

# The deconstruction of a cathedral: on recent debate about Nuernberg's St Lorenz church

## Abstract

This presentation is about the background and implications of a recent phenomenon, especially in German Protestantism, of 'partial profanation of churches'. I propose that it reflects an 'in-depth' secularisation in Protestantism, leading to a redistribution of roles of custodianship of the spiritual cultural heritage in society.

**Keywords:** semiotics of mediaeval churches, mystagogy of sacred architecture, theology of sacred space, secularisation, re-dedication of churches, post-secularism, and sacred heritage

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## Introduction

I present recent controversy about - fortunately averted - plans, to build up a large portion of the majestic late Gothic city church of Nuernberg, ('cathedral') with rooms for profane purposes.

In the case presented here, the majestic Gothic 'cathedral' of St. Lorenz was to be built up with profane rooms on a floor space of 190 sq. meters, three storeys high, with elevator and all. These installations would have filled the narthex and the western parts of the side wings. Visitors would have had to pass by these profane rooms, comparable to a museum, or to a shopping mall - as prof. Dr. Stefan Trinks noted, in his poignant documentation and analysis of these plans in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, that alerted the public nationwide to the nefarious plans.<sup>1</sup> The visitors were to enter through a permanently opened main portal.<sup>2</sup> The sense of being in an integral 'sacred space' would be lost - as prof. Sebastian Küchler-Blessing, a prize winner of the International Organ Contest - the *Internationale Orgelwoche Nürnberg* (ION) declared in protest.<sup>3</sup> The 'mystagogic character of the cathedral,<sup>4</sup> that rules its architecture, the statues and sculpture, the stained-glass rosetta, and most works of sacred art in it, would have become virtually unrecognisable. This would have amounted to a systematic 'de-signification' of this Gothic cathedral, and to a secular 're-signification', as explained by Umberto Eco,<sup>5</sup> that when knowledge about the semiotics of a work of architecture get lost, then the destruction or alteration of its significant features often follows. In the present case, the symbolism of the main gates, and of the sequence of sacred spaces played no role, and were not even discussed in the church press. This means, that the symbolism of this cathedral was not recognised - and appeared as irrelevant or unknown to the proponents of the profane installations in it. These plans would have changed the character of the cathedral permanently, since the interior shape of a gothic church comprises all its parts as significant: the narthex, the nave, the aisles, the transept, the choir, etc. as a unified whole. Each of the elements having a specific spiritual

<sup>1</sup>Trinks Stefan. "St. Lorenz Nürnberg mit Einbau: Mit dem Aufzug durch die Spätgotik". *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Voigt Hartmut. Extensive construction work: That should change in the Lorenzkirche. 2020. .

<sup>3</sup>Küchler Blessing, Sebastian Das. Response to the article by Stefan Trinks. 2021 in the FAZ. 2021.

<sup>4</sup>Panofsky Erwin. Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures. Princeton; 1979.

<sup>5</sup>Eco Umberto. English edition: A Theory of Semiotics. Indiana University Press; 1979.

and theological symbolism. All of them contribute to the meaning of a cathedral, as 'representation of paradise'. It is symbolised at the main portal, by the flanking nude figures of Adam and Eve, representing mankind outside the gates of Paradise. In the central tympanum, the depiction of the Final Judgement indicates the 'eschatological' ('future salvation') aspect of the cathedral, and its present meaning, as a site of 'purification', repentance and redemption. The main gate is flanked by the statue of the Virgin Mary with Jesus Christ on her arms. The doors are only opened ritually, on special occasions. The plans ignored the significance of the portal, and of the narthex, as threshold between the 'profane' (literally: 'outside of the temple'), and the sacred space, constructed as symbolic restitution of 'paradise'. The programmatic character of the St. Lorenz cathedral, is affirmed by its unique sculpture, the 'Salutation of the Virgin Mary', the 'Annunciation', by Veit Stoss, 1447, suspended in the heart of the cathedral, the 'crossing.' Here the winged angel represents the messenger from Paradise. St. Mary, who receives him, symbolizes the faithful, and the Christian community. Thus, the cathedral symbolizes a sacred space in the image of 'Paradise', with graded steps of access to the sanctuary. As a 'hortus conclusus', as an 'enclosed garden' that is ritually accessed in liturgy and prayer. The church also has a Marianic dimension: the body of the Virgin Mary, and the 'body' of the cathedral refer to each other. This symbolism would have been deliberately destroyed.<sup>1-5</sup>

The transformation of churches, by including for secular purposes, has become widespread in European countries. The authors of a research project, conducted at the university of Zürich. state that the loss in membership and financial means of Churches is in tension to the size and stability of the church buildings. The church authorities react by opening the church buildings for cultural and other secular purposes.<sup>6</sup>

In some cases, parts of historic churches are built up with rooms for 'profane' functions, serving parish functions. The worship space is confined to a part of the original interior space of the church buildings. While the outer shape is preserved, the interior is changed considerably. This process is reflected in debate and research in the field of conservation of historic monuments, such as in a publication by the office of cultural heritage of the province of North-Rhine-Westphalia,<sup>7</sup> in which forms and limitations of such 're-constructions'

<sup>6</sup>Walther Raphael, Kunz Ralph. Kirche ohne Religion. Die Umnutzung von Sakralräumen im urbanen Kontext. 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Meys Oliver, Gropp Birgit, Kirche im Wandel. Veränderte Nutzung denkmalgeschützter Kirchen. [Gelsenkirchen]. 2010.

and 're-dedications' are discussed. Thus, authorities of conservation act as guardians of sacred architecture, including its symbolism.<sup>6–11</sup>

The special features of the case of St. Lorenz in Nuernberg are, that the 'de-construction' of this church was proposed and pushed for by the parish itself, with the administrative, political and financial support of the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria, historically dominant in Nuernberg. As such, this case can be interpreted as reflecting a profound-self-secularisation of this - historically dominant Lutheran Church, for its disregard of the spiritual symbolism of this cathedral. The planned 'de-construction' would have destroyed its character as a meaningful coherent architecture, with its parts, that constitute its meaning as a gothic 'mystagogic' space. The disregard for it, expressed in the utilitarian attitude, that views this cathedral essentially as 'under-utilised real estate', may reflect such a process. (An interplay between secularisation in society, and its reverberations in theology – that influence the understanding of the sacred space of churches – has been noted, and may be assumed here too.)

The plans for this cathedral are of systemic importance, because, if they had succeeded – as in previous cases of 'lesser' historic churches – a legal precedent would have been set. In a controversial case, of the installation of modern stained-glass windows in a gothic church in Hannover, the regional court of justice had applied rigorous standards, in its binding ruling, that the character of this church had to be preserved in its entirety.<sup>8</sup> The irony of this case is, that whereas the provincial court in Hannover court was meticulous in its ruling, to safeguard the character of the Gothic 'Marktkirche', the church authorities in Nuernberg evidently did not feel bound by the architectural and spiritual 'programme' expressed in this masterpiece of Late Gothic architecture.

The plans had been marketed in the Church press, as means to adjust the church to a current secularised society, to "create a welcoming culture of low threshold",<sup>9</sup> and to "utilise the advantage of the location",<sup>10</sup> by conversion to (lucrative) secular purposes. After tempestuous debate and civil engagement, by the regional press,<sup>11</sup> the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,<sup>12</sup> the foremost national newspaper, successfully engaged for the restoration of Germany's architectural heritage for decades – by the curator of architectural heritage in the city of Nuernberg, and seventy prominent signatories, from art history and culture, universities, museums and cultural institutions, nationwide and abroad, and of an influential local organisation for the preservation of heritage, these plans were revoked by the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria, as indefensible, in view of the public outcry, locally and nationally.<sup>13</sup> The parish pastors and council followed suit, grudgingly.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, the case is meaningful. It shows that civil society

<sup>8</sup>Landgericht Hannover. The Hanover Regional Court in the 2022 financial year. 2020.

<sup>9</sup>Olschewski Jutta, Standortvorteil nutzen. Lorenzkirche in Nuremberg is looking for new ideas for the entrance area". In: *Sonntagsblatt. Evangelische Wochenzeitung für Bayern*. 2021.

<sup>10</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup>Voigt Hartmut. Heftige Kritik an Umbauplänen für Nürnberger Lorenzkirche. 2021.

<sup>12</sup>Trinks Stefan. St. Lorenz Nürnberg mit Einbau: Mit dem Aufzug durch die Spätgotik". *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 2021.

<sup>13</sup>Voigt Hartmut. Heftige Kritik an Umbauplänen für Nürnberger Lorenzkirche. 2021.

<sup>14</sup>Voigt Hartmut. Reconstruction plans for the Lorenz Church discarded: the effort was worth it". In: *Nürnberger Zeitung, (NZ)*.2021;9.

– individuals, the press, and institutions – assumed responsibility as custodians of the symbolic architectural spiritual heritage, where its traditional guardian failed. A reversal of roles is observable. It may reflect a crisis within the Protestant Church, as to its traditional role in society, to preserve knowledge, understanding, and respect for the symbolism of its mediaeval churches. Certainly, its mysticism, of a 're-presented' paradise, built and carved in stone, springs from Roman Catholic mysticism; yet it forms part of the Protestant inheritance, and could thus be regarded as binding.

At a time, when Notre Dame of Paris – in some ways the symbolic equivalent of St. Lorenz - is being restored with immense financial support, by France, in a national endeavour, the plans for St. Lorenz, indicate a shift, that raises questions about the roles of Church, its theology of 'sacred space', in view of the engagement of actors in society – of media and of conservationists - for the preservation of the common cultural spiritual heritage in the context of ongoing secularisation. An element of post-secular appreciation of this legacy of sacred architecture and art<sup>15</sup> could be observed here too.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicting interests declared by the authors.

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