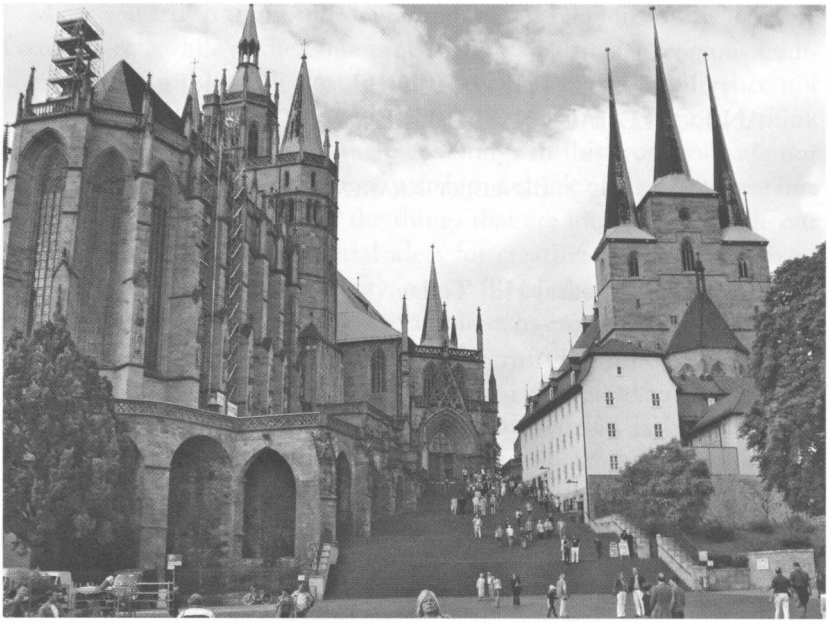
THE CATHEDRAL HILL OF ERFURT: AN ECCLESIAL ENSEMBLE IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

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A Tour of the Cathedral Hill Today

The Cathedral Hill of Erfurt, which seen from the old city appears as an imposing set of buildings, is doubtless a location of significance for art history – the art historian Georg Dehio has described it as 'the most beautiful architectural group (...) that Germany possesses' (*Thüringen* 1998, 294). It is closely related to the history of the city of Erfurt and, because it can be seen from a distance, shapes the image of the city. Because the city used to belong to the former German Democratic Republic, Erfurt is affected by, among other things, the consequences of an atheistic religious policy. Nonetheless, for both the large section of its population without religious confession and the smaller group which does profess a religious alliance it is an identifying symbol. Erfurt is defined/represented by the silhouette of the Cathedral of St Mary (*Sankt Marien*) and the Church of St Severus (*Sankt Severi*).

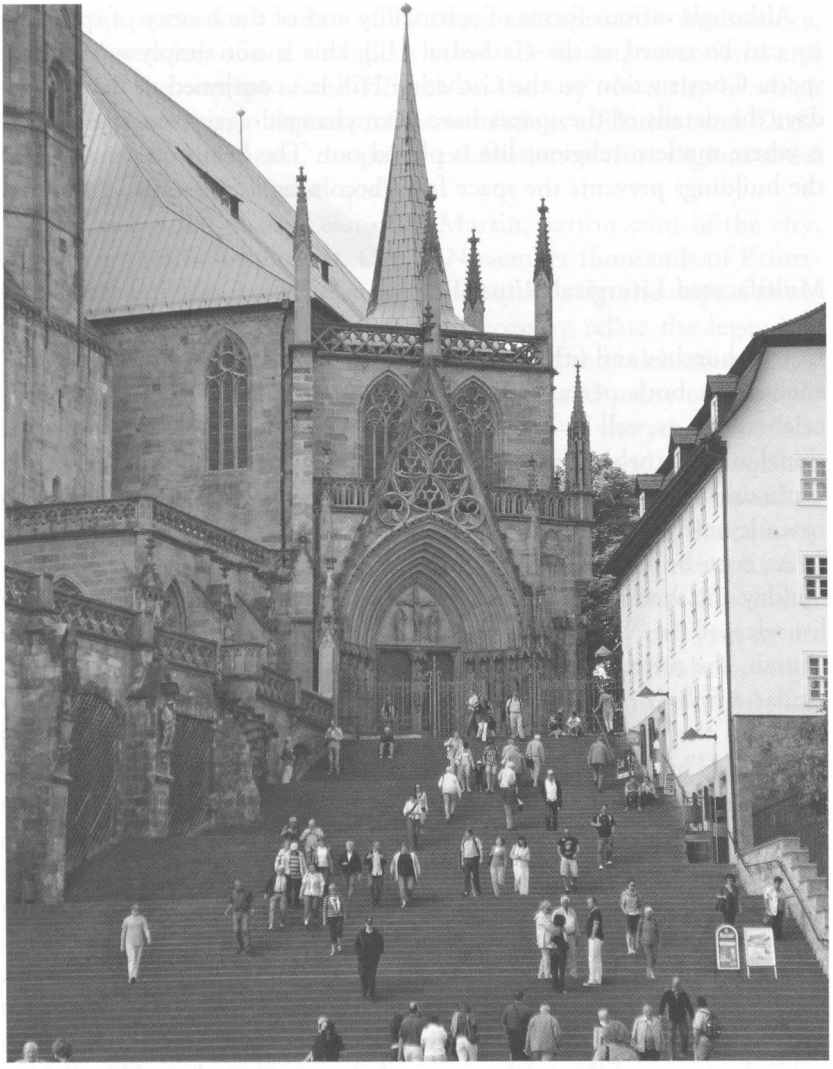
Above all, however, the Cathedral Hill is the setting for various liturgies, communal and individual rituals which are formative for Christians and non-Christians alike. The liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church is celebrated here, as are other religious/spiritual forms of expression and celebration (private prayer, devotion, reflection, etcetera). Concerts are performed here, tours of the churches are offered, and much more. Although this is an ecclesial space, it is also a public place, available for a great variety of events. The Cathedral Hill is home to two great Roman Catholic churches, *Sankt Marien* and *Sankt Severi*, the small C/chapel of Bonifatius, the cathedral crypt, various buildings for housing and administration, the medieval cloister and a part of the Catholic Faculty of Theology, as well as a café and a tourist shop, and of course the cathedral square. *Sankt Marien* is the Episcopal church in Erfurt. Ecclesial life here was recorded as far back as the eighth century, and this place has continued as its central point throughout the centuries. The cathedral, the former collegiate church of *Sankt Marien*, attained its current form



The Cathedral Hill of Erfurt, seen from the east
(photo: B. Kranemann)

between 1349/70 and 1455/83. The Church of *Sankt Severi*, also a collegiate church, was constructed between 1274/1276 and the second half of the fourteenth century. Both churches house significant pieces of art, for example the medieval figure of Wolfram, the Light-Bearer (ca. 1160), a medieval Sabbath lamp (ca. 1200), choir stalls richly carved with a variety of scenes (ca. 1330), and, in *Sankt Severi*, a shrine to St Severus (fourteenth century). The *Gloriosa*, the great medieval bell of the cathedral church, is known far beyond Erfurt; its fascinating sound also carries beyond the church space, connecting people with the church. Both churches border on an open area which, seen from the city, is marked by the triangular portal of the cathedral. The various parts of the buildings are open at different times. Liturgies are celebrated regularly, above all the Eucharist and the Offices of the Hours. Visiting the churches is only possible via the officially approved guided tours.

When you reach the Cathedral Hill, you find yourself above the city: the Hill is located in the middle of the city, but rises above it. This is an urban place, which nonetheless possesses a distinctive character due to



The Cathedral Hill of Erfurt, seen from the east
(photo: B. Kranemann)

its medieval buildings and iconography, as well as its religious purpose. It places its mark upon the city. Some people are interested in the ecclesial character of the place, others simply value its sacred and spiritual atmosphere or its aesthetics.

Although various forms of spirituality and of the history of spirituality can be traced at the Cathedral Hill, this is not simply a historical space. Construction on the Cathedral Hill has continued to the present day; the details of the spaces have been changed again and again. This is where modern religious life is played out. The liturgical/ritual use of the buildings prevents the space from becoming a museum.

Multifaceted Liturgical/Ritual Praxis on Erfurt's Cathedral Hill

In the churches and other buildings of the Cathedral Hill of Erfurt one encounters both permanent and temporary uses, common liturgical celebrations as well as individual spirituality, religiosity that is confessional and that which has a more individual character. New uses for the Cathedral Hill are constantly being found, and on each occasion the space is newly constituted as a place of religious praxis.

As is to be expected, Roman Catholic services are celebrated here. Sunday and weekday Masses, the feasts of the Church Year, and various liturgies of the Word take place in the high chancel of the cathedral church, the nave, or the crypt. The spaces are changed, take on a particular emphasis, or are shaped by practical needs. They are linked by means of the liturgies, and for public services/liturgies outdoor space is also used. This is particularly the case for the diocesan pilgrimage, which is celebrated in September and in which thousands of people from all over the diocese participate. They come to celebrate the Eucharist with the bishop of the diocese and then take part in the diocesan festival. The altar, set up at the foot of the stairs leading to the Cathedral Hill, becomes the visual centre point. Thus the Church in the diocese of Erfurt becomes symbolically visible, as the faithful gather before the silhouette of the Cathedral Hill, which then is the centre point not only of the city but of the entire diocese. The Church presents itself to the public by means of this celebration in this prominent place. The celebration receives coverage from the media, for instance in television broadcasts. Liturgy is here clearly *cultus publicus*.

The procession for Corpus Christi – which in the state of Thüringen is not a public holiday – takes place on the Sunday following Trinity. It proceeds from *Sankt Marien* at the Cathedral Hill down to the lower-lying areas, circling a part of the Hill. Not only this parish community, but all Roman Catholics of the city take part in this celebration, which thus links together various locations at the Cathedral Hill and in the

city. In the procession a variety of meanings are expressed – for instance, the demonstration of one's religious belief, the linking of ecclesial and civic space, the concept of the 'Church on the way'. In a city in which the majority of the population profess no religious affiliation, and Christians are largely Protestant, the public celebration of this religious ritual certainly possesses an 'exotic' quality.

The celebration of the Feast of St Martin, patron saint of the city, has a long tradition in Erfurt. On 10 November thousands of Erfurters gather with lanterns on the cathedral square. On the steps a musical play is performed which does not necessary relate the legend of St Martin, but does follow a set ritual. Focus of the celebration is not only Martin of Tours, but also Martin Luther, and many may simply be celebrating a festival of lights at a dark time of the year. The various meanings overlap one another. Social activities and traditions are part of this day, which could not possibly be left out of the calendars of the city and church. Students of ritual studies will find the composition of the group of participants with their various confessions and world-views of great interest. Each participant can link his or her identity to this celebration, but at the same time they can join in the common celebration. This occurs in a place, the cathedral, which unites the population of the city, even though some of the population have never entered it.

This was also true in the case of the memorial service for the killing spree at the Gutenberg High School in Erfurt, which claimed the lives of seventeen people in April 2002. The cathedral and the cathedral square became the meeting place for very different world-views and ways of life. It was particularly impressive to see how young people from the city, regardless of their religious convictions, that week used the chancel of the cathedral as their place of mourning. Countless pictures, texts, flowers and other objects were laid around the altar, as a memorial to the dead and as an expression of the sorrow of those remaining behind. Together with several other locations this central place was especially chosen for this purpose. The city's non-denominational memorial service took place in the cathedral square. The ecclesial space received a new function: It became a place to mourn and remember the dead, a memorial site. One interpretation might be that a space used and understood in a religious way by Christians was seen to be suitable and perhaps also as already appropriately formed for this purpose. The mourners could fall back on a memorial culture which was already in place, and fill it with their own meaning.

The *Lebenswendefeier* ('coming-of-age celebration'), an ecclesially supported alternative to the *Jugendweihe* ('youth consecration'), a state-enacted rite of passage from childhood to youth which had taken place for decades and had been misused for purposes of political indoctrination, also takes place in the cathedral. The ideologically open celebration, which is intended specifically for those without religious affiliation, is made plausible by the space which is characterised by its iconography and Christian liturgical praxis. Without articulating an explicit confession of faith, the young people celebrate their transitional stage of life in a space that sets the human life cycle in the context of God's actions. The space becomes a frame of meaning which can be understood and taken up in very different ways. At the same time the celebration itself changes the space, which from the ecclesial point of view is interpreted through the lens of the coming-of-age ritual as a public religious space.

The Cathedral Hill as a Place for Liturgical/Ritual Praxis in a Secular Society

The Cathedral Hill in Erfurt, with its varied/multifaceted and intensive uses, is an example of the way in which ecclesial spaces can serve as visible religion in situations of extreme diaspora. What is essential – besides the location and its aesthetic quality – is its use, and an openness to a variety of meanings. This is not a museum or a place of folklore. Certainly, the liturgical/ritual praxis of the Roman Catholic Church will dominate; it is from this praxis that the various ecclesial spaces receive their sacrality. This does not, however, remain simply an internally focused sacrality; rather, the location gives rise to multifaceted external perceptions. It becomes a place of religious and spiritual liturgical/ritual praxis. It is not rigid and fixed; on the contrary, new and changing perspectives and practices are constantly being constructed. This is in any case the nature of the Christian liturgy and culture of celebration, which in changing combinations avails itself of very different spaces and combinations of space. Thus, even in a landscape strongly characterised by the lack of any religious affiliation, this ecclesial complex remains a place of visible and at the same time multifaceted religion, which draws its dynamic above all from rituals and liturgies.

(Translation: Rowena Roppelt)

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