

# 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.<sup>1</sup>*

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-

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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.