

Churches in secular space. Relational approach to the reconstruction and use of church buildings in north-eastern Germany.

Why do people strive to rebuild a church building in the city where over 80% of the population does not belong to any religious organization, and only a handful of faithful gather in one of many existing churches for Sunday service? Why in a village where few people are believers, people decide to devote time and resources to rebuilding and then maintaining a church building, and some of them do so despite their declared atheism? What happens in such a renovated church and who takes care of it? Who does pay for its maintenance? Do the inhabitants of a given locality consider alternative uses of such a building? Will they agree to open a café in it? Library? Organizing a concert? Can such a building become a place of a secular wedding or funeral ceremony? What is the position of the Church as an organization on these matters?

This project analyzes cases of the reconstruction and renovation of church buildings in north-eastern Germany, a region that is considered one of the most secularized in Europe. Although in the *European Values Study* survey conducted in 2017, 90% of respondents from this region replied that religion "does not matter" or "does not matter at all" in their lives, there are signs of presence of religion in public space. Religious organizations are responsible for running schools, retirement homes, kindergartens, counseling services for those in need; in many places religion is the subject of school activities, and what is more important from the point of view of the present project, church towers shape the architectural landscape, and church bells commemorate important occasions, not just religious ones. Although the communities of practicing believers are small, they are often very active and initiate many projects and activities. This project focuses on one particular action: the reconstruction and renovation of church buildings in this region, from the late 1980s to the present day.

One of the analytical paths used to understand the role of places of worship in secularized space is the concept of heritagization. It is used to describe the situation when religious places become places of heritage. Such a process takes place also in East Germany; however, the author of the project puts forward a hypothesis that a strong discourse of the "difficult heritage", referring first of all to the period of national socialism, has made all references to the past in Germany potentially problematic. Probably one of the most important concepts needed to understand attitudes towards the past in Germany is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* - overcoming the past, dealing with the past. One of the project hypotheses is that the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* approach has contributed to the specific attitude towards the past and commemoration in Germany - a precautionary attitude requiring continuous analysis of feelings and motivations, because the reference to the past is always potentially dangerous. How do discussions about reconstruction of churches look like, when a given building has a controversial history, as in the case of the Garrison Church in Potsdam? One of adopted strategies is the reconstruction of churches as "places of reconciliation". How do such places work in practice?

The main goal of the project is to analyze how in practice the distinction is made between secular / religious, especially if a given place is used and conceptualized both as secular and religious: at the same time or on various occasions, by different actors, or in a time sequence. This leads to the adoption of a post-secular / post-religious perspective, according to which the distinction between secular and religious is a process taking place in specific social, historical and political conditions and is mobilized by various social actors for reasons that have to be understood through careful empirical research.