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III.2 Religion and Urban Life

1 Introduction

Urban areas can be defined as settlements that are *dense* and *mixed* in terms of their population, built environment, and land use pattern. Urban areas encompass not only cities, but also towns, suburbs, and more extended conurbations. In this chapter, I am interested in “urban life”, by which I mean the different ways that people inhabit and help to shape urban space. I say “help to” here because urban space is always produced through interactions involving multiple groups of people going about their business: planners, developers, construction professionals, politicians, activists, businesspeople, caregivers, police, logistics workers, artists, tourists, and many others. These interactions do not only involve people; memories, desires, values, buildings, wildlife, technologies, resources, and regulations also help to make urban space. As all of this suggests, urban spaces are never static or simple; they are always changing, always complex – full of life.

The subject of this chapter – the relationship between religion and urban life – received very little attention before the turn of the twenty-first century. This was due to a widespread assumption that cities are inherently “**secular**” **places** (Lanz 2014) (Dreßler; Yelle in this volume). From the late 1990s, this began to change due to the growing visibility of migrant religious communities in North American and Northwestern European cities (Orsi 1999; Nagel in this volume). In more recent years, there has been a surge of literature which foregrounds the diverse, shifting, and *mutually transformative* relationship between religion and urban life (Christ et al. 2023; Dora 2018; Lanz 2014; Rüpke 2020; Rüpke and Rau 2020; Woods 2019).

In this chapter, we will journey to eleven global contexts to investigate some concrete examples of the interplay between religion and urban life. Readers who have not experienced these cities first-hand may wish to explore them as we do in my classes – by visiting them virtually using Google Street View. Crucially, my conception of religion is not limited to beliefs, creeds, and texts, but also incorporates **material** things, buildings, technological devices, and embodied practices (Langer this volume). Correspondingly, I do not understand religion’s influence to be confined to private domains; it is an active force shaping – and shaped by – urban life at large.

2 Southern Perspectives

All but one of the case studies that I discuss are in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This is a deliberate decision: these regions have been repeatedly overlooked by scholars of religion and urban life. Meanwhile, urban areas in North America – and to a lesser extent Northwestern Europe and East Asia – have been significantly overrepresented in such research (for exceptions, see Garbin, Coleman, and Millington 2023; Dilger et al. 2020; Stausberg 2023). This is readily demonstrated by the recent *Routledge Handbook of Religion and the City* (Day and Edwards 2021). The book features fourteen chapters on cities in the United States alone, and only eight on cities outside North America. One solitary chapter is reserved for Africa (which has almost double the urban population as that of North America). This disparity is especially conspicuous given the expectation that by 2050, a majority of the world's population (58%) will be living in an urban area situated in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Caribbean – regions commonly associated with the term “**Global South**” (United Nations 2019: 25).

My emphasis on “Southern” contexts should not be taken to imply that they are completely different or disconnected from their Northern counterparts – whether in terms of their religious composition or more generally. Indeed, several researchers have convincingly argued that Southern urban areas are critical sites for understanding global processes of urban transformation which are equally relevant to Northern urban areas (Robinson 2006; Roy 2009). In addition to birthing a wider research agenda known as “comparative urbanism” (Robinson 2022), this maneuver is also notable for its reversing of the standard direction of travel when it comes to theory-making, whereby Southern contexts are exclusively understood and evaluated with reference to North-centric models rather than on their own terms (Lawhon 2020; Myers 2020). Correspondingly, my contention is that Southern urban areas are also important sites for understanding entanglements between religion and urban life that transcend geographic boundaries – including the North-South binary (Lanz 2014).

3 Urban Expansion and Splintering

On a large highway in Nigeria, at the edge of the sprawling megacity of Lagos, is the international headquarters of one of the fastest-growing religious organizations in the world: a Pentecostal church named the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). Their headquarters, Redemption City, is one of several “prayer camps” constructed along this highway by competing Christian and Muslim orga-

nizations. The concept of the “prayer camp” derives from revivalist “camp meetings” first organized by British and American Protestant groups in the nineteenth century (Avery-Quinn 2019). Asonzeh Ukah (2014) demonstrates how, by developing more permanent camps at the margins of Lagos, religious organizations have single-handedly instigated a wave of urban expansion and renewal. In addition to a gigantic worship auditorium, Redemption City boasts several upmarket residential estates, banks, shops, a university, and its own dedicated energy infrastructure system. There is also a disciplinary “bureau” which enforces strict behavioral protocols on those within the boundaries of the camp to preserve its “Pentecostal” character, expelling people who fail to comply. In these ways, Redemption City resonates with aspirational visions of urban modernity and respectable, middle-class suburbia. RCCG frames Redemption City as a utopian alternative to the perceived disorder and immorality of Lagos. In turn, the camp’s rapid expansion, its manicured estates, and its vast auditorium are interpreted as signs of divine favor. Nevertheless, Ukah explains, Redemption City remains deeply entangled with Lagos’s networks of patronage and influence: the camp’s expansion has been enabled by financial gifts from wealthy individuals and organizations who use the space as a platform to bolster their reputations.

Hew Wai Weng (2019) identifies similar dynamics at work in Depok, a suburb city within the Jakarta Metropolitan Area of Indonesia. In this context, some Muslim residents have channeled their unfulfilled desires for an Islamic state into the construction of urban spaces dedicated to Muslim communities and their moral preferences. Such spaces include schools, hotels, salons, malls, restaurants, and – most notably – gated residential estates. Much like Redemption City and Lagos, Depok’s gated communities are marketed as a refuge from the grime, insecurity, and moral corruption that some associate with Jakarta. These estates typically appeal to aspirational residents seeking to assert a pious and middle-class identity, generating land value uplifts that have forced some poorer residents into more peripheral districts. Weng coins the term “religious gentrification” to describe how, through developments like these, dynamics of urban renewal and religious revival overlap. In this regard, religion contributes to global processes of “urban splintering” whereby the proliferation of fortified residential enclaves and lifestyle bubbles serves to fragment urban space (Graham and Marvin 2001). As all of this demonstrates then, religious organizations, values, and aspirations are facilitators – even instigators – of transformative urban processes. Simultaneously, these expanding and fragmenting urban spaces act as important sites for residents to cultivate new forms of religious identity and practice.

A rather different splintering dynamic can be seen in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where Stefan Maneval (2019) demonstrates how privately-owned beach resorts and gated communities serve as spaces where (wealthy and well-connected)

young men and women can dress and interact in ways that would not be otherwise permitted in a city subject to strict religious prohibitions on such behavior. In the context of Jeddah then, urban enclaves, while still exclusionary, enable people to *circumvent* religious programs of surveillance and discipline. This illustrates well how urban spaces always extend possibilities for residents to explore alternative – even formally prohibited – ways of doing things together.

4 Urban Conflict and Cohabitation

In the suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon, there are two neighborhoods, Hayy Madi and Mar Mikhail, which have historically been inhabited by Christian residents. Following the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), when the neighborhoods were heavily bombed, they became home to displaced Shia Muslims. Hiba Bou Akar (2018) shows how, in more recent years, Hayy Madi and Mar Mikhail have become a frontier for sectarian “real estate wars” between Christian and Shia residents. This ongoing conflict is fought not with arms, but rather through housing markets and planning regulations. These struggles have dramatic consequences for the two neighborhoods. On the one hand, Shia property developers are constructing expensive residential blocks to house new Shia residents. Some developers, particularly those associated with the militant group Hezbollah, strategically target areas associated with non-Shia groups. On the other hand, the Maronite Church are purchasing plots where there are ruined buildings – not primarily to redevelop them, since they lack the financial means, nor even to memorialize them, but rather to “hold ground” and thereby prevent Shia developers from buying them up. Accordingly, Bou Akar shows, Hayy Madi and Mar Mikhail now resemble a “checkerboard” of ruins and upscale high-rises. As this case demonstrates, buildings and plots of land serve as important means by which religious groups claim urban space and seek to magnify their influence. Whether they are crumbling ruins or shiny new developments, buildings can also become sites or emblems of inter-religious conflict, carrying the aspirations and fears of urban residents.

A very different example of religious competition for urban space can be found in Accra, Ghana, where Marleen de Witte (2008) foregrounds conflicts over *sound*. In particular, she focuses on frictions between Ga traditional religious practitioners and Pentecostal churches at the time of the Homowo festival (see also Goshadze 2019). In this month, Ga traditional authorities issue a ban on drumming, clapping, and other “noisemaking” across Accra. The purpose of the ban is to preserve a harmonious relationship with the spirits that reside in the city, and to assert their authority over this territory. From 1998, however, Accra’s

Pentecostal churches – whose (characteristically loud) worship and preaching is geared towards invoking the Holy Spirit and warding off evil spirits – started to disobey the ban. This led to sometimes violent clashes. Pentecostal groups opposed the ban on grounds of “freedom of religion”. Meanwhile, “neo-traditionalist” groups defended it on the grounds of preserving “local cultural heritage”. In 2002, the state resolved the issue by enforcing year-round noise regulations, reframing the traditional ban using secular discourses of public health and order. De Witte’s study demonstrates that struggles between religious groups over urban space are not always solely related to efforts to exert “symbolic” control; they can also result from clashing sensibilities regarding how to inhabit (spiritually charged) urban space. The case also indicates that such contestations do not always revolve around buildings and land; they may also hinge on sensory dynamics or ritualized occupations of space.

At this juncture, it is worth emphasizing that urban life is not always or even often marked by inter-religious conflict and competition. Urban areas are typically sites where people seek to build meaningful lives alongside people with different religious affiliations and cultural sensibilities, often amidst demanding conditions of (co)habitation. Keeping with the topic of soundscapes, consider Brian Larkin’s (2014) work on the Nigerian city of Jos, a setting marked by recent inter-religious conflict. Jos’s urban landscape has become “saturated” with religious sound broadcasted through loudspeakers used by competing churches, mosques, and street preachers. Larkin shows that Jos’s residents have developed a sophisticated cultural technique that he calls “inattention” – a capacity to selectively “tune out” of the sometimes-provocative messages that are broadcasted through these loudspeakers; messages which may otherwise trigger violent encounters. This is a perfect example of the kind of shared cultural practices that residents acquire as they navigate urban life together in religiously plural – and at times fraught – contexts.

5 Urban Lives and Public Infrastructure

The next case study takes us to Complexo do Alemão, a cluster of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil which are popularly associated with drug gangs and associated violence. In the lead-up to the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, military forces staged an occupation of these settlements to “pacify” them. Martijn Oosterbaan and Carly Machado (2020) describe how, as part of this campaign, the military strategically collaborated with Pentecostal Christian leaders and organizations. Their aim was to capitalize on the perceived trustworthiness of these ac-

tors among favela residents, as well as the disciplinary potential of their teachings around personal salvation – their capacity to cultivate “redeemed” citizens. One way that this played out was through the state’s funding of a network of rehabilitation clinics operated by Pentecostal organizations. Going beyond just treating drug addiction, these clinics take in members of drug gangs and provide them with opportunities to become “born again” and thereby escape the cycle of violence and crime. At one church, a team of reformed “ex-bandits” – described as a “spiritual militia” – works to “protect” favela communities and to “rescue” more gang members. In Complexo do Alemão then, pastors and ex-bandits function as mediating figures positioned between soldiers and residents. By foregrounding the blurred lines between the state security apparatus and religious organizations, Oosterbaan and Machado demonstrate that Pentecostal actors literally become public infrastructure, actively facilitating military efforts to govern favela communities in Rio de Janeiro.

Rosalind Fredericks’ (2018) research on waste infrastructure in the city of Dakar, Senegal provides a rather different example of how religion factors into urban governance and public service delivery. Fredericks shows how refuse workers in Dakar, most of whom are Muslim, have sought to frame their (historically stigmatized) work as a pious act of religious service on behalf of the city. By demanding recognition in this way, refuse workers have acquired a certain moral authority among residents of Dakar. This has facilitated refuse workers’ protests against neoliberal austerity measures implemented by the state, allowing them to galvanize public support for their demands for fair wages, job security, and improved working conditions. In contrast to Rio de Janeiro then, where the state has co-opted religious organizations as part of their urban governance agenda, Fredericks demonstrates how, in Dakar, religion has acted as a vital resource with which to *challenge* state policy.

More generally, both cases point to the important roles that religion can play not just in relation to how urban areas are assembled, but also how they are *sustained* and *ordered*. In these ways, religion has a profound influence on determining the habitability of urban space – its capacity to support people and the lives they seek to build (see Kirby, Sibanda, and Charway 2021).

6 Transient Cities and Urban Beyonds

The Kumbh Mela is a Hindu festival that alternates between four different pilgrimage sites in India. The most recent Kumbh festival in 2019 attracted about 200 million people, culminating in a gathering of over 50 million people on a

single day – perhaps the largest public assembly in history. Rahul Mehotra and Felipe Vera (2015) describe the Kumbh Mela as a temporary megacity whose assembly, coordination, and disassembly is meticulously planned. The 2019 festival, for instance, was supported by a vast infrastructure incorporating numerous “tent cities” catering to all budgets, 122,000 temporary toilets, sewerage, roads, electricity, hospitals, pontoon bridges, floating river terminals, police teams, AI-assisted surveillance systems, and a dedicated mobile app (ET Online 2018). All of this is orchestrated and financed by governmental bodies in collaboration with religious institutions and private contractors. Like RCCG’s Redemption City, the vast scale and logistical complexity of the festival has itself become an object of wonder, likely bolstering popular impressions of its organizers’ legitimacy (Camera Culture Group 2015). For Mehotra and Vera, the Kumbh Mela subverts the impression of permanence that is typically associated with urban space. The case of the Kumbh Mela is instructive because it reminds us that religious practices – whether they involve 50 million people or a single individual – almost always depend on some kind of background infrastructure which itself forms urban landscapes (Kirby 2024).

Another case study that expands standard conceptions of urban space is offered by Simon Coleman and Katrin Maier (2013) who share Asonzeh Ukah’s interest in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). RCCG’s strategy of expansion encourages the proliferation of small parishes in urban settings worldwide to heighten the accessibility of church attendance. Coleman and Maier focus on the case of London, United Kingdom, which has a large Nigerian population and a dense concentration of RCCG parishes (primarily attended by Nigerian and Nigerian-descended worshippers). As RCCG networks in London have thickened, some members have come to perceive the city’s social and spatial character as increasingly reminiscent of Lagos, where the church has its base. Many members living in London also pilgrimage to RCCG’s Redemption City headquarters for large gatherings. Through these physical and imaginative crossings between London and Lagos, RCCG members forge a **transnational** community which inhabits both cities simultaneously – a “stretched city space” that traverses and transcends the bounded territories of Nigeria and the United Kingdom. Coleman and Maier designate this space “London-Lagos”.

A different example of what I call “urban beyonds” comes from Christina Schwenkel’s (2017) research on Vinh in Vietnam, examining an urban space that extends beyond the city’s visible landscape. Schwenkel investigates the multiple lives of the Diệc Pagoda – a historic Buddhist temple that served as a secret meeting space for Vinh’s resistance movements under French colonial rule. It was later almost entirely destroyed by U. S. bombing during the Vietnam War. The ruined pagoda was largely abandoned during the postwar era of socialist rule, re-

flecting safety concerns as well as the state's perception that "superstitious" practices were inimical to its vision for Vinh as a modern, secular city. Nevertheless, the pagoda site remained a site of affective and spiritual attachment, even anxiety. This was because of popular rumors about a powerful Buddha statue said to be buried beneath its ruins. Devotees also continued to appropriate its spirits by secretly placing incense sticks around the site. In more recent years, the Diệc Pagoda has emerged as an important center of religious revitalization in Vinh. This shift was precipitated by an elderly nun, Sư bà, who – despite the best efforts of state authorities – began to rebuild the pagoda and its altars with the help of local devotees, reintegrating it with the wider urban landscape. The ruined pagoda has subsequently been designated a heritage site. Sư bà also led a successful initiative to reclaim adjacent plots of land which the municipality had planned to sell off to private developers.

Schwenkel's study demonstrates the enduring, even intensifying, potency of (ruined) religious spaces and spiritual forces in shaping the redevelopment of cities like Vinh, even in an environment pervaded by secular visions of urban modernity. Such visions are undoubtedly "beyonds" in that they conjure images of futures that transcend the city's physical form – but the same is true of the emotional and spiritual forces that those seeking to implement these ideals must reckon with. Of course, in Vinh, the opposition between these "beyonds" is neither inevitable nor permanent. Indeed, Schwenkel herself observes that there are now plans to redevelop and expand the Diệc Pagoda into a grand temple complex, hinting that it may "assume a more complicit role in urban development", with as-yet unforeseen implications for its roles as a devotional center and heritage site.

7 Conclusion

This chapter illustrates the complex, multifaceted, and deeply **entangled** relationship between religion and urban life. Its case studies challenge prevailing assumptions about the inherently "secular" character of urban life, as well as doggedly immaterial and disembodied conceptions of religion. As we have seen, urban spaces can be important sites of religious revitalization and innovation, fostering new forms of religious practice and identity – often in response to shifting conditions of urban life. Correspondingly, religious groups actively contribute to processes of urban transformation, as well as efforts to sustain and govern urban space, thereby influencing its habitability. Religious sites and initiatives facilitate and obstruct attempts by other actors to shape how urban space is produced and inhabited, some-

times triggering contestations over buildings, events, or sound. Religious interventions in urban space may be geared towards allowing people to fulfil spiritual obligations, garner influence, realize aspirations, stave off anxieties, or simply get by. By linking together cities in disparate locations and pointing to their hidden dimensions, religion also challenges what is conventionally understood as urban space. At the outset of this chapter, I noted the virtues of **comparative approaches** for theorizing religion and urban life. Now, at its close, I invite you to draw your own comparisons between the cases and dynamics discussed here and those of other urban contexts with which you are familiar.

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