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Sacred Geography: Religion in the Lived Space of Climatic Change

Global climate change represents one of the most demanding challenges to humanity in the twenty-first century and beyond. Acknowledging this situation, climate impact science has developed into one of the most successful interdisciplinary research fields. Nevertheless, current scientific, political, and public discussions about mitigating and adapting to climate change are largely shaped by the limits of contemporary mechanistic and economy-oriented worldviews which neglect the deeper human and cultural dimension of climate change. This project locates itself in recent research that puts the vulnerability of people at the center, and thereby it enters an alternative interdisciplinary path: it explores the implications of climate change in the frame of the environmental humanities while focusing on the study of religion as a microcosm of the human and cultural dimension of climate change.

In this context, religion is regarded as a central and determinative driving force in human practices and ideologies with regards to both the alleviation of and the adjustment to climatic changes. The role of religion in climatic change is hereby not analyzed as an isolated phenomenon but explored with regards to its intersection with the environment, climate impact science, environmental anthropology, and human geography. This research is realized with the help of previously untried methodology—an objective-designed concept of space. Therefore, the project produces insights of significance not only for the religious studies but also for environmental and climate science.

Space and place have been marginalized or even absent in religious studies and theology for long periods in history. This mirrors a strong characteristic of the so-called Western culture and its history, which consequently has prioritized time over space. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, space/place reflections have moved away from the margins to several sectors of sciences and the humanities which have been characterized as “the spatial turn.” Spatial metaphors and the central image of the Earth as “our home” are also at the heart of environmentalism. My previous research projects have emphasized identifying the religious dimension of topographies, architecture, urban studies, and technical mobility systems, which for religious studies and theology represents a quite unconventional path. This project will draw on insights and tools from these previous investigations and will apply the theories and methods which so far have proven relevant to the field of climate change.

Furthermore, this project is located in a wider long-term research process that has been initiated by Dr. Dieter Gerten, PIK and myself in 2007. This process has so far led to three international workshops and two published books. My project focuses on the exploration of the spatiality of religion in the lived space of climatic change, especially with regard to three questions:

- a) How could the theory of religion be integrated into critical urban studies and its third space, i.e. to study the E. Soja approach?
- b) Could such an approach be fruitfully applied to the human ecology of climatic change, in my preliminary words “the lived space of climatic change”?
- c) How can one, in a theoretically robust way, substantiate a model for the exploration of “religion in the lived space of climatic change”?