of appreciation, marginalisation, and, sometimes, negation. A building like the Haus der Religionen in Bern demonstrates a positive attitude towards religious plurality within civil society and local political agencies,³¹ whilst the prohibition against building minarets introduced into the Swiss federal constitution in 2009 can be seen as a regulation which aims to keep the spatial presence of Islamic buildings as invisible as possible.³² Furthermore, the populist pretension to define Europe – as a continent and a culture – as being fundamentally Christian illustrates the dialectic between (alleged) religious identity, spatial practices and power structures.³³ As discussed above, the subversive practice of painting murals in Athens expresses individual and/or collec-

30 For an initial approach to the concept of identity in interaction with religion see Wimmer 2008; Dahinden / Moret / Duemmler 2011 and Fritz / Höpfinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgiaiti 2018, 153–192.

31 Haas 2014; Pezzoli-Olgiaiti 2020a.

32 Gross / Krebs 2010.

33 Nexon 2006; Bottici / Challand 2013, 145–165; Quenzel 2005, 95–136.

tive processes of identity by visualising and materialising criticism towards political and religious rulers.

2.5 Transmission over time

To analyse these intertwined processes, the concept of religion has to consider transmission over time. Religious traditions can be considered as crystallisations of symbol systems by means of transmission over generations. In the passing on of religious worldviews and practices from one generation to another, religious symbol systems adapt to political, linguistic, cultural, social, and technological changes. By selecting, recomposing, and reconstructing a tradition, symbol systems can be transmitted diachronically and permanently renewed.³⁴ Places like Plaka and the Acropolis Hill display the dynamics of reconfiguration and adaption in a very explicit way. The archaeological restoration of the cultural heritage in this very site corresponds to a spatial strategy of dealing with and reconstructing the past. Even if the related symbol systems are no longer used in the sense of shared religious practices or worldviews, the ancient vestiges are selectively integrated in an idealising narrative of a polytheistic Greece as the privileged custodian of cultural and political achievements of the 5th century B.C.E., while, with a few exceptions, the traces of the various religious communities and practices in this settlement over several millennia have been erased. Fragmented traditions, processes of transmission, adaption, and innovation are crucial aspects that shape places and their material and ideological settings.

2.6 Diffusion processes in society

In addition to plotting transmission processes in an intergenerational, temporal perspective, religious symbol systems also circulate through various societal spheres. The spatial transmission of religious orientations along the diachronic axis is in many cases linked to organisations empowered to design

34 Assmann 2010; Hobsbawm 2013; Hervieu-Léger 1993; Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgiaati 2018, 193–213.

a certain place by means of buildings and other interventions on the territory. Furthermore, diffusion processes of religious symbol systems through different social spheres are no less important when exploring the interaction between religion and places. The presence of religious symbols in different societal domains is multifaceted and often discontinuous, but still paramount. Particularly, but not exclusively, in contemporary society, religious communication also takes place beyond the influence of religious organisations and institutions. Politics, economics, marketing, media, arts, or entertainment – amongst others – receive, adapt, and transform various elements from religious symbol systems moulding them for different purposes.³⁵

This often fragmented and diverse occurrence of religious symbols in many societal spheres appears to be disparate compared to processes within religious institutions that use elaborate strategies for regulating chains of transmission of knowledge, practices, and heritage from one generation to another. Nonetheless, the diffusion of religious symbols, narratives, and practices in society is a fundamental aspect of the study of spatiality and religion. To name a few examples, museums and art exhibitions as public spaces often exhibit objects from religious traditions in order to highlight their role in cultural heritage or to promote dialogue about religious plurality and mutual understanding. By means of spatial practices such cultural institutions invite audiences to engage with and to take position towards religion. Art, films, and variegated media including digital forms of communication adapt and re-enact symbols, narratives and practices that originated within religious traditions and elaborate on them in a wider context. From this perspective, galleries, theatres, museums, or virtual spaces can be addressed as public places of imagination where religion is negotiated amongst or in combination with other topics: from the reenactment of crucial narratives originating in religious traditions to imaginative sceneries – whether they be utopian or dystopian – religion is constitutive for many genres of art and media production.³⁶ The fashion industry also displays religion. Fabrics, cuts and patterns, hairstyles, jewellery, tattoos, or clothing habits and trends inspired by religious communities are adapted and promoted in both haute-couture and mainstream production.³⁷ Fashion influences bodily and

35 See e.g. Lövheim 2011; Lövheim / Lynch 2011.

36 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015b.

37 Glavac / Höpflinger / Pezzoli-Olgiati 2013; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2019.

clothing practices and therefore contributes in shaping the body in private and public places. The body – which is, from a spatial perspective, the condition of human presence in places – and clothing are means of expressing differences in gender, status and social roles in places.³⁸ Transmission processes of religion through time and diffusion processes through different societal spheres are interrelated and mutually influence one another. Fragmented references to religious narratives and practices in culture interact with institutionalised denominations and organised communities, which are mirrored in spatial practices.

2.7 Religion in the cultural imaginary

Religion is consequently outlined as a practice of representation, a meaning-making system involving a broad range of media. It generates encompassing images of the world, configures the boundaries between the immanent world and transcendent dimensions. It enables and influences processes of identity, of transmission through time and diffusion in society that, on the one hand, designs places and on the other hand, is shaped by them. In line with this approach, religion is considered as being part of the cultural imaginary, of the variegated pool of mental and material representations that arise and take root in the historical development of a society. The cultural imaginary is linked to expectations, narratives, practices, and ideas that allow meaning-making processes within a group. Affecting emotions and cognitive processes, it involves both individuals and collectives. The cultural imaginary is the background of the multilayered communication processes in a society, it encompasses the plurality of production and reception processes in communicative practices. The imaginary is characterised by two contrary tendencies: mimesis and reiteration on the one hand and innovation and creativity on the other. It can therefore inspire novelty and utopian thinking, and open up spaces that in some ways drift from reality, or, the other way round, it may legitimate a status quo, emphasising a cohesive, conservative, or immobile order of society. Researching religion as a part of the cultural imaginary broadens the focus of spatial exploration including public areas

38 Ornella / Knauss / Höpflinger 2014.

and practices that cannot be linked directly to a particular religious organisation or tradition.³⁹

2.8 Religious plurality and shared places

Consequently, the scholarly approach to religion that I work with in this spatial exploration encompasses and merges different aspects. Of particular importance are communication processes that mould symbolic meanings and negotiations and provide a general orientation: processes of belonging and exclusion, processes of transmission over time, and processes of diffusion in society. These dynamics which conceptualise religion as an interaction between emic perspectives, social constructions, and academic discourses is grounded on the assumption that religion is a practice of representation deeply rooted in the cultural imaginary at a certain time and in a certain place.

Such a broad concept of religion is intended to be a tool for exploring the multilayered interactions between places and various social constructions of religion as well as emic perspectives of organisations and individuals. In this way, religion is considered as a complex, variegated and often contradictory discourse on both the theoretical and the phenomenological level. Based on a cultural studies approach, this study focuses on meaning-making processes and on the spatial dimension where they unfold. Culture and society are consequently regarded as being (religiously) plural by definition.⁴⁰

To address the fact that religious practices, worldviews and traditions are manifold, different terms may be used, such as plurality, pluralism, pluralisation and diversity. The use of these terms in different languages, such as English, German, or Italian, always implies different emphases and meanings. Plurality and diversity are often viewed as rather descriptive approaches to societal (and religious) multiplicity, while pluralism is often understood to relate more to political agendas and moral commitments which seek to positively highlight diversity. Pluralisation, by contrast, tends to emphasise the process by which diversity increases, due to dynamics of globalisation, mobility and migration. In keeping with the general conceptual outline of

39 The concept of cultural imaginary related to religion is elaborated in the volume Pezzoli-Olgati 2015c, particularly 9–38.

40 Gladigow 2001.

the present study, I privilege the term plurality as a constitutive element of culture and religion. Diversity is often used in a broadly synonymous way. It can also include an additional perspective, however, which highlights identity processes that focus on distinction and acknowledgement of differences in emic and social discourses. In any case, all these terms, like concepts in general, have both descriptive and normative traits.⁴¹

The term plurality, when applied to religion, evokes a contrast between »diverse, plural« and »homogeneous« societies with an underlying assumption that there are socio-historical examples of religious plurality – such as in contemporary European society – as well as other forms of religious uniformity. Such assumptions need to be questioned and nuanced for several reasons. First, they are rooted in widespread categorisations of religious traditions that suggest too great a degree of uniformity within these traditions. Such approaches to the history of religion and the contemporary world are based on a vision of religious knowledge, worldviews, and practices that are basically orientated towards normative, standardised interpretation of a religious community. They have been developed within intellectual approaches to religion in European history since the emergence of Humanism and became fixed with the diffusion of encyclopaedic works in the Enlightenment. For instance, the influential encyclopaedia collecting an encompassing knowledge about religions in texts and images, the *Céramonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, published in Amsterdam in the middle of the 17th century and illustrated by Bernard Picard, influenced scholarly representations and perceptions of religion down the centuries.⁴²

41 Liedhegener 2018 and Eberhardt 2024, 170–176. See also Marty 2007 and Lassman 2011.

42 See Barnes 2005, 411: »The idea that there are a number of identifiable entities called ›religions‹, different species of a common genus, is itself a construction of the Enlightenment. During the Age of Reason ›religion‹ came to designate not the life of faith and the proper worship offered to God, but the external ›system‹ of practice, an object of scientific data of the category ›religion.‹ With the growth of knowledge of other continents the discovery of analogous systems of belief and practices created a religious geography [...]. However, the classification of ›religions‹ as different and discrete is older. See as an illustration the multilingual, encyclopaedic children's book *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* by Johann Amos Comenius, first edited in 1658. To plurality as constitutive in European history of Religion see e. g. Rüpke 2009 and Gladigow 2009. For a critical reflection on the paradigm of »world religion« see Masuzawa 2005 and Stroumsa 2010.

Still today, they are uncritically reproduced, particularly in media and even in some academic approaches.⁴³

Nevertheless, these historically established classifications of religious traditions and communities are being challenged in recent decades and opened up by new orientations within the study of religion. Among the major changes in scholarly research, there is a tendency to broaden the canon of sources such construction processes are based on, beyond a tradition's own sacred scriptures and theological and intellectual literature, to explore in more depth the range of practices and the various roles, stakeholders, and members. Along with this, other media of religious communication such as images, music, performances, food, clothing or (video)games, mass and digital media are attracting considerable academic attention. The focus on religious practices and different forms of piety has enriched the reconstruction of religious symbol systems considering materiality and the body as crucial dimensions for understanding religion. The analysis of neglected sources, media, and practices undermines the assumption of homogeneity in religious communities and traditions, highlighting the variety of practices, opinions, and beliefs.⁴⁴ These transformations of approaches results also from the reception of gender, ethnicity and post-colonial studies in researching religion, which have radically challenged implicit assumptions and critically assessed the presupposed homogeneity of a *homo* (often identified with a *vir*) *religiosus* as being the subject of religion.⁴⁵ A broader hermeneutical sensibility in the study of religion has led to a greater awareness of the biases we have inherited from the history of research and contributed to an understanding of religious symbol systems, traditions, and communities as complex clusters that resist simple classifications and labels.⁴⁶ In some cases, all-encompassing, generalising classification of religious communities may arise in the peaceful or contentious exchange between diverse communities. Labels may be attributed to minorities by dominant, powerful groups, in which marginalising othering

43 See e.g. the analysis of standardised representation of religious tradition in media dedicated to explaining religious plurality to children in Eberhardt 2024.

44 See e.g. Promey 2014; Braun / Dietrich / Treiber 2015; Traut / Wilke 2015; Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgati 2018.

45 As influential position in the history of research see e.g. Said 1994; Stroumsa 2010; King 1995.

46 See e.g. Fitzgerald 2000; Kippenberg / von Stuckrad 2003; Antes / Geertz / Warne 2008.

processes are involved. The contacts and exchanges between religious groups living in the same place is a key factor in differentiating religious communities from an inner and an outer perspective. Frequently, the theoretical classification of religion has uncritically absorbed and combined terms originating in contested social discourses as well as insider perspectives, fading out the different value connotations they imply.

Analysing religious symbol systems and practices as intrinsically variable entails various levels of plurality. First of all, there is the plurality within a tradition: labels such as »Greek« religion, »Christianity«, »Judaism«, »Islam«, or »Hinduism« – just to list a few examples – although useful for an initial, rough orientation, are not precise enough to sustain more in-depth exploration. Depending on the era, culture, language, the socio-political context, and the perspectives and actors under consideration, as well as many other variables, the symbol systems that may be combined under such categories in an academic discourse may be extremely diverse.⁴⁷

Plurality does not only concern religious communities, but permeates social and cultural settings where various, mainstream or minority, institutionally well-established or marginalised groups coexist and influence each other.⁴⁸ Furthermore, plurality arises from an approach to individuals as diverse and autonomous beings. Individual religious beliefs and practices are not compulsory static and homogeneous. Depending on the social, familial, and biographical contexts that undergo changes and transformation, individuals may refer to various practices and symbols systems within the same community and tradition. According to their needs, the personal and cultural situation as well as the persuasions, ideas, or habits, individuals interact with religious symbol systems, practices and communities in different, heterogeneous ways.

Religious symbol systems, orientations and practices are manifold. This plurality is embedded in places, where diversity within traditions, in the exchange and conflict between different religious and/or non-religious orientations and the personal choices of individuals converge. Consequently, places are always shared. They constitute the existential foundation of any

⁴⁷ Stolz 2004.

⁴⁸ Gladigow 2004, 25–27; Liedhegener 2018.

form of plurality, which is formed and mediated between many actors, material things and practices of representation.⁴⁹

This is an approach that opens up the concept of religion as a part of culture for approaching spatiality. As already mentioned, it is inspired by cultural studies approaches, which brings to the fore the role of representation and the mediality of symbol systems. As we will discuss later in this book, cultural studies have placed a particular emphasis on spatiality and related concepts. In the following chapters we will explore how the concept of space is transformed within the European history of religion and how a cultural studies approach to space may enrich the analysis of religion as a part of culture.

49 Thompson 1988; Rüpke 2001.

3 Place and Space as Concepts Travelling through Time

*Qui comenza el mar scuro*¹

Cultural studies have greatly influenced the study of religion, stimulating the reception of theories and methods from other disciplines and widening the field of inquiry. As already mentioned in the previous chapters, overall, cultural studies have radically changed scholarly approaches to religion and the ways in which we address this phenomenon in the past and present. The attention to spatial practices that permeate culture and society are rooted in a series of academic debates that arose during the latter half of the 20th century, initiated by the work of the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in the 1970s.²

In this stage of our imaginary journey, we reflect on the concepts of place and space, unravelling the intricate threads that link the history of religion with theoretical reflection upon religion. The aim of this chapter and those that follow is to set-out intertwining approaches to space as a general, abstract category, within which concepts of place are envisaged as a foundational lived dimension, perceived in manifold ways. For this purpose, we begin by exploring a selection of medieval and early modern sources that illustrate developments in concepts of space and place that occurred during this time.

1 »Here begins the dark sea«, Fra Mauro, *Mappamondo*, edition by Falchetta, 2006, 175 (*2).

2 An important impetus arose from *La production de l'espace*, published by the sociologist Henri Lefebvre in 1974 (*2000), who inspired, further inspiring works such as *Thirdspace, Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* by the geographer and urbanist Edward Soja published in 1996. Overviews of the development of approaches to space can be found in Crang / Thrift 2000; Döring / Thielmann 2008; Günzel 2009 and 2017; Kajatzke / Schroer 2012.

We will focus on representations of the world conceived as a divine creation, selecting images which offer a global view of the whole cosmos. The analysis of the chosen images highlights the intellectual transformations that took place in addressing spatial questions during this particular era of the European history of religion. There was a shift from a vision of space originating from divine creation to space as an abstraction of human experience and exploration.

After this journey through history, we will shift forward in time to explore contemporary approaches to current spatial practices, albeit rooted in the historical developments outlined in the present chapter. In order to link together these two approaches to space and place, namely, the analysis of religious-historical sources in the current chapter and the discussion of theoretical debates from the 20th and 21st centuries, discussed in the next chapter, we will begin with some epistemological observations. That is to say, before we consider some particular concepts of space, let us first take a step back, and ask: what are »concepts« from a cultural studies perspective and how do they illuminate research on shared places?

3.1 Concepts that travel

Cultural studies can be addressed as a research paradigm embracing various approaches, which, depending on the academic tradition and the period, are characterised by different emphases and concerns. Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, both scholars of English literature, argue that:

The plurality of approaches to the study of culture, including the differences between them, testifies to the fact that the study of culture is in itself very much a cultural practice. Cultural Studies, *Kulturwissenschaften*, the study of culture, *sciences humaines* are epistemological configurations constructed on disciplinary and local specialisation, and it is within regionally circumscribed epistemic communities that many of the key concepts for the study of cultures have been developed.³

3 Neumann / Nünning 2012, 2.

Nonetheless, despite the diversity of ways in which cultural studies are understood and practiced, there are common lines that enable us to chart the contours of this research paradigm more neatly. First of all, addressing culture as a subject for scholarly investigation has to do with political engagement tackling complex challenges in society in different phases of the 20th century. This is the main reason why cultural studies fostered fairly radical transformations of academic organisations and epistemological procedures. According to the sociologist Stuart Hall, cultural studies are a discursive formation deeply entangled with politics, which is its most distinguishing trait.⁴ He defines cultural studies as a commitment to:

[...] the question of a general theory which could, in a critical way, connect together in a critical reflection different domains of life, politics and theory, theory and practice, economic, political, ideological questions, and so on; the notion of critical knowledge itself and the production of critical knowledge as a practice.⁵

This opinion is shared by other scholars, including the historian Peter Burke and the English literature scholar Aleida Assmann, who also emphasise the interplay between cultural studies, politics and society. Assmann highlights that cultural studies arose from far-reaching transformations in society, which explains why this paradigm emerged in different places and in such variegated forms.⁶

Second, the entanglement between cultural studies and societal concerns is mirrored in the topics addressed: the role of language and of different modes of communication, the acknowledgement of heterogeneity and polysemy in meaning-making processes, the interdependency of representation and power, the role of symbols, which led to the broadening of canons of sources for scholarly investigation, including popular culture. The body and materiality became objects of academic research as well as gender and ethnicity. The role of social practices and their agencies moved to the centre of interest, as did the concepts of memory and of space. This sensitivity

4 Hall 2016.

5 Hall 2019a, 74.

6 Assmann 2008, 11–30; Burke 2019, 2: »The cultural turn is itself part of the cultural history of the last generation«.

towards history and memory as always being performed in a place, which is particularly relevant for this volume, reflects the entanglement between social challenges and cultural studies. The extension of space through digital media, human relationships with the natural environment, processes of globalisation, migration, urbanisation, segregation and gentrification are central questions of our time embedded within spatial practices that demand comprehensive analytical approaches and interpretative study.⁷

Self-reflexivity is a third aspect that can be traced among the various approaches within cultural studies. Thinking about the interaction between knowledge, politics and society implies a realisation that scholarly analysis of culture is a cultural practice in itself. As Neumann and Nünning put it:

The engagement with the theory and practice of cultural studies inevitably calls for self-reflexive research agendas, which can draw attention to the epistemological, cultural and political implications of the theories and concepts we endorse.⁸

Subject matter such as the history of culture, the concept of culture itself, of religion, media, symbol, performativity, memory, politics, body, materiality, or space are not based in a particular discipline but are debated across many fields. Accordingly, academic self-reflexivity leads to questioning of disciplinary delimitations, of being attentive to how disciplines and organisations developed historically, and how configurations of scholarly thinking and knowledge production undergo continuous change.⁹

This hermeneutical approach, which is typical for cultural analysis, has consequently demonstrated the necessity to foster inter- and transdisciplinarity as essential practices for tackling complex questions and enhancing self-reflexion. Emphasising the relevance of inter- and transdisciplinarity does not mean the annihilation of disciplinary investigation; on the contrary, the exchange between different fields dealing with these topics is an endorsement of these disciplines, since it fosters innovation and transforms

7 Assmann 2008, 153.

8 Neumann / Nünning 2012, 3.

9 Partey 2011, particularly 9–10.

the different fields of knowledge.¹⁰ The history of the study of religion well illustrates such dynamics. As an academic field, it arose at the intersection between the comparative study of languages and cultures, the study of specific literatures, as well as theology, history and other fields scrutinising societal issues past and present.¹¹

Acknowledging the interconnections between cultural studies, different disciplinary methodologies and society is paramount to explain how theoretical reflection about place and space unfolds. Space and place are fundamental aspects that permeate both scholarly and societal practices. The attempt to formulate concepts to capture spatial issues is deeply embedded in the history of culture and of religion, given that spatiality is such a basic and contested dimension of human life and organisation.

Like several key concepts in the humanities, space and place are best addressed as »travelling« concepts, a metaphor expressing the flexibility and adaptability of theoretical approaches that are exchanged between individual scholars, disciplines and fields, as well as across histories of ideas and disciplines.¹² As Mieke Bal points out:

Concepts are tools of intersubjectivity: they facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. Mostly, they are considered abstract representations of an object. But, like all representations, they are neither simple nor adequate in themselves. They distort, unfix, and inflect the object.¹³

The present volume is inspired by this understanding of concepts focusing on displacements, exchanges, transformations as well as crossings of disciplinary boundaries, scholarly traditions and languages. In different places

10 On the question of defining disciplinarity, inter- and transdisciplinarity see e.g. Banse / Fleischer 2011; Mittelstrass 1996; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2020b.

11 Kippenberg 1997; Sharpe 1998; Tworuschka 2015; Waardenburg 1999. Stroumsa 2010 offers an illuminating contribution to the history of our field. He emphasises the continuity between intellectual curiosity for religion in the Enlightenment and the constitution of the field as an academic discipline in the second half of the 19th century.

12 Bal 2002, 22–55. The image of travel to describe transfers between disciplines and epochs has been used by Said 1983 and Clifford 1997. See also Neumann / Nünning 2012, 4–7; Frank 2009 and, applied to theories of religion, Tweed 2006 and van den Heever 2022.

13 Bal 2002, 22.

and at different times, concepts assume different meanings and convey different ideas. Concepts are best outlined as dynamic, multilayered tools for framing and conceptualising approaches in cultural analysis.

In the following pages, keeping in mind the metaphor of concepts that travel, we discuss »space« and »place«, as two concepts that are fundamental within cultural studies, yet have only recently been included in the study of religion, and are still establishing themselves in our discipline.¹⁴ In this book, we explore travelling concepts of space and place in two steps. As a first step, in the present chapter, we discuss selected representations of space and place in the transition from medieval Christian cosmology to early modern cartography. This period is very important to historically contextualise the way in which we conceive of space and place today.

The test cases show how the world, as a whole, was represented at a time when the exploration of the terrestrial globe and of the universe was radically changing human perception of the world. The discovery of other continents and trade routes, new approaches to the solar system and the universe, new debates in natural philosophy and later in natural sciences, as well as a new reception of theological and philosophical traditions, laid the foundations for addressing space and place as complex concepts for delineating an essential precondition for human life.

The selection of visual sources aims at illustrating a transformation in representing the world as an encompassing space. The first examples we discuss present images of creation in which it is conceived as a harmonic whole encompassing places that are existentially relevant for believers. These spatial representations are permeated by the history of salvation: the cosmos is the dimension in which a believer's life unfolds; it appears as an ordered entity in which past, present and future as well as individual life and behaviour are located. The case studies we analyse in this chapter show an increasing intellectual curiosity in merging together information about places and spaces derived from different traditions and sources of knowledge. These sources of knowledge include: Christian history of salvation, the reception of Biblical narratives and theological traditions, the reception of spatial theories from antiquity, speculation based on direct observation of the territory, navigation maps as well as written and oral travellers' reports. In early modern

14 For overviews see e.g. Gehlen 1995 and 1998; Gill 1998; Knott 2013; Park 1994.

time, these diverse approaches to creation could no longer be reproduced by a homogeneous, harmonic image of the world. The concepts of space and place became multilayered and complex; religious cosmologies presenting the world as a homogeneous spatial entity coexisted with approaches to space and place as objects of scrutiny. This transformation did not follow a linear timeline. This is the reason why the following examples are not discussed in a strictly chronological order. Instead, we follow different genres and typologies of representations of the word as a unity.

3.2 A retable reveals a Christian worldview: The Graner altarpiece in Regensburg

The altarpiece (or »retable«) reproduced in figure 4 depicts a late medieval representation of a Christian cosmos.¹⁵ The retable with bas-reliefs was donated by Elisabeth Englmayr († 1491) and her husband Sigmund Graner († 1484) from Regensburg, Germany, to the church Alte Kapelle in 1488 when Sigmund had already passed away.¹⁶ Today, it belongs to the collection of the History Museum of Regensburg. It is well preserved, although a few elements are missing. The reverse panels of the winged altarpiece, when closed, depict St. Simon and St. Bartholomew, the patron saints of the Graner family. When opened, the altarpiece reveals a complex network of places believers can visually enter while praying for the poor souls of the dead.¹⁷

In the central panel Christ appears as Judge seated on a rainbow,¹⁸ his feet are placed on the terrestrial globe. This upper panel depicts a scene unfolding in heaven: Mary and St. John intercede for the souls of the believers who kneel and pray on the left and the right (from the viewer's perspective) of Jesus Christ. The lower part of the panel offers a close-up view of what happens, meanwhile, on the terrestrial globe,¹⁹ the earthly dimension

15 For an introductory overview see e. g. Auffarth 2002; Dinzelbacher 2007; Jezler 1994, Kliege 1991; Minois 1991; Segal 2004; Vorgrimler 1994.

16 See also Halm 1922, 14.

17 For an analysis of the retable see Halm 1922; Jezler 1994, 190–191; Pezzoli-Olgiaiti 2014.

18 The rainbow is a typical element of the iconographic motif of Christ in Majesty (*maiestas domini*). See Kirschbaum 1971, 521–522; Schiller 1971, 233.

19 From an iconographic point of view, the globe merges different motifs (see Gerlach 1970). On the one hand, it refers to the orb, which was originally a symbol of Roman power (see



Fig. 4: A medieval Christian worldview encompassing the human world and otherworldly cosmic realms. Retable with bas-relief, 1488, 124 × 188 cm, Museen der Stadt Regensburg. On the lower edge: herr Sigmund graner Elizabeta sein hausfraw m cccc lxxxviii (Master Sigmund Graner Elizabeth his wife 1488).

human beings inhabit. The terrestrial globe is depicted according to a medieval T-O map and is placed in the geometrical centre of the panel (fig. 5).²⁰ On the right, Mary is represented for a second time as Virgin of Mercy, taking care of humanity in this terrestrial world: her outspread cloak shelters members of the clergy on the right and laypeople on the left. Beside her, St. Bartholomew stands with a knife as his attribute. His hand protects a woman that kneels and prays with her two young daughters standing before her. The coat of arms identifies her as Elizabeta, the donor of the retable, her name being painted on the lower edge of the altarpiece. In front of her, on the left side, Elizabeta's already deceased husband, Sigmund Graner, kneels holding a hat in his hands. He prays while St. Simon, with a saw as an attri-

Fillitz 1971); on the other hand, the T-O map depiction refers to medieval *mappae mundi* that represent the Earth as a surface divided into three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe. In the Middle Ages, the Earth was conceived as being a sphere. See e. g. Brincken 2008b.

20 T-O map defines a particular type of map. See below footnote 62, page 67.



Fig. 5: Detail of the central panel representing the earthly globe as a T-O map.

bute, gently protects him. Elisabeth and Sigmund are ideal believers. Both are immersed in prayer and, the inscription tells us, have sponsored an altarpiece to visually express their piety and affection to Christ, Mary, the Saints, the church and the souls of the dead.

In the lower left-hand corner of the central panel, there is a contact zone between earthly and otherworldly places. Various medieval motifs referring to Christ as the Saviour are presented. The motifs include: the Risen Christ; Christ showing his healing wounds; Christ holding his own body as a host in his hand, and a *fons pietatis* – the fountain of mercy, that is represented as filled with Jesus' blood – with small tubes that carry the healing fluid to the poor souls in Purgatory, depicted below.

The smaller panels on the lateral and lower sides extend the topics addressed in the central part: they offer a panorama of what is going on in the world (in the four panels on the upper left and upper right parts of the retable) and in the underworld (in the lower four panels), in domains humans can not directly access but nevertheless experience by means of the visualisation the altarpiece provides. Above, on the left, a priest is celebrating Mass, consecrating a host and wine that are transformed into Christ's body and blood. A man (a layman or a cleric?) attends Mass and holds the priest's

gown in his hand. Immediately below, a wayfarer shares his coat with two destitute men he encounters on his journey. On the same level, on the right side, a wealthy man in red clothing gives food and drink to a pilgrim. In all three side panels an angel takes the most representative object of the scene: the host, a piece of the coat, and the pilgrim's saddlebag.

Finally, in the upper panel on the right, a praying scene unfolds. Two men are kneeling at the foot of the cross looking at Jesus Christ who has sacrificed his life for their sins. The pious man on the left side is modestly dressed and is immersed in contemplation. The other does not fold his hands properly, he is well dressed, wears an impeccable red coat, blue trousers and fashionable shoes. He is distracted and thinks of his business and properties, depicted behind him in a house. The house represents various vices (from top-left): a coffer (referring to avarice), a woman looking into a mirror (vanity), a couple making love in a bed (lust); a dining table (gluttony), and a store room with barrels (envy). In the final scene we see the man looking out of the door with his horse (pride). This panel contrasts a righteous and a dissolute way of praying, a motif that recurs in another representation (fig. 6), which facilitates the interpretation of this scene.²¹ In this panel, the angel transporting an object is not preserved, but, as we will see below, the missing messenger originally took the the rosary of the sincere believer.

Worldly life is depicted as a place of piety and devotion but also of free choice. Men and women can decide how to orientate their life. They may choose to help destitute and defenceless people, care for the souls of the dead in Purgatory, by praying and uniting themselves with the saints, Mary and Jesus Christ with fervent devotion, and attending the Mass or choose instead to dedicate themselves to earthly pleasures. Both ways are possible and indeed divide humanity into two groups: the former may expect to be saved at the end, whilst the latter will suffer eternal pain, as the lower register of the retable vividly shows.

²¹ Halm 1922, 17–18.



Fig. 6: Single-sheet printing representing the motifs of righteous and dissolute ways of praying. A devout, poorly dressed man with bushy hair and a wealthy man, impeccably clothed and with hair combed, pray at the foot of the cross. The prayers of the first are focused on the wounds of the crucified Christ. The rich man does not pray at all. Instead, he thinks of himself, admiring himself in a mirror (vanity), lying in bed with a woman (lust), eating and drinking fine food (gluttony), accumulating a fortune (avarice) and confronting himself with the wealth of others (envy). The comparison with the retable in Regensburg in figure 4 highlights small differences: in the altarpiece, the reference to envy extends into both rooms of the ground floor and the opulent house replaces the checked structure in the printing's list of vices. The printing is even more didactic in expressing the moral qualities of the two men, characterising them with a small angel and a devil as well as including lines to express what they are saying and thinking. Painted xylograph, 15th century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

The two central lower panels depict Hell on the right and Purgatory on the left. The angels represented in the four earthly scenes discussed above here bring offerings to the poor souls who are undergoing purification for their sins in a prison-like construction. Three of them stretch their arms out of a window and grasp the objects which the angels are bringing which represent good deeds. A fourth receives the chalice with Christ's blood. This is the most effective offering: the angel guarding Purgatory opens the massive door and liberates this soul. No escape is possible from Hell, which is rep-

resented as a dark furnace. An angel and a corpulent black devil together oversee the realm of damnation.

The two panels on the lower register's outer wings cannot be clearly understood. On the left, the otherworldly, prisonlike building is empty, its door open, while on the other side, the massive cellar is closed; its door is secured with a massive iron chain. I personally think that these scenes anticipate the final judgment: the souls of the righteous have been raised to Paradise and therefore Purgatory is empty. On the opposite side, the Devil and the sinners are barred from Paradise, imprisoned in the sealed bottomless pit, which may refer to a second, definitive death. These scenes anticipate events at the end of time and therefore bring an eschatological perspective into the representation. It suggests a chronological order between the personal judgement individuals are afforded when they pass away and the definitive judgement at the end of time.²²

Overall, from a spatial perspective, the retable can be interpreted as a material representation of a worldview encompassing the terrestrial globe and the otherworldly domains human beings dwell in after passing away. The altarpiece focuses on exchanges between the different places. The mutual interactions among people and between humans and divine beings demonstrate a correspondence between the various places that composes the entire cosmos.

Furthermore, there is a strong link between the prayer scene in the middle of the altarpiece and what the viewer is expected to do in front of this image: to pray and sincerely immerse oneself into the depicted worldview. Consequently, the performance of looking locates the viewer within the religious worldview, it merges the cosmological representation with his or her life. The retable has a didactic function: it depicts how the world is composed, what places it encompasses and teaches believers how to behave in the world which they inhabit.²³ When it stands open, the winged altarpiece reveals a multilayered reality which was perceived on entering the church in which it was displayed. The retable materialises a revelation and offers a place for reflection about the human condition in this world, in the afterlife and at the end of time. Yet, this spatial representation is incomplete: by focusing on the

22 In my opinion, the representation of the two opposite lateral lower panels echo Revelation 20. See Halm 1922, 19, footnote 29. Jezler 1994, 190 interprets the lower panel on the left as a »Vorhölle«, and the place opposite on the right as Limbo. On the relationship between individual and end-time judgement see Jezler 1994, 13–26; Auffarth 2002, 151–198.

23 Halm 1922, 14.

mutual exchange between earthly life and the otherworldly domains of punishment and expectation, it implicitly suggests Paradise without depicting it.

3.3 A mirror provides individual orientation: The single-sheet printing *Spiegel der Vernunft*

A complete overview of all the cosmological places in a medieval worldview is presented in a single-sheet print from southern Germany, also produced in 1488 – the date is written in the middle of the image (fig. 7). It depicts a mirror, composed by portraying a circular reflecting surface in the middle and a frame around it. As the title *Spiegel der Vernunft* (*Mirror of Reason*) indicates,²⁴ it is meant for personal meditation, for reasoning about the world and the position of human beings in it.²⁵

In the centre, the viewer sees him- or herself, depicted as a pilgrim crossing a bridge, designed with a rising and then falling path, which represents human life. Under the wooden planks of the bridge are inscribed years, at five-year intervals, from 5 to 95, with 50 positioned at the central raised point of the bridge. The pilgrim walks upwards, moving toward the axis in the middle: the tablets on the pillar are not legible, but it is highly likely that the Golden Rule is written on them.²⁶ Above the two tablets, the cross is depicted. A devil pulls the pilgrim backwards, whilst an angel points at the two tablets. In the banner a prayer is written: »O Lord, thou know everything, have mercy upon me, thy will be done, help me to thee«.²⁷

24 For the origin and significance of the mirror in (book) titles from the 14th to the 18th century see Grabes 1973.

25 An edition of the text in the single-sheet printing is provided by Griesse 2011, 99–102.

26 This printing may have been used as the basis for an oil painting from 1766, which is still displayed in its original place, in the ossuary St. Michael in Oberägeri, Switzerland. In this adaption the inscriptions are translated into Latin. An analysis of the oil painting can be found in Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgati 2018, 65 (fig. 28, in colour); Grünenfelder 1992 and 1999, 280–282; Odermatt-Bürgi 1984; Pezzoli-Olgati 2014, 112–116. The painting can be explored in a video: <https://www.kulturpunkte-zug.ch/orte/beinhaus-st-michael/aufruttelnde-bildtafel-im-beinhaus-st-michael> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

27 The original text reads »O her du wayß piß gnedig mir / Dein will gescheh, hilf mir zu dir.« Griesse 2011, 100. Translation into English by the author.



Fig. 7: *Spiegel der Vernunft*, painted xylograph, 1488, 40.4 × 29.1 cm, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich.

On the other side of the bridge, Death, a skeleton with a bow and arrow, is waiting. As soon as it shoots the arrow, the man will land in the grave under the bridge. Death is unpredictable: the clock, depicted above the skeletal figure, which was a widespread motif at this time, emphasises the transience of human life.²⁸

The short path of the pilgrim's life starts in this world, represented in the frame, on the left side of the bridge. Again, the contrasting motifs of a virtuous life and a life of vice, which we have already seen in the retable, recur: in the upper part, people are praying and working, in the lower part, divided by a wall, people are sitting on a huge table and enjoying themselves. On the opposite side, the first stage of otherworldly life is presented: Christ judges the dead according to their deeds. An angel directs them into Purgatory, Hell, or Paradise. In the lower part, the entrance to Hell is represented as a monstrous mouth, while Purgatory, above it, is drawn as a fountain containing the poor souls. In Paradise, in the upper part of the mirror frame, God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are depicted. Mary is interceding for the believers. The Trinity and Mary are visually linked to the *fons pietatis* from which Christ's blood flows into the chalice, which is located directly above the cross.

The different domains at the centre and in the frame of the mirror represent a medieval Christian image of the world with all the places that constitute it. As we have already observed in the retable of Regensburg, these domains are distinct, yet they are tied together: they are constitutive parts of the cosmos. The trinity is linked to human worldly life through the cross and Christ's blood of salvation, accessible through the Eucharist. The viewer can relate to the divine world by means of prayers and good deeds, and obviously, by looking at the mirror and meditating about what it reveals. In the frame of the mirror, angels address the reader directly, explaining the relevance of what the viewer is seeing for his or her life. The angel positioned between Paradise and Judgement says:

See, pilgrim, that your soul is formed after God.
You shall here repent and keep God's commandments.

28 The skull and the clock are iconographic references to the transience of human life and *vanitas* (futility). They often recur together. See Gsodam 1972; Günther 2011; Maurice 1972.

Hope and believe in him and so he will give you.
Grace here and after this time eternal life.²⁹

Between Judgment and Purgatory and Hell:

See, pilgrim, here you do not stay.
You must die and [go] to the last judgment.
And you don't know when, how, where and whereto afterwards.
Therefore prepare yourself at all times.³⁰

Between Hell and worldly life:

See, behind you pilgrim, that your body is made from earth.
And it will become earth again.
Will you not leave the sin here and avoid [it].
Then you must endure a great suffering.³¹

Eventually, between worldly life and Paradise:

See behind you, pilgrim, and think about.
What good God and your neighbour have done for you.
And also what you have done against them and is iniquitous.
Consider for what you are guilty.³²

29 »Sich über dich pilgrim dein sel ist gepildt nach got. / Du solt hye pues than und gancz halten seine gepot. / Hoffe ud glaub in yn so will er dir geben. / Hye gnad und nach diser zeyt das ewig leben.« Griese 2011, 100. Translation into English by the author.

30 »Sich für dich pilgrim hye plyebestu nicht. / Du must sterben und für das letzt gericht. / Vnd wayst nit wenn wie wo und wuhin darnach. / Darumb so schick dich darzu allzeyt und tag.« Griese 2011, 101. Translation into English by the author.

31 »Sich hinter dich pilgrim und dein leyb kumpt von erden. / Vnd er wirdt auch widerumb zu erden warden. / Wiltu hye die sünd nit lassen und meyden. / So muestu darumb auch grosse peyn leyden.« Griese 2011, 100. Translation into English by the author.

32 »Sich hinter dich pilgrim und gedenke doran. / Was guetz dir got und dein nächster hat gethan. / Auch wastu wider sy gethan hast und unrecht ist. / O bedencke wastu darumb zu than schuldig pist.« Griese 2011, 100. Translation into English by the author.

The worldview in the retable from Alte Kappelle in Regensburg and in this single-sheet printing each have different emphases but both relate to the same concept of space. In both images, the cosmos is depicted and conceived as a well ordered whole, with its characteristic worldly and otherworldly spheres and their mutual relationships. The representation of the cosmos has a direct relevance for the viewers/readers who are taught how to conduct a proper life and achieve eternal life in an eschatological future.

In these worldviews, the biography of the viewer and the cosmic order are merged; the descriptive and prescriptive significance of the depicted places are intertwined. Whereas the retable could only be seen in the church on (feast) days when the panels were opened, the single-sheet printing was intended for personal edification for lay people.³³ The mirror reveals its role as a mediator between the Trinity and the viewer/reader in the spiral banners in the upper parts of the sheet which represent the string for hanging it on an imaginary wall.³⁴

The three of us are one God and Lord over all the kindred,
therefore, pilgrim, look into the Mirror of Reason.
Whence you come, who you are and how you live, I ask,
where you must [go] and where you [will] stay forever.³⁵

Both images of a Christian worldview we have considered to this point offer insights into domains that cannot be explored during earthly life but only by means of (visual) representation. All the interconnected places shown in these images are relevant for the stability of the cosmos. However, the world, as humans experience it, is represented in light of salvation history, focusing on characters, behaviours and values for viewers/readers seeking to attain Paradise. In other images of the world, the territory that pious believers and sinners inhabit is explored more accurately, with a more explicit interest in a cartographical depiction. There is a focus on the features of creation, the

33 Griesse 2011, 102.

34 For an in-depth study of the motif of the mirror as a metaphor for reflection and revelation about the world see Jónsson 1995.

35 »Wir drey sind ein got und herr über alle geschlecht. / darum pillgram sich hie in den Spiegel der vernunft. / Wann kumstu Wer bistu und Wie lebstu frag ich. / Wo muestu hine und Wo bleipstu ewiglich.« Translation by the author.

place where human life unfolds and the places where Christ's incarnation, passion and resurrection took place, as the next example shows.

3.4 The limits of creation are explored: The timber ceiling in St. Martin, Zillis

The representation of a Christian cosmos on the ceiling in the church of St. Martin in Zillis takes us back to the 12th century. The village is located in the Swiss Alps on the road that leads to the Splügen Pass, which was a crucial north-south road at that time in the Middle Ages, as it connected what is today southern Germany, Austria and Switzerland to Chiavenna, Lake Como and Milan. Coming from the north, travellers had to cross the Viamala canyon on an exposed, dangerous passage over the river Rhine before reaching the valley where Zillis is situated, and then going on to tackle the steep road across the Alps.

The single nave building of St. Martin, which was the main church of the valley, is first mentioned in 803 and the ceiling is dated from the beginning of the 12th century.³⁶ This is a unique treasure, as it preserves the only known Romanesque timber ceiling with figurative representations in Europe. Equally remarkable is the excellent state of its preservation, the quality of the paintings and the fact that it can still be seen today in its original location (fig. 8). Unlike the frescos on the church walls, the ceiling survived iconoclastic interventions during the Reformation.³⁷ The style of painting is typical for northern Italy, which is not surprising in a village on a busy road, which functioned as a contact zone between different cultures.³⁸

The work is comprised of 153, almost square panels (approx. 90 × 90 cm), made of spruce wood boards, arranged in a rectangle of nine panels in width and seventeen panels in length.³⁹ The single panels can be slid into

36 Nay 2015, 29.

37 For detailed analysis of the ceiling see Nay 2015; Blanke 1994; Brugger-Koch 1981. Nay 2015, 19–28 offers a detailed reconstruction of the research history of this unique monument.

38 Brugger-Koch 1981; Nay 2015, 317–362.

39 153 may be a reference to the Gospel of John 21:11: »So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.« In his homily on John 20:30–31 and 21:1–11, Augustine presents an intricate calculation in which he argues that 153 is to be understood as a symbolic number representing the whole Church and all Christians: »Not therefore



Fig. 8: Ceiling of the church of St. Martin, Zillis, as it appears today. The sequence of the scenes is based on the reconstruction made in 1940. The outer frame of panels represents the sea, while the internal panels are to be read from left to right and from east (above) to west (below). Rows 2 to 14 depict the life of Jesus, row 15 the life of St. Martin.

the decorated guides that fix them onto the ceiling.⁴⁰ The building, and consequently the image of the world in the ceiling, is oriented towards the east, (even though not perfectly), which corresponds to the usual orientation for a church, the rising sun shining through the choir being associated metaphorically with resurrection. The location of the scenes has been changed over the centuries and the original layout is still a matter of scholarly debate since major restoration works took place in 1938–1940. Since 1940 the ceiling is oriented in a reading direction in which each row is read from left to right, beginning in the eastern part. However, before 1938, the panels were possibly organised according to a different reading direction, according to a »S« shape, switching from left to right and vice versa. It is not possible to definitively reconstruct the original sequence. Nevertheless, details of the figural representation and ornamental elements suggest that the Gospel narratives played a central role in the order of the scenes.⁴¹

The rectangle encompasses a central field and a frame surrounding it. The whole composition comprises different iconographic programmes. The first and most extended sequence, made of 14 rows of panels, begins in the eastern edge (in fig. 8, above), and shows a *Vita Christi*. It is a detailed arrangement of motifs in the life of Christ with clear references to the Gospels.⁴² Strikingly, the representation ends with the scene of the *Crowning with Thorns*, and not, as many researchers expect, with the death on the cross or the resurrection.⁴³ The second iconographic programme, in the penultimate row of panels, is dedicated to the life of St. Martin.

are only one hundred and fifty-three saints signified as going to rise again to eternal life, but thousands of saints who belong to the grace of the Spirit [...]. Therefore, all who belong to this grace are represented by this number, that is, are figuratively signified.» Translation by Rettig 1995, 71. Many thanks to Sean Ryan for suggesting these references.

40 A drawing of the fixing system can be seen in Nay 2015, 61.

41 Brugger-Koch 1981, 23. Nay 2015 offers an accurate analysis of the different sequences that can be reconstructed before the restoration of 1938. Furthermore, he suggests convincing corrections, particularly for the marine part in the frame. In his monograph, three possible orders of the panels are visualised in four attached enlarged reproductions in colour.

42 Blanke 1994, 24–37 emphasises the unusually precise correspondence between text and image. He assumes that the production of the ceiling was influenced by the theological and biblical thought of Bernard of Clairvaux.

43 According to Blanke 1994, 19–24 and 126–127 kingship is the Leitmotif of this *Vita Christi*. Therefore, the iconographic programme ends with the motif of the *Crowning with Thorns*, a first – though mocking – reference to Christ's kingship. It results in an image of

The third programme consists in the representation of the sea that surrounds the life of Christ and of St. Martin. The orientation of these panels is different: they are not to be read from the eastern side to the western and from the left to the right, but they follow a central symmetry, the lower edges being directed outwards, forming a border that encircles the world. The fourth and last iconographic programme is composed by the angels, which today are placed in the bottom left and right corners.⁴⁴

The four parts of the ceiling are tightly connected with each other, and together they build a map of the world. The domain in the middle of the ceiling represents the earthly place where Jesus' human life unfolds. Earth is therefore identified with the dimension of incarnation. St. Martin's life can be interpreted as a local connection to Zillis: the saint, to whom the church is dedicated, represents an ideal, an *exemplum*, of a follower of Christ. The frame represents the limits of the world: the depiction of the sea and of the marine beings in it refers to the borders of the terrestrial world, while the angels are an anticipation of apocalyptic events at the end of time.

The composition is visually unified by a cross which extends over the whole length and width and is marked by a double frame around the central panels.⁴⁵ Along this line, the map in Zillis anticipates the theological and didactic aspects which we discussed before in the representations of the cosmos from the 15th century. The all-encompassing cross highlights that salvation history permeates all domains of the world.

In the present reconstruction of the ceiling, that is based on the restoration of 1938–40, the scene in the middle of the cross, the geometrical centre of the representation, depicts Christ's temptation by the devil as described in Matthew 4:8–11 (fig. 9). The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, promising him power over all this in exchange for worship. The parallel text in Luke 4:5 reads: »Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world«. From a theological perspective, this panel emphasises the righteousness of Christ's sovereignty – in opposition to the power of the

Jesus Christ as the humiliated and at the same time dignified saviour. Possibly, the crucifixion scene was depicted on the church's wall.

44 About the basic organisation of the iconographic programme of the ceiling all analyses converge. See Nay 2015; Brugger-Koch 1981, 24–25.

45 Blanke 1994, 20.

Fig. 9: Standing on a high mountain, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, which Jesus refuses to accept from him. The small map in the lower centre of the panel represents the world in a circular form containing buildings with towers, circles (maybe places or coins?) and bowls (?). These elements, according to the biblical text, refer to the splendour and richness the devil is promising in exchange for worship. The items are depicted in a light colour on a black background.



devil – as the leitmotif of the ceiling. Furthermore, from a spatial perspective the scene expresses the very idea of the map itself: it provides an instant overview of the whole world, specifically over all the inhabited domains of the earth. Visually, this scene contains a map within a map.

Our aim in this chapter is to consider selected representations of medieval Christian cosmologies as visual conceptualisations of space and place. As part of this analysis, the ceiling in Zillis is particularly illuminating because it depicts a domain that belongs to the order of creation, even though it contains unusual animals and scary scenes. The sea represented in the frame is an earthly territory that lies far away, but not beyond the limits of a human lifetime.

The marine borders contain various motifs. First, there are depictions of hybrid sea creatures, painted as a combination of different animals: an elephant or a ram with a fish's tail (figs. 10–11). These composite beings, made of different parts of exotic animals, refer to different sources. On the one hand, they echo bestiaries, contemporary collections of indigenous animals, as well as exotic creatures and other beasts we would today consider as imaginary such as unicorns, griffins, or dragons. Such illuminated collections were very popular in the Middle Age and contain descriptions of the animals' features and information about their symbolic meaning with references to the Bible, and wider Christian tradition as well as fables. On the other hand, in the context of the ceiling, the hybrid creatures also refer to beings living in the deep abyss from various Old Testaments books as well as to beasts appearing in the Book of Revelation.⁴⁶

46 Different interpretations of the hybrid creatures can be found in: Blanke 1994, 44–47;



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Figs. 10 and 11: Hybrid creatures living in the water of the sea that surrounds the Earth.

Fig. 12: A hybrid creature, half human and half fish, plays a string instrument.

Furthermore, there are hybrid figures half human and half fish playing a string instrument. They resonate with representations of sirens (fig. 12), fascinating, irresistible creatures who lure humans into the marine abyss.⁴⁷

Third, there are scenes with characters interacting with each other, like a devil riding a fish (fig. 13), an Amazon feeding a hybrid being half hart and half fish (fig. 14) and a devil-fish who is about to eat a naked human on a spit (fig. 15) as well as other fighting scenes with hybrid creatures biting one another.

Brugger-Koch 1981, 30–32; Nay 2015, 293–295; Poeschel 1941, 13–14. About the recurrence and meanings of monster on maps see Mittman 2006, particularly 45–81. For an illustrated introduction to bestiaries see Morris 2019.

47 Brugger-Koch 1981, 32–24.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Figs. 13–15: Scenes unfolding in the frame of the map, which show the chaotic waters of the sea: a devil is riding a fish, while an Amazon feeds another hybrid creature, half hart and half fish. A being half devil and half fish eats a naked human on a spit.



Fig. 15

Finally, there are three panels – one is damaged – representing people on boats. The interpretation of these scenes is challenging: some scholars read them as references to biblical scenes, others add a symbolic layer of meaning alluding to trial and final judgment. In my opinion, these depictions could also refer to the sea as a place of human activity (fishing, trading) and exploration (figs. 16–17).⁴⁸ As is typical for visual communication, the representation is polysemic, allowing manifold meanings.

48 Brugger-Koch 1981, 41. Three of the five fish swimming in the sea are caught in the net. The depiction may refer, according to Blanke (1994, 144–146), to different New Testament texts. One possibility is to interpret the image according to the Gospel of John 21. Accordingly, the disciples are fishing in the sea and do not recognise the risen Christ. Only once



Fig. 16: Two men are fishing on a large boat.



Fig. 17: Two men are in a large sailing boat. One is holding an oar, the other a box. A third character, clothed in a different colour, speaks to them.⁴⁹

Overall, the sea is depicted as a place inhabited by ambiguous, uncontrollable creatures. The recurrence of demonic figures makes the danger lurking in these waters visible. Marc Antony Nay's reconstruction of the frame suggests a procession of hybrid beings led by the playing sirens. The frame is the most damaged part of the ceiling and several panels painted in 1938–40 are copies of other preserved panels. This part of the restoration work provides an artificial sense of symmetry in the frame which cannot be historically verified.⁵⁰

The ceiling in Zillis can be interpreted as a medieval world map, a *mapa mundi*, a genre that visualises in a single representation the whole cosmos as well as all knowledge about it.⁵¹ This particular map of the world as a

their net is full, do the disciples realise who is speaking to them. Others relate the scene to the final judgement as described in the Gospel of Matthew 13:47–50: »Also, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Some fishermen throw their net out in the lake and catch all kinds of fish. When the net is full, they pull it to shore and sit down to divide the fish: the good ones go into their buckets, the worthless ones are thrown away. It will be like this at the end of the age: the angels will go out and gather up the evil people from among the good and will throw them into the fiery furnace, where they will cry and grind their teeth.«

49 Blanke 1994, 146–147 and Brugger-Koch 1981, 39–40 assume a reference to Jonah 1:3. See Nay 2015, 296 for a critical assessment of the different assumptions.

50 Nay 2015, 308–316.

51 Brincken 2008d; Egel 2014, 66–72; Kliege 1991, 51; Woodward 1987.



Fig. 18: The angel in the northern corner of the ceiling at the eastern edge. The name of the northwind *Aquilo* is written close to its left wing (from the viewer's perspective).

rectangle combines the history of salvation with the depiction of the liminal zones around the world.⁵² The principal iconographic programme leads the viewer through the life of Jesus by means of precise references to the canonical gospels with elements from apocryphal traditions. The representation of the sea as a liminal, dangerous zone of uncontrollable forces reminds viewers of the extension of the territory humans inhabit and the dangerous zones at the very edge of creation.

As mentioned above, akin to the retable and the single-sheet printing, the map of the world in Zillis refers to salvation not only as a revelation that is received on Earth, in the place human beings inhabit, but also as a chronological timeline. Jesus Christ and St. Martin's lives in the past address the viewers in the present through their messages, whilst the angels in the corners announce an eschatological future at the end time. Only the two angels that are currently placed at the eastern edge of the map are original. In the opposite corners there are replicas produced in 1941.⁵³

⁵² Brincken 2008a, 22.

⁵³ Some scholars propose that the angels on the opposite edge were associated with winds from the east and the west, others conclude that only the two preserved angels belong to the original composition. See Poeschel 1942, 12–13; Brugger-Koch 1981, 41–44. Nay 2015, 291–310 suggests instead that there were only two angels representing both the winds and the cardinal points north and south. He argues that they were possibly placed closer to the central axis in the eastern edge of the ceiling.

The preserved angels are associated with winds through an inscription: in the north corner it reads *Auster*, in the opposite corner *Oliuqa* (for *Aquilo*), the name being written in reverse (fig. 18). The emphasis on A and O as well as the attributes of the angels echoes Revelation, were Alpha and Omega, the first and the last letter of the Greek alphabet, a merism, alludes to Christ as the beginning and the end of time.⁵⁴ In Revelation 7:1–3 the angels are described as follows:

After this I [John, the protagonist of the book] saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds so that no wind should blow on the earth or the sea or against any tree. And I saw another angel coming up from the east with the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels to whom God had given the power to damage the earth and the sea. The angel said, »Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees, until we mark the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.«

The mighty angels in Zillis hold two wind instruments in their hands but they do not play them yet. They introduce a tension into the composition on a chronological level. Human life is transitory and may be jeopardised by temptation and monstrous creatures. The cosmological order is also transitory: as soon as the angels blow their horns, the end of time will unfold. By entering the church and looking at this *mappa mundi*, the viewers could (and can) grasp the relevance of Christ's revelation, passion and salvation, which permeates all territories of creation, and offers them hope of redemption in the secure domain they inhabit.

3.5 Creation is mapped in a prayer book: *The London Psalter Maps*

As already mentioned, *mappa mundi* is a medieval Latin term for world map. *Mappa* means cloth or banner, while *mundus* designates the world as

⁵⁴ Revelation 22:13: »I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.« See Blanke 1994, 141–142.

God's creation.⁵⁵ It is used as a denomination for a specific genre of overarching representations in a text-image combination.⁵⁶ *Mappae mundi* belong to medieval encyclopaedic collections of knowledge treating cosmological, natural, historical, theological and moral subjects.⁵⁷

The next example we will explore is a small full-page *mappa mundi* (17.1×12.8 cm) known as the *Psalter Map*, that is part of a manuscript produced in England in the second half of the 13th century.⁵⁸ Among other texts and images, this volume contains: a calendar, prayers, and various liturgical texts written in Anglo-Norman, French, and Latin.⁵⁹ This *mappa mundi* is part of a larger group of medieval world maps and shows features that are typical for maps of this period, such as the Hereford, the Sawley, or the Ebstorf map.⁶⁰ The world is represented twice, on the front (*recto*) and on the back (*verso*) of the same page. Folio 9 *recto* (r) depicts a detailed *mappa mundi* in colour with inscriptions providing names and information, as well as symbols such as small golden triangles for locating specific places (fig. 19). On folio 9 *verso* (v) the world map is reproduced in a schematic

55 Egel 2014, 64 refers to Isidore of Seville's definition in *Etymologiae* XIII, I »Mundus est coelum et terra, mare et quae in eis opera Dei. De quo dicitur (Ioh 1,10): »et mundus per eum factum est.« in the English translation by Barney / Lewis / Beach (2006, 271): »The world consists of the sky and the land, the sea and the creations of God within them. Whence it is said (John 1:10): »And the world was made by him.« Isidore of Seville's work merged a Christian world view with the reception of antique concepts and had a long-lasting influence on medieval *mappae mundi*. See also Jaynes 2018, 78–97.

56 *Mappae mundi* comprise both image (*pictura*) and text (*scriptura*). Kliege 1991, 51 writes »The mappa mundi as a simple schematic map was first of all a symbol for »the world«, and, given its size, offered very little space for geographical details and further historical information. In contrast, the extended form of the *mappa mundi*, which is documented particularly during the 11th–13th century, is characterised by a differentiated, geographical-cartographic design of the continents and comprehensive material on names based on the interaction between ancient, biblical, and contemporary information. For the design of the image the draftman's intention and talent were decisive, since he connected a multilayered, Christian symbolism with the *pictura*.« Translation from the German by the author. See also Brinken 2008c and 2008d; Edson 2007, 11–32; Egel 2014, 66–72; Schöller 2013 and 2015, 18–28 156–162; Woodward 1987.

57 *Mappa mundi* and *speculum* can both be considered as encyclopaedic genres. See Egel 2014, 63–72. On the origins of *mappa mundi* see also Uhden 1931.

58 The manuscript is preserved in the British Library (BL Add. MS 28681).

59 For a description of the manuscript see Schöller 2015, 37–38 and Brott 2018, 212.

60 For a general introduction to medieval cartography see Jaynes 2018; Kliege 1991; von Brincken 2008a and 2008d; Woodward 1987.

way (fig. 20). The placement of the two maps on each page and the size of the earthly circle correspond precisely.⁶¹ While f. 9 r. details the location of places such as monasteries, cities, regions, rivers, mountains and seas, f. 9 v. contains a diagram in a schematic T-O shape with a list of names: the Earth is depicted as a circle (O), whilst the T refers to the division of the continents: Asia (upper semicircle), Europe, on the left, and Africa on the right of the lower semicircle.⁶² Whereas f. 9 v. lists and classifies provinces and cities in the three parts of the world by means of written words, f. 9 r. locates places on the earthly surface by depicting and, in many cases, also naming them. Water fills the horizontal boundary dividing the continents in the middle of the map and the vertical separation between Europe and Africa in the lower semicircle. Like the timber ceiling in Zillis, the map is oriented towards the east. Here we focus only on a few elements of this detailed *mappa mundi* in order to grasp its general concept of space.⁶³

61 Reudenbach 1998 offers an illuminating analysis of the mutual relationship between f. 9 r. and 9 v.

62 According to Brincken 2008a, the designation »T-O« arises in the 14th century, as a reference to Leonardo Dati's verses from the poem *La sfera* (ca. 1422, edition Dati 1859, 9): »Un T dentro a un O montra il disegno / Come in tre parte fu diviso il mondo, / E la superiore è il maggior regno / Che quasi piglia la metà del tondo / ASIA chiamata: il gambo ritto è segno / Che parte il terzo nome del secondo / AFRICA dico da EUROPA: il mare / Mediterran tra esse in mezzo appare.« (»A T within an O shows the drawing / as in three parts the world has been divided/and the upper is the major realm / that takes almost half of the circle / called ASIA: the straight stem is the sign / that divides the third name from the second / AFRICA I say from EUROPE: the sea / Mediterranean between them appears.« Translation by the author. The T-O map type, inherited from antiquity, could be matched with the biblical tradition, associating Noah's sons Shem, Ham and Japheth respectively with Asia, Africa and Europe. See also Jaynes 2018; Kliege 1991; Schöller 2015.

63 For a detailed analysis of the *Psalter Map* see Reudenbach 1998; Edson 2007; Schöller 2015 (containing a critical edition and a translation into German), Brott 2018, Brott / Wacha 2022; Mittman / Crossely / Wacha / Brott / Foy 2022. An edition and translation of the inscriptions on the map into English can be found on <https://sims2.digitalmappa.org/36v> (accessed 6 August 2025).



Fig. 19: *Psalter World Map*, 13th century, 17.1 × 12.8 cm, BL Add. MS 28681, folio 9 recto.



Fig. 20: Psalter List Map, 13th century, 17.1 × 12.8 cm, BL Add. MS 28681, folio 9 verso.

The *mappa mundi* in f. 9 r. merges significant places in the history of salvation with details of the territory as well as information from ancient mythology and other sources.⁶⁴ This ordered compilation of different forms and sources of knowledge can be observed, for example, in the representation of the eastern parts of the world. The Garden of Eden, the Earthly Paradise, is placed on the far east (which corresponds to the upper part of the map). Within a circular frame that is well bounded – Eden is not accessible to human beings, even though, according to medieval tradition, it is located on Earth – there is a portrait of Eve and Adam, the two figures being divided by a tree with fruit. Five rivers flow out from a circular element, which recalls a reversed fountain, beneath the garden's wall. From the viewer's perspective, read from right to left they are: *phison*, *geon*, *tigris*, *euphrates*, *ganges fluuius*. The four rivers Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates from the creation narrative in Genesis 2:10–13 are complemented with *ganges fl.* (an abbreviation for *fluuius*). The rivers *phison*, *geon* and *tigris* flow into the Red Sea, highlighted in red (the strip where the seawater parted for the crossing of the Israelites according to the book of *Exodus* is highlighted), whilst *ganges fluuius* ends in a circular element.⁶⁵ To the right of Eden *arbor solis* and *arbor lune* (the tree of the Sun and the tree of the Moon) are depicted, which refers to an episode from the Alexander Romance. Beneath these trees, a golden triangle is explained as *are liberi erculus*). The medievist Bettina Schöller, comparing this map inscription with other contemporary sources, interprets the inscription as referring to altars of Dionysos (*Liber Pater*) and Hercules, while the isolated inscription *columne* on the right side indicates the Pillars of Alexander, that mark the eastern end of Alexander the Great's kingdom.⁶⁶ Furthermore, alongside geographical names of cities, regions, rivers and seas *turris* (»tower«, meaning the tower of Babel) and *arca noe* (Noah's ark) are precisely located in the eastern part of the Earth. The east is represented as the place from which humanity originates and where the main early episodes of the history of salvation took place. In addition, the east is the site of the legendary expeditions of Alexander the Great and constitutes

64 Schöller 2015, 77–180.

65 Schöller 2015, 58 suggests that *ganges fluuius* may continue to run underground and join up with the *phison* there, since in medieval time the two rivers were often identified. This expedient may have been necessary to match biblical sources with geographical knowledge.

66 Schöller 2015, 60.

a territory that can be explored and geographically located. In this encyclopaedic map, Biblical narratives and religious worldviews, medieval romance literature as well as cartographic knowledge are harmoniously merged.

Jerusalem (*Ierusalem*) lies at the centre of the map, it is the omphalos of the world. It is pointed out by the largest inscription, which is encircled in gold and silver and framed by a red line. Jerusalem is a real city, one can visit on pilgrimage, the sacred place where the passion, death and resurrection of Christ took place.⁶⁷ The large golden circle around its name visually refers to the nimbus of Christ outside the earthly territory and echoes the description of the heavenly city of Revelation 21–22, alluding therefore to an eschatological event beyond human history. Just above Jerusalem, and slightly to the right, a mountain alludes to Jesus' temptation: *mons excelsus ubi deabolus statuit dominum* (»The highest mountain where the devil took the lord«, a reference to Matthew 4:8).⁶⁸ The tension between salvation and temptation reinforces the link to the Earthly Paradise: whereas Eve and Adam brought sin into the world, Christ sacrificed himself for its redemption. This tension recurs in all representations of the world we have analysed so far.

Africa, according to medieval map conventions, is located on the right-hand side of the map, in which the border with Asia is marked by the Nile (*nilus fl.*) – which corresponds to *geon* and is depicted several times on the map – flowing down towards Alexandria. North-African cities near the Mediterranean Sea are named, while the distant parts of the continent *terra arenosa et sterilis*, unproductive and sandy land, a reference to the Sahara Desert, are inhabited by hybrid, monstrous beings with human traits.

Europe, in the lower left side, is more detailed, with its major cities such as Rome, Paris or Cologne listed, and mountain chains like the Alps and rivers like the Danube named. Northern territories like *scocia* (Scotland), *norwegia* (Norway) or the mythical territory *iperboria* (Hyperborea) are placed within the ocean surrounding the earthly circle. This liminal domain is de-

67 Brott 2018, 220: »The placement of important pilgrimage destinations on the maps also speaks to the historical moment in which they were created. Jerusalem's central place is a reflection of the fundamental shift in the European worldview that correlates with the role of the Holy Land in a post-crusade religious landscape.« See also Brincken 2008e; Woodward 1987, 341.

68 The parallels between this inscription and the central panel in the ceiling in Zillis are striking, see above page 59–60. This is an additional argument in favour of the reliability of the reconstruction of the Zillis panels in 1938–1940.

limited as an outer circle in green and contains personifications of twelve winds, together with several islands, most of them unnamed. The four cardinal winds – *subsolanus*, *ventus septentrionalis*, *ventus zephirus*, *auster vel nothus* – are drawn bigger and in a lighter shade, whilst the eight winds in-between are smaller and in dark blue.⁶⁹

In both maps on f. 9, the creation as a whole, including the liminal parts beyond the African desert and the outer ocean, is represented as the body of Christ. Christ's representation extends outside the maps, with Eden and Jerusalem placed on a vertical axis, emphasizing the theological significance of this encyclopaedic map. According to these maps the territory which humans inhabit is the very place where Jesus's incarnation took place. From a theological perspective, these are the key elements of a Christian interpretation of the world: first the world was created, then sin came into it through Adam and Eve's behaviour, and eventually the passion and resurrection of Christ opens a new eschatological perspective on the New Jerusalem.⁷⁰

In f. 9 r. Jesus Christ is depicted with a nimbus, with a cross motif, in gold. Visually, as already mentioned above, the golden colour links him to Jerusalem. He holds in his left hand a globe with the T-O scheme, a miniature representation of the world, a motif we have already observed in the retablo of Regensburg. Christ's right hand is depicted in the gesture of blessing. Two mighty angels flank and worship him with censers, possibly a reference to (heavenly) liturgy. In f. 9 v. Jesus Christ holds the creation in his hands, flanked by four angels.⁷¹ His feet are depicted below the circle, they crush the head of two hybrid creatures, wyverns, alluding to demonic beings. In both maps, the creation is Christ's body, the circular form symbolising at the same time the Eucharistic host.⁷² This representation echoes apocalyptic imagery and motifs from the psalms, which coheres with the placement of these maps in relation to the overall character of the book.⁷³

69 For an in-depth analysis see Schöller 2015, 47–74.

70 Schöller 2015, 123–127: »In the Psalter map theoretical considerations about the divine order of the world become tangible within the space of human experience« (p. 126). Translation from the German by the author.

71 On f. 9 v. the divine figure may also be God, since the nimbus does not depict the cross. It may also be an identification of the two persons of the trinity, see Schöller, 2015, 214.

72 Brott 2018, 218.

73 On the intertextual relationship between the map, the whole manuscript and the Psalms see Reudenbach 1998.

From a cartographic perspective, there is an interest in locating places and tracing relationships between territorial landmarks, cities, and provinces. The comparison between the *World Map* and the *List Map* is meaningful: while f. 9 v. reproduces a perfect T-O scheme, f. 9 r. is influenced by this convention yet is more flexible, adapting the scheme to the forms of the shores and continents. The *Psalter Map* condenses in two images a detailed, encyclopaedic knowledge about the world, merging theological, geographical, literary, and historical sources. Places are located in order to fill the surface, there is no empty space.

A comparison of these differing cosmological representations, notably the ceiling in Zillis and the *London Psalter Map* highlights some significant common features. Both maps combine elements from different sources and domains of knowledge, merging them into a complete depiction of the creation as a whole, albeit in a complex unity. It is significant to note that both representations are directly related to religious practices: while in the church of St. Martin, the community gathers to celebrate the Eucharist, the *Psalter* book is a medium with information about prayer and liturgical practices.

Both convey a concept of space as having been created, composed by different places that are bounded in themselves, which are both accessible and yet can be explored through travel by viewing them in the context of worship and meditation.⁷⁴ The terrestrial territory in Zillis principally maps salvation history. Although the reference to the liminal zones of the world suggests an exploration of distant, chaotic domains, they nonetheless also remain part of the cosmos. In the *London Psalter Map* the territory is explored more in detail by means of a graphic and symbolic representation of geographical elements. Overall, visually, the figural representation of Christ extends outside the terrestrial circle, which anticipates an increasing difficulty in harmonising, in a single representation, theological, geographical, historical and literary knowledge about the world.

74 Brott 2018 explores the map in its relationship to the psalms the manuscript contains, analysing mutual references between the maps, the text of the Psalms and the miniatures in the capital letters. She concludes (p. 222): »The intertextual and intervisual relationships in this manuscript provide fertile ground for the reader-viewer to make exegetical connections and move through the text for cross-comparisons. The act of flipping between the text and images creates a spatialized experience, which is complemented by the presence of maps at the front of the manuscript«. On the interaction between text and map see Ryan 2023.

At this time, the representation of places and the conceptualisation of space becomes multilayered, as the tension between different approaches to faith, theological speculation and the extension in space which humans inhabit increases. The earthly territory where the incarnation and salvation took place, where human history unfolds and cultural exchanges take place, was increasingly being explored in detail. Including all known facts in a single representation of the world became a growing challenge, as the next extraordinary map illustrates.

3.6 A map of the world widens cartography: Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo*

Fra Mauro's world map was completed in Venice in 1460 in the Camaldolese monastery San Michele in Isola on an island in the Venetian lagoon (today, Venice's cemetery is located on the island). The *Mappamondo* was planned and produced by the monk and cartographer Fra Mauro, who worked for decades on this representation of the globe in which a broad and detailed knowledge is visualised in a striking text-image composition (fig. 21). Mauro's map is a unique document that visualises a turning point in the conceptualisation of space within the history of culture and religion in Europe. It is a monumental work in both size and significance. The almost square *Mappamondo* measures 223 × 233 cm; it contains a planisphere 193–196 cm in diameter encircled by a circular wooden frame. The planisphere is made of four parchment sheets glued onto a poplar panel comprised of three boards. The rectangular part is made of four boards of spruce wood; in the four corners cosmological and cartographical issues are addressed.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ There are several digital, interactive reproductions of Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo*. See e. g. <https://engineeringhistoricalmemory.com/FraMauro.php> or <https://mostre.museogalileo.it/framauro/en/introduction.html> (accessed on 6 August 2025). For an introduction and an edition of the map's inscriptions with commentary and an English translation see Falchetta 2006 and 2016; Cattaneo 2011. See also Egel 2014. The first facsimile edition is Gasparrini Leporace 1956.



Fig. 21: Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo*, parchment on wood, ca. 1460, 223 × 233 cm, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice.

The map was completed in 1460, as a note on the back of the wooden panel reveals: »MCCCCLX a dì XXVI agosto fu chomplido questo lauor«. ⁷⁶ Scholars propose that Mauro began to draw the map in 1448.

There is little information about the biography of this monk, even though he was well known as a gifted cartographer. He probably entered the monastery of San Michele in 1409 as a *conversus*, an adult adhering to monastic vows, and spent his entire adult life there. It is understood that he died in

⁷⁶ »On August 26th 1460 this work has been completed.« Cattaneo 2011, 38 proposes that on this day the map was put on display in the sacristy of San Michele.

1459.⁷⁷ The details about the production of the *Mappamondo* are reconstructed from different historical documents. There is a scholarly consensus that whilst the map was fully planned and designed by Fra Mauro, nonetheless, many hands contributed to its realisation. The representation of the Earthly Paradise in the lower left corner is attributed to the painter Leonardo Bellini and was completed last, possibly after Mauro's death.⁷⁸

A further aspect makes the historical reconstruction challenging and controversial: it is not clear how many *Mappamondi* Fra Mauro produced. It is assumed that the world map was commissioned by Alfonso V, the King of Portugal but it is not possible to ascertain if the map preserved today in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice is a copy of the work sent to Portugal, or if it is the original map.⁷⁹ The *Mappamondo* was originally displayed in the Church of San Michele in Isola in 1460, and later moved into other rooms within the monastery, where it remained until 1810. At that time, the cloister was dismantled following the abolition of its religious order and, therefore, the map was handed over to the Marcian library in Venice which still owns it.⁸⁰

The *Mappamondo* is a refined visual depiction combining drawings and texts. It is made of precious materials such as gold and lapis lazuli powder (for the blue of the sea). The writing is in red and blue; some names are written in golden capital letters with a dark border. The map contains about three thousand inscriptions comprised of names or short texts in the Venetian vernacular.⁸¹ In the 15th century, Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo* was widely known.⁸² The map contains an astonishing amount of information about places, landscape features, and human activities, both in drawings and in texts. The map conveys an idea of the world as a known territory:

From a cosmographical point of view, the way in which Fra Mauro places his text on the *mappa mundi*, in synergy with hundreds of draw-

77 See e.g. Falchetta, 2016, 13–16.

78 For the reconstruction of Fra Mauro's biography and the dating of the production process see Cattaneo 2011, 33–46; Egel 2014, 33–39; Falchetta 2021.

79 The questions linked to the commission(s) and the number of copies is controversial. See Baumgärtner 1998; Cattaneo 2011, 33–74; Egel 2014, 33–39; Falchetta 2016, 23–58 and 2021, 14–17.

80 Falchetta 2016, 59–63.

81 On the language see Cattaneo 2011, 227–234.

82 See Cattaneo 2011, 46–74.

ings, reinforces and alludes to a representation of space in which the world is seen as completely knowable and inhabitable. The text, written all over the *mappa mundi*, contributes to the creation of a concept of terrestrial space that is completely knowable and human. For Fra Mauro the Earth, or better, all of the earth, is *oikumene*. Without necessarily reading the cartouches, but just looking at their placement, the ancient and modern spectator could plausibly perceive the fullness of the world.⁸³

The map is oriented southwards, locating Africa on the upper part, and, in the lower semicircle, Asia on the left and Europe in the right, which distinguishes it from medieval European *mappae mundi*. Yet, in Venice in the 15th century, an orientation towards the south was not uncommon; this may be explained by influence from Islamic cartographic conventions and/or by Venice's position towards the south in matters of travel as well as commercial and maritime expansion, as Cattaneo explains:

The orientation of the *mappa mundi* towards the south may also reflect the vision of the world that Fra Mauro had come to have as a participant in, and interpreter of, Venetian culture. Fra Mauro conceptualised and gave graphic form to the possibility of combining the circumnavigation of Africa with Arab, and possibly even Chinese, navigations in the »Seas of India« into a single immense route: from his cell in San Michele di Murano, Fra Mauro clearly oriented his intellectual and cultural interest in cosmography towards the south and south-east.⁸⁴

Besides the southwards orientation that differs from previous cartographic convention, Mauro's *Mappamondo* contains another distinctive trait that is striking from an epistemological perspective. In some cartouches he expresses his personal opinion and assesses the sources he consulted whilst preparing the map. The cartographer legitimates his considerations and discusses the different interpretations he has received in his research. This procedure permeates the map. By way of example, alluding to the traditional T-O

83 Cattaneo 2011, 90.

84 Cattaneo 2011, 88.

scheme of medieval *mappae mundi*, he comments on the general organisation of space in maps as follows:

Regarding the divisions of the world – that is, of Asia from Africa and of Europe from Asia – cosmographers and historiographers give various opinions. Of these one could discuss at length, but because it is boring to dwell on this controversy, I will make a brief note with their opinions and leave the prudent to decide which one they should hold as best. Some follow the Ancients – for example, Messala, the orator who wrote of the family of Octavian Augustus, and Pomponius Mela and those who followed him. They claim that it is the Nile which divides Asia from Africa and the Thanai Asia from Europe. Some claim that Ptolemy says that the chain of the Arabian Mountains, which lies to the side of Nubia and extends through Abassia and beyond southern Ethiopia, constitutes the division between Asia and Africa. Others – that is, the modern writers – observe that these divisions of Africa (either by the Nile or by those mountains) make Africa too small. They say that it is the Red Sea or Arabian Gulf that divides Africa from Asia. What is more, seeing that the river Edil, which flows into the Caspian Sea, runs from further northwards than the river Thanai, they say that it is this river Edil which better divides Europe from Asia. This latter opinion seems clearer and more evident; and there is less need for the sort of imaginary line that seems to be required by those who adopt the other divisions. However, I advise those who are looking at this work not to worry themselves too much about discussing this division, given that it is not very important. Let them opt for that which seems to them most reasonable and probable, both to the eye and to the intellect. None the less, I remind them that it is a praiseworthy thing to follow the authority of the most veracious.⁸⁵

This cartouche is significant in seeking to grasp the attitude toward space and place which emerges from this map. Fra Mauro receives controversial traditions about the location and the style of representing the continents. Although he judges the matter as of little importance, »materia tediosa«

85 *2489, translation by Falchetta 2006, 637–39.

(«boring subject matter»), he highlights different opinions asking the audience to take a position according to two criteria: »quanto l'occhio e quanto l'intelletto«, according to what can be seen and what can be understood.

In another cartouche the cartographer explains that a map can only be a means for approaching the complexity of the cosmic space, without being able to explain it adequately. The intellectual exploration of space is limited by the human condition. On the one hand, a person cannot explore all parts of creation by travelling through them, on the other hand, even an erudite cosmographer cannot completely understand, by means of reason alone, all the mysteries of God's work.⁸⁶ The map, nonetheless, remains helpful in reproducing and conceptualising space by means of drawings and inscriptions. Together with direct observation of the territory and the study of the scholarly traditions, the abstract representation of the map helps the readers figure out features of the earthly territory, the globe and the universe:

Note that throughout this work there are some green marks or some rows of small trees which serve to indicate the divisions and borders between provinces. But those who want to understand [these signs] well must have seen with their own eyes or else have read well. And they must have a good sense of proportions and the ability to interpret the drawing; otherwise, they will draw little fruit from these signs and will not be able to form a good idea of what they see depicted above.⁸⁷

In a further note, the target audience of the map are explicitly indicated. The author presents his map as an approach that deserves to be accessible to a broad audience, which explain the choice of Venetian instead of Latin:

In this work I have of necessity decided to use the modern names of common speech because, to tell the truth, if I had done otherwise only a few learned men would have understood me. However, even they cannot always reconcile what the auctores say and what is current practice.⁸⁸

86 *2193, Falchetta 2006, 575–577.

87 *2847, translation by Falchetta 2006, 703.

88 *2202, translation by Falchetta 2006, 577.

The map presents an accurate compilation of very different sources and, with them, worldviews. Discussing the controversial matter of the inhabitants of Africa, the author notes that the map relies on a long and accurate personal study of sources: »[...] Not because I want to contradict the authority of these men but because of the care I have taken in all these years in studying all possible information [...]«.⁸⁹

Different categories of sources inform the map: first, the cartographic tradition including the *mappae mundi*, nautical as well as regional maps; second, literary texts like Marco Polo's *Milione* (entire passages of this work are quoted in some cartouches), the fourth book of *De varietate fortunae* by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), or an account of the explorations of the merchant Niccolò de' Conti (1395–1469) who travelled across Asia; third, the authoritative texts from the Christian tradition and the Bible and, fourth, most importantly in the 15th century, Ptolemy's *Geography* that had been recently rediscovered and influenced Fra Mauro not only in the choice of cartographic representation but also in his aim to address the task of providing a complete overview of the entire earthly space:⁹⁰

The cosmographers never agree on the number of provinces because they received different information; some give more, some give less. Therefore, I do not give my opinion; almost everywhere – except in the smallest places – I have annotated a »p« to indicate a province, but only to give a form to the description of regions and the diversity of peoples. But those who are not happy that more provinces are given than indicated by Ptolemy should accept the meaning – that is, of such and such a region or such and such a province. Here there are not all the names of provinces given by Ptolemy, who says there are 94. However, I recall that I have not been able to put everything, and not even to respect the names he uses, as they are different today. Yet I do think that, under different names, I have indicated all his provinces, and some that were not known to him. Similarly, there are various

89 *1043: »[...] non perhò che io voglio contradir a le autorità de tanti, ma per dir la diligenza ho habuta in inquirir tute le novità se à possudo investigar per molti anni [...]«, edition and translation by Falchetta 2006, 387–389.

90 For a detailed reconstruction of the sources see Baumgärtner 1998; Cattaneo 2011 and Falchetta 2006, 33–69.

opinions regarding the circumference of the Earth, but it is not possible to verify them. It is said that it is 22,500 or 24,000 miles, more or less, according to the different estimates and opinions, which are not very reliable because they have not been verified by experience. And even if some have repeatedly sailed in the southern and northern regions, they have not had time to measure, or even estimate, these distances, given that they navigated as events dictated and not to measure the navigation itself. So I leave to eternal God the measurement of his work, which only He can understand in full. [...] ⁹¹

Biblical and theological reflection remain important, given that some aspects of this map are still very much linked to medieval cartography. Yet, compared to the other maps we have explored above, the religious worldview assumes a different role. In this map, innovative procedures are applied. The experience of sailors and travellers becomes a fundamental factor in order to check the received tradition, as emerges from the last quotation.

The location of Jerusalem clearly illustrates this tendency. The city is not exactly in the middle of the planisphere (Babylon is located in the central position, *0920), yet Jerusalem is carefully highlighted by means of a large compass rose.

By latitude, Jerusalem is at the centre of the inhabited world; but by longitude, it is further west. However, as Europe is more [densely] populated, Jerusalem does appear to be at the centre [of the inhabited world] by longitude as well, if one takes into account not [geographical] space but the number of inhabitants. ⁹²

Jerusalem is depicted as a real place; a representative building (the church of the Holy Sepulchre) is used as a *pars pro toto* to represent the holy city. The author explains his decision to locate Jerusalem not in the centre, mediating between the expectations towards Jerusalem as the centre of the world in the light of salvation history and the necessity to adhere to a precise geographical concept.

91 *2828, translation by Falchetta 2006, 597–600.

92 *1011, translation by Falchetta 2006, 381.

The availability of new sources of information and speculative reflection based on travellers' experience and literature emerge also in the representation of Africa, which has radically changed compared to *mappae mundi* similar to the *London Psalter Map*. Fra Mauro had new information at his disposal, coming from explorations of the Atlantic coast of Africa and other accounts by contemporary travellers. He considered that the continent could be circumnavigable, as was later proved by Vasco da Gama at the end of the century.⁹³ About the controversy on the features of Africa's inhabitants, Fra Mauro notes:

Because there are many cosmographers and most learned men who write that in this Africa – and, above all, in the Mauritanias – there are human and animal monsters, I think it is necessary to give my opinion. [...] And in all these kingdoms of the negroes I have never found anyone who could give me information on what those men have written. Thus, not knowing anything, I cannot bear witness to anything; and I leave research in the matter to those who are curious about such things.⁹⁴

Despite reporting, cautiously, the assumption about the existence of hybrid monsters in Africa, Fra Mauro's distances himself from it, relying on oral

93 *0149: »[...] These men have drawn new navigation maps and have given names to rivers, gulfs, capes and ports, of which I have had a copy. So, if one wants to disagree with these men, who have seen with their own eyes, then there is all the more reason to dissent from and not believe those who have left writings on things they did not see with their own eyes but only believed to be the case. What is more, I have spoken with a person worthy of trust, who says that he sailed in an Indian ship caught in the fury of a tempest for 40 days out in the Sea of India, beyond the Cape of Soffala and the Green Islands towards west-southwest; and according to the astrologers who act as their guides, they had advanced almost 2,000 miles. Thus one can believe and confirm what is said by both these and those, and that they had therefore sailed 4,000 miles. In the third book of his Cosmography, Pomponius Mela says that a certain Eudossus, fleeing from Lathmin, king of Alexandria, sailed out of the Arabian Gulf and navigated through those southern regions until he arrived at Gades, which is the Strait of Gibraltar. One can therefore claim without any doubt that this southern and south-western part is navigable, and that the Sea of India is an ocean and not an inland sea. This is what is said by all those who sail this sea and live in those islands«, translation by Falchetta 2006, 211–213.

94 *1043, translation by Falchetta 2006, 387.

accounts by travellers and the conviction that the Earth is inhabited by humans everywhere.

In this chapter, only a few aspects of this huge and dense source can be addressed. Accordingly, we focus now on the liminal zones of the Earth. Eight winds are depicted by means of compass roses. In the waters on the external borders of the map there are many islands and different kinds of ships cross them. While in the regions beyond Africa most islands are unnamed and the water is generally designated as *oceanus*, on the external limits of Europe and, particularly, of Asia, many islands are carefully depicted and identified, whereas the seas are named with specific denominations. Japan appears for the first time on a European map as »Island of Cimpagu«.⁹⁵ The idea of an ocean surrounding the Earth is still there, nevertheless it is elaborated in light of contemporary knowledge, such that it now represents a known part of the earthly territory.

The Earth has become a sphere whose extension can be calculated.⁹⁶ The ocean entirely covers the side of the sphere that lies beyond the represented surface. It is a dangerous, dark domain. In the extreme southern part, near the compass rose on the top pointing at Austro, south, a cartouche reads: »Here begins the dark sea«.⁹⁷

Despite the accuracy in providing evidence based on sources that are considered as authoritative and reliable, knowledge derived from direct experience of the territory – either from literary travel accounts or from travel reports from people Fra Mauro possibly met in the cultural melting pot of Venice – tend to prevail.⁹⁸ Although references to places of theological relevance that are beyond human experience are not completely erased from this map, they are, nonetheless, displaced outside the circle.

In the corner between the map and the square frame of the work, crucial cosmological questions are addressed in image and text. In the upper left-hand corner, a geocentric cosmological system is depicted and commented on. On the opposite side, on the right, the link between lunar phases and tides, the material composition of the sublunar domains as well as the relationship between water and earth in the terrestrial globe are discussed, while,

95 *1334: »Ixola de cimpagu«, Falchetta 2006, 435.

96 See above *2828, footnote 91, page 81.

97 *2: »Qui comenza el mar scuro«, Falchetta 2006, 175. See also Vogel 2016.

98 Baumgärtner / Falchetta 2016.

on the lower right hand corner, a theory of elements and the question of habitability of the different zones of the planet are discussed.⁹⁹ Finally, on the lower left hand corner (in a north-easterly direction) the Garden Eden is depicted and the question of the location of the Earthly Paradise debated as follows (lines 1–6):

The Paradise of Delights does not only have a spiritual meaning; it is also a real place on the earth, as St. Augustine says in his *De Genesi* and in his book *De Civitate Dei*. This place is very far from all human settlements and knowledge; and according to the teachings of the holy doctor Bede, whose authority is also followed by the Master of the Sentences [Peter Lombard], it is to be found in the East. In his book *De natura loci*, Albertus Magnus also puts it in the East, beyond the circle of the equinox. In this Paradise was placed our first parent, Adam, in a state of innocence. And in the middle of Paradise there was a spring that waters it, and from which arise the four main great rivers. And God had planted it with two trees, one of which was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, bearing the fruit which God had ordered Adam not to eat. However, straying from that commandment, Adam did not obey and he ate the fruit. Hence, as well as the Good which he had already seen before, he also felt Evil, and he fell into the defects that are implicit in sin. And from this fact that tree has been called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The other tree is the Tree of Life, eating from which man could have nourished himself for a long time. In fact, if this had been his constant nourishment, man would have lived forever, as St. Augustine says in the book *De civitate Dei* and also *De diversis quaestionibus*.

Later in the text, Eden is linked to the history of salvation (lines 9–10):

This was so that Christ be the first to enter into the heavens and paradise of the blessed. And on the day of his Ascension, he showed men the way to get there, as had been predicted by the prophet Micaiah.

99 The texts are edited and translated in Falchetta 2006, 720–735.

Through his death, our redeemer earned for men entrance into the paradise of the blessed.

In the last section, the author addresses the controversial question of locating the rivers arising from Eden (lines 12b–13a):

As there are still many who wonder how it is possible that these four rivers, arising from that most remote place, should yet have sources that are very far from one another, I will answer with the words of St. Augustine's *De Genesi*: these rivers, whose sources are known to us, are linked by underground routes, running through many regions and then coming to surface in different places.

Fra Mauro argues, following authoritative theological positions, in favour of conceiving of Paradise as a real place on Earth («esser un luogo ne la terra situato»), located somewhere within the inaccessible dark sea. The enigma of the four rivers is solved in a similar manner to that which we observed on the *London Psalter Map* on f. 9 r., assuming an underground channel linking the waters of Eden to the known rivers of the Ganges, Tigris, Euphrates and Nile. Still, visually, this place of spiritual and geographical significance is placed outside the circle of known territories in a corner of the map. It is also interesting that, even though the text is ascribed to Fra Mauro, the depiction of Paradise is attributed to Leonardo Bellini. The representation of Eden is not realised by means of cartography but as a painting.¹⁰⁰

Fra Mauro's world map is an encyclopaedic compendium of various traditions, sources, opinions, and travel accounts, all of them accessible in the monastery of San Michele in Isola that was part of the vibrant fifteenth-century Venetian metropolis. On the map, the cartographer engages with cosmological, historical, philosophical, and theological questions, with the aid of cartographic and geographic knowledge and offers a synthesis expressing his personal opinion. This is a very interesting and novel feature of the *Mapamondo*. The monk comments on open questions and controversies in the first person singular, «io». The historian Nicolaus Andreas Egel emphasises

100 For an analysis of the painting and the question of attribution see Marcon 2006. About the whole representation including text and image see Cattaneo 2003 and 2011, 132–157.

Fra Mauro's critical reception of the knowledge he had access to. Manifold approaches, elaborated in different contexts and fields, coexisted and could no longer be merged into one harmonic worldview. Consequently, the cartographer reproduced the main arguments and reported his personal point of view.¹⁰¹ Compared to the maps we have considered so far, this is a striking element. »I« explicitly suggests the authority of the subject, but also the subjectivity of knowledge: the world map becomes a matter of scholarly opinion, and – despite the opulence of details, information and the quality of the drawings and the materials used – it is presented as a symbolic rendering¹⁰² of the still unexplored complexity of nature:

If someone finds incredible certain of the previously-unheard things which I have noted above, he should not submit them to the judgement of his own reason but rather list them amongst the secrets of Nature. We know only a small part of the innumerable things that Nature does, and those that we know by constant experience are not really held in consideration – even if they are admirable – whilst those which seem to us to be unusual we do not believe. This occurs because Nature goes beyond the human intellect; and those who do not have an elevated intellect cannot grasp even the things of constant experience, let alone those which are unusual. Thus, those who want to understand must first believe in order to then understand.¹⁰³

Fra Mauro's map is an excellent example to grasp the profound transformation in conceiving space and place that took place at this time and, certainly not by chance, in this very place. Venice was a political, economic, technological, scholarly and cultural centre stimulating innovation and attracting many people from very different parts of the world.¹⁰⁴ Overall, this map visualises not only how the world is from a cartographic point of view, but also how knowledge about space and places is produced, highlighting open

101 Baumgärtner 1998; Egel 2014, 107–185.

102 In many places on the map, Fra Mauro notes that it is not possible to represent everything, e.g. *594 »In this sea there are many islands that cannot be specially noted because of lack of space.«

103 *2193, Falchetta 2006, 575–577.

104 Cattaneo 2011.

questions and suggesting possible implementations by means of speculative approaches to nature and the territory.

In this dynamic early-modern society, theological approaches to the world coexist with the reading of an increasingly comprehensive range of ancient, medieval and contemporary sources and a direct observation of places. Unlike the maps discussed above, this work is not directly received within a religious practice, rather it addresses an audience seeking to scrutinise and understand the world, even though it is provided by a monk and displayed in a sacred site. In this respect, Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo* can be considered as a visualisation of the profound changes in exploring the territory as a fundamental dimension of creation and of human life, as the historical events and the geographic and scientific discoveries of the following decades and centuries demonstrate.¹⁰⁵ The worldviews become more complex and more detailed but also more fragmentary. All the established approaches to place can no longer be harmonised into one general depiction of a homogeneous terrestrial space.

3.7 Locating all places in an encompassing space

The five visual representations of the world discussed above differ in terms of genre, style, provenance, and time, although they all feature common traits. Placed in various contexts, they depict the cosmos as a comprehensive, ordered whole and stimulate the viewers to evoke places they cannot directly experience, either because they are far away or they are located beyond the limits of earthly life. The selected images elucidate trends and tensions in a crucial transitional period of the European history of religion. They mirror dynamics between medieval Christian cosmologies and emerging geographical knowledge in the early modern period at the dawn of the discovery of new territories and routes across the Atlantic and beyond the African desert.

105 Falchetta 2006, 55: »At this point it is clear that the task Fra Mauro has set himself is an ambitious one: by subjecting traditional knowledge – that of Classical Antiquity and that of the post-Classical cosmography – to such a critical reading, he hopes to redefine both the contents and nature of geographical knowledge, putting forward himself and his own world map as a synthesis of past and present knowledge.«

The Graner altarpiece in Regensburg from 1488 is, in some ways, a window that opens up a space encompassing places beyond the limits of human agency. The depiction of the cosmos focuses on the relationship between the earthly places in which human life unfolds and the afterlife domains. The representations of transcendent places of damnation and the places humans inhabit are connected through Christ's revelation and sacrifice and through the devotional practices of the believers. The orientation within this cosmological vision relies on religious practices that merge cosmic space and time with the biography of individuals. Looking at this depiction of the whole cosmos is a religious practice in itself that offers devotees orientation and opens up a possibility of salvation.

The *Mirror of Reason*, printed in the same year, has a similar function; it provides a complete depiction of the cosmos and precisely locates the earthly life of an individual. The mirror is an all-encompassing representation of all the places that comprise the cosmos and of the mutual relationships that link these places together. Again, cosmology and biography are intertwined; salvation history and individual behaviour merge, the inherent conceptualisations of space and time are intertwined. While the Graner retable was located in a church, a public place, the single print sheet of the *Mirror of Reason* addresses an individual in a private sphere. The mirror is both an object delineating this particular vision of the cosmos and a metaphor for reflection and meditation. This second image emphasises the location of the human being within cosmological space. This overview of the world comprised of earthly and transcendent places such as Paradise, Purgatory and Hell, and the transitional place of Judgment, is depicted from an anthropocentric perspective. Looking at the mirror, the devotee ponders his or her position in life, the afterlife and the history of salvation.

Like the altarpiece of Regensburg, the *Spiegel der Vernunft* reproduces the cosmos as a complete, encompassing space articulated in different places. The concept of cosmological space arises as an abstract idea from the materiality of the image whenever anybody looks at it. From the perspective of visual communication, the print and the retable allude to a concept of space as a well-defined entity containing all the depicted places. The two sources emphasise different cosmic domains, according to their function, location, and style. Being images, they have a specific agency, involving the viewers in a religious performance of looking, meditating, and praying.

Produced at the end of the 15th century, both representations reproduce medieval Christian worldviews and practices. The retable depicts the globe as a T-O map, which refers to cartography as a form of encyclopaedic knowledge aiming at explaining the features of the earthly territory as well as praising creation. The *Mirror of Reason* addresses the individual in an everyday language and reveals a complete vision of the cosmos in a few square centimetres by means of a personal, religious practice.

The timber ceiling of Zillis brings us back into the 12th century and shows a different visual approach to space. The Earth is the very place where the history of salvation unfolds, with Christ's sacrifice at its core, and is the location of the life of St. Martin, who is an exemplum of an ideal believer. This place is framed by the ocean, a liminal place populated by demonic beings, hybrid creatures, as well as a place of certain human activities. The ceiling reveals a map that offers a visually and theologically complete description of relevant places that constitute the cosmos as a dimension of life, Christ's incarnation and redemption. By entering the church and looking towards heaven, the believers experience a vision of creation that extends beyond the limits of their everyday experience. As in the other images, space and time merge in a Christological concept of the world and history.

The *London Psalter Maps* from the late 13th century present two different forms of image-text composition in the genre of a medieval *mappa mundi*. Albeit with varying accentuations, both offer an encyclopaedic chart of the world which bring together theological and geographical knowledge. On a very small surface, the page of a codex, f. 9 r. condenses salvation history with a detailed depiction of explored and mythological places on Earth. The depiction of the three continents according to the T-O scheme, the location of cities, regions, rivers and mountains visually aims at locating salvation history within creation as the place humans inhabit. The comparison between the Graner retable and the *London Psalter Maps* highlights the twofold representation of the terrestrial globe in the same image: the Earth is represented in both as a visual attribute of the figure of Christ with the T-O scheme dividing the continents, and as the place in which human life unfolds. While the former focuses on the relationship between human agency on Earth and transcendent cosmic places, the *mappae mundi* within the *London Psalter Maps* explore the features of God's creation by means of a compendium of knowledge from the different source of knowledge the author was familiar with.

Finally, Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo*, in the middle of the 15th century, illustrates a further development in European early modern cartography that still combines theological and cosmological knowledge based on the Bible and authoritative Christian authors but extends the range of sources to newly available ancient literature, other cartographic and geographical approaches, as well as information from written and oral descriptions of travel. Although theological issues continue to be addressed in this map, the religious worldview and the encyclopaedic depiction of the globe influenced by the direct observation of the earthly territory can no longer be represented in a single, homogeneous drawing. The wide surface of the map is not even broad enough to contain all the details and names the author knows. Still, the map depicts in its drawings a remarkable number of places that fill the hemisphere. At the same time, the text within the map explicitly addresses the impossibility of rendering in a single drawing the all-encompassing world, as it is a space whose vastness and complexity are the subject of philosophical speculation.

The sources discussed in this chapter are produced and displayed in religious places such as churches, monasteries or private rooms. The Earth is understood to be a divine creation, part of an ordered design in which human beings are addressed by divine revelation and respond to it with the appropriate attitude of faith and behaviour. All of the examples locate places and their relationship with each other and possible passages humans may use to reach them. In doing so, they allude to and reproduce concepts of space.

Space emerges as an abstract container of all depicted places, as the outcome of the divine act of creation, and as the result of human reasoning and knowledge, observation and speculation. Being visual sources, the selected case studies crystallise debates from the historical context in which they were produced. At different times and in different places, the approaches to space as a theological category and as a matter of human discovery and reconstruction are variegated and influenced by specific questions and concerns. Still, at this time, a worldview based on theological assumptions and on observation were still interrelated but increasingly distinguishable topics, as the question of the location of Eden illustrates.

Various ideas of what space and place may be, and of the relationship between places and space coexisted. Maps could depict all places that constitute the finite space of creation or visualise known places and allude to the

unknown territories beyond the possibilities of human discovery. Accordingly, in early modern times, the cosmic space, the features, rules and extension of the Earth and the universe became subject to intense exploration and speculation. Different questions led to different approaches and methodologies to explore places and scrutinise space. The lines between places that lie before and after the individual human biography, between the territory humans inhabit, experience and observe, and the transcendent places of religious narrations and worldviews were questioned, moved and contested. The Italian geographer Franco Farinelli sums up this crucial trend as follows:

It is precisely the disappearance of Paradise from maps during the modern period that shows the end of the awareness concerning the prophetic, or at least prognostic, nature of geographic images.¹⁰⁶

We have only discussed a few selected examples from a significant period that clearly illustrates how concepts are moulded and transformed over time. We did not present the sources in a chronological order since it is not appropriate to think of a homogeneous and linear transformation from medieval to early modern approaches. The selected sources convey various forms of interrelation between theologically founded worldviews, religious practices and observation of the earthly territory and speculation. All of them refer to Christianity as the dominant religious tradition and assume a geocentric idea of the universe. Still, the comparison between the different approaches taken in the selected sources crystallise different trends in conceiving space. They allow us to grasp the complex transformations from a vision of space as a container of all cosmological places to an idea of space as a puzzling concept for conceptualising, an extension that needs to be scrutinised and described by means of exploration and speculation.

106 Farinelli 2014, 40.

4 Space and Place as Concepts Travelling through Disciplines

*But the Lord God called to the man
and said to him, »Where are you?«¹*

Whereas time has been a dominant concept in academic research in the humanities for many centuries, it was not until the advent of cultural studies in the 1950s that the concept of space was explored to the same extent. This is surprising, given the relevance of spatiality for understanding (human) beings, society and culture. Space has often been taken for granted, and as a result, as a concept, it has frequently been overlooked, naturalised or ignored.² In the study of religion, space remains a rather marginalised concept that needs more attention. As Kim Knott writes in *The Location of Religion*, space is a crucial aspect for researching religion within society that challenges the way religious traditions are described, reconstructed, and presented:

The value of beginning with the locally particular and seeking to understand the reciprocity of the religious, social, (other) cultural, political, and economic is one of the motivations behind this study [...]. It has a number of advantages, which I see as having the potential to make it a useful approach within the study of religions. One of these is the way in which – through its focus on specific locations (whether physical, social, textual, or virtual), the particular constellations of relations therein, and localised religious groups, places, and activi-

1 Genesis 3:9.

2 Danani 2013, 13–17; see also Schroer 2006, 46.

ties – it challenges the »World Religion« approach of religious studies with its focus on discrete, generic traditions, and normative beliefs and practices.³

Analysing religious symbol systems, practices, communities, and traditions in a particular place, profoundly challenges long-held assumptions that are often uncritically presupposed. A perspective which addresses religion as a complex system and a practice that takes place in a specific location and interacts with it is a momentous achievement resulting from the reception of cultural studies in our discipline. In this chapter, we explore theoretical approaches to space and place that may be helpful in addressing shared places where different religious worldviews, practices, and traditions interact.

In the previous chapter we focused upon transformations that occurred in representing places and space in a crucial period of the history of religion in Europe. The present chapter engages instead with contemporary transformations of space and place which function as tools for studying religion in culture. Accordingly, we consider both religious-historical explorations and theoretical debates as two aspects of the same dynamic: space and place, which were significantly shaped in early modern times, are best understood as »travelling concepts« *par excellence* that are moulded through crossings of time and disciplines. In the following pages, different perspectives from various disciplines are discussed in the light of their relevance for researching religion.

As a first step, we will briefly discuss the conceptualisations of space that can be inferred from the visual sources analysed in the previous chapter. The second step is an overview of the transformations that occur when shifting from considering space as an encompassing dimension to conceptualising space as being multilayered and relational. This transformation occurred in interdisciplinary debates that took place in the second half of the 20th century. As a third step, we will focus on space as a social practice, which leads to a fourth step, in which we focus on the role of the human body in a relational approach to space. These steps raise the issue of the tension between space and place as complementary concepts. In the fifth and final step, we will critically evaluate the results of this exploration of space, place and the body

3 Knott 2013, 118–119.

as »travelling concepts« and their relevance for researching places. In this analysis we will reflect upon how these »travelling concepts« bring together a plurality of religious worldviews, practices and traditions.

4.1 Space as a homogeneous dimension containing all things

The images discussed in the third chapter do not present abstract concepts such as »religion«, »space« or »place«. Instead, they represent places in different visual languages, some of them involving writing and cartographic conventions. Nonetheless, they do implicitly evoke concepts of religion, space and place.

In fact, a critical comparison of these images of the world highlights some of the significant transformations that occurred in the way that space was understood in the 15th century. In the case studies considered in the previous chapter it was observed that locating places within the delimited space of creation was both a spatial exploration and a religious practice. These images symbolically communicated an encompassing concept of space that allowed for both a cosmological and a biographical orientation. They merged theological, biblical, cartographic and geographical knowledge with devotional practices and a curiosity for discovering the features of the Earth that humans inhabit. As we have seen, even in a tiny medieval world map in a codex, for example, all of these aspects recur. However, in early modern times, the attempt to depict all the places within the encompassing space of creation became increasingly questioned as more of the world was explored and discovered through travel and travelogues. This is particularly evident in Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo* where medieval cosmological assumptions are still recognisable but, at the same time, challenged and broadened. The body of knowledge about the earth and the heavens vastly increased in this era, through the combination of rediscovered treatises from antiquity, new ideas based on the observation of the earthly sphere as well as on the movements of the celestial bodies. This wealth of new information initiated extensive and wide-ranging research on space, which became a subject of enquiry in a range of disciplines. The extension and the features of the earthly terrain and the universe itself became an object of study in theolo-

gy, philosophy, and the emerging natural sciences, which produced various concepts of almost limitless scope. Over the centuries, different approaches led to different conceptualisations of space that could no longer be harmonised and unified in one all-encompassing worldview.⁴

Overall, the visual sources we have considered rely on a concept of creation as an extension in space where all that has been created is located. This mirrors an Aristotelian idea, the dominant paradigm for conceiving space in the Middle Ages. Space is defined as a homogeneous, finite, ordered extension. Space contains all material things and the relationships between them; yet, it is not influenced by them, it exists as such, as an absolute entity.⁵ The concept of space as a container that exists independently of what it contains remains a prevalent approach down the centuries and in many cases continues to be relevant today, as we will discuss later. However, reflection on space using increasingly multifaceted approaches began to develop over time.

By way of a general orientation, it is common to identify two poles that set the parameters for debates about space across individual disciplines. On the one hand, there are approaches to space which consider it to be a homogenous container, an *a priori* entity, which are referred to as »absolute« concepts of space.⁶ On the other hand, »relational« concepts that focus on space as a process or a network have emerged. The sociologist Martina Löw describes the transformation of conceiving of space as a uniform, homogeneous dimension to an approach to space as being relational, developed in the light of lived experience:

The notion of »living in space« is based upon acquired Euclidean competence, the conflation of the difference between model and world, a socialization that makes space experienceable as uniform and continuous, and traditional ideas of space. Disruptions of this idea can initially only be brought about by bodily-sensory perception of the physical world going beyond Euclidean thought. Due to insularization

4 Crang / Thrift 2000; Dünne / Günzel 2006; Günzel 2009.

5 Schroer 2006; Günzel 2006.

6 For a detailed overview of different approaches to space in the history of philosophy see Dünne / Günzel 2006. A concise discussion of the transformations within absolute concepts of space that pay attention to their differences can be found in Löw 2001, 130–151 and in Schroer 2006, 17–46.

and contact with new media, space is no longer experienced as that which uniformly surrounds us, but as volatile, networked, and immaterial. My conclusion is that in addition to the idea of surrounding space, the idea of relational space emerges.⁷

4.2 From locating things to space as a multifaceted concept

We travel to a specific place: a city, a village, a house. We represent them on maps following cartographic conventions. We paint a wall in a room and hang a picture on it, put a laptop on a table and sit on a chair in front of it. All of this involves material things, human actions and bodily movements, relationships, planning and design, and above all, symbolic meaning-making processes. The city, the village, the house, the map, the wall, the painting, the table, chair and laptop are related to space and place but are not identical with them. Since »place« and »space« are concepts, resulting from different ways of thinking, categorising and differentiating, they remain abstract categories that arise from scholarly approaches to places humans inhabit, observe, and imagine. In everyday life, the concept of space seen in the visual sources of the third chapter is still relevant: we measure a room; we mark out the ground to lay the foundations of a building. Yet, there are also experiences that challenge assumptions of space as a homogeneous container. In the examples outlined above: the painting on the wall opens up a fictional space. In the case of a painting with a religious symbol on it, it allows for a relationship with a transcendent dimension and attributes a certain character to the whole room. The electronic device on the table opens a door to the Internet, a virtual space that – even if it relies on the materiality of the machine, the electricity, the room and the human body using it – detaches communication from a homogenous space (and time), allowing you, for instance, to be simultaneously alone at home and at work with colleagues in a Zoom meeting »room«.

Approaches to space respond to specific scholarly questions. As travelling concepts, they mirror the concerns people and disciplines are dealing

7 Löw 2018, 89.

with, at that time and in specific academic traditions. Space has been a central question in philosophy and the sciences for centuries. Yet, in the 20th century, new questions linked to spatiality arose: new technologies, colonisation, urbanisation, mobility, globalisation, digitalisation, gentrification, mass destruction and questions of sustainability – phenomena that are interrelated with each other – have radically changed societies and cultures across the globe and shed new light upon the question of space, place and the body. Consequently, these fields of inquiry appeared prominently on the agenda of the social sciences and the humanities.⁸

A different focus arose, centred on space as a dimension constituted by means of social practices. From this perspective, space is not only the material dimension that can be measured, planned and represented, but also a fundamental interrelation of multifaceted meaning-making processes. This new approach to space as a relational concept permeates cultural studies and the fields that were influenced by them. By way of illustration, Aleida Assmann explores the link between history, memory and space, emphasising that the spatial dimension is not simply a stage on which »history takes place«. Following the historian Karl Schlögel's *In Space We Read Time*, she conceives of history and space as being in a mutual relationship.⁹ The geographer Julia Lossau points out the shift that took place in her discipline from considering space as a physical-material extension to a concept highlighting the »symbolic meaning-making dimension of geographical reality«. ¹⁰ Space as a concept that embraces meaning-making processes became a central topic in literature, film, art, and media studies – to name just a few fields.¹¹ These illustrative examples indicate the transformation that arose in dealing with space within cultural studies and disciplines influenced by it, which has been variously labelled as the spatial, topographical, or topological turn.

The »spatial turn« is commonly employed as an umbrella term to indicate all these new approaches to space as a relational concept. The term became prominent in the work of the US American geographer Edward W. Soja,

8 Assmann 2008, 153; Günzel 2017, 7–23; Jackson 1989; Soja 2010, 1–23; Rau 2017 and 2019.

9 Assmann 2009; Schlögel 2016. The original German version is from 2003.

10 Lossau 2009, 31 (translation from German by the author).

11 For an anthology containing an overview of space concepts in different fields see Günzel 2009.

who introduced it in his volume *Postmodern Geographies* in 1989.¹² Later, in the first page of *Thirdspace*, a book from 1996, Soja describes the new relevance of space as follows:

It is to encourage you to think differently about the meaning and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent *spatiality of human life*: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography. In encouraging you to think differently, I am not suggesting that you discard your old and familiar ways of thinking about space and spatiality, but rather that you question them in new ways that are aimed at opening up and expanding the scope and critical sensibility of your already established spatial or geographical imaginations. Mobilising this objective of a belief that the spatial dimension of our lives has never been of greater practical and political relevance than it is today. Whether we are attempting to deal with the increasing intervention of electronic media in our daily routines; seeking ways to act politically to deal with the growing problems of poverty, racism, sexual discrimination, and environmental degradation; or trying to understand the multiplying geopolitical conflicts around the globe, we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities. Perhaps more than ever before, a strategic awareness of this collectively created spatiality and its social consequences has become a vital part of making both theoretical and practical sense of our contemporary lifeworlds at all scales, from the most intimate to the most global.¹³

The spatial turn has generated a broad debate about both terms, »spatial« and »turn«, stimulating different responses and results. To characterise this approach to space, alternative terms have been proposed. Within European cultural studies, the term »topographical turn« has been suggested, in order to highlight that space is a cultural texture that can be decodified. This latter

¹² Soja 1989, 39.

¹³ Soja 2010, 2.

term is often associated with a polemical stance: in defining the topographical turn, it serves as a reminder that relational space concepts are far older and better rooted in the philosophical and sociological history of research than Soja assumed.¹⁴ The topological turn is more of a methodology which deals with the social construction of space, focusing on structuralist approaches, rather than a consistent focus on transformation within spatiality.¹⁵ As far as the idea of a radical »turn« is concerned, some, like Soja, use it to underscore the change in dealing with space, which is no longer viewed as a background for human activities but as an interaction of social practices. Others tend to focus more on continuities within relational conceptualisations of space down the centuries and, therefore, relativise the idea of a sudden, radical transformation.¹⁶

For our exploration of the interrelation of religion and space, two points from this debate are most significant. First, relational approaches to space arise in an inter- and transdisciplinary exchange.¹⁷ Second, »spatial turn« implies a re-definition of the concept of space as a multifaceted interrelation of social practices which leads to a re-thinking of the position of researchers investigating it. If space is the production of social practices, the analysis of these practices can stimulate a transformation of spatial arrangements and therefore of society.¹⁸ Consequently, a common thread that has emerged in cultural studies research on space in Anglophone and European scholarship has been an interest in its political dimension. This common interest in the political dimension of space has cut across other wide-ranging differences in conceptualising that fundamental dimension of human life.

14 Weigel 2002.

15 Günzel 2017, 114–140.

16 For an overview and characterisation of the different »turns« see Döring / Thielmann 2008; Günzel 2008.

17 For a short introduction to the terms inter- and transdisciplinarity see Pezzoli-Olgiaati 2020.

18 Soja 2008, 255.

4.3 Space as a social practice

Edward W. Soja's conceptualisation of space as a social practice has been widely received, contested, and further developed, and the idea of a relational space has been adapted according to the scope of several research fields and disciplines. His approach to space is rooted in the interaction between history and society:

As we approach the fin de siècle, there is a growing awareness of the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical, and the spatial, their inseparability and their interdependence. And this three-sided sensibility of spatiality-historicity-sociality is not only bringing about a profound change in the ways we think about space, it is also beginning to lead to major revisions in how we study history and society. The challenge being raised in *Thirdspace* is therefore transdisciplinary in scope. It cuts across all perspectives and modes of thought, and is not confined solely to geographers, architects, urbanists and others for whom spatial thinking is a primary professional preoccupation.¹⁹

Soja addresses the interrelation of history, society and space with a spatial concept as a conglomerate of three interacting dimensions. *Firstspace* epistemologies embrace approaches to space as a »material and materialised ›physical‹ spatiality that is directly comprehended in empirically measurable configurations«. ²⁰ Firstspace concepts tend to focus on objectivity and materiality: »Spatiality thus takes on the qualities of a substantial text to be carefully read, digested, and understood in all its details«. ²¹ *Secondspace* epistemologies are characterised by an explanatory character. They assume that »spatial knowledge is primarily produced through discursively devised representations of space, through the spatial workings of the mind. In its purest form, Secondspace is entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies.« ²² Finally, *Third-*

19 Soja 2010, 3.

20 Soja 2010, 74.

21 Soja 2010, 75.

22 Soja 2010, 79.

space epistemologies embrace all critical approaches to the interaction of Firstspace with Secondspace: »*Thirdspace epistemologies* can now be briefly re-described as arising from the sympathetic deconstruction and heuristic reconstruction of the Firstspace-Secondspace duality.«²³ First-, Second- and Thirdspace are different though overlapping facets of conceptualising space. They are formulated as tools to analyse the interaction of space, society and history.

This threefold concept is largely informed by the work of Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), a French scholar to whose rediscovery Soja contributed. Lefebvre not only witnessed almost the entire 20th century, but articulated his thinking, which was widely influenced by Marxism, in an impressive body of writings that cover topics in philosophy, sociology, geography and urbanism. In 1991 his *La production de l'espace*, a volume originally published in Paris in 1974, was translated into English. This led to a reassessment of his oeuvre and approach to space, making Lefebvre retrospectively a leading thinker of the spatial turn. *The Production of Space* begins with a programmatic sentence:

Not so many years ago, the word »space« had a strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty area. In scholarly use it was generally accompanied by some such epithet as »Euclidean«, »isotropic«, or »infinite«, and the general feeling was that the concept of space was ultimately a mathematical one. To speak of »social space«, therefore, would have sounded strange.²⁴

For Lefebvre space is not primarily a matter of materiality – his concept of »nature«, he notes, tends to be relegated into the background – but is rather a social product: »l'espace (social) est un produit (social)«.²⁵ Each society produces its own space that is characterised by particular modes of production. According to him, social space embraces various levels: the social rela-

23 Soja 2010, 81.

24 Lefebvre 1991, 1.

25 Lefebvre 2000, 39. The entire sentence in translation (1991, 30): »As a programmatic foretaste of the topics I shall be dealing with later, I shall now review some of the implications and consequences of our initial proposition – namely, that (social) space is a (social) product.«

tions of reproduction which refers to bio-physiological relations according to specific gender, generation, and family organisation as well as relations of production such as »the division of labour and its organization in the form of hierarchical social function«. ²⁶ Forms of production and reproduction are inscribed in social space; space merges them by means of symbolic representations, which allows for stabilising social relationships of coexistence and cohesion:

Thus space may be said to embrace a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location. As for representations of the relation of production, which subsume power relations, these too occur in space: space contains them in the form of buildings, monuments and works of art. Such frontal (and hence brutal) expressions of these relations do not completely crowd out their more clandestine or underground aspects; all power must have its accomplices – and its police. ²⁷

To analyse this complexity and its role in representing and legitimating power structures, Lefebvre distinguishes three interacting dimensions of the concept of space as a social practice: first, *la pratique spatiale*, »the spatial practice«; second, *les représentations de l'espace*, »the representations of space«; third, *l'espace de représentation*, »the space of representation«.

The first layer of Lefebvre's concept, the spatial practice – or *l'espace perçu*, the perceived space – is defined as follows:

The spatial practice of a society secrets that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectic interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it. From the analytic standpoint, the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space. ²⁸

²⁶ Lefebvre 1991, 30–31.

²⁷ Lefebvre 1991, 33.

²⁸ Lefebvre 1991, 38.

Lefebvre's perceived space corresponds to the materiality of space as it is perceived by the senses and can be measured.²⁹ It is the space of geography, more or less what Soja names Firstplace.³⁰

The second layer, the representations of space – or *l'espace conçu*, the conceived space – refers to:

conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived. [...] This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production). Conceptions of space tend, with certain exceptions to which I shall return, towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs.³¹

This aspect of space is linked to design and planning imagination, it is associated with ordered structures, readable, conventional signs and production processes. Representation of space encompasses conceptualisation of space. It corresponds to Soja's Secondspace.³² Finally, representational spaces – or *l'espace vécu*, lived space – are the domains of symbolic representations:

space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of »inhabitants« and »users«, but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.³³

29 Günzel 2017, 78–80.

30 Soja 2010, 66–67.

31 Lefebvre 1991, 38–39.

32 Günzel 2017, 78–80; Soja 2010, 66–67.

33 Lefebvre 1991, 39.

Whereas perceived and conceived space are strongly linked together, what Lefebvre denominates as lived space – and Soja Thirdspace – grasps a different aspect of the production of social space. The interrelation between spatial practices and representation is placed at the centre of scholarly attention:

here we can find not just the spatial representations of power but the imposing and operational power of spatial representations. Combining the real and the imagined, things and thought on equal terms, or at least not privileging one over the other *a priori*, these lived spaces of representation are thus the terrain for the generation of »counterspaces«, spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral, marginalised positioning.³⁴

This articulated concept embracing perceived, conceived and lived space redefines space not as an *a priori* category but as a process. Social space results from multifaceted relations and is moulded and formed slowly, over periods of time. Soja proposes a re-reading of Lefebvre that particularly emphasises representational spaces. He keeps the definition of Thirdspace open, rather blurry. Thirdspace is both an approach to space and a research programme promoting a critical attitude.

Sociological debates have reshaped our thinking on space as a practice. Significant theories, notably Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social fields have informed spatial approaches. Although it is not possible here to study this aspect in more depth, it is important to mention how the concept of space, as a central concern in analysing social practices, arose from complex debates in different disciplines and countries.³⁵

Considering our interest in the mutual relationship between religion and space, the concept of space as a social practice is illuminating. First, it points out that thinking of space as a practice embraces material, mental and symbolic dimensions. Second, it emphasises the plurality of perspectives facing space: the perspective of everyday life; of space perceived as simply being there; the perspective of designing and planning that translates imagina-

34 Soja 2010, 68.

35 See particularly Foucault 1984; Bourdieu 1994.

tions of living together into the material fabric of society; and the perspective of critical approaches to perceived and conceived spaces and the force that emerges from the different practices of spatial representations.

The interrelation of different approaches to space as a practice is also very much at the heart of Martina Löw's *Sociology of Space* from 2001.³⁶ For the German sociologist, space is:

a relational arrangement of living beings and social goods. Space is constituted by two processes that must be analytically distinguished: spacing and the operation of synthesis. The latter makes it possible to unite ensembles of goods and people to one element.³⁷

Being a social practice, space happens within a daily routine, which is enabled and stabilised through everyday institutions. Resources and social structures allow collective processes of spacing and synthesis. On the one hand, spacing designates the relational dynamic of the positioning of human beings and goods: space is constituted through positioning human beings and social goods, which encompass both material goods (like a wall) and symbolic goods (like a rule). On the other hand, space is constituted by an act of synthesis: by means of perception, imagination, and memory people and goods are aggregated into spaces. Löw defines the potential of a space for being received as atmosphere.³⁸

This approach to space may be illustrated by the following example. By entering a Christian basilica and sitting on pews fixed to the floor and arranged in a regular, parallel order, the bodies of the believers are placed in a specific relationship towards each other, the altar, the representative of the congregation performing a specific ritual, and the immaterial imagination of a transcendent good. The arrangement is perceived as being typical for a service in which a certain worldview and idea of the divine, the role of the different actors and the power hierarchies between them mould this very space. The spatial constitution is based on a specific order, which, in the case of a ritual in a church, is strictly regulated through the repetitive performance of arranging bodies, architectural elements, liturgical things, the progress of the

36 *Raumsoziologie* was translated into English in 2018.

37 Löw 2018, 135.

38 Löw 2018, particulary 129–188 and 232–233.

ritual, and standardised behaviours into a specific order. People respond to the place they contribute to constructing by perceiving it in different ways.

Although we are unable to fully address the complexity of Lefebvre's, Soja's, and Löw's theories, this concise discussion of influential positions within the spatial turn has sought to illustrate the range of meanings and approaches to the concept of space. It maps these theories as travelling concepts across time, disciplines and academic traditions.

Approaches to space as a social practice underscore the interaction between society and spatiality, highlighting a mutual influence. Space is defined as a relational concept, used to analyse spatial relationships of goods and humans, of practices of production, reproduction and representation. Space is conceptualised as being transitory, in continuous transformation. Moreover, these approaches, albeit distinct, consider the manifold perspectives interwoven in and through spatial practices. Overall, the concept is extended and captures adjacent, paradoxical dimensions that are not to be reduced to an absolute concept highlighting homogeneity and continuity.

4.4 The role of the human body

The concept of space as a social practice not only analyses society but also critically reviews its own analysis. The concepts we have considered scrutinise spatial agencies of different actors, such as people perceiving places or institutions, planning and designing them, by privileging a certain placement of living beings and material and immaterial goods. Within the spatial turn, place as a relational concept was introduced to open up conceptions of place beyond an absolute *a priori* condition, in order to respond to the challenges of modernity.

In this way, thinking of space as a multifaceted process involving material, mental and symbolic practices is a concept that carries a political momentum, a concern for society that goes beyond academic analysis. The concept of space as a social practice focuses on relationality, conceiving of space as an interaction, a network that transforms and is continuously transformed. Therefore, I would argue that a relational approach to space is inherently anthropological, since a human being interacts on many levels in the network of spatial connections that constitute space and are constituted by it.

A person interacts as a body in relation to other bodies and goods, as a subject or object of planning and designing, as a critical reviewer of spatial practices. Consequently, addressing space as a social practice implies a specific attention to the role and the location of the human body as both a physical matter and a spatial agency.

The role of human beings is at the core of Martina Löws analysis of the social construction of space:

People as components of a space construction have the special feature that they place themselves and vacate placements. Furthermore, they influence space construction with their facial expression, gestures, language, and so on. Although people are more active than social goods in their possibilities of moving and making decisions, it would fall short of the mark to assume that in contrast to people social goods are passive objects. Social goods also have an external effectuality, for example in odors and sounds, and thus influence the possibilities of space construction.³⁹

The author highlights that people interact with space and social goods, and they take an active part in the process of spatial construction. As individuals, they perceive different aspects of space, responding in different ways. In the mutual relationship between human beings and space, when a space is perceived, a spatial atmosphere is created.

Bodies form space and space moulds bodies. An illuminating perspective on the role of the body in constructing space has been proposed by the philosopher Edward S. Casey. His approach to space, place and the body is embedded in a philosophical phenomenological discourse. His motivation to rethink space arises from a similar concern within cultural geography and sociology, namely, to formulate an alternative to defining space as an absolute, monolithic entity. Casey distances himself from a conceptualisation of space as »a neutral, pre-given medium, a tabula rasa onto which the particularities of culture and history come to be inscribed, with place the presumed result«. ⁴⁰ In line with his phenomenological approach, he address-

39 Löw 2018, 132.

40 Casey 1996, 14.

es space from the experience of perception. Casey's approach to spatiality is based on place: »Yet we do always find ourselves in places. We find ourselves in them, however different the places themselves may be and however differently we construe and exploit them«.⁴¹

Experience happens in places, which means that our body is always located. Referring to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Casey stresses that »the lived body integrates itself with its immediate environment, that is to say, its concrete place. The integration is effected by various ›intentional threads‹ that bind body and place in a common complex of relations«.⁴² The human being is thus defined as »a lived body, as body (in) a living place, ›the natural subject of perception‹« – here he quotes Merleau-Ponty.⁴³

The experience of perceiving that I discussed earlier requires a corporeal subject who lives *in* a place *through* perception. It also requires a place that is amenable to this body-subject and that extends its own influence back onto this subject. A place, we might even say, has its own »operative intentionality« that elicits and responds to the corporeal intentionality of the perceiving subject. Thus place integrates with body as much as body with place.⁴⁴

Being a lived body means being-in-place. For Casey, the body serves as a field of localisation through all the senses which allows a multifaceted perception of places; the body connects to spatial settings with the bodily dimensionality of up and down, front and back, right and left. Furthermore, perception is possible through the concreteness of the body, its physical features, that answers to the concreteness of a given place. The relationship between a given lived body and an experienced place tends to be particular; both the body and the place are not well delimited, as the skin and the physical body as well as the place are porous, the corporeal and the spatial borders uncertain, body and place interpenetrated.

41 Casey 1996, 17.

42 Casey 1996, 22.

43 Casey 1996, 22. The quote is from Merleau-Ponty 1962, 208.

44 Casey 1996, 22.

The lived body Casey describes is a body that moves in place. Movement is paramount in the interaction of body and place. Bodily movement can happen in a given place or connect different places by means of travel.

There is much more to be said about the role of the body in place, especially about how places actively solicit bodily motions. At the very least, we can agree that the living-moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: lived bodies belong to places and help to constitute them.⁴⁵

The living, moving body perceives and assesses a place, and the place forms the body. The relationality of body and place is a premise to define the link between space and meaning-making processes. Perception happens in space, where living bodies, material and symbolic goods are interwoven. In this relationship, human beings become part of the cultural and social setting they inhabit. Places carry cultural processes to humans and humans carry culture into places.⁴⁶ Embodiment is the condition and the result of being part of a cultural setting, since it is a constitutive part of a spatial practice.⁴⁷

4.5 Place happens

The centrality of the human body and of perception raises further questions about how space functions as a social practice. For Lefebvre and Soja, the question of humans perceiving space is embraced in the concepts of *espace perçu*, of spatial practice, or in Firstspace. For Löw human beings are elements of the spatial flowing network, having agency. The three approaches discuss the role of the human body within theories that focus on space as a multifaceted concept for analysing and moulding society. Casey's phenomenological approach differs in its scope, since it addresses, within a philosophical tradition, the question of the human being as a subject that perceives, as being-in-place. Therefore, he addresses spatiality by starting from the concept of place:

45 Casey 1996, 24.

46 Casey 1996, particularly 33–37.

47 See Danani 2013, particularly 19–47.

Given that we are never without perception, the existence of this dialectic means that we are never without emplaced experiences. It signifies as well that we are not only *in* places but *of* them. Human beings – along with other entities on earth – are ineluctably place-bound. More even than earthlings, we are placelings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit. [...] place, rather than being a mere product or portion of space, is as primary as the perception that gives access to it. Also suggested is the heretical – and quite ancient – thought that place, far from being something simply singular, is something general, perhaps even universal.⁴⁸

Places and living bodies mutually influence each other. Humans perceive places, inhabit them and link them together by means of travelling through them. Places form living bodies and assume the qualities of their inhabitants:

Rather than being one definite sort of thing – for example, physical, spiritual, cultural, social – a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only *are*, they *happen*.⁴⁹

For instance, a specific place may evoke particular memories for a person of experiences that occurred in this place. According to Casey the »power of place consists in its nontendentious ability to reflect the most diverse items that constitute its ›midst‹.«⁵⁰ Place are events, they embody culture, they merge space and time. Places are relational and inherently regional, they are never isolated but grouped through living bodies in movement. Aleida Assmann defines the concept of *Ort* – the German term for place – similarly. While the concept of space aims at doing and planning, looking forwards to the future, place is a concept that, in a certain sense, implies a retrospective approach. In places something has already happened: it has

48 Casey 1996, 19.

49 Casey 1996, 27.

50 Casey 1996, 28.

been done, experienced, or suffered. Places are moulded by the history that takes place in them.⁵¹

4.6 Navigating space and place for researching religion

The debates summarised here trace the transformations that the concept of space has undergone in its displacements between time and disciplines. Originally conceived as an absolute, homogeneous, all-encompassing dimension, space has become a practice that constitutes and is constituted by social interactions between things and (human) beings. Overall, the concept of space today integrates many debates and perspectives. Just as in the case of »religion«, it is not possible to reduce the complexity of spatiality to a single approach to space.⁵² In addressing selected perspectives, questions and approaches within this complicated, long-standing debate, the tension between space, place and body emerges. Material, mental and symbolic approaches to space interact as do different perspectives on this social practice: places can be perceived by individuals and groups; in places cultural processes are embodied that mould the living bodies that inhabit and produce them. The concepts we have scrutinised are basically abstractions grounded on an anthropological (or even anthropocentric) perception. Thinking of space as a social interaction means, finally, relating the constitution of social space to humans.

The concept of place, in particular, highlights the dynamics that occur between living bodies and perceived place. More than the concept of space, place emphasises the transitory character of spatiality and the role of perception through the senses. Perception is always located, and in places that arise from relations to living bodies, culture is received, transformed and transmitted. Although there is a tension between space and place, nonetheless, the two concepts complement each other, since they gather different questions and perspectives.

In the various arrangements of material and symbolic goods and living, perceiving, moving bodies, socialisation processes take place. In turn,

51 Assmann 2009.

52 Schroer 2006, 179.

through socialisation processes and cultural practices, places are constituted and transformed. Religion is a crucial part of received, lived, transmitted, transformed and adapted cultural practices.

It is striking to realise that often contemporary space theories do not consider religion as being a relevant aspect of society. The Marxist influence transmitted through Lefebvre or an uncritical reception of secularisation discourses – understood as dismissing religion from society – may explain this. On the other hand, the study of religion has historically addressed space and place with approaches to religion that have largely marginalised these concepts. Today, although a growing interest can be traced, the significance of space as a general approach to religion is still often underestimated.⁵³

In the last decades of the 20th century, emerging from a sometimes controversial dialogue between geography, theology and the study of religion, a varied approach to spatiality and religion has been elaborated.⁵⁴ The geographers David E. Sopher and Manfred Büttner, in particular, have shaped the agenda for the field of geography of religion, systematically addressing the relevance of geography to analyse religion and the impact of religion on geography.

Cultural geography is concerned with man, not as an individual, but as a sharer and bearer of culture. Its particular concern is with two kinds of relationships: the interaction between a culture and its complex earth environment, and the spatial interaction among different cultures. The geography of religion investigates these relationships, concentrating its attention on the religious component in culture.⁵⁵

From the very beginning, the idea of an interrelation prevailed. On the one hand, »geographical facts of the environment (rain, snow, mountains, rivers, lakes, cities, economy, transport etc.)«⁵⁶ were analysed in light of their impact on various religions. On the other hand, interactions between religion and geography were analysed by correlating changes in theological speculation and religious practice with geographical transformations. In order to estab-

53 Knott 2010, 29–30.

54 See. e.g. Bürkle 1990.

55 Sopher 1957, 1.

56 Büttner 1980, 99.

lish this new field, the history of research in geography, the history of theology and the study of religion were scrutinised with the aim of providing a *status questionis* and of promoting a solid interdisciplinary exchange.⁵⁷ By reading Büttner's and Sopher's revealing publications today, the difficulties they encountered in establishing their research programmes shine through. Geography of religion had to negotiate a clear focus and a shared methodological and theoretical basis in order to allow a fruitful exchange between the disciplines involved.

Divergent ideas about how the geography of religion had to be positioned in religious studies and in geography had to be negotiated. This debate about the positioning of the geography of religion and the profile that distinguishes this field is well documented in a broad range of publications.⁵⁸ In the transition between the 20th and the 21st century, under the influence of the spatial turn in geography and the study of religion, this interdisciplinary field has developed a defined agenda. The geographer of religion Lily Kong offers a panorama of these »new geographies« with a survey of the development within her field in the 1990s. Her approach widens the field to religious practices considering the transformation and challenges of the contemporary world. Overall, Kong makes a strong case in favour of mobilising concepts and adapting them for understanding the interaction between geography and religion as a mutual relationship that takes place in social practices:

To sum up, in conditions of modernity, »new« geographies of religion must take on board more actively: 1) different sites of religious practice beyond the »officially sacred«; 2) different sensuous sacred geographies; 3) different religions in different historical and place-specific contexts; 4) different geographical scales of analysis; 5) different constitutions of population; 6) different dialectics; and 7) different moralities.⁵⁹

57 Sopher 1957 and 1981; Büttner 1974, 1980 and 1998.

58 Overviews of the development of geography of religion in the 20th century are provided e.g. by Cooper 1992; Hoheisel 1988; Kong 1990; Knott 2010 and 2013, 104–110; Rinschede 1999, 20–28.

59 Kong 2001, 228.

Kim Knott's *The Location of Religion*, published first in 2005 and already quoted above, represents a turning point in receiving the programme of Kong's »new geographies« of religion and the challenges of the spatial turn for analysing religion as a social practice. The author scrutinises the results of the spatial turn for developing an approach to the role of religion in everyday life and re-discusses the commonly (uncritically) assumed divide between religious and secular places. For Knott, the concept of space in the study of religion serves as »a medium in which religion is situated«; it is a productive tool to question the common, sharp gap between secular and religious places, which confine researching religion to places that are marked as religious in political-medial debates. Her interest lies in the production of space by religions, religious groups and individuals in contemporary western societies.⁶⁰

Knott's approach to space as a concept for the study of religion highlights the role of the body in perceiving, conceiving and producing space, which is understood as »multi-dimensional, being physical, mental, and social«. Social relations are always embedded in space; in space all things converge. Space is multidimensional, different places overlap and interconnect in it. Place is paramount to understand power, »not only hegemonic power, but also the powers of resistance, strategic incursion and ironic collusion«. Space has an active agency, it brings places into being, reproduces and adapts them. Sacralisation of space requires a spatial agency.

Finally, Knott emphasises that space is both material and symbolic and remains a contested issue.⁶¹ Her exploration of the spatial turn, and particularly of Lefebvre's approach, aims at focusing on the role of the body in constructing social space. Knott's volume analyses the religious significance of body concepts that regulate everyday life beyond religious practices. In particular, she focuses on the left hand in western societies, scrutinising the effects of the dualistic opposition between the left and the right that permeates many facets of society. In her works on space, place and religion, Knott proposes a concept of space that is also a methodology for »examining the location of religion in the fabric of the secular«: space may be analysed considering the role of the body as »a source of space«, the different dimensions of space as well as its properties, aspects and dynamics.⁶² She

⁶⁰ Knott 2013, 3.

⁶¹ Knott 2013, 127–130; quotation 128.

⁶² Knott 2010, 35–36.

highlights that research on space opens up new perspectives on religion, it stimulates an interdisciplinary exchange between disciplines, and extends the focus beyond established topics, such as pilgrimage and sacred space. It adds to the agenda questions like the link between religion and power, gender, the body, social practices and religious-secular tensions.

The present book picks up the thread of Kim Knott's exploration of space and develops it further, exploring in more depth a different question. Inspired by the variety of cosmological and cartographical representations of places and living beings from medieval and early-modern times, as the title *Shared Places* indicates, this book focuses on places where a plurality of worldviews, religious orientations and practices are negotiated. On the one hand, we look at spatial practices that foster religious plurality, and on the other hand we analyse how places explicitly dedicated to a plurality of orientations mould a vision of what religion in public space is, may or should be. We consider how the interaction between religious plurality and spatial practices is formed on a material level, on the level of planning and regulation and which symbolic dimensions arise from them. How is plurality spatially perceived and received? What visions, imaginations and utopias are mirrored in those places? What do they make possible and create?

The theoretical debate we have addressed in the present chapter aims to provide a conceptual foundation, which functions as a tool for understanding spatial practices as multifaceted and complex. It allows for a conceptualisation of space as an aggregation of different approaches and perspectives, focused upon a fundamental dimension of culture and society. Therefore, we delineate the concept of space as a practice encompassing at least three different dimensions: first, space as it is perceived in everyday life; second, space as a matter of planning and design, a product of mental processes; and, finally, space as a medium of representation and of critical confrontation with the other two dimensions of space: perceived and planned space.

The concept of place implies a different perspective on this multilayered concept of space, since it emphasises the relationship between living bodies receiving and moulding spatial dimensions. Place happens: it is a transitory experience of moving bodies.

Both, space and places are relational approaches to spatial practices that, in very general terms, can be rendered as social arrangements of material

and symbolic goods and (human) beings in a transitory, continuous transformation.

In this approach to space and place, the human body plays a crucial role. Humans interact with space and place in everyday corporeal practices and generate meaning-making processes and symbolic orientation by such interaction. Concepts of space, place and the body are not to be aligned into a single consistent, all-encompassing concept, rather, they can be related to each other in order to constitute a theoretical frame for addressing the case studies that are explored in this volume.

In this volume, theoretical reflection on spatiality is merged with the concept of religion addressed in the second chapter. Religion as a symbol and communication system that shapes processes of belonging and exclusion, is transmitted over time, permeates different spheres of society and shapes cultural imaginaries: religion, as a social practice, contributes to shaping space and is moulded by it.

In the next stages of our imaginary journey, we will travel to mountains and visit funerary places, sacred buildings in urban contexts, museums and art exhibitions. In the selected case studies, plurality is gathered and formed in spatial practices. In the analysis of specific places, further theoretical debates will be discussed to illuminate particular features and transformations of the spatial practices that constitute them.

5 The Alps: Appropriating Liminal Places

Sollte jemals ein Auge dem innersten m³ der Alpen begegnen, so würde dieser zu einem entblösten Feldkubus oder eher zu einer ihm entsprechenden Staubwolke und seine Bezeichnung wäre verdampft und verloren. Oder sie wäre rechtzeitig abgehauen an den neuen innersten Ort des Massivs.¹

Our imaginary journey takes us to the Alps, a mountain range with a great diversity of cultures. In alpine regions, many and various religious practices, beliefs, and traditions can be found, owing to transformations that occurred in these regions over time, resulting in the presence of a variety of languages and a range of cultural settings. In this chapter we will explore spatial practices in a liminal territory, considering alpine regions that are not always permanently inhabited, but more often are visited or crossed.

Religious practices are very visible in the mountains: symbols of various religious traditions and of individual beliefs are scattered across the landscape. They reveal different facets of the contemporary appropriation of the alpine wilderness, evidencing ways in which people have sought to negotiate diverse orientations and interests. In exploring mountains in the Alps

1 »Should an eye ever encounter the innermost cubic metre of the Alps, it would turn into a naked rock cube or rather into a corresponding cloud of dust, its demarcation evaporated or lost. Or it would flee in time to the new innermost place of the massif.« The passage is taken from the essay *Dem innersten m³ der Alpen. Das Massive und die Einsicht* (The Innermost Cubic Meter of the Alps. The Massive and the Insight) by Sandra Boeschstein (2026, 370), a Swiss artist, author, and alpinist (<https://www.sandraboeschenstein.ch>, accessed on 6 August 2025). Translation into English by the author.

as shared places, a striking, complex, interaction emerges between bodily practices, scientific and technological approaches and diverse worldviews.

5.1 Visible traces of religious exchanges in the Alps

Figure 22 depicts a cabin in Val Cadlimo, a valley in the Gotthard region in the southern part of the Swiss Alps. The cabin is accessible only on foot following a trail that connects the Lukmanier Pass with the Piora region. The tiny hut is located on a wide pasture at an altitude of 2300 m.a.s.l. It serves as a shelter for Nicola Toscano, a shepherd who has lived on this site, every summer, for decades. From April to October, he cares for a large herd of Tibetan yaks, all of them descendants of a small family group of yaks brought here years ago from Tibet. Nicola Toscano is a Tibetan Buddhist. Every year, when he returns to this cabin, he sets-up small shrines in it (fig. 23). Outside his home, he displays prayer flags in different sizes at strategic points all over the pasture. The colourful Tibetan-Buddhist flags can be spotted from far away; they signal to the yaks and the passersby that the cabin is inhabited and, at the same time, they reveal the religious affiliation of its inhabitant.² In such a remote place, the material religious symbols attribute a specific meaning to the cabin and its surroundings. Hikers and alpinists immediately grasp the reference to Tibet and Nepal which is evocative of the religious and mountaineering traditions of these Himalayan countries (fig. 23). This alpine pasture in a remote valley in southern Switzerland is a shared place: visual symbols reveal the encounter between local subsistence practices and Tibetan-Buddhist traditions.

2 The documentary *Il mio piccolo Tibet* (Mario Casella, CH 2016) traces Nicola Toscano's life. He grew up in the region, became a shepherd as a young adult, and, for many years, he spent the wintertime in Nepal dedicating himself to increasing his understanding of Tibetan-Buddhist texts and practices.



Fig. 22: The cabin inhabited by the shepherd Nicola Toscano during the summer in Val Cadlimo, Switzerland.



Fig. 23: A Mani stone is placed on the windowsill of the cabin. On it the mantra *Om mani padme hūm* is carved, an epithet of Manipadma, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. The five traditional Buddhist colours – white, yellow, green, red and blue – add a further layer to the multiple symbolic meanings of this mantra. In Tibetan Buddhism, Mani stones with this text are very popular.³ Val Cadlimo, Switzerland.

3 Many thanks to Dolores Zoé Bertschinger for translating and explaining the inscription. See e.g. Buswell / Lopez 2014, 529.

A Tibetan-Buddhist hut introduces the topic of this chapter, which explores selected alpine places where diverse religious practices and worldviews are shared and negotiated. After a short overview of the Alps as a territory characterised by ambivalent interpretations, we will explore the contemporary display of religious symbols on mountain summits. Then we will consider the rituals performed in the construction sites of tunnels. The two case studies illustrate practices of appropriation of liminal places, in which diverse religious practices, scientific-technological innovation and the human body are entangled.

5.2 The Alps as an ambivalent territory

The alpine range creates a natural barrier extending from France, through Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Lichtenstein, and Austria to Slovenia. Before comfortable railways and roads made it easier to cross the Alps, this territory was quite inaccessible due to its topography, the harsh weather, particularly in winter, and the exposure to natural dangers such as avalanches, rockfalls, or landslides. Nonetheless, the history of the Alps, from antiquity until today, is characterised by movements and explorations, and, consequently, by intense cultural and religious exchanges.⁴

The Alps and their valleys are a territory characterised by a broad variety of cultures, languages, religious beliefs and practices. Significantly, the Alps are a place linked to multiple imaginaries: the imaginaries of their inhabitants, as well as the imaginaries of urban dwellers who visit them and travellers who cross them. The history of the imaginaries linked to the Alps is shaped by diverse encounters and interpretations.⁵

Until the Enlightenment, the mountains were often perceived as an impassable barrier, a border dividing people, and a dangerous, gloomy place inhabited by dangerous beings. In modern times, in line with the development of travel across the Alps, by road and other means of transportation, as well as scientific discovery and mountaineering exploration, a fascination for the

4 Höpflinger / Pezzoli-Olgiate / Previšić / Volken 2024; see also Egli / Tomkowiak 2011 and Bergier 1997.

5 For a general introduction to the history and culture of the Alps see Mathieu 2009 and 2015; Bätzing 2005; Bergier 1997.

alpine mountains arose.⁶ With the formation of nation states and the development of tourism and alpinism in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Alps became a symbol of human connection to nature and of unity between diverse cultures and states in Europe.⁷

Over the centuries, the Alps have become a territory of scientific, technological, touristic, sporting, and religious exploration.⁸ Their representations in the arts and sciences have stimulated a broad variety of symbolic interpretations ranging from a vision of the Alps as dangerous, inaccessible domains inhabited by wild beings and uncontrollable forces to a glorification of these elevated territories as places of human fulfilment and transcendent experiences.⁹ Even today, the alpine regions are subject to processes of appropriation in which contrasting perceptions of them may be articulated, often with reference to transcendent benevolent and/or demonic beings.¹⁰ In many religious narratives and practices in the past and the present, the tension between the constant exposure to danger and the precariousness of living in a hazardous environment contrasts with a sense of wonder and a desire to conquer the mountains.

The votive painting, reproduced as figure 24, depicts a woman who has fallen from a narrow ledge where she was cutting vegetation, which was needed to feed the cattle in winter. Her companion tries to save her with a rope. In this dangerous situation, the women entrust their lives to the local representation of Mary who intervenes on their behalf. The miraculous rescue was depicted by a professional painter, Giovanni Antonio Vanoni (1810–1886) and donated to the local church, where this particular representation of Mary is venerated. GR stands for *grazia ricevuta* (»grace received«). The painting is an offering that remembers the deadly danger of that situation. It vividly illustrates the challenges the inhabitants of an alpine valley are exposed to in their everyday lives.

An illustration taken from the book *Die Alpen in Natur- und Lebensbildern* written by Hermann Alexander von Berlepsch, published in 1861, pres-

6 Nicolson 1997; Günther 1998; Giacomoni 2005; Scharfe 2007 and 2021; Mathieu 2006 and 2015.

7 Mathieu 2015, particularly 93–110 and Bätzing / Perlik 1995.

8 See Mathieu 2006; Kuhn 2001; Atwood 2020.

9 For a contemporary example of this ambivalence in media representation see Pitches 2018.

10 Kuhn 2001; Höpflinger / Pezzoli-Olgati / Previšić / Volken 2024.



Fig. 24: Giovanni Antonio Vanoni, oil on canvas, 64 × 54 cm, undated, Oratorio di Santa Maria delle Grazie, Maggia, Switzerland.



Fig. 25: *Die Alpen in Natur- und Lebensbildern* written by Hermann Alexander von Berlepsch, published in 1861, contains 16 illustrations based on original drawings by the Swiss painter Emil Rittmeyer. This reproduction is taken from a softcover edition of the popular book (von Berlepsch 1862), unnumbered page.

ents a contrasting image of the relationship between humans and the Alps (fig. 25). Addressing audiences in German speaking countries and in Great Britain (the work was translated into English in the same year), this image depicts a man leading an expedition as it reaches a peak, while his fellows (or helpers?) are still climbing. The man is represented as a conqueror, in a victory pose raising the Swiss national flag.

From a religious-historical point of view, the alpine regions are a territory characterised by a broad diversity of beliefs, practices, and traditions, shaped by the dynamics and cultural exchanges that took and take place.¹¹ To address religious practices in the Alps it is crucial to keep in mind the perspectives of both local communities and urban dwellers, the latter of whom have greatly influenced the representation of the mountain wilderness.¹²

As anticipated at the beginning of this chapter, in the following pages we shall focus on the role of religion in alpine spatial practices by looking at two extremities: the display of religious symbols on summits and the performance of religious rituals in tunnel constructions. Both case studies are centred on the central Alps, focusing particularly on Switzerland.

5.3 The appearance of religious symbols on mountains

In September 2016 a glowing crescent suddenly irradiated the mountain peak named Freiheit (Freedom), 2139 m.a.s.l., in the Swiss Canton of Appenzell (figs. 26 and 27). The crescent installation, powered with photovoltaic solar panels, had a diameter of 3 m and was made of acrylic glass. The installation had been flown in by helicopter and assembled on the mountain top by Christian Meier, an artist born in 1978 who lives in Appenzell and Shanghai. Disregarding the legal process, Meier did not ask the owner of the land for permission to install his crescent on Freedom. The symbol of Islam stood prominently and illegally on the peak, with the result that after a week, it had to be removed.

¹¹ Mathieu 2006.

¹² Mocarrelli 2005; Mathieu 2006.



Fig. 26: Christian Meier's crescent was installed on the mountain Freedom in the Swiss Canton of Appenzell in September 2016. In this photograph, a cross on top of another mountain can be glimpsed in the background.

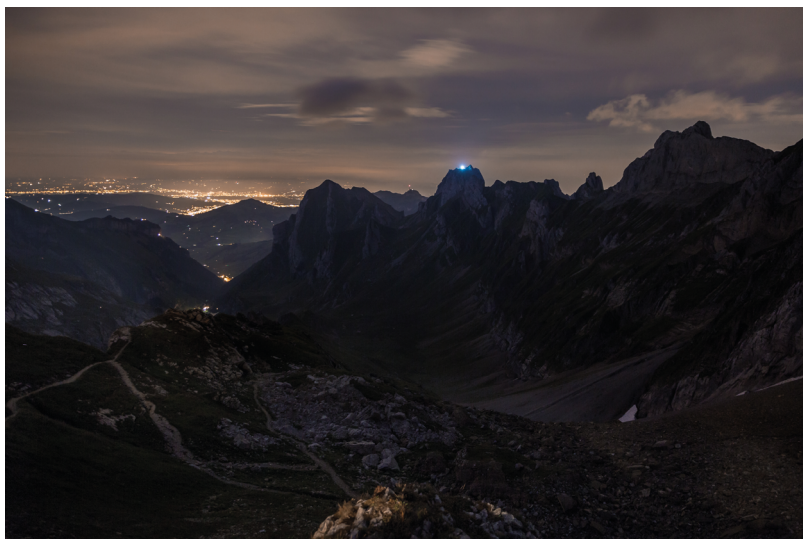


Fig. 27: Christian Maier's installation was lit up at night, powered by solar panels. With a diameter of 3 m, the crescent could be seen from far away.

Notwithstanding the short duration of its exhibition, the crescent on the mountain initiated a heated dispute in the media and beyond. According to the artist, who defines himself as an atheist, putting an Islamic symbol on a mountain was an artistic performance aimed at stimulating a debate about the widespread practice of displaying religious symbols, in fact primarily crosses, in the Alpine landscape. The mountain's name also added a further layer of meaning to the action.

In this instance, the very name of the mountain, »Freedom«, could suggest that the alpine wilderness had to be freed from human control, specifically from religious communities and traditions. Since the visibility of Islam is a sensitive topic within Swiss politics and the public sphere, not least after the prohibition of building minarets was added to the federal constitution in 2009,¹³ putting a crescent on a mountain is an intentionally provocative act. According to his many interviews in the media, Christian Meier also opted for a crescent for aesthetic reasons. He considers this shape as particularly harmonious and the reference to the light and the planet particularly powerful when displayed on a summit. His plan was that the huge, illuminated moon on Freedom would provide a unique spectacle which could be seen from far away.¹⁴

This short-term action can be interpreted as a contemporary, polemical adaptation of the historic practice of human appropriation of uninhabited alpine landscapes. Demarcating a peak with a symbol is a praxis rooted in religious traditions that was transformed and reinterpreted at the beginning of alpine mountaineering. The crescent on Freedom generated a controversy in just a few days because it tackled an established but already controversial practice. In the context of the long-term ambivalent reception of the Alps as a place of imagination and desire, the crescent on the mountain crystallises an urban debate about questions of contemporary mobility, religious plurality, and conflicts. The remote site of Freedom became a (transitory) mirror of contemporary national identity processes.

13 The prohibition was introduced on 29.11.2009 into Article 72 of the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation, which regulates the relationship between church and state (Paragraph 3): »The construction of minarets is prohibited« (<https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/404/en>). For introduction to the controversy linked to this political debate see Tanner / Müller / Mathwig / Lienemann 2009 and Mayer 2009. See also page 29 in this book.

14 For a selection of media coverage in the German speaking area see Hehli 2016; Ramezani 2016; Ritter 2016; Theile 2016. See also Pezzoli-Olgati 2020a, 15–16.



Fig. 28: A small chapel along a path in Centovalli, Switzerland. It is not possible to date this construction. The frescoes inside are damaged, yet the unsophisticated, popular style is clearly recognisable. The chapel contains a collection of items from different times and religious traditions; the flowers and the arrangement of objects suggest that it is still used as a religious construction.

The installation of symbols, and specifically crosses, on mountain tops in the Alps is a practice whose religious significance is not self-evident. Rooted in the beginning of alpine mountaineering expeditions, the significance of religious symbols on summits has been ambivalent from the very beginning and has undergone significant transformations since its first appearance at the end of the 18th century. Throughout its history, the cross on a mountain top has been a materialisation of competing claims for control of these unoccupied domains. To understand this new practice at the beginning of mountaineering, it needs to be contextualised against the backdrop of the traditional occurrence of religious symbols in the alpine regions.

Along the paths that link villages on the valley floors to remote pastures at altitude, crosses, small chapels (fig. 28), or larger constructions were built to protect and bring together the scattered communities (fig. 29).¹⁵ Predominantly present in Catholic regions, these Christian symbols and constructions had different purposes, depending on their location and size. In general, they were used to locate rituals and prayer practices.¹⁶ Chapels offered an occasion for rest during an ascent. By means of their architecture and image programmes, they made the presence of God, Mary, and the saints visible. The small shrines marked a specific location where divine figures could be addressed: they had a protecting function, keeping dangers away and preserving humans and cattle. Crosses were placed in specific spots, for example in exposed passages on dangerous tracks, on pastures, or in proximity to glaciers (fig. 30).¹⁷

Depending on the region, the religious constructions and symbols differ in shape, material, and style, although they share common meanings. Religious buildings and crosses in alpine altitudes articulate the tension between the mountains as a living place and the constant exposure of the fragile human being and cattle to natural dangers. In the alpine regions, the tension between what can be controlled and what eludes human capacity for control and foresight profoundly imprints religious beliefs and practices. Often, natural phenomena were interpreted as caused by evil forces that needed to be dominated or, at least, domesticated.¹⁸ Therefore, if we take Catholicism as the broader traditional frame in which to place religious material symbols in the Alps, it is crucial to consider popular beliefs as an integral part of this. This is the case even if such popular piety was not always accepted by theologically informed, institutional representatives of the church.¹⁹

15 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2011. The historian of the Alps Jon Mathieu (2006) suggests that the habit of placing Christian symbols in the alpine landscape developed after the Tridentine Reform and was originally linked to Catholicism. On the specific use of crosses in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland see Petrini 2016, 52.

16 Mathieu 2006 and 2023, 87–97.

17 See e.g. Loose 2004. For the particular case of the crosses in the Aletsch region see Holzhauser 2009, 61 and Volken 2016, 78–81.

18 Pezzoli-Olgiati / Höpflinger 2024.

19 For an ethnographic overview see Petrini 2016.

The Alps



Fig. 29: An undated cross along the path that leads to the large plateau in Quarnéi (2046 m.a.s.l.), Val Malvaglia. Made of two small wooden beams fixed with iron wire it suggests the transience of human life on this alpine settlement.



Fig. 30: A cross in the region of the Aletsch glacier, Switzerland, which is the largest glacier in the Alps. The crucifix from 1968 is mounted on a bigger, weather-beaten cross dated to 1818 in a spot called Baselflie in the Üsser Aletschji. In the background, the Oberaletsch glacier is visible as are the traces of substantial reduction of the ice mass due to climate change. Crosses were placed as boundary markers, to stop the dangerous enlargement of the ice that jeopardised settlements.²⁰

20 In the Canton of Valais votive processions to protect settlements against the glacier have

Even though the shape and the religious reference are similar, crosses on summits appeared later and resulted from a very different attitude towards mountains and religion. They were a symptom of a profound transformation in how the Alps were perceived and related to. In the modern era, mountains became a terrain of exploration and conquest, hand in hand with the exploration of other continents and world regions, so similarly attracted the attention of scholars, adventurers, and travellers. Since the second half of the 18th century, travel to the Alps and mountaineering became a European fashion.²¹

In the pre-modern era, mountain peaks were not places human beings were expected to go. In many cases, access to mountains was expressly forbidden, as the widely cited case of an early expedition to the Pilatus, a summit of 2119 m.a.s.l. that towers over the town of Lucerne, illustrates. In the 15th century, a monk from Zurich and his companions disregarded the prohibition to climb the mountain and they were legally convicted and put in prison by the city authorities. At this time, the Pilatus was considered responsible for the weather, particularly for severe storms. Legends linked to Pontius Pilatus provided explanations for these events: the bad spirit of Pilatus that inhabited the mountain had to rest undisturbed, otherwise he would damage Lucerne by means of terrible weather.²²

The (re)discovery of the Alps begins in the 18th century and is intertwined with scholarly approaches in the natural sciences, philosophy, theology and the arts. The fashion of aristocrats and the bourgeoisie travelling across Europe, the grand tour, largely contributed to this new approach to the remote alpine regions. Furthermore, this transformation affected the relationship between religion and the Alps not only through theological approaches, but also through new forms of experiencing the Alps as a place of human fulfilment and conquest, described as having religious qualities.²³

In this early age of alpinism (this neologism became current in the 1870s),²⁴ different objects were installed on mountain tops, such as measuring instru-

been regularly performed. In 2010, the parish of Fiesch in the Gomsertal valley obtained the permission of Pope Benedict XVI to reverse a ritual dating back to the 17th century for protecting houses from the dangerous glacier. During the procession, that takes place on 31st July, God and the Saints are now invoked to permit the Aletsch glacier to regrow.

21 Scharfe 2007 and 2021, Mathieu 2015.

22 For more details and bibliography see Kuhn 2001 and Matt 2012.

23 Scharfe 2007 and 2021. See also Atwood 2024.

24 Mathieu 2015, 203–205.

ments for studying the climate and the properties of the Alps tied to pillars or pyramids, flags of different kinds (see as an example fig. 25), or empty bottles containing a message. Even if they assumed different functions and meanings, all of them were material traces of the appropriation of the Alps by humans. The German anthropologist Martin Scharfe emphasises that they were anonymous objects: they documented the ascent of individuals that stood for the collective community of the courageous explorers of the Alps.²⁵ According to Scharfe, there are different explanations of the practice of putting objects as tangible signs of the new appropriations of the hostile mountains in the 19th century. First of all, the material objects demonstrated that the alpinists had really reached the summit, since, in some cases, the signs could be spotted from far away. They proved that an expedition had been successful. Second, they documented the new approach to places that had been considered, for a long time, as outside human culture. By climbing mountains, humans intruded into domains belonging to transcendent beings and divine forces. Placing a visible sign made the (transitory) human presence more enduring.

Furthermore, the constructions on mountain tops were provided with instruments to analyse the Alps as an object of natural-scientific investigation: from this perspective, summit signs were also a symbol for a new approach to the Alps as an object of research.²⁶

The Kleinglockner (3770 m.a.s.l.) in Austria is the first well documented case of a cross mounted on a peak (1799), followed a year later by the Grossglockner, which at 3798 m.a.s.l. is the highest mountain in the country. The massive iron construction standing today on Austria's highest peak, weighs 300 kg and results from the assemblage of 60 pieces. This was erected in 1880 as a substitute for the original wooden cross. The massive iron construction on the Grossglockner has been under national heritage protection since 2024 – the first instance of such status for a summit cross – after having been briefly removed to allow for a substantial restoration.²⁷

To protect them from storms, the crosses were often equipped with a lightning conductor, at the time of their introduction a new technological

25 Scharfe 2007, 253–254.

26 Scharfe 2007, 253–275; Cuaz 2009.

27 See <https://www.alpenklub.info/2024/06/07/gipfelkreuz-auf-dem-grossglockner-unterdenkmalschutz/> (accessed on 6 August 2024).

invention.²⁸ Despite the explicit reference to Christianity, the crosses were a symptom of a new approach to both the Alps and to religion. The monumental iron construction on the Grossglockner was celebrated and dedicated to the emperor Franz Joseph I and his wife Elizabeth for their 25th wedding anniversary in a ceremony on 2 October 1880, which reveals the entanglement between political and institutional-religious power. The cross represented a Catholic empire, but also the beginning of a new approach to the mountain, involving courage and bodily fitness, new emotions and curiosity for nature and its mechanisms.²⁹

National and religious identities became entangled in the appropriation of the alpine domains, which were still perceived in an ambivalent way. Summits were hostile and dangerous, and, at the same time, they could be conquered and subdued thanks to human resilience. Moreover, the crosses themselves carried an approach to the alpine wilderness based on scientific curiosity, providing an ideal location for new measuring instruments. In fact, the crosses could only stand by means of technological innovation because they needed to be preserved by lightning rods. Precisely as a religious symbol, as a reference to Christian belief, principally Catholicism, they were moulded from the profound transformations and ambiguities of the time in which they were introduced.³⁰ Over time, crosses on summits were also used in Protestant regions.³¹

Nonetheless, crosses on top of mountains were not very common in the 19th century. This practice became more widespread in the 20th century, particularly after World War II. Martin Scharfe interprets the increase of crosses in the post-war period as a way of processing the trauma through an *imitatio Christi* practice: as Christ carried his cross on mount Calvary to expiate human sins, so alpinists did something similar to atone for the war.³² Eventually, access to helicopters from the 1960s onwards, made the practice of installing crosses on the top of mountains very popular. For different reasons, individuals and groups practicing alpinism as a sport kept this tradition alive.

28 Mathieu 2006 and 2015, 135–140; Scharfe 2007, 253–275 and 2021, 33–43 and 198–235.

29 Mathieu 2023, 92–93; Rech 2023.

30 Mathieu 2006 and 2015, 135–140.

31 Mathieu 2023, 94.

32 Scharfe 2007, 269.

In the past and present, the cross on mountain peaks marks the human presence in the Alps, reflecting a variety of local traditions and historical transformations of the practice.

Despite all the differences, some recurring aspects can be discerned. As a planned, material construction it transforms the mountain into a designed place. The cross towers over the summit and articulates, by means of its shape and symbolic references, the relationship between the ground where mountaineers stand and the sky or heaven (according to one's cosmological worldview). The cross is placed on an endpoint, on the spot at which the ascent is completed and the human view of the earth seems infinite.³³

Often the cross results from a collective effort of a group and is not directly linked to a church or a religious organisation. From the beginning in the late 18th century, crosses were planned, carried and installed by climbers, which does not exclude the participation of a religious community or a regional institution, but nonetheless distinguishes this construction from other sacred buildings. As is typical for votive offerings, crosses on summits mirror the practice of laypeople rather than of religious representatives or specialists. There are no formal rituals or liturgies linked to crosses: their interpretations are not regulated and depend on the subjective perspective of their receivers. They negotiate the meaning-making processes according to personal views, beliefs and ideas, which mirror social and cultural transformations, as the example of Meier's crescent on Freedom clearly illustrates.

From this perspective, the religious references and the function of summit crosses are not defined within an institution but rather by a wider cultural setting. The reference to Christ's passion, death and resurrection may be associated with different ideas of Christianity, depending on the denomination and the subjective religious socialisation, or, as a *pars pro toto*, with religion as a general attitude, or the history of mountaineering and the human appropriation of a remote territory since the modern era. Alpinism was from the beginning framed in a religious language and in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, as we have already mentioned, it broke with a feeling of fear towards the mountains and their transcendent inhabitants, and, on the other

33 In the history of culture, the gaze from the mountain top has a relationship to religious feelings and narratives. See della Dora 2018.

hand, this new outdoor activity offered a new scientific, human, emotional, and corporeal challenge. Yet, throughout the history of alpinism, these new experiences have been described using typical religious language: awe and fear, desire and fulfilment, revelation and rapture.³⁴ In this way, crosses transformed summits into shared places in which different ideas of religious practices and experiences were negotiated according to the actors involved in the interpretation of the symbols at this specific place, entangling exploration, scientific knowledge, and religious worldviews and practices.

5.4 Summit crosses as a negotiation of diverse worldviews

This overview of the different phases and characteristics of mountain crosses shows that various actors at different times promoted these symbols for different reasons. The crosses are not principally an institutional Christian expression, but rather a symbol encapsulating an ambivalence towards the mountains: awe and curiosity, corporeal exploits and bodily performance, appropriation of a wild territory intertwined with individual ideas of the divine, and of the liminal experience of immanence and transcendence that characterises mountaineering from the beginning.

Crosses on summits were always quite robust constructions, since they were planned to resist the hostile weather conditions, which explains why they have persisted. Over time, diverse interpretations have been applied to these prominently located symbols, mirroring comparable transformations in people's relationship to the Alps, mountaineering, religion and culture.

As already mentioned, crosses became popular in the second half of the 20th century. Within the range of constructions on summits, the cross remains constant and predominant over time, even though the size, shape and material it is made of and the iconographic features may vary. Sometimes the construction is a simple, abstract cross (fig. 31), sometimes the body of Christ is represented in a typical crucifix, sometimes a statue of Mary is added. Since the end of the 20th century, crosses are very often combined with Tibetan-Buddhist prayer flags (fig. 22) and other objects, which high-

34 Günther 1998; Atwood 2020. See also Berner 2020 and Nicolson 1997.



Fig. 31: A cross on the top of Gradiccioli, 1936 m.a.s.l. The construction is made of granite and placed on a massive foundation stone. Around the cross the soil is sealed with stone slabs and fixed with concrete.

lights the links between Alpine and Himalayan mountaineering, and the widespread mobility of people practicing this sport between the European and Asian mountain ranges.

As the case of Meier's crescent well illustrates, in recent decades crosses on summits have become a contested topic. A few were dismantled in protest actions aimed at liberating the natural landscape from religious, and more specifically, Christian dominance.³⁵ According to these perspectives, the mountains must be religiously neutral places and the alpine landscape freed from religious interpretations. In 2010, a mountaineering guide damaged two summit crosses in the Prealps in the Canton of Freiburg in Switzerland. Two years later, he was sentenced in court: his action had been considered a violation against the freedom of belief and religion.³⁶

Crosses are still being installed on mountain tops. Figure 31 depicts a newly placed cross on the Gradiccioli, a prealpine mountain in southern Switzerland.

³⁵ Rech 2023.

³⁶ See e.g. Swiss News Agency 2010 and 2012.

The cross is made of granite and stands on a massive foundation stone that carries a small inscription in silver-grey letters on a green background. Translated into English, it reads:³⁷

The intensity of life is not measured by the number of breaths, but on the basis of places and moments that take the breath away.
Anonymous 2006

The cross is less than 2 m tall but the massive shape carved from a stone block strongly marks this location.

The text on the green plaque is attributed to an »anonymous« author. It is an aphorism circulating on the Internet and on social media, tentatively attributed to diverse authors, without a precise identification. It states that what matters in life is not longevity but the capacity to enjoy the wonder one can experience. Indeed, reaching the top of the Gradiccioli is breathtaking. Even if it is not particularly high, it offers a 360-degree view of the Alpine range as well as the Po plain. At this very location, »breathtaking« may refer to the feeling of being overwhelmed by the spectacle of such a wide landscape that includes peaks over 4000 m.a.s.l. Or it may also allude to the physical effort needed to reach the top.

The inscription influences the interpretation of the granite symbol. The cross may allude to Christianity, or, more precisely, to the passion of Christ, or simply to the action of placing crosses on mountain tops as a votive or a mountaineer's practice. The text addresses the readers in a direct way, offering them an interpretation of what they have just achieved and maybe of the emotions and feelings they are experiencing. It imbues the outdoor activity with an existential meaning: better a short and intense life overwhelmed by the beauty of the Alps than a long life without such emotions. Both, the cross and the inscription, offer interpretations of a sporting activity involving bodily effort. The cross and the inscription endorse diverse meaning-making processes of being on a mountain top, they invite the viewer to think of the corporeal performance as a meaningful activity which is worth doing and rewarding in terms of quality of life.

37 »L'intensità della vita non si misura con il numero dei respiri, ma in base ai luoghi e ai momenti che ci hanno fatto mancare il fiato. Anonimo 2006« Translation by the author.

Not only is the text anonymous, but also the people who installed the cross and its plaque are similarly unknown. While the cross re-enacts the tradition of this specific symbol we have recapitulated above, the inscription actualises the traditional practice in its own way. The text frames the symbol, it suggests that it does not matter if the reader is religious or not: the point is rather that once the top is reached, the mountain can be experienced as an intense, enriching, and existentially meaningful place.

Today, alpinism is practiced as a sport focused on corporeal and psychological challenge with a broad range of techniques and interpretations involved. From extreme performances by professional mountaineers to gentler forms of hiking as a leisure activity; the Alps are explored by diverse groups with different practices and goals. Crosses and other religious symbols persist in alpinism, despite being questioned and being interpreted in various ways. They transform the wild peaks into a cultural domain, materialising the human presence in the mountains. The meaning-making processes linked to the religious symbols are variegated and contested. In this negotiation of the relationship between human beings and the natural territory, the contemporary plurality of worldviews and signifying practices are mirrored. In this sense, mountain summits become shared places where contemporary religious and political debates, collective and individual orientation are negotiated and challenged.

5.5 Crossing the Alps in the era of mobility

Religious practices and meaning-making processes in the Alps can be observed not only on the summits but also in the depths of the mountains. The second case study in this chapter deals with contemporary religious practices in the construction site of the railway tunnel crossing the Gotthard massif, completed in 2016. Measuring 57 km, it is currently the longest railway tunnel worldwide (the Brenner base tunnel, currently under construction, will reach 64 km).³⁸

38 The results of the research on this case study have previously been published as an essay for a broader audience in Pezzoli-Olgiati 2024b.

The St. Gotthard Pass, 2106 m.a.s.l, is a place that played a significant role, on a social, economic, political, and symbolic level in the formation of Switzerland as a modern state and continues to shape national identity today.³⁹ The Gotthard massif, located between the cantons of Valais, Uri, Ticino and Graubünden, and bounded on the western side by the Nufenen Pass and, on the eastern side, by the Lukmanier Pass, encompasses a range of peaks, the highest being the Pizzo Pesciora (3192 m.a.s.l.). Until 1716, when it was correctly measured by Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, the Gotthard massif had been considered the highest mountain in the Alps.⁴⁰ The history of the extensive use of the pass, that links the Reuss Valley with the Leventina Valley on a north-south axis, is well documented from medieval times onwards, although this passage across the alpine range was known already in the Roman era. Its development over the centuries is a prominent example of the entanglement of technological development in transportation with transformations in the symbolic interpretation of the Alps.⁴¹

While access to the pass from the southern slope is smooth, the northern part is arduous because of the pronounced gorges on the river Reuss. The first descriptions of the crossing of the pass are dated to the 13th century. At that time bridges were built to facilitate the crossing of the gorges, particularly over the Schöllenen canyon, probably adapting alpine construction techniques for water ducts. In this era the Gotthard pass was used on a local scale for pasture and for the transport of goods with mules, an activity organised by specific guilds. In 1653 a weekly transit from Lucerne to Milan was introduced by Pietro Maderni from Lugano, the journey taking four days. In 1696, Caspar Muralt from Zurich and Beat Fischer from Bern instituted a mail transport between Zurich and Milan twice a week with horses. The first road tunnel to facilitate the transit through the pass was dug in 1707 at a place called Urner Loch. It measured 60 m. In 1803 the Canton of Ticino joined the Swiss Confederation and, in 1826, deals with other cantons were concluded to complete the road link from Basel to Chiasso, which allowed the country to be crossed from the borders with Germany and France to that with Italy. From 1831 a regular transport of mail and people by stage-coach was established. In wintertime, sledges were used on the pass road.

39 Schueler 2008; Bergier 1997.

40 Bruns 2012, 125; HLS / DHS / DSS 2016.

41 For a history of the pass see e.g. Bruns 2012.

In the 19th century, the significance of the Gotthard Pass increased. After lengthy political negotiations and evaluations of diverse alternatives to build a railway crossing the Alps, in 1871, Switzerland, the Kingdom of Italy and the German Empire agreed to share the costs for a railway tunnel linking Göschenen with Airolo. The tunnel of 15 km was opened in 1882. In the early 1920s, the railway lines from Basel and Zürich to Chiasso were electrified. In the late 1930s the pass road was adapted to carry vehicles. Even today, this road is still closed during the winter. The further development of road connections and of the Swiss and European motorway network led to the construction of a road tunnel of 17 km that runs parallel to the first railway tunnel in 1980.⁴²

Although there have been different railways and roads crossing the Alps since the end of the 19th century, traffic over and under the Gotthard Pass increased significantly in recent decades because the tunnel allowed for regular passage throughout the year. In the 1990s, a new – and contested – debate arose over shifting transportation, especially of goods, through the Swiss Alps from road to rail. It led to the planning of two base tunnels under the Lötschberg and the Gotthard, along with other major constructions in Switzerland and the neighbouring countries. The whole project had been conceived as a joint programme to rearrange European railway connections on the north-south axis. On 27 September 1992, Swiss citizens voted in favour of it. The Gotthard base tunnel was opened on 10 December 2016. Today, it links Biasca to Erstfeld in 20 minutes, which contributes to shortening the journey time from Zürich to Milan substantially, reducing it from approximately four to three hours. On 29 September 2021 a construction site for a second tube tunnel for the motorised traffic between Airolo to Göschenen was opened.⁴³

This short recap of the history of crossing the Alps over and under the Gotthard highlights the close interrelation between increasing demand for mobility of goods and people, the development of new alpine construction technologies, politics, and economics.⁴⁴ The irregular topography and the weather conditions of this territory have been overcome by complicated, challenging constructions of rails, roads, bridges, and tunnels. Along with

42 For a detailed reconstruction of the process see Bergier 1997, Ratti 2016, 19–35.

43 Bruns 2012, HLS / DHS / DSS 2016. For a summary of the political and economic debates relating to the base tunnel see Ratti 2016, 123–143 and Schueler 2008.

44 For an overview of the interrelation between industrial revolution and the development of alpine passes see e.g. Mathieu 2015, 165–179.

this transformation, the interpretation of the Gotthard has changed. Particularly after the consolidation of the modern national state with the introduction of a new federal constitution in 1848,⁴⁵ the Gotthard became a strong symbol of national identity and cohesion between the diverse Swiss cultures. This narrative of the Gotthard massif at the centre of Europe that divides and reunites Switzerland and Europe remains influential to this day.⁴⁶

5.6 A broadcast ceremony from the depths of the mountain

In the trains crossing the Gotthard, the travellers are often informed that the tunnel they are passing through in 20 minutes is a remarkable engineering achievement. It consists of two single track tunnel tubes of 57 km, each uni-directional, embedded in a complex system of additional subterranean constructions ensuring the laborious maintenance and the security of the tunnel. Overall, the infrastructure consists of 151.8 km of tunnels.⁴⁷ The construction took 17 years to complete, with an estimated workforce of 2,600 people, working in three eight-hour shifts, 24 hours a day. The tube tunnels are almost flat, the entrance on the south being at 216 m.a.s.l., on the north at 460 m.a.s.l., which is suitable for high-speed trains. The costs amounted to 12.2 billion Swiss francs and were entirely provided by public funding. The tunnel, planned for a capacity of 260 goods trains and 65 passenger trains a day, was opened in December 2016.⁴⁸

The construction has transformed travelling and living habits in Switzerland, since the trip from the principal cities in the north of the country to the southern regions has substantially shortened, making daily commuting possible. The connections from Germany to Italy have been substantially accelerated, as the railway is more efficient for passing the Alps. From 2023

45 For an overview of the complicated process leading to the constitution of 1848 see Kley 2023.

46 Bergier 1997.

47 <https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/documentation/media-releases.msg-id-35644.html> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

48 For more details on the tunnel infrastructure see <https://www.news.admin.ch/newsd/message/attachments/39641.pdf> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

to 2024 the tunnel was closed to passenger trains for almost a year because of a major accident, which has shown that, despite the advanced security procedures, the high-tech construction remains vulnerable.⁴⁹

The ambivalent interpretation of mountains, particularly of the Gotthard, played a major role in the political debates that led to the realisation of the project and continued to be very significant during the construction and afterwards. The Gotthard is described as the symbolic centre of Europe with a political, economic, and cultural significance. For example, the sources of the rivers Rhein, Reuss, Ticino, and Rhône, that originate on the massif, were interpreted as a symbolic link between the North Sea and the Mediterranean, connecting European nations, cultures and languages. Natural elements of the landscape were also interpreted as an expression of political conformity.

Besides serving as an element of cohesion between the diverse Swiss cultures, the Gotthard assumed the quality of being a centre for a whole continent. Such politically and economically motivated narratives of the mountain as a symbolic place of Swiss and European unity contrasts with the reading of the Gotthard as an impassable barrier that had to be overcome by means of scientific research and engineering innovation.⁵⁰ In fact, questions about the geological structure and formation of the massif were still open in the planning phase, which required complicated strategies in organising the excavation and consolidation of the construction. A great amount of the excavation was made with two boring machines produced for this specific task and mounted within the tunnel tubes, measuring approximately 400 m in length and with a boring head of ca. 8.90 m in diameter. They were called by the nicknames Heidi and Sissi.

The achievement of the tunnel as a technological contribution to the unity of Switzerland and Europe and as a challenge to the mountain that divides countries and cultures, was the leitmotif for the first ceremony in this construction site, which was broadcast on state television and internationally received. It took place on 15 October 2010 to celebrate the breakthrough of the east tunnel tube. Representatives of political, economic, and religious institutions, national and international media, as well as miners and workers were invited to celebrate the new connection between south and north.

49 Gotthard Rail Tunnel, World's Longest, Closes for Months after Swiss Derailment 2023.

50 Bergier 1997.

The ceremony was performed in front of the last wall of rocks, in the middle of the Gotthard massif, a quite inhospitable dark place with very hot temperatures that needs artificial cooling and illumination to be bearable for human beings. Furthermore, a live stream made the event accessible to all the workers on the construction site and other invited guests in diverse locations in the Canton of Uri and Ticino as well as to the 27 ministers of transportation of the EU countries that were meeting in Luxembourg. The event took place in the northern sector of the tunnel, whereas Sissi, the boring machine, would be digging from the south.

In the following section, a close reading of selected parts of the celebration focuses on the role religion assumed in providing meaning to the mountain and the human achievement in opening a new connection through the Gotthard. The analysis is based on the live stream on the Swiss-Italian state television (Radiotelevisione svizzera di lingua italiana, RSI) that combines broadcasts from the north and the south side commented upon in a voice over.⁵¹

The formal part of the breakthrough ceremony began with a vocal performance composed by the German theatre director Volker Hesse, followed by addresses from representatives of the construction site and political leaders, and by a religious ritual. Art performances, speeches and a liturgy highlighted the significance of the construction and of this place. Afterwards, Sissi, the boring machine, dug the last metre of rock and, finally, the miners and all the people involved celebrated this important milestone in the project. A common meal outside the tunnel concluded the celebration.⁵²

51 The analysis is based on my recording of the live stream on 15 September 2010. A commemoration of the day is published as a DVD (*Il cantiere del secolo*, Versione italiana, Gieri Venzin / Mario Casella / Paul Nicol / Gigi Neri, RSI 2011).

52 The »Final Breakthrough« was announced as a »dramatisation« deep under the Alps, along with the programme, as follow: »On behalf of DETEC [Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communication], theatre director Volker Hesse will herald the historic moment of the Final Breakthrough under the Gotthard with dramatic visual and sound effects. The human battle against the rocks of the Gotthard will be transformed into a poetic experience. Visual and acoustic performances will be presented inside the tunnel with contributions from various artists including Rolf Derrer (lighting concept), Angel Sanchez (photographs of miners: »Heroes of Work«), Christian Zehnder (overtone singing, tuning horn), Töbi Tobler (hammered dulcimer and voice), Norbert Möslang (sounds), Arthur Schneiter (musical stones) and Roman Signer (blasting artist).« <http://www.57km.ch/en/final-breakthrough/programme/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

There was no formal stage, only a few elements were used, like a podium for the speakers, and a demarcation of the area for the audience. The thin wall dividing north from south was decorated with a stencil depicting the logo and the name of the company »Alp Transit. Gotthard/San Gottardo«. On the wall of the tunnel there was a small shrine, illuminated with a light chain, containing the photographs of the people that died accidentally on the construction site (fig. 32).

All those present were required to wear a protective helmet and a work vest, both in orange, with very few exceptions. On that Wednesday many people in Switzerland and abroad followed the live stream on TV. Speeches by Luzi Gruber, representing the principal construction company, Renzo Simoni, the CEO of Alp Transit, the company responsible for the construction site, and Moritz Leuenberger, at the time Swiss minister of transportation, explained the significance of the base tunnel as a political, economic, technological and symbolic achievement.

Simoni welcomed the audience in the official Swiss languages German, French, Italian and Rumantsch as well as English, emphasising the local and international significance of the base tunnel, gave thanks to all the specialists working in such a demanding place, and remembered the men who died on the construction site, paying his respects by taking off his helmet.

Despite the stringent safety procedures to avoid accidents, death lurks in the depths of the mountain. The uncontrollable character of the massif was also addressed by the next speaker, Leuenberger, the minister representing his department and the Swiss government:

Dear Swiss electors, dear miners, builders, surveyors and engineers, dear Transport Ministers of the EU, in live stream from Luxemburg, dear Sissi, dear St. Barbara, the mountain is tall, we are small. Yesterday we wanted to move the mountain. Today we pierce it and realise the longest tunnel in the world, on time, as we had planned, at the costs, as we had calculated.⁵³

53 »Liebe Schweizer Stimmbürgerinnen und Stimmbürger, liebe Mineure, Bauarbeiter, Vermesser und Ingenieure, liebe Verkehrsminister aus der EU, live zugeschaltet aus Luxemburg, liebe Sissi, liebe heilige Barbara, der Berg ist gross, wir sind klein. Gestern wollten wir den Berg versetzen. Heute durchbohren wir ihn und schaffen den längsten Tunnel



Fig. 32: The small temporary shrine containing the photographs of the victims of accidents during the construction. At this time, eight people had died. Screenshot of the live stream by Radiotelevisione Svizzera di lingua italiana. By the end of the tunnel construction nine people had lost their lives: Andreas Reichhardt (Germany), Jacques Du Plooy (South Africa), Heiko Bujack (Germany), Albert Ginzinger (Austria), Salvatore di Benedetto (Switzerland), Andrea Astorino (Italy), Thorsten Eisenmann (Germany), Hans Gammel (Germany), and Giuseppe Luizzo (Italy).



Fig. 33: Transportation minister Moritz Leuenberger takes the floor during the ceremony.

der Welt, zum Zeitpunkt, wie wir ihn planten, zu den Kosten, wie wir sie rechneten.«
Translation by the author.

The minister was very proud of such a huge performance by a small, diverse country in the middle of Europe. In his speech, he interpreted the breakthrough as a clear expression of a functioning direct democracy, a sign of recognition of the nation's minorities, and a contribution for sustainability. He stressed the significance of this technological achievement for Europe's train infrastructure and its contribution to strengthening solidarity within the continent (fig. 33).

The list of the people addressed at the beginning of his speech anticipated the values he elaborated on later: direct democracy, advanced knowledge and professional skills, a good political and strategic network within Europe were the conditions for the success. The mention of Sissi and St. Barbara echoes the tension between technology and religion: while the former is a sophisticated machine that enables the appropriation of the mountains for the sake of the economy and mobility, the latter refers to religious practices that help negotiate the contingency of a dangerous working environment. In the context of the broadcast ceremony, the contrast between machine and the saint is noteworthy. Invoking the presence of a holy figure, the minister referred to the mountain as an uncontrollable, transcendent force. Even in a time of safety protocols and sophisticated engineering, divine protection is very important to face contingency and danger. The memory of the dead colleagues underlined this existential aspect.

5.7 Diverse religious rituals in the Gotthard base tunnel

After the speeches by the authorities, two Roman-Catholic priests in traditional liturgical clothing and the compulsory orange security helmet took the stage and transformed the ceremony into a religious ritual (fig. 34). Pater Vigeli Monn from the Benedictine cloister in Disentis and the priest Reto Nay, a member of the parish of Sedrun, situated 800 m.a.s.l directly above this transitory sacred place, represented the local communities. They alternated meditations and prayers in German, Italian and Rumantsch, before performing a blessing of the wall and the people gathered in the tunnel.

In this liturgical part, the mountain was praised as being part of God's wonderful creation. Selected biblical passages from the Psalms and Jesus Ben Sirach, combined with prayers, emphasised the ambiguity of the rela-

tionship between human beings and the divine creator. The harmony of creation and the human capacity to discern such harmony was described in a certain tension to each other. Human beings are part of God's creation and, at the same time, they are responsible for protecting it. However, they need God's guidance to prevent them from ruining creation. The risk of blurring the thin line between caring for creation and just transforming nature as an object was often evoked, for instance in this prayer:

Allmighty God, you have empowered the human being to subdue the earth and for that you have endowed him with spirit and strength. We thank you for this work, which was created through the planning and the labour of the many people working here. May your holy spirit rule in their hearts, so they not only act, but also understand, that you are the great breakthrough in their life. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.⁵⁴

In front of a political, economic, scientific, and technological success such as the base tunnel, the prayer suggests that the *homo faber* should not forget who the true creator of the universe is. Accompanied by a female worker in an orange overall, holding a metal bucket, the priests sprinkled the wall and the audience with holy water (fig. 35). Intercessory prayers reiterating creation-theological motifs and the ambiguity of human action concluded the liturgy. The priests prayed to God to illuminate the use of science and technology, whose astonishing achievements were visible on the tunnel, for the sake of humanity, and to preserve the workers and the future travellers. The liturgy ended with a last prayer for the deceased workers.

By means of words and songs, the blessing ritual added a theological meaning to the breakthrough celebration. The ambivalent mountain that is a barrier and a link between countries is hence interpreted as being a part of God's creation. The human beings are reminded of their double role within a Christian worldview, being themselves created and responsible for preserving God's work. The tunnel is read as a metaphor for the relationship between God and humanity.

54 This prayer was spoken in German. Translation from the audiovisual source by the author.



Fig. 34: The priests begin a religious ritual in front of the stone wall.



Fig. 35: The priests bless the mountain and sprinkle the stone wall with holy water. Screenshot, live stream.

It is not clear why a Roman-Catholic liturgy was chosen for this celebration, possibly because of the location of the wall beneath the upper part of the valley Surselva where Catholicism is predominant. In a culturally and religiously diverse nation, considering that the community of the workers encompassed people from many countries, and the live broadcast was addressing audiences in various places, an interreligious ritual might have been expected.



Fig. 36: The tunnel boring machine called Sissi, on the south side of the tunnel tube, is tackling the last wall. On the control panel photographs of the people who died in working accidents are visible.



Fig. 37: Over the stencil on the last stone wall, first cracks appear.

Overall, the religious ritual takes up a significant amount of time within the formal celebration, which is surprising in a ceremony about a world record in subterranean engineering in contemporary society. Furthermore, the relationship between religion and technology plays an even more important role in the following events of the celebration.



Fig. 38: The wall collapses under the pressure of Sissi. The boring head is visible behind the stone dust.



Fig. 39: St. Barbara and Hubert Bär after having crossed the new passage through the Gotthard.

The Roman-Catholic liturgy concluded the formal part of the ceremony. At this stage, Sissi was already at work, tackling the rock dividing the two parts of the tunnel tube (fig. 36). As the first cracks on the wall appeared (fig. 37), the tension within the audience increased. The noise of the boring machine became very loud, rocks fell down and, at 2:18 p.m., the entire wall collapsed. Behind the thick dust layer, the boring shield of Sissi appeared (fig. 38).



Fig. 40: St. Barbara joins the deceased miners.



Fig. 41: Flags of the different countries of the workers are waved.

The sound of trumpets from the southern part reached the participants in the northern part. The oldest miner, Hubert Bär, was going to pass first, but only after the statue of Barbara, the patron saint of miners, he held in his hands, had crossed the new threshold (fig. 39). Once he joined the enthusiastic audience on the other side, he placed the statue inside the small shrine for the dead (fig. 40). Meanwhile, other miners and tunnel workers passed across the fallen rocks and reached the northern side.



Fig. 42: The minister of transportation Moritz Leuenberger receives a statue of St. Barbara from his predecessor Adolf Ogi.



Fig. 43: The shrine of St. Barbara in the access-tunnel in Amsteg.

The saint is holding a tower with three windows. On the left side of the door, made of wrought iron and glass, a hammer and a pick with wooden handles are integrated in the design. They are a common symbol of miners, which also recurs in heraldry.⁵⁵ On the right side, there is the blossoming branch of a cherry tree, which refers to a tradition linked to the feast day of St. Barbara on 4 December.⁵⁶

55 See Kirnbauer 1975.

56 Eberhart 1988, 70–73.

Everybody was happy and proud. In fact, the drilling from the two sides matched perfectly, the difference was less than one centimetre, the timing perfect. The miners waved the flags of the bordering cantons – Ticino and Graubünden – first, then of the Swiss confederation, followed by the flags of the diverse countries they came from (fig. 41). The spontaneous gestures, the emotions of the people who worked strenuously for so many years, and under such hard conditions engaged the audience present on site and in front of their TV-screens. Another St. Barbara statue appeared in the arms of ministers (fig. 42).

There is no construction site within the Alps without statues of this saint. Usually, a small shrine with St. Barbara is placed at the entrance of the tunnel construction site. Once it is completed, the saint follows the workers on to other places. In the Gotthard base tunnel, an installation that needs a pains-taking maintenance, there are still three statues in the corresponding access points to the tunnel in Faido, Amsteg and Sedrun (fig. 43).

St. Barbara is considered the protectress of miners and all who work in subterranean digging. According to her legend, she lived in antiquity. The wealthy nobleman, Dioscurus of Nicomedia, (a city in Asia Minor, today Izmir in Turkey), imprisons his beautiful and brilliant daughter in a tower, before leaving on a journey, to protect her from the danger of malicious men. Barbara devotes herself to study and becomes a Christian. She represents her new faith by adding a further window to the two already existing, as a reference to the trinity. On his return, the pagan father understands immediately the disgrace that has happened to his own daughter and tries to kill his Christian child. Miraculously, a cleft appears in a rock, and Barbara finds a refuge there. Unfortunately, a shepherd betrays her whereabouts but is immediately turned into a rock himself, whilst his sheep become locusts. Barbara is imprisoned and tortured, but Christ heals her wounds during the night. In different variants of the legend, the list of the suffering she has to endure, vary: her breasts are cut off, she is burned with torches, or dragged naked through the street. Eventually, her father beheads her and, immediately, a fire from heaven kills him.⁵⁷

Barbara appears in lists of saints from the late medieval period. She is depicted with various attributes: a peacock, a symbol of resurrection, a tow-

57 Sigrist 2008, Eberhart 1988 and Schmid 1951, 202–204.

er with three windows, a chalice with a host, the crown of the martyrs. Over the centuries traditions surrounding St. Barbara emphasise her role as a protectress of people in distress. In particular, she is associated with the danger of a sudden death, for example by lightning. In alpine regions, St. Barbara became the protectress of artilleryists and miners since the 17th or the 18th century. Until today, her feast day is celebrated on 4 December.⁵⁸

In the Alps, the devotion to the saint was clearly located in a Roman-Catholic context. In the contemporary subterranean working practices, however, the institutional frame seems to be blurred. The worship is embedded in the multicultural teams of specialised workers. In the liturgy we have analysed, St. Barbara is only briefly mentioned, but never directly addressed, while she is very much the focus in the performance after the breakthrough. The statue of the saint is held in the arms of the miners, she is carried to the portraits of the workers who died, and handed over to the political representatives.

While the priests perform a ritual based on biblical texts, traditional prayers forms and theological interpretation of nature, the miner's worship of St. Barbara is performed by material practices, beyond an institutional frame. There are no formal mentions of the saint beside the – significant – address by the minister of transportation.

The relationship with St. Barbara is mirrored in the bodily connection with the statues. Her function as a protectress of the subterranean workers in a high-tech construction site is performed by means of gaze and touch. There is a link between Sissi, the boring machine, and St. Barbara. Both are part of the equipment to overcome the mountain as a barrier. The former stands for the most advanced developments of civil engineering, the latter for a form of protection that goes beyond practical safety procedures. For people working in shifts in a dangerous, subterranean environment without daylight, exposed to high temperature in the middle of an alpine massif, the statue of St. Barbara materialises a transcendent form of protection. Inherited from tradition and adapted to modern working conditions, the devotion to the Saint is a way of transforming the workers into a community exposed to the force of the mountain. The community not only include Barbara as a transcendent saint. The dead colleagues are also part of the group. Their

58 Eberhart 1988, 11–25.

portraits are not only in the temporary shrine for the ceremony, but also in the cockpit of the boring machine.

The devotion to St. Barbara and the memory of the dead in this construction site refer to a fundamental human experience in the face of the uncontrollable. The saint does not avoid death but helps others to deal with danger and accidents. This religion of the base tunnel is a collective practice which is part of working routines. It materialises the experience of contingency in a domain of scientific innovation and technological record performances. In the ceremony for the tunnel tube breakthrough, it becomes visible as an integral part of the subterranean community of miners.

5.8 Religious practices in liminal places

The exploration of mountains as liminal places where religious worldviews, practices, and traditions are negotiated and adapted has been introduced with a Tibetan-Buddhist cabin in the Gotthard massif. The seasonally inhabited hut is a visible trace of contemporary cultural and religious exchanges between Europe and the Himalayan religion. Taking up this introductory example, the following case studies on alpine peaks and a tunnel construction site probe the question of the role of religion in alpine spatial practices more deeply. In both cases, diverse orientations and a plurality of worldviews and practices contribute to shaping these remote places.

Peaks and tunnels in the Alps are liminal places where the human presence has a transitory character: hikers and mountaineers, miners, workers, and, finally, travellers do not dwell permanently in the mountains, but come from other places, and visit them for diverse purposes. In both spatial practices the body plays a crucial role. Climbing is a physical activity. The perception of the mountain is strongly mediated by the body: the immediate exposure to the weather conditions, the specific terrain of the territory, and the altitude are a corporeal challenge. Working within the tunnel also demands specific bodily adaptations to hostile conditions such as the lack of natural light, high temperatures, and noise. Both activities expose the human body to potentially lethal dangers.

The mountains are also liminal places because they are perceived and interpreted as geomorphological and metaphorical borders, separating riv-

ers, regions, valleys, languages, and cultures. While the top of a mountain marks the limit between earth and sky, or, in a religious key, heaven; the rock, which in a religious interpretation is part of creation, is a material barrier that has to be removed with a huge technological effort. Putting crosses on peaks and constructing passages beneath the Gotthard massif are contemporary appropriations of liminal places embedded in a historical development characterised by the interrelation between spatial practices and the negotiation of diverse religious orientations.

From a religious-historical perspective, the mountains are also liminal places in the articulation between diverse transcendent beings. The exploration and later exploitation of those remote territories became a trend in the modern era and is based on a diverse approach to the wilderness, which has become attractive as a place of human fulfilment by means of bodily and technological endeavour. This uncontrollable part of creation is transformed into a natural environment that has to be discovered, scientifically studied and appropriated. The alpine territories are transformed by new spatial approaches encompassing new forms of planning and design. Material things and technologies appear as markers of the human appropriation of the remote. Still, as spaces of representation, mountains remain ambivalent places, liminal zones in which the human body is challenged in a specific way.

The different appropriations of the alpine mountains we have considered here do not at all correlate to a linear transformation from a religious interpretation to a scientific and technological domestication. As the case studies show, religious meaning-making processes are still ongoing and result from complicated negotiations of diverse attitudes, ideas, expectations and the adaption of specific traditions.

The crosses on the peaks articulate continuity and a rupture with traditional forms of marking the pastures and paths with Christian symbols. Down the centuries, this bold symbol has been interpreted in a variety of ways, ranging from its use as a material support for scientific instruments to a political-imperial sign, to an expiatory practice or an open reference to the individual, existential impact of reaching the top. The destruction of crosses or the reference to Islam belong to this broad range of spatial appropriation of the mountain as a liminal zone in which political, religious and scientific meaning-making processes are blurred. Religious symbols on mountain peaks transform the perception of those places by means of their very visible,

often massive materiality. They shape identities of anonymous groups that share similar physical activities, sports techniques and material equipment.

Similarly, in the construction of the longest tunnel in the world, a place of extraordinary engineering innovation, religious interpretations and practices are merged with advanced technological and safety procedures. The reference to the mountain as creation attributes to the rock a certain agency: it challenges humans, it exposes them to danger and hostile conditions. Scientific knowledge is paramount to achieve the goal and improving railway connections in Switzerland and Europe. Still St. Barbara is part of this process of appropriation of a liminal place in the depths of the earth; technological procedures and religious worldviews, political processes and economic strategies are intertwined. The religious practices we have reconstructed by means of a significant celebration shape the identity of miners and workers and build the transitory community of professionals that gathers, as long as the construction site is in progress. To this community also belong the deceased that are part of the religious practice in the ceremony and in everyday working life. Although the devotion to St. Barbara is historically embedded in Christianity, the community practicing the »religion of the tunnel« is an internationally diverse group of specialists spanning many countries and cultures.

6 Cemeteries: Remembering Places

*Camogli: si videro bare
smottare nell'acqua salmastra
discendere dal cimitero
per l'ultima danza scomposta.
[...]*¹

Whereas in the last chapter we focused on remote places in the Alps which are not permanently inhabited, in this chapter we discuss liminal places that are permanently located in settlements: places for the dead, which materialise the dividing line between the living and the dead.

6.1 Places for the dead

Attached to the Protestant church of Safien Talkirch, a village in Safiental, a valley in the Swiss Canton of Graubünden, a wall delimits the area of the cemetery (fig. 44). Gravestones, similar in size, regularly aligned emerge from the snow. This type of cemetery visually suggests the idea of people being equal in death, although in life they differed according to gender, age, education, profession, religious denomination, or familial and social background. The enclosure circumscribes the place of the dead and divides it from the village nearby, where the life of the inhabitants, most of them moun-

1 From Fabio Pusterla's poem *Ruina Belford* in the collection *Tremalume* (Pusterla 2022, 51).
»Camogli: coffins were seen / sliding into the salty water / descending from the cemetery / for the last disassembled dance.« Translation by the author.



Fig. 44: The church with its cemetery in Safien Talkirch, Canton of Graubünden, Switzerland. The gravestones are not identical, but similar in size and material. The wooden cross in the fourth row is temporary; after a year it will be replaced by a gravestone.

tain farmers or artisans, unfolds. The small gate attached to the church wall serves as a threshold between these distinct realms. This cemetery is still in use, with the size, material and style of the gravestones regulated by a communal law. Coffins and urns are put in single graves; alternatively, a collective tomb can be used, but only for ashes without an urn.²

This kind of cemetery located in a churchyard is typical today for many villages in the alpine valleys and rural regions. Formally, it belongs to a type of burial place that was common in many European countries until the modern era. The burial place in Safien Talkirch is, however, a modern cemetery regulated by the municipality. While the formal arrangement corresponds to a traditional Christian churchyard, the individual representation by means of a head-stone as well as the sense of order and rural idyll are typical features of a modern cemetery that were absent in a medieval burial site.³ While

2 The communal law can be downloaded here: https://gemeinde.safiental.ch/uploads/files/gemeinde-safiental_gesetz-bestattungs-friedhofwesen.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025).

3 For a description of the key elements of the layout of a graveyard in medieval times see Sörries 2005.

death as a biological phenomenon universally defines human life, the idea of mortality is embedded in social practices and is transformed and adapted according to the specific cultural context.⁴

In researching the interrelation between space, place and religion, funerary sites are particularly significant. They are delimited places in which diverse worldviews are made visible by means of material arrangements. Furthermore, as a place, the cemetery is characterised by a tension between the diversity of individuals interred there and death as a shared experience of human finitude. This chapter analyses negotiations involving diverse orientations, worldviews and practices in two different urban places dedicated to the dead, both located in the London Metropolitan area: the Victorian Highgate Cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall. While the former case study is centred on a cemetery founded in the 19th century which is still in use, the latter is a very recent case of materialising the memory of deceased people.

This exploration focuses on the role of material practices in designing and characterising places where the line between life and death is made visible and the memory of the dead is visualised by material things. The discussion of the two sites is introduced by a concise overview of the modern transformation of dealing with the dead, the introduction of communal cemeteries and their specific spatial traits within the urban fabric.

6.2 Modern cemeteries as shared places

The dead body represents the finitude of individual life and confronts a society with the necessity of dealing with the corpse and death. The deceased are placed in specific sites, which down the centuries have been adapted for the purpose. As inhabitants of those places, they also stand in relationship with the living; the sites for the dead mirror aspects of human society, particularly concepts of death, afterlife and the human body.

Drawing upon a concept of space understood as a relationship of emplacements, Michel Foucault considers the cemetery as a heterotopy. In his article

4 Benkel 2012, 7–11; Höpflinger / Müller 2022, particularly 33–44.

Des espaces autres (Different Spaces) published in 1984,⁵ Foucault focuses on specific places that are in a direct relationship with all other emplacements yet also question them:

But what interests me among all these emplacements are certain ones that have the curious property of being connected to all the other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralize, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented [*réflechis*] by them.⁶

While utopias are imagined emplacements that are not located in real spaces, heterotopias are materialised and exist. Still, they share with utopias the quality of »suspending, neutralising or reversing« spatial and social relations. Heterotopias are places of contestation and subversion of a given social order:

There are also, and probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable.⁷

Michel Foucault characterises heterotopia as a spatial tension that can be found in all societies. However, depending on the context, it assumes different traits and functions, and it is always negotiated and transformed. Heterotopias are places where emplacements converge that usually do not coexist or are incompatible with each other.⁸

Burial sites are heterotopic because they bring together the whole web of places that characterise the society of the living by linking it directly with the dead. Furthermore, a gravestone, a tomb, or an entire cemetery can be

5 Foucault 1984. The essay is a written version of a conference paper presented in Tunisia in 1967.

6 Quotation from the English translation in Foucault 1998, 178.

7 Foucault 1998, 178.

8 Foucault 1984, 755–756.

interpreted as a contact zone between the society of living people and other imagined places beyond human time and space. According to Foucault, heterotopias are also heterochronias, since they bring different times that are discontinuous into relationship. Deceased people from different epochs inhabit burial sites, and different imaginations of afterlife time are materialised in cemeteries. In this way, in a cemetery different layers and qualities of time are superimposed.

Furthermore, heterotopia is permeated by a paradoxical relationship between being open and, at the same time, inaccessible. In modern cemeteries, for instance, a wall encloses the burial site: visitors can pass beyond the gate and access the cemetery, but they cannot cross the line between life and death. Eventually, heterotopias question the general organisation of a society. A cemetery mirrors a given society, reproducing ideas of equality or difference, social structures, and power hierarchies. Moreover, it represents the finite and ephemeral site of individual and social life, annihilating at the same time what it mirrors.⁹

According to the Austrian philosopher Thomas Macho, death is an »opaque, impenetrable phenomenon« – that cannot be fully comprehended.¹⁰ While the finitude of human life is a universal experience, ideas of death and mortality are culturally formed and negotiated in specific ways in different socio-political contexts. Funerary sites are places in which the meaning-making processes facing mortality and the tension between death and life take place.¹¹ The burial site inscribes into a place a phenomenon that remains abstract and displaced.¹² By gathering the bodies of the dead, the cemetery, as a het-

⁹ Foucault 1984.

¹⁰ Macho 2000, 91.

¹¹ Barloewen 2000; Benkel 2012, 7–11; on the influence of the dead upon cultural production see e.g. Belting 2000. For an excellent overview of religion and death see Höpflinger / Müller 2022.

¹² Benkel describes the social function of a cemetery as follows: »Indem er [der Friedhof] die ›Ortslosigkeit‹ von Tod und Sterblichkeit verhindert, wehrt er die Gefahr ab, dass das Todesbewusstsein und vor allem der Umgang mit Todesfällen nach rein subjektspezifischen Lösungen verlangen. Der Friedhof bekräftigt, dass der Tod tatsächlich ein kollektives Einzelfallproblem ist« (2012, 8). By preventing the »placelessness« of death and mortality, the cemetery reinforces the fact that death is indeed a collective, rather than just an individual problem.

erotic place, bridges the gap between the materiality of the corpse and the absence of the deceased person.

These general reflections on death and funerary places arise from a comparative approach to diverse cultures in history and the present time. Death as a universal phenomenon delimits life, but the historical and cultural forms of dealing with it not only vary but are in constant transformation. Before focusing on two selected case studies of urban places in which the relationship with death and the dead is materialised in spatial practices, it will be beneficial to offer a short recapitulation of the main changes in dealing with burial sites in Europe since the early modern age.¹³ However, in trying to concisely highlight some key developments, we need to keep in mind that such transformations were not linear or uniform, given that the cultural history of burial places in Europe is discontinuous and rooted in very diverse contexts.¹⁴

In medieval times, the dead were usually buried in churches or in churchyards, the consecrated territory marked out from the normal mundane place of the village or the town. According to dominant Christian values, the institution of the church conveyed a worldview in which the afterlife was organised according to the conduct of life and provided practices to achieve salvation. In such a religious worldview, which included afterlife domains and the possibility of eternal life and resurrection, the inhumation of the body was considered as a crucial point in preserving the identity of a person through all the processes of the afterlife transformations.¹⁵ Furthermore, the tomb was placed in a direct spatial and symbolic proximity to the church and the saints, which were often present in the form of relics, to facilitate the intercession between the human and the divine sphere. These burial practices were accessible only for members of the community. Other people who did not share the same faith or who were excluded from the community, such as those who died by suicide or execution, murderers, or people in censured professions, like prostitutes, were buried elsewhere, usually in mass graves.

13 For an overview see e.g. Fischer 1996; van den Breemer 2021, 75–109. On transformations in dealing with death see e.g. Ariès 1977.

14 Fischer / Herzog 2005.

15 Medieval Christian representations of the afterlife domains are discussed on pages 45–46 of this volume. For a description of the relationship between the biological and the social dead and the role the body plays in this dialectic see Höpflinger / Müller 2022, 78–91.

In churchyards, the graves were not arranged in a precise order and often the corpses were interred on different levels in the same ground. Only important people who could financially afford it had a gravestone with an inscription on it. Otherwise, the dead were inhumed anonymously.¹⁶

In early modern times, following the Reformation, new ideas emerged about the interaction between life on earth and otherworldly spheres, as well as new approaches to the human body, illness, and health that had a long-lasting impact on the concepts of death and, consequently, burial practices.¹⁷ The focus on the burial was shifted from the deceased's participation in salvation to the bereaved and their relationship to the deceased and death. Down the centuries, under the influence of new scientific approaches to the human body and the development of modern medicine, the very idea of burial sites underwent a radical change.¹⁸

An increasing interest in the mechanism of diffusion of diseases and so-called theories of miasmas – basically the idea that illness was transmitted from the dead to the living by means of the contagious stench produced by the decomposition of the corpse – led to churchyards being perceived as smelly, unhygienic places.¹⁹ In many European cities, industrialisation had attracted workers from peripheral areas; this population growth combined with a high mortality rate, led to an increase in deaths. The graveyards proved too small for the needs of urban areas. Because of the lack of place, burial practices were increasingly perceived as dangerous and unfitting. Furthermore, corpses were even stolen from graves and sold to medical schools for anatomy studies.

Gradually communal cemeteries run by municipalities or private companies were introduced. They were designed as representative places outside the town's centre; in opposition to the overcrowded churchyards, the new cemeteries were designed as delimited areas with individualised, sometimes monumental tombs, trees and flowers, and above all fresh air.²⁰ A cemetery became a place for remembering the deceased person, and along with

16 Sörries 2005.

17 See e.g. Happe 1991, with a particular focus on the developments in Germany. See also Happe 2003a.

18 Happe 2005; Sörries 2007.

19 Happe 2003b.

20 Winter 2007.

it, to face death as an individual destiny, and as a place of imagination and reflection about death and the afterlife. As the sociologist Thorsten Benkel summarises, in the face of death the cemetery became a »topographically framed signifying construction«.²¹ The introduction of the cemetery as a communal infrastructure was realised by means of diverse forms of regulation, in some countries it was enforced by laws forbidding the traditional burial places and with the closure of existing graveyards.²²

Modern cemeteries were embedded in a multifaceted interaction between urban transformation and the individual and collective challenge facing death. Their layouts and the practices performed in these new burial sites mirrored the transformations of modern cities between the 16th and the 19th centuries.²³ Moreover, they materialised a transformation in the religious interpretation of mortality and the dead body. In contrast to the churchyards, where only members of the religious community were interred, the cemetery offered a dignified burial to people from diverse denominations, religions, cultural and social backgrounds, in urban areas characterised by mobility and plurality. A significant illustration of this development is offered by the *Cimitero acattolico* (literally: non-Catholic cemetery) in Rome. This field in the city's outskirts was used since the 17th century as a burial place for people who did not belong to the Roman-Catholic Church, the vast majority of them being foreigners. In the course of time, it became the monumental cemetery that can be visited today. Modern cemeteries accommodated a variety of burial practices and tombs, where individual differences and social plurality were represented by means of spatial practices.²⁴

Along with the introduction and the consolidation of modern cemeteries, new forms of dealing with the dead body and, consequently, with death emerged. By the end of the 19th century, cremation began to be practiced.

21 Benkel 2012, 42: »[...] ein topographisch gerahmtes Sinnkonstrukt«. Translation by the author.

22 See as an example the city of Munich. All the graveyards in the city centre were closed in 1788. An already existing burial site in the south was developed into a central cemetery, today the *Alte Südfriedhof*. See Denk 2007.

23 See e.g. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Friedhof und Denkmal Zentralinstitut und Museum für Sepulkralkultur Kassel 2003; Denk / Ziesemer 2007; Christ / González Gutiérrez 2022.

24 Leisner 2003.

More generally, strategies were endorsed to tackle death as an individual and collective problem in an efficient way, by means of new technologies.²⁵

These notes on historical changes in locating the dead and organising new burial places principally highlight major trajectories. On a local scale, the transformations were manifold and depended on the specific circumstances. Overall, the emergence of new places to bury the dead also entailed a radical transformation in mourning practices and of the relationship between individuals, the collective and the dead.

The modern idea of the cemetery is still dominant today in Europe, yet, social changes in approaching death, the deceased individual and burial practices continue to influence and adapt the use and the arrangement of this heterotopic place. For example, the increasing desire for anonymous burials or the request to disperse the ashes of the dead body in a natural environment have led to the creation of new areas within cemeteries in order to respond to those needs and ideas of remembering the deceased. Moreover, in a society with a greater mobility and plurality, diverse religious prescriptions in dealing with death have to be accommodated and cemetery rules changed. For instance, the request for areas for members of Muslim communities where various Islamic burial rituals can be enacted has been negotiated following lengthy debates in many European cities.²⁶

Burial sites, particularly in urban settlements, are places of negotiation of individual and social identity. They interact with ideas about human beings, the meaning of human life and the relationship between the individual, the collective, and death. As we will explore more deeply in the following case studies, the strategies to materialise the presence of the deceased may vary. Nonetheless, the very idea of visualising the dead body by material and spatial practices can be understood as a demarcation of the liminal experience of the absence and presence of an individual and the collective society of the dead.

25 Fischer 2003b.

26 On the transformations of burial sites and practices since the 20th century see e.g. Sörries 2003; van den Breemer 2021; Höpflinger / Müller 2022, 137–158.

6.3 Highgate Cemetery and its transformation over the centuries

Highgate Cemetery is a prominent example of a modern cemetery still in use.²⁷ Situated north of London, on a hill in the village of Highgate, on Swain's Lane, it was opened in 1839 as the »Cemetery of St. James at Highgate« by the London Cemetery Company, a commercial, joint-stock company. Its mandate was regulated by a *Burial Act* in 1852.²⁸ In response to the high demand for burial plots, the cemetery was enlarged towards the east in 1854. Following the opening of Kensal Green in 1833 and West Norwood in 1839, Highgate Cemetery became the third of seven so-called »Magnificent Seven«, Victorian cemeteries built in London in the 19th century to accommodate new demand for burial sites in a growing urban agglomeration.²⁹

These Victorian burial places, designed as garden parks, can be contextualised in the wave of similar transformations all over Europe summarised above.³⁰ Even more than in other cities, in London, then the largest capital in the world, the lack of space in churchyards was a major issue. In the 19th century the city was expanding very fast; between 1801 and 1840 the population had doubled.³¹ Driven by the industrial revolution, both the population and the death rates increased sharply which caused an increased demand for burial places in already over-crowded churchyards. Hygienic concerns, the assumption that the »miasmas« arising from the corpses were causing epidemics as well as a new conception of the dead body as endangering the dense population were further important factors which stimulated a change in dealing with the dead. Progress in science and medicine provided arguments in favour of displacing the corpses into suburban parks. As already

27 This chapter is based on my previous study published in Pezzoli-Olgiati 2020c.

28 Burial Act of 01.07.1852, Schedule (B). This Burial Acts also prohibited further burials in the churchyards in London. The text can be downloaded here: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1852/85/pdfs/ukpga_18520085_en.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025).

29 These three named cemeteries were followed in 1840 by Abney Park, Brompton and Nunhead and, a year later, by Tower Hamlets. For an introduction to the London Victorian Cemetery see Curl 1972 and 1975; Barnard 1990; Beach 2013; Rutherford 2008. The volume edited by Mäder / Saviello / Scolari in 2020 explores many facets of Highgate Cemetery from its foundation until today.

30 Rugg 2008. On the role of nature in a Victorian Cemetery see Jeffers 2020a.

31 Jeffers 2020b, 82–85.

mentioned above, at the same time, the scientific exploration of the body, had stimulated a greater demand for dead bodies used for dissection, which encouraged so-called »body snatchers«, who sold corpses stolen from graves to academic institutions.³²

Furthermore, in a plural society with a diverse population, the monopoly of the Church of England over burials contributed to dissatisfaction in many groups in civil society. Non-conformists were denied appropriate funeral rituals and burial sites. The commercial cemetery companies, by contrast, could provide places for performing rituals and arranging graves according to individual needs and preferences.³³

With the *Burial Act* of 1852, London churchyards were definitively closed.³⁴ The new commercial park cemeteries were designed and built as places in a natural environment with fresh air, promoting health, which were morally uplifting and aesthetically pleasing.³⁵ They addressed diverse religious and social groups, making areas available for specific denominations and plots at different prices.³⁶ The lush nature of the Victorian cemetery resulted from the entanglement of gardening and architectural design, which was influenced by imaginations of Arcadia, the Elysian fields, or even Ancient Egypt, inspired by the history of religion.³⁷ The anthropologist Paola von Wyss-Giacosa recapitulates the role of the garden in the Victorian cemeteries as follows:

The new cemeteries offered a liminal space animated by the timeless quality of nature perpetually renewing itself; they created attractive public places, thus the implicit argument, in which the performativity of nature would help ease the pain of the bereaved, supporting their

32 Jeffers 2020b.

33 Sarah Rutherford (2008, 13–23) emphasises that religious motifs were paramount in the creation of new burial places in England: »The earliest English garden cemeteries were set up primarily for religious motives rather than reasons of health. The first cemetery in England, the Rosary in Norwich, was set up by a dissenting clergyman, Thomas Drummond, in 1819, using his own money. It was non-denominational and its 5 acres offered space to Non-conformists and Anglicans alike, a great innovation« (13). See also Curl 1972, 86–103; Meller 1994.

34 Walvin 1982, Jeffers 2020b.

35 Wyss-Giacosa 2020; Saviello 2020.

36 Rutherford 2008, 5. On the importance of a decent burial for the working class in the 19th century see Walvin 1982, especially 353–357.

37 Rutherford 2008, 13–23 and Saviello 2020.



Fig. 45: *Highgate Cemetery 1841*, with a view of London, wood engraving printed on a contemporary postcard.

common hope for an eternal peace of the dead, while at the same time inviting visitors to enjoy the beautiful landscape.³⁸

Highgate Cemetery was designed as a stunning garden with wonderful views of the city and exclusive burial sites (fig. 45). It was planned by Stephen Geary (1797–1854), an architect and civil engineer, entrepreneur, and founder of the London Cemetery Company. The cemetery was built in partnership with the landscape gardener David Ramsey (1795–1852) and the architect and surveyor James Bunstone Bunning (1802–1863),³⁹ who was also a keen antiquary and designed the underground parts of the burial complex. The Bishop of London consecrated the area dedicated to Anglicans on 20 May 1839. Two further acres were provided for the burials of Dissenters, members of other religious groups, agnostics, and atheists. Overall, this older part of the cemetery encompassed 17 acres (7 ha). The two unequal sections of the orig-

³⁸ Wyss-Giacosa 2020, 312.

³⁹ For the biography and achievements of the founders see Curl 1972.

inal cemetery were unobtrusively divided by trees that screened any direct visual contact with the Non-conformist plots.

The cemetery entrance consisted of a building encompassing two chapels, symmetrically built on the left and right of the entrance: the first for the members of the Anglican Church and the other for Non-conformists. Fifteen years after its opening, once the extension on the east part with an additional 19 acres (7.7 ha) had been completed, the cemetery company installed innovative technology, an underground hydraulic lift, for transporting the coffins across Swain's Lane, the street dividing Highgate Cemetery in two parts.⁴⁰ Highgate Cemetery became a fashionable place for remembering the dead equipped with the latest inventions of the 19th century.

Highgate Cemetery was very well received; it became popular and praised for its quality and beauty.⁴¹ The positive reactions to the burial site had been anticipated by advertising campaigns and media reports circulating before the opening of the cemetery. In *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, a weekly magazine published in London since 1822, the foundation of the London Cemetery Company was announced on 15 September 1838 with an illustrated description aimed at reassuring the upper-class inhabitants of Highgate who may have been sceptical of having a burial ground close to their villas (fig. 46). The magazine stated that the task of constructing the garden and the architecture of the cemetery had been given to the most distinguished experts and that the new cemetery would add value to Highgate:

that is one of the most beautiful and picturesque spots in the vicinity of the metropolis, commanding, not only a view of the giant city, but of many miles of the country beyond it.⁴²

40 Curl 1975, 25–26; Barker / Gay 1984, 7–20.

41 The cemetery was reviewed enthusiastically in various publications, see Curl 1972, 92–94. As an example of a report of the time see the issue of *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* from 21 December 1839, 490.

42 *The Mirror* 1838a, 178.

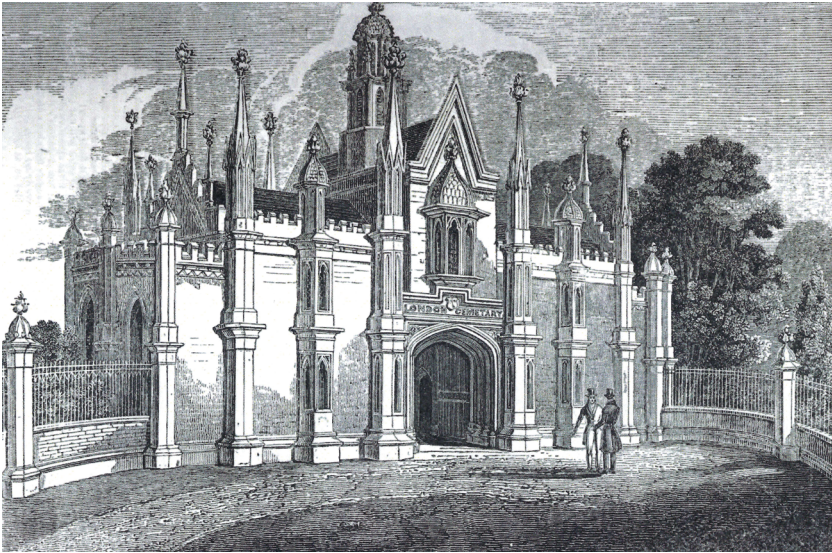


Fig. 46: Illustration of the entrance to Highgate Cemetery with the chapels for Conformists and Non-conformists as depicted in *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* on 15 September 1838.

Later, on 3 November of the same year, once the buildings were completed, they were favourably reviewed in *The Mirror*, praised as an improvement to the London area:

We understand that the company intend commencing cemeteries in the eastern and southern parts of the metropolis, of fifty acres each; and if the architect, Mr. Geary, and the landscape gardener, Mr. Ramsay, perform their several works with as much taste, in appropriate architecture and beauty of design, as they have displayed at Highgate, they will confer additional honour on themselves, by further ornamenting the suburbs of London with those peculiarly useful and interesting establishments; and though the beauty or gloom of the place of sepulture can make no difference to the departed, it is consolatory to the minds of the survivors to be enabled to visit the tombs of relatives and friends, without being disgusted with the revolting scenes

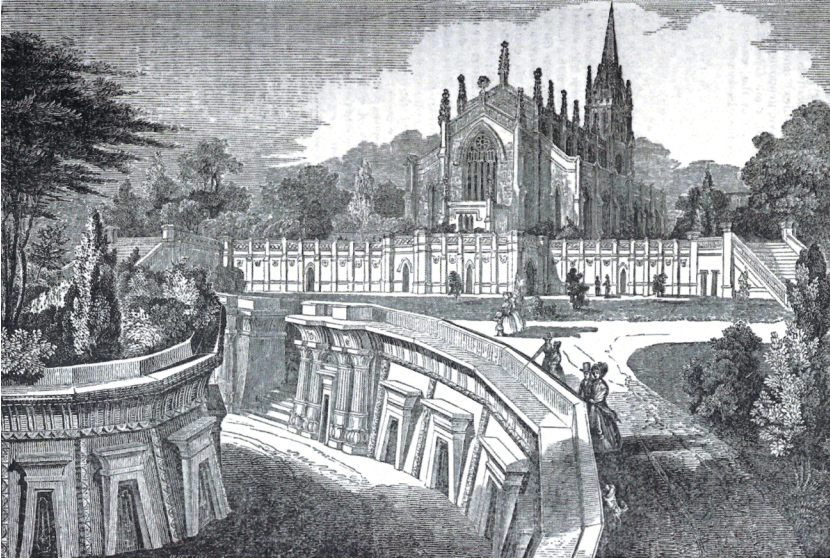


Fig. 47: View of the Egyptian catacombs and the Cedar of Lebanon, with the church of St. Michael in the background of the cemetery as printed in the *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* on 3 November 1838.

that are so continually recurring in the over-crowded and gloomy churchyards of the metropolis.⁴³

Illustrations of the stunning sites underline the positive impression of the author (figs. 47 and 48). In the text quoted above, the change in the attitude towards cemeteries is made very explicit: the burial site no longer addresses the dead, but the living, affording them an aesthetic, healthy, and uplifting experience while visiting the remains of deceased people.

⁴³ *The Mirror* 1838b, 291.

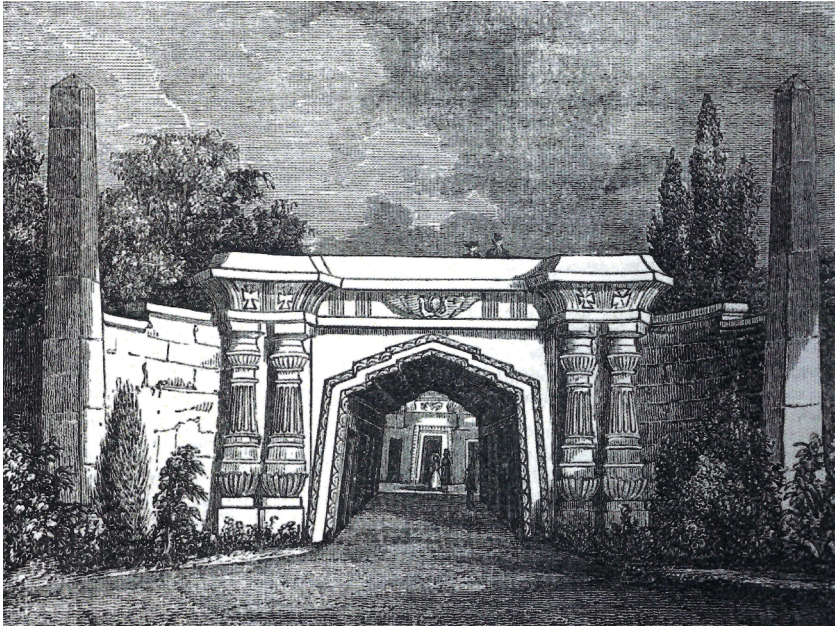


Fig. 48: The entrance gate to The Egyptian Avenue as printed in *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* on 3 November 1838.

Soon the Cemetery became a destination not only for the bereaved, but also visitors. With a mix of references ranging from Gothic to Ancient Egyptian buildings, which were very much *en vogue* in the Victorian era, Highgate Cemetery became an attraction. In 1865 William Justyne published the first *Guide to Highgate Cemetery*. In the introduction, the cemetery is described as follows:

Highgate Cemetery is situated on the southern slope of Highgate Hill, and close beneath the picturesque church whose lofty spire, towering above the topmost trees, reflects the first glimmering light of morning, and the last lingering rays of evening. No Cemetery near London can boast so many natural beauties. The irregularity of the ground, rising in terraces, the winding paths leading through long avenues of cool shrubbery and marble monuments, and the groups of majestic trees casting broad shadows below, contribute many natural charms to this solemn region. In the genial summer time, when the birds are

singing blithely in their leafy recesses, and the well-cared-for graves are dazzling with the varied hues of beautiful flowers, there is a holy loveliness upon this place of death, as though kind angels hovered about it, and quickened fair Nature with their presence, in love for the good souls whose tenantless bodies repose there.⁴⁴

The guide contrasts the idyllic description of the western part of Highgate with the previous, miserable conditions in churchyards:

The ancient churches of London – venerable relics of olden piety – which survive to witness the growth of this great Babylon, and stand like hoary sentinels in the midst of the surging flood of life that rolls along its echoing streets from earliest dawn to almost dawn again, were once surrounded by quiet grounds where the green grass nodded in the sunshine over the graves of citizens. Those sacred spots were passed with reverence then! Now they are blocked in, narrowed, and in many instances have totally disappeared before the advancing tide of brick and mortar. They sturdily resisted encroachments, and long after the sunshine had been excluded and all vegetation gone, they were used for purposes of burial. The unpleasant truth, however, that the city burial vaults and grounds were becoming so many sources of death-dealing pestilence gradually forced itself on public attention, and at last became too apparent for even the respectable blindness of official routine; so after years of procrastination, and many violent controversies with those individual interests which always impede a social reform, the solemn old places have been closed, and the advantages of rural cemeteries recognised by every class of society.⁴⁵

44 Justyne 1865, 7.

45 Justyne 1865, 12–13.

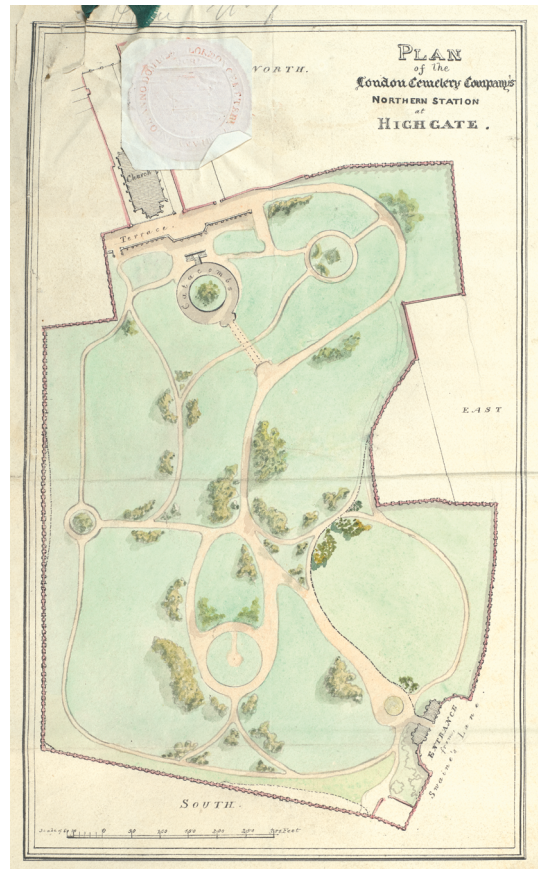


Fig. 49: Plan of Highgate Cemetery as a garden from 1839.

After vividly depicting London as a Babylonian, restless place and the unpleasant churchyards within the city, the author invites his readers to a promenade that starts by the principal gate in Swain's Lane, then goes to the colonnade standing in front of the entrance chapel. By ascending the flight of stairs that leads to the higher avenue, Justyne takes the Circular Road, and finally reaches the Egyptian Catacombs, graciously disposed around the Cedar of Lebanon. On his way, the author describes selected gravestones including their inscriptions, adding impressions of the overwhelming natural elements, the hymns and poems, describing impressive monuments, recalling

famous personalities buried there.⁴⁶ The suggested walk takes the reader to the Dissenter's area:

The chestnut-tree to which we have alluded is one of a long, stately row which separates the Church of England ground from that of the Dissenting portion of the community.⁴⁷

Along the path, William Justyne further comments on selected funerary monuments and the people they remember, passing by the Lebanon Catacombs, also for Non-conformists, and eventually concludes the tour at its starting point. »Advertisements« for cemeterial items such as monuments, marbles, tombs, railings (with drawings) and funeral companies are added at the end of the booklet, which also contain a foldable map of the site. This first guide highlights a radical transformation in the perception of the cemetery that becomes a recommended destination for an excursion in a quiet, enjoyable, restful landscape (fig. 49).⁴⁸

During the 20th century, Highgate declined. Over the decades, the well-tended garden became a wild woodland, with the growing vegetation invading and jeopardising monuments and graves. In an article published in 1975, the architectural historian and architect James Stevens Curl describes Highgate Cemetery's state of preservation in these words:

The general state of the cemetery is absolutely lamentable, and the cemetery company, which was taken over by a body known as United Cemeteries Limited, subsidiary of Raybourne Holdings, has not maintained the cemetery adequately. Vandalism has played its part.⁴⁹

In the same year, a trust to ensure the preservation of Highgate Cemetery was founded. The Friends of Highgate Cemetery pursue the following goals: first, the preservation of Highgate Cemetery as a »place of historic and other interest and beauty«, considering not only the architectural heritage, but

46 On the role of poetry and hymns in Highgate Cemetery and, more generally, on Victorian ideas of a »good death« see Ryan 2020.

47 Justyne 1865, 45.

48 Wyss-Giacosa 2020; Saviello 2020.

49 Curl 1975, 27. See also Barker / Gay 1984, 18–20.

also the natural dimension of this human-made site; second »to permit the Cemetery to be used as a public burial ground«; third securing »repair, restoration and preservation of the Cemetery for the public benefit«. ⁵⁰ Overall, until today, in the western and eastern part of Highgate Cemetery around 170,000 people have been buried. However, the number of burials has declined since the middle of the 20th century. ⁵¹

The meaning of the cemetery has been transformed during its history: Highgate cemetery is not only a burial site, but also a tourist destination, ⁵² a place for observing flora and fauna, ⁵³ vampires and ghosts, ⁵⁴ a popular stage for films and performances, and a setting often quoted in literature and other media. ⁵⁵ The cemetery is also a destination for »pilgrimages« to the graves of famous people, above all to the tomb of Karl and Jenny Marx in the eastern part. ⁵⁶

The Friends of Highgate, seeking to secure a long-lasting plan to restore and upgrade the cemetery, organised an international competition in 2021 to provide a masterplan, which was won by Gustafson, Porter and Bowman (landscape project) and Hopkins Architects (architectural project). ⁵⁷

6.4 Materialising the presence and absence of the dead

From its foundation in 1839 until today, the question of providing a burial place for diverse social and religious communities and individuals has characterised the planning, realisation and preservation of Highgate Cemetery. Over the decades, besides being a place for the dead and their remembrance, further activities have developed such as walking in an idyllic park and visiting tombs and monuments of famous personalities. The cemetery

50 <https://highgatecemetery.org/about/the-friends>. The rules for burials and the conditions for purchasing a lot are published on <https://highgatecemetery.org/burials> (accessed on 26 August 2025).

51 See Bulmer 2014, 48.

52 Mäder 2020.

53 Jeffers 2020a.

54 Höpflinger 2020.

55 Penke 2020.

56 Bertschinger 2020; Scolari 2020.

57 <https://highgatecemetery.org/future/competitions>; <https://www.gp-b.com/highgate-cemetery>; <https://www.hopkins.co.uk> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

is also a heritage site that needs huge efforts not only to ensure its continued functioning as a cemetery, but also for preserving it as an historic landscape and architectural site, and a remarkable space for flora and fauna in a densely populated urban area.

Drawing on these observations, in the following pages we will discuss selected graves from different eras that illustrate how a plurality of religious and other worldviews and belongings have been negotiated and promoted down the centuries in Highgate Cemetery. The tombs that can be seen today in this Victorian cemetery are often comprised of a gravestone with epitaphs, bas-reliefs, diverse kinds of images, sculptures or very complex mausoleums. Some graves are plain, others sophisticated, depending on the means of the people who commissioned them and the fashion of the different epochs. Despite all the differences, one element characterises all the tombs: they materialise in a specific place the presence of a dead body. In this context, the materiality of the grave is to be understood as a spatial practice in which the body of the living person visiting the cemetery and the (invisible) body of the deceased are involved in a relationship by means of representation.⁵⁸

Figure 50 shows tombs in the eastern part of the cemetery with grave-stones from different times, in various styles, designs, materials, and sizes: diverse types of crosses, angels, pyramids, mourning figures or sober tombstones with inscriptions, some of them with floral ornaments, are placed very close to one another. Daffodils, ivy, and older trees are an important part of the composition; from the beginning real and represented vegetation were part of the concept of this garden cemetery. However, the woodland in fig. 50 does not correspond to the standards of the London Cemetery Company for a well-tended garden, as it used to be in Victorian times, but can be perceived as a tangible sign of the transformation the site has undergone over the years: the whole spatial arrangement and the relationship between architectural and landscape elements convey the historical dimension of the site.

58 On the role of materiality in performing memory see e.g. Assmann 2010.



Fig. 50: Graves in the east part of Highgate Cemetery today.

Notwithstanding the differences, the burial complex locates the presence of the dead as a homogeneous community. Within the bounded area of the two parts of the cemetery, mortality is represented as a shared human destiny by means of the materiality of the tombs.

The presence of the dead in the cemetery is ambiguous: the gravestone refers to the invisible remains of people from different centuries, recalling some unique attributes according to the habit of a specific time and social context, such as the name, the date of birth and death, the profession, or the family relationships. Sometime the affiliation to a religious community, a political party, or a nation is explicitly represented by symbols and inscriptions. Furthermore, in the eastern part, people sharing a political or national affiliation are buried in the same area.

The gravestones materialise the threshold between the domain of the living and the realm of the dead, and, depending on the worldviews of the deceased and their relatives or friends, and the visitor to the cemetery, it may also mark the passage between the present world and otherworldly dimension of the afterlife. Moreover, the tomb is, at the same time, a physical spatial extension, a delimited ground with peculiar traits that stands in



Fig. 51: The family vault of Sir Benjamin Hawes K.C.B., who died in 1862, in which Anglican and Non-conformist members of his family were buried together but on different sides of the building, as indicated by two inscriptions. Highgate Cemetery, west part.

a relationship with other graves, the paths of the cemetery, and the natural environment. At the same time, the grave results from a precise planning process. The location within the burial site, the material elements composing the tomb, the use of ornaments, visual representations, or epitaphs, as well as the combination with vegetal elements are arranged according to a layout aimed at highlighting specific aspects of the life of the buried individual and the practices of remembering the social context, within the rules of the cemetery operator. Finally, the graves condense multilayered symbolic representations, referring to the life of the dead person, her familial and social position, and her worldview.

Considering the interaction of these spatial dimensions, the burial place stimulates a diversity of meaning-making processes, involving visitors in a variety of interpretations. The entanglements between the corpse of the deceased, the body of the person in front of a grave and the imagination arising in the perception of the grave are the crucial elements in the interpretation process that takes place within the cemetery. A relative or a friend has a different perception of the same site compared to a tourist, or a scholar conducting research on burial grounds. Still, in all interpretations that may occur in the encounter between such diverse bodies, the ambiguity of

the presence and absence of the dead is constitutive. Let us explore the heterotopic spatial quality of the cemetery by looking at a few selected graves.

The vault of Sir Benjamin Hawes (1797–1862) is located in the western part, in the avenue leading from the entrance gate towards the Egyptian Catacombs by keeping to the right (fig. 51).⁵⁹ The iron gate contains popular Victorian symbols of mortality, such as the inverted torch (in the upper part) representing the end of life, with a flame, referring to the continuity of the soul after death, or, in the panels in the lower part, the winged hourglass, representing the passing of time.⁶⁰ An inscription indicates the name of the owner and the use of the site for a family:

FAMILY VAULT OF
SIR BENJAMIN HAWES K.C.B.⁶¹

Above, a lunette contains a bas-relief depicting snowdrops: the first flowers blossoming at the end of winter were a symbol of hope and consolation.⁶² On the edge of the lunette, a quotation from 1 Corinthians 15:36 is painted in black capitals:

THAT WHICH THOU SOWEST IS NOT QUICKENED, EXCEPT
TO DIE

⁵⁹ Meller 1994, 164; Boase 2013.

⁶⁰ Bulmer 2014, 28–29.

⁶¹ K.C.B. stands for »Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath«. It is a British chivalric order introduced by King George I in 1725 conferred for exemplary military or civil merits. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Most-Honourable-Order-of-the-Bath> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

⁶² In Victorian time, flowers were promoted as a precisely coded language, which was explained in magazines and illustrated booklets. In an issue from March 1883 of *Golden Hours. A Monthly Magazine for Family and General Reading* published in London since 1864, in an article dedicated to spring flowers, the snowdrop is described as follows: »When the heart of man has been saddened by the gloom of the winter; when the north wind whistles, and the hoar frost clothes the verdure-despoiled trees; when the earth is covered with her carpet of snow; when not even the bold Crocus dares show its head; and when the more brilliant flowers are in their winter's sleep, – then are the pearly flowers of the Snowdrop a symbol of hope, an emblem of consolation, an assurance of coming spring.« (*Spring Flowers* 1883, 165). On the language of flowers see also Seaton 1995.



Fig. 52: The gravestone on the tomb of Mary Ann Brown who died aged 25 on 11 August 1883, Highgate Cemetery, east part.

The New Testament text reinforces the floral symbolism and links it to an explicit religious tradition; referring to resurrection, it explains rising from the dead using the image of the seed that has to die in order to generate a new plant. Inscriptions symmetrically placed on either side of the gate and highlighted by indentations in the wall reads »CONSECRATED« (on the left) and »NON CONSECRATED« (on the right), pointing out that the vault has been built over the boundary between the areas for Anglicans and Non-conformists. Through its austere layout and the strong symmetry, the building (which has traces of further inscriptions damaged by the weather) suggests a sense of equality between the remains of the people laid on the two different sides of a denominational border.

In the eastern part of the cemetery a tomb remembers Mary Ann Brown (fig. 52). From the gravestone we learn that she was »the beloved wife of Walter Brown, departed this life August 11th 1883, aged 25.« The epitaph states:



Fig. 53: The tomb of Harry Thornton (1883–1918), Highgate Cemetery, east part.

THE CUP WAS BITTER THE STING SEVERE
TO PART WITH ONE I LOVED SO DEAR
MY TROUBLES WERE GREAT I WILL NOT COMPLAIN
BUT TRUST IN CHRIST TO MEET AGAIN.

In the gravestone arrangement, the suffering of being divided from the beloved woman and the hope of meeting her again in Christ is combined with the motif of the clasped hands, a recurrent symbol at Highgate Cemetery, which expresses the desire of bodily contact between the living and the dead, anticipating a reunion in an imagined otherworldly place and time. The hands are framed with the sentence: »WE SHALL MEET AGAIN«; carved in stone, they refer to the tension between the absence of the living body and its presence in a transcendent afterlife.

The tomb of the pianist Harry Thornton (1883–1918),⁶³ who died during the influenza pandemic, expresses the tension between presence and absence

63 <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/tomb-of-william-henry-harry-thornton-1883-1918-312096> (accessed on 6 August 2025). Originally, a portrait relief was part of the grave.



Fig. 54: The grave of Patrick Caulfield (1936–2005) in the east part of Highgate Cemetery.

with a sculpture enacting the contrast between music and deadly silence (fig. 53). A grand piano made of stone refers to his artistic talent and profession. The burial sculpture does not reveal his age, only his family name »THORNTON«, placed over the keyboard. On the left side, an epitaph quotes from *Madame Butterfly*, an opera by Giacomo Puccini that premiered in Milan in 1904 and was soon translated into English.⁶⁴

SWEET TH[O]U ART SLEEPIN[G]
CRADLED ON MY HEART
S[A]FE IN GOD'S KEEPIN[G]
WHILE I MUST WEEP APART
PUCCINI

⁶⁴ The quotation is taken from the final aria of the opera (Act III, second part). Butterfly, the protagonist of the drama, says goodbye to her son before committing suicide.

In this tomb, the reference to religion is mediated by the opera quotation. The grand piano is open, however, no sound resonates in the cemetery. The boundary between life and death is articulated by means of an acoustic image.

A comparison with a more recent gravestone highlights a further way to materialise the same tension between absence and presence (fig. 54).

The grave of the painter and printer Patrick Caulfield (1936–2005)⁶⁵ was the last work of art he designed. It is a sculpture made of a dark granite. The stele is perforated with holes in the shape of the stylised letters D – E – A – D. The reading direction suggests a descending stair, an allusion to the course of human life that ends finally under the earth. The sculptural contrast between void and massive stone may be interpreted, on the one hand, as a visual representation of the contrast between the fullness of life and the intangibility of death. On the other hand, from a visual perspective, the void letters are small windows through which we see the surrounding cemeterial landscape: when one looks at the gravestone, the void letters form our gaze here and now, shaping our view of life. The inscription is tautological: it points at death as the final stage of human life, suggesting that life has to be seen through its end. There is no reference to a transcendent or otherworldly dimension.

I have chosen Highgate Cemetery as a striking example of a modern urban burial place that from its very foundation has been promoted as a shared place. Negotiations of religious plurality are inscribed in its historical heritage and in contemporary burial practices. Albeit in this chapter only a few cases chosen from the great number of tombs could be discussed, diverse strategies of dealing with the ambiguity of the presence and absence of the body in remembering the dead could be described. The »invention« of the cemetery articulated the relationship between an individual whose unique characteristics are recalled in his grave, and the burial site as a place enacting remembrance for relatives and friends, as a spatial practice. Furthermore, the cemetery also established itself as a leisure and a tourist destination. As an urban installation delimited from other places, the cemetery stands as the place for the collective group of its dead inhabitants, whose bodies have crossed the opaque line between the realms of life and death.

65 <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/grave-of-patrick-caulfield-19362005-312095> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

6.5 Representations of the dead in the Covid-19 pandemic

Making deceased individuals visible and gathering them in a place where their uniqueness and plurality could be represented by means of a material thing – a tomb, a gravestone, a sculpture – has been one of the crucial factors in the transformation of burial practices from the 18th century onwards. Interestingly, in the contemporary world, while individual tombs and niches in cemeteries are still being used, anonymous burials are increasingly practiced. In the 21st century, the scattering of ashes in forests or waters, in common graves, or in specific areas of cemeteries – with minimal or no references to the buried persons – are becoming more and more widespread. The individual localisation of the dead by means of a tomb is no longer a socially obligatory habit.⁶⁶

During the Covid pandemic, death became omnipresent and the need to handle a great number of deceased, combined with the strong regulations of public space transformed mourning and burial practices. The tension between the presence and absence of the dead and their representation became a controversial matter. The practices of visualisation and materialisation for remembering the dead were no longer easily accessible. In the second case study of this chapter, we focus on the contested practice of representing the finitude of life during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly on The National Covid Memorial Wall in London. The analysis is introduced by some general remarks on the representation of the deadly consequences of this unexpected, socially distressing situation in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak.

In spite of the advanced knowledge and technologies of contemporary biomedical sciences, there was not an immediate response to SARS-CoV-2 that was spreading worldwide in the first months of 2020. The virus proved to be highly infectious, recalling in dramatic ways that the human body is not a secluded island, but a permeable being interacting with others.⁶⁷ The virus did not care about individuals, social, or national borders and roamed through human bodies, and places, according to its reproductive rhythms. To curb the epidemic, political and health authorities reverted to isolation, an ancient means of tackling the spread of the infectious agent, while science

66 For a general introduction to transformations in burial culture see Fischer 2003a and Süßmann 2022 and, with a focus on the transformation in dealing with the dead, Clark 1993.

67 Dickel 2020. On the significance of the body in contemporary society see also e.g. Le Breton 1990.

and industry were searching for solutions to this social crisis. With lockdown and so-called »social distancing« measures, public space was soon deprived of its material dimension and relegated to the intimate sphere of private living places and the Internet.⁶⁸ This abrupt and challenging rearrangement of public space profoundly transformed all social relationships, including dealing with death and the dead, which was, in fact, the main reason why such measures were implemented.

According to the World Health Organisation, since March 2020 Covid infections caused more than 7 million deaths worldwide.⁶⁹ With individual mobility restricted and gatherings strongly regulated or prohibited, the representation of the deadly consequences of the illness was transferred to the media and the Internet.

Death became a current topic in media coverage, which was illustrated with graphs and press photographs: images of common graves dug with bulldozers, coffins aligned in a neat order, quickly enlarged burial sites, or funerary pyres were often used to convey the ubiquity and spread of death and the fragility of the human body facing such a contagious virus.⁷⁰ The visualisation of the diverse practices of dealing with a great number of victims all over the world reached people secluded in their homes, communicating the specific strategies of tackling the crisis and, at the same time, death and human fragility as a shared challenge.

While the lethal consequences of SARS-CoV-2 and the representations of mass mortality were negotiated in mass media, attending a funeral or visiting relatives and friends of deceased people was almost impossible. Depending on the period and the specific country, the regulations for gathering in public areas and the strategies of distancing affected people differently. At the same time the performance of funerary rituals and mourning practices for the dead was being dramatically staged in the media during the pandemic, which made it omnipresent on the one hand and, paradoxically, even more abstract and distant in everyday experience. Let us illustrate this with

68 Knoblauch / Löw 2020.

69 As of 7 August 2024, 7,059,612 death cases worldwide had been reported to WHO with regular weekly spikes between April 2020 and April 2023. In Europe, over 2 million people died of the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths?n=o> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

70 Pezzoli-Olgiasi 2022.



Fig. 55: The Roman-Catholic Chiesa di San Giuseppe in Seriate was turned into a communal funeral chamber. A soldier in white overalls sanitises the coffins with a spray. The footage of this place went viral and circulated in media all over the world. This photograph was published in *The Guardian* on 30 March 2020.

an image that went viral in March 2020, showing a row of coffins neatly arranged in a north Italian church (fig. 55).

Photographs and video coverage from the Chiesa di San Giuseppe in Seriate, a town close to Bergamo, were published in newspapers, news websites and broadcast on many television networks.⁷¹ Being one of the first hotspots of the pandemic in Europe, Italy immediately became the focus of politics, media and mass audiences. The images from Seriate visually conveyed the lethal effects of the virus on the population. Since the usual practices in dealing with the dead collapsed because of the sudden surge in demand, this Roman-Catholic church was turned into a communal funeral chamber. The aligned coffins transmitted not only the enormity of the disaster, but also the difficulties for the political and health systems in addressing them.

71 For an analysis of the media coverage of how this church turned into a communal funeral chamber see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021.

The photograph depicts death as a social threat. The video footage showed the following mass transport of the coffins to crematoriums in military trucks, which emphasised the logistical challenge local, national and international institutions had to cope with. Audiences did not know who was lying in those coffins; each one was very similar to one another, they remained anonymous. The pictures from Seriate anticipated what would soon happen in other countries. The rearrangement of spatial practices and, consequently, the shift into media and virtual places impacted all aspects of individual, familial and social life and, along with it, the relationship to the deceased. Religious and other forms of funerary practices were drastically reduced, with strong regulation for taking part in ceremonies. Often, digital surrogates were offered.

6.6 The National Covid Memorial Wall as a spatial initiative against oblivion

Overall, during the pandemic, death, jeopardising the life of many, moved into the centre of state policies and legitimated social regulation in all domains of life. At the same time, it became a distant phenomenon, secluded in private places, in almost inaccessible intensive care units or in isolated institutions. Whereas in the public sphere death turned into a logistical challenge, individual and collective mourning and burial practices were neglected. The second case study I present in this chapter focuses on a funerary practice enacted for questioning this social tendency in the United Kingdom and providing bereaved people with a place for remembering their relatives and friends who died of Covid.

On 29 March 2021, on the south bank of the Thames, just in front of the Houses of Parliament, a collective began to paint hearts in different sizes, all of them outlined in red.⁷² The graffiti was initiated and coordinated by a group of relatives and friends of people who had died with a SARS-CoV-2 infection called Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice. The group was founded in 2020 by Jo Goodman and Matt Flower, who had both lost close members of their families. In their opinion, deaths could have been avoided if a different political approach to the pandemic had been taken. In the course of time

⁷² See. e. g. Rawlingson 2021; Townsend 2021.



Fig. 56: Beginning of The National Covid Memorial Wall on the Westminster Bridge side. On a weekly basis, the number of people who died with Covid in the UK is updated. On 9 July 2023, the day this photograph was taken, 227,871 victims were counted.

this initiative was sustained by a growing number of members. The group supports bereaved relatives and friend of victims of the pandemic as well as investigations into the Government's policies in dealing with the pandemic.⁷³

The graffiti on the River Thames stretches from Westminster Bridge to Lambeth Bridge, a walk of over 500 metres, and is composed of more than 240,000 hearts (figs. 56 and 57), that represents all the people who died with Covid until the present day in the UK. The heart is associated with life and feelings, particularly love. It remembers the person as being in a positive, strong relationship with others.⁷⁴

For several years, members of the Bereaved Families for Justice joined by volunteers kept painting the hearts, using art pens. Relatives and friends of people who died with Covid from all over the country wrote dedications and epitaphs with black pens on a heart. Later, the Friends of the Wall assumed the

⁷³ <https://www.covidfamiliesforjustice.org/about-us>.

⁷⁴ For an overview of the many meanings of the heart in the history of religion and in the present see Meslin 2005.



Fig. 57: The wall underneath St. Thomas's Hospital. The fading hearts have turned pale pink.

task of preserving and continuing the work. Every week, they repaint faded hearts with a long-lasting paint, restore the writings and remove other graffiti.⁷⁵

The National Covid Memorial Wall is a shared place for mourning and remembering the victims of the pandemic. Painted by volunteers and bereaved families, it is a spontaneous work that can be interpreted as a piece of street art which shares an attitude of criticism toward political authority and, in this precise socio-political context, an anti-establishment attitude towards various facets of Conservative Party policies in the pandemic.⁷⁶ Being accessible in central London and painted without permission, it expresses empathy towards bereaved people, publicly denounces a social concern, and engages in a political debate (fig. 57).

As with many works of street art, The National Covid Memorial Wall is located in a concrete place and at the same time online.⁷⁷ Soon after the wall

75 <https://www.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org>. The story of the wall is told in podcasts on the website (accessed on 6 August 2025).

76 Tollerton 2022, 332.

77 On the use of graffiti during the pandemic see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2024a. On graffiti as a form of art see pages 17–23 in this volume.



Fig. 58: Screenshot of a virtual walk on the <https://walk.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org>. The number of hearts passed by are indicated on the lower right edge. While virtually walking, the visitors can listen to stories of people relating to the wall while hearing the sound of the city.

had been initiated, Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice published a website, designed in cooperation with the activists Led By Donkeys, at the beginning an anti-Brexit group, for enabling a virtual walk through the graffiti.⁷⁸ The digital tour combines a visualisation of the graffiti with an audio reproducing the sounds of the city (fig. 58). During the digital visit to the funerary memorial, the walk can be stopped to hear voices sharing their experience of losing a close person and commenting on what the painted heart and the memorial means to her or him. Courtney, judging by her voice a young girl, is mourning her grandmother:

I'll do the heart for my nan, she passed away last year on the 9th of April. I come from a very tight knit family. My nan was without a doubt my best friend in life. They say you only got one soul mate and that was my nan ... with her passing, it was so cruel ... you don't know where to look to or where to go ... so coming here ... we don't have a headstone for her because we haven't had the opportunity to put her in the ground ... so this is almost like a headstone ... it is almost

⁷⁸ <https://walk.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

somewhere where she is remembered and somewhere where people will walk past and think like you can see her as clear as daylight. For someone to just walk past and recognise the fact that my nan and these other 150000 people in this world is so significant because ... everyone is so desperate to get back to normal life but ... something that worries me most is ... my normal life was spent with my nan ... it evolved entirely around my nan. How do I go back to normal live ... Embrace risk, risk forgetting everybody here. I don't think anyone got the proper opportunity to say goodbye so this wall represents a 150000 ways of saying goodbye, like our way.

Zarina is mourning her father:

So this is my heart here ... Syed Mohammed Khadri. This is my father and he passed away in the first wave. I think this wall has been a great memorial to all the people that have lost their lives to Covid. As you can see there's so many names here and people from all different backgrounds, religion, colour, and it's a great way for everyone to come together and be united ... of different faiths, religions. As you know the pandemic doesn't discriminate.⁷⁹

The audiovisual, interactive reproduction of The National Covid Memorial online allows people to participate in this funerary practice without having to travel all the way to London. Dedications to be published online can be posted on the website.⁸⁰

Furthermore, the website offers the possibility to send a dedication via social media or email that will be written by a volunteer of Friends of the Wall on a heart. The memorial is conceived as being interactive with bereaved people and passersby, in situ and online; digital and analogical places are blurred.

79 Both audiotracks from <https://walk.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org> (accessed on 6 August 2025), transcription by the author.

80 <https://nationalcovidmemorialwall.dedicationpage.org/?q=Courtney#search> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

Remembering Places



Fig. 59



Fig. 60



Fig. 61



Fig. 62



Fig. 63

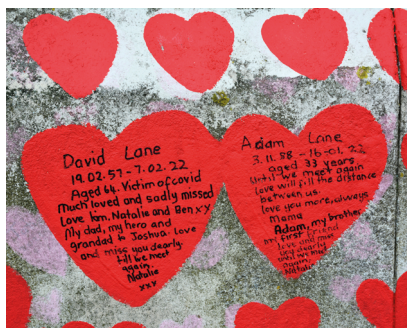


Fig. 64

Figs. 59–64: Personalised hearts on The National Covid Memorial Wall, displaying diverse designs, languages, symbols, objects, nationalities, and relationships between the people indicated by a name and a dedication.



Fig. 65: Information about the graffiti on the Westminster Bridge side on 9 July 2023.

The initiative has been well received by a large audience, by people from diverse social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. There is a strong expectation by citizens who recognise the wall as a dignified place for mourning and remembering the dead that the British Government will develop a long-lasting strategy to preserve this unique memorial.⁸¹ The wall is used as a remembering place, albeit there are no remains of the bodies buried here. The dedications recall the dead and the relationship between the anonymous writers and the deceased (figs. 59–65). Flowers are placed on the wall and on the ground (fig. 58 and 63); the hearts represent the person, the dead body and the loving relationship with the bereaved (fig. 64). As is the case with the graves of a cemetery, all the different hearts, painted by hand and dedicated to a specific person, are unique as they remember an individual who died. The wall, as a memorial, visualises death with Covid as a shared social phenomenon.

81 Booth 2021a; Booth 2021b; Grierson 2022; Vernon 2024. In Britain, there have been a range of initiatives for a national covid memorial, involving diverse institutions and civil society; for an overview including an analysis of The National Covid Memorial Wall see Tollerton 2022.

Spatially, the memorial is not enclosed within a wall like Highgate Cemetery. However, inscriptions on both sides of the graffiti (fig. 65) inform visitors and passersby about the site. Panels indicate some rules to be followed. They read:

The National Covid
Memorial Wall
created by bereaved families

The hearts on this wall are in memory of our fellow citizen who have died since March 2020 with Covid-19 on their death certificates.

Every heart represents a person who was loved.

The wall belongs to us all, and we all have to share it. If you want to add an inscription to the wall in memory of someone whose life was lost to Covid-19, please abide by the original principles:

- ♥ Please only take one heart for each person
- ♥ Find a freshly-painted heart and make a dedication
- ♥ Hearts should be similar in size and no larger than an adult hand

The Friends of the Wall are a group of bereaved volunteers who maintain the memorial by removing graffiti, repeated inscriptions and re-painting fading hearts. All efforts are being made to maintain original dedications.

We can be contacted on Twitter at @CovidMemorialUK. Please get in touch if you would like to volunteer. Donations for the upkeep of this memorial can be made at nationalcovidmemorialwall.org.

Even if there is no owner or communal body behind this spontaneous action initiated by a very small group, the wall is well tended. Its multifaceted functions – as a site for mourning and remembering individuals, as a visualisation of the impact of the pandemic and as political criticism towards government policies – frame the tension between the absence of the people who died with covid and their presence in the form of single hearts.

Overall, the graffiti on the south bank of the Thames, impressively conveys a need to materialise and localise the memory of very diverse people. By means of a spatial practice, that may be performed either at the memo-

rial in London or online, death as a common anthropological constant, the transiency of the human body and mourning practices are linked with social-political engagement.

6.7 Remembering the dead as a spatial practice

The tiny cemetery in an alpine valley introduced this chapter dealing with shared places dedicated to the dead. This approach to the spatial performance of remembering the deceased is developed by considering the difference between death as a biological process and the social elaboration and significance of mortality. From a socio-cultural perspective, death is a challenging, opaque phenomenon, that cannot be fully grasped either as an individual or as a collective experience. The two case studies discussed in this chapter show different spatial approaches to death and the dead at different times. Being located in the same city, their comparison allows one to draw out some lines of continuity as well as transformations in dealing with the finitude of human life.

Highgate Cemetery is a representative case of the change in dealing with burial places in many European cultures since modern times: the garden cemetery provided dignified burial places in a society undergoing radical changes and soon became a place for promenades and enjoying an extraordinary quiet and lush park with a magnificent view of London. Over the centuries, while remaining a burial site until today, the cemetery slowly declined, took on diverse uses and meanings, until it became a heritage site to be preserved. All through its history, it has always remained in private hands. The National Covid Memorial Wall, despite not being a burial place, offers a place for remembering the dead by means of visualising individuals with red hearts. The urban graffiti provides a place for bereaved people who lost relatives or friends because of a Covid infection. In front of the wall or in its digital reproduction, they can remember them.

In both cases, the body plays a crucial role. The Victorian cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall are place of remembering the body of the deceased. In the first case, the transformed corpse (that may be inhumed or cremated) lies in the tomb, in the second it is only represented. In the cemetery, the presence of the dead body is visualised with a three-dimensional

construction, while on the wall, deceased individuals correspond to a visual symbol, the heart. In both cases, the absent person is remembered by means of a material, visual thing: the tomb or the heart can actually refer to the dead body only when a living body is interacting with it. The materialisation in the form of a gravestone in the cemetery or as a graffiti on the wall is a practice enacting the impassable limit between death and life by linking the body of the deceased with the living person. In the process of representation and of reception, the bereaved recall the absent person by looking, touching or simply standing in front of the materialisation and visualisation of a dead person. Being present as a body in these liminal places connects the living person with the dead by remembering him or her, and imagining transcendent places they may inhabit or elaborate upon ideas of afterlife as the very end of human life.

Both funerary sites are delimited places within a complex urban formation, with specific territorial characteristics: Highgate Cemetery is still a green area located on a hill; the memorial wall stands in central London on the south bank of the Thames. Besides being a place one can visit in a grieving process or as a traveller, Highgate Cemetery and especially The National Covid Memorial Wall are places that can also be seen online. All these places are merged to enlarge and facilitate the interaction between the funerary sites and their users.

The cemetery and the wall are both the result of accurate planning aimed at gathering diverse ways of dealing with death. Initially the London Cemetery Company, and later the Friends of Highgate Cemetery took over a function that was traditionally provided by a religious institution. The memorial wall is an initiative deeply rooted in civil society involving activists and volunteers. Diverse actors also provided those places for remembering and representing mortality in different historical contexts. From the very beginning, the cemetery was conceived as a park in which nature and architecture were moulded into a stunning arrangement, conveying an idyllic enclosure in the larger London area: in the garden cemetery, diverse types of graves represented social, religious, or gender differences; though, overall, the cemetery represented the place for the dead as a homogeneous society in continuity with and in contrast to the society of the living. The National Covid Memorial Wall was planned as a mourning place and a political action against the government. The location facing the House of Parliament is part of the planning process.

Both funerary sites are places of representation of death as a universal phenomenon that delimits and defines human life and of individual and familial ways of addressing it. As spatial arrangements, both places refer to mortality and the practices that have been developed to deal with it. The tension between the meaning of death and life represented in the contrast between the delimited funerary places and the urban settlement is intertwined with meaning-making-processes linked to the single tombs or hearts, respectively. In the material representation of each deceased, diverse individual, familial, social and religious identities emerge. A plurality of references to after-life dimensions are expressed by epitaphs, dedications, visual and material representation as well as by means of images of nature or real flowers and plants. From the perspective of representation, the meaning-making processes enacted by being in front of a funerary place may also vary according to the position of the visitors and his or her relationship to the deceased.

Materiality and visibility are paramount in the spatial practices of remembering the dead: the materiality of the invisible corpse or the mere reference to a dead person buried elsewhere is evoked by the single tomb or heart as well as by the overall arrangement of both sites every time a living person enters those places. The meaning of death and life is negotiated in these processes of communication that take place in the cemetery, at the memorial wall, and in their representation on the Internet.

These communication processes are dynamic, involving also changes and adaptations over time. In the cemetery, transformations over the centuries are also represented and can be read in the diverse architectural designs of the graves as well as in the development of the natural environment. Even the memorial wall, initiated in April 2021, shows a development over time: the original hearts being of an ephemeral nature are fading away; preserving the wall is possible only thanks to the engagement of several actors repainting and rewriting the hearts.

Both Highgate Cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall are spatial practices in which death is negotiated in multifaceted processes, whereby the interaction between religion and politics play a dominant role. By enacting new ideas about mourning and representation of death, a plurality of religious and other worldviews and traditions are gathered in common funerary places mirroring the diversity of society and its strategies to face human finitude.

7 Multireligious Architecture: Accommodating Plurality

*Cuadrados y ángulos
Casas enfiladas, casas enfiladas,
Casas enfiladas.
Cuadrados, cuadrados, cuadrados.
Casas enfiladas.
Las gentes ya tienen el alma cuadrada,
Ideas en fila
Y ángulo en la espalda.
Yo misma he vertido ayer una lágrima,
Dios mío, cuadrada.¹*

In the last chapter, Highgate Cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall were discussed as places which bring together diverse religious and other traditions and worldviews. Through multilayered spatial practices, they provide individuals and communities with places for locating and remembering the dead. Both case studies mirror spatial characteristics of plural societies in urban contexts that have attracted people of different origins, beliefs, and social backgrounds throughout the modern era. The urban formation and spatial practices linked to religious and existential worldviews interact in complex dynamics that are constantly transformed over time. Whereas in the case of the Victorian cemetery and the memorial wall in

1 »Houses aligned, houses aligned, / Houses aligned. / Squares, squares, squares. / Houses aligned. / People already have square souls, / Ideas in line / And angles in their back. / I myself shed a tear yesterday, / My God – square.« (Translation by the author). From the collection *El dulce daño* by Alfonsina Storni published in 1918 (Storni 2018, 149).

London diverse religious and other orientations interact in facing death and the remembrance of deceased loved ones, the places we will explore in this chapter respond to a contemporary trend in dealing with religious plurality. We will look at buildings designed to accommodate diverse religious rituals and communities. Accordingly, our journey leads us first to Germany where we visit a meditation and prayer room at Munich international airport. Later we move to Bern in Switzerland and discuss a larger project combining sacred and communal rooms for diverse religious and cultural communities with offices, housing and commercial services.

7.1 A tree trunk for praying and meditating

A huge tree trunk stands in a small square room illuminated by white and warm yellow light (fig. 66). The trunk rises from the floor and disappears into the ceiling. Its massive presence in this small, bare cubic space is astonishing. The vertical sculpture sparks the imagination, evoking the presence of a huge tree with roots stretching down into the foundations of the airport and its imagined branches sprouting out of the roof. The walls of the tiny room are made of glass. Simple benches placed in niches on the right and left side of the entrance invite those who come in to take a seat in this quiet spot. There are no windows, and the noise of the frenetic activity of an international transportation hub does not reach this secluded place.

This room for meditating and praying is situated in the non-Schengen area of Munich Airport. In 2002, when the decision was made to enlarge the airport by adding a new terminal, representatives of the Roman-Catholic and the Bavarian Lutheran Church suggested the inclusion of a room for prayer and silence, initiating negotiations with the management of the airport and the political authorities. In cooperation with all the stakeholders and thanks to the planning and financial support of the two state-recognised churches, this multireligious room was opened on 8 December 2005.²

2 Raum für Stille und Gebet im Flughafen München Terminal 2 2007.



Fig. 66: The Prayer and Meditation Room (room 2194 at level 05) in Terminal 2 at Munich Airport was completed in 2005. The cube is formed of glass walls, with a wooden floor and ceiling, illuminated by artificial light. It contains a huge tree trunk which rises out of the sand and disappears upwards.

The prayer room, measuring 650×500 cm, contains a construction in white opaque glass with a square base. The neon tubes illuminating the small cube are installed on the floor, behind the glass. Whereas the sides are bathed in a bright white light, the wall in front of the entrance, the background behind the trunk, is illuminated in a warm yellow hue (fig. 66). The trunk of a 130-year-old tree was transported here from southern Bavaria. It stands in a small square of sand. The floor is covered with wooden boards; the ceiling consists of a trellis with a checkered structure. On a floorboard in the middle of the entrance, a small metal compass indicates the cardinal directions. An arrow scratched into the wood by visitors points more explicitly to Mecca, witnessing the use of the compass for Islamic prayer practices (fig. 67).



Fig. 67: The compass at the entrance to the glass cube.

The glass container is accessible through a narrow vestibule whose walls are painted black and decorated with common symbols of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism (fig. 68). Selected texts from various religious traditions in diverse languages are painted in white on the dark background: an excerpt from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a Word of Buddha, selected verses from a Psalm in the Hebrew Bible, quotations from the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew and the first Surah of the Koran. Translations into German and English printed on black paper hang under the quotations. The vestibule serves as a transitional space. On a wooden bookshelf there are sacred texts from diverse traditions. On the day I visited this room, prayer carpets were spread-out on one of the benches in the glass cube. In front of the Meditation and Prayer Room, there are separate facilities for women and men used for ritual ablutions. The religious room in Terminal 2 is indicated with the standard signs used for all other airport services (fig. 69).

The room was designed by Maximilian Kinseher, an architect of the archdiocese of Munich Freising, and the artist Erwin Wieglerling whose work is mainly dedicated to the relationship between human beings and nature.³ The trunk in this place looks out of proportion, creating a striking presence in the context of the technical design and functionalist aesthetic of an interna-

3 On his website, <http://hommage.e-lin.de/vita/> (accessed on 6 August 2025), Erwin Wieglerling (e.lin) characterises his work as follows: »e.lin shows us creation as a work of art that needs to be protected. His work stimulates, by means of discrete hints, a reflection on the imbalance between human beings and nature. His works use the languages of our time and witnesses meditative calm and spiritual expressiveness.« Translation by the author.



Fig. 68: The symbols of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism on the wall of the vestibule in the Meditation and Prayer Room.

tional airport. There is a strong light contrast between the dark vestibule and the yellow illumination of the bare glass cube. In this architectural setting, a tree and the interplay with different shades of light were chosen as generic symbols that may be comprehensible for people from different cultures and religious traditions. This artistic elaboration of a tree and light was intended to refer to creation as a unifying concept, assuming that a reference to this motif is a common ground for diverse religious and non-religious orientations and practices.⁴

According to Christine Stöhr, the Lutheran pastor working at the ecumenical airport chaplaincy, the prayer room is frequently used by travellers and employees at the airport.⁵ More than 30,000 people from diverse cultures and nationalities work in numerous professions and services at Munich Airport.⁶ The prayer room is used especially by Muslim people for performing the daily prayer practices.

4 Raum für Stille und Gebet im Flughafen München Terminal 2, 2007.

5 Many thanks to the Lutheran Pastor Christina Stöhr for guiding me through the labyrinth of the airport and allowing me to access the Meditation and Prayer Room as well as the documents about the project.

6 https://www.munich-airport.de/_b/00000000000000014262414bb62dfec93/beschaefigten-erhebung-2021.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 69: A sign indicating the Meditation and Prayer Room in the non-Schengen area at Terminal 2 of Munich airport.

The glass cube with its minimalist design and the absence of explicit references to a particular tradition seems to accommodate the needs of many. In the guestbook of 2023–2024, laid out in the vestibule, visitors, writing in different languages, frequently highlight the quiet atmosphere and the aesthetic quality of this intimate space. »Thank you for providing such a great place for prayer to our great Creator«, writes a traveller. Another note reads: »Thank you so much for providing this beautiful calm place for us to pray to Allah. We really appreciate it.« Other visitors note: »Thank you so much for providing a very beautiful place to do prayer/worship. Much respect for German Government for being fair to all faith and religions«; »Wonderful provision for travellers who want to connect with their Earth and find peace«; »It is good to have such a space of spirituality where everyone comes together regardless of their separate faiths«.⁷

7 The selected quotations are taken from the guestbook that covers the period from 11 May 2023 to February 2024. The quoted comments were originally written in English. The selection is not based on a detailed analysis, rather it conveys appreciation of the architectural design, which often recur in the guest book.



Fig. 70: The Christophorus Chapel built in 1992 at Munich Airport.

This room is not the first place dedicated to prayer at Munich Airport. The Christophorus Chapel was built in a central position in the public area in the new airport in 1992, together with the offices for the ecumenical chaplaincy. From the outset, this chapel was conceived as an ecumenical room. The architectural design presents typical elements of a Christian church (fig. 70).

There are striking differences between this earlier chapel and the Meditation and Prayer Room, even though both spaces result from a collaboration by the same main actors, the Lutheran and the Roman-Catholic Church. The Meditation and Prayer Room expresses a different attitude towards the need for religious practices or simply for a short quiet break for travellers and employees. The abstract design of the cube is open to various interpretations. The symbols and texts from five religious traditions in the vestibule frame the openness of the symbol of the tree; yet the reference to nature, or creation, strongly denotes this spatial arrangement.

Today, meditation and prayer rooms are considered a standard facility in airports. A new religious room for Terminal 1 has just been commissioned by the airport management. This development from an ecumenical Christian chapel to a meditation room for people from diverse religious traditions (or none) illustrates a transformation in locating plural religious practices in urban contexts in contemporary society.

7.2 Shared architecture for individual practices

Rooms dedicated to diverse religious traditions have become common in urban places such as airports, train stations, hospitals, universities, sports facilities, or shopping malls. In contrast to the hectic activities in the buildings where they are located, these rooms provide a quiet atmosphere. The association with silence and personal meditation characterises such religious architecture since its introduction in the mid-20th century.

In 1952 a Room of Quiet was opened in the United Nations Headquarters in New York. In 1957 it underwent a renovation. The initiative for the re-design of this religious space in the building of the General Assembly was taken by the Swedish General Secretary of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld and financially supported by Sweden. The re-designed room consisted of an abstract mural by the Swedish artist Bo Beskow, a rectangular block of iron, whose upper surface is illuminated by a single beam of light, and twelve benches designed by Carl Malmsten. (The benches were replaced by identical replicas in 2021). From the beginning, the room was planned as a »room of quiet«. In the opening ceremony, Dag Hammarskjöld addressed the character and aim of the new meditation room as follows:

We have within us a centre of stillness surrounded by silence. This house, dedicated to work and debate in the service of peace should have one room dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense... People of many faiths will meet here and, for that reason none of the symbols to which we are accustomed in our meditation could be used.⁸

This idea of a quiet room dedicated to personal reflection and meditation as part of a larger building hosting public services has since become widespread. From the 1950s onwards, similar rooms were built to accommodate individual practices for people from diverse cultures, religions or other

8 <https://www.un.org/ungifts/meditation-room> (accessed on 6 August 2025). On this site there is a photograph of the Room of Quiet. For more details about this place see Kraft 2007, 34; Duttweiler 2017.

ideological orientations, mirroring social changes stimulated by increasing mobility and plurality.⁹

The architecture dedicated to meditation, prayer and silence can be categorised according to various concepts and spatial designs, depending on their location and function in a specific setting. In a study surveying a range of rooms dedicated to silence within noisy, hectic contexts in diverse social spheres, such as public administration, political organisations, finance, health care, education, entertainment, or travel and tourism, the architect Sabine Kraft proposes five types built from the second half of the 20th century to date. *Chapels and other religious rooms* provide a place of silence by using architectural forms embedded in a specific tradition, in the European context mostly Christianity. *Multireligious rooms* gather diverse architectural and material objects as well as symbols referring to specific traditions in one place, providing a sense of identification for members of a specific community. *Interreligious rooms* address plurality by staging emptiness materialised by means of neat basic, abstract architectural forms. Also *universal rooms of quiet* do not refer to specific traditions but shape the room using abstract forms. Works of art and objects refer to values considered to be universally shared, such as tolerance, peace or a balanced relationship to nature. The prayer room at Munich Airport is a mix of the last two types. *Holistic rooms of quiet* can be understood as a further development of the latter type. A holistic concept of health and wellbeing is at the core of architecture that sustains processes of mental and bodily regeneration. There are no references to specific religions, but often to eastern practices of meditation.¹⁰

Across this typological system different architectural strategies and designs are used to convey the quality of the specific room. Nonetheless, a common aspect connects all these places: they address individuals seeking a short break from the restlessness of their daily routine. The quiet places, realised by deploying specific architectural forms, aim at fostering the individual's search for an inner balance.

Qualities of the physical space, notably the materiality and calm of such rooms, are ideally transported into the inner self of the visitors. The materiality of the architecture defines and orders, through its spatial practices,

9 For an overview of multireligious rooms see e. g. Beinbauer-Köhler / Roth / Schwarz-Boenneke 2015.

10 Kraft 2007, 28–39.

the functions performed in the building of which it is a part.¹¹ Accordingly, the meditation room at Munich Airport or the Room of Quiet in the UN Headquarters delimit places dedicated to silent reflection in environments characterised by a significant mobility and plurality. The simple arrangements, the staging of natural elements (in these specific cases, a trunk or an iron block), the artificial illumination imitative of natural light, and a careful use of simple forms are intended to be open to diverse interpretations by avoiding specific symbols referring to historical and contemporary traditions and communities. The architecture materialises the idea of silence and reflection by relying on abstract forms and staging natural elements everybody can connect with.

The openness of such architecture essentially addresses individuals. As is the case in the Meditation and Prayer Room at Munich Airport, objects such as sacred books, small prayer carpets or a compass, enable an individual to perform religious practices according to a specific tradition. Sharing rooms for performing community rituals, however, proves far more complicated. This is because collective religious practice depends on specific arrangements, consistent with architectural knowledge appropriate to each tradition's understanding of how to approach transcendent dimensions. These rooms express symbolic meanings grounded in an encompassing network of metaphorical references that are regulated within a community and its traditions.

7.3 Accommodating diverse religious communities

The Meditation and Prayer Room at Munich Airport combines a multireligious character (in the vestibule) with a universal approach to meditation and silence (the glass cube), which is, in my opinion, the focus of the room's design. The room and its location in a narrow side corridor tangibly express the contrast between frenetic activity and the individual's search for peace. The architectural arrangement allows individual religious practices to be performed according to community regulations. For example, it is possible for individuals to perform ritual ablutions correctly and to use required items

11 For an introduction to the relationship between religion and architecture see e.g. Jones 2000 and Karstein / Schmidt-Lux 2017.

for prayers. However, as an airport facility which is open to everyone and managed by a Christian ecumenical chaplaincy, the room is not intended for community rituals. Considering space as a multilayered practice embedded in a specific context, such a room interacts with diverse worldviews in the context of the mobility of people and goods, and the cultural plurality characterising an important economic hub. The encounters of diverse religious practices in this space are, therefore, transitory and contingent, consistent with the perspective of travellers. The use of the room by employees, however, highlights plurality as a characteristic and stable aspect of contemporary European cities, resulting from migration processes and demographic differentiation.

Reading the cultural texture of a city through this lens, draws attention to projects aimed at gathering diverse religious communities within the same area, combining specific rooms for specific communities as well as premises for encounters and exchange. In some cities, initiatives by religious organisations, civil society groups, and political actors have been promoted and, in some cases, realised.¹² These multireligious places combine common areas for cultural activities, interreligious education and exchange with specific premises for the groups involved, built according to their particular religious performances and needs.¹³ In most cases, as in the example we will discuss below, such rooms are arranged in a shared building.

As the sociologist Markus Schroer points out, buildings outline and delimit specific functions within a social context. The materiality of architecture facilitates orientations in routines, permits constructive responses to contingent situations, removes expectations from imaginations of possibilities, establishing them as concrete, inhabited places. Architectural materialisations gather specific social functions and spheres, they – literally – construct social order.

Accordingly, multireligious buildings in urban formations make religious diversity visible and locate the presence of plurality in a specific place.¹⁴ At the same time, they frame and regulate religious practices as well as the

12 See the examples discussed in Hohberg / Stolte 2015 and Burchardt 2021 (Berlin); Bossi / Giorda 2021 (Turin). For an overview see Rötting 2021.

13 Giammetti 2018; Averna 2021; Rizzi 2021.

14 Schroer 2015; Bräunlein / Weiß 2020.

exchanges between manifold traditions and communities.¹⁵ Multireligious buildings are often conceived of as an encounter between communities traditionally established in a territory and minority groups. Shared buildings always imply a selection and, consequently, an absence of some communities; depending on the social and political organisation, multireligious places can assume very different facets.

This aspect points out the regulative function of architecture as a negotiation of belonging and separation, of making visible and concealing.¹⁶ While the selected cases we are analysing express a contemporary approach to religious diversity, it is important not to forget that sharing and adapting buildings used by different religious communities is a spatial practice that can be traced down the centuries. Architectural arrangements reflect and shape religious and social dynamics inherent in urban formations in the past and the present.¹⁷

7.4 The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen in Bern

The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen (*House of Religions – Dialogue of Cultures*) in Bern, the capital of Switzerland, highlights the interrelation of religious communities, urban planning and lived plurality.¹⁸ In the western part of the city of Bern, a large, disused area became the object of a regeneration plan in the final decades of the 20th century. It was an unattractive place, bordered by a motorway and a busy main road, a railway track and local transportation lines: a kind of urban in-between.¹⁹ After a lengthy process involving stakeholders from politics, diverse civil society groups, religious communities and individual citizens, the whole urban area was re-organised around a new square and a multifunctional building encompassing shops, offices, private housing, and a vast multireligious compartment (fig. 71 and 72). New stations for public transport were constructed.

15 Beinbauer-Köhler 2015; Herbert 2017.

16 Buchardt / Giorda 2021. A range of examples of multireligious buildings are analysed in Giammetti 2019.

17 Baker / Beaumont 2011; Buchardt / Becci 2013; Beinbauer-Köhler 2015; Verstegen 2015; Rüpke 2020; Rau / Rüpke 2020; Christ / Fuchs / Iori / Keller / LätzerLasar / O'Reilly / Rau / Rüpke / Urcioli / Wagner 2023.

18 This part of the chapter is based on research published in Pezzoli-Olgiaati 2020a.

19 Herzog / Blaser 2015, 18; Schläppi / Sauer 2015, 13.



Fig. 71: A view of the area in 2004 (left) and in 2023 (right). The building containing the *Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen* is highlighted.

Currently, »Europaplatz« – which is the new name for the area – is connected to the central station in the historic part of the city by a short trip of just a few minutes.

The building was principally funded by the Canton and the City of Bern, who commissioned the studios Bauart (Bern, Neuchâtel, Zürich) and Urbanoffice Architects (Amsterdam) under the leadership of Madir Shah, the construction and real estate company Halter AG to design and construct the space.

The management of the resulting multireligious complex was undertaken by a committee which included the foundation Europaplatz – Haus der Religionen, the interreligious forum Runder Tisch der Religionen, and the Association Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen. Together they contributed to the development and realisation of this project, which was completed with an investment of 75 million Swiss francs.²⁰ After two decades of negotiations, on 14 December 2014, the new building was opened.²¹ Occupying 20 % of the total area of the multifunctional building, the Haus der Religionen is set at the core of the construction (figs. 72–74).

With this project combining diverse services, linking minority religious communities together and positioning them in a new, vibrant urban place, the initiators wanted to transform the disused area from a »non-place« (in German *Unort*) to a »place« (*Ort*).²²

20 Herzog / Blaser 2015, 18.

21 For a detailed historical reconstruction of the project see the publication *Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen* 2012; Haas 2014; Hauck-Hieronimi 2015; Widmer 2017; Arm / Leutwyler 2021; Rieger 2024.

22 Fischer / Lewis 2015, 34.

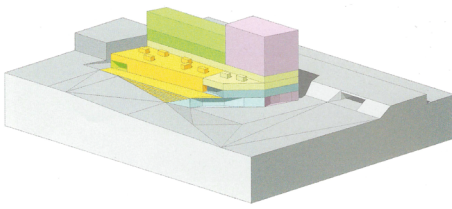


Fig. 72: The diverse areas of the multifunctional building: Haus der Religionen (dark yellow), offices (pale yellow), shops (light blue), housing (green and purple).

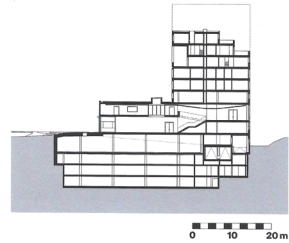


Fig. 73: Cross-section of the building.

The innovative project has proved successful. Today Europaplatz and the Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen are well established in the city of Bern. The efficient public transportation connecting the area with the historic city centre has transformed the once abandoned area into a central hub with a high standard of living. In the multifunctional building there are grocery stores, coffee shops and bakeries, a post office, restaurants, offices for companies, underground parking, and other facilities. The housing part accommodates long-term residents as well as commuters that work in the Swiss capital during the week. The multireligious building has become an important place for both religious communities and cultural initiatives. Furthermore, the Haus der Religionen is a popular tourist destination.

From a legal point of view, the Haus der Religionen is a shared property. The diverse religious communities, organised as associations, have bought the premises for their sacred rooms in the shell and completed them with their own financial and human resources, according to their specific religious norms, their preferred architectural style, the civil legislation building regulations and the needs of the various communities. The common areas belong to the Foundation Europaplatz – Haus der Religionen (founded in 2006) which, together with the association Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen (founded in 2002), manages the multireligious part of the building, including a restaurant, and is responsible for the cultural and education-

al programmes as well as for a broad range of activities. It also moderates the exchange between all the communities involved and the wider public.²³

In the region of Bern, the idea of supporting religious minorities to establish themselves in appropriate, attractive places for worship and for community life resulted from lengthy negotiations. For decades it involved a complex network of people and organisations aimed at fostering religious diversity as a paramount aspect of a democratic society and a resource for the whole nation.

In the 1980s, amidst sometimes polarised debates on the presence of communities from diverse nationalities, languages and cultural backgrounds in Switzerland, interest groups within and outside the state-recognised churches began to promote initiatives to stimulate interreligious dialogue. They involved communities that had settled in Switzerland for various reasons as well as local groups and individual engaged in enhancing a constructive exchange between diverse religious and cultural groups. Reconstructing this first phase of the interreligious dialogue in Bern, the theologian Albert Rieger summarises the spirit of those initiatives as follows: »Is there a third way between ›conformation or return‹? [...] And how could a true integration, a living together of cultures in our country, and, particularly, in the canton of Bern, be practically organised?«²⁴

The Haus der Religionen arose from the persistent work of diverse actors committed to interreligious and intercultural dialogue for decades, which culminated in the decision to realise an ambitious project in cooperation with the political authorities and civil society.²⁵ In the minutes of a key meeting of the Foundation Europaplatz – Haus der Religionen from April 2011 the main lines of the project are outlined as follows:

In the »Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen« that is to be constructed, local communities from five world religions will go about their religious lives autonomously, within their own rooms but united under a single roof. Under that same roof will also be a centre for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Additional religious com-

23 <https://haus-der-religionen.ch/ueberuns/stiftung/> and <https://haus-der-religionen.ch/ueberuns/verein/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). For details on the legal and financial organisation see Hauck-Hieronimi 2015, 168–170.

24 Rieger 2024, 8.

25 See Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen 2012 and Rieger 2024.

munities and numerous institutions and organisations associated with migration, integration, and culture will participate in this dialogue. Communities of Alevis, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims have each expressed a wish to take responsibility for an individual religious space

The Jewish community, Baha'i, and Sikhs as well as numerous non-religious institutions and organisations will also participate in the dialogue of cultures, by engaging intercultural and interreligious questions as a contribution to peaceful coexistence. The dialogue of cultures will provide a platform for encounters, exchanges, and education. It will become anchored in the Bern region as a cultural institution concerned with cultural identity and praxis-oriented integration, for migrant groups in particular.²⁶

The idea of a multifunctional building was at the core of the plans for rearranging the abandoned urban area from the very beginning. The project was designed to correspond to various purposes: first, it had to provide a dignified place for religious minorities.²⁷ The move from garages and backyards to a central urban place would make them visible within the public space and honour their role within Swiss democracy. Second, the new construction was conceived as an opportunity to stimulate a dialogue within the communities and their multifaceted traditions. Accordingly, a third goal of the project was to sustain the minority communities in articulating their beliefs and practices in the Swiss context, considering the legal framework and other factors like language, the education system, gender roles and intergenerational relationships. Fourth, the house had to be a place of interreligious dialogue and of encounters between religious communities, cultural associations and the civil society for enhancing knowledge about the diverse religions, allowing not only an intellectual exchange about religion, but also experiencing religious practices and, consequently, contributing to a peaceful living together.²⁸

26 https://www.haus-der-religionen.ch/assets/files/1_Das%20Projekt_Haus%20der%20Religionen.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025). Translation by Rona Johnston, see Pezzoli-Olgati 2020a, 26.

27 Hauck-Hieronimi 2015.

28 Haas 2016.

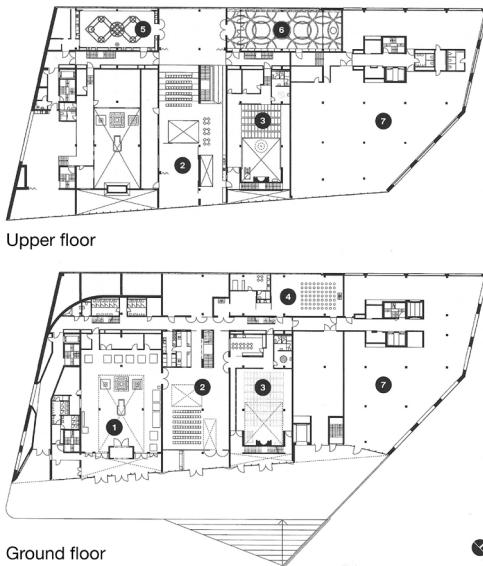


Fig. 74: Plans of the first and second floor of the building. The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen encompasses 1 to 6. 1 Hindu temple, 2 area for dialogue, 3 mosque, 4 Buddhist prayer room; 5 Alevi prayer room; 6 Christian chapel; 7 shops.

The architectural layout of the Haus der Religionen moulds these aims into a spatial form (figs. 74 and 75). It combines the common areas for educational and cultural programmes with specific premises run by each religious community, dedicated to individual meditation, communal worship, festivals, and cultural activities.

Eight different religious associations joined the project, but not all wanted new rooms. The Jewish Community of Bern, a unified community with a modern Orthodox leadership, is a member of the Haus der Religionen, but does not own a room in it, since it has a synagogue and a community in the centre of Bern. Similarly, the Baha'i community participates in the multi-religious project, without having its own premises in the house. The Sikh community possesses four Gurdwaras in Switzerland and cooperates on an analogous basis with the multireligious project without residing in it. Nevertheless, these three communities are visually represented with dedicated windows exhibiting representative sacred objects in the main lecture theatre.

7.5 Rooms for worship and cultural activities

Five religious organisations have built rooms for worship in cooperation with different architectural studios from the region. Some have additional rooms for the community, other use the same room for religious rituals and festivals as well as for cultural events. The premises are built according to traditional architectural styles, ritual regulations, financial possibilities, and specific needs of the various communities. Consequently, the layouts differ significantly from each other.²⁹ In the context of the same building, the heterogeneity of the architectural languages results in an impressive spatial experience of plurality. In the space of a few metres, visitors enter places with entirely different atmospheres, a diverse use of light, proportions, colours, materials, and fittings, evoking specific interpretations of the religious tradition they are embedded in.

The mosque was built by an Albanian-Macedonian community, the Muslim Association Bern. Accordingly, the interior architecture features elements from East European Islamic traditions. To allow for a correct orientation of the room towards Mecca, the mosque is placed within a wider area (fig. 74). The room is organised on two floors with separate entrances. On the ground floor, the rectangular area of the mosque, entirely covered with carpet, is oriented towards the mihrab. On the right side, there is the minbar. The second floor is built as an inner loggia that is reserved for women during the Friday prayer. The walls are beautifully decorated with geometric patterns and calligraphies (fig. 76).

The mosque has an independent entrance. On the roof, a small dome indicates the presence of the mosque. It stands in place of a sculpture echoing a miniature minaret that was displayed after the completion of the mosque, an artistic response to the prohibition to build new minarets in Switzerland since 2009.³⁰ The mosque can hold up to 400 people and is one of the biggest in the country. Within the Muslim communities, the mosque in the Haus der Religionen assumes an inclusive role and is becoming an important place for negotiating a liberal Islam in Switzerland beyond the specific Macedonian-Albanian tradition.

29 For further information about the architectures of the diverse rooms see <https://haus-der-religionen.ch> (accessed on 6 August 2025). See also Hauck-Hieronimi 2015; Widmer 2017; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2020a.

30 See page 29 in this volume.



Fig. 75: Front of Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen on Europaplatz soon after the building had been completed. On the left side of the main entrance, the upper part of a Hindu altar sticks out of the roof. On the right side, a miniature minaret on the roof is placed to indicate the main entrance to the mosque.

On the other side of the building, a separate entrance leads to the Arulgnanamigu Gnanalingesurar Temple dedicated to Shiva (fig. 77). The community follows a Tamil tradition and is organised as the Saivanerikoodan Association. The temple's shrines and sculptures were made by a team of artists under the guidance of the temple builder Purushothaman Kaliaperumal. They travelled from India to Bern for this purpose and used traditional techniques and materials. Indian and Swiss planning strategies could not be entirely synchronised, and, therefore, the uppermost part of an altar sticks out above the ceiling and is visible on the roof from outside.

The Hindu temple and the related rooms for the community are the largest premises within the Haus der Religionen. Up to 600 people can be accommodated. The temple is open for individual prayers, for religious rituals and festivals as well as for private celebrations. The Association aims at reforming their religious tradition and at promoting Tamil culture in Bern and,

Fig. 76: Interior of the mosque with the mihrab, and, on the right side, the minbar.



more broadly, in the whole country. In 2015, for the very first time in this religious tradition, four female priests were consecrated. The exchange with Protestant reformed communities, the interest of female members in assuming an active role as religious experts, the search for renewal, and the openness to gender equality motivated this epochal transformation.³¹

The mosque and the temple are located at the opposite sides of the building and do not share a wall or an entrance: the location of the two sacred buildings is the result of a negotiation that took place in light of the conflicts between Muslims and Hindus, particularly in the Indian subcontinent.

The Association for the Promotion of Alevi Culture aims at promoting its culture and religion in Switzerland. The Dergâh, built on the second floor, hosts religious rituals and cultural events (fig. 78). The association commissioned the architect Patrick Thurston to design the room, and he developed a new symbolic language with references to the Alevi tradition, highlighting the link to nature, particularly to fire and light, air and wind, water and earth. Twelve illuminated niches symmetrically distributed along three walls refer to poets, philosophers and imams constitutive for the community's identity. The large window front opens up the room towards the urban surroundings at the back of the building. On the ceiling, a geometric pattern with diamonds in pale shades extends over the whole room.

Whereas the architectural programmes of the mosque and the temple follow the typical features of the respective traditions, for the Dergâh an original design was specifically developed by the members of the community and the architects. The room presents a unique orientation; the linear layout and

31 <https://haus-der-religionen.ch/hindus/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). Bühlmann 2015; Läubli 2015; Hui / Jeyakumar / Tharmalingam 2016.



Fig. 77: The interior of the Arulgnanamigu Gnanalingesurar Temple dedicated to Shiva.



Fig. 78: The interior of the Dergâh

the versatile, airy design allow manifold uses and can easily be adapted for rituals, dance and music performances, or common meals and celebrations.

Patrick Thurston also designed the Christian church located in front of the Dergâh, which was commissioned by the Association Church in the House of Religions, the ecumenical body that owns this room and in which Protestant, Roman-Catholic, Tewahedo, Moravian, and Christian Catholic communities are represented. This room is conceived as an ecumenical place devoted to the exchange between diverse Christian denominations and serves also as a chapel for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (fig. 79) and the Moravian Society (fig. 80).

The structure of the room results from the challenge of creating a church for very different traditions and liturgical uses. On the one hand, an Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the oldest Christian denominations, is characterised by an iconostasis, a separation between the nave, where the community gathers, and the sanctuary, which is the holiest place accessible only to the priests. On the iconostasis icons of saints are depicted. By contrast, in

Fig. 79: The room as Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church with colourful paintings on the iconostasis.



Fig. 80: The same room in the opposite direction with the Moravian star on the left.



the Moravian tradition, an early protestant denomination that emerged during the Bohemian Reformation in the late 15th century, churches are kept in an austere design, without images.

The Church in the Haus der Religionen accommodates these different spatial concepts by using the rectangular room in two different orientations. The iconostasis is placed on the northeast, while the Moravian community uses the same room in the opposite direction, directing the gaze to a hanging star and an organ that is integrated into the entrance wall. The main doors and the shutters on the window front, made in wood and painted in white, can be closed in order to create a rectangular, austere bright space.

The diverse liturgical uses of the church are united by the relief on the ceiling. The abstract ornament in white consists of intersecting circles, inspired by Gothic ribbed vaults. It refers to God, who is the same for all diverse Christian denominations. The furniture is mobile and can be used according to the needs of the communities for different events. Besides serving as a chapel for these communities, the room is used by The Association Church in the House of Religions, which is responsible for the ecumenical Chris-



Fig. 81: The Buddhist temple.

tian room, for a variegated programme of activities promoting an exchange between various Christian denominations and a theology of encounters within Christianity, with other religions and other worldviews.

A Buddhist cloister is located directly beneath the church, on the first floor. The premises include the entrance with an altar, a library and meditation room, a small kitchen and an apartment. In a similar manner to the Christian church, the Buddhist rooms are used by diverse Buddhist schools. The rooms are designed in a neutral style and can be adapted to the requirements of a particular Buddhist tradition with items that are stored in cupboards. The Inter-Buddhist Association in the House of Religion was founded in 2008 for promoting this project. Currently, Tibetan Buddhism, Theravada, Zen and Chan Buddhism are represented (fig. 81).

The heterogeneous rooms representing Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Alevism reflect diverse ways of negotiating a religious identity within a tradition. The Hindu temple and the mosque result from processes of adapting a tradition to the socio-political context in which the members of the communities live. The temple dedicated to Shiva has become a place of innovation of a Hindu tradition, which attracts a new generation born and brought up in Switzerland. Similarly, the multireligious project in Bern was an important opportunity for the Alevi community in Bern in its search for an identity within the Swiss context. For the Buddhist and Christian associations, the premises are linked to projects for increasing dialogue between the diverse denominations and schools who share the building. Furthermore, living together under the same roof fosters a continuous process of mutual understanding and conflict solving.

7.6 Common rooms for dialogue

In this urban context, building a house dedicated to diverse religions was only possible through a process of reflection and negotiation about the position and the role of the various religions in contemporary society. This involved reflecting on the inner diversity within religious traditions, as well as considering their cultural heterogeneity and language diversity, the influence of different historical developments, the specific causes of displacement and migration processes. The complex process of establishing a dialogue, planning the house, completing the rooms, and starting the various activities could be realised only because the minority communities involved, the state-recognised churches, political authorities at various levels, the civil society as well as the architectural studios joined forces for a shared purpose. The realisation of this project involved elaborate negotiations due to the different formations of each tradition and the socio-historical backgrounds of the associations involved as well as the diverse concepts of diversity and plurality.³² Sharing sacred places in the same building has been a new experience for all the partners involved. The process has always been accompanied by an interreligious moderation that culminated in the foundation of the Association Haus der Religionen, that has taken over the responsibility for the planning process since 2002 and continued after the premises were completed.

The association runs the common rooms dedicated to promoting the exchange between the diverse communities that inhabit the house. Furthermore, it offers a broad range of educational and cultural activities, to increase the understanding of religious and cultural diversity in society, addressing a general audience and specific groups, like schools.³³ Experts in the study of religion, interreligious dialogue and cultural mediation are responsible for the cultural programmes, which involves members of the diverse associations. The premises dedicated to the cultural activities are generous. The wooden fittings and the linear design create an inviting, sober atmosphere.

At the centre of the building, on the ground floor, the Restaurant Vanakam is a meeting point for people working in the Haus der Religionen, members

32 For a deep reflection on the multiple facets of the interreligious dialogue in the Haus der Religionen see Haas 2016.

33 For a reflection on the activities and the exchange in the Haus der Religionen see Haas 2016 and Leutwyler / Tharmalingam / Hofstetter Rogger 2019.

of the communities as well as visitors. The restaurant is open to the public and offers vegan menus and non-alcoholic drinks at lunch time from Tuesday to Friday. On Saturdays a brunch is served. Sasikumar Tharmalingam, the chef of Vanakam, is a Hindu priest whose engagement was crucial for realising the temple and enhancing the multifaceted aspects of his community's life as well as the Haus der Religionen as a whole.

7.7 A work of art for interconnecting religious traditions

Overall, the varied architecture of the Haus der Religionen highlights religious traditions as being complex and diverse. Such variety emphasises the differences between the specific projects, associations and religious communities that are part of the multireligious building. The various sizes and proportions of the premises, fittings and art, materials and colours reveal manifold strategies for materialising a relationship to divine dimensions. The educational and cultural programmes offered by the Haus der Religionen do not present »religion« as a harmonic phenomenon, rather they offer a deeper understanding of the traditions present and their practices, worldviews, rituals, communities and transmission processes as well as the challenges of contemporary society. Religious plurality is openly debated, negotiated and nuanced as a complex, contested and enriching dimension of society.

This commitment to plurality and to a constructive exchange is addressed by a work of art which confers on the building a visual uniformity. The artist Nika Spalinger, who teaches art in public spaces at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, has created an ornamental pattern that envelops the building's facades and visually represents the concept of the Haus der Religion at Europaplatz. The motif is reproduced by means of a digital print on the large windowpanes (fig. 82). The pattern highlights the premises of the Haus der Religionen, visually detaching them from the surrounding shops and facilities of the complex.³⁴

34 Berger 2015/2016, 83.



Fig. 82: The ornaments on the façade on Europaplatz.

Realised in cooperation with Daria Tschapanova, the irregular pattern, inspired by motifs from diverse religious traditions, represents both the interconnection and the differences between the communities that inhabit the building. The artist explains:

The ornament combines everyday life, culture and religion – playing with different emphases, reflections, discontinuities and breaks. Formally, it characterizes the dialogue area and reinforces the lively interplay of light and weather through reflection and shadows.³⁵

The work of art wraps the building and emphasises the doors of the mosque and the temple on the south side. It is repeated on the north facade of the building.

35 <https://nikaspalinger.ch/public-ornament-fassade/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 83: Looking through the ornament designed by the artist Nika Spalinger.

Observed from the outside, the impressive ornament on the large facades suggests, on the one hand, a consistent function of the whole construction. On the other hand, the irregularity and the variation raise an open question, a search for shared lines. Looking out of the windows from the inside, the ornament can be interpreted as a filter through which one may observe what happens outside (fig. 83): watching people crossing the square, the trains passing by, the intense traffic, and the whole urban context, it reminds the viewer that many diverse religious worldviews and identities coexist in contemporary society and that religion is a crucial dimension for many people and cultures that inhabit the city.

7.8 Building places for diverse religious practices and communities

The two case studies addressed in this chapter propose distinct responses to the challenge of gathering diverse religious traditions and communities in dedicated places in urban contexts.

Both are located in central areas of urban formations, a major international airport and a capital city. The decision to plan and construct rooms and buildings shared by diverse religious orientations, beliefs and worldviews in central areas makes religious plurality visible by means of spatial practices. From this perspective, these projects can be interpreted as commitments to the presence of religion in contemporary society. Beyond normative scholarly, political, and media debates about the role that religion assumes in today's complex societal formations, these rooms suggest that religion is a lived dimension that needs appropriate places. Moreover, in this context, »religion« refers to a wide range of practices that may be part of an institutionalised traditional community, or an expression of an individual attitude or a combination of both. These places stand for the presence of religion as a complex orientation that is always dynamic and mirrors the societal transformations that go along with intense mobility and transcultural exchanges.

Nonetheless, the planning and realisation of these shared places are articulated in different ways, according to distinct architectural types. The Meditation and Prayer Room at Munich Airport combines a multireligious with a universalistic character. The symbols of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism in the vestibule allow the members of communities belonging to these traditions to perceive an identification with these religions. Yet, the Meditation and Prayer Room in a strict sense, does not work with religious symbols but with a work of art. The reference to nature, that may be understood as creation, is open to diverse interpretations. A tiny, intimate room, it addresses individuals that may be travellers or employees seeking a short break for a prayer or a moment of silence. Mirroring the movements of individuals characterising a major transportation hub, this room brings together a form of plurality that is contingent and transitory.

The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen in Bern was planned as a permanent building aimed at improving the position of minority religious communities in the city, the exchange between them and established church-

es as well as with the wider public. The project is committed to gather a plurality of communities, beliefs and practices that are part of the social fabric of the urban agglomeration of Bern and not only making it visible but also providing an opportunity to meet and experience the diverse worldviews, practices, traditions, histories, and food. The space dedicated to the Haus der Religionen within the multifunctional building is designed to highlight the unique features of the communities that actively participate in this challenging project. The worship rooms under the same roof illustrate, in a striking way, how diverse religious practices, worldviews, and ideas of the relationship to a transcendent, sacred dimension may actually be. The ways of negotiating religious belonging within and between the associations involved differ, and mirror multifaceted strategies to articulate religious belonging and identities in a plural context. The constellation of such diverse communities practicing religious rituals and fostering their specific worldview and relationship to the transcendent world in the same building encourage reflections and adaptations, with the potential also for tensions and conflicts to arise, as well as exchanges and common activities.

Both projects, although they differ in their scope, size and location, rely on an institutionalised moderation for the processes of construction and management. While the common use of the Prayer and Meditation Room is supervised by the ecumenical chaplaincy, the Haus der Religionen is run by a team responsible for the manifold tasks a project of this size requires: the management of the location, the common areas, the financial aspects, the cultural and educational programmes, the organisation and moderation of shared activities, the restaurant built into the frame in which the diverse religious groups reveal their community life and are perceived in the city.

The engagement of various actors including political authorities, representatives of established churches, pre-existing interreligious groups, organisations from civil society and private individuals were paramount, in both cases, for realising the projects. Multireligious places are rooted in a wider social debate involving diverse social spheres.

As complex spatial practices, multireligious rooms and buildings assume articulated symbolic meanings. Both cases considered in this chapter combine architectural concepts with works of art, which magnify the representative dimension. The sculpture at Munich Airport serves as a common ground and can be interpreted independently of the religious or ideologi-

cal background of regular users or occasional visitors. The ornament on the window panes of the Haus der Religionen embeds the core idea of the project: involving diverse traditions in a network of constructive and challenging dialogues and, at the same time, resisting the idea of a symmetry, moderating conflictual debates and fostering transformation. Overall, in this urban context, the architectural complex as a whole stands, on a symbolic level, for »religion« as a dimension of society. Alongside shops, services, offices, or housing, an urban formation needs a place for religious plurality to be open for confrontation, exchange and dialogue. From this perspective, the front windows, particularly at night, allow people to see into the Haus der Religionen. During festivals or cultural events, passersby can experience a glimpse of religious diversity and plurality by looking at the illuminated interiors of the buildings.

Architecture that accommodates religious diversity, making plurality visible in a place, is a complex, multilayered, and challenging process. On the one hand, these places respond to a need within the contemporary, mobile society. On the other hand, they stimulate innovation and transformation of lived religious experience in a specific socio-cultural process, which impacts diverse spheres of society, established religious communities and minorities and, overall, the public discourse about religion as a resource for democratic participation.

8 Museums: Places of Encounter

*Auf der Suche, atemlos, durstig, stückweise begreifend.
Inseln der Ruhe, Orientierung, Sehnsucht,
bis alles sich fügt zum Einen, zum Du.
Beziehung, Augenblick, zeitlos, bedingungslos,
schwimmen, verschwimmen, hineinsinken, Eins werden.
Und weiter, wieder auf der Suche.¹*

The multireligious architecture we explored in the previous chapter provided contemporary examples of shared places where diverse personal and communal worldviews, practices, and transmission processes are fostered and interact with one another. Museums are equally important urban institutions where negotiations with diversity take place. They demonstrate the presence, the manifold forms and diverse roles of religious worldviews, beliefs and practices, displaying religion as a human phenomenon that shapes societies in the past and present. While multireligious rooms enable religious practices and foster communities, museums are dedicated to collecting, preserving, researching, and displaying material objects for the purposes of education, enjoyment and sensory experiences. In the last stop on our imaginary journey, we discuss a selection of exhibitions and approach museums and art galleries as places where religious plurality is negotiated, involving audiences in specific spatial performances.

1 Anne Sachs in Auf der Suche... 2022, 47. »Searching, breathless, thirsty, understanding piece by piece / Islands of rest, orientation, longing, until everything connects together as one, as you / Relationship, instant, timeless, unconditioned, swimming, blurring, sinking in, becoming one. / And forwards, searching again.« Translation by the author.

8.1 Walking a labyrinth in a white cube: *Signs of Life*

In a white room within a museum, visitors are invited to take off their shoes and walk on a labyrinth designed to imitate a well-known medieval pattern. In contrast to the cold stone pavement of a Gothic cathedral, however, visitors walking on Su-Mei Tse's *Proposition de détour* in the Art Museum Lucerne in the summer of 2010 could feel a soft wool carpet under their feet, depicting a Persian Paradise garden (fig. 84).

The artwork combines motifs from different religious traditions. Its layout reproduces the first eight circuits of the famous labyrinth in Chartres cathedral (which has eleven circuits), in the same scale as the original.

The labyrinth was originally a common motif in Greco-Roman culture but appeared with increasing frequency in Christian churches from the 4th century onwards. In medieval Christianity, the labyrinth was used as a visual metaphor for human life: the path meanders in different directions and, finally, leads to the centre, which stands symbolically for the hope of salvation and eternal life. The orientation of the labyrinth follows the overall orientation of the cathedral in Chartres from the entrance on the west side to the altar in the east, which symbolically refers to the rising of the sun and the resurrection from the dead.²

By contrast, the artwork's materiality points to a different religious tradition. The carpet the labyrinth is made of reproduces in enlarged scale a fragment of the *Coronation Carpet*, a Safavid knotted pile carpet dating from ca. 1520–1530 and measuring 701 × 366 cm. It belongs to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art collection. This carpet's name denotes its use in the coronation of Edward VII as king of the United Kingdom, which took place at Westminster Abbey in 1902.³ Art dealers provided this carpet along with other tapestries and rugs to decorate the cathedral.⁴ The carpet depicts a Paradise garden with floral motifs, cypresses, flowering trees, and flowing water. Real and imagined animals, birds and water creatures inhabit the luxury gar-

2 For an introduction to labyrinths and their cultural history see e.g. Santarcangeli 1984; Kern 1999.

3 The presence of this large piece in the royal ceremony is documented in a painting by Edwin Austin Abbey, oil on canvas, ca. 1902–1907, 109.2 × 458 cm, Royal Collection.

4 <https://collections.lacma.org/node/229589> (accessed on 06 August 2025).



Fig. 84: Su-Mei Tse, *Proposition de détour*, printed wool carpet, 2008, diameter 900 cm, here in the exhibition *Signs of Life*, Museum of Art Lucerne, 2010.

den. Winged dragons and phoenixes suggest that this garden belongs to a transcendent, otherworldly place.⁵

The combination of the labyrinth with a Safavid Paradise carpet can be interpreted in various ways. Significantly, both the labyrinth and the carpet convey an idea of otherworldly dimensions of salvation that lead believers on the path of their earthly existence. Su-Mei Tse's artwork plays with diverse religious traditions that stand in a line of cultural continuity. Inviting the visitor to engage in a direct haptic, corporeal contact, the labyrinth offers a detour during the museum visit. This artwork offers the visitor an experience of walking along a long path that is not straightforward, transforming a bodily activity into a symbolic representation of human life.⁶

Proposition de détour was part of a larger exhibition reflecting on the role and meaning of ancient symbols in contemporary art. *Signs of Life. Ancient Knowledge in Contemporary Art*, curated by Peter Fischer and Brigitt Bürgi,

⁵ Komaroff 2009.

⁶ Fischer 2010b.

displayed a broad selection of works of art by influential artists such as Nancy Spero, Louise Bourgeois, Ana Mendieta, Kiki Smith, Marina Abramović, Peter Buggenhout, Sigalit Landau, Abdel Abdessemed, Philipp Taafée, Mariella Moster, Amar Kanwar, Bharti Kher, Tea Makipää, and Sandford Biggers.⁷ According to the curators, the exhibition had two main aims:

With specifically chosen works it firstly seeks to enable an impressive experience of art in the sense that the immediate force of the works can be witnessed. Secondly, it aims to initiate a reflection on the origins and development of art and on the artworks' potentiality for placing something meaningful into the world. The exhibition *Signs of Life* derives its distinct appeal from how, in their works, contemporary artists quote old, artistically recorded religious knowledge and thereby offer a perspective on the twenty-first century.⁸

Both objectives are relevant for our exploration of museums as places dealing with religious plurality. First, the idea of the museum as a secluded place where audiences can experience art as a force that involves people in meaning-making processes of the world resonates with diverse concepts of religion. Second, equally relevant is a sensitivity to art's ability to quote »old knowledge« as a repertoire of references that are significant for meaning making. Approaching artworks in this way, as attempts to express layers of significance in the contemporary world, overlaps with the relevance of religious symbol systems.⁹

Art is a sign of life, while these works are also signs for life. They represent immaterial goods such as principles, values, and ideas. With no immediate counterpart in the material world, they are either images, chiefly through personification; or they are abbreviated to their essence as abstract signs; or, finally, they are reenacted in narratives that mostly consist of performative acts. All these artistic principles are based on cultural and social conventions and are expressed in

7 See Fischer / Bürgi 2010.

8 Fischer 2010a, 9.

9 For more in-depth study of this aspect of religion, see Woodhead 2011; Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgati 2018; Pezzoli-Olgati 2024c.

clearly defined iconographies, symbols, myths, and rituals. Considering how these cultural codes contain, if only latently, the entire history of their usage, their semantic potential increases the longer they have been in circulation.¹⁰

Indeed, from the perspective of the study of religion, the artworks displayed in *Signs of Life* adapt and reframe a rich collection of symbols, narrations, and practices well rooted in religious traditions from all over the world, alluding to diverse cultures and times. The exhibited objects offered a rich repertoire of clearly recognisable references to prehistoric objects, ancient religions from the Levant and the Mediterranean, spanning South- and Mesoamerican, South Asian and Indian, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions sometimes combined with natural elements or patterns. Certainly, *Signs of Life* emphasised the presence and the role of references to religious symbols, narratives and practices because of this explicit focus and the specific selection of artists and works. Nonetheless, the exhibition with its dense and detailed overview of contemporary global art production, also pointed to the significance of the interaction between art, museums and religion more broadly.¹¹

In the following pages, multilayered aspects of the mutual interdependencies of (art) museums and religion are highlighted, considering first the origins of the museum as a public place and, second, contemporary museum practices dealing with religion as an interconnected and multilayered cultural phenomenon. Subsequently, selected exhibitions are analysed with a specific focus on different ways of exhibiting religious plurality as being historically, politically and aesthetically relevant.

¹⁰ Fischer 2010a, 9.

¹¹ Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015a.

8.2 The museum as a liminal place in the modern era



Fig. 85: A painting representing a 17th century gallery in which works of art are exhibited. Left, on the table, precious objects and artefacts are on display. These collections were precursors of the museum of the long Nineteenth Century. Cornelis I. de Baellieur, *Gallery of a Collector*, oil on panel, ca. 1640, 116 × 148 cm, The Princely Collection, Vaduz.

Museums as places accessible to the public, showing collections to broader audiences and not limited to the private sphere, arose in the modern era. They were first conceived of as places that display art.¹² Interestingly, the first public art museums combined collections of artwork with objects from earlier cabinets of curiosity. The displays mirrored modern categories of knowledge and presented curated arrangements of artworks with selected natural items and artefacts, such as archaeological objects, scientific instruments, and other objects of curiosity deriving from older royal, monastic and ecclesial, or scholarly collections (fig. 85).¹³

12 The term »exhibition« arises in this context. See Bättschmann 1997, 12–57.

13 On the origin of museums see e.g. Impey / Macgregor 1985; Bennett 1995 and Schade / Wenk 2011, 148–153.

The natural and hand-made things displayed in museums were separated from the context in which they were originally embedded; in their new location in a museum exhibition, they assumed a new significance as autonomous artworks, as objects of curiosity and public attention.¹⁴

Consequently, the museum transformed the objects, attributing to them new functions and meanings. The displaced artefacts addressed visitors who saw the exhibits in a new arrangement in purpose-built locations, focused on a direct encounter between things and visitors. Addressing a public audience, the modern museum offered a specific way of seeing the displayed artworks and objects in new spatial practices, enacted in secluded places, detached from everyday life. The museum was consciously designed and built as a liminal place specifically meant for perceiving artworks and selected objects.¹⁵

From the outset, the museum was conceived as a place for cultural improvement. Intensively observing the exhibits, the audiences were to be involved in an aesthetic experience that would transform them in a positive way. In the museum's arrangement, the objects as independent actors divorced from their original context and alienated from the functions they were produced for, would affect the viewers on many levels.

The aesthetic experience was meant to be the promotor of cultural, educational and moral refinement.¹⁶ Over time, the museum became an important public place where natural and hand-made things were collected, preserved and displayed. The British Museum, the Louvre in Paris, the Altes Museum in Berlin, the National Gallery in London, the Alte Pinakothek in Munich are a few examples of major museums opened to the public in the 18th and 19th century.¹⁷ While the Louvre was established within an existing royal residence, other collections were housed in buildings purpose-built as museums, very often in a classical revivalist style.

14 Bräunlein 2011, 3: »Museums are an intrinsic component of European history and culture, closely linked to the revolution of modernity and to the desires of a new class, the emerging bourgeoisie. The experience of mobility and acceleration of life, fear of loss, belief in progress and education, imperial appropriation of the world, rapid advancement of the sciences – all this gave birth to the spirit and purpose of a new institution, the museum.«

15 On the emphasis of the sense of sight and museum practices see e.g. Bräunlein 2011, 3; Bättschmann 1997, 12–57.

16 Duncan 1995, 16; Kugele / Wilkens 2011.

17 Schade / Wenk 2011, 149.

The references to ancient Greek and Roman architecture, and particularly to temples, amplified what the very name »museum« already suggested: the reference to the Muses, the ancient goddesses of the arts.¹⁸ Imitating the architectural features of an ancient temple, the museum as a public building presented itself as a place transcending everyday life which sought to create an enlightening aesthetic and educational improvement. Thus, in the context of the long 19th century, in modern, expanding urban formations the museum as a public institution was established as a liminal place dedicated to transforming visitors by means of the contemplation of the displayed objects.¹⁹

The development of museums as institutions collecting, preserving, and displaying objects related to an ideal of European universal knowledge was entangled with the formation of the nations.²⁰ As a publicly accessible place fostering processes of human improvement, the museum contributed to forming the identity of citizens in the modern state. The relationship between the idea of the museum as a liminal place and its educational and political significance in the modern era is entangled with colonialism. Many natural and hand-made objects collected in the cabinets of curiosity in the

18 The ancient Greek and Latin terms *μουσεῖον* and *musaeum* had two meanings: on the one hand, it was the place consecrated to the Muses inhabited by the nine goddesses of poetry, music, and the liberal arts and, on the other hand, it referred to the library at Alexandria, a centre of research and knowledge in the classical world. In the Renaissance, *musaeum* was referred to as a concept, the activity of collecting, and a place where the scholar dedicates himself to studying. Paula Findlen (1989, 61) explains the complexity of the term as follows: »[...] in its crystallisation as a category which incorporated and ultimately unified a variety of – from our own perspective – seemingly disparate activities, the museum was indeed a central organizing principle for cultural activity by the late sixteenth century. It was a conceptual system through which collectors interpreted and explored the world they inhabited. [...] In reviving liberal arts, the humanists self-consciously placed themselves in the grove of the Muses, creating »museums« as they did so, to stress their direct tie with ancient wisdom.« The author describes the transition from the renaissance concept of museum to the development of museum as a public institution in the late 18th century as follows: »The museum, as mosaic, brought together the pieces of a cosmology that had all but fallen apart in the course of several centuries. Organising all known ideas and artefacts under the rubric of museum, the collectors of the period imagined that they had indeed come to terms with the crisis of knowledge that the fabrication of the museum was designed to solve« (73).

19 Duncan 1995, 7–20 and Engert 2002.

20 Schade / Wenk 2011, 149; Duncan 1995, 3.

early modern period and, later, in museums, were brought to Europe from other continents in colonial practices including robbery, questionable deals and as gifts.²¹ The museum displayed items from other times and places that, on the one hand, illustrated the variety of human cultures and of natural environments, and, on the other hand, the (alleged) superiority of European colonial countries expanding their economic, political, cultural and religious power all over the world. An encompassing, generic idea of »European« culture was promoted in othering processes by outlining a common identity in opposition to the stranger other. In shaping this shared sense of belonging to the »West« and of delimitation from the »Rest«,²² museums played a paramount role.²³ In Peter Bräunlein's words:

The museum offered housing space for science and art, for knowledge seeking and emotion, for representation and colonial ambitions, for the politics of memory and a sense of security. The museum as a public realm of »civilising rituals« is an active constituent of Western culture, invented at a particular historical moment.²⁴

Overall, the birth of the museum as a liminal place was strongly connected to coeval ideas of religion. Many artworks and things displayed in the museums referred to their previous location in religious buildings and practices. Precious liturgical objects and paintings from Christian traditions well rooted in Europe were exhibited beside items from antiquity and other parts of

21 The ethnological museum in Munich, the Museum Fünf Kontinente, presented the exhibition *Kolonialismus in den Dingen. Das Museum Fünf Kontinente und seine Bestände aus der Kolonialzeit* in 2024/2025, a project in which the museum reflected on the history and the contested role of the museum in colonial times (Hölzl / Museum Fünf Kontinente 2024).

22 The terms are from Hall 2019b, 144: »The so called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe's contact and self-comparison with other, non-Western societies (the Rest), very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development, and cultures from the West was the standard against which the West's achievement was measured. It is within the context of these relationships that the idea of ›the West‹ took on shape and meaning.«

23 Schade / Wenk 2011, 152 and 158–166; Lidchi 2013.

24 Bräunlein 2011, 4.

the words that inspired both a sense of wonder and admiration as well as an attitude of superiority.²⁵

Moreover, the entanglement of religion and the museum was not only linked to the collected and displayed objects. Museums were also places of religious performance according to a romanticist concept of aesthetics as a sublime experience transcending human life. In her influential book *Civilising rituals. Inside Public Art Museums*, the art historian Carol Duncan summarises all those aspects in describing the 19th century museum as a ritual place. The museum's architectural design, inspired by ancient temples, provided a space for the ritual of seeing and contemplating the displayed artefacts:

Like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case, for contemplation and learning.²⁶

Adapting Victor Turner's approach to ritual, Duncan defines museum as a temporary, liminal experience detached from everyday life and taking place in this new public place of the modern era.²⁷ Accordingly, every time they visited a museum, audiences were invited to experience a liminal place with a different quality of space and time. In the museum, the visitors performed the ritual of contemplating artefacts that would allow an intense aesthetic experience, enhancing them. The purpose of a museum visit understood as performing a ritual is, consequently, transformative:

Through most of the nineteenth century, an international museum culture remained firmly committed to the idea that the first responsibility of a public art museum is to enlighten and improve its visitors morally, socially, and politically.²⁸

An approach that interprets a museum visit as a »civilising ritual«, enhancing the audiences by means of contemplation, also encompasses the repetitive

25 Lidchi 2013; Sommer 2025.

26 Duncan 1995, 10.

27 For first-hand engagement with Turner's approach to ritual see Turner 1969 and 1982.

28 Duncan 1995, 16.

dimension of visiting exhibitions. In modern urban society, going to a museum becomes part of public life and its educational effects rely on reiteration.

This brief outline of some aspects of the birth of the museum as a public institution allows us to grasp its spatial features. The museum arose as a place built to mould a specific way of seeing things, with the purpose of inspiring a sense of wonder and enlightenment, which was emphasised also by the architecture, designed in the reception of classical antiquity. The museum formed specific spatial practices promoting liminal experiences beyond everyday life based primarily on visual, sensory experiences. Overall, the museum stood as a specific place negotiating the space between modernity and history, between being in a European urban place and experiencing other countries and cultures through contemplation, admiration and educational improvement which conveyed political and normative ideals of that time, including colonialist and orientalist attitudes. Moving through the rooms of a museum, visitors could mould identity processes as citizens in the era in which modern European states were founded.

In the establishing phase of museums, religious objects, along with related practices and traditions, played a substantial and variegated role. Christian art was an integral part of the collections that covered diverse phases of European art history. Furthermore, as we have seen, ancient and, specifically, Greek and Roman religions were mirrored not only in the material heritage but were received as a frame for idealised practices to engage with the artefacts, with explicit references to ancient sacred architecture and the inspiring force of the Muses.

The variety of artworks and objects in nineteenth-century museum collections testified to the variety of religious traditions from different times and places. These collections stimulated a growing interest in the diversity of religious forms in academia, which contributed to the introduction of the comparative study of religion into the canon of academic disciplines at universities.²⁹ References to religion could also be found, first, in the museum's objects and collections, second, in the performance of seeing improved by those new public places and framed by a specific architecture, and, eventually, in the scholarly approaches promoted by the museums as educational institutions.

29 Kippenberg 1997; Bräunlein 2004 and Stroumsa 2010.

Looking at museums today, some lines of continuity with this heritage emerge; whereas colonial aspects of modern museum practices are being addressed and practices of repatriation of collections, that often includes human remains, are beginning to be implemented,³⁰ new museum practices have also arisen.

8.3 The museum as contemporary public place

The idea of the modern museum has creatively adapted to the needs and imaginations of today's societies. Museums have become an essential aspect of the cultural life of contemporary cities. Stunning museum buildings shape urban skylines with innovative architecture and are substantial tourist hubs attracting millions of visitors per year.³¹ In many cases, a museum visit requires careful planning, purchasing tickets and reserving time slots in advance, in order to avoid queuing at the entrance of overcrowded exhibitions.³²

There are museums of all sizes, dedicated to a variety of topics and practices with variegated collections and displays.³³ Despite the differences, there is a common trait which characterises the museum as a contemporary institution: by means of spatial, visual, and sensory experiences, museums shape a particular relationship between the viewer and the exhibits.³⁴ The International Council of Museums, a worldwide non-governmental organisation and membership association comprising representatives from all over the world, proposed the following definition in 2022:

³⁰ See e.g. O'Neil 2017; Heuser / Appl 2025.

³¹ Buggeln 2017 proposes a classification of diverse types of museum architecture highlighting different entanglements with religion.

³² Among the most visited museums in the world are the Louvre (ca. 8.7 million visitors in 2024), the Vatican Museums (ca. 6.7 million in 2023), and the British Museums (ca. 6.5 million in 2024). Figures from <https://presse.louvre.fr/8-7-million-visitors-to-the-louvre-in-2024/>, https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/07_Cultura_Anuario_2024.pdf, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c39v2ddn4p4o> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c39v2ddn4p4o> (accessed on 06 August 2025).

³³ Paine 2017 offers a systematic typology with a focus on the role religion plays in the different museum types.

³⁴ Bräunlein 2008, 169–170, and Mohr 2011, 21.

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.³⁵

This definition clearly contains lines of continuity with the idea of the 19th century museum we have addressed above, yet it also elaborates new roles for museums in contemporary plural societies, emphasising their role as public institutions and inclusive places that foster diversity and sustainability. Accordingly, museum practices are increasingly transformed in experimental places where ideas about the public sphere are forged.³⁶ As the Italian philosopher of dwelling Carla Danani points out, museums offer the possibility for visitors to imagine what the community they inhabit should be, figuring out its past and ideas about its future:

In the democratic regimes of the 21st century, museums are public spaces *par excellence* due to both their functions and the practices they host. Museums invite people to journey beyond their own private selves by calling their attention to a common heritage, constructing narratives to share, and offering a stage on which debates and negotiation can take place. These and other cultural experiences cultivated in and by museums are addressed – potentially – to everybody.³⁷

Museums involve audiences in a process of reflection within the museum by moulding spatial practices, such as by designing itineraries, which facilitate an exchange with the displayed objects. The spatial organisation offers a range of possible narratives depending on the movement of the visitors around the objects staged in an exhibition. The museum is »a spatial medi-

35 <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> (accessed 06 August 2025).

36 Mohr 2011, 17.

37 In Danani / Pezzoli-Olgiati 2023, 255. Danani develops her argument in critical dialogue with Barrett 2012.

um for a public sphere». ³⁸ The museum as a place and an institution moulds social practices. By entering this place, secluded from the routines of everyday life, visitors are expected to engage with the displayed artefact in a sensory, aesthetic experience often centred on visual reception. ³⁹ The movement of individuals within the museum is strongly regulated. Access is possible only at fixed times and with an entrance fee; there are rules regarding clothing, and the type and size of items that can be carried. Security and custodians watch the visitors, ensuring that they keep the established distance from the artefacts and behave according to agreed expectations. ⁴⁰

As already mentioned above, objects collected and displayed in museums and exhibitions have been subjected to a process of museumification: they have been displaced, often many times, from other places in which they were used and handled in different ways. ⁴¹ The museum transforms the objects in manifold ways. First, they become part of an archive in which cultural memory is materialised, where they are classified, preserved, and restored. ⁴² Whenever they are taken from the storehouse and placed into a specific exhibition, they assume new meanings. ⁴³ The exhibited thing always stands for something else; in the interaction with other objects, new layers of symbolic meaning are added. Travelling from one display to another, the exhibited object appears and represents at the same time, inviting the visitors to share sensory, aesthetic experiences. ⁴⁴ The meaning-making process that arises by means of an object in a museal practice depends on the general idea of an exhibition and the location within the specific layout, the relationship to the other displayed objects, and the individual reception through a visitor moving through the museum rooms. Visitors also interact with each other. In the silent atmosphere of the museum, they perceive other people engaging with the displayed objects. ⁴⁵

38 Danani / Pezzoli-Olgiati 2023, 255.

39 Grieser / Hermann / Triplett 2011.

40 See e.g. Reitstätter 2015, particularly 181–183.

41 On this term and for further analyses of the transformation of objects in museums see Bräunlein 2011; Paine 2013; O’Neil 2017; Franke / Jelineck-Menke 2022.

42 On the role of materialisation in constructing memory see e.g. Assmann 2010.

43 See e.g. Kugele / Wilkens 2011, particularly 11.

44 Thiemeyer 2014, 230.

45 Psarra 2005.

The spatial practices of museums resonate with those experienced in sacred places. As already discussed, the reference to ancient religious architecture increased the ritual character of visiting museums.

This heritage from the 19th century is also inscribed in contemporary museum architecture.⁴⁶ In many urban formations, museum buildings assume a similar role to monumental religious buildings in the past, having an analogous role, for example, to a Gothic cathedral in medieval times, functioning as the marker of a city.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the regulation of the visitor's movement within the building, recall attitudes that are typical for visiting a sacred building. The bodily presence of audiences is regulated: people are expected to keep quiet and to stand, since sitting is allowed only in specific places and under specific conditions; the objects can usually not be touched, a certain distance from the displayed objects is required.⁴⁸ There is also a resonance between religious and museal ways of looking: things are exhibited so as to involve the visitors in a sensory experience. Furthermore, religious aspects of contemporary museums are also linked to the role that religious motifs, narratives and constellations, or practices play within the stored items and the displays.⁴⁹

Museums, being material archives, are crucial for preserving cultural heritage. Often, in a project aimed at presenting the complexity and plurality of cultural transmission processes, religious objects play a central role.⁵⁰ Moreover, the significance of religious worldviews and practices in cultural transmission processes is also mirrored in their increasing relevance in contemporary art exhibitions.⁵¹ The exhibition *Signs of Life* that introduced this chapter is an illuminating example of this trend.

Accordingly, in the following pages we focus on two different types of museums and exhibitions dealing explicitly with religion as a cultural phenomenon. First, selected exhibitions focusing on religion as an integral part of both cultural heritage and contemporary society are presented; second, a multisite exhibition exploring the power of religious symbols in contem-

46 Wuthnow 2009.

47 Buggeln 2017, 11.

48 On regulation guidelines in museums see Reitstätter 2015, especially 166–206.

49 Paine 2013 offers an analysis of the diverse facets of communicating with objects in museum's practices.

50 Meanwhile, there is a copious bibliography on museums and exhibition dedicated to highlighting religion as cultural heritage. See e.g. Buggeln / Franco 2018 and Runge 2022.

51 As introductions see Clifton 2014 and Mickan / Klie / Berger 2019.

porary art is analysed. Despite being realised in different decades and places and with diverse purposes, the selected examples focus on religious topics as essential aspects to understand historical and contemporary cultures. Furthermore, these projects reaffirm the museum's function in preserving material and immaterial dimensions of religion and in transmitting knowledge about this multilayered phenomenon. Presenting religious traditions and communities by means of selected objects, museums highlight the plurality of perspectives that characterises religion in the past and present.

Diverse strategies for displaying religion in museums are explored in the selected case studies. First, we discuss *Maria Magdalena Mauritius*, a project by the Swiss National Museum in which medieval Christian devotion is presented as a fundamental aspect of a common heritage. The second case study, again a Swiss example, is *Glaubenssache*, an exhibition dealing with religious plurality as a complex dimension of plurality in democracy. The third selected exhibition deals with the interaction between identity and politics. It scrutinises the permanent exhibition of the House of European History in Brussels, which highlights the contested role of religion in fostering a shared identity for the continent. The exhibits display religion in diverse times and places with artwork and multimedial installations. They invite the audience to reflect on the role of religion in history and the present by communicating knowledge and by means of interactive elements, enhancing the sensory perception of the objects and the museum's place.

The last case study, *Auf der Suche...*, is a multisite exhibition of contemporary art exploring the human quest for existential orientation in the post-pandemic era.

8.4 The role of medieval saints for Swiss heritage: *Maria Magdalena Mauritius*

From All Saint's Day (1 November) 2007 to Easter (24 March) 2008, the Swiss National Museum in Zurich displayed the temporary exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen* (*Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Dealing with Saints*). The exhibition presented the museum's collection of medieval wooden sculptures, which encompasses around 400 statues and 20 altarpieces. Most of these were purchased by the museum about thirty years after its



Fig. 86: The Virgin Mary in diverse iconographic types. Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.

foundation in 1889, mainly to avoid them being sold abroad. The purchase of these medieval sculptures was part of an initiative to strengthen the cohesion of the modern Swiss state in the second half of the 19th century as the national museum was still building up a representative collection to establish itself for preserving and restoring Swiss heritage. In a multicultural and multilingual country, the construction of a national identity was a paramount challenge to consolidate such a diverse nation.⁵²

The exhibition of the restored medieval wooden sculptures aimed at presenting the pivotal role saints played in Christianity and society. The exhibition sought to articulate iconographic motifs, attributes and meanings, as well as explain the different constellations, relationships and hierarchies among the saints. Information about collective rituals and individual ways of relating to these transcendent figures were included in short text panels next to the objects.

Three rooms were dedicated to prominent figures such as St. Maurice, the Virgin Mary (fig. 86) and Maria Magdalena. Another room presented sculptures according to the liturgical calendar (which was echoed in the dates of the exhibition indicated on flyers, mentioned above, which specified feast days). Other rooms (e.g. fig. 87) displayed altarpieces as complex media that made the saints' presence and protective function tangible. The exhibition showed how altarpieces and compositions could be transformed and integrated into religious festivities by means of movable elements (fig. 87).

⁵² De Capitani 2022.



Fig. 87: Room with statues with movable elements like the cart-wheels under the donkey that Jesus is riding. The composition refers to the Gospel episode and the iconographic motifs of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem which is celebrated the Sunday before Easter. The wheeled-donkey enables the processional movement of this statue of Jesus, re-enacting his entry into Jerusalem, which liturgically concludes the last week of Lent, in which the Passion of Christ begins.⁵³ Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.

In a further, dark room the practice of burying damaged statues in ossuaries – usually a small building next to the parish church, where human remains were collected – was recreated (fig. 88).

By walking through the different parts of the exhibition, visitors could immerse themselves in the historical context by hearing medieval music through their headphones. The religious-historical part of the exhibition concluded with the rejection of pious devotion to saints in the Reformation, with explicit references to the polemical attitudes towards images and statues by John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli. Accordingly, many statues in the reformed territories were destroyed or hidden and smuggled to other places. In the last room, visitors were confronted with the transience of religious objects and practices as well as their transformations and reinterpretation. In doing so, the display addressed the long-standing denominational conflicts that had enduring influence on Switzerland. Religious plurality and the

⁵³ For a detailed description of the composition see Flühler-Kreis / Wyer 2007, 173–179.



Fig. 88: Damaged statues were buried in ossuaries like human remains. In the museum, a burial site is reenacted. Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.

conflict arising from the coexistence of the two denominations were therefore presented as a key historical issue characterising the nation.

The last room displayed the role of the museum in preserving the medieval statues that survived until the early 20th century, showing techniques of storage that ensure the professional conservation of the wooden statues for future generations (figs. 89 and 90).

The exhibition was accompanied by a new publication catalogue of the complete collection containing high-quality photographs.⁵⁴ The exhibition and the publication demonstrate in different ways and with diverse media the crucial function of the national museum in documenting and preserving Swiss religious-cultural heritage. The exhibition was particularly promoted for schools, with special guided tours and detailed documentation for teachers from elementary to high schools.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Flühler-Kreis / Wyr 2007.

⁵⁵ Senn / Maurer 2007.



Fig. 89: A variegated selection of wooden sculptures. The golden background suggests the preciousness of the objects and the relevance of staging the museum collection which provides a direct insight into medieval Christian piety. The installation can be interpreted as a self-reflexive composition elaborating on the role of the exhibition and the national museum. Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.



Fig. 90: The professional storage of sculptures is shown in an installation in the last room of the exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.

8.5 Negotiating plural beliefs in the museum: *Glaubenssache*

In October 2006 Stapferhaus in Lenzburg, a town in the Swiss canton of Argovia, opened an exhibition focusing on religion as a societal phenomenon, which attracted wide interest in Switzerland and beyond and ran for a year. Stapferhaus is a museum committed to debating contested contemporary questions:

At the Stapferhaus, right next to Lenzburg railway station, the big questions of the present stand at the forefront: what impacts our lives, what triggers the country's interest and what moves the world. In interactive, sensory exhibition worlds, we invite you – in an entertaining way – to take a critical look at the central issues of our time.⁵⁶

The exhibition dedicated to religion was entitled *Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige* (*Matter of Belief. An Exhibition for Believers and Non-believers*). The project aimed at stimulating reflection on plural religious beliefs in their interaction with religious freedom as a crucial dimension of a constitutional democracy. It sought to articulate the tension between religion as a private matter and the presence of diverse religious orientations and communities in the public sphere. The exhibition's profile is described on its website as follows:

With the project »Matter of belief«, the Stapferhaus Lenzburg stimulates a debate about questions of belief and invites people to search for answers. Our society needs to learn how religious freedom may be implemented in times of religious plurality. Overall, everyone can only believe what they want if they grant the same right to their neighbours. The project questions people's own beliefs. It confronts you with other people's opinions about faith and looks for a dialogue in a playful way.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ <https://stapferhaus.ch/en> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

⁵⁷ »Das Stamperhaus in Lenzburg fordert mit dem Projekt ›Glaubenssache‹ dazu auf, Glaubensfragen zu debattieren und Antworten zu suchen. Unsere Gesellschaft muss üben, wie sich die Religionsfreiheit in Zeiten der Religionsvielfalt umsetzen lässt. Denn es kann nur dann jeder glauben, was er will, wenn er dieses Recht auch seinen Nachbarn zugesteht.



Fig. 91: The doors to enter *Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige*, Stapferhaus, Lenzburg, 2006/2007, which expected the visitors to take a position before visiting the exhibition.

The active role the audience were expected to take was communicated unmistakably at the entrance: to buy a ticket, the visitors had to choose between two doors, »ENTRANCE: BELIEVERS« or »ENTRANCE: NON-BELIEVERS« (fig. 91).

Along with the ticket to the exhibition, the visitors were also given a data stick. In each room, they could plug it into a computer station and answer questions about their religion, beliefs and opinions about plurality. At the end of the itinerary, the anonymous data saved on the sticks were collected and analysed once the exhibition closed.

This large project presented diverse aspects of religion in Switzerland, exploring the diversity of religious traditions and communities, institutional and individual worldviews, contested religious practices in the public sphere, and politically sensitive questions of religion and religious plurality in democracy. These topics were linked to objects and audiovisual installa-

Das Projekt fragt nach der eigenen Glaubensposition. Es konfrontiert mit anderen Glaubensansichten und sucht spielerisch den Dialog.« in: Stapferhaus Lenzburg 2006, 7. Translation by the author.



Fig. 92: A nun takes a picture of items collected by the museum for this exhibition, representing individual beliefs. Exhibition *Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige*, Stapferhaus, Lenzburg, 2006/2007.

tions, with a specific focus on individuals and their attitudes towards their own religious beliefs and those of others. The range of opinions explicitly encompassed sceptical, agnostic or atheistic worldviews. Individual religious orientations played a central role: the diversity and variety of perspectives was materialised with an impressive installation made of 100 personal objects, collected for this purpose by the curators (fig. 92).

Conceived in the aftermath of 9/11 with growing public pressure on Muslim communities and other religious minorities, the exhibition relied upon academic research on the development and transformation of religion and beliefs in Switzerland and particularly focused on the tension between privatisation of religion, secularisation and post-secularisation. The catalogue, *Glaubenssache. Ein Buch für Gläubige und Ungläubige* (*Matter of Belief. A Book for Believers and Nonbelievers*) is a collection of essays by well known scholars from a broad range of academic disciplines related to religion, among them the study of religion, theology, history and sociology of religion.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Stapferhaus 2006.

Fig. 93: The exhibition catalogue *Glaubenssache. Ein Buch für Gläubige und Ungläubige*, a collection of scholarly essays on the role of religion and religious plurality in today's Swiss society. The cover mimics a card for a Roman-Catholic first communion.



In the first decade of the 21st century, religious plurality, a constitutive aspect of Swiss democracy, was a dominant topic in political debate.⁵⁹ The concept of the exhibition made controversial questions about the role of religion in the public sphere appealing, by means of two main strategies. First, it involved the visitors by asking them to take a position and to actively express an opinion. Second, it presented the topic in a playful, enjoyable way.

The catalogue lay-out emphasized this playfulness. On the cover the title is written in golden letters on a white background with a circle in its centre, which – playfully or ironically? – imitates a Roman-Catholic First Communion card. The circle is a hole piercing the volume (fig. 93). Is it a reference to a (missing) host? Or a graphic suggestion that the readers should fill-in the missing part with his or her own experiences and ideas or even leave it empty? Overall, individual beliefs may not be a matter of printed words.

After the closure of the exhibition, the museum published the results of the survey. From the 40,213 visitors, 63.5 % chose the door for believers, while 36.5 % entered the museum as »non-believers«.⁶⁰

The exhibition *Glaubenssache* displayed religious plurality by means of objects and interactive, audiovisual installations. Moreover, it demanded the visitors to assume an active part in staging the plurality of positions by

59 On the role of religion in democracies in Switzerland and in Europe see e. g. Heit / Pfeleiderer 2012 and 2013; Liedhegener / Köhrsen 2024.

60 A short summary of the results of the survey can be downloaded here: https://backend.stapferhaus.ch/assets/uploads/Schlussdokumentation_kurz_03.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025).

interacting in various ways, connecting the data stick to the computer stations and taking an explicit position – even just for fun. As a result, the audience became a performative representation of the diverse attitudes towards matters of faith, belief, and religion. In this regard, the exhibition offered a shared space focused on a multilayered reflection on the role of religion within democracy and the possibility to foster a dialogue and an exchange between the discrepant views and expectations. The educational role of the museum consisted in presenting diverse religious as well as non-religious worldviews, in stimulating self-reflexion, and raising awareness of the individual contribution and the political efforts needed for negotiating plurality within the constitutional frame of the federal state.

Maria Magdalena Mauritius represents an exhibition type which aims to value the role of religious traditions and their transformations within the cultural heritage,⁶¹ and which emphasises the museum's function as a material archive of memory fostering a shared national identity. Conversely, *Glaubenssache* proposes another way of displaying religion in museums, since this exhibition's goal is to question religious transformation and diversity from a different angle. Its focus is on the tension between religion as a private and a public matter. It deals with religion as a fundamental aspect of society: religious plurality is displayed in the tension between private choices and negotiation processes in the public sphere.

8.6 The role of religion in constructing European identity: House of European History

On 6 May 2017 the House of European History opened its doors as a brand-new museum in the European quarter in Brussels.⁶² The idea was launched by Hans-Gerd Pöttering, the 12th President of the European Parliament. On 13 February 2007, in his inaugural address, he called for the establishment

61 For a possible classification of museums exhibiting religion see Paine 2017.

62 For diverse analyses of the House of European History see Fickers 2018; Kesteloot 2018; Lutz 2019; Danani / Pezzoli 2023. For a broader analysis of the influence of museums on European cultural identity see Kaiser / Krankenhagen / Poehls 2012.

of a museum to increase European identity. In the introduction to the main catalogue of the museum, he writes:

The idea behind this European project was to create a place where memories of our shared history and of the work of European unification could be nurtured. At the same time, it was to be open to the subsequent shaping of Europe's identity by all European Union citizens, present and future. It should be a place for the »European idea« to grow. The House of European History, then, is intended to convey the outlines of European history, so as to foster understanding of more recent events, and of the present. The exhibitions therefore show common values of European unification – human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, peace, and the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity – as representing the progress of peaceful coexistence, particularly since the end of the Second World War and the overcoming of divisions within our continent.⁶³

From the very beginning, the project to present a common history had been linked to values fostering a sense of belonging to the European idea. Accordingly, the museum arises from an articulated, but contested, political and academic process of planning and realising a common »house«.⁶⁴

The initiators had to build the museum from scratch, since there was neither a pre-existing collection nor a dedicated building. This makes this initiative a particularly illuminating one for reflecting upon the link between exhibiting things in a public place, spatial meaning-making processes and attempts to foster a European political and cultural identity. Being the first museum dedicated to a shared history of the continent, the construction of the museum demanded considerable work not only in designing the building but even more in developing a concept of history to be translated into a museum itinerary.

The idea of an exhibition on a collective European history resists an additive procedure: the museum was not intended to be a collection of fragments divided into national or regional historical pieces. Therefore, in order to highlight a shared narrative, the focus shifted to contemporary history, represent-

63 Pöttering 2018, 11.

64 See also Kaiser 2017.

ing Europe in the light of the creation of a political body after World War II. In this context, its perspective on ancient and modern history aimed to suggest common historical roots. Since a shared Europe is a contested issue, the main attention was directed rather to asking questions about what European identity may become, rather than proposing an answer to be agreed upon. Consequently, the museum developed a programme aimed at involving the visitors in thinking about what Europe is, may or should be.

The itinerary of the permanent exhibition assigns a very active role to individual visitors. The museum promotes a historical knowledge generated in the interaction between individual, familial or social memories encountered in the displayed objects and the audiovisual installations.⁶⁵

The name of the museum, »house«, emphasises this goal. Visitors can enter the building free of charge in order to feel »at home« in a place that represents their shared history.⁶⁶ The museum is located in the Eastman Building, a former dental clinic from 1935 that has been transformed and considerably enlarged to host the project's impressive size: the permanent exhibition is spread over six floors.

The concept of representing a sharable history was developed in the interaction between EU politicians and academics with an expertise in history and museology. Accordingly, the boards in charge of constructing the museum had to negotiate between those diverse positions. On the one hand, the politically motivated intention of stimulating participation and identification with the EU and, on the other hand, a historical narrative based on scientific rigour understood as being independent and rather objective.⁶⁷ To achieve this ideal, a committee comprised of nine people from different European countries and universities was charged with the task of choosing the topics to be translated into galleries and distributed across the exhibition itinerary. The diverse boards worked in close cooperation with interior designers and curators.⁶⁸

65 For a detailed description of the whole process of planning and realising the House of European History see Mork / Christodoulou 2018. For further information see Vovk van Gaal / Dupont 2012; Building a House of European History 2013; Mork 2016; Conceptual Basis for a House of European History 2018; Augstein 2011; Grau i Segú 2016.

66 See Danani / Pezzoli-Olgati 2023, 251 for a reconstruction of the boards involved and their specific competences.

67 Hütter 2018.

68 Danani / Pezzoli-Olgati 2023.

The permanent exhibition offers a panorama on contemporary European history by combining six narrative units that follow a chronological order.⁶⁹ In the first section, *Shaping Europe*, the mythological and historical origins of Europe are presented, while the second, *Europe as a global power (1789–1914)*, discusses the Enlightenment as the basis for a contemporary European identity. The subsequent galleries are dedicated to the 20th century: the third unit, *Europe in ruins*, presents World War I and II, the fourth section, *Rebuilding a divided continent (1945–1970)*, thematises the reconstruction of Europe, the Cold War, the construction of social security, the beginning of European integration, and the memory of the Shoa. While the fifth unit, *Shattering certainties (1970–today)*, deals with the challenges after the post-war economic boom came to an end. The sixth and final part, *Europe now*, is a section focusing on urgent questions of our time, among others the role of the European Union, climate change, colonial heritage, the pandemic, digital revolution, terrorism, and Brexit.⁷⁰ This last gallery was redesigned in 2021.

Given the vast size of each storey and, correspondingly, of the galleries, the link with the overall concept of the exhibition may sometimes become lost during the visit. A huge sculpture suspended in the stairwell in the middle of the building takes on the role of keeping all the pieces together. The idea of Europe as united in diversity is suggested by *The Vortex of History*, a massive work of art by Boris Micka and Todomuta Studio in Sevilla, measuring 25 m in height, made of steel and an aluminium-magnesium alloy. Evoking a kind of organism, the metal sculpture is composed of text quotations in diverse languages and scriptures cut out in banners snaking from a central corpus through the floors of the exhibition. While at the centre of the staircase the banners are so dense that they are illegible, following the meandering parts as they reach the individual galleries, letters and words can begin to be deciphered (fig. 94). *The Vortex of History* is a representation of the dynamism of European history and its ever-changing interpretations. It contrasts with the neat architectural lines of the building, but some affinities are hinted at through the use of some common materials and the metallic elements, all vibrate together as a result of the effect of the light coming from above. The letters merge into quotations from significant moments

69 <https://historia.europa.eu/en/exhibitions-events/permanent-exhibition> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

70 <https://historia.europa.eu/en/digital-offer/audio-guides>.



Fig. 94: The *Vortex of History*, a monumental sculpture merging 27 quotations in different languages.

in European history, as they burst into the exhibition spaces. In total 27 quotes are incorporated in the sculpture.⁷¹

The itinerary leads the visitor through the six museum floors. Objects and multimedia installations are presented with little written information, since the visitors are provided with audioguides in the 24 languages of the EU at the entrance. Visiting the whole exhibition demands a considerable physical effort, since the galleries are wide and the information provided extensive.

The interplay between the diverse topic units and the *Vortex of History* represents the leitmotif of the exhibition and the House of European History. Europe is diverse and, at the same time, a common ground for its citizens. Accordingly, European identity arises from active participation in the political process of the EU. Fostering a shared memory means thinking about common aspects of the European heritage, asking questions about the past, the present and the future of the continent, as well as sharing a constructive approach to present challenges. Cultural diversity is highlighted as a positive characteristic of Europe and language translation as a concrete and a metaphorical procedure that bridges the diverse identities on the continent.⁷²

71 <https://historia.europa.eu/en/our-work/news/vortex-history> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

72 Schmidt 2018, 83.

Against this background, the exhibition's approach to religious plurality is striking. Religion is addressed mainly in the section dedicated to the origins of Europe, as a religious-historical aspect associated with the ancient myth of Europe and Christianity, with a few hints to Judaism and Islam.

The Greek myth of Europe is addressed in the first section, *Shaping Europe*, and linked to open questions about a European memory (fig. 95).

What is Europe? Geography shows us that Europe has never been a clearly defined space. The continent's name comes from the ancient Greek myth of Europa, a story that has been re-interpreted, like history itself, from various points of view over time. Europe is described through its achievements and traditions, but what distinguishes it from other continents? Can we say that we have a shared European past, when history has affected people differently? Can we find any commonality – a reservoir of European memory?⁷³

In the context of this first gallery, the myth is interpreted as a narrative highlighting the fact that Europe has always been the result of negotiations between diverse lands and cultures. Europa, a Phoenician princess, is abducted to Crete by Zeus appearing in the guise of a white bull. It follows that the very name of »Europe« itself, in fact comes from »abroad«:

Europa, a mythical princess from Phoenicia – today's Lebanon – is abducted by the Greek god Zeus, who appears to her in the form of a white bull. Having fallen in love with her beauty, he takes her to the island of Crete. Europe's name has been associated with this myth from antiquity to the present. It appears in art, literature, religion and politics, where the story and imagery are often reinterpreted to reflect the issues of the day.

At the core of the myth of Europa is the reality of ancient interconnections – both good and bad – between the peoples of Europe and

73 Transcription of the audioguide *Shaping Europe*, https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829649845%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-w6y2Rs-jFv63&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true (accessed December 20, 2021).

those from distant lands. That Europe actually took its name from a mythological princess from western Asia is a testament to such contacts. As is the fact that the myth gives us glimpses into the historical development of the Greek alphabet, a development triggered by contact with the Phoenicians in antiquity.⁷⁴

The role and variety of the various receptions and adaptations of the myth is illustrated by selected archaeological objects and contemporary works of art depicting different adaptations of the myth of Europa and the bull.

This approach to religious-historical elements is reiterated in addressing Christianity as a crucial aspect of European heritage along with other characteristic elements of European history such as democracy, philosophy, the Rule of Law, Humanism, the Enlightenment or the slave trade and Colonialism. The chapter dedicated to European heritage is introduced as follows:

What binds the continent together. What could be regarded as European heritage? Europe is more than the addition of national histories. But is it a civilization and culture characterized by particular traditions and values developed through history? There are basic elements which were originally European and have spread all over the continent. Can these be considered distinct hallmarks of European culture? If so, which parts of this European heritage should we preserve; what do we want to change, what should we contest?⁷⁵

74 Transcription of the audioguide *Reception of the myth* https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829653289%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-9b4DmVfpUGi&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true (accessed on 6 August 2025)

75 Transcription of the audioguide, https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829656526%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-kX7E9EeN9Fm&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true (accessed on 6 August 2025).

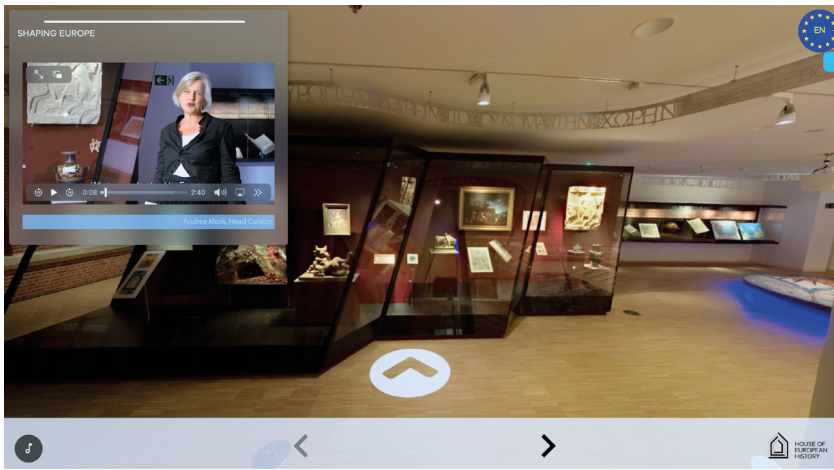


Fig. 95: A video still of the virtual tour of the gallery *Shaping Europe*. In the upper corner on the left side, Andrea Mork, the Head Curator of the House of European History presents the section. On the ceiling hangs a branch of the *Vortex of History*.

A medieval wooden statue of a pope materialises the exhibition's concept of Christianity, which is addressed in the audioguide *Omnipresence of Christianity*:

From its origins in the Middle East, Christianity extended its influence across the whole of Europe to become a defining feature of western civilisation. For thousands of years the power of Christianity in Europe centred on Rome and the pope was immense and extended far beyond mere spiritual concerns. It permeated every aspect of life, influencing politics, culture, commerce, and law. Yet Europe's relationship with Christianity has always been diverse and complex. Christianity has frequently been deeply divided within itself, significantly in the division between Eastern and Western Churches and through the Reformation. Also Islam and Judaism have co-existed for centuries in Europe helping to define European life and culture. Today, despite falling church attendance and increasing secularism, Christianity remains embedded in daily European life with values, traditions, and cultures

all reflecting Europe's Christian heritage. In an increasingly multi-religious Europe will Christianity remain in its dominant position?⁷⁶

The exhibition expects the visitors to be basically familiar with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, since there is no information about the characteristic symbols, practices or worldviews of those traditions. The audioguide begins with a parallel between Europe's myth and Christianity, since both originated in the Middle East, which is echoed also by means of an oriental melody in the background. The presentation emphasises the power of the church and the pope during millennia and the broad influence of Christianity on all social spheres. This omnipresence is countered by the divisive character of Christianity and today's decline of membership and attendance in religious rituals. After a short reference to Judaism and Islam as being part of European history, the text ends with a dilemma the audience may think about: even though Christianity still permeates daily life, will its dominant position be compatible with the multireligious character of Europe?

Overall, the permanent exhibition avoids the topic of religion and particularly Christianity as being too controversial. Rather, the museum endorses a secular reading of history, which is rooted in the assumption that the development of scientific approaches since the Renaissance overcame misleading religious interpretations of the world. Dealing with crucial chapters of contemporary European history, in the subsequent floors of the exhibitions, only a few references to religious elements can be found. They are mainly linked to individuals.⁷⁷

Overall, the House of European History offers a long, articulated itinerary where visitors are asked to participate in a search for common elements fostering a shared public memory of Europe.⁷⁸ Sharing memory is conceived as a spatial practice individuals perform by walking through the permanent exhibition and observing the displayed objects, receiving multimedia installations and the information and questions in the audioguide.

⁷⁶ Transcription of the audioguide, https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829659844%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-g42w94EdUUA&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true (accessed on 6 August 2025).

⁷⁷ Danani / Pezzoli 2023, 270–277.

⁷⁸ Winter 2010; Danani / Pezzoli-Oligati 2023, 252–262.



Fig. 96: The House of European History located in the Eastman Building in Brussel's European Quarter. On the right and the left sides of the entrance the name of the museum is presented in the 24 languages of the EU.

The museum's itinerary displays plurality of cultures and nations as a basis that allows European citizens to share a reflection on a common historical narrative. Accordingly, cultural diversity is associated with the plurality of languages and interpreted as a valuable aspect of Europe: the possibility of reciprocal understanding despite 24 languages is highlighted by means of banners at the entrance (fig. 96), through the multilingual audioguide and the stunning *Vortex of History*.

Religion, by contrast, is not presented as a constructive dimension of European history but rather as being essentially divisive. The museum aims at implementing a sense of belonging to Europe by means of a symbolic representation of the tension between plurality and diversity encouraging shared memories. Hence, despite being integral to the ancient and medieval roots of Europe, according to the exhibition's conception, religion belongs in the private sphere since the Renaissance. Even if it is recognised as a crucial dimension of societal plurality, religion is neglected and relegated to the background of history. This position, based on a neat opposition between

secular and religious worldviews, mirrors a more general attitude toward religion in political debates about Europe, which is received controversially.⁷⁹

In the context of our exploration of museums as places negotiating religious plurality, the House of European History is an illuminating case study, because of its hesitation in addressing religion, displaying it as a contested dimension of modern European society. In its search for a common ground to foster civil endorsement of Europe as both united and diverse, religion is elaborated on as a crucial part of a shared cultural heritage and a divisive force in the present. This interpretation, in my opinion, does not consider the complexity of religious worldviews and practices and relies on a superficial approach to the European history of religion and the present, mirroring a political agenda based on a secularised view of society.

The House of European History demonstrates an important aspect of contemporary museum practices: by means of a specifically designed place the museum becomes a public space to foster political engagement by constructing a shared historical memory. Walking through the galleries, following the inscribed branches of the *Vortex of History* – which brings one back to the core of the exhibition – climbing up the six floors, listening to the audioguide and looking at the objects and installations, visitors are expected to broaden their knowledge about Europe and immerse themselves in a critical reflection on their relationship with it. The museum design, which demands significant endurance due to the size of the exhibition, invites the audience to perform a journey through time, starting in antiquity, passing through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, the modern Era, World War I and II, the post-war era with the creation of Europe as a political entity and finally reaching the present day. Notwithstanding the attempt to root the itinerary in an independent academic discourse, the political impetus of the exhibition shines through, as we have seen with the exhibition's interpretation of religion. Nonetheless, the House of European History allows the visitor to take a position and to develop a personal view on Europe as a political and cultural common ground.

79 On the role of religion in implementing European cultural and political integration see e.g. Nexon 2006 and Bottici / Challand 2013, particularly 163–165. See also Casanova 2006.

8.7 The human quest for orientation in contemporary art: *Auf der Suche...*

The House of European History highlights the educational impetus of a contemporary museum. The last example we will discuss returns us to the beginning of the chapter as it concerns another contemporary art exhibition that was on display in Munich from 12 May to 22 July 2022. *Auf der Suche... Ein Ausstellungsprojekt im Dialog von Kunst, Kirche und Wissenschaft* – in English *In Search of... An Exhibition Project in Dialogue with Art, Church and Science* – is a project involving diverse institutions and public places. Like the House of European History, *Auf der Suche...* also relied on an intense interaction between the exhibited artworks and the visitors, who were expected to follow a long itinerary across the historic centre of the city. Rather than stimulating a reflection based on historical knowledge, this project invited the audience to directly interact with the works of art, in many cases to construct them in collaborative processes.

DG Kunstraum is an art gallery and not a museum in a strict sense. Nevertheless, being a not-for-profit institution with an exhibition profile fostering diversity and sustainability, its goals resonate with the definition of a contemporary (art) museum discussed above.

Auf der Suche... was initiated by DG Kunstraum Diskurs Gegenwart, a gallery for contemporary art that belongs to the Kunstverein Deutsche Gesellschaft für Christliche Kunst, a non-profit and independent association founded in 1893 to sustain Christian art production and the exchange between artists and churches as patrons. Today, the association promotes contemporary art as a practice addressing existential questions and particularly the relationship between the human being and the whole of society. The gallery fosters dialogue between visual arts, architecture, music, theology, and the humanities and opens up a space for debates about spirituality and transcendence.⁸⁰

Auf der Suche... was conceived during the Covid-19 pandemic as a cooperation between Ulrich Schäfert, the head of the Department of Pastoral Theology and Art in the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising⁸¹ and Benita Meißner,

80 <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/verein/ueber-uns/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

81 <https://www.erzbistum-muenchen.de/ordinariat/ressort-4-seelsorge-und-kirchliches-leben/kunstpastoral> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

the director of the DG Kunstraum. Representatives of Roman-Catholic and Lutheran parishes in the centre of Munich, that logistically and financially contributed to the realisation of the exhibition, were also involved as well as the artist and art professor Shirin Kretschmann from the Academy of Fine Arts Munich and me as a scholar of the study of religion. While the art students contributed with works specifically designed for this exhibition, the students in the study of religion attended classes on contemporary art in the diverse sites of the exhibition and wrote short texts for the catalogue.⁸² The project was centred on the question of people in search of orientation in the aftermath of a period of isolation, which, particularly for artists, proved particularly challenging:

»In search of ...« – What are people searching for? Today, this question seems more relevant than ever: despite major technical and medical achievements, uncertainty dominates people's lives around the world. The ongoing climate crisis, the war in the middle of Europe and the Covid pandemic have shattered the sense of ›normality‹. These are events that polarise people, shake fundamental democratic values and question societal cohesion in the most serious way. The longing for love, security, peace, health, and a constructive future seems almost impossible to fulfill.⁸³

The multisite exhibition presented an international selection of artworks displayed in the art gallery DG Kunstraum, in an art space in a tube station and in different Roman-Catholic and Lutheran churches.⁸⁴ Unlike the oth-

82 Auf de Suche... 2022.

83 »Auf der Suche ...« – Was sucht der Mensch? Diese Frage erscheint uns heute aktueller denn je: Trotz großer technischer und medizinischer Errungenschaften bestimmt Verunsicherung das Leben der Menschen weltweit. Die anhaltende Klimakrise, der Krieg mitten in Europa und die Corona-Pandemie haben das Gefühl von ›Normalität‹ zerrissen. Es sind Ereignisse, die die Öffentlichkeit polarisieren, grundlegende, demokratische Werte erschüttern und den sozialen Zusammenhalt auf gravierende Weise in Frage stellen. Die Sehnsucht nach Liebe, Geborgenheit, Frieden, Gesundheit und einer konstruktiven Zukunft erscheint kaum erfüllbar.« <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/auf-der-suche/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). Translation by the author.

84 For the complete list of the artists and locations involved see <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/auf-der-suche/> (accessed on 6 August 2025) and Auf der Suche... 2022.



Fig. 97: Charwei Tsai, *Feather Project*, Installation, 2022, St. Paul, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

er projects discussed so far, *Auf der Suche...* created a temporary exhibition space encompassing various locations, among them churches that regularly display artworks. The exhibition's topic – being in search of – was thus echoed in the transient network structure of places involved. We will discuss this exhibition by focusing on two selected artworks that articulate in different ways the complex entanglement between spatial practices, artworks and religious plurality.

In the Roman-Catholic church of St. Paul, the Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai presented *Feather Project* (fig. 97), an installation to be completed by the visitors.

The installation was located in the northern side aisle of the church, to the left of the main altar, and consisted of a large round mirror placed on a white, wooden octagonal platform, white goose feathers and markers. Visitors were invited to write texts on the feathers and to pile them up on the mirror according to the following instruction sheet:

INSTRUCTION

1) Choose a feather. Give thanks to the feather for being the messenger of your prayers.

Set your aspiration for participating in this project. For example, to pray or to aspire to transcend oneself and others through connecting with spirituality.

2) Inscribe your aspiration on the feather in one phrase.

3) Dedicate this merit: May everyone who comes across this work be free from suffering and the causes of suffering and rest in joy and love.

Making an aspiration is to set an intention for one's mind, speech, and action to synchronize as one with the aspiration. The motivation for *Feather Project*, created for the St. Paul's Church in Munich, is to encourage visitors to express their aspirations with consideration of the great calamities such as wars, pandemic, and climate crisis of current times that we are facing all around the world. Through the act of writing on a feather, this intention is set and manifests from an invisible force to the physical world. The project is, therefore, enacted and completed with the participation of the visitors.

Charwei Tsai⁸⁵

85 The instruction sheet is published in *Auf der Suche...* 2022, 91.



Fig. 98: The mirror optically magnifies the vertical axis. Charwei Tsai, *Feather Project*, Installation, 2022, St. Paul, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

The artwork's four elements have diverse proprieties. The large, white feathers are of natural origins and refer to the bird's ability to fly. In many cultures and religious traditions, transcendent beings have feathered wings allowing them to travel between worldly and otherworldly domains. Also in this work the feathers serve as messengers: they carry the sentences written by the visitors to other dimensions or simply to other people observing Charwei Tsai's installation. Those writings are the second, crucial element of the composition: the visitor embodies an invisible thought on a feather – according to the instruction it may be a prayer or an aspiration – making it tangible. The third element, the flat mirror, is a human industrial artefact from the early modern era, with a dense history that merges the history of religion with the development of the natural sciences.⁸⁶ The mirror reflects the place and, depending on the position of the viewer, visualises different points of the neo-Gothic architecture. Its optical property amplifies the space of the church and accentuates the height of the nave (fig. 98).

⁸⁶ On the fascinating history of flat mirrors see e.g. Edgerton 2009.



Fig. 99: Angel's wings and feather interact in the mirror. Charwei Tsai, *Feather Project*, Installation, 2022, St. Paul, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

The mirror lies in the centre of an octagonal white, wooden construction that reproduces the shape and colour of a floor slab under the baptismal font, located in the southern aisle, on the right of the main altar, in a symmetrical position to *Feather Project* (fig. 97). Charwei Tsai's artwork interacts with the church space in various ways: its shape and colour harmonise with the church fittings and design; the mirror, emphasising the vertical axis, retrieves the architectural reference to heaven; the natural feathers interact visually with the angel's wings of the northern aisle main altar (fig. 99).⁸⁷

The work of art in St. Paul's does not display clear religious symbols, constellations or practices. However, combining feathers, a mirror, and an octagon, *Feather Project* opens up a space of multiple interpretations, echoing the diverse recurrences and the multilayered symbolic meanings those

⁸⁷ For further descriptions and photographs of the project see the description of the curator Ulrich Schäfert in *Auf der Suche...* 2022, 93–95 and <https://charwei.com/projects/feather-project-installation-st-paul-church/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). *Feather Project* has been adapted to diverse contexts. In a version from 2011 exhibited in Taipei, Sufi poetry was written on the feathers. <https://charwei.com/projects/feather-project-2011/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 100: The artist, holding a small model, explains to passersby how to fold milk carton to form a rose. Frank Bölter, *Weißer Rose (XXL)*, 18 May 2022, Viktualienmarkt, a transitory site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

elements carry in various religious traditions and cultures. Located in a Roman-Catholic sacred building, it stimulates individual reflection, resonates with the architecture, the liturgical fittings and the other artworks in St. Paul's, where the presence of contemporary art is prominent. In this station of *Auf der Suche...*, the exhibition's and religious practices are deliberately blurred by fostering interactions between the audience that lives in the post-pandemic society and worldviews and/or religious practices the visitor may refer to by following the artist's instructions and collaborating in completing the installation.

The participative role of the audience in creating the displayed artwork was even stronger in the performance and temporary installation *Weißer Rose (XXL)* by the German artist Frank Bölter. On 18 May 2022, on a marketplace in the historic centre of Munich, the Viktualienmarkt, he made a public folding activity using white milk carton sheets – Tetra Pack coated paper – in a collaborative one-day performance with passersby. Using an origami technique, he involved people in this busy pedestrian area in fold-



Fig. 101: The collaborative performance begins. Frank Bölter, *Weißer Rose (XXL)*, 18 May 2022, Viktualienmarkt, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich 2022.



Fig. 102: The blossom is completed. Frank Bölter, *Weißer Rose (XXL)*, 18 May 2022, Viktualienmarkt, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

ing the large sheets to form a giant rose (figs. 100–102).⁸⁸ The completed flower measured 5 metres in length, while the blossom had a diameter of 2 metres.

Frank Bölter's contribution to *Auf der Suche...* was inspired by the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the White Rose, a student resistance group

⁸⁸ A video of the performance by the filmmaker Lion Bischof can be seen here: <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/frank-boelter-weiße-rose-xxl-viktualienmarkt/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 103: White roses at the memorial for the resistance group, a bas relief by Lothar Dietz from 1958, in the inner courtyard of Ludwig Maximilian University at Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1 in Munich.

against the Nazi regime, formed in 1942. *White Rose (XXL)* refers to the fresh white roses that are offered daily in memory of the group on the monument in the inner courtyard in the historic building of Ludwig Maximilian University Munich (fig. 103.) Laying a white rose is a gesture that recalls the courageous action against the regime by the group's leaders executed in 1943: the students Alexander Schmorell, Hans and Sophie Scholl, Christoph Probst, Willi Graf and the professor Kurt Huber.

Bölter's action magnified the rose in a public place to emphasise, through an artistic collaborative performance, the crucial significance of recalling the White Rose, their ideas, courage and sacrifice. Building a giant rose was meant as a memorial to increase awareness for democracy as a practice that is not self-evident but fragile. Shaping a giant rose on a marketplace in Munich is an unmistakable symbolic action. It is not only about the urgency to resist totalitarianism but even more a plea to preserve the historical memory and to actively participate in the democratic process.

The choice to build a rose out of paper also refers to the relevance of paper sheets as media of resistance and memory. The origami sculpture can be interpreted as a reference to the leaflets that the members of the White



Fig. 104: Robert Schmitt-Matt, *Memorial Collage*, ceramics, 1987, outside the main entrance of the historic building of Ludwig Maximilian University at Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1 in Munich.

Rose distributed among the population inviting people to resist the regime. On 18 February 1943, they threw a stack of leaflets down from the upper gallery in the university hall, their last action before being arrested and executed by the Gestapo.

Paper also refers to the memorial by Robert Schmitt-Matt from 1987/88, a collage of the White Rose leaflets made of ceramic slabs on the ground in front of the university main entrance (fig. 104).

After completion, the extra-large white rose was transported to the nearby Church Heilig Geist, where it was on display for a few weeks (fig. 105). The oversized flower made out of milk cartons lying on the floor, with the blossom toward the altar, formed a strong contrast with the delicate Baroque interior of the church. In this sacred place, the bulky rose resonated with further religious symbols that, depending on the visitors, could assume diverse meaning. References to sacrifice as a central theological Christian



Fig. 105: Frank Bölter, *Weiße Rose (XXL)*, milk carton, temporary exhibition in the Church Heilig Geist, 2022, Munich, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

category and/or to white roses as a symbol of purity in Marian devotional practices may have played a role.⁸⁹

Overall, the exhibition *Auf der Suche...* involved the visitors in a museal spatial practice on many levels. The itinerary transformed the city into a place for experiencing and participating in the creation of artworks in the aftermath of lockdowns and isolation. To explore possible answers to the exhibition's question – what human beings are looking for in an uncertain time – the visitors were sent on a spatial quest in the city, visiting churches and galleries scattered across the historic centre. Together, the diverse sites built a multisite, temporary exhibition network in which artists and audience could explore possible answers.

⁸⁹ For reviews of the performance and the temporary exhibition see Benita Meißner and Ulrich Schäfert in *Auf der Suche 2022*, 10–17 and <https://frankboelter.com/weisse-rose-xxl/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 106: Empfangshalle, *Woher Kollege Wohin Kollege*, art project in the public sphere, 2022, St. Markus, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...* Munich. The orange garbage truck transformed into a camper van is visible on the portraits of the »homeland« by employees from all over the world.

The two actions discussed above are only a small part of this large project encompassing a broad range of artistic expressions and elaborated multimedia works such as *Woher Kollege Wohin Kollege* by Empfangshalle, the artists duo Corbinian Böhm and Michael Gruber, presented in the Lutheran church St. Markus (fig. 106)⁹⁰ or the installation with tape *I'll be a Good Mom* by Paula Niño in the DG Kunstraum (fig. 107).⁹¹ *Woher Kollege Wohin Kollege* consists of a photographic exhibition and a film documenting a mobile art project displayed in the city of Munich from 2002 to 2006. The project explores the question of homeland (»Heimat«). The duo transformed a garbage truck of the city's waste management into a comfortable camper van. Employees were invited to travel for holidays to a place they considered to

90 http://www.empfangshalle.net/sites/projekte/proj_woher.html (accessed on 6 August 2025).

91 <https://paulanino.net/I-ll-be-a-good-mom-1> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 107: Paula Niño, *I'll be a Good Mom*, in situ installation with tape, 2022, ca. 530 × 800 cm. In the middle: *Twin Flame*, an interactive installation by Cheng-Hsin. DG Kunstraum, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

be their homeland and to take a picture of it. Subsequently, the photographs were displayed on the garbage trucks collecting the rubbish in the city, making the homeland of the employees and the international composition of the team visible in a public place. The mobile artwork contributed to highlighting individual biographies, diversity of culture, sometimes of religion, and spectacular travel experiences by people contributing essentially to the quality of life in Munich.⁹²

With *I'll be a Good Mom* the Columbian artist Paula Niño materialises reflections she developed during the pandemic, as she was far away from home and secluded in her studio. Facing so many deaths, she began to think about birth as a process that in a few hours brings a new human being to life. In this in situ installation, the tension between life and death and the flow of time

92 Auf der Suche 2022, 40–45; http://www.empfangshalle.net/sites/projekte/proj_woher.html (accessed on 6 August 2025).

are explored. Sticking small pieces of paper tape on the gallery wall in a regular pattern, the artist materialised the feelings of patience and concentration.

The two exhibitions of contemporary art that frame this chapter, *Signs of Life* in Lucerne in 2010 and *Auf der Suche...* twelve years later, explicitly interact with religious symbols, iconographic and narrative constellation practices in very different ways. *Signs of Life* focuses on the adaption of religious elements from various religious traditions in contemporary artworks in a museum's white cube atmosphere, whereas *Auf der Suche...* establishes the quest for existential orientation at the core of the project, integrating churches as exhibition spaces but with works that do not forcibly adapt elements from religious traditions. The visitors are challenged to figure out possible answers to fundamental anthropological questions, interacting with the artworks and following an urban itinerary on the search for the next site.

8.8 Museum practices for exploring religion as a multifaceted phenomenon

Even though the exhibition projects discussed in this chapter were planned in different contexts and pursue different aims, they all deal in an explicit way with religion as an influential aspect of cultural heritage, a contested matter in political debates, a dimension of processes of belonging and exclusion, or as a repertoire of symbols linked to existential questions of human life. The variegated ways of displaying religion mirror the entanglement between museums and the European history of religion as an intertwining of traditions and practices. The museum as an institution and the selected exhibitions are places of negotiation of religious plurality as an intrinsic element of transmission processes and cultural exchanges in the past and present.

To conclude, we highlight some common aspects arising from comparative perspectives that are particularly significant to grasp contemporary strategies of representing religion in the public sphere. The museum moulds social practices which, as we have seen, are rooted in the modern era. In museums, visitors enter a place that is specifically dedicated to conveying a sensory, aesthetic experience based on the interaction with the building itself and the displayed artefacts.

Exhibitions function as media generating meaning-making processes by arranging objects according to a defined concept, topic and purpose. Exhibitions unfold following an itinerary that puts the artefacts into a relationship with each other. The objects, displaced from their production and storage contexts, are arranged along the itinerary by means of frames, showcases, pedestals, dividing walls, lights, captions, explanatory texts, audioguides, music, and audiovisual media. Moreover, catalogues, posters, websites, and maps complete the exhibition.⁹³

In this complex multimodal and multimedial spatial arrangement, religion can be evoked by diverse strategies. A religious tradition, a specific community in a given time and place, or a ritual can be represented by the displayed object. For instance, a wooden statue of a saint may refer to a general idea of medieval Christianity or a female deity riding a bull carved on an ancient *metope* to the myth of Europa. An artwork can adapt and transform symbols, constellations, narratives, or practices and rituals from a specific tradition and combine them in a new arrangement. The printed wool carpet *Proposition de détour* by Su-Mei Tse, which introduced this chapter, or *Feather Project* well illustrate this strategy for evoking religion. In other cases, the references to religion are not conveyed by the artefacts, but rather they are enshrined in the exhibition's arrangement, in the interaction between the displayed objects and/or in a specific place.

Auf der Suche... represented the human quest for orientation by transforming diverse places into exhibition sites and extending the display itinerary through the historic centre of Munich. This long path was designed to enact the topic of being in search of meaning as a bodily performance. Depending on the visitor's worldview, the itinerary may resonate with undertaking a pilgrimage as a religious practice.

In an exhibition, the relationship between artefacts and visitors is paramount. As a medium, it offers possibilities, that may be realised or not. In the case studies we have considered the gaze remains the dominant mode of engaging with the exhibits. By the sensory experience of looking closely at an object, mental images, remembrances, associations are evoked. Depending on one's knowledge, experience or affinity with the objects, diverse meaning-making processes take place. Within the multimodal and multimedia

93 Locher 2000.

context the object is embedded in, references to religious traditions, communities or practices may play a more or less predominant role.

In those cases, in which the visitors are directly addressed and expected to answer questions, to take sides, or even to be part of the artistic performance, linking material objects with mental imaginations becomes part of a shared practice between individuals. This is particularly striking, since religion in media, politics and in general, in the public sphere, is often discussed as a contested topic, associated with conflict and exclusivism. This attitude is crystallised in the House of European history, but even there, the visitors are asked to react and reflect on the meaning of possible developments in a multicultural Europe, where a broad range of religious beliefs and other worldviews are intertwined. The interactive actions stimulate a reflection on personal opinions making the role of other visitors visible. The sentences written on feathers in the church of St. Paul materialises the presence of other visitors, or the construction of a giant rose on the historic marketplace involves a coordination between strangers that have met by chance. The presence and the interaction between visitors are further essential dimensions of museum practices: walking along an exhibition itinerary in the strictly regulated rooms of a museum is a shared practice. Visitors interact with the same objects, go along the same route experiencing individual meaning-making processes in a sensory, aesthetic experience perceiving the presence and the interactions that others are performing in this very place.

The communication between artefacts and audiences is the catalyst. Objects, being material thing, do not represent the abstract concept of »religion«. They have individual stories of production, restoration, origins, and travels. They ended up in the museum's storage in different ways, having been given as a gift, or lent, purchased, or often stolen. Religious objects are unique specimens that illustrate the diversity of religious practices and beliefs, even within the same tradition. Paradoxically, this is even more evident, when, in the exhibition's itinerary, a religious object – or as often the case in contemporary art, a reference to a religious symbol – stands for whole communities or encompassing worldviews. In this case, the artefacts stimulate meaning-making processes from an ambivalent position: being very specific and embedded in a particular socio-historical context, they are used to produce a generalisation.

The museum as a public place, collects, preserves and exhibits religious objects as material and immaterial dimensions of cultures and transmission processes to increase knowledge, enforce identity processes, or stimulate reflection in an atmosphere of contemplative enjoyment. Embedded in specific exhibition itineraries, artefacts often stand for abstract concepts of religious communities or symbol systems and embody ideas of religion as an ancient, persisting, disrupting, contested or challenging phenomenon inspiring imaginations of human expectations and coexistence.

9 Religion Takes Place

*[...] Mostly
that travel is not the easy going
from point to point, a dotted
line on a map, location
plotted on a square surface
but that I move surrounded by a tangle
of branches, a net of air and alternate
light and dark, at all times;
that there are no destinations
apart from this.
[...]¹*

During the imaginary journey we have undertaken in these pages, we visited historical and contemporary places in a number of European countries and crossed national, cultural and linguistic boundaries, which have been defined, contested and redefined down the centuries. Overall, the route we explored was dedicated to recognising religion as a complex communication process rooted in and, at the same time, shaping spatial practices in which manifold worldviews, traditions, practices of individuals, groups, or institutions interact. Looking back at the itinerary we have followed, two main movements characterise our exploration. Spatially, we moved through territories from peripheral areas, such as mountain summits or a construction site in the depths of the Alps, to urban formations with a focus on funerary sites, multireligious buildings, museums and exhibitions. Temporally, we

¹ From the poem *Journey to the Interior* by Margaret Atwood published in *The Circle Game* in 1966 (Atwood 1998, 56).

crossed back and forth over our timeline, discussing spatial practices in the history of religion and in contemporary society.

Our chosen approach focuses on religion as a multifaceted phenomenon that is negotiated in a given place and time by different actors and material things. In those places, symbol systems, worldviews, practices, and transmission processes involve individuals, communities and institutions with diverse origins, representation practices, needs and expectations.

The places we visited together following an imaginary route mirror my interest in visibility, materiality and religion. It is precisely this field of research that drove me to understand more deeply the role of spatial practices in shaping the relationship between a viewer and a medium. The selection of case studies is therefore based on examples that arise from the interaction between human beings and visible objects such as graffiti, crescents and crosses, sculptures, graves and headstones, walls, buildings, or works of art. We have mainly considered spatial practices performed in a physical territory with a few references to corresponding digital spheres, notably in the interaction between graffiti on urban walls and their reproduction on the Internet.

Spatial concepts are travelling abstractions circulating for centuries, which have crossed many disciplinary boundaries. In this book, we have focused on aspects of these debates that are particularly relevant to address religious spatial practices. It is not only the selection of case studies which is conceived of as a movement through time and territories. The approach to spatial theories also follows a similar procedure, combining a religious-historical investigation with contemporary approaches in cultural studies.

Initially, we approached space and place by analysing historical visual sources. Medieval representations of a Christian cosmos were chosen that showed crucial developments in the construction of abstract concepts of space and place. As a whole, the selected images illustrated the shift in conceiving of creation as a space containing all things towards a new approach based on human observation. The selected medieval representations depicted the territory humans inhabit as a defined area in which every part is arranged according to a divine plan, without gaps or contradictions. Places inhabited by humans and transcendent places of divine intervention, whether of grace or perdition, were neatly arranged in all-encompassing visions of creation in which the history of salvation and the depiction of the diverse cos-

mological domains are merged. The cosmos is the body of Christ and the Earth, the dimension where human beings have access to salvation, conditional on their faithful response and moral conduct. Over time, questions about the features, the extension and the limits of the places that humans inhabit stimulated a detailed observation of territories, resulting in some of the maps we have discussed. Biblical and theological approaches are reread in the light of more precise cartographical knowledge, the reception of classical authors, travellers' experiences, and cultural exchange.

Where, in fact, is the Garden of Eden? How do the rivers flow from this primordial place crossing the globe of the Earth to reach the Mediterranean and the Red Sea? Is Jerusalem located at the centre of the Earth and history? Who inhabits Africa? These are some of the questions inspiring new representations of the inhabited world. In the early modern era, the tension between spatial approaches based on Biblical knowledge and salvation history on the one hand and, on the other, approaches based on topographical observations challenged the relationship between space and place. The historical, visual approach proposed in this volume aims at highlighting the mutual interaction between spatial concepts, perception of space and religious worldview as well as the dynamics characterising this entanglement over the centuries.

As a second step, cultural studies' approaches to space build upon theoretical foundations to tackle the complex interaction between conceptual and lived approaches to space. As already mentioned, only a limited sample of the wide-ranging inter- and transdisciplinary discourse on space and place could be discussed in depth in this volume. The positions chosen were highlighted because they proved to be particularly illuminating for analysing the manifold interactions between religion and space. The concepts developed on this basis focused on space and place as tools for asking diverse questions and understanding these social practices in an anthropological, and, in the context of religious communities and transmission processes, admittedly anthropocentric key. Thinking of space as a social interaction emphasises the dynamics between inhabited areas and their inhabitants, between the perception of being in place and the ways this very place allows perception. Human beings are always located, as is the case for religious worldviews, practices, and transmissions processes.

The tension between the concepts of space and place responds to the complexity of analysing the anthropological experience of being located. Basic-

ly, these concepts lead to different, but complementary questions. In combination, they accentuate manifold dimensions of spatial practices. »Space« is a tool for unravelling the multiple layers of spatial practices. The entanglement of spatial perceptions in everyday life, of practices of planning and designing based on specific visions of how space should be constructed, and the symbolic dimension of space as a practice of representation are crucial dimensions. »Place«, however, brings a different perspective on spatial practices. This concept foregrounds the relationship between bodies and spatial practices, which is understood as a mutual interdependence. This approach highlights the transient character of place: place is a dynamic relationship, it happens when people move and interact with others and material things, it is a transitory constellation of bodies in a spatial arrangement. Both dimensions of spatial practices are revealing for analysing spatial formations arising from the interaction of manifold worldviews and orientations.

Religious communication is rooted in spatial practices and spatial practices are shaped by religious symbols, narratives, constellations, and practices. In the Alps, this interrelation of spatial and religious practices is influenced by the perception of these lofty territories as being liminal: the mountains offer both livelihood and exposure to natural dangers. With the conquest of summits, this ambivalence of meaning is sharpened: climbing peaks, alpinists move on the edge between the preeminence and vulnerability of their bodies. Putting crosses on summits marks a conquering human presence in this hostile territory that, from the late 18th century onwards, is increasingly considered an object of study in natural sciences and cartography.

These symbols demonstrate both that mountains became part of the territory designed by humans, whilst also referring to transcendent dimensions. As a religious symbol, they undergo transformations of meaning, which vary according to time and historical circumstances. Introduced as an homage to Habsburger rulers, the crosses first referred to particular Christian religious rituals and narratives and later, to a more general idea of the sublime. The symbolic meanings produced by summit crosses are multifaceted, and in recent decades have become increasingly contested.

The liminal trait of the Alps assumes an even stronger connotation in the construction of the Gotthard tunnel. This mountain is a material barrier that had to be overcome with engineering innovation to increase the effi-

ciency of the rail network in Central Europe. Yet, even within such a technological appropriation of the mountain, spatial and religious practices are blurred. The underground territory is perceived as being extremely hostile and dangerous, and the technical appropriation of this place is entangled with religious practices that elaborate on the tension between controllable and uncontrollable natural and transcendent forces. Both strong safety policies and St. Barbara contribute to safeguarding miners and workers in the depths of the massif but on different levels. Religious practices add layers of meaning to the spatial practices of representation beyond the pragmatic devices of technology, linking the construction of a tunnel with human vulnerability and divine protection.

Funerary sites locate the experience of human life's transience and materialise the memory of the dead by means of various media. Highgate Cemetery was planned to respond to the profound transformations of modern metropolises in the 19th century. It was conceived to re-imagine burial practices in a plural society, by laying out a funerary site as a stunning garden accessible to the public. Similarly, the National Covid Memorial Wall today provides a place for remembering people that died in the pandemic by means of a standardised representation of single hearts. By visiting the wall in London and/or on the Internet, a pedestrian street by the river Thames can be turned into a funerary place with explicit references to the manifold religious, cultural, and national identities of the deceased named in the heart. This spatial practice of representation traces lines of continuity between the transmission of funerary symbols in the Victorian cemetery to the contemporary memorial graffiti in London. In both cases, the symbolic meanings are generated in multilayered communication processes arising from the funerary materialisation of the dead bodies. References to religious interpretations of the dead and conceptions of the afterlife may arise depending on the worldviews of the people interpreting the graffiti and the inscriptions.

Urban multireligious architecture offer places dedicated to individual and/or community rituals and practices from diverse traditions as an answer to the increased mobility of people in contemporary society. Architectural concepts and negotiations between political authorities, civil society, and representatives of various religious communities are materialised in buildings that respond to diversity with different strategies. The multireligious Meditation and Prayer Room at Munich airport addresses plurality with a

focus on elements referring to the natural world: light and a tree, which resonates with symbolic meanings in many religious traditions in the past and present. These arrangements accommodate individual practices, offering a small, tranquil spot in a particularly busy place. The Haus der Religionen in Bern was part of a major urban development involving not only manifold religious communities but also a reorganisation of public transportation, of housing, and other business activities in an area that had almost fallen into disuse. The arrangement of diverse minority communities and the common activities in the same building have transformed the institutions involved and significantly changed the perception of religious plurality beyond the city and the canton of Bern. This case study emphasised the interaction between a building, dynamics within communities and in the interreligious exchange. The adaptation of traditions, rituals and worldviews is both the premise for and the result of the Haus der Religionen. This unusual place is shared by each religious community's own members, as well as people working in the area, citizens, visitors, and tourists. As a consequence, the Haus der Religionen represents »religion« as a human phenomenon enhancing societal cohesion.

Over the past three centuries, museums have undergone many transformations. Nonetheless, they have constantly remained places of encounter between visitors and objects. Museums are designed to improve education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge. Religion has played a multilayered role in the formation of museums as public accessible places since the outset, with explicit references to classical traditions combined with a romanticist ideal of contemplating art as a sublime experience. Today, works of art and displayed objects integrate references to religion as a crucial dimension of shared cultural pools of symbols, narratives, constellations, and practices in manifold ways. Moreover, in their role as a place of education, museums explicitly address religious communities and traditions with specific exhibitions dealing with cultural heritage and societal plurality. Museums foster spatial practices of encounter between visitors and objects. Specific layouts lead audiences across exhibitions, stimulating them to engage in interpreting the displayed objects and critically assessing the overall topic of the show. By moving within the galleries, the audience weaves a network of relationships between the displayed objects and other visitors.

The selection of places we visited was naturally limited and the case studies principally stand for themselves rather than being mere illustrations for something else. Nonetheless, in conclusion, some common threads may tentatively be emphasised. References to diverse religious worldviews, communities and transmission processes permeate peripheral and urban places and they are perceived in everyday experiences by people dwelling there. Complex communication processes happen in arrangements in which people and material objects interact, making visible in place the relationship between immanent and transcendent dimensions. A cross on a summit, a statue in a tunnel, a heart on a wall, an artwork in a museum or a tree trunk in a meditation room at the airport are part of the space we experience, the result of planning processes and practices of representation. Their religious significance is shaped by the interaction of all those levels of space. Therefore, religion, as a multilayered communication process, takes place in spatial practices involving manifold individuals, groups, or institutions that interact within the place they inhabit.

In transmission processes over time, practices of appropriation in the liminal territories in the Alps, of remembering the dead in funerary sites, of configuring rooms accommodating manifold individual meditation or collective rituals, of encounters between exhibited objects and visitors, religious symbol systems undergo transformations in a sophisticated balance between change and recognisability. While the material dimensions of spatial practices tend towards the stability of symbol systems, the interaction among the actors in practices of representations is more dynamic. In spatial arrangements, new meanings emerge, stimulated by the interaction between diverse religious and other worldviews. The movement of bodies in places is always regulated, which contributes to the production of meaning and the interaction between the actors and the spatial arrangement. An inscription on a summit cross, a ritual performed in the construction site of a tunnel, the wall and the gate of a cemetery, instructions for painting a heart on a memorial wall, the layout of a place used for worship and prayer delimit the communication that unfolds, and are linked to different roles and functions assumed by the people involved.

Overall, addressing religion through »place« and »space« contributes to understanding this phenomenon as taking place, as always being located,

Conclusion

negotiated in spatial arrangements, and transformed in multilayered negotiations that resist generalisations.

The programme of the journey that leads through this book was inspired by spatial practices fostering religion as a resource for enhancing shared places. I hope that the travel does not stop here but that these pages may inspire new approaches and studies to space, place and religion.

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