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kim knott, volkhard krech & birgit meyer

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kim knott[a], volkhard krech[b] and birgit meyer[c]

[a]lancaster university, uk; [b]ruhr-university, bochum, germany; [c]utrecht university, netherlands

ABSTRACT

In order to understand current dynamics of religious diversity, a focus on the tangible presence of religion and the co-existence of new and longstanding religious buildings, sites and artifacts in urban spaces is a fruitful starting point. Launching the notion of iconic religion, this introduction seeks to contribute to developing a scholarly framework for the nexus of religion and the city from a spatial, material, aesthetic and semiotic angle. Situated in the interface between matter and religious meaning, religious icons are not simply carriers of meaning, but make it present.

Keywords: iconic religion, urban diversity, aesthetics and the senses, materiality of urban space.

Kim Knott is Professor of Religious and Secular Studies at Lancaster University and Deputy Director of the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST). http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/ppr/about-us/people/kim-knott. k.knott@lancaster.ac.uk

Volkhard Krech is Professor of Religious Studies at Bochum University and Director of the Center for Religious Studies (CERES). For more information see: http://www.ceres.rub.de/en/personen/details/volkhard-krech/.

Birgit Meyer is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University and one of the editors of *Material Religion*. For more information see: http://www.uu.nl/staff/BMeyer/0.

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Visitors to the cities featured in this special issue—Berlin, London, Amsterdam and Granada—could not walk far without encountering the material traces of religion. Even if they failed to pay heed to them, their gaze would fall upon religious buildings, they would brush past pedestrians wearing items of religious dress, glance at evidence of religious events on posters, leaflets and sign-boards, and hear church bells, the Islamic call to prayer or other religious sounds. The history, culture and politics of European cities cannot be grasped without reference to religion, but all too often it has been neglected in discussions of urban space. Scholars of religion have been slow to consider the built environment and urban infrastructure as contexts for religious place-making and an opportunity for religious creativity and performance. In the academic field of urban studies, the city has predominantly been seen through a secularist lens (Lanz 2013). This pertains in particular to cities in Europe, long taken as the vanguard of modernization and secularization. From such a linear, teleological perspective, the constitutive role of religion in shaping urban space is easily overlooked. At the same time, with increasing religious diversity and its many palpable signs, the traces of the religious past also come back into view. There are promising beginnings (e.g. Garbin 2012; Garnett and Harris 2013; Hüwelmeier and Krause 2011; Oosterbaan 2014; Vertovec 2015), but there is still more to be done to understand and analyze the spatial, material, and sensorial presence of religions in cities across Europe and the complex ways in which past and present intersect (Hayden and Walker 2013). This special issue contributes to this endeavor by offering a set of articles that focus on specific religious sites and buildings that have been vested with either a sacrosanct or, as we call it, an iconic character.[1]

Urban Diversity

Since the turn of the century, religion has become a widely discussed issue across Europe. Religious concepts, symbols and practices have made their appearance in media and popular culture, and religion as an issue has found its way into debates about identity, heritage, migrant communities, equality issues and faith-based social services. Crystallizing religious diversity alongside marked secularist positions, cities are prime arenas in which the public presence of religion—through, for instance, modes of dress, buildings, sounds, rituals and performances—is displayed and discussed. In inner cities, and increasingly in suburbs (Dwyer, Gilbert, and Bindi 2013), religious people and groups leave material evidence of their presence. New places of worship and other religious sites, purpose-built or recycled, permanent or temporary, have been constructed to meet

the needs of migrant communities or of evolving networks of spiritual seekers. More important for this special issue is the engagement with material traces of the religious past, as it shows in the use of existing Christian buildings as sites for other religious or secular purposes (Beekers and Tamimi Arab, and Engelbart and Krech in this issue), the re-appropriation of the Crossbones Graveyard, found to host the bones of persons denied a decent Christian burial in London (Berns in this issue), or the divergent negotiations of the Alhambra in Granada (Hirschkind in this issue). Such sites, and other spatial and material manifestations of the urban sacred, make demands on urban space. They embody a relationship between worshippers and the divine; they draw attention to cultural differences and to the public expression and performance of identities (Verkaaik 2013). In this sense, they are excellent entry points to study the dynamics of religious diversity.

Despite the reification of tolerance and diversity in official discourse, equality legislation, and education, observers—whether religious participants, regular passers-by, or tourists—respond in many different ways to religious buildings, symbols, processions and events. Some people see them as the positive expressions of urban multiculturalism, or the necessary products of freedom and equality; others as signs of the Islamization of society, or as unwelcome evidence that religion is re-gaining ground in public life. Such views come to the fore in public debates and media coverage, for example when news gets round that there are plans to build a new mosque (Tamimi Arab 2013).

How are Europe's many historical churches, cathedrals and chapels, once filled with the sights and sounds of Catholic and Protestant worship, "read" today? Their use may have changed from religious to secular (witness those that have been converted to warehouses or performance spaces). They may have changed hands and become objects of art history, cultural heritage, and thus of touristic interest (Engelbart and Krech, this issue), or may have been converted into mosques, gurdwaras or Hindu temples, making them still more difficult to discern as the traces of different religious regimes compete within them. Even those that remain in active use as Christian churches may seem impenetrable and unapproachable to the uninitiated. But it is not only the Christian past that resonates in contemporary urban space. Granada's Alhambra—qualified as one of Europe's prime heritage sites—points to the longstanding presence and eventual defeat of the Moors in Andalucia, opening up for divergent memories and sensibilities in the context of current diversity (Hirschkind, this issue).

Religious and other campaigning groups, especially those established by migrants, often make direct claims either to

secure space or to be publicly noticed via a representative building. As Beekers and Tamimi Arab (in this issue, but see also Berns, in this issue) suggest, they have "iconic aspirations." An application for planning to extend or change the function of a building or to hold a public procession constitutes just such a claim (Kong 2005). The first signals a group's commitment to religious place-making, and its intention to grow and put down roots (Vásquez and Knott 2014); the second, to reproduce cultural traditions in a new location, to draw the public gaze and invite questions (Garbin 2012). In contemporary secular societies, religious claims, by their very nature, are contested. They are interpreted by majority institutions (planning authorities, heritage organizations, the state) as minority claims made in a context of scarce resources. Urban space is densely occupied, highly sought after and in short supply. Interpretations of how such space should be apportioned and used, what buildings or practices are appropriate and where, and what values are expressed and endorsed in adjudicating between religious and other claims are all important. Disputes arise because local authorities and residents are attached to particular conceptions of their neighborhoods, and resist having these unsettled (Berns, in this issue).

Such material assertions are not necessarily negatively received by public bodies, but may instead be framed as a public good. "Diversity" has become a trade mark of global cities (Vertovec 2015), celebrated in markets and festivals as well as reified in public discourse (Stringer 2013). Furthermore, religion is often given a positive value within an urban heritage economy in which contemporary constructions of the past are narrated to add value to contemporary "visitor attractions" (Macdonald 2013). Religion has an important place in such accounts, and often finds its way beyond the built environment of churches and synagogues into the material culture of tourist souvenirs, guide books, documentaries and historical re-enactments. This heritage presence rarely renders the theological or ritual particularities of religious traditions, but it does foreground the place of religion in the history of cities and brings it to the attention of contemporary tourists and inhabitants. Underlying such representations, however, may lie deep differences about how religious sites should be maintained and for what purpose; this comes to the fore markedly in the different imaginations of the Alhambra (Hirschkind, in this volume). Whose interests and interpretations are privileged, and whose are buried and ignored in the making of heritage? And how can sensibilities within scholarly research be attuned towards alternative ways of relating to a city's past?

Tangible Presence

The guiding proposition of this special issue is that a focus on the tangible presence of religion in urban spaces is a fruitful starting point to understand the dynamics of religious diversity. Our notion of iconic religion is situated against this backdrop. In the introduction to their volume *Iconic power*, Jeffrey Alexander and Dominik Bartmánski criticize social theory for having "preferred the trope of disenchantment over totemism" (2012, 3). As a consequence, social theory fails to grasp how significant material artifacts do not only enshrine values and meanings, but also engender sensations, feelings and experiences that are difficult to put into words and yet are central to constructing society. Their proposition of a new synthesis of the Durkheimian notion of the totem as a material artifact that is able to arouse a sense of effervescence among its worshippers and the so-called iconic turn as it took off in the German strand of the study of visual culture (*Bildwissenschaft*) is well-taken. This synthesis crystallizes in their sociological concept of the icon: "Objects become icons when they have not only material force but also symbolic power. Actors have iconic consciousness when they experience material objects, not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally, but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force" (1). Profiled as a new concept for social analysis that brings together discourse and aesthetics, meaning and sensation, the icon is a productive starting point for the study of the transformation of the urban sacred, and the tensions and discussions engendered by them. Indeed, "to appreciate the iconic is to think about social construction differently, broadening sociological epistemology in an aesthetic way" (4). Such an integrated approach also underpins the contributions to this special issue, which evolved around analyzing the role of certain objects, buildings and spaces in the politics and aesthetics of world-making in Amsterdam, Berlin, Granada and London.

While Alexander and Bartmánski look at icons and iconic power across a large number of contexts, this volume concentrates—as is appropriate for the journal *Material Religion*—on religious material forms such as burial grounds, mosques, churches, and ruins. For a long time the study of religion was characterized by a bias towards meaning making, and tended to neglect the role of objects, the body and the senses in the binding and bonding of believers and in the genesis of a sense of divine presence among them. Calling systematic attention to the physicality, corporeality and spatiality of religion, the material turn in the study of religion opens up new perspectives on how religion takes place in urban space (Meyer 2013). As noted, the modern European city has long been taken as offering evidence to the privatization

and disappearance of religion, which were taken to be key features of secularization. The subsequent closing down of Christian churches in the course of processes of "unchurching" was taken for granted. As a consequence of the preponderance of the master narrative of secularization and its abstract, immaterialized understanding of religion in terms of belief, the tangible remains of this process, as well as the materiality of processes of demolition and repurposing, gained too little attention.

While the decline in church attendance and membership is a social fact, it would still be short-sighted, as the contributions to this issue show, to simply overlook the traces of the Christian past in urban space. These traces, we argue, are vested with a special iconic quality. Iconic quality here refers to a particular human–object relation in which a building, site or other item has the capacity to enshrine and convey a sense of a special, sacrosanct presence to beholders whose acts and attitudes resonate with and reproduce this presence. Iconic quality is relational and arises within particular human–object encounters. Concerted public—and scholarly—attention to old and new religious architecture only emerged with the arrival of religious newcomers, especially Muslims, who eventually sought to develop their own mosques, thereby assuming visibility and audibility in urban space (Verkaaik 2013). In this process old and new iconic engagements with religious buildings and sites come into view. While at least in dominant discourse the Alhambra in Granada operates as a reminder of Catholic victory over the presence of Islam that gains new momentum in the light of the arrival of Muslim migrants, the Fatih Mosque in Amsterdam is the site of a conversion of an abandoned Catholic church to a mosque frequented by Muslim migrants in the center of Amsterdam. Crossbones Graveyard, as a gloomy reminder of a past Christian regime that denied allegedly deviant people a decent burial is iconized as a site to commemorate the outcast dead. The site Luisenstadt situated in the district Mitte of Berlin is a socio-culturally constructed space where different layers of meaning such as economics, politics, cultural heritage, and religion interact with each other, and icons of nostalgia alternate with those of religious resilience. Such material processes of the destruction, reshuffling, construction and iconization of old and new religious sites, as well as the tensions and debates ensuing from them, are the central focus of this volume. In the following section, we will outline how the notion of iconic religion involves an integrated spatial, material, aesthetic and semiotic approach that is suitable to cover the complexities of the divergent meanings, values, sensations and feelings that emerge between certain religious sites and buildings and their interlocutors.

Iconic Religion

The notion of iconic religion refers to the term "icon," which has a long history. We would like to highlight the following four aspects, which are of particular relevance for our purposes.

First, Plato has given one of the oldest proofs for using the notion of "icon." In his book *The Sophist*, Theaetetus debates with a stranger about the truth of an image (*εἴδωλον*; *eídōlon*). After having discussed aspects of imitation, likeness, reality and illusion, the stranger seems to be confused and asks: "Then what we call a likeness [*εἰκών*; *eíkōn*], though not really existing, really does exist?" Theaetetus answers: "Not-being does seem to have got into some such entanglement (*συμπλοκή*; *symplokḗ*) with being, and it is very absurd" (*Sophist* 240b—241c, in Plato 1921, 351). Thus, a fundamental paradox of presentation, representation, and presence is connected with the very beginning of using the term "icon." The philosopher Noburu Nōtomi comments on this passage as follows: "First, an image (or likeness) not really is F (that is, not the original); it is different from the original. Second, however, it is false to say that an image really is-not F; it is not completely different from the original, either. Third, we can say that an image *is* F in a certain way" (Nōtomi 1999, 161). Furthermore, the quotation from *The Sophist* shows that the intertwining (*συμπλοκή*; *symplokḗ*) of image and language (in a broad sense, including behavioral gestures and other sign languages) as an indicator for reality is decisive for further conceptualization and analysis. Icons depict something which is not present (or even does not exist); they bring it to appearance (or even into existence) through bearing a resemblance with the depicted. However, likeness can only be realized via performative ascription. It only exists if a relation between an image and the depicted is called likeness and is authorized as such. What is made present (or even brought into existence) in socio-cultural reality through icons involves a condensation of concepts, physical objects, physiological perception, and feelings. The iconicity of religious icons consists of the likeness with and thus the presence of the signified attributed as religious and authorized respectively within a religious tradition. Icons might therefore be considered as being part or even in the center of a "sensational form" (Meyer 2009).

Second, it is not by chance that the concept of the icon plays a crucial role in the history of religions, since the function of the icon—namely bringing something which is not present into appearance—is an essential responsibility of religion. If we take the distinction between immanence and transcendence as a point of reference, it makes sense to state that religion sets out to make the unavailable available, the invisible visible, the untouchable touchable, the unheard

hearable, and so on. For example, Jesus Christ has been called an incarnated icon of the invisible God since early Christianity. However, soon after the concept of the icon was adopted it began to be contested, whether Christians venerate icons such as the cross and depictions of Jesus Christ or relics of Saints.[2] The debate culminated in the Council of Hieria in 754, which condemned the production and veneration of icons. The council opposed the deification (*ἀποθέωσις*; *apothéōsis*) of matter, which pejoratively was called idolatry. On the other hand, theologians such as John of Damascus (ca. 676—ca. 749) strongly defended the veneration of icons. His argument refers to the doctrine of incarnation: Since God became flesh in Jesus Christ, Christians may and indeed must make and venerate icons (John of Damascus 2003). The position of the iconophiles was officially sanctioned by the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787. Against this backdrop, icons have become a crucial reference of veneration in Orthodox Christianity. In consequence of the iconoclast controversy, icons "are seen as necessary adjuncts and expressions of the Church at worship, as representing—or better, making present—the whole 'company of Heaven.' The assemblage of imagery is intended to 'symbolize' the reality of the Church as the new creation, the meeting place of Heaven and earth" (Prokurat, Golitzin, and Peterson 1996, 165). As Sonja Luehrmann points out in her contribution, Orthodox "icons and their use belong to a visual paradigm of 'seeing into being', where what one puts before one's eyes has profound effects on the kind of person one becomes and the reality one lives in." Within this visual paradigm, icons both trigger and attract religious experience as a performance, in which the object and the act of seeing share similarities or are even considered as a unity. Without neglecting the differences, the concept of the icon performed and reflected in Orthodox Christianity corresponds with practices in other religions, e.g. in Hindu worship, which is centered on the act of seeing (*darśan*) (Eck 1998; see also Pinney 2004).

Third, the semiotician Charles S. Peirce (1839—1914) uses the term "icon" to characterize a certain class of signs. As the contribution of Robert Yelle highlights, Peirce calls those signs icons which bear a qualitative resemblance to the signified object. An icon is a sign which makes the object present by showing a qualitative similarity with it, but without being identical with the object (otherwise, semiosis would collapse). However, the icon is only one element of the threefold semiotic approach. While the icon is a certain kind of sign vehicle (representamen), which stands for what it resembles, the index is a sign that correlates with and thus implies or points to the object, and the symbol is a sign that denotes an object by virtue of a conventional concept, rule or habit. All

of the three sign aspects are intertwined with each other in the semiotic process, but there is no finally given and static relation between them: "No particular objects are intrinsically icons, indices, or symbols. They are interpreted to be so, depending on what is produced in response" (Deacon 1997, 71ff). For example, the sign "church" can stand for the iconic presence of a sacred space, indicate a physical building, and refer to a concept of a place of worship. It depends on the empirical case, which of the sign aspects is stressed.

Fourth, in the study of art history and visual culture the picture, the act of seeing, and their relation, are often conceptualized by using the term "iconology." However, the understanding of iconology is contested. By proclaiming the "pictorial turn," William J. T. Mitchell (1994) focuses on the materiality of the picture and its embeddedness in the political context. Gottfried Boehm has coined the term "iconic turn" in order to understand the "iconic logos" and investigate how images create meaning (Boehm and Mitchell 2009, 105—106). Thus, approaches in art history move between the materiality of pictures as icons, concepts that are inherent in icons, and the reception of icons. David Morgan has extended the notion of the icon even to sound, and adopted the concept to the study of religion: "Sound is a powerful 'icon' when it turns into the very thing it represents: the voice of the divine. Whether spoken, sung, heard, or seen, sacred forms of representation are performances that transform sounds and images into the things they signify" (Morgan 2005, 10). While Gottfried Boehm (2011) reacts to the paradox of presentation, representation, and presence in a hermeneutical way by introducing the approach of "iconic difference" between the factual existence of pictures and their reflection, Hans Belting in his contribution to this special issue takes up an anthropological position and points out that the iconicity of pictures mainly consists of a twofold presence: of the presence "in" a picture and the presence "of" a picture.

Synthesizing these four central aspects of the use of the term "icon," we suggest treating "iconic religion" as a heuristic and analytical concept in the study of religion that helps us grasp the emergence of a sense of a sacred surplus. Religious icons are not essentially given—they are not revealed nor do they appear as an epiphany—but develop as authorized socio-cultural constructs. Once established, they foster religion in all its dimensions of experience, materiality, cognition, and action. We suggest that artificial and natural objects (or sets of objects) such as buildings, pictures, places, statues, pieces of clothing, texts, gestures, and bodily behavior can be referred to as religious icons if they trigger religious communication, including action and experience that is attributed with religious meaning. Just as pictures are a medium of communi-

cation (Sachs-Hombach 2013), religious icons are a medium of religious communication. They have a high recognition value (like labels of economic products and company brands) and thus channel perception, behavior, and communication into the direction of religion. Religious icons foster the self-referentiality of religion. Objects only function as religious icons if religion has comprehensive agency.

A religious icon, however, is often contested, since the concepts, objects, feelings and actions which it refers to, triggers and attracts, are always polysemic and multivalent. This is enhanced in a context of high diversity, as in the cities of Amsterdam, Berlin, Granada and London, where different religious groups with their own takes on the sacred as well as secular atheists and agnostics live alongside each other in more or less strained configurations. A religious icon therefore does not essentially and at all times bear a resemblance to a religious concept or image (*εἴδωλον; eídōlon*) and a religiously addressed experience or action, but may also be treated as inadequate and even false, as Plato argues in his *Sophist*.[3] Translating this metaphysical position into a social scientific approach, scholars in the study of religion do not decide about truth and falsehood. They rather try to explain the ways in which the distinctions between "adequate" and "inadequate" or "true" and "false" are dealt with in socio-cultural reality. What is qualified as true in a certain religious perspective might be qualified as false—i.e. not functioning as a religious icon—from another religious perspective or in another context (e.g. in the fields of politics, law, economics, or arts). Thus, religious icons may transform into secular icons (Alexander, Bartmański, and Giesen 2012), or change their meaning while continuing to be a religious icon. The notion of iconic religion therefore is useful for analyzing different understandings of and tensions around religious sites and buildings in diverse urban settings. For example, a vivid religious iconicity may turn into or be complemented by a "nostalgic iconicity" after a church has been secularized, or, in general, if sacred objects become part of cultural heritage (Paine 2013). A religious icon might also change its religious meaning, as is the case with churches that have been converted into mosques (see Beekers and Tamimi Arab in this issue). In turn, objects with a common socio-cultural meaning might be transferred to religious icons, as the contribution by Steph Berns on the Crossbones Graveyard shows.

Even if religious icons are not contested, they always perform an interplay between different kinds of reference, namely of a reference to its physical existence, to concepts, to expressed feelings, and to visible bodily behavior. It is an empirical question, which figuration of the different references a religious icon constitutes and which reference it

stresses. The notion of iconic religion therefore allows us to study, empirically, the multiple ways in which certain objects are appreciated and treated. If, for instance, the reference to its physical existence is accentuated, certain affordances come to the fore (Gibson [1979] 2015). In the case of the Crossbones Graveyard described by Steph Berns, the gates attract people to attach (visible bodily behavior) proper objects to them (physical dimension) in order to express their appreciation (as a certain feeling) to the dead (based on a certain concept of memory). Thus, the physical sign vehicle of the gates with deposited objects and its meaning (including action and experience) are strongly connected, without being identical. In the case of religious icons, religion "gets physical" in as much as the physical objects they refer to function as "material anchors" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 195—216) for religious communication. Since religious icons are the interface between matter and religious meaning, they are not simply carriers of meaning, but make it present. In short: they embody religion.

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notes and references

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[2] "By 'icons' is to be understood in this context any form of religious art, whether mosaics, frescos, decoration of sacred vessels, garments and books, even statues, as well as paintings on board" (Louth 2003, 8). We easily can extend the scope of the term icon to further objects such as buildings, places, garments, gestures, words, physical books (Parmenter 2013), religious texts and sound (Morgan 2005, 10), and much else.

[3] Plato uses the term "illusion" (*φάνταομα; phántasma*).

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