Roundtable on Spirited Topographies: Religion and Urban Place-Making

Ordinary Cities and Milieus of Innovation

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This introduces a roundtable on the articulations of religious practices and imaginaries with the creation and remaking of urban landscapes in Bangalore (India), Vinh City (Vietnam), and Houston and New Orleans (United States).

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, June 2018, Vol. 86, No. 2, pp. 454–472
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfx066
Advance Access publication on January 20, 2018

While recognizing that urban expressions of religion are articulated with political and economic forces, this collection shifts the focus to the spatial, material, and sensory media with which the religious and the spiritual are enacted within urban life worlds. We aim to advance a critical intervention in the analysis of religion and spirituality, but also to map the ways that different publics create designs for and of urban life through religious and spiritual practices that may celebrate, interrogate, or challenge modernist, liberal, or postcolonial/postsocialist programs and geographies.

TYPIFYING WHAT Jennifer Robinson (2006) has called "ordinary cities," California's capital, Sacramento, founded as the gateway for California's mid-nineteenth-century gold rush, is now dominated by government institutions, port and sport facilities, malls, and housing developments. In the last two decades, public and private investments in downtown districts and outlying edge cities have brought a new wave of urban growth and development in Sacramento's deindustrialized center and its suburban periphery; at the same time, the regions lying between the city's core and its affluent suburbs, where the city's ethnic minority communities (Chinese, Latino, South and Southeast Asian, and African American, among others) are concentrated, have been sites of disinvestment, failed development, and resource-poor communities (Hernandez 2009, 2014; "Sacramento Diasporas Project"). While this socio-spatial pattern and the narrative of class formation, gentrification, and exclusion it contains will be familiar to many readers, what may be less familiar are the emergent geographies of religiosity that map these in-between areas and that make them sites for innovation, community expansion, and resilience. In these respects, the religious geographies of Sacramento and other "ordinary cities" can be understood as being embedded in enduring (and unfinished) social and historical processes of *becoming* (Schwenkel, this issue; Hancock and Srinivas 2008).

Consider the thoroughfares whose paths between center city and suburban developments crosscut these in-between areas. Interspersed between abandoned and repurposed military sites and storage facilities, low-income housing, ethnic groceries, pawn shops, and yoga studios are a variety of religious spaces, dating from the 1980s onwards, that accompanied urban and economic restructuring (see Figure 1). These social spaces, which arise as sites of both moral critique and moral possibility, serve new and established religious movements, as well as diverse spiritualities. They range from purpose-built churches and temples to community centers and houses fronted by signboards advertising evangelical Christian services. A large Laxmi Narayan temple on Elder Creek Road in south Sacramento brings together Gujarati, North Indian, Nepali, and Fijian Hindus to an altar space featuring

Figure 1. Calvary Chapel, south Sacramento. Photo by Mary Hancock.

marble images in a north Indian style (see Figure 2), but it also hosts gatherings of multinational devotees of the south Indian global guru, Sathya Sai Baba, in its kitchen annex. The Gurdwara Sahib, a Sikh meeting space in West Sacramento, occupies a refurbished Christian church that was purchased in 1983. Other sites, such as the Kuan Yin temple, with a Chinese style roof and a soothing pool (associated with the Indo-Chinese Friendship Association), was built on the sinews of a farmhouse (see Figures 3 and 4). And, in 2010, a stretch of one connector (Stockton Boulevard) was designated "Little Saigon," a reference to the local Vietnamese American community, with its Buddhist worship and teaching spaces becoming anchors for a vision of urban futurity rooted in and sustained by a traumatic history. As a group, these kinds of new spaces of religious and spiritual practice, while varied in their constituencies and orientations, have become spaces that materialize moral imaginations by reconstituting communities through voluntarism and education, broadening trans-ethnic alliances, and reconciling past traumas through various forms of civic action and community engagement.

We invoke Sacramento as an ordinary example of a global city—not the first-tier command and control centers described by Saskia Sassen or

Figure 2. Laxmi Narayan temple shrine, Elder Creek Road, Sacramento. Photo by Smriti Srinivas.

Figure 3. Kuan Yin temple, Elder Creek Road, Sacramento. Photo by Smriti Srinivas.

David Harvey—but a type of urban world that, over the latter half of the twentieth century, has become increasingly familiar to many of us. Cities not unlike Sacramento dot the globe—from New Orleans and Houston

Figure 4. Exterior pool of Kuan Yin temple, Elder Creek Road, Sacramento. Photo by Smriti Srinivas.

in the southern United States, to Vietnam's recently rebuilt Vinh City, to southern India's cyber-technology hub of Bangalore—and this round-table concerns the articulations of religiosities and urban imaginaries in these landscapes. Such cities are both ubiquitous and unexceptional in form *and* in the entwinement of multifarious religious and spiritual spaces and practices in that form. In these places, global forces and flows converge, worldly imaginaries are expressed, and the urban is (re)assembled through everyday experiments in survival and aspiration.[1] Set within a mottled urban fabric of both abandonment and redevelopment, these spaces are entwined with and sustained by informal, sometimes invisible, and transversal economic and social ventures and associated mobilities. These religiosities form milieus of innovation that articulate with cities and the histories and spaces of mobility that integrate, extend, and connect them. Acting on and with these imaginative resources, persons inhabit, represent, and transform urban space through responses to urban imperatives that range from finding novel ways to address resource-poor conditions to reinventing religious architectures in new landscapes.

[1]Regarding the ways that actors, understood as historically situated figures, may enable scholars to make sense of the urban as a "conglomeration of particularities as well as a space of structured relations of power," see Barker, Harms, and Lindquist (2013).

The articles that make up this roundtable are the outcomes of conversations initiated at a 2014 symposium, "Spirited Topographies," sponsored by the University of California Humanities Network, that concerned the various ways that religiosities are manifest in and inscribe contemporary urban worlds. If our own experiences with cities like Sacramento helped catalyze some questions, our varied scholarly paths brought us to the other, "ordinary" cities that we reflect on in this roundtable. In urban worlds made by ever more mobile persons, commodities, finances, images, and ideas, and by neoliberal restructuring of the spaces of work, leisure, residence, and production, how have various imaginations of citizenship, cultural memory, and space—both dystopic and utopic—emerged from the articulations of religion and spirituality with those changing landscapes? How does a mobility-oriented approach allow us to engage the imaginative practices of urban actors, while also allowing us to theorize the urban as a space of experimentation and cultural futurity? For, although it is undeniable that degradation, fear, and violence are parts of urban life, cities also promise hope and healing. How might cities and religion be theorized to better account for these diverse, yet mutually imbricated potentialities?

The questions that this roundtable engages draw directly and indirectly on a conceptual resource—the mobility paradigm—that over the past decade has coalesced as a product of the interdisciplinary concerns of the geo-humanities (Büscher et al. 2011; Cresswell 2006; Cresswell and Merriman 2016; Jensen 2013; Urry 2007). The mobility paradigm directs our attention to *movement* as a fundamental component in the making of social and cultural institutions, spaces, and identities. "Movement" here refers to walking, mechanical transport, virtual and imaginative mobility, as well as the blockages and immobilities that constrain and channel movement. This conceptual entry derives from but also departs from other kinds of spatially oriented approaches in the social sciences and humanities by flipping the idea that a built space (and the values or ideas asserted therein) is the central mover of action or institutions, such as religiosity, memory, or nationalism. Instead, it starts with mobility, and thus contingency, and asks how various fixed and institutional forms arise as products or coordinators of mobility, or as barriers to mobility. While injecting contingency and thus agency into the study of space, this approach also enables us to spatialize our thinking about religion's role in community formations and identities and in the affective orientations that bind and unbind us to each other and the world (see Tweed 2008).

Turning to urban spaces, a mobility-oriented perspective directs our attention to the ways that cities are produced as nodes for many kinds of movement. They are inscribed, physically and geographically, as spaces

of convergence where different peoples, economic practices, languages, and commodities come together. These convergences, moreover, are frequently organized by religious imaginaries and, for that reason, cities have long been mapped and produced by religious actors, practices, and sites. If some settlements became urban through processes driven by religious practices or achieved new meanings through religious mobility across space, other well-established cities offered fertile sites for the emergence and growth of religious movements (Bianca 2000; Çelik et al. 1996; Favro 1996; Heitzman 2008; Roberts and Roberts 2003; Werbner 2003; Wheatley 1971). Recent years have seen the rise of "faith-based organizations" whose members have intervened in urban landscapes to provide housing, food, medicine, and social services—and in certain cases, to proselytize—in response to de-industrialization, violence, natural disasters, migrations, and inequality (Arif 2008; Carter 2010, 2014; Deeb 2006; Elisha 2011; Khalil 2015; Lichterman 2005; Lipsitz, this issue; McRoberts 2003; Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013; Srinivas 2008). Contemporary studies of the articulations of religious identity and life with urban structures and global circuits have also recontextualized understandings of existing religious traditions within colonial, postcolonial, postsocialist, or transnational geographies (Becker et al. 2014; Diouf and Leichtman 2009; Eiesland 2000; Elmore 2005; Han 2010; Hervieu-Léger 2002; Nyitray 2006; Pena 2011; Pow 2015; Schwenkel 2009, 2012; Shacher 2015; Wilhelm-Solomon et al. 2017). They also highlight transversal collaborations between differently situated actors, whose own mobilities have shaped movements of material, social, and symbolic value across space in activities such as shrine-building, life cycle observances, and commemoration in new urban landscapes (Ahmed 2013; Garnett and Harris 2013; Górak-Sosnowska 2013; Hancock 2008; Orsi 1985, 2005; Srinivas 2001, 2015; Vasquez and Marquardt 2003; Waghorne 2004, 2016).

Although the ways that religious institutions, representations, and actors inhabit urban worlds are amply documented, the exploration of religiosity within geography and urban studies has remained, until recently, underdeveloped (see Kong 2001, 2010; Kong et al. 2013). This owes something to the ways that Euro-American secularisms are embedded in social scientific discourses on cities: if the "urban modern/postmodern" is necessarily the "secular," religiosity, especially as it takes shape within public realms, can only be read as a failure of the modernizing project and as a parochial contamination of cosmopolitan lifeworlds (Connolly 1999,19–25; Hancock 2015, 219–21). Such perspectives have hampered work on cities of the global South, which are often dismissed as object lessons in failed modernity. They do not recognize the ways in

which Enlightenment values and discourses and positivist methods have lent character and meaning to the religion/secularity binary, to urban planning, and to spatial modernity in Europe and North America. And they may foreclose critical explorations of utopian and, what some have called, "post-secular" designs for urban living and the forms of individual and collective agency that they underwrite, including the diverse forms that secularism, as a form of moral imagination, may take as it shapes cities' spatial and material landscapes (Beaumont and Baker 2011; Bartolini et al. 2017; Connolly 1999; Das 2010; Engelke 2013; Habermas 2008; Hancock and Srinivas 2008; Hegner and Margry 2017; Molendijk et al. 2010; Srinivas 2015; Uberoi 2002).

By bringing together three grounded studies of urban religious expression, this roundtable aims to resituate debates regarding urban place-making by interrogating the tendency to define the city as either the preeminent space of the secular or as the site of religion's violent return, and by attending to alternate and emergent ways in which religion and spirituality are imbricated in urban landscapes and socialities. The approach to religion here treads a middle ground between the historical contingency of "religion" in various disciplines or social formations (e.g., Asad 1993, 2003) and religion-as-medium (e.g., de Vries 2001), by stressing *religiosity*, the practices, subcultures, discourses, media, affective dispositions, and materialities that subsume both canonical practices of "world religions" as well as the diversity of orientations glossed as "spiritual."[2]

The roundtable's process-oriented approach to urban place-making attends necessarily to the many kinds of *mobilities* that engender and are articulated within city spaces, including transport and travel; the circulation of investments and remittances and labor; the ritualized spatial practices of religious, racial, and national belonging, and of resistance and civil disobedience; the imaginative and virtual mobility of images, maps, and texts; and the communicative mobility of conversation and telephony. By recognizing mobility as a property of things and people, as circulation, and as geographical movement, we understand the urban as a process of various replacements and displacements articulated with the logics of emergence, transition, and transformation that religiosities may express.

[2]Religiosity, in our usage, is meant to overcome the binary (common in colloquial and scholarly usage) that sometimes treats "religion" and "spirituality" as oppositional categories, with "religion" denoting a formal, institutionalized, and often textualized body of canonical practices and "spirituality" denoting a more individualized, idiosyncratic, and heterodox category (see also Engelke 2013, 38; Bender and McRoberts 2012, 2–3). For important recent efforts to reposition and broaden understandings of religion and the secular in relation to mobility, see Ivakhiv (2006) and Tweed (2008).

In this issue, Smriti Srinivas sees forms of "post-Hindu" expression in new urban mobilities and infrastructures. She emphasizes the hopeful futurity in the "healing fables" born of recombined Hindu, Buddhist, and theosophical ideals, and expressed in the diverse sites, from street shrines and mobile altars to monumental meditation halls, that make up Bangalore's new urban and suburban landscapes. This, like recent work on cross-sectarian engagements with ritual sites nominally associated with a single tradition (e.g., Novetzke 2008; Bigelow 2010), complicates recent work on place-making in India, much of which has exposed the ongoing spatial strategies of racialized Hindu nationalism, including nationalists' uses of pilgrimage and processional forms to threaten Muslim communities (e.g., Fuller 2001; Hansen 2001). Along with ethical responsibility to scrutinize and respond to those strategies, which, under the current Hindu nationalist government, have continued to foment deadly violence, Srinivas argues for our continuing need to comprehend other, more hopeful intersections of religiosity with urban designs for living (see also Das 2010).

The roundtable also contributes to discussions of place-making by exploring what we call *urban re-fabulation*, the reiterative, vernacular productions in and of urban spaces (such as murals, improvised shrines, stories, or body cultures [see Figures 5 and 6]) that incorporate idioms of devotion and sacrality. Such efforts inscribe religion and spirituality in cityscapes through material, performative, and other means (Orsi 1999; Osumare 2010a, 2010b; Roberts and Roberts 2003, 2008; Srinivas 2001; Sutherland 2017). In a similar vein, Christina Schwenkel (this issue) traces historical emergences and occlusions of spaces of popular Buddhist religiosity in Vinh City, Vietnam, over its socialist and now post-socialist periods of development (cf. Niedźwiedź 2017). She emphasizes Vinh's city-making as a process of "reassemblage," pointing out that while some representations deemed traditional have been incorporated within state-sanctioned commemorations, others have been used to obstruct municipal redevelopment efforts. Together, these strategies point to the multiple, and not always consistent, ways that religion contributes to the making and remaking of urban space in Vietnam, while also complicating its official secularist ethos.

Our interest in re-fabulation as a mode of spatial production is aligned with other recent efforts that explore the relations of cityscapes to vernacular and civic imaginaries that are inflected by diverse spiritual and ethical projects. *Global Prayers* (2016), for example, has made use of collaborations between art and science-based researchers, and explores the images and sounds, spaces, and practices of the religious in eight metropolitan

Figure 5. Buddha image in a Vietnamese religious center set against Sacramento's urban periphery. Photo by Smriti Srinivas.

centers from Lagos to Berlin (Becker et al. 2014). By contrast, focusing on artists largely from urban Senegal and Dakar, Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts brought together stunning visual celebrations of the Sufi saint, Amadou Bamba, both in text (Roberts and Roberts 2003, 2008) and as a curated exhibition at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. Other significant examples include Mary Miss's *The City as Living Laboratory* (2016) focused on New York City, and *The Urban Sacred* (2017) and *Urbanizing Faith* (2016), both multi-city initiatives.

While forms of urban re-fabulation may express religious transculturalism, hybridity, exclusivity, or other nuances depending on the context, the advance of capitalism has also set the stage for a wide range of new religious responses to its desires and fears, from witchcraft accusations to the "prosperity gospel" (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Guyer 2007; Stoll and Garrard-Burnett 1993; Weller 2001). Although capitalism and neoliberalism's impacts are spatialized in the monumentality of high-rise structures, billboards, and transport hubs, religious idioms and practices may be entwined in their realization and use. Indeed, the very forces of privatization and deregulation that mark neoliberal statecraft may anchor their own speculative theologies, while also offering openings for various religious interventions, often in what has come to be called "faith-based" service (see Sadler 2014). In the cases

Figure 6. Shiva image in serene contemplation in low-income south Sacramento. Photo by Smriti Srinivas.

analyzed by Srinivas (this issue), we encounter several such monumental spaces that have emerged from the labor and utopian visons of religious actors rather than the state or corporate institutions.

The often-aggressive verticality of modern urban spaces also entails the creation of *underscapes*, spaces of abandonment and socio-cultural amnesia, such as empty homes, decommissioned factories, and vacant lots, left in the wake of disinvestment and deindustrialization as well as retreating states. Such strategies create impoverishment and zones of exclusion that, in turn, may be claimed through habitation or use for new, improvisational, or precarious forms of life. In such contexts, emergent collectives—youth cultures, informal strata, middle classes, religious movements, or ethnic groups—may draw on religious, postsecular, or utopian registers to create designs for living that challenge modernist, racialized, or transnational geographies (De Boeck and Plissart 2004; Roberts and

Roberts 2003; Simone 2004; Varzi 2006). In his comparison of African Americans' creative interventions in two urban landscapes—Houston's Project Row Houses and New Orleans' street parades—George Lipsitz (this issue) argues that these artistic projects turn places of racialized containment and confinement into venues for envisioning and enacting new kinds of physical and psychological mobility (see also Lipsitz 2011). These new sites in Houston and New Orleans are borne of subjugated peoples' moral commitments to "making right things come to pass."

As a group, the contributors to the Spirited Topographies roundtable recognize the many ways in which the urban is produced by the state, capital, and market; at the same time, we insist that such productions are never total. Recognizing that the city is a "nexus of situated and transnational ideas, institutions, actors and practices that together demand an analytic of assemblage" (Ong 2011, 4), this roundtable takes as its point of departure the spatial, material, and sensory media with which the religious and the spiritual are enacted within urban life worlds. We work outward from a set of keywords—*mobilities*, *re-fabulation*, *underscapes*—to advance a critical intervention in the analysis of religion and spirituality, but also to map the ways that different publics create designs for and of urban life through religious and spiritual practices that may celebrate, interrogate, or challenge modernist, liberal, or postcolonial/postsocialist programs and geographies. With this effort, we hope to continue a conversation about the ways that urbanity and religiosity are mutually invoked, in Stephan Lanz's words, in reciprocal interaction "producing defining and transforming each other" (Lanz 2014, 25–27).

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