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Urban Prayers. Neue religiöse Bewegungen in der globalen Stadt

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June 2013, Beyoğlu, Istanbul: The occupation of Gezi Park began as resistance against the government's plan to turn the last remaining park in the metropolis' center into another shopping mall, following the logic of neoliberal urban transformation that has shaped the governance of the ruling Islamic party for the past two decades. What began as a peaceful protest by eco-activists suddenly developed into a collective uprising against the politics of the AKP. An alliance evolved that united groups as diverse as anarchists, Kemalists, secular nationalists and Kurdish activists, anti-capitalist Muslims and feminists, all protected by the soccer ultras of Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray. This conjuncture surpassed the secular-Islamic fault line that is often used to refer to contemporary problems within Turkish society. Luxury hotels, as well as neighboring mosques opened their doors as a sanctuary for protestors fleeing from tear-gas and riot police batons. During Ramadan demonstrators from diverse backgrounds met on Istiklal Avenue for the *iftar* and transformed the religious fast-breaking into an urban political protest; a ritual reinforcement of the *communitas* of

resistance on the main artery of consumer culture in Istanbul.

Those recent dynamics unfolded exactly at the intersection of religion and urban transformation, which is the analytical subject of *Urban Prayers*. The publication is embedded in a wider project called *Global Prayers. Redemption and Salvation in the City*, which seeks to examine mutual processes of transformation: of religion establishing new urban spaces, as well as the city creating and re-shaping new forms of the religious. The volume was edited by metroZones, a collective of journalists, urbanists and artists that understands its mandate as interweaving "research, knowledge production, cultural practice and political intervention at the interface of art, academia and politics, and to provide a forum for their public discussion" ([www.http://globalprayers.info/](http://globalprayers.info/)).

Urban Prayers assembles a variety of scholarly perspectives on the phenomenon of contemporary urban religiosity. The ten contributions focus on metropolises in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe. The majority of the authors have a background

in either Anthropology or Sociology. Their contributions address the religious in charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity, liberation theology, Hindu-nationalist groups, Sikhism and Islam. In addition to seven conventional scientific papers, the strongest dynamics unfold in the three conversations with Dussel, Eckert, Penta and Schiffauer. Those fruitful exchanges allow both sides – editors as well as authors – to capture the various interconnections of religion and urban formation more precisely than any scientific monologue would be equipped to. The interviews also enable both sides to take a distinct position. The book's textual form is complemented by a series of black and white photos that visually underline the arguments.

The collection is a unique and unprecedented attempt to close an academic gap. It interweaves two academic inquiries where usually either one would treat the other as a marginal footnote. Given the mentioned contents, *Urban Prayers* manages a well-balanced account of identity politics, economic aspects and the porous boundaries between what is considered religious and secular in urban space. Bayat, for example, exposes the “myth of the Islamic poor”, drawing on the examples of the Islamic revolution in Iran and militant Islamic movements in Cairo. His analysis disentangles the relation between scarcity and religiosity, a view that tenaciously pervades many descriptions of religious practices in the metropolises of the global south. Focusing on Pentecostalism in a *barrio* of Buenos Aires, Semán also deconstructs the notion of the religious

Other as a deficient silhouette of the Self; of a culture of poverty as the fertile soil of religion.

The publication furthermore highlights that religion can allow for various forms of agency and empowerment. This is an important additional aspect of the phenomenon mentioned above. Even though some of the religious organizations analyzed may instrumentalize the urban poor for their political purposes, Eckert's account of the Hindu-nationalist *Shiv Sena*-movement and their efforts in impoverished neighborhoods in Mumbai accentuates that the relationship between religious movements and the urban poor is of a dialectical nature.

Several authors pose the question whether the new religious movements are a source of separation or convergence. One of the strongest articles, Teschner's account of urban religious movements in Nairobi and Durban, describes how religion bridges rather than reinforces the divides between different ethnic groups, especially so in densely-populated, poor neighborhoods. Ukah, on the other hand, shows that the Prayer Camp in the outskirts of Lagos, the biggest private property in Nigeria, ultimately functions as a means of exclusion: a gated community where only affluent believers gain access to new forms of living. Urban violence as the ultimate form of conflict and separation is a central topic that many contributions revolve around. Religiosity is depicted as a way out of violence in the case of Pentecostalism in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Adherents of the Hindu-nationalist *Shiv Sena*, Eckert concludes,

instrumentalize and are instrumentalized by the Mumbai middle class as perpetrators of violence to accomplish political goals and economic hegemony.

Bayat points to transregional dynamics in the conceptualization and political implementation of urban development. The author shows how the discourse on modernization and religious fundamentalism is reinforced through concepts of security applied by institutions like USAID and European NGOs. In Arif's account it is faith-based organizations that fill the void in urban public services created by neoliberal structural adjustment politics of the state.

Urban Prayers is published in German and therefore focuses on a German-speaking audience. It creates the opportunity for an overdue debate on the subject. The variety of articles manages to reach beyond the narrow ideological dispute in Germany, where religion is either being ignored or addressed with a mixture of fear or taunting arrogance, effectively obstructing the view on the relevance of new religious movements for urban transformation.

Even though the issue critically assesses conceptual entanglements of modernity and the religious, it refrains from treating religion in the heart of the beast of Western modernity. This is especially unfortunate as the city is considered the spearhead of modernity. The few contributions not geographically situated in the global south deal with recently-migrated groups like Bangladeshis in London or Turkish *almancilar* in Berlin. In any case, these are the "other"

to the majority of the German readership. In contrast, the supporting exhibition *Urban Cultures of Global Prayers* that was held in a Berlin art gallery in 2011 also shed light on an evangelical youth project, which rents one of the most-frequented cinemas in Berlin for Sunday church services, thus accessing a predominantly secular space for religious purposes. An account of this sort would have enriched the publication, as it could have shown that the re-formations of the religious in urban settings are not only limited to a cultural "other" that can be easily identified. Further, a clear stance of the authors would have added to the progressive and differentiated scope of the publication. With the exception of Enrique Dussel and Leo Penta, both of them theologians, none of the contributors reveal their personal position on religion.

"Those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so by great peril" (Berger 1999). In line with Berger's famous quote, *Urban Prayers* represents a seminal effort in de-silencing religion in urban affairs. It successfully manages to present a series of contextually differentiated insights, respectfully revealing the ambivalences inherent in the subject.

Bibliography

Berger, Thomas (1999): *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Michigan: Grand Rapids.