On the Social Significance of Religious Spaces in Times of Religious Relativisation

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Introduction: On the Need for Anchors in the Ocean of Contingencies

"Now space is a reality that endures", writes Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 140), thus hitting the spot of giving social groups a feeling of continuity and permanence and the impression of a stable order in a constantly changing society. In the course of globalisation and despatrialisation, the need seems to be growing for "people [to] anchor themselves in places, and recall their historic memory" (Castells 2004, 69), thus opposing the fluid network society with independent expressions of collective identity. Thus the local venue gains significance, and it is precisely architectural spaces that can become a "kind of anchor in the ocean of contingencies" (Schroer 2009, 46). While this is true for many spaces, there is a space structure that gives, like hardly any other, to many people exactly that which is symbolised by an anchor: fidelity, support, and stability – that is, church buildings.

Obviously this also applies in a situation of religious relativisation if – on the one hand – the increasing loss of meaning of ecclesiastic institutionalised religion does not also imply the abandonment of church buildings but, on the contrary, produces the social phenomenon of a strong civil society commitment for preserving them. This can be observed especially in East Germany as the most strongly atheist influenced part of the world in which, at the same time, many people are committed to the preservation of church buildings in more than 1,000 associations, obviously wanting to preserve the church building as a symbolic place (Liska 2013) even while being distant from church. But religious relativisation is not only visible in secularisation but – on the other hand – also in pluralisation, and there, in

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1 This contribution was published first in German (Körs 2014), based on the detailed presentation of the study (Körs 2012), and has been expanded in the concluding section.
Germany, especially in the growing proportion of the Muslim population and their spatial materialisation. "The group not only transforms the space into which it has been inserted, but also yields and adapts to its physical surroundings", writes Halbwachs (1980, 130), thus demonstrating that spaces can always be shaped and are an expression of social change, the spatial changes often lagging behind the social ones and, in most cases, not being possible in an arbitrary way but only within limits. Precisely this is the situation as it presents itself in the current negotiation processes between Muslims and majority society about suitable spaces and their corresponding visibility as a translation of presence to representation (Färber et al. 2012, 63). As harmoniously or conflictual as this can happen, it becomes volatile in any case when a church is to become a mosque, as it is the case in Hamburg through the adoption of a disused Evangelical-Lutheran church building by a Muslim community. Again the symbolic implication is cited, and again church buildings are interpreted as "symbolic spaces", which is supposed to mean, in this case, a quite particular symbolism, i.e. the Christian one, because in general it is, at best, marginal for the Friends of Church associations.

While it thus is obvious that church buildings are of symbolic and thus special social relevance, it most often remains unclear what significance is actually meant with this, who is ascribing it or in how far it can be generalised, and how these meanings emerge (or also disappear). This applies the more if, like in this case, empirical answers are looked for and the social significance of church spaces is measured by current attributions of meaning, primarily following the perspective of the church visitors rather than the church administration.

For this purpose, a space-related sociological theory approach is, at first, outlined in the following paragraph, church spaces being understood as social constructions and thus being made accessible to an empirical study (2). Afterwards, an insight is given into the empirical findings (3) and, based on this, a theoretical interpretation of the church space as a "hybrid actor" is outlined (4), to be followed by some conclusions with regard to current events in the end (5).

Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

The central assumption is that spaces are not to be understood as a kind of container, filled with certain contents, but as relational ordering of living entities and social goods in constant need to be newly constituted, the people being incorporated into a synthesising process that works through perception and cognition (Löw 2001). Thus the church building is not predetermined as a rigid entity but understood as a social construction. Against this background, the question is less that of what the church space is but rather how it comes about. By analogy, the symbolism is not understood to be a given or clearly determinable but rather emerges in a subjective process of "appresentation" (Schütz 1962, 294ff.) as a synthetic performance of consciousness by drawing a conclusion from something present to something not present. From such a perspective, church buildings are among the social "repertoire of symbols that are transmitted, collectively handed down and known, or also implicitly effective", but even they "owe their existence [...] to the fact that ultimately noting that is accessible to human experience and communication can escape the symbolic work that we learned to perform" (Soeffner 2000, 180). The task is therefore to reveal the significance spectrum of church spaces and to demonstrate the patterns of their construction.

For this purpose, the perspectives of both the church administrators (experts) and of different groups of church visitors were elucidated with a combined application of qualitative and quantitative methods: community members, urban population and tourists. The focus here was the micro-perspective of the church visitors that, building up on the insights from the qualitative expert interviews, was collected through quantitative questioning in 2005 of 1,641 church visitors by means of a part-standardised questionnaire and analysed in a statistical (multivariate) procedure. The place and thus also the object of the questioning were four brick Gothic city churches along the Baltic coast – St. Mary's Church in Lübeck as well as the St. Nicolas Churches in Kiel, Wismar and Stralsund – the scope of the results thus being limited to this particular type of city church while, because of their similarity and thus guaranteed comparability, the results may be considered very valid.

2 Here, they are not representative because this would have necessitated the knowledge of the totality of visitors as well as a random sampling, and these two conditions were not available.
Empirical Findings

Church Spaces as Spaces of Varied Significance: between Architecture and House of Worship

In order to determine the significance spectrum of the church buildings, the church visitors were asked, with regard to 23 individual meanings that had emerged as especially relevant on the basis of the expert interviews, how far they connect these with the respective church. On the whole, a high degree of agreement emerged, the significance spectrum of the church building moving between the poles of an architecturally outstanding building, transmitting a special aesthetic experience through its extraordinariness, and a house of worship, in which Christian faith is expressed and practised. Here, the different attributions of meaning can be summarised into religious, ecclesiastic-community related, historical, urban, church-architecture related and building-atmosphere related dimensions.

As expected, these partially apply to varying degrees to different groups. Thus, for example, the ecclesiastic-community related meanings are attributed by members of the church community, especially when, e.g., “personal or family events” are associated with the church building. In contrast, historical and specifically also religious meanings are, interestingly enough, unaffected by the type of visitor, and it is altogether amazing that community members, inhabitants of the city and tourists, despite great differences in their usage behaviour, are closely similar with regard to their attribution of meaning. Here, the tourists also feature a high level of education and a strong religious orientation, but they are often devalued as rather superficial by the ecclesiastic leadership with regard to the intentions for their visit. By not corresponding to this image at all, they prove to be an underestimated group of visitors. More information about especially this group could be worthwhile for the churches whose future sustainability is increasingly dependent on tourism.

Even more important is the insight that there are here multiple connections rather than unambiguous and exclusive attributions. In empirical reality, the church building is hardly ever experienced, e.g., as purely religious or purely aesthetic. Especially in this variance of meaning there lies a key for understanding the collective reference to church buildings. They admit a diversity of different and even contradictory attributions of meaning that frequently happen cumulatively and therefore, in their totality, seem rather diffuse or at least ambiguous. Church buildings belong, as thus may be confirmed, “to the small but significant group of collective symbols of identity available for society”. The decisive meaning of such a collective symbol consists in the “general social reaction that it causes in almost all members of society” (Söffker 2000, 134).

Nevertheless this is not to suggest that church spaces could conserve universal meanings. Even the reference to Christianity cannot be assumed to be universally valid. In contrast to the claim of ecclesiastic actors and the assumption that “of course churches always represent Christian faith”, as an expert phrased it, the church visitor survey showed that, while this (still) applies to the greater part of about two thirds of the interviewees, the other third agrees only partly or not at all with the reference of the church space to “God and Christian faith”. The same applies to the (non)agreement with the statement that church spaces point to “there being something that transcends the human being”, so that even the reference to the religious in a wider sense is not universally valid. Thus, church spaces are not able to produce universal statements, for even those meanings that are taken to be self-evident can change, become marginal or even disappear – unless they are constantly actively reproduced.

Church Spaces as Media of Collective Memory

At the same time, church buildings – and here lies another key for understanding the “general social reaction” – are characterised by their special ability to trigger human memories. They do that, on the one hand, by participating in individual as well as collective memory processes as

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3 Thus, e.g., the religious dimension of meaning contains a reference to “God and Christian faith”, “there being something that gives meaning and certainty to my life” and “there being something that transcends us human beings”, or the historical dimension contains a reference to concrete events like “the Second World War and its destructions”, “the reconstruction of the churches” and “times of political change in the 1980s and 1990s”, but also generally to “human life and the generations who lived before us” as well as “the future and whatever is going to happen”.

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explained with the mutual connection between memories and sentiments. As church buildings recall experiences, they take part in the emergence of, e.g., sentiments of belonging, home or love that are connected with them and can be reactivated (as the sentiments steer memories, people remembering what is emotionally significant). But how can it be explained that even first-time visitors, with nearly four fifth, state that they connect "positive sentiments" with the respective church? Instead of experiences, what is frequently talked about here are feelings that seem to have been caused directly by the space, like, e.g., when a woman writes, "The light, the colours, the smell, the size. I feel safe and perceive how small and insignificant human beings are, which sometimes can be very calming". Hereby, the space is addressed in its materiality or its effects, and a specific potentiality of the space appears that can be understood as atmosphere, as "something between subject and object" (Bühne 2003). This is obviously able to cause positive sentiments even when people have no relationship with the respective church, mediated through previous impressions, experiences or narratives, but enter it for the first time.

Is there, then, a "language of the space" after all, and does the church building have a universal effect beyond the social realm? No, rather the atmosphere that is here collectively perceived as positive is caused by the social-structural commonalities of the interviewees, like especially their strong religious-ecclesiastic conditioning or current orientation. This is also the direction in which the answers of 135 pupils from Wismar and Stralsund point who were less conditioned this way or not at all. One third of them states that the church causes "no feelings at all", and almost one further fifth replies with "don’t know"; that the church causes "positive feelings", in contrast, is stated by only 37% of the pupils in Wismar and even only 16% of the pupils in Stralsund.

Thus the same applies to the explanation of the atmosphere of the church space and sentiments arising from it as for its memory-related function and ultimately any other significance content. From a sociological perspective, the danger is always to be pointed out of supporting a kind of immediateness that sovereignly ignores the fact that we have no immediate access to the things, spaces and bodies but one that has always been mediated (Schroer 2008, 144). Even here, the objection applies that

Church Spaces as Emotional Places

This memory-cultural function is frequently linked with another potentiality, that is, to trigger human sentiments. First of all, this may be

4 With this term, Halbwachs describes the spatial frame without which memory would not be possible, thus justifying the process of remembering no longer as a mere reproduction but as a socially conditioned act of reconstruction.

5 According to Nora (1990, 11) and different from Halbwachs’s opinion, places of remembrance are precisely not able to constitute a collective memory but rather symptoms of a historical rupture. It is therefore their function to preserve the collective memory against its own decay and to maintain the (almost) lost traditions.

6 They visited the church in the framework of their religious education and participated in the survey, but, based on this particular survey situation, remained otherwise unconsidered in the data analysis.
an immediate pure inherent effect of the church space does not exist; instead it seems that even the emotional experience of the church space has been shaped socio-culturally.

On the Interpretation of the Church Space as Hybrid Actor

Is the church space, then, a mere construction performance, to be interpreted as a mere projection surface of human attributions? No, because any interpretation in which an exclusive explanatory power is attributed to socio-cultural contingencies as underlying factors would deny the fact that church spaces are not only an expression of the social realm but are also able to react upon the social realm. But this is precisely what it does when it, as demonstrated, awakens memories or causes sentiments or, as the visitors write, mediates calm or gives strength or, as one expert observes, would trigger a "kind of national disaster" if missing. This potential for an independent power to act becomes educationally clear in connection with current mosque conflicts. But how can this effect of religious spaces be understood theoretically without attributing it exclusively either to the church building nor to the church visitor but by localising it in its connection as suggested by the empirical findings?

In this context, a sociological approach is revealing that is as controversial as it is productive, opening an interpretation of the church space that transcends the constructivist view pursued here without regressing into a materialist perspective: the "actor-network-theory" (ANT), a leading developer of which was the French sociologist Bruno Latour. Starting from the accusation against sociology of reducing the social exclusively to the relationship between human beings, Latour, in contrast, pursues the goal of re-including the excluded realm of things by including spaces into the reflection about the social and society. The core idea of ANT is to understand the worlds of humans and things not as separate but as interlinked and to replace the traditional concept of the social as the relationship between humans by a network sociology, focusing on the associations of human and non-human beings. What does that mean for the understanding of the relationship between church space and visitor?

Starting from the non-differentiability of the two spheres, church space and visitor are not to be considered as object and subject, as two mutually independent entities, either the church space acting on the church visitor or, vice versa, the church space being a mere projection of social construc-

tion. Rather than "having to choose between meaning without object and objectivity without meaning" (Latour 2005, 205), none of the elements, neither church space nor church visitor, can be taken as given in order to explain the respective other; rather, both are to be treated as dependent variables that are changed in the process of their encounter to a degree that something third emerges: in Latour's language a "church space-visitor" (or "visitor-church space") as a hybrid actor of human and non-human components. Neither the church space nor the church visitor determines the events but the inter-relational mixture of both.

Despite its basic openness with regard to results, this process does not happen at random, for things not only enable certain translations but also carry them out. Each artefact has its script, its stimulative nature, its potential, to seize passers-by and to compel them to play a role in its narrative (Latour 2006, 485). From this perspective, the church space is no neutral involved party that does not add anything to the action or just enables it. Thus, e.g., a pulling effect proceeds from the Nicolas Church in Kiel when, with its doors open, it "calls out to passers-by... "Ah, do come in, do come, it's warm here. Retreat, do get out of the hustle"", or in the Nicolas Church in Wismar "the glances are... pulled upwards when the people come in. And that also happens inwardly", as the church leaders narrated.

This potential of influencing people, of prompting them to certain actions, goes back to their script that they derive from their share of the institution church which, as an actant-network, also consists of non-human elements like beliefs, religious practices, rules and norms etc. as well as, in addition, essentially also of church spaces. The ecclesiastical institutional action programmes are increasingly confronted with counter-programmes in times of religious relativisation, like processes of secularisation and pluralisation, thus becoming partly modified. But the associations between the church space and the people still constitute stabilised networks, as becomes obvious from the continuing discussions on the handling of church spaces, and the "superior morality" as established by Latour for technical artefacts applies also to church spaces. At the same time, on the other hand, they are also able to break up society, as the partly contentious discussions on the construction of mosques in German cities show (Schmitt 2003; Hüttermann 2006; Hohage 2013). Estimating the mediating role of church spaces precisely is so difficult because the action that we try to estimate is subject to "blackboxing", a process that obscures the united production by actors and artefacts completely (Latour 2006, 491).
spaces are not only an expression of human changed reality; they are themselves shapers when dealing with religious diversity. What could possibly result from ever more church buildings becoming mosques? From the perspective outlined here, they would enter network-like linkages in which not only church space, mosque and the faithful of both religions take part but also the secular public, which is important especially in religiously relativised cities with a high share of people without any religious affiliation. They would then not only be an expression of an obviously successful interreligious dialogue but would themselves actively help to shape it.

In Germany, however, it is precisely this case – the reuse of a church as a mosque – that so far was declared out of the question both by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church and by the Catholic Church, the main argument being the symbolic value of the church. If, however, as this contribution has shown, the symbolic power does not exist or, as the case may be, the Christian symbolism is only part of a comprehensive range of meanings, this also relativates an important argument against its reuse. Moreover, as argued elsewhere (Körs 2015), it is precisely the mutability of the symbolic that can be an argument for the reuse of a church as a mosque. This could express the complex demands of a plural society in an especially authentic way: making the interconnections (and thus also contradictions and ties) spatially and temporally tangible and cohesion as a mutual dependence experienceable (Löw 2014, 34ff). The reuse of a church as a mosque could thus become a representation of a religiously plural society that is understood, beyond a Christian-secular mainstream society as well as a religious parallel society, as a fabric of relations between different and internally diverse religious and ideological groups – each acting in solidarity. However, this does not simply result from the reuse but is to be shaped as a social process.

If and in how far these theoretical deliberations actually apply is currently becoming observable in Hamburg where that which is impossible according to the guidelines of the two great churches became possible anyway, a former Evangelical-Lutheran church being transformed into a mosque for the first time in Germany. This became possible because the Kapernaum Church, after the fusion of its congregation, was first of all sold to an investor who did not realise his original plans of building a children’s daycare centre and then, in 2012, sold the building to the Muslim Al-Nour community who since refurbished the building and transformed it into a mosque. Although the reuse itself is still pending and is to be anal-
yed more closely, reusing a church as a mosque, in this case, seems not only to be possible but also, with its communication and negotiation processes between the parties from the religious communities, political parties, civil society, academia, media and neighbourhood, to make a contribution to societal understanding. The transformation of a church building into a mosque can thus also be a social chance, and it seems worthwhile to consider this possibility more than before in the discourse about the reuse of churches.

Bibliography


