Religions and the Urban Space: Pentecostal Churches in Kampala (Uganda)

Alessandro Gusman (University of Torino)
alessandro.gusman@unito.it

Religions in the city

A Post-secular perspective: the sacred, far from having disappeared from the city, has instead contributed to the making and re-making of urban landscapes during the last decades. The presence of the religious in the urban space found new and creative ways of expression, such as the re-utilization of industrial and commercial places, or the occupation – materially and symbolically at the same time - of non-religious spaces (streets, squares, stadiums, etc.) to attract new believers (see Becci, Burchardt and Casanova, Topographies of Faith, 2013; Becker, Klingan, Lanz and Wildner, Global Prayers. Contemporary Manifestations of the Religious in the City, 2013)
Religions in the city

- Analysis of the transformations of religious landscapes, exploring how the spatial organization of religious communities shapes urban identities and vice versa.
- The presence of the sacred in urban spaces is visible in the public domain: strategies of space occupation and of visibility can be diversified, including the utilization of the new media in order to obtain a presence through movies, websites, music (Meyer and Moors 2006).
- Religious groups adopt different strategies in order to “take place” and “make place” in the city: need to analyse dynamics of competition among different congregations in the “religious supermarket” of the urban fabric.
Religions in the city

- Focus on the social and political presence of religious groups in the urban space (provision of social services, such as hospitals, schools, gathering places). Conveying the sacred through actions is a strategy of emplacement for religious groups, as issues of belonging and visibility can find a public dimension with the appropriation of the urban space.
- Religious groups continue to play an important public role, contributing to the creation of alternative arenas for state-society relations: need to further explore how different religious actors are competing, appropriating and contesting public spaces in contemporary cities.
Approaches to Religious Spatiality

“Spatial turn” as a revolution in the social sciences during the 1990s: a critical scrutiny of the notion of “place” (a specific territory; fixing of boundaries). Inspired by the work of Pierre Bordieu, Henri Lefebvre and others, social scientists abandoned the Cartesian view of “space” as a passive container for human activities, and conceived it as inherently dynamic and related to power, history and time.

Effects on anthropological theory: space is considered not an abstract entity taken for granted, but something “culturalized”, a product of social practices, in the same way as culture is conceived as “spatialized”. Space as a product of interrelations and as a dimension always under construction.
Approaches to Religious Spatiality

A major change in religious studies, too, which led to the formulation of an innovative approach for the spatial analysis of the religious, especially in the urban setting (K. Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, 2005).

If space is produced and reproduced by human action and interaction, «religion, which is inherently social, must also exist and express itself in and through space. Moreover, it plays its part in the production and reproduction of social space» «Without an arena of struggle, a space to produce and to shape, ideas and beliefs, principles and values remain ephemeral and ungrounded ... the ritual process produces the sacred space »
Based on these theoretical premises, the aim of this paper is to show how new religions, and especially the Pentecostal movement, have redefined the religious meanings of urban space in Kampala by sacralizing not only ordinary homes but also the leftover spaces of the city. I will argue that this strategy of space occupation is one of the main reasons of the success of Pentecostalism in Kampala.
Kampala as an «arena of struggle»

Religion spills out the privatized enclaves of homes, churches, mosques, temples, to assert broader claims on urban space, taking to the streets to negotiate religious presence, position, or power in the city.
Kampala as an «arena of struggle»

- Kampala is classified in the group of “medium-sized cities” (less than 5 millions) that are the fastest growing in Africa
- This urban population often grows in informal and unplanned settlements (this is the “natural” space for Pentecostal churches)
- Growth of urban population of Kampala: 24,000 in 1948; 330,000 in 1970; 1,500,000 in 2009. Day population: around 2,500,000.
- The average density is 6,100 ppKm2, but in the slums it raises up to 30,000 ppKm2
- According to UN-Habitat (2007) slums occupy 21% of the total city area and host 39% of the urban population
- Around 21% of the houses are in low lying wetland zones (out of the urban planning and mostly recent houses, built in the last 20 years)
Kampala as an «arena of struggle»

- The space of the city has a history, a spatial history of power relations between center and periphery in which different religious orientations have been negotiated.
- During colonial times planning was used as a tool for the manipulation of space and as a mean of fostering hegemony (racial and health segregation policies); the African population remained confined to rural areas around Kampala or in the kibuga. Only in the Fifties two neighbourhoods (Nakawa and Naguru) were created specifically for Africans to live within the municipality of Kampala.
- 1951: the Town and Country Planning Ordinance established 5 residential areas, with different density level; the racial and health segregation is replaced by a social segregation, with low, medium and high density areas (slums are outside this categorization).
The religious geography of Kampala

The study of the religious geography of Kampala highlights the way in which the different religious groups have been reinforcing their presence in the public space; it shows the plurality of the religious presence and the political meaning this physical occupation of the urban space had in the past, and has today.

3 levels of analysis of the differences in the strategies of space occupation:
A) Architecture and planning
B) Emplacement
C) Ongoing transformations in Pentecostal churches (from biwempe churches to mega-churches)
Biwempe churches
Biwempe churches
Mega-churches
KATWE II PARISH 2002

Legend
- Division boundary
- Parish boundary
- Main roads
- Feeder roads
- Tracks
- Railway
- Buildings
- Drainage channel
- Church
- School
