

Annual conference 2025

## **Making Boundaries – Performing Religion and Urbanity**

### **Concept note**

Boundaries are quintessential markers of the urban setting made of diversity and complexity. Boundaries are often defined as lines or divisors that can (and even must) be seen as possessing stability and a certain degree of permanence. This instinctive approach to the definition of a boundary can be seen in many modern reflections on them. Whether it is the Green Line in civil war-torn Beirut or rivers dividing cities, boundaries are seen as permanent and stable. In most cases we are used to a visible form of boundary making in the city. These can be directly deliberate as a process in which fences, walls, or posts are erected to separate or limit. Or they can be indirectly deliberate in which a street, a rail track or a canal create a space set apart from the others. While these offer immediate prominence, they are by no means the only form of boundary making processes in the city. Equally prominent are the invisible boundaries that are created through ritual, social grouping or authority. Religious boundary making is a prominent example of how this operates in practice, with communities, ideas and practices existing often (but not exclusively) within boundaries that are not immediately visible. This makes boundaries quintessentially ambiguous within the urban landscape with profane boundaries becoming sacralised and religious ones becoming profane.

This religious boundary making is the focus of this conference. Moreover, we are looking at doing invisible boundaries rather than legal norms or architecture. While boundary studies have already proposed definitions and discussed certain aspects, we are interested in looking at “boundary doing” as an analytical tool to better understand urbanity and the reciprocal formation of religion and urbanity. Making boundaries means performing religion and urbanity.

While the concept of boundary presupposes characteristics such as linear or marginal, tight or permeable properties, boundaries are often seen as resulting in static

phenomena. The next annual conference will be instead interested in the **fluid** and in the **in-the-making** of the boundary and the contributions are expected to highlight the interplay of urbanity and religion. Thus, it will put in the centre of its investigations the dynamic, the permeable and the ambiguous. Investigation of such boundaries like the Roman *limes*, faith communities within medieval towns, or the religious borders in modern cities puts to the fore the issue and the concept of boundary making as a negotiation – with other people, within social groups and, perhaps most poignant today, with nature and the environment. Similarly, the non-spatial boundary making like, for example, boundaries in time, are inherently processual and moveable. This aspect we want to put to analysis in this annual conference.

While we intensively discussed about boundaries characteristics and properties in preliminary events, the annual conference focuses on processes or “boundary work” or “doing boundaries”. Urban religious boundaries, especially mental and symbolic ones, are fluid, ambiguous phenomena that (also) need to be looked at in a dynamic perspective. Therefore, the conference welcomes papers discussing the processes of boundary making, boundary changing, boundary crossing and boundary maintaining. In early modern Europe for instance, the reformation movement saw the crystallisation of confessional identities and the **formation** of a new sharp boundary within a, until then, coherent group (boundary making). In some cases, this new divide overlaps existing boundaries of other nature, such as political, economic, social class-like fractures. This raises the question of an attraction/temptation towards **congruent boundaries**, that is the formation of multi-dimensional boundaries that collapse pre-existing social, political and economic ones. Congruent mental boundaries are generally produced because they are perceived as more graspable, more efficient or more powerful. In the wake of nationalist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular, congruent boundaries crystallised along the idea of “natural boundaries”: physical linear boundaries such as river or mountain ranges were projected as overlaps of linguistic, cultural, political, sometimes religious identities.

Boundaries not only are produced, but they also need active **maintenance** to ensure their continuity: artifacts, rituals, guidelines, tropes and institutions are created or

used to mark boundaries and to make them efficient elements of the urban. We are especially interested in how forms of social interaction in the city can be used to successfully (or unsuccessfully) maintain such divisions in the city.

A further process regarding boundaries is the **modification** of existing boundaries in a claim of urbanity or claims in the city. Procession, annual festivities, upheavals and other urban events and practices, but also the circulation of new narratives and rhetoric themes, count amongst the moments and tools facilitating the change of boundaries or the claim of new boundaries. We also welcome reflections on how the build environment influences the modification of invisible urban boundaries.

Finally existing boundaries are not just disputed but also **crossed**: as permeable entities, they allowed the movement of people and ideas now defined as insiders or outsiders. The crossing of spatial but also social boundaries represents one of the major binaries of Thomas Tweed's religious analysis, which can be read at urban level too. Mental boundaries can be passed through multiple ways, as for instance in the case of *Hijra* communities in South Asia that do not just cross gender boundaries, but also challenge social and ethical borders. Further examples would be ruling slave soldiers in the Islamic world such as the *Siddis* in South Asia or the *ministeriales* of high medieval Central Europe.

With this framework, we are to explore to what extent "doing boundaries" is an indispensable part of performing religion and urbanity.

We invite contributions that will engage with one of the following sessions:

- 1) **Forming boundaries**
- 2) **Maintaining and modifying boundaries**
- 3) **Removing and dissolving boundaries**
- 4) **Crossing boundaries**

**Venue**

4-6 June 2025

C19 Weltbeziehungen, Max Weber Centre, Erfurt University, Germany

**Organisers**

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