

# Religious pluralization in Potsdam: a spatial perspective

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## Introduction

One way of clearly illustrating the religious pluralization thesis is to list the number and type of religious communities settling in cities after the Second World War. In Geneva, thanks to the precise work done by the two researchers<sup>1</sup>, we have today such a documentation at disposal. The size of the city allowed the researchers to meet all the communities, gain their trust and collect reliable data.

We applied a similar method to study the religious life in Potsdam. The capital of the state of Brandenburg obtained, however a rather different picture. Although this city is not much smaller than Geneva, counting today a little more than 150'000 persons, religious pluralization occurred to a much smaller scale: while there are about 400 religious communities in Geneva, we counted only about 40 different denominations, making up about 80 communities in Potsdam. The main reason for the significant smaller number of religious communities certainly lies in the historical development that characterizes the city. After Reformation the German regions more generally tended towards territorial mono-denominationality as a consequence of the peace-accord of Westphalia which ended the devastating civil war of 1618-1648 by defining each kingdom as religiously homogenous. Brandenburg would become a slightly deviating case in this panorama, because of the policy of tolerance in late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The two World Wars certainly accelerated and Socialism "forced"<sup>2</sup> the secularization process. Still what we observe today in the city, and in particular since German Unification, is highly interesting in terms of religious pluralization. In the current public urban space religious tolerance is put at a high value with a discourse reaching far back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this article, we shall describe some aspects of the particular case of religious pluralization in Potsdam by relying on our study run between 2010 and 2015 and aimed at censusing all religious communities and spiritual initiatives in the city. We first propose a historical reading of the city's religious spaces in two steps: we start with Reformation and focus then on the socialist period which has a huge impact still nowadays. Secondly, we present some of the data from our observation and problem-centered qualitative interviews with religious leaders, and congregants on the basis of an analytical approach which proposes a nuanced understanding of the legal public-private divide and of the spatial dimension of religious places as they are practiced.<sup>3</sup>

## The Historical establishment of religions in Potsdam

After the Prince of Brandenburg converted to Lutheranism in 1539, the new doctrine diffused in Potsdam but remained timid since in the following decades the city had to face devastating fires. Although the doctrine 'cuius regio eius religio' had been in force since 1555 in the region, Prince Johann Sigismund converted to Calvinism in 1613 urging his officials to follow him, while the pastors refused. This caused the unique proto-pluralistic situation of the so-called 'Hofcalvinismus': the members of the court converted to Calvinists, while the

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<sup>1</sup> B. Knobel and C. Gonzalez have been the main authors of this study which can be found on the website of the publicly funded center [www.cic-info.ch](http://www.cic-info.ch), last accessed 12.1.2016

<sup>2</sup> This expression was coined by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Uta Karstein, and Thomas Schmidt-Lux in their study: *Forcierte Säkularität: Religiöser Wandel und Generationendynamik im Osten Deutschlands*. Campus: Frankfurt am Main, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> First through questionnaires, then by interviewing and participant observation we collected information about the location, the history, the gender balance, the current difficulties, networking activities, the ritual interpretations etc.



population remained entirely Lutheran. One century later, King Friedrich Wilhelm I. invested in the army and in a pietistic form of Protestantism and ordered the construction respectively the renovation of a number of churches in town such as the Garrisonchurch, built in the 1730ies. The building was ornamented with Mars, the god of war, a cross-bearing orb, and the imperial eagle. After each of its victories the German empire celebrated a thanking ritual there, with the stored trophies and commemorated killed soldiers. Subsequently the church became the main crypt for the Prussian kings. Since King Frederic Wilhelm I., the 'soldier's king', believed that religion strengthens the character of a good soldier he provided churches for his mercenaries, among them Catholics from Belgium. 1738 he ordered to erect a simple building for their celebrations, which was in use until 1870. Following the influx of Silesians and Polish during the 19<sup>th</sup> century a larger church was built at the most central pedestrian-zone.

Friedrich Wilhelm I and Friedrich II also favored first the settling of Huguenots then the construction of their temple which has kept its shape until today. The Edict of Potsdam of 1685 granted Calvinist refugees from France religious freedom in Brandenburg-Prussia. The temple, as well as the centrally located "Christuskirche", built for the autonomous Evangelical-Lutheran community thanks to the protection of the empress Auguste Viktoria at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are oversized with regard to the number of their members. They have struggled to remain independent first during Nazism, then during socialism without losing their location. The Prussian Monarchs' investment in manufacturing since the 18<sup>th</sup> century facilitated immigration into Potsdam also from Switzerland, the Netherlands, France, Bohemia, and Russia, and churches or temples were built for other smaller religious communities.

Jewish settlers who started to migrate to Potsdam at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century founded a community around 1740. A first small Synagogue was inaugurated in 1767. Most members of the community were entrepreneurs and the edict of 1812 granted them Prussian citizenship. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city counted about 500 Jewish citizens and in 1903 a new Synagogue opened which was destroyed in the bombings of 1945<sup>4</sup>. By the end of the Second World War and even during socialism, there was no more Jewish life in Potsdam. The first Jewish families settled after German unification.

The Russian-Orthodox church was built in the 1830s when the Prussian King called in soldiers from Russia and built a large colony for them, it is now part of the UNESCO world cultural heritage. This elegant church is the oldest Russian-Orthodox church in Germany, signposted throughout the city and mainly visited by tourists. Most of the about 1.000 members are German nationals originating from Russia. The building was first renovated during the 1960s by the Soviet government. The current archpriest has held his office since then and stands as a powerful symbol for continuity. He struggled to keep residing with his family in the buildings of the colony adjacent to the church while the local authorities offered other buildings to renovate the historical house (Tchernodarov, 2009: 26; Hecker and Kalesse: 2003; Haase, 2009: 7). Religious diversity hence emerged from the pursuit of economic interests. Following a harsh economic crisis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, actually numerous foreign city dwellers left. Moreover, the churches' importance in the life of Germans diminished during Enlightenment<sup>5</sup>, but their public authority remained strong.

During socialism, the authorities wanted to contrast the city's historical role as a military base for the Prussian empire and the Nazi regime, and almost completely restructured the historical city center and demolished numerous churches and castles. Urban planning during the 1950s expressly envisaged a "socialist city" in order to demonstrate the rejection of "Prussian

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kaelter et alii. 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hölscher, Lucian (ed.), *Datenatlas zur religiösen Geographie im protestantischen Deutschland. Von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001.



militarism" (von Preuschen, 2011: 98). In this move, the Garrison Church<sup>6</sup> was destroyed in 1968 under the impulsion of head of state Walter Ulbricht. Parts of the tower had survived the heavy bombing of the allies and were preserved by the GDR as an anti-fascist landmark. Until its final destruction in 1968 a small community used it as its place for worship, now under the name "Holy Spirit Church" under a clear pacifistic agenda. They were ousted and dispossessed by the socialist authorities. The Garrisonchurch was destroyed but it lived on in the collective memory. After reunification a dramatic competition between different concepts took place in the Potsdam public debate: the questions were whether the Garrisonchurch could be rebuilt as it used to be, transformed into a center for peace and reconciliation, or remain a ruin. The Protestant church took a lead by establishing a provisional spiritual center on the empty ground to arise awareness of the fatal connection of Christianity and the military on the one side and of oppression by fascism and communism on the other side. Today the Garrisonchurch is the battlefield of discourses on the relation of city and church, the role of religion in society and on the lessons of the past. This debate stands as exemplary for the special character of Easter German society.<sup>7</sup>

### Religious Innovations in post-socialist Potsdam

Potsdam is connected to Berlin by many historical and infrastructural ties.<sup>8</sup> When driving from Berlin to Potsdam one hardly notices to be leaving one city and entering the other. Potsdam is known as the city with the highest percentage of scholars and scientists in Germany, since 22 research institutes (up to 1.000 employees), a university, two universities of applied sciences and several academic projects are located there. This aspect contributes to value science hugely. In Potsdam, the public space is secular, but not neutral with regard to religion. As Colin Campbell argued, "scientific orthodoxy"<sup>9</sup> plays a prominent role in post-religious societies: the high value given to science, for instance through the many advertisements of scientific conferences, research centers etc. in the city, indirectly endangers the self-esteem of religious communities by raising plausibility-standards. Religious actors need to strengthen their argument or deepen their convictions when defending a religious position in a secular environment. Until 1990 Potsdam youth received an education based on the doctrine of historical materialism refuting every religious, metaphysical or even constructivist concept altogether as bourgeois and unscientific 'idealism'. State-Marxism collapsed in 1990, but not its long-term effects. Both, the scientific orthodoxy of the parent generation and the individualistic pathos present in the younger generation create an

<sup>6</sup> This church was associated with the "Day of Potsdam" (on 5 March 1933) when part of the celebrations of the opening of the Reichstag took place in the Garrison Church. The handshake between Hitler and Hindenburg, the elected president, but also the figurehead of the Prussian military. This act was to symbolize historical continuity between the Third Reich, Prussia, and the German Empire. A recent initiative to reconstruct the church has been stopped: the opposition came from Christian and from secular associations questioning the need and the aim of the plans (cf. <http://www.preussisches-kulturerbe.de/>, <https://ohnegarnisonkirche.wordpress.com/category/aktuelles>, <http://www.christen-brauchen-keine-garnisonkirche.de/erklaerung.html>, <http://garnisonkirche-potsdam.de>)

<sup>7</sup> In the year of reunification 1989 mere 30% felt affiliated to one of the two major churches (25% Protestant (5% catholic); in 1949 – the beginning of GDR – it was a stunning 90%. In contrast the numbers in Westgermany went down from similar 90% anno 1949 to 85%.

<sup>8</sup> In 1996 the population of Brandenburg turned down an attempt to merge the state of Berlin (3,4 mio inhabitants by then, now 1,5 mio) with the state of Brandenburg (2,5 mio), although all political parties favored the fusion. One of the reasons for the rejection was the fear of Potsdam (130.000, now 165.000, 4,8% non-nationals) to end up as one of Berlin's vicinities.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, Colin: The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization, in: *The Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 4: Religion in the Contemporary World, ed. Hamilton, Malcolm London/New York: Routledge, 2007, 145-158, 154 passim. For historical examples in several religions see Stump, Roger: *The Geography of Religion. Faith, Space and Place*, Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008, 231-238 and 268-272.



atmosphere of suspicion against religious beliefs in the public space thus expecting accountability of religious individuals and causing religious communities to remain timid. Considering this particular configuration of secularity, in our research, we have included a number of groups or initiatives that stand for strong worldviews which are not directly religious: for instance we inquired into the humanist or other associations which organize the Jugendweihe, a youth-consecration ritual massively diffused during socialism to mark the transition from childhood into the working class.<sup>10</sup> Today, around 10% of each age-group in Berlin and Brandenburg celebrate the Jugendweihe, which still outnumbers Protestant confirmation. The organizers of this ritual, whom we interviewed, are no more state-funded, dropped the Marxist oath and explicitly reject its ideology, but have kept the same symbols. Marxist orthodoxy with its faith in science is now substituted by a call for self-determination with its promise of autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, Potsdam ranks as sixth among the fastest growing cities and tenth among the most attractive cities in Germany: unemployment stands at a rate of 7,3 % and empty houses at about 1 %. Today and similarly to other post-socialist German cities, only about 20% of the Potsdam population counts as Christian while non-Christian religious communities reach very low percentages and the overwhelming majority displays no religious belong at all.<sup>12</sup> In our research we identified about 40 different religious denominations in the city between 2010 and 2015.<sup>13</sup>

Nowadays, besides the socialist cityscape, the architectural legacy in Potsdam also testifies of the city's religiously plural past. As the city has served as a military and administrative center for the Prussian kingdom as well as the residence for the royal family of the German Empire, and during the GDR as the headquarters for the cadres of the communist party, the police and the military, this plurality is rooted in an economic and strategic reasoning.

Just after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, which concerned Potsdam's territory confining at west Berlin, the city has first experienced a drastic decrease in population (Büloff 2005: 108) as the rest of Eastern Germany, but, contrary to it, the population has again increased afterwards. From 1990 to the end of the 2000s, about 100'000 persons moved in and out. The city has developed strongly its touristic, economic and scientific attractiveness. Its cultural landscape – a heritage from its time as Prussia's capital – granted since 1990 by UNESCO, is one of the largest world heritage sites in Germany. The spatial regime in the historical city center is marked by an imposing renovation process. As a consequence, the rents have climbed so much in the central area that inhabitants with low incomes and independent shops

<sup>10</sup> Within the years 1956-59 the Jugendweihe became state-organized, with a skyrocketing participation from 12% to 80%, whereas the participation to the protestant confirmation dropped dramatically. (Cf. Pollack, Detlef/Rosta, Gergely: *Religion in der Moderne. Ein internationaler Vergleich*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2015, 277). The official book-gift for the socialist Jugendweihe which reached 90% of the age-group in the late 1980ies popularized historical materialism ("Weltall Erde Mensch. Ein Sammelwerk zur Entwicklungsgeschichte von Natur und Gesellschaft, Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1954-74 (20 editions, 3 times completely revised)", „Der Sozialismus – Deine Welt, 1975“, „Der Sinn unseres Lebens, 1983“). About 200.000 copies were produced each year making it the most printed book in the GDR.

<sup>11</sup> Depending on the organizers' preference the Jugendweihe follows rather a freethinker tradition (Humanistischer Verband) stressing 'tolerance', or is framed in terms of a family event, according to the parents' experience (Jugendweihe e.V.). In the last ten years the popularity and impact of the ritual is also decreasing, similarly to its competitors, the catholic and protestant initiation.

<sup>12</sup> Source: Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Zensus, Statistik Berlin Brandenburg Zensus 2011. Bevölkerung und Haushalte, Kreisfreie Stadt Potsdam*, Potsdam 2014.

<sup>13</sup> This number is quite considerable compared to larger post-socialist cities such as Halle (231.565 inhabitants) (Daniel Cyranka and Obst (ed.), '... mitten in der Stadt'. Halle zwischen Säkularisierung und religiöser Vielfalt, Halle 2001) and Leipzig (over 500'000 inhabitants), which count less communities but in a larger variety of traditions (Sikhs, Jehovah's witnesses, various Muslim communities..., cf: <http://www.leipzig.de/jugend-familie-und-soziales/auslaender-und-migranten/migration-und-integration/interkulturelles-leipzig/religioese-gemeinschaften>)



leave the center in search of cheaper rents (ibid., 106). Recently, some prominent personalities from the German show-business have settled in luxurious villas bordering one of the city's twenty lakes. This gentrification process (Holm, 2006) accompanies the city's current redefinition of its historical legacy. The new city profile is both in continuity and breaking with the image Potsdam had acquired in particular during socialism: the strong orientation towards science and technology and the importance given to anti-militarist culture. Since German reunification the city oriented efforts to revamp its identity on the long-term legacy, harkening back to early modern age of tolerance and enlightenment. The Prussian castles of the 18<sup>th</sup> century are now part of the UNESCO patrimony. Consequently political discourses, history books, or exhibitions on Potsdam portray the city as a cradle of the values of tolerance and diversity, including religious diversity.<sup>14</sup> Symbolically, the heart of this meta-narrative on Potsdam as a model for religious tolerance is carved in the Edict of Potsdam of 1685. In 2008, Potsdam's mayor backed a large public debate on the issue of tolerance and published a "New Potsdam Edict"<sup>15</sup>. Since then, a conversation is constantly alimented to promote tolerance for diversity through various public initiatives.

### Mapping religions in the Potsdam city-space

In order to locate the religious communities we have identified in our research in the city space, we relate them to the German legal spatial regime. We precise the usual distinction between *private* and *public* by differentiating two domains in each category.

Firstly, the private sphere contains an intimate space, the household, which is constitutionally guaranteed (art. 13) as inviolable and therefore not freely accessible. The meetings of religious communities in private apartments – as is the case for the Baha'i community or the group *Friedensspirale* in Potsdam – constitute the "hidden religious topography"<sup>16</sup> of the city. According to our research, few denominations, only the Mormons and Jehova's Witnesses, attempt to reach out into people's intimate spaces.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, within the private sphere there is *the communal space*: cinemas, or shops for instance. Some of these spaces are rented by congregations for meditations, rituals or meetings. The access may be exclusive as is the case for the temple of the freemasons (e.g. Johannis-lodge "Teutonia zur Weisheit"<sup>18</sup>) or half open as in the case of the *Jerusalem-Kirche*, which transformed an apartment into a church. Most of these spaces are open to interested guests and first-time-visitors, particularly if the group pursues a missionary objective<sup>19</sup> or wants to attract new customers (yoga-classes). Usually, these groups are legally recognized as registered association ("eingetragener Verein e.V."), that is, they belong to the private, not the public sphere.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the Potsdam museum (visited in January 2015) exhibiting the historical definition of Potsdam citizens as persons "die aus aller Welt Orten herbey geschafft wurden" in the Zedler Universal Lexicon, 1745 and Bauch, Martin/ Baumert, Agnes/ Büloff Tobias (eds.), *Potsdamer Geh-schichte: Gotteshäuser*, Berlin: edition q bebra: , 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kleger, Heinz (ed.), *Potsdamer Toleranzedikt*, Potsdam, 2008. 10.000 brochures were distributed, the website was accessed 70.000 times, 110 public billboards for suggestions were deployed all over the city. Passers-by wrote their comments on tolerance and diversity. The result was ambivalent, since many misused this opportunity for silly or radical slogans ('dancing unites', 'death to fascists' ...). But the public discourse showed also the overwhelming consensus of the population to accept other cultures and religions. Cf. [www.potsdamer-toleranzedikt.de](http://www.potsdamer-toleranzedikt.de).

<sup>16</sup> Becci, 12.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview with Mormon missionaries in Potsdam/Golm (June 2014) they stated that only two out of hundred visited households would invite them to enter.

<sup>18</sup> Even if freemasons uphold the secrecy of membership and exclude foreigners from their ceremonies they regularly offer open meetings for interested men.

<sup>19</sup> This is the case of the free, that is, not affiliated to the mainline national churches, evangelical communities (for instance the *Freie Evangelische Gemeinde*).



As for the public space, we firstly distinguish a *civic space* within it: the streets, pedestrian-zones (Brandenburger Straße), squares (Luisenplatz), and sidewalks where people – mostly strangers to each other – meet and mutually perceive each other. Here, some religious communities reach out: it happens in Potsdam to bump into a stand of Scientology (which has its headquarters in Berlin) or of the Ahmadyyia.<sup>20</sup> This domain also contains the public transportation, the historic and public parks, the palaces as tourist spots, and communal enterprises like the theater, the concert-hall and the stadiums. Upon request they can be used for exhibitions, for instance, as did the Baha’I community together with Bedito (a society for interreligious dialogue) and the Institute for Religious Studies of the University of Potsdam.<sup>21</sup> One cabaret is for instance rented on Sundays by an evangelical church<sup>22</sup> that settled in the city a few years ago and holds its services there. It is legally an entity of public right but remains rather within a low standard of publicity. It has for instance opened a café in one of the booming areas of the city and has an office in another building. Moreover, it takes a series of initiatives to help elderly persons, support local initiatives of solidarity, etc.

A second dimension of public space is the *official space*. It consists mainly of the representations of authority in a society: the city hall, the parliament, the administration and its ministries. But it also extends to initiatives and institutes which organize lectures or festivals in behalf of the city respectively the state. At a higher institutional level it can be the project on tolerance in Potsdam,<sup>23</sup> the reconstruction of the earliest Qor’an versions (Corpus Coranicum) or the publications of the center *Moses Mendelssohn* on Jewish-German history. Since these institutions are financed by the public they are obliged to make their findings public.

The German federal republic rests on the constitutional consensus which holds that the state is obliged not only to tolerate but to cooperate with religious communities while keeping its neutrality. The main instrument for this is the entity under public law<sup>24</sup>, a construct which merges persons into one legal entity with special privileges and duties, like organizing religion courses in public schools, running divinity-schools at public universities or imposing religious expectations on its employed members and duties such as having a constitutional character, guaranteeing stability and contribute to the common good.<sup>25</sup> Those religious denominations in Potsdam which hold this status are the Protestant (union of Lutheran and Reformed), the Calvinist and the Catholic denomination, which possess churches in the historic center, act not only as an aggregation of individuals but as representatives of historical continuity. Their buildings are closely linked to the common public spaces: to the civic space by being part of the world heritage open for any visitor (e.g. Friedenskirche) or by providing space for events in their parish-centers; to the official space because they host the

<sup>20</sup> The distribution of free copies of the Qor’an in German pedestrian-zones since 2012 triggered a fierce debate, fueled by Christian apocalyptic fears. This seems rather exaggerated regarding the fact that not even 5.000 Germans converted to Islam, mostly following their Muslim spouse. In spite of all criticism the constitutional right of freedom of religious exercise (Art. 4) never was put into question.

<sup>21</sup> The exhibition’s title was “The World-religions”.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. <http://mittendrin-potsdam.de/>, accessed 17.1.2016.

<sup>23</sup> See below „Neues Potsdamer Toleranzedikt“.

<sup>24</sup> There is no adequate translation for the German term *Körperschaft öffentlichen Rechts* since ‘corporation’ refers to economic entities and ‘public body’ would comprise also federal entities. A concise, but bulky rendering would be ‘statutory body under public law’. They are similar to ‘Anstalten öffentlichen Rechts/institutions under public law’ (public banks, broadcasting, hospitals) who have users, but no members.

<sup>25</sup> Traditionally the Protestant Landeskirchen and the Catholic dioceses held this title. Following the pluralization of society the status was endowed to many smaller groups, who applied for it in recent times: Orthodox, Baptist, Christ-catholic, Jehova’s Witnesses, Christian Science ..., but also non-Christian denominations like Ahmadyya, Jewish congregations, Baha’i, and non-religious groups like the freethinkers or the humanist society. Each state has its own record: Berlin hosts 47 *Körperschaften* (by 2013), Brandenburg hosts 19 (by 2007). Cf. [www.uni-trier.de/?id=26713](http://www.uni-trier.de/?id=26713).



opening of the newly elected city-council (e.g. Nicolai-Kirche). The mentioned debate about the Garrisonchurch shows how controversial such an overlap can get.

Today, 22 Protestant parishes partly with kindergartens, schools, associations etc. are located in the city. The imposing size of the churches stands in contrast to the small number of their members. These shrinking parishes in cities are currently inventing new strategies in order to maintain legitimately their place. During socialism, East German Churches adopted a *niche strategy*: they created spaces that filled the only few niches that the socialist organization of society left open. They sheltered political dissidents but were also primarily located at very private and intimate levels. Interestingly, while the structural position of the churches changed after the fall of the socialist regime, there is continuity in this niche-attitude. Nowadays, it is no more a state-organized oppression but a cultural secularity that constitutes the environment.<sup>26</sup> This drives most of the religious communities into a kind of double-diasporic state, and they focus on interior stabilization. It is a great difference, if a religious group lives in a diaspora among many other denominations like in the USA or in a diaspora among predominantly non-believers. In the latter case the intellectual costs of keeping the tension are much higher.<sup>27</sup> Today, the historical churches in the city center are increasingly used for cultural purposes, such as music concerts, which is still considered a spiritual offer.<sup>28</sup>

Also Potsdam's Catholic parish shrunk dramatically during the socialist period and displaced its main communications into private apartments. Migration from Western Germany since 1990 rose the number of members from a few hundred to now 6.000 which amounts to 5% of the city-population. Nowadays, it is organized into two parishes, with various more or less formal organizations: for children, for the elderly, for the ill etc. Catholics are active in students' conferences, kindergartens and in different *Caritas* initiatives.<sup>29</sup> Recently a Catholic school (primary and highschool) has been opened which enjoys a high demand. By diversifying their activity Catholic maintain a strong presence in the city. Around 30.000 citizens and tourists walk into the Catholic church in the city-center to sightsee it.

### The spatial dimension of religious city life

Relying on our recent proposal to consider religious actors in urban spaces either at work keeping, making or seeking the space dedicated to their main activities<sup>30</sup>, our attention now goes to this use of the church building which reflects that such spaces cannot be limited to their official function but play a major role in terms of city-memory. While the usual variable considering the participation to religious celebrations indicates a decline in time, other uses of historical churches need to be taken into account if one wants to understand their social valence. This point becomes clear in the words spoken by an elderly man who considered himself very secular and describe his relation to a church building, Saint Matthew church, in

<sup>26</sup> Eastern Germany has more explicit atheists and fewer believers in a personal God than any other region in the world (Gärtner, Christel/ Pollack, Detlef/ Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika (eds.), *Atheismus und religiöse Indifferenz*, Opladen: VERLAG 2004). Only 18% of the Eastern German population consider themselves a religious person (contrary to 58% of West Germans). Cf. Pollack/Rosta., *Religion in der Moderne*, 354f.

<sup>27</sup> This situation is extensively explained by Charles Taylor in his book *A secular age*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> For instance in January 2015, a concert by Soname Yangchen with the very universalized title "The voice of Tibet. Spiritual songs from a lost homeland" took place in the Nicolaikirche. This church had been renovated demonstratively by the East German socialist authorities and considered a monument while other churches were destroyed (von Preuschen 2011, 98). The Nattwerder church and the Friedenskirche, too, are used for concerts during summertime.

<sup>29</sup> See for an overview, <http://www.caritas-brandenburg.de/70544.html> (accessed 20. April 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Becci, Burchardt, Giorda, in *Current Sociology* 2016



Berlin in the following way<sup>31</sup>:

„Close to Potsdamer Platz there is a yellow churchbuilding... *Sankt Matthaeus Kirche am Kulturforum*... I used to enter this church when I was ten or so in order to steal some scrap because it was a ruin at the time, 1950, I was eight, and we used to go on the rampage there and smoke already and so on... around us everything was reaped down and there were some garden plots and and ruins (.) and I was driving along there today and said to myself, 'hey it's open, let's go inside'. And there was a short service going on with a very nice pastor who made a short sermon about love and everything was ok so.”

Ushers today take it as an issue to keep the Catholic church in Potsdam open every day and sell religious items, especially newly designed guides for visitors and children. The Catholic, Protestant and Calvinist churches are strongly active in urban ecumenical circles together with free evangelical communities. Beyond their immediate sacred function, in cities, historical churches can play a crucial role for the maintenance of cultural identity.<sup>32</sup> Weekly church attendance remains low and keeps decreasing, but Protestant and Catholic churches are reorienting their main activity: cultural and educational activities are added to the ritual ones. While pastoral demands for baptisms, weddings, funerals reach the inner circles of the congregations, seasonal rituals like Christmas and Easter liturgy attract a more distant population.<sup>33</sup> In Potsdam, an inconspicuous tradition gained a lot of attention and participation from all sides: The lampoon-procession on St. Martin's day which is organized in pre-schools groups turned into a semi-religious ceremony attended by non-religious and Muslim children and parents as well. It is noteworthy, that it takes place on the public streets and squares, not in a church. But such out-reach is matched by the opposite tendency to narrow the horizon of religious practice: The Corpus-Christi-procession of the Catholics used to take its route through the main street (Brandenburger Straße). Since the parishioners felt uneasy with walking through street-cafes and tourist shops they changed the route to a parking-lot adjacent to the church, where they celebrate on a skater-ramp. To prefer such a profane spot over the city-magistrale documents the cautious attitude of religious groups in Potsdam in a clear way.

Although Potsdam's historical sources indicate the presence of Muslim soldiers already since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Göse, 2013), no religious building was offered to these soldiers. Ironically, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV. ordered during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the building of a so-called mosque but this building actually was the pumping station bringing the water to the castle's fountains. Today, the association of Muslims, the “Al Farouk Moschee”, founded in 1998, counting about 30 members and reuniting up to 200 persons from about 50 countries for the prayers, has already moved three times and now rents two apartments, which cannot be identified as a mosque from outside. Unlike Berlin which hosts large Muslim communities and mosques, Potsdam has few Muslim inhabitants. Here, the community fully relies on resources from local members, rents a rather small and poorly equipped room so that the prayers on some holy days need to be held twice in order to allow for all members to participate, many of which are commuting from Berlin for professional reasons. The long-term aim of the community is to purchase a permanent place but since the current global political situation is so delicate for Muslims the community is very attentive at not getting

<sup>31</sup> Interview made by Irene Becci on February 2007 in the framework on a research on religious life after prison. The church is located close to the former border between east and West Berlin, close to Potsdamer Square. Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were ordained pastor here. Cf. Becci, I., *Languages of Change in Prison: Thoughts About the Homologies Between Secular Rehabilitation, Religious Conversion and Spiritual Quest*. In: Becci, I./ Roy, O. (eds.), *Religious Diversity in European Prisons. Challenges and Implications for Rehabilitation*. Berlin: Springer, pp. 159-176, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. also Lütke Daldrup, Engelbert Kirchen im öffentlichen Raum – aktuelle Herausforderungen, in Keller, Manfred / Vogel, Kerstin (eds.), *Erweiterte Nutzung von Kirchen – Modell mit Zukunft*, Münster: Lit 2008, pp. 23-41.

<sup>33</sup> Usually attendance to Christmas celebrations is five to seven times higher than on ordinary Sundays.



involved in any public activity. Apart from the practicing Muslims, no one really visits this place.<sup>34</sup> The Muslim community manages its belonging to the locality by using the German language within the community and by constantly being in touch with local authorities. Members of the community accompany Muslims when they go to hospital or to government offices for administrative issues. They also help to organize funerals in the local cemetery and so on. The relation to space for this community enters into what Knott and Vasquez call “place-making”.<sup>35</sup> survey by the integration office of the region of Brandenburg among migrants' religious communities<sup>36</sup> in 2009 found that they moved their places of worships several times in recent years, including being hosted by other communities or meeting in a prefabricated container building.

A similar spatial relation is handled by one small and two larger Jewish communities making up more than 400 members in Potsdam. The communities are involved in difficult debates with various city authorities who globally support the plan on the construction of a new Synagogue.<sup>37</sup> They have divergent understandings of the main purposes of the building so that today each community meets in different provisional places. Most of the members of one community are refugees from the former Soviet Union and have socio-economic and occupational concerns, which are reflected in their building plans. The strategy of place-making builds on the connection of the community to the historical identity of the city reaching before the world wars.

In our research, we also included an investigation of places and initiatives that could count as alternative to the world-religions. In Potsdam, some of these religious or spiritual traditions are not new but present at latest since the reign of King Friedrich Wilhelm II. who was fascinated by Spiritism. He had one pyramid erected in his park which still stands today, and other buildings linked to his occultist interests.

In recent years, in Potsdam a number of new spiritual – neo-oriental, esoteric, shamanistic or new age – initiatives have emerged. Offers such as channeling for the spiritual personality development, Buddhist meditation, astrology, yoga, reiki, healing, Ayurveda, develop and are visible when one walks through the city center, enters cafés or organic shops and sees advertisements, posters, decorations. However, this offer is also in constant flux. The initiators are mostly local Germans and have variegated relationships to the spaces they occupy. Most of them actually do not own spaces but instead are engaged in what we call strategies of “place seeking”. Since the beginning of 2010 until today, for instance, an “Indian library”, and the esoteric shops “Methatron” (sic!), which also offered channeling courses, and “Moonbird”, although very popular, have shut down as a consequence of the above-mentioned gentrification processes in the historical city center. However, the activities themselves have not disappeared but are now “‘on the move’ and take place at existing places or festivals, which are expressions of the process of eventization of religion. The Yoga and mantra singing meetings continue but take place in the homes of the initiators or in fitness studios. One Ayurveda group actually meets in rooms located in the same building as medical cabinets. A Reiki healing circle is composed of persons coming from a post-socialist

<sup>34</sup> Except for investigative reasons. During our meeting with representatives they mentioned that school-projects, students and journalists keep on pouring with requests for interviews. The Muslims share the fate of other small communities who experience public curiosity and observation, which leads – as in the case of the Jerusalem-Gemeinde – to stricter self-seclusion. As in the case of the Muslim community such seclusion would draw even more attention and suspicion.

<sup>35</sup> Vasquez, Manuel A./Knott, Kim: Three dimensions of religious place-making in diaspora, In: *Global Networks*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 07.2014, 326-347.

<sup>36</sup> Ten were repertoired but only 6 (Christian, Muslim and Jewish) communities actually contacted. Cf. [http://www.masgf.brandenburg.de/media\\_fast/4055/ib\\_religionen.pdf](http://www.masgf.brandenburg.de/media_fast/4055/ib_religionen.pdf), accessed 15.5.2015.

<sup>37</sup> The old synagogue was burnt down 1938 during the Reichspogromnacht (night of broken glass).



background who reject Christian doctrines but are open to all sorts of mystic influences.

One New Age meditation center that has existed for 10 years is an exception in this panorama. The owner of the place, herself an esoteric master, has become a very important reference in the field, but is continuously balancing the need to remain a spiritual agent, keep up finances and maintain good pragmatic relationships with the neighborhood. The range of people using the place is great so that alternative places for offers are constantly needed. A similarly paradigmatic case is a Yoga teacher we met who was influenced by Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. Originally from India, her teaching was much appreciated by her loyal yogis. For years, she was in an unstable situation and had no permanent place to hold her classes. Places were either ill-suited or generally rather temporary solutions. She had therefore been looking for a better room for a while and sometimes practiced yoga in parks. Interestingly, this uncertain situation did not at all bother her yogis who told us "we don't care about the place" when asked about their point of view. They were very confident they would find a place where to practice. *Place seeking* can in this case also be seen as a philosophy of constantly looking for a space without getting attached to any specific place. The connections to spaces are liquid, in the sense proposed by Zygmunt Bauman to qualify the current social condition: as he writes, fluids "travel easily. They 'flow', 'spill', 'run out', 'splash', 'pour over', 'leak', unlike solids, they are not easily stopped - they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still." Indeed the lack of a stable inscription in a precise space of the city is not viewed as an obstacle but as a chance. Interestingly, this fluidity is now being adopted consciously by religious new-comers in the city such as the evangelical free church which calls this operatory mode "contextualization of their implantation".<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Our short overview of the religious plurality in Potsdam indicates that in the current situation, religious groups, communities or initiatives tend to achieve visibility through deterritorialization. In Potsdam's religious landscape we observed that the denominations who had the privilege of owning a church in the midst of the public space, are prone to territorialize themselves. Whereas the denominations who were without representative buildings hail their existence as pilgrims and thus deterritorialize themselves. If this is true the spaces would form the religions they host and not vice versa.

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<sup>38</sup> *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, 2.



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