THE CHANGING RELIGIOUS SPACE
OF LARGE WESTERN EUROPEAN CITIES

Reinhard Henkel

Abstract: Throughout history, cities rather than rural areas have been places of religious activity. This also applies to secularisation, i.e. "negative religious innovation." Especially in Western Europe, it was (and is) cities where secularisation has been strongest. On the other hand, it is cities where new religious movements can and do grow. With the secularisation thesis losing ground as the dominant explanation for changes on the religious scene, attention is increasingly drawn to these developments even in Western European cities. Following the spatial expansion of major cities in Western Europe in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, most new churches were built in outlying areas, while many old churches found at central locations have been turned into museums and other tourist sites, often without an active congregation or just with a small one. Religious "newcomers" such as Islam and charismatic and evangelical Christian churches often have to resort to the urban periphery. Because their members usually are scattered across a large area within the urban agglomeration, accessibility by car and large parking lots are more important than a central, representative location. Rather than interpreting this observation as an exodus of religion from the centres of life and centres of cities, it should be seen as an adjustment to, and an expression of, changed modern and postmodern lifestyles.

Keywords: secularisation, religious innovation, geography of religion, postsecular cities

The religious landscape of Europe is changing rapidly (Knippenberg 2005; Henkel 2012). After World War II, a process accelerated that had already started before. It is usually called secularisation, but sometimes dechristianisation, too (Lehmann 1997). In Western European countries, it is observable more obviously in traditionally Protestant countries than in Catholic ones. In Eastern Europe, it is linked to Communist regimes, which took power after the War and which strongly tried to suppress religion altogether. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and of Communism, a resurgence of religion in many Eastern European countries has been stated by

observers. But does the East/West distinction still make sense at all? Arguably, the religious divide in Europe, as was discussed at the second meeting of the series "The changing religious landscape of Europe" in Amsterdam in 2004 with the theme "The political geography of religion: Historical church-state relations in Europe and recent challenges," between the mainly Protestant North and the mainly Catholic South, is as important as the difference between Western Christianity and traditionally predominantly Orthodox Christian Eastern Europe (Knippenberg 2006). In the latter case, issues of national identity are still or (after Communism) again strongly related to religious adherence.

One question immediately arises: Can one generalize on the structure and development of religious spaces of Western European cities? Given the fact that all cities have their own individual history this seems very unlikely. My main thesis is: Changes in the religious space of large Western European cities result from the general socio-spatial developments in these cities. This sounds very obvious but needs to be said and to be shown. I will first look at the general social science approaches and come to the genuine geographical aspects, i.e. those concerning space and place, later.

Enlightenment and secularisation

Historically, urban centres have been places from which religious innovations started. In the classical age, Christianity spread into the main cities of the Mediterranean. It is in these population centres where the first congregations were founded. Bishops resided here, and cathedrals were built here. "Pagan" (paganus) originally simply meant "country bumpkin." The rural areas were the pagan ones. The same applies throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period: The Protestant Reformation as well as 18th century Pietism and 19th century Evangelicalism were urban phenomena (Casanova 2013, 114). During the 19th century, however, this trend changed: Modernisation processes in all areas of life, based on the Enlightenment, led to secularisation. And this effect was first noticed again in urban centres. Industrialisation resulted in huge migration streams from rural areas and hence to a so far unknown growth of cities. The classical quotation is that of the French sociologist le Bras who wrote that "the moment a French peasant sets foot in Paris' Gare de Montparnasse, he stops going to church" (*ibid*., original le Bras 1956, 480). And not only that. Once people left the rural parish behind, they not only ceased being practicing Catholics but became irreligious altogether. After the Second World War, the Roman Catholic priest Fernand Boulard investigated spatial differences in religiosity within France. Probably it was not by chance that this was done in the country where the Revolution took place in 1789 and which in a way was the

origin of the Enlightenment. He noted: "One can state that large cities constitute a big religious problem: The proportion of the population which does not observe their Sunday duty is considerable, and in certain social classes abstention is almost unanimous" (Boulard 1954, 73). Whereas regular attendees constituted 26% of the population in France, the figure for Paris was 13.6%, and for other major cities between 13% and 19%. For Germany as well, a number of studies show the rapid decline in church attendance in fast growing cities in the late 19th century. This first applied to the Protestant Church where the attendance rate has always been lower than in the Catholic Church. Today some 4% of the members of the main Protestant Church only go to church on an average Sunday in Germany. In the Catholic Church, attendance still used to be around 50% in 1950. Meanwhile it has dropped to 12% and it is still declining. In both churches, it is the urban areas where attendance is lowest (Henkel 1988, 2001). This development could and still can be observed in England (Gay 1971, 57–60, 79) and in most other West European countries as well. This led many sociologists of religion to take up the secularisation thesis, which had already been formulated by Max Weber at the beginning of the 20th century. Looking at Western Europe and North America, the American theologian Harvey Cox in his book "The secular city" published in 1965 postulated that the emergence of urban civilisation and the collapse of traditional religion were the dominant characteristics of his time and that they were closely linked. Weber had already seen the development of European society as an irreversible process of secularisation. It would eventually lead to an "Entzauberung" (disenchantment) of the world and finally to a complete disappearance of religion. And this development, according to Cox, starts in urban centres. Shortly after Cox, the Austrian Peter Berger (1967) published his influential study "The Sacred Canopy." This study tries to provide theoretical explanations for secularisation, which is regarded as a process by which parts of society and sections of culture are released from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. David Martin in 1978 pursued an empirical survey of this process for all European countries. At that time, it was assumed that the secularisation process would spread from Europe to all other continents where it could not yet be observed. One exception, however, was the United States, where church attendance was and still is much higher than in Western Europe.

   In the 1990s, social scientists increasingly started to question the notion that secularisation would eventually spread from Europe to the whole world. The Belgian sociologist Karel Dobbelaere (1981) had already differentiated between three dimensions of becoming secular – societal, organisational and individual – and José Casanova built on these categories to articulate a series of processes at the heart of secularisation: the differentiation of societal secular spheres from religious institutions and norms; the decline of religious belief and practice; and the marginalisation of religion to the private sphere. In his case studies of Spain, Brazil, Poland and

the United States, he notices a deprivatisation of religion and finds that also as a "public matter," religion hasn't reached the end of the road (Casanova 1994). Increasingly, Europe began to be regarded as the exceptional case rather than being the global "pace-setter" towards secularisation and religious decline (Davie 2002).

Religious diversity is constantly increasing worldwide. The spread of globalisation with its new means of communication and its migration streams brings religious movements that in the past had been confined to certain parts of the Earth into other regions of the world as well. And, of course, this is first apparent in large cities, especially global cities, because most migrants go to urban areas where they can find employment. Meanwhile a great number of empirical studies of new, especially of migrant religious communities in major European cities have been carried out. The diversity of these new religious movements is so great that some observers speak of a resurgence of religion. Of special interest is how the migrant congregations adapt to their new host environment, changing characteristics of their social and theological features. For many German cities, it is important to note that it is not Muslims who form the majority of migrants but immigrants from Christian countries in Southern Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. And the largest group is Neo-Pentecostals or Charismatics who very often start new congregations of their own, but because of their new contacts also influence German churches as well. This has been clearly shown for the cities of Mannheim and Heidelberg (Henkel 2011a). And the situation is similar in the UK, Benelux and Italy.

Because of these and other new empirical findings, Peter Berger who put forward what one could call a systematic secularisation theory meanwhile has "revoked" his earlier works and now speaks of a process of desecularisation. According to Berger, there are only two secularised sections left in the world. One consists of "people with a Western-style higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences […] (who when) they travel to, say, Istanbul, Jerusalem or New Delhi, […] almost exclusively meet with other intellectuals – that is, people much like themselves – and they can then jump to the conclusion that this or that faculty club faithfully reflects the cultural situation outside – a fatal mistake indeed!" (Berger 2001, 445–446). The other secularised section left, according to Berger, this time geographically defined, is Western Europe. On the other side, there are scholars such as Bruce (2011) and Pollack (2003) who maintain that the secularisation thesis is the best thesis explaining on-going societal processes with regard to religion not only in Western Europe but also worldwide.

Other scholars diagnose our urban societies to become post-secular. Perhaps the most conspicuous of them is Jürgen Habermas (2008) who argues that in Western societies, religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secular certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernisation is losing ground. The British geographers Baker, Beaumont, and Cloke (2011, 2012) analyse

post-secular cities and emphasise the significance of faith-based organisations, which increasingly become advocates and supporters of the losers in neoliberal societies where the state fails to care for the poor. It seems to be undisputed, therefore, that large cities, especially global cities, in Western Europe are still sites of secularisation but at the same time of religious innovation and diversification.

Urban religious landscapes

How are these general social developments reflected in urban religious landscapes, on the map? First of all, it needs to be said that there is still a lot to be done by geographers of religion. We still lack solid empirical local studies. Although there is a number of local studies available already, especially for German-speaking countries (REMID 2013), very often, however, these mappings of urban religion are done by non-geographers for whom the spatial aspect is marginal. This deficit is already apparent in the famous models of urban growth developed by the Chicago School of urban studies (Park, Burgess and others), as Casanova recently observed (2013, 118). Despite its ethnographic focus on immigrant and ethno-racial group dynamics, it completely missed the religious dimension of these urban processes in Chicago and elsewhere in America. The same applies to European urban geographers who tried to apply these models to European cities. While class, and more recently race and gender, were regarded important features of population groups shaping certain city districts, religion was not taken into account. Even the new cultural geography to a large extent ignored religion as a marker of identity (see Henkel 2011b).

During the immense growth of cities in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, many people moved out from the inner cities to the outskirts. The churches which were often built in Medieval or early modern times, of course stayed put. Although they continue to be religious symbols in public spaces, today many of them have become, to a great extent, tourist sites and museums, often without an active congregation or just with a small one. What about the new congregations, whether started by immigrants or by "natives"? For the Christian ones, it can be said that many of them represent a type of congregation which had been foreign to the European religious landscape, attracting people of a particular theological and/or cultural/lifestyle orientation (e.g. music played and sung in services, style of preaching, use of modern technology etc.). This contrasts sharply with the traditional concept of the parish comprising all Christians residing in a particular spatially defined area. In many of these new congregations, the number of younger members and visitors (university students, young professionals, and young families) is surprisingly high, again in contrast to the composition of church attendees at most worship services at traditional churches where elderly people dominate. Because

of the free church situation which means that the finances needed for church life exclusively come from the members of congregations, the identification of members with their church and their commitment usually is very strong. Most of the new, independent congregations are not very large – with membership usually numbering between 50 and 200. But most of them are actively involved in church life. If one takes attendance of religious services rather than membership as a measure, therefore, it can be stated that in some cities, these new congregations attract more people than the established religious institutions. For new congregations started by immigrant groups as well as for those started by locals, both being newcomers in the religious landscape, it is very difficult to find buildings or rooms to buy or rent where they can have their worship services. Sometimes they are allowed by traditional churches, which still are or used to be state churches of one sort or other and which are still privileged, to use their existing church buildings in central locations. But very often they have to look for worship places in the commercial real estate market. Therefore, many congregations meet in the periphery of cities where rent and land values are lower. In many cases, office or storage buildings or spaces are rebuilt into storefront churches, which only can be identified as churches on the second look. But these changes in church location are also a result of the mobile lifestyle of these Christians. On the other hand, they indicate that the catchment areas of these congregations usually comprise a very large area within urban agglomerations. Very often, accessibility by car and large parking lots are more important than a central, representative location. Especially in light of the old huge, often empty churches in city centres, this observation can be interpreted as an exodus of religion from the centres of life and of cities, so to speak the spatial aspect of church and religion being pushed out from the centre to the margins of society at large. This would run parallel to the general observation that religion is moving out from the centre of society into a marginal position because it is becoming irrelevant. But one can also take it as an adjustment to, and an expression of, changed lifestyles in the same way as the new worship forms are an adaptation to modern or postmodern and globalised lifestyles. I tend to the latter interpretation. It remains to be seen if one can speak of an Americanisation of the urban religious landscape in Europe (Henkel 2004, 459). To a considerable degree, this depends on the policies of issuing building permits by municipal authorities, which differ from country to country but also from city to city. Regarding Islamic communities, there seem to be national differences, e.g. between Germany and Great Britain: While in the former they are more restrictive in allowing mosques to be built in central locations (Schmitt 2012), they are more open in the latter (Gale 2003).

One of the main postwar socio-spatial developments in Western European cities was burgeoning suburbanisation: The city spread into its surrounding landscape. Few geographers have looked at this issue and what it meant for religion. In a recent

study, three new religious communities in suburban London were investigated (Dwyer, Gilbert, Shah 2013). The authors argue that vast suburban spaces were for a long time regarded to be even more void of religion than the inner cities and find that "religion is an element in a wider account that sees the potential for creativity, flexibility and innovation in suburban worlds" (p. 416). It can also be seen that new forms of Christianity, both inside and outside the established churches, have broken with traditional models of parish communities which are only oriented towards the population in the immediate neighbourhood of the church. Many of the religious innovations in Western European cities, at least as far as Christianity is concerned, originate in the United States. One of them is the emergence of megachurches during the last 30 years. They are defined as churches with an attendance of 2000 persons or more per weekend and are usually located in suburbia rather than in city centres. Most of them are Evangelical or Charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal in their theological orientation. In a thorough study of one megachurch in the Los Angeles area, Wilford (2012) maintains that these churches succeed because they are structured in such a way as to recapitulate the transformation of the American city in the second half of the 20th century and therefore mirror the spatial and social logic of what he calls "post-suburbia." While megachurches as a religious innovation have spread into many Latin American, African and Asian cities, especially larger ones, Western Europe seems to hardly participate in this trend. The two largest European megachurches, which are still fairly small compared to those on other continents, are found in Budapest and Kiev (World Megachurches 2013). This observation coincides with the (Western) European exceptionalism mentioned above. Whether this exceptionalism is going to stay as it is or whether these as well as other religious innovations will also influence cities in this part of the world remains to be seen.

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Reinhard Henkel
Geographisches Institut, Universität Heidelberg
Berliner Str. 48, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany
e-mail: reinhard.henkel@geog.uni-heidelberg.de