Transformation of Sacred Space: Function and Use of Religious Places in Germany (TRANSARA)

In March 2020 the inter- and transdisciplinary research project „Transformation of Sacred Space: Function and Use of Religious Places in Germany“, funded by the German Research Foundation (FOR 2733), started. The project has a duration of thirty-six months until evaluation for a second period. The project is hosted by Bonn University and is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Albert Gerhards, Dr. Kim de Wildt and Dr. Robert Plum. The research consortium focuses on the transformation of sacred space, predominantly church reuse, from different disciplinary approaches, such as practical protestant and catholic theological and philosophical perspectives, art historical, architectural perspectives, and economic perspectives. This diversity of perspectives is needed since church reuse is a multilayered, societal phenomenon which involves not only religious stakeholders, but, and sometimes even more so, several secular actors as well. Church reuse is a pressing matter in Germany since, due to a decreasing number of churchgoers, the question what to do with so-called obsolete church buildings becomes an increasing reality for many parishes and congregations and for society as a whole. Church reuse encompasses a wide range of uses from religious reuse, e.g. the use of a church by another denomination, to cultural and social reuses, e.g. reuse as an art gallery or retirement facility, or commercial reuses, e.g. office space. The project is divided in seven subprojects which are located at the Universities of Bonn (main applicant), Leipzig, Cologne and Wuppertal. As the main geographical focus, we have chosen the areas of Aachen and Leipzig, since these are especially interesting for comparative reasons. Whereas Aachen is still predominantly Roman Catholic, Leipzig is mainly secular and Protestant. Besides, Aachen and Leipzig can be seen as illustrative of the complex history of Germany, being representative of, respectively, the western and the eastern part of Germany, reflecting their differing histories and attitudes towards religion. We focus on the interaction between objects, people, and processes in order to develop practically applicable criteria for the future use of church buildings. We have initiated the Network Church Reuse in Germany to further the dialogue between diverse stakeholders and are building a database of church transformations in the Aachen and Leipzig areas to which the diverse disciplines contribute their research. Although the
research deals predominantly with church reuse as a topic that concerns the future and transformation of sacred space, another focal point consists of the new forms that future sacred spaces may take. Therefore, one of the projects within the research consortium deals explicitly with multifaith spaces as new forms of sacred space. Moreover, the overall aim is to develop a theory of sacred space that encompasses its transformational dimensions, the changing face of the sacred-profane-dichotomy and the increasing societal interest in material heritage.

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