

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.