

THE SACRED IN THE METROPOLIS

*International Expert Seminar
Tuesday, March 24th 2009
University of Antwerp
Hof van Liere*

—— CALL FOR PAPERS ——

Topic

Although the city is the object of different types of research, there is a stratum in the city that doesn't receive much scholarly attention. This stratum is the way in which the city interacts and copes with the sacred, with religion and with the human search for meaning in life. While rural community life – as monocultural and monoreligious – is considered more propitious to a virtuous lifestyle, the city, as the habitat of the liberal individual, invokes associations with a secularised, hedonistic lifestyle. Given however the diversity in the contemporary cultural setting, it is exactly in the city that different religions and quests for meaning confront one another, ignore one another, communicate with each other and compete with each other – all driven by the same desire for recognition. The relics of the sacred procure unity and union, but also conflict and division. The impact of religions and their functional substitutions on the private and public life of individuals is undeniable. Understanding contemporary society and its challenges requires attention to the way in which spiritual meaning, religion and world views are shaped within urban space. Traces of this can of course be found in the presence of the traditional religions which wax and wane in the city, but also in an enormous spectrum of functional relics and alternatives.

An example of such a functional alternative is the way in which museums in the contemporary metropolis remind us of the significance which temples, churches and cathedrals once had. Museums have become sanctuaries of contemplation through which one strides with a feeling of awe and deep respect. In a sacrosanct silence one contemplates from a low seating the painting or art work that makes such an impression as if it were the shrine of a favourite saint. The architecture of contemporary museums is often spectacular (see Kiasma in Helsinki, Metropolitan and Guggenheim in New York, musea in Linz, Toledo, Boston, San Francisco, etcetera) and defines the cityscape in the same penetrating way as cathedrals once formed the landmarks of European cities. One could extend the comparison up to the opening hours on Sunday and the 'piety images' sold in the museum shop.

But there are naturally many ways in which the quest for meaning in life finds expression in the contemporary city. This workshop wants to get an overview of the scattered research that has already been done on this subject. The workshop also wants to address the methodological question concerning how this research can be done best: which conceptual tools, which approaches, which theoretical models are useful and revelatory?

Only a multidisciplinary approach combining the expertise of philosophers and historians, architects and social geographers, urban developers and sociologists, offers the possibility to draw a nuanced picture of the different layers of spirituality and religion in the city.

Organisers

University Centre Saint-Ignatius Antwerp (cf. www.ucsia.org), in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Walter Van Herck of the Department of Philosophy of Religion and the Centre Pieter Gillis of the University of Antwerp in the framework of the UCSIA scholarship of Dr. Liliana Gómez-Popescu, Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow, Columbia University, Department of Anthropology and Institute of Latin American Studies, New York and Associate Lecturer, Freie Universität Berlin, Latin American Institute, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Germany.

Keynote speakers

Liliana Gómez-Popescu, trained as Architect and Philosopher in Berlin, Oslo and Paris, is currently a lecturer in Literatures and Cultures of Latin America at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, and a DAAD-postdoctoral fellow at Columbia University and realizes research about the urban as new order, Nation-building, and the cultural field in the Caribbean. She concluded her Ph.D. in Philosophy and Humanities at the Freie Universität Berlin. The publication of her book “Political and Cultural Theories of the Megacity in Latin America” is forthcoming. Her main research fields are urban studies and sociology, literary, cultural and political theory, and philosophy.

Jan-Hendrik Bakker (1953) is a Dutch philosopher and journalist. His philosophical work focuses on anthropological themes like dwelling, reading and imagination. His PhD-thesis ‘Tijd van lezen’ (Time for reading, 1999) is a phenomenological approach of the media. The study ‘Toewijding’ (Dedication, 2003), pleads for introduction and application of electronic humanities. In his recent publication ‘Welcome in Megapolis, reflections on dwelling, city and future’ (2008), he explores the possibilities of a liveable and durable future in a strongly urbanized world. He publishes regularly in literary and philosophical magazines. In 2007 he was awarded the Jan Hanlo Essay Prijs Klein for an essay about art, nature and the city. His journalistic work encompasses literary critique and articles on urbanism, environment and landscape.

Sigurd Bergmann – born in Germany, trained in Göttingen, Germany, and Uppsala and Lund, Sweden, and living in Norway – works as professor in Religious Studies (Theology, Ethics and Philosophy of Religion with Theory of Science) at the Dept. of Archaeology and Religious Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim since 1999 and is chair of the “European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment”. In the 1990s, he lectured in systematic theology and human ecology at Lund’s university, worked as a research fellow in art history at Tromsø university, held a position as ass.prof. at Göteborg university, served as a secretary for the Nordic Forum of Contextual Theology, and initiated and founded the Institute of Contextual Theology in Lund, and between 2002 and 2005 he participated in the Norwegian national research programme on ‘Religion in the Age of Globalization’.

How Spiritual Can City Life Be?

Jan-Hendrik Bakker

Metropolises have a double origin. They stem from geographical and economical factors as well as from religious-political ones. However, since the Enlightenment the metropolis is the embodiment of the profane. It has become a synonym of the secular and material(istic) world. To ask for the relics of the sacred in the metropolis is to ask what is left of the spiritual experience in a world of concrete and glass, individualism and materialism. We have two approaches in the search for answers. The first one is to redefine 'the sacred' in terms of 'the sublime'. It turns out that art, architecture, literature and music, as typical representatives of secular modern and urban culture, are able to transform the metropolis into the scenery of the sublime — or even the sacred, as in mediaeval cathedral cities — although this is not a necessary outcome because aesthetics also have a tendency to hedonism and are therefore by no means a sound and secure substitute for the religious experience. The second approach starts from a radically different view of the sacred. This view does not identify the sacred with the transcendental but with the immanent, it sees nature as the divine source of everything, thus inspired by Spinoza's famous definition of the world as *Deus sive Natura*. Here we get involved with the ecological dimension of city life, or the lack of it. To experience nature is to experience the wholeness of being. It will be argued that both approaches fit into the scheme Martin Heidegger gave of *Da-sein* as dwelling. His definition of being-there as dwelling in a symbolic space called *Geviert* (The Four) — space which is ruled by the existential axes gods-mortals and heaven-earth — still offers us a perspective for today. This implies, however, a radical critique of modern life and the reintroduction of *locus*, place, in city building, architecture and urbanism.

Religion in the Built Environment: Aesth/Ethics, Memory and Ritual in Lived Urban Space

Sigurd Bergmann

As urbanisation moves on, and as it joins large parts of the world into one "post-metropolis" (E. Soja), we urgently need to address questions about the interplay of urban space and religion. How does "post-metropolis" interact with religion? How is "lived religion" affected by "lived (urban) space"? How can religion contribute to turn the city into a habitable place? Should we interpret religion itself as a spatial phenomenon? And how do we perceive the late modern city in the lens of the Sacred? What could spirituality in the context of "dangerous environmental change" mean for the urgent transformation of built environments in the needs of climate adaptation?

Questions like these offer a point of departure, not for a survey of them all, but for a more experimenting reflection about how to approach the field. Drawing on concepts from ecological phenomenology, anthropology, critical urban studies, theology and ritual theory, the contribution will discuss how to catalyze the spatial turn of religion in built environments with regard to "aesth/ethics", remembrance and ritual.

The Urbanization of Society: The Sacred and the Modern Metropolis

Liliana Gómez-Popescu

With the emergence of the modern metropolis and its cultural transformations that is the complete urbanization of society – following Henri Lefèbvre – the relationship between the sacred, the profane, and the everyday life has been radically changed. The lecture proposes to examine, on the one hand, those significant changes and the epistemic impact on the then emerging social sciences. On the other, it will examine the urban as new order. We will look in particular at the theoretical program proposed by the Collège de Sociologie and at its 'sociology of the sacred' in order to decipher the modern metropolis' cultural transformations and, hence, the re-emergence of the sacred also in contemporary urban spaces that rearticulate the dynamics between religion, politics, and aesthetics. Not only do those cultural transformations reflect the profound economic changes, but they also determine the sacred as an opposition to the way of perception and thinking that has given shape to the domain of both the production and the consumption.

Call for papers

Scholars are invited to present their research on the topic of the seminar in short presentations (approx. 20 minutes). Applications are welcomed from all disciplines that can offer a relevant contribution to the analysis of the religious in the urban environment.

UCSIA is prepared to arrange accommodation for selected candidates coming from abroad.

Publication

Liliana Gómez-Popescu and Walter Van Herck will edit a book containing the selected papers. Papers should count a min. of 6.000 words and not exceed 10.000 words. Instructions for the authors will be made available later.

Application

Please send an abstract of min. 800 words and max. 1000 words to the address mentioned below by the 1st of January 2009. The selection committee will report about acceptance before the 25th of January 2009.

Contact and information

The completed application form in attachment, abstract and CV are to be submitted to:

Barbara Segaert
Project Coordination
UCSIA

Prinsstraat 14– 2000 Antwerp – Belgium
Tel.: 00/32/(0)3/220.45.94
Fax.: 00/32/(0)3/707.09.31
barbara.segaert@ua.ac.be

University Centre Saint-Ignatius Antwerp (UCSIA)

THE SACRED IN THE METROPOLIS

International Expert Seminar

Tuesday, March 24th 2009
University of Antwerp
Hof van Liere

APPLICATION FORM

Please type, print, or write in block capital letters

PERSONAL AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Name, Surname	
Gender	
Date of birth	
Citizenship	
Permanent address	
Address for correspondence (if different from permanent address)	
Telephone and fax number (incl. country and area code)	
E-mail address	

B. ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

Highest Academic Qualifications Received

Title of the Degree	
Date Degree Received	
Discipline, Area of Specialization	
Degree-Granting Institution	

Current Enrolment in Academic Programs (if applicable)

Name of the Program	
Institution	
Discipline, Area of Specialization	
Anticipated Date of Completion	

C. PROFESSIONAL DATA

Current Employment (if applicable)

Position	
Institution/Company (Name, contact information)	
Dates of Employment	
Brief Description of Duties (if academic position, specify the titles and level of courses taught)	