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# Space - Religion - Communication: State of the Arts and Exemplary Empirical Analysis

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# Space - Religion - Communication: State of the Arts and Exemplary Empirical Analysis

*by* Thea D. Boldt

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## 1. Introduction

This article was conceived to demonstrate that in the course of research on space in the context of studies in religion a general and crucial shift from a substantialist notion of space to a constructivist notion can be observed. This shift eventually leads to the concept of construction of space in liaison with studies in religion from the perspective of communicative constructivism; also, it encourages the subjective dimension and the cultural and institutional aspects of the construction of space in the context of religion [Knoblauch 2017, 293-328]. Subsequently, drawing on the state of the arts in the research on space in the frame of studies in religion, in the first part of this article, the research desiderata will be pointed out in order to address the necessity of empirical work on space, religion, and communication. Following this postulate, the second part of this article will be dedicated to an exemplary analysis of spacing practices in the context of a work-in-progress empirical project on the spread of meditation practices (Shamatha/Vipashyana, Mindfulness) in the West. This analysis takes its point of departure in a concept of space that calls attention to materiality and sociality of space [Löw 2001] and brings space in close relationship with communication and body [Knoblauch 2017] [see also Knoblauch/Löw in this volume]. Accordingly, this paper draws on spacing practices as material objectifications of the religious and – on the basis of videographical data recorded during a silent meditation retreat in a Buddhist meditation centre in Germany – focuses 1)

on the material objectivation of the religious as a product of communicative actions of the social actors involved in the design, construction, and utilisation of religious spaces, 2) on the question in what way and through what means the organisation of ritual spaces influences the structure of religious rituals. Since this paper understands rituals as forms of communicative, or more precisely symbolic action [Soeffner 2004; 2010], the main concern of the empirical analysis is not only how ritual spaces are shaped in their materiality through translocal, poly-contextual and mediatised communicative actions, but also how ritual spaces are being constructed through the relational arrangement of social actors, objects, and technologies, insofar that we are able to speak about the ritualisation of space and the ritualisation of religious practices at the interface between the materiality and the sociality of the religious.

## **2. Space – Religion – Communication: Short Overview of the State of the Arts**

The notion of space has been playing a major role ever since the beginnings not only of sociology of religion, but also more generally since the beginnings of research in religious studies. Up until the end of the Twentieth century, space has been understood as being a “container” for religious activities, as an objectively prespecified geographical factor that contains the religious rituals – predominantly those that have been institutionalized by the respective churches [Carroll 2015, 2-5]. However, the largely absolutist ideas of a territorial, location-dependent, and Kantian provenance,<sup>1</sup> that regard space as an a priori principle of order, are still to be found in literature addressing religious space(s) to this day. Both the theoretical and the empirical treatises in this field take the definiteness and separability of religious space as their starting point. They refer to the specifics of religious space(s) in the form of churches, temples, chapels, and so forth, while assuming a strict separation of the sacred and the profane (likewise, of center and periphery, inside and outside, high and low, above and below, and so forth). The origin of this mindset traces back to the work of Emile Durkheim [1912] and its further development by Mircea Eliade [Eliade 1957a; 1957b; 1958]. The profane – a mountain, a river, a tree, a city, a building, and so

<sup>1</sup> Taking a reference to Immanuel Kant’s work [1781/2009] it has to be said however, that Kant’s objectives were forms of knowledge (in German *Erkenntnisformen*) and his notion of space (and time) can only be understood in this context as forms of intuition (in German “*Anschauungsformen*”). And these *Anschauungsformen* of space and time (that always appear together as each others reference) are given *apriori* as forms of cognizance. Kant is therefore referring to space and time in an anthropological manner, as possibilities of cognizance, knowledge, perception, to put it in other way – as consequences of an anthropological heritage of human kind.

forth – is transcended in an act of hierophany, in a revelation of sacred space. When a territory or any location reveals itself as sacred to the *homo religiosus* in an act of hierophany, a rift in the homogeneity of space occurs, as well as “the revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse without mark” [Eliade 1957a, 23].<sup>2</sup> Among other things, the sacred space is endowed with special significance in Eliades’ work because it allows for orientation (which, in itself, is a term relating to space). It constitutes the “center of the world,” “the fixed point,” the “central axis” [*Ibidem*, 23]. In this vein, research literature is interested in the architecture of sacred places, churches, places of pilgrimage, and their symbolism (for example, doors and vertical components as transition zones between the sacred and the profane, or the possibilities and limitations of the representation of the divine, and so forth). In a similarly classical religio-phenomenological manner, Wheatley [1971, 41ff.] describes the sacred places of antique Chinese cities as cosmo-magical symbols, Carrasco [1981] the cosmological symbolism of Aztec temples, and Ray [1977] the royal altars in Buganda. On the whole, a vast abundance of treatises could be subsumed under the heading “religious space(s),” that, increasingly since the late 1950s, have been dealing with the significance of the architecture of religious places and buildings in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or indigenous belief systems from antiquity to the present.<sup>3</sup> A major part of the research conducted in this field advocates an understanding of topographies of sacred places as well as the rituals that take place there in connection with territorialization, hierarchization, and structuring of the encounter with the divine.<sup>4</sup> Some of the more recent scientific works do investigate sanctuaries with regard to their theatrical aspects, to draw attention to how social and political power relations are introduced, put to the test, established, consolidated, affirmed, and challenged [Kilde 2002; 2008]. Most of the treatises, however, still largely go along with a conception that postulates a substantial religious space, without minding the efforts that contribute to the social construction of their religious character.

The research works of the recent past have increasingly opposed the substantialist conception of space in the wake of Eliade. The work of Jonathan Z. Smith [1978; 1982; 1987] constitutes prominent criticism and, at the same time, an extension of the Eliadian paradigm. Following Victor Turner’s *Sociology of Rituals* [1969], Smith states that religious rituals denote liminal experiences and do not necessarily always emerge in the center, but quite the contrary, at the social and geographical

<sup>2</sup> Translation from German edition by Thea D. Boldt.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see Brereton [2005, 7978-7986]; Carroll [2015].

<sup>4</sup> For medieval times and the early modern era, see Rau and Schwerhoff [2008].

periphery – and hence have a political function, as they destabilize the center. Doing so, Smith emphasizes the active contribution of religious actors in the construction of religious space(s) and thereby contradicts Eliade’s essentialist basic idea of an absolute entity or existence that “prescribes” the sacred spaces. A similar shift can also be observed in geography of religion.<sup>5</sup> In this context, religion is put in relation with specific spacial units that are often congruent with political boundaries. This applies to cities, but also to wider regions, as in Hero, Krech and Zander [2008], who conducted a complete survey of the religious field in the German federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia – of course, it also applies to whole states and entire countries. However, divergent spacial dimensions usually do not matter much, and the focus on national administrative divisions ordinarily results in the review of religious forms that are state-approved or officially recognized and formally institutionalized. Above all, the city as a research parameter plays such a major role that a separate elaboration would be in order, a desideratum that is, however, beyond the scope of this treatise.

In his prominent publication *The Geography of Religion* [2008], Stump, by contrast, postulates the fundamental spatial and cultural contextuality of religious systems. According to his proposition, religious groups do not just simply exist in space, but put their religious beliefs into effect as spatial constructions [*Ibidem*, 23]. In these spatial constructions, religious subjects find an expression of their ideas about the order of the world, their philosophy of life, and their place in the world [*Ibidem*, 24]. Although Stump uses the Eliadian concepts of sacred and profane space, he still puts forward the proposition that religious ideas both structure sacred space as well as penetrate profane space and give meaning to it. In “deep maps,” which nowadays make use of a variety of media – the *Digital Atlas of American Religion* is an example – spaces are, inter alia, contextualized ideologically, discursively, or culturally.

With the so-called “spacial turn,” interest in subjective experiences of religious actors with space begins in the 1970s and 1980s. Under the influence of the theoretical spacial concepts of Yi-Fu Tuan [1977], de Certeau [1984], Lefebvre [1991] and others, the previously accepted notion of religious space has been widely challenged. The studies that were conducted in this context increasingly interpret religious space(s) with regard to the analysis of rival, competing discourses about the negotiation of conflict-laden territorial claims [Carroll 2015]. On a related note, Chidester and Linenthal [1995] assert that sacred spaces are manufactured, claimed, granted, possessed, and managed to denote and enforce political and social interests of certain groups. Furthermore, employing ethnographical and narrative methods, there is the articulation of new research questions in the field of religious studies that is practiced in

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see Park [1994].

everyday life. Space is a constitutive element of religion, because space affects people, and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the performative practices of sacralization and putting in order of space by means of sensory elements, visualizations, sounds, smells, gustatory sensations, and physical gestures become the primary research focus.<sup>7</sup>

In German-language research, the reception of Löw's theory attests to this new apprehension of space and religion. Martina Löw's sociological conceptualization of space is based on the assumption of a relational arrangement of social goods and people (living beings) in places [Löw 2001, 224]. This relational concept makes it possible to understand space as a systematic means for the social construction of reality. Space is not assumed to be known beforehand [*Ibidem*, 13], but is processually integrated into the course of action, in a way that "space(s) emerge from an arrangement of bodies and objects" [*Ibidem*, 67].<sup>8</sup> As a result, the separation of materiality and sociality of space(s) is overcome. Spaces become social structures that are marked by material and symbolic components [*Ibidem*, 15]. Applying Löw's theory of space to textual analysis in the context of religion, Geiger [2010] examines *Deuteronomy*, the fifth book of the *Old Testament*, with regard to the conceptions and ideas of space (synthesis) that are constituted in the text and actions that create space (spacing), that refer to places of living beings of the implied readers [Geiger 2010, 108].

Furthermore, Stoetzer [2010] states that

memories and attributions of meaning concerning the spatial configuration of a place are remembered together with the place itself. Strong emotions respecting modifications in these built, institutionalized spaces, in church buildings etc., in regard to their conversion or even demolition, can be explained with recourse to a relational concept of space that does not deterministically deduce stability from repetitive action, in the systematic separation of place and space [Stoetzer 2010, 102] (translation from German by Thea D. Boldt).

The shift in basic theory is accompanied by the observation that the diagnoses of a "secular modernity" no longer apply to the conception of religious space. So, only now the consequences of secularization – in a second modern era, so to speak – become apparent, for example, in the large-scale reutilization of religious spaces: The decline in church attendance, but also the decreasing numbers of priests, more and more frequently result in the question if and how religious buildings can be alternatively used. We are talking about the "form type" of buildings that are identified as unequivocally religious, which are coupled with a new "usage type" – which sometimes leads to considerable conflict [Francescato 1994]. If secularization can

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Erne and Schütz [2010]; Kane [2006].

<sup>7</sup> For an overview, see Hall [1997].

<sup>8</sup> Translation from German by Thea D. Boldt.

be regarded as a modern phenomenon, then the process of “resacralization”, even “desecularization” [Berger 1999], engenders not only growth, but a (new) spreading of religion. This was initially considered a globalization and deterritorialization of religion, but the growing number of mosque buildings, Hindu or Buddhist temples, that are the visible results of the migration of adherents of these religions [Guggenheim 2010] – as well as the migration of the contents of other religions since the 1960s and their mingling with Western knowledge, which results in independent forms (New Age, spirituality) with their own particular spaces [Greverus; Welz 1990] – attests to the fact that we are facing the formation of new religious places and spaces. In this context, Anttonen [1996; 2005] observes that various attributions of sacrality should be understood

as representations of the general mental capacity of human beings to set apart places and sites in specific locations and points of terrain in local topography in order to mark ritual spaces and establish rules of conduct for their maintenance as well as for specific social values and categorizations on which the inviolability of behavioral norms is based [Anttonen 2005, 185].

Tweed’s survey [1997; 2006] among Cuban Catholics in the USA comes to the conclusion that religion, especially in connection with space, has an exceptional significance for migrants; it safeguards the spatial organisation of their experience and their belonging. Religion becomes a space of physical-material, territorial, and cosmic marking of belonging, as is reflected in the shrines of Cuban migrants in Miami, the Mexican patron saints feasts in which Californian compatriots participate via video transmission from their villages [Kummels 2010], but also in the way the Muslim mosques in Germany develop their own specific form of “spirituality” [Schiffauer 2010, 36ff.]. This brings about what many researchers call a “heterolocal” religious space that connects diverse religious groups and communities [Vasquez and Marquardt 2003]. In that vein, Tweed [2006] suggests to replace the notion of a spatially confined diaspora with a concept of religion that, as a “locative process,” is concerned with the finding of places and movement through space(s). With this in mind, Kilde [2002] analyzed the architecture of American megachurches and made visible the integration of religion into everyday life, and Waghorne [1998] demonstrates how the Sri Siva Vishnu temple in Washington constitutes a specific American form of Hindu identity. In Germany, Karstein [2014] pointed out the historical role of church building in the fight against secularization, and Duttweiler [2015] draws attention to a new religious type of architecture that is found, *inter alia*, in soccer stadiums and shopping malls. Hence, Schroer [2015] even talks about “spatial inversion,” since religious groups design spaces that are increasingly

profane, whereas the traits of religious architecture emerge more and more in profane space [Wittmann-Englert 2006]. As a consequence, the focus of research, in accordance with the progressive pluralization of societies, is directed towards the genesis of new multireligious places – for example, chapels in airports, hospitals, prisons, and shopping malls – but also towards the practice of rededication of already existing buildings to religious purposes. At the same time, it is stated that major sporting events can have a religious character and that, in a sense, the topography of large shopping malls prompts the revitalization of religious rituals [Zepp 1997].

In case of the last-mentioned developments, we are not simply facing an expansion of religion, a resacralization, but rather the fact that religion undergoes a profound transformation [Knoblauch 2009]. This is accompanied by the thesis that modernization does not inevitably lead to secularization. Nowadays, we can observe a synchronization of seemingly contrary tendencies: a parallel juxtaposition of the secular and the religious, a decrease in church memberships and an increase in new forms of religion and religiosity, a transmission of differing religious stocks of knowledge in one society, and so forth. This transformation of religion, as in society as a whole, expresses itself, among other things, in space; to be more precise, it can be conceived of as being part of social change altogether, of social refiguration. Exactly this refiguration of space is being thematized by the collaborative research group (*Sonderforschungsbereich*) at the Technische Universität in Berlin under the supervision of Martina Löw that recently applied for fundings at the German Research Council (DFG). However, the subject of religious space(s) is not being represented by any project belonging to that pending application even though there is a lack of empirical studies centering around this kind of spatial transformation with regard to religion so far. As a matter of fact, the progressive pluralization is decidedly translocal and systematically brings forth poly-contextual religious spaces. Therefore this paper calls for a concern not with the analysis of a “container space” that contains the religions, but much more with the question of altered forms of religiousness against the background of changing spatial figurations, which are translocal, poly-contextual, and mediatized. In this context, it would be especially interesting to focus on the processes that are characteristic of this refiguration: migration and circulation of people and migration of religious knowledge, of religious conceptions, ideas, and practices. Refiguration of religion, however, is not limited to the spatial distribution of religion, as is so often the case in the field of Urban Religion, which studies the formation of new religious spaces that serve as symbolic markers in cities and elicit reactions that are correspondingly substantialist. Researchers have already discussed these classic forms of marking of religious space, the forms of “zoning” – the forma-



tion of ethnic and religious spatial districts – but also phenomena that surface in situations such as the minaret controversy: The pronounced peculiarity of the minaret is sufficient to raise conflicts in the course of which the “other” is excluded and the “self” as a nation, ethnic group, or local civic identity is (re)constituted [Guggenheim 2010]. Contrary to those specimens of resubstantializing reactions, there are, however, other phenomena that might help answer the question of how religious space itself is re-figured. Part of this phenomenon are, on the one hand, the conventional forms of hybridization or syncretism, both of which presuppose (the detectability of) clearly marked forms (i.e. the religions from which syncretism or hybrids can be formed). On the other hand, there are phenomena of translocation that allow for new forms to develop, such as those that are described in connection with “popular religion” as a consequence of mediatization [Hepp and Krönert 2009; Knoblauch 2009]. It should be noted that translocality itself contains an aspect of transcendence – or of transcending – that should be discussed, particularly with regard to transcendental experience.

At the same time, there is a lack of empirical research that takes communication – more precisely, communicative action [Habermas 1981; critically: Knoblauch 2013] – as the starting point for the construction of space and inquires into the acts of spatialization that are found in these new religious forms and which show themselves in the communicative practices of synthesis and spacing [Löw 2001]. Beyond that, there is also a need for empirical studies that look into how communicative action creates the forms of space that can be subjectively perceived as religious. Because religion is a highly subjective phenomenon and there is a strong tendency to subjectify it, I am here postulating the need for research that is focused on changes in subjective experiences with and in knowledge of religious space. The question about the refiguration of space in subjective knowledge is paramount here, the question if and how the spaces are experienced from the subjective perspective of believers and practitioners, as well as if and how shifts have occurred in temporal perspective. However, spaces should never be regarded as subjective constructs of individual minds or of the knowledge that is stored in them. Hence, it is imperative to face the question of what forms constitute religious spaces. If we assume that material objectification of religion in form of religious spaces is the product of the communicative practice of agents that are involved with its design and application (in this context, Löw speaks about the social practice of spacing, see Löw [2001, 158ff.]), then it is now necessary to turn towards the practices of spacing in empirical research. As it has been already mentioned at the beginning of this article, while drawing on spacing as a concept that takes materiality and sociality of space into account [Löw 2001] and brings space into close relationship with communication and body [Knoblauch 2017], the empir-

ical analysis could focus 1) on material objectivation of the religious as a product of communicative actions of the social actors involved in the design, construction, and utilisation of religious spaces, 2) on the question in what way and through what means the organisation of religious spaces influences the structure of religious rituals and vice versa. When we understand rituals as forms of communicative, or more precisely symbolic action [Soeffner 2004; 2010], it could be asked not only how religious spaces are shaped in their materiality through translocal, poly-contextual and mediated communicative actions, but also how religious spaces are being constructed through the relational arrangement of social actors, objects, and technologies insofar that we are able to speak about the ritualisation of space and the ritualisation of religious practices at the interface between materiality and sociality of the religious. The following chapter is dedicated to the empirical explication of that postulate.

### **3. Empirical Case Study**

The work-in-progress study the following empirical analysis draws upon focuses on the transmission of Buddhist rituals and practices to the West, especially those Buddhist rituals and practices that are not centered around written and spoken language, but much more around the absence of that language – silence. While dealing with silence, the project treats silent meditation as an interesting though quite paradoxical communication practice – as a communication ritual. In this respect it follows the critical postulate by Hubert Knoblauch [2013], to extend the concept of communicative action beyond the acts of speech and to overcome the gulf between instrumental and communicative action, both theoretically posited by Habermas [1981]. These problems are approached here empirically using the example of the transmission of Buddhist silent meditation rituals to the West, known under the Sanskrit term “Shamatha/Vipashyana”, the Tibetan term “Shine/Laktong”, or the Western term “Mindfulness”.<sup>9</sup> Within the total framework of the project the main interest lies on the one hand in the experiences that meditators have during silent meditation and their reflection on those experiences, on the other hand in the forementioned issue of silence as a particular, ritualized communicative practice. As a methodological consequence, the project works with narrative interviews [Schuetze 1979] with meditators, contrasting them with ethnographical, especially videographic material

<sup>9</sup> The discussion of the issue how the discourse of Mindfulness appeared in the West and how it influences not only the Buddhist but also other more secular discourses, like psychology and psychotherapy, cognitive and neurological sciences, education, consumption, and so forth, can be found by Boldt [2014; 2017] and won't be discussed here further because it goes beyond the scope of this article.

[Tuma, Schnettler and Knoblauch 2013]. In doing so, the project looks into “people and their situations” as well as into “situations and their people,” to use Goffman’s turn of phrase [Goffman 2013, 9].<sup>10</sup> With both of these levels, the empirical analysis concentrates on three analytical dimensions: 1) body, 2) space, and 3) time. In the following, only the second analytical dimension of the project, the dimension of space, shall be addressed in a work-in-progress manner.

### 3.1. *Theoretical Point of Departure*

In order to address the issue of space, the paper takes its point of departure in the theoretical work by Martina Löw [2001], that takes materiality and sociality of space into account as well as in the work of Hubert Knoblauch, that brings space into close relationship with communication and body [Knoblauch 2017]. Since both authors are included in this volume of *Sociologica*, there is no need for any additional introduction to their theoretical take on the issue of space. Briefly, Löw understands space as the relational arrangement of social goods: of material elements and human beings. Space is not a given, preexisting thing, but is brought forth by the arrangement of elements in the course of social actions. Thus, the constitution of space is to be regarded as a process. Löw distinguishes two different processes of spatial constitution: spacing and synthesis. Whereas spacing refers to the placement of material objects and bodies, synthesis relates to the processes of imagination, perception and memory that make the construction of spaces possible. These can be compared to Lefebvre’s notions of spacial practice and conception of space. Even though this communicative take on the conception of space is crucial for the research presented here, the project itself is not that much concerned with the construction of space(s) as such, but rather with the communicative construction of Buddhist silent meditation rituals – and the spacial arrangement of social goods and human bodies is important from this perspective.

More specifically: the project departs from the theoretical acknowledgment of spaces as the material objectifications of the religious, as products of communicative actions of the social actors involved in their design, construction, and utilisation. But most of all, it asks the question in what way and through what means the organisation of ritual spaces influences the construction of religious rituals. Since the paper understands rituals as forms of communicative, or more precisely symbolic action [Soeffner 2004; 2010], the main concern of this paper is not only how ritual spaces are shaped in their materiality through translocal, poly-contextual, and medi-

<sup>10</sup> Translation from German by Thea D. Boldt.

atised communicative actions, but much more how ritual spaces are being constructed through the relational arrangement of social actors, objects and technologies insofar that we are able to speak about the ritualisation of the space and ritualisation of religious practices at the interface between the materiality and the sociality of the religious.

In order to focus on this point, the following work-in-progress empirical analysis will draw upon the videographic data recorded recently during a silent meditation retreat in a Tibetan-Buddhist meditation centre in Germany and on the basis of this video-data will address the question of how the meaning of the silent meditation ritual performed in this particular setting is being constructed in the context of space and spacing practices.

### *3.2. Methodological Issues and Work-in-Progress Analysis*

The concrete space that co-constitutes the silence meditation ritual at stake is being looked at from the standpoint of a comparative method that unfolds in the following steps that have been generally derived from the notion of theoretical sampling as proposed by the Grounded Theory [Glaser and Strauss 1998, 51ff.]:

1) First, the external (it can also be called outer, or extensional) comparison during which the space of this particular meditation ritual is described and analyzed in comparison to other spaces. This part of the interpretation can be extended as far as it seems meaningful for the development and verification of the main structural hypothesis.

2) Secondly, the internal (inner, or intensional) comparison during which the interior dimension of the particular space of our interest is delineated and characterized with recourse to the consideration of its own constitutive features, attributes, and properties: material objects and bodies.

Both steps of the analysis can be enacted in two stages: *A*) before the people performing the ritual enter the space, space when people are absent, and *B*) space with people present, while the ritual is being performed – here the process of the construction of the space during the ritual is of importance, or, in other words, the appropriation of the space in the process of ritualized communicative action.

In order to interpret the material, the sequential method of hermeneutical reconstruction will be used all the way through the different stages of analysis [see Soeffner 2004].

### 3.2.1. External Analysis<sup>11</sup>

During the external analysis of the space it is advisable to take into account the fact that the space is always part of another space. As Löw states: A spatial arrangement exists by virtue of the mere fact that we compare a space to other spaces [2001]. That way, a particular kind of order, or arrangement of spaces, occurs in specific locations.



FIG. 1. A Space Prepared for the Silent Meditation Retreat.

*Source:* Author's photo.

In our case study, the space that has been prepared for the silent meditation ritual (see Fig. 1) is a part of the entirety of the meditation center, which in turn is a part of the village and the overall environment, and so forth. This is something that invites closer inspection – the relational arrangement of spaces. Apart from that, there are several other rooms in the meditation center that shall be taken into account, like kitchen, bathrooms, office rooms, single bedrooms, dormitories, but also – which is quite relevant – other assembly rooms as well as other ritualistic or ceremonial rooms. It is worthwhile to think about the significance of choosing that particular room from among the available repertoire of rooms for the performance of that specific ritual.

Furthermore, the room that we are interested in (Fig. 1) has, like any other room, already an order, an arrangement to it, without people being in it. Although in case of any room we are always dealing with floor, ceiling, and four walls, these

<sup>11</sup> Since we're dealing with work-in-progress analysis, this part will only be roughly sketched, while the parts of the internal analysis will be discussed in more detail.

alone differ from each other from room to room. So, we have the arrangement of this room in relation to other rooms in the building. Likewise, the entire meditation center building has a specific order in relation to other buildings in the vicinity. This constitutes several perspectives within the external comparative analysis.

A further perspective that plays a role within the framework of the external comparison results from the comparison with other spaces that are known to us and have a similar function. Since this study is concerned with a silent meditation rituals, it would be possible to compare this space to other spaces of silence or meditation within the spectrum of this same Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Karma Kagyu), as well as different Buddhist traditions, but also other spiritual, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and so forth, as well as secular traditions that produce spaces for silence and/or for meditation. Here, the spectrum for comparison can be extended as far as it seems meaningful from the perspective of the project at stake.

Doing so, it becomes apparent that it makes sense to systematically distinguish different forms of silence in regard to their spacial construction: On the one hand, we have spaces that are deliberate products of communicative actions of people involved in their design and utilisation – in this case we can talk about spaces as objectifications of silence. They are deliberately prepared, arranged, constructed, and therefore are objectifications of silence as a form of knowledge. This applies to all sacral spaces, which are “frozen” actions, products that have been deliberately manufactured – for example, excluding the noise of the outer world to create a silent space, and so forth. But on the other hand, there are also natural spaces that can be sought out to experience silence. It should be noticed that the Romantics sought out silence in nature. They visited spaces in nature in which they were looking for silence. For example, Eichendorff’s famous poems center around woodland solitude and silence. So, we are talking about manufactured spaces of silence and also about the comparison between those and the sought out spaces of silence that are not human-made but are being made meaningful as spaces of silence by human beings. Here, the construction of silence is produced on a different level.

### **3.2.2. Internal Analysis**

With the internal comparison, we semantically address those aspects, features, and attributes that belong to the space that we are particularly interested in. In our case, we are dealing with the space in which the silent meditation ritual is taking place.

In the first step of the internal analysis, we look at this space as a product of the communicative action, from the perspective of the practice of spacing. Doing so, we focus on the aspects that are interesting to us: how this ritual space has been con-

structured through the relational arrangement of social actors, objects and technologies insofar that we are able to speak about the ritualisation of the space and the ritualisation of the religious practices at the interface between the materiality and the sociality of the religious. Here, the focus lies on the reconstruction of the ways the religious spaces influence the communicative construction of the rituals being enacted there, but also on how the practice of the rituals helps constitute those spaces. This means that we are manoeuvring in a web of materiality and sociality and that we are reconstructing the significance of the silent meditation ritual by means of a correlation of both elements: material objects and bodies.

First, we have a look at the space before the first participants of the meditation retreat enter it; this means that we inspect the room the way it was prepared by the architects as well as the organisers of the meditation ritual. The video material but also the photo above (Fig. 1) allow for several glimpses of the meditation room.

For example, it can be observed that the windows are half-open. Through the windows, fresh air enters the room, but also (if you listen to the audiovisual data) dampened noises. Since this is a meditation center in a small village, the noise level is rather low, so, we are dealing with a retreat location, but not with absolute silence, which could have been effected by elaborate soundproofing of the room that is technically possible nowadays. In this way, we are dealing with a certain form of silent space that I would like to call “*a space-in-between*” – between opening and closing, between total silence and total noise, and so forth. This hypothesis, that might seem a little exaggerated here, works also on other levels of the analysis – like the body and time level, that won’t be presented here.

Another thing that is immediately perceptible in this “space-in-between” is the spatial creation of order. For example, we can observe a specific arrangement due to the positioning of cushions. Somebody put them there deliberately. There is the row arrangement, almost military in appearance, but not quite, because the mats and cushions can be moved around, so, there is something unsolid about them. Since the objects are not fixed, they can be dismantled, disassembled, taken down, and/or moved at any given moment. That way, the whole scenario would be gone, which indicates the temporality of the event – and the issue of temporality, or the issue of time more generally, as we learn later on the different levels of the analysis, is closely connected with the assignation of meaning to silent meditation. This temporality in turn suggests a certain openness with regard to a possible reinterpretation of the structural principles of this space, which further emphasizes the above-mentioned thesis of the “space-in-between.”

Three seats (that can be seen on the left-hand side of the Fig. 1) are highlighted – first, by means of the placement of these seats in front of the rows, and secondly

by virtue of their elevation in comparison to the rows. For one thing, there is the seat of the Buddha statue on the table with the white tablecloth, for another thing, there are the two seats next to the table – these are the seats of the meditation teachers. This arrangement implies certain hierarchies of knowledge and these hierarchies of knowledge are established here by the specific spatial arrangement, to begin with. This spatial order has a structuring function in the context of the acquisition of knowledge but also in the performance of the ritual, since it influences the order of interactions between people. This dynamic emerges in the space insofar as only specific realisations of interaction order are possible under the given circumstances of the spacial construction. For that reason, also, we can talk about the communicative construction of space(s).

Another aspect is that in the case of our space the objects fill the room, yet, there are open spots, discrepancies, empty gaps. What are these gaps made of and what sense do they make?

For one thing, a discrepancy between the architectural space and the objects placed to construct this space can be observed in which the temporality of the space and the architectural predispositions of the building have to be reconciled. The architectural space is almost uncanny in its order and linearity – for example, the electrical sockets are vertically arranged below the lamps, the funnel-shaped tapering of the roof points towards the elevated Buddha figure, all of these things correlate with each other; but then, there are the cushions, the positioning of which almost seems chaotic in this context. On the whole, and if the room really serves as a meditation space, the question might be asked why there are so many electrical sockets, and why the lamps have been placed on the walls the way they have been placed, and why the floor lamp you can see in the upper left corner of the photo 1 is unplugged. So, some of these elements seem absurd if you look at their arrangement. There is a certain sloppiness, negligence in the arrangement. Therefore, in one sense, we are facing the issue of *order* (later also the interactive order of the ritual) but also the issue of *chaos*, or rather the issue of overcoming, mastering of chaos which, as we may say, again might lead us to a certain dynamic in-between, the dynamic that might be called an “orderly chaos.”<sup>12</sup> Even though the further aspects of orderly chaos hypothesis can’t be discussed in detail in this paper, it shall be sufficient enough to state that the references to order and chaos can be found later in the analysis on the levels of body and time.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, the term “orderly chaos” plays a crucial role in the teachings on the mandala principle by Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa [2004].



Let's stay with the hypothesis of empty gaps in the context of space. The conclusion that hardly any fixed objects have been positioned in this space again refers back to a relatively "non-filled state" of the whole scenario but further empty gaps result from that too. The arrangement of mattresses on the floor is equally interesting in this context. The rows are all facing forward. There are other possibilities, of course. In various Christian churches it can be observed that the rows are arranged in a semicircle, facing the front and center. We have a different arrangement here – the rows are not facing a center, instead, they are facing straight forward, towards the wall. This is interesting in the sense that this arrangement differs from what is usually found in Tibetan-Buddhist monasteries. There, the seats are also arranged in rows, but in a way that leaves an open corridor that extends from the main entrance to the shrine, and the rows on the left and right face each other. In our space both leading figures (the two mattresses on the left side of the fig. 1) face the audience, but the participants' mattresses are not aligned to be in their focus, neither are they aligned directly with the seats of the two meditation masters, nor with the altar with the Buddha figure on it. This is also an interesting fact, giving rise to the question what significance this *diffuse order of gazes* has. It is of importance who can see whom from what angle, how the viewing directions evolve because this is what tells the story here, this is the actual narration and therefore shall be paid attention to, especially since later on it will become clear that the avoidance of eye contact is playing a major role in establishing the interaction order of the meditation ritual.

As we can see so far, the topology of the space as well as the topology of objects that have been placed in order to construct this space specify what kind of interactions can take place here as well as what meaning they may have.

Since we are looking into the topology of the space through the lens of the practice of spacing (placement of objects and bodies), it is interesting to see where the objects have been placed in relative proximity to each other and where they are further apart, especially since that room is not too big and also since it became obvious throughout the spacial analysis that we are rather dealing with a multifunctional space, with a room that has been filled and optimized for the purpose of using it for this particular event.

When we pay attention to the distance between the various big and small objects, what becomes particularly important is the grouping of objects and the order of interactions that results from that. Let's have a look at some of the groups of objects in this space: There is a table with a white tablecloth (see fig. 1 and fig. 2), which is not an altar, because it is not architecturally styled like an altar, but it nevertheless takes on the role of an altar. In that case, it is an altar in an exposed position, facing the audience. It is positioned like a stage – it is an elevated table – and on this stage, there is a

shrine (here, in turn, we have objects that make up the shrine through their positioning). This positioning of objects constitutes the ritualism of that arrangement – it does not have to be something that has been architecturally designed to be an altar, instead, the table with the white tablecloth *becomes an altar by virtue of its position*. It is a table with a white tablecloth, facing the audience. The audience (the arrangement of mattresses and cushions attests to that) will be looking at that table, at that stage, and the stage is taken up by the table, upon which a religiously marked figure – in our case a Buddha statue – is positioned that some participants will be facing and some not. We are talking about a specific positioning that constitutes the ritualisation of this space.



FIG. 2. Altar.

Source: Author's photo.

Let us have a look at further empty gaps that occur in that space, and let us look at them on another level of analysis, by the triangulation of the interview material collected with the participants and the analysis of the space, and let's do it with regard to the example of the altar that we are dealing with. On this altar, there are bigger and smaller objects that have been arranged in a particular way. In the center, we see a Buddha figure, but not in its classic form of Buddha Shakyamuni in which the Buddha points to the floor with his right hand and holds a begging bowl in his left hand, but in the form of Amogasidhi. In this specific Tibetan Buddhist form, Buddha performs a specific gesture with his right hand, a *mudra* that differs from the well-known Buddha Shakyamuni gesture. In the interviews, it becomes apparent that only a few

of the meditators assembled there for the meditation ritual know about the meaning of this specific Buddha figure, those who have been meditating for about twenty years and longer, and who bring along their knowledge from other Buddhist contexts. In this meditation course, however, the objects on the altar are hardly ever discussed, let alone the attributes of this specific Buddha statue explained. This means that there are gaps emerging here too, and they are not filled in the context of this meditation course, and what is particularly interesting is the fact that they *do not have to be filled*. This is important insofar as there are things present, and the participants are either not fully or not at all aware of their meaning – (which in turn is the accomplishment of synthesis by Löw 2001). But since the objects are there, they must have a meaning. They have a lexical meaning, a religious meaning, they can be culturally elaborated, and so forth, but they do not have to be explained in the context of the ritual and the reason for that is that they are subjectively comprehended in the course of the performance of the ritual, and they become a meaningful in the context of the particular spacial order. And that is an important characteristic of this event. This characteristic corresponds to the silence that is practiced here and that constitutes this space.



[VIDEO 1. People Entering the Room.](#)

One can see that quite clearly in the next step of the internal analysis when participants enter the room (see the video). With regard to the objects on the altar: There is a text wrapped in brocade, two candles as an offering, and seven glass bowls filled with water that have to be emptied out in the evening and filled up in the morning. For the purpose of this ritual, the altar is assembled by the meditation teacher and ever-changing assistants that are being chosen quite spontaneously by the meditation

instructor from among the people in attendance. Now, only the meditation teacher has knowledge about the significance of the objects, as well as some of the assistants who put these objects in their respective positions, but only if they are chosen from among the more advanced meditators. However, there is no explanation to the participants of the meaning of the objects used for the ritual. Still, there is an interaction with these objects [in the way that Simmel conceptualizes it, see for example Simmel 1986, 111ff.] over the course of the ritual. Sacrificial bowls are filled up and emptied out, the candles are lit and extinguished, and not only by the meditation instructor, but also by selected attendants. In some cases, the attendants are chosen from among the people who are participating in a meditation course for the very first time and who do not know anything about the meaning of these objects or the meaning of the actions they are performing. But it does not seem to make a big difference for the order of the ritual. Even though there are some participants with more and some with less knowledge, it is possible to participate without knowing a thing, because it all makes sense through the order of the interaction. The meaning is created in the act of placement: Something is in front, something in the back, the seats are arranged in rows, something is in the middle, bodies are placed in a certain way, which means that some of them are staring at the wall, and so forth. The order of things and bodies creates meaning. For example, there is a center without a focus of observation, and there are those little rituals, like the lighting the candles. And as to the question about the meaning or the significance – on the one hand, there is the lexical meaning that can be found in different Handbooks of Buddhism, that means you can read about it, on the other hand, there is meaning that is both subjective and realized, comprehended through the spacial order as well as in the course of social interactions. In that way, the meaning does not have to be semantically filled, but it is actualized in the act of multiple references; the meaning is constructed in the context.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Concluding the work-in-progress analysis regarding the question of how meaning is created in the context of the communicative construction of spaces and rituals, it can be stated that different aspects of silence will be practised in the context of that particular silent meditation ritual:

- 1) There will be silence that is filled discursively – there will be an explanation of the meditation master on how to be silent in a particular way, in that particular tradition of Buddhism, how to “silence” your body, speech, and mind.

2) There will also be an experienced silence, about which people will say in the interviews: This is what I've done and this is what I've experienced while doing this and that.

3) And there will be silence that fills the discursive gaps that result from lack of knowledge, and these will be filled through the performance of the ritual, through actual interactions as well as through the spacial construction of order.

Therefore, there will be different variations of silence in the context of this particular case study that have to be systematized.

Looking at silent meditation from the perspective of communicative construction of space, the gulf between instrumental and communicative action (that has been theoretically posited by Habermas [1981]) is empirically transcended (as postulated by Knoblauch [2013]). This is done by putting the emphasis on the materiality of the execution of actions; by reconstructing meaning from material markers of action, which are bodily, corporal courses of action (like facial expressions, gestures, and so forth, that we can interpret on the level of the analysis dealing with the body that has only been hinted at briefly in this article), but also from the materiality of space – all the gadgets and things gathered there as products of communicative actions: Somebody had to pick those things up, chose them from all other things possible, and placed them in this room to construct a space of interaction order. What we cannot express precisely with words, we can “tell” with physical objects. They can bear big metaphors without allowing for imprecision in detail. They are products of choices, tokens of either-or. Either there is a white tablecloth or a Buthanese brocade, either there are transparent water bowls made in Germany or the Nepalese ones, either you sit in a chair or on a mat on the floor, and so forth. The materiality of the action is its inevitable sign. As a consequence, the space in which this communicative action of ritualised meditative silence is enacted – and which in turn finds its expression in the silent bodies – must be regarded as a meaningful product of communicative action.

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## **Space - Religion - Communication: State of the Arts and Exemplary Empirical Analysis**

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Abstract: Whereas the theoretical approaches to the problem of space in social sciences have been problematised in the wake of “spacial turn” and discussed broadly in the recent years, there is still a need for empirical research relating spacing practices with religion. As it’s going to be discussed in the first part of this article, space has been the central category for religious studies since the very beginning. However, the empirical studies of religious space as a product and as a mean of communicative actions are still lacking. Taking the overview of the state of research on space and religion as a point of departure, the second part of this article is being dedicated to empirical analysis of spacing practices. There is not the analysis of the very different constitutions of space within the belief systems of different religions but rather a hermeneutic reconstruction of spacing practices on the example of silent meditation ritual (also known as mindfulness meditation) based on a videographical material recorded during a silent meditation retreat in Buddhist meditation centre in Germany. Drawing on spacing as a concept that relates materiality and sociality of space into account [Löw 2001] and bringing space in close relationship with communication and body [Knoblauch 2017], the empirical analysis focuses 1) on material objectivation of the religious as a product of communicative actions of the social actors involved in the design, construction and utilisation of religious spaces, 2) on the question in what way and through what means the organisation of ritual spaces influences the structure of religious rituals and vice versa. Since the paper understands rituals as forms of communicative, or more precisely symbolic action [Soeffner 2004; 2010], the main concern of this paper is not only how ritual spaces are shaped in their materiality through translocal, polycontextual and mediatised communicative actions, but much more how ritual spaces are being constructed through the relational arrangement of social actors, objects and technologies insofar that we are able to speak about the ritualisation of the space and ritualisation of religious practices at the interface between the materiality and sociality of the religious.

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*Keywords: Space; Spacing; Religion; Communication; Western Buddhism; Meditation; Mindfulness; Empirical Analysis; Videography; Ethnography.*

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