Urban Space and Religion in the United States
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https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.470
Published online: 27 July 2017

Summary
Religion has always been a contextually based phenomenon, particularly in urban space. Cities of every size, in every period, and in every region of the country have been defined by the towers and spires of faith traditions. They have mapped cities, providing anchors to religionists who worship there, and contributing to the construction of civil society and a sense of place. Communities of faith have drawn migrants and immigrants to settle in a particular place and provided resources for adaptation and integration. Houses of worship have often defined neighborhood identities and become progenitors of social capital beyond their walls. Increasingly the physical and social forms of religion are becoming more diverse—different accents, practices, music, dress, and even scents pour into and out of houses of worship that may not be grand old structures but more modest structures built for other purposes, blending into the cityscape. Still, religion is influential in shaping its context both spatially and socially.

But the relationship is reciprocal, as context acts on the questions, meanings, and practices of faith groups as well. The city has occupied the religious imaginations of many traditions as an ambivalent symbol, seen as both the locus of depravity and of redemption. Out of these imaginaries religious questions, meanings, practices, and forms of engagement have been shaped. Further, the economic, political, social, and institutional dynamics of the urban space impact the practice and understanding of religion, and how it is expressed and lived out in everyday life.

The interaction of religions and urban space—what can be described as a dynamic synapse in a human ecology—is emerging as a focus of exploration in understanding how cities work. Although religion is often overlooked by many urban theorists, researchers, planners, developers, and governments, it is gaining fresh attention by scholars. Drawing on major schools of urban theory—particularly the modernist Chicago School and the postmodern L.A. School of Urbanism—the spatial dimension of urban religion is being analyzed in research projects from a growing number of contexts. Theoretical and empiric work is enabling a deeper understanding of the relationship of religion and cities; they cannot be considered in isolation. Religious agency cannot be exaggerated or romanticized but should be considered as what two researchers have called “one of the ensemble of forces creating the new American metropolis” (Numrich, Paul D., and Elfriede Wedam. Religion and Community in the New Urban America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.). In the same way, faith groups of all traditions and dimensions do not exist in isolation of their context as bubbles in city space. The intersection of space and urban religion is complex, especially as both religion and cities are in the midst of great change in the 21st century.

Keywords: spatial theory, urban planning and development, Chicago School, L.A. School of Urbanism, immigration

Subjects: Christianity, Religion in America, Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology of Religion

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