

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-I924ARpPPpc-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 Grigoroussa, 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-Olgati 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-Olgati 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 / Höpflinger / 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.

