

# CHAPTER 21 Religion

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In his seminal work on the medieval and early modern cities of Europe, Max Weber (1978) pointed out that in these cities, “The urban citizenry usurped the right to dissolve the bonds of seignorial domination, this was the great – in fact revolutionary – innovation which differentiated Occidental cities from all others.” Out of this grew the idea of *Stadtluft macht frei* (city air liberates), and the commercial–military might of self-governing cities culminating in powerful trade-states as in early modern Italy, or the seventeenth-century Netherlands. In these urban spaces grew new freedoms, new religious forms including the Protestant notion of belief as individual and ethics that, according to Weber, ultimately enabled new instrumental rationalities to emerge.

This creation of the city as a relatively free space, and as a world onto itself, a “true urban community” (Weber 1978) set the Western city, and indeed the modern city fundamentally apart from the “traditional” city, a form that dominated in the East. The “Eastern city” was entirely defined and subsumed by the larger society and cosmology. Eastern cities served essentially as sites of religious authority intertwined with sovereign power, as privileged bridges to another and “cosmic truth” as Paul Wheatley (1969) puts it:

The representative capitals of the traditional world were axes mundi where it was possible to effect an ontological transition between worlds, quintessentially sacred

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enclaves within which man could proclaim the knowledge that he shared with the gods and dramatize the cosmic truth that had been revealed to him.”

In thinking about cities, anthropologists have largely followed the classical logic that classified social life as being defined by temporality: either modern or traditional, belonging to either *Gemeinschaft* or to *Gesellschaft*, either Western or “Eastern.” Religious practice was in this scheme indeed the very heart of “tradition” whose proper place remained the village or the small town, pervaded by customary culture, and suffused with what Durkheim termed a *conscience collective* founded upon mechanical solidarity. Religion was at the heart of this undifferentiated world, argues Toennies (1988): “The guild is a religious community, and such is the town itself.”

By contrast, the modern industrial–commercial city was the site where “all that is solid melts into air” as Marx had it (Berman 1983), where individuation, alienation, and new forms of instrumental social relations, and the mundane routines of industrial time, burned away and displaced traditional mores and certainties. New divisions of labor and functional differentiations created “organic solidarities” and religious cosmology gave way to the new fetish of the individual: “As all the other beliefs and all the other practices take on a character less and less religious, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. We erect a cult on behalf of personal dignity which, as every strong cult, already has its superstitions” (Durkheim 1984). Industry, commercialization, and modern bureaucracy created their own rhythms and authority structures that were largely independent of religious sanction and morality. The religious impulse assumed new forms. For Durkheim, the function of religion and ideology in modern societies was to reunite their conflicting parts and social cleavages under an umbrella of shared morality. For Marx, religion was an effective ideological mystification, and a pleasant opiate, masking the real conditions of exploitation (Firth 1981).

This line of thought also informed the influential volume, *Secular Ritual*, where renowned anthropologists reflected on a range of modern and ostensibly secular mass-ceremonies – festivals, political rallies, national parades, sports events. The contributors all pointed to the importance of ceremony in having something akin to religious effects in creating a world, affirming a social bond and a moral community. “Ritual,” the editors concluded, “can assert that what is culturally created and man-made is as undoubtable as physical reality” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977).

## COLONIAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

Colonial culture and the scientific authority of evolutionary thought reinforced this mental construct within anthropology and beyond. The notion that modern, differentiated, rationalized life in urban areas was categorically different from a rural tradition based on an integrated, holistic customary culture was mapped directly onto administrative and spatial classification: townsmen

versus rural tribesmen; traditional rule and cultural purity vested in the rural traditional leaders and headmen versus the deracinated and unstable, unmoored character of a new urban proletariat in slums, *bidonvilles*, and *favelas*. In colonial Africa, cities were supposed to be de-tribalized while the rural areas became subjected to much firmer rule under traditional or appointed chiefs and tribal heads (See Mamdani 1996 for a synthetic argument along these lines.)

In the schema of classical anthropology, religion in its primitive and elementary form was at the heart of culture and custom, rooted in the rural, timeless village society. In the closing pages of his celebrated monograph *Nuer Religion*, Evans-Pritchard (1956) even questioned whether Nuer religious thought should be properly called “religion.” Despite being strongly theistic, pervaded by an ethos of submission to a central and omnipresent force, *kwoth* (spirit or God), Nuer cosmological thought was so intertwined with natural phenomena and mundane existence that it could not be compared with “religions of civilization” (Evans-Pritchard 1956). Rejecting Durkheim’s maxim that religion is the way a society worships itself, Evans-Pritchard suggested that one should think of Nuer thought as a branch of “African philosophy,” a form of knowledge that relies “not on concepts but on imaginative constructs” (Evans-Pritchard 1956).

For early urban anthropology coming out of the Manchester school in the 1950s–1960s – mostly based on African material – it was the transformations and objectification of tribal identities in urban settings that were of primary interest. Religion did not feature as a separate category in the classical studies by Epstein (1958) of the mining town of Broken Hill, in Clyde Mitchell’s (1956) work on the Kalela Dance or his later work on social networks. Religion was entirely subsumed within a broader cultural cosmology and the interest of this generation of anthropologists was in how urban life and new disciplines of work did not dissolve cultural affiliations but transformed them into more consolidated if also more superficial ethnic identities. In the mining towns, ethnicity was not tantamount to deep filiations and obligations as in the rural areas, but more superficial if effective markers of identity and difference, transacted through stereotypes and jokes. However, the distinction between the urban and the rural as a deep moral gulf between the “proper” of the countryside, the past frozen in time, and the improper and unstable life of the town remained an enduring matrix. As Max Gluckman put it in a canonical article from 1960, “an African townsman is a townsman, an African miner a miner; he is only secondarily a tribesman.”

This distinction drew sustenance from colonial policies as well as from landmark essays in sociology and anthropology. Simmel (2002 [1903]) described rural life as governed by emotions, depending on “the steady equilibrium of unbroken customs” which stood in contrast to the “metropolitan type” whose mind develops “mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness.” In his 1938 essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life” Wirth emphasized the “segmental” and “transitory” character of urban life, relying mostly on “secondary rather than primary contacts.” Cementing the notion of the spatial difference between the city and the countryside as a temporal difference, Robert Redfield’s essay “The Folk Society” (1947) depicted the life of towns and

villages as that of “little traditions,” sites of enduring local moral registers that stood opposed to the anonymous life of the modern metropolis.

Philip Mayer’s (1961) classic study of Xhosa migrants to Port Elizabeth demonstrated that the distinction between the Red (traditional Xhosa) and the School People (Westernized Xhosa) as two starkly opposed moral–social registers of conduct, mapped on to the rural and urban distinction. In Mayer’s account, Xhosa ritual practice and Christianity were involved on both sides of this divide but the more radical calls for discarding tradition altogether came only from heterodox, modern Christian churches in the city. In a similar vein, the urban milieu and its new demands for replacing traditional kinship obligations with strong horizontal ethnic ties became the midwife for a new form of religious organization in urban Nigeria. The constant contiguity and competition between Hausa and Yoruba speakers in urban space hardened and reified ethnic distinctions (Cohen 1969). What appeared to be “re-tribalization” on the surface was in fact a new phenomenon: the organization of Hausa identity as a political phenomenon, articulated through the Tijaniyya Muslim brotherhood – a transregional organization that gave Hausa political clout and expanding economic opportunity. Today, transnational religious organizations connect Hausa traders with Senegal, Egypt, Cape Town, and further afield (see Chapter 17, “Transnationality”).

In other parts of the world, dominated by what Evans-Pritchard (1956) termed “religions of civilization,” the move from the country to the city was conceptualized as a move from the customary, habitual, often heterodox “little traditions” to the rule-bound, abstract “great tradition” residing in more formalized institutions in cities. This was particularly true in the Muslim world and in South Asia, where rulers for centuries had made cities and towns into sites of performance of both ritual and secular power (e.g., Eck 1982; Wheatley 1969). These cities were celebrated as places of great learning and refinement but also full of decadence and moral depravity. In both the Muslim and the Hindu tradition, the splendor and beauty of the holy city always existed in tension with the purity of the more rustic but more authentic traditions – the Hindu sages and shrines in the hills, the great Sufi saints of the hinterland, the forest monks, etc. (Tambiah 1984).

This changed radically with the coming of colonial rule. Now, the same cities were conceptualized as sites of a decaying “tradition,” symbolized by their dense, overcrowded, and unhygienic medinas and qasbahs, crumbling mosques and temples. Colonial cities from Fez, Cairo and Beirut to Delhi, Hyderabad and Lucknow were now doubled by a new modern colonial town, replete with administrative buildings, parade grounds, and geometrically laid out streets, squares, parks and clock towers (Gilsenan 1982; see Chapter 5, “Built Structures and Planning”). The effect was immediate: the old town was “black town,” chaotic, overflowing, unruly, and suspicious in the eyes of colonial officers (Mitchell 1988). In the words of Dale Eickelman (1976), who studied the transformation of the holy city of Boujad in Morocco: “French policy created three zones, for ‘traditional’ Moroccans; ‘evolved’ Moroccans, and Europeans. Each zone was presumed to correspond to the mentality of certain elements of

the population.” It was clear that religion would play different roles in these different zones of the colonial city. Folk deities and traditional practices were generally assumed to persist in the “old city” and in the slums brimming with new urbanites. It was the modern part of the city, European or native, which was assumed to embody a certain cosmopolitan flavor but never secularity in the sense sociologists have attributed to the large European industrial city cosmopolitan (see Chapter 18, “Cosmopolitanism”). Colonizers were seen as Christians, and they behaved like it: churches, clubs for Europeans only, Christian organizations, schools and institutions abounded in the new city spaces of the colonial world. With hardened racial divides in the late nineteenth century, native elites and middle classes set up parallel networks of schools, clubs and associations, mostly based on existing community ties and affiliations, and often modern religious reform agendas producing new and austere forms of Islam (Gilsenan 1982), modern reformed Hinduism (Jones 1976), and reform Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1990; see Chapters 3, 9, and 12, “Community,” “Class,” and “Race”).

Anthropologists of South Asia noted early on that colonial urban spaces indeed were modern but also marked by religious activism and civic associations, making them rather different from Wirth’s model of superficial social ties. David Pocock (1960) asserted that it was in fact only in the city that the detailed spatial and institutional segmentation of communities, the very stable of the Hindu social order, could fully unfold and realize themselves, as evidenced in older Indian cities such as Surat or Banaras (see also Haynes 1991; Kumar 1988; see Chapter 1, “Spatialities”). Milton Singer (1972), in a not dissimilar vein, proposed that the new urban spaces in India enabled previously disorganized and dispersed religious practices to be re-organized and institutionalized in novel ways that only strengthened their public visibility and prestige. Modernity transformed tradition by producing a more rigorously organized “great tradition” that in turn swallowed and homogenized the multiple “little traditions” (Singer 1972). Anthropologists of China demonstrated that similar processes of codification and institutionalization of religious and cultural practices took place in major Chinese urban centers (Skinner 1977).

### THE SACRED AND THE CITY

The brief overview above should make it clear that the conceptualization of religion-as-tradition/custom has had a long, and agenda-setting, life in anthropology in spite of rich ethnographic evidence that has strained at the limits of this thinking. One problem was that urban anthropology shared with colonial administration the fundamental idea that outside of the Western world, the urban and the rural evolved in two separate temporal frames. The “time of the other” was always delayed or static, also when the colonized other lived in “native quarters” in the middle of colonial cities. The other major problem in this intellectual model was that there was overwhelming evidence against it, both in the modern Euro-American industrial cities, as well as the non-

European cities whose cultures and groups were the object of anthropological interest. The modern industrial city was never a secular space in any meaningful way but awash with all kinds of religious groupings, institutions, and missionaries, many of them outside the organized edifice of religious institutions. It is difficult to overemphasize the depth of worry and skepticism that characterized debates about the modern industrial metropolis in Europe in the late nineteenth century. The new urban proletariat was seen as unstable and deracinated. The emergence of sociological and psychological theories of crowd behavior and crowd pathologies – Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, Sigmund Freud, and others – was but one symptom of the fear of the social pathology and degeneracy of populations and social mores in the large metropolitan areas in the world. These populations were also objects of systematic missionizing and social relief work by religious movements that worked at home as well as in the colonies. In their work on missions and modernity, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff identified a “dialectic of domesticity”: nonconformist preachers and missionaries who were engaged in efforts to create proper and moral homes and domestic disciplines among the working class of the northern cities of England, as well as among new converts on the colonial frontier (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997).

In the United States, the burgeoning industrial cities were seen as imminent social catastrophes as the combined waves of impoverished immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, often regarded as “white-but-not-quite,” and emancipated African Americans moved to urban centers in large numbers. This triggered major racial and ethnic tensions and marked the beginning of an unprecedented level of activism and missionizing by many groups and movements in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and numerous other cities. Some activities were driven by strong anti-Catholic sentiments, others by the temperance movement, and others again by attempts to organize and galvanize communities along ethno-religious and racial lines as shown by Robert Orsi (1999) in compelling detail (see Chapter 27, “Social Movements.”).

This dynamic was even more pronounced in the large colonial and postcolonial cityscapes where religion historically played, and continues to play, a huge but often underestimated role. At times, religion was articulated alongside mobilization of cultural and ethnic identities. The creation of the annual Ganesh festival in Bombay in the 1890s by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a conservative Hindu and early nationalist, is a good example of a mass spectacle that was a public display of religious sentiment and community but also an anti-colonial statement, and an anti-Muslim manifestation, despite borrowing its basic format and aesthetic form from the Shia Muharram festival (Kaur 2005). Today this mass spectacle has become the signature event of the city, one of the largest religious festivals in the world, and every bit as labile and unsettling of intercommunity coexistence as it was in the 1890s. Although the form, tenor, and political forces pushing this festival are radically different from anything Henri Lefebvre had in mind, it is probably one of the more spectacular attempts to claim the “right to the city.” Bombay was historically a city of migrants and minorities from all over the subcontinent. From the 1950s it became the center of a long campaign

to be defined as a Maharashtrian city in the new monolingual state of Maharashtra at a time when Marathi speakers made up only around half of the city's population. This religious/linguistic movement, and its offshoot, the militant and Hindu populist movement Shiv Sena, actively promoted the thousands of local neighborhood committees that for months each year prepared images and tableaux to be displayed during the intense processions and displays during eight days of festival each September. The Maharashtrian and Hindu claim to the city is today firmly established.

At other times religion is articulated in its own right, as a moral force that can be mobilized as a bulwark against the imputed immorality of urban life and excesses of modernity, like Orsi (1999) shows for the United States. Here, the formation of reformist Muslim organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood in urban Egypt (Mitchell 1993; Zollner 2009), or Tablighi Jamaat in colonial and postcolonial South Asia (Masud 2000) are paradigmatic cases in point. At other times broad religious symbols became a temporary axis of identification and solidarity among very diverse communities, pitching them against an enemy community in violent clashes, staged mainly in urban spaces. The historically deep and enduring rift between Muslims and Hindus in India is a case in point (Hansen 1999; van der Veer 1994), but the recurrent and escalating clashes between Hausa-speaking Muslims and Yoruba-speaking Christians in the cities of northern Nigeria is another instance of this pattern (e.g. Falola 1983; Larkin 2008) (see Chapter 3, "Community").

These clashes are not about the city in a strict sense, but like urban ethnicities, they take strongly spatial forms, are "place making" in that they imply enduring marking of territories and boundaries. They are fought along the lines of culturally "thin" but effective and flexible filiations of otherwise socially disparate groups, filiations created more by the contiguity of ethno-religious others than by deep camaraderie or sympathies with co-religionists. Deep ethno-religious divisions in everyday urban life are effects of violent clashes rather than their initial cause as such. The perverse outcome of such recurring conflicts is, in other words, that they precisely tend to produce their own ostensibly "natural" and initial cause – enduring enmity and socio-spatial separations.

In all of these cases, religious institutions, identities, and sentiments are intimately involved in the very making of urban spaces. They continue to leave deep marks on the structure of urban political and social conflicts and distinct experiences of urban space, architectures, and soundscapes. Yet, this nexus between religious identity and urban experience has rarely been explored. Scholarship on religious phenomena, and work on urbanity and urban cultures, have often happened along two parallel but rarely intersecting or cross-fertilizing lines. The obstacle seems to lie in two forms of conventional thinking:

- 1 Organized religion continues to be thought of as a separate domain of life with its own institutions and ethical injunctions that only incidentally touches or impacts the general economic and political life of cities, or ordinary people. Those who study religion often focus on specific experiences,

beliefs, rituals, movements, institutions, and congregations. These are ready made and well-delineated fora and objects that often prove welcoming to the visiting ethnographer.

- 2 Those who study urban life, or urban communities, tend to focus on questions of pressing everyday concern – livelihoods, housing, resistance to urban reform processes, transformation of gender roles, and so on. Religious concerns often appear incidental to such general issues that in many cases are shared across religious boundaries.

While neither of these assumptions is wrong or misguided, the net result is nonetheless a continuous separation of religion and city life. However, we may well be missing important dimensions of how religion and religious identities powerfully shape what urban experience, and urban aspiration, may look like for millions of people across the world.

Let me explore how religious life, urban experience, and urban space are co-articulated in two domains: firstly, as everyday marking of urban space through shrines, inscriptions, buildings, and community institutions. These physical markers often acquire an enduring significance or polluting effect that are not easily transformed by the logics of the property market, urban planning, or gentrification. Areas that are marked by religious community, spectacular events, and sacrifices tend to remain so for a long time.

Secondly, as lifestyle communities where forms of consumption, outward identity markers, and styles of ethical orientation blend into the making of exclusionary religious enclaves, either physical or virtual.

### SACRED SIGNS AND MARKED SPACES IN THE CITY

Let us begin with an imaginary walk through the old mill district of Mumbai, the famed home of the working class that substantially defined the city and its politics for most of the twentieth century (see Chapter 9, “Class”). Here, in what once a famously multi-ethnic and multi-religious area, one will find remnants of dilapidated mills, the dense working-class *chawls* (tenements), and remnants of many of the institutions that defined popular life there for generations: *akharas* (gymnasiums), eateries, libraries, and so on. In the same terrain one also finds a large number of small temples and small shrines under trees, painted stones, trees that have been made into representations or abodes of spirits or saints; as well as mosques, madrasahs, small stone *dargahs* commemorating long-dead Sufi saints and spirits, as well as older Christian institutions from the Salvation Army to large well-maintained churches and a plethora of small wayside Catholic shrines dedicated to the Virgin or to local saints.

Today these districts are more sharply segregated than before after decades of conflicts especially between Hindus and Muslims, but the historical lines, signs of the sacred, and patterns of residence are of long standing. This is a landscape upon which people and religious communities for generations have left marks and have cultivated certain forms of life. The process continues and

a city like Mumbai, and most other cities across the Indian subcontinent and well beyond, houses thousands of small shrines, or trees anointed to become home to healing or more malevolent spirits. Such shrines often grow incrementally, over decades, and attract heterogeneous groups of worshippers who add pictures, decorations, bricks, small loudspeakers, etc. These structures and sites flout all municipal regulations and yet persist, aided by local activism, patronage by local politicians and business people, or by the sheer persistence of the worshippers (see Chapters 19 and 20, “Practices of Sociality” and “Memory and Narrative”). When the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai undertook a drive against such “unauthorized structures” and “overgrown trees” in 2003, it generated vehement protest across the city. Many of the remnants and the debris from the demolitions soon acquired the status of sacred objects and incipient seeds of new shrines (Bharne 2013).

Such mundane forms of the sacred seem to resist easy conceptualization. They are not easily classifiable as set apart from the profane world as a Durkheimian definition would hold, because they are so integrated into the daily flow and life of the city, and the life on pavements, open spaces, neighborhoods, and roads. Yet, removing them is never easy and sits awkwardly with a long and colonial tradition of safeguarding and respecting sites of worship and spiritual importance. Demolitions of religious sites and structures by the authorities or hostile communities inadvertently end up in long-drawn court battles, often brought by social workers or aspiring politicians hoping to reap publicity and public standing from a defense of what is commonly regarded as inviolable sites and structures. Such historical patterns of sacred spaces and sites that are often reproduced through popular performances and ritual, form an enduring deep structure of urban space that can both interrupt and structure urban expansion, as Smriti Srinivas has shown in compelling detail for Bangalore (Srinivas 2002; see Chapter 1, “Spatialities”).

Compounded by ethno-religious conflicts that often crystallize in space around certain physical borders such as streets, squares and blocks, the everyday sacred markings of space leave durable traces that are not easily erased and become visible markers that are used to navigate the city, and define communities in distinct spaces (see Chapter 6, “Borders”). These effects of collective violence tend to compress religious identity into a more generalized form, defined by the “other” and from without, and making religious identity intensely embodied and somaticized. It comes to define space, fear, and practical parameters of everyday urban life – where one can safely shop, walk, work, and live.

Despite the enormous power of the forces of real-estate speculation and gentrification, so eloquently analyzed by Neil Smith (1996), the deep structures of urban space that attribute certain areas to certain ethno-religious communities decisively shape how urban redevelopment can take place, and how real-estate markets can develop. The old mill lands and working-class areas in Mumbai now see a vigorous growth of new high rises catering to the city’s burgeoning middle class and elites. But most of the new high rises in these areas cater precisely to the people who already feel comfortable there. Areas that are historically seen as Hindu dominated see an influx of mostly Hindu

families; historically Christian areas attract the upwardly mobile from that community and the few high rises in Muslim areas cater almost exclusively to Muslim families. Historically, many colonial cities were segmented along lines of religion and caste by colonial authorities that actively encouraged new migrants to settle among their own communities and kind. These segmentations are today reinforced and reinvented by the twin forces of ethno-religious conflict and the preferences and prejudices governing the real-estate market.

Similar logics can be observed in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. As Africans, Coloreds, and Indians were moved into separate townships in the 1960s, their former areas were turned into industrial estates and other non-residential land, serving as buffer zones separating such townships from white areas. Interestingly, apartheid planners demolished homes in older areas but never churches, mosques, and temples. To this day many township dwellers perform rituals and services in these older religious institutions, surrounded by large industrial enterprises and warehouses.

In the townships, the apartheid planners had carefully laid out plots of land designated for religious institutions. Lack of resources and sponsorship left many plots vacant or underused. After the end of apartheid, a conspicuous religious revival has gripped the township and many other parts of the country. Old industrial buildings and cinema halls are turned into mega-churches, Pentecostal tent missions abound, and smaller old temples and mosques built by earlier generations of modest means are now replaced by gleaming new structures, often marking their presence by loud sonic means – amplified *azaans*, temple and church bells, amplified singing of hymns and *bhajans* and so on. These give rise to new forms of pride and new misgivings. A temple committee in the formerly Indian township of Chatsworth outside of Durban has just erected a 40-foot statue of Hanuman. A member of the temple committee told me in 2011 that now he felt “proud to be a Hindu. Previously we were made to feel ashamed of our heritage but now we are free to say: our forefathers built this area and made it what it is. They were Hindus and they would have been proud of what we do today.” The force of his sentiment was directed at the many local Hindus – especially those of lower social class and caste – who converted to Pentecostal Christianity, which today enjoys a conspicuous presence in the area. The Pentecostal preachers were clear and unambiguous in identifying the Hindu gods and their abodes, the temples, as nothing but the work of the devil – institutions and influences they have devoted themselves to remove from the life of their flock and the township as a whole. Local Muslim clerics encouraged the Muslims in the area to send their children to some of the proliferating Muslim schools and to move to mainly Muslim areas in order to make sure that their families were exposed to what they would call “more healthy and clean life styles” (see Hansen 2012: 223–290). These contestations of space as religious territory, and older racial demarcations, had direct consequences for how the real-estate market in the suburbs of Durban functioned. Real-estate brokers in the area told me that “no white person ever tries to buy here.” They also related that proximity to a temple, mosque, or church now is a major consideration for people buying houses. “No Christian will buy next

to a temple or a mosque – they think they will get affected by the power of the spirits there.” Similarly, many Hindus would complain about the loud singing and music from makeshift churches. The feeling of being defiled by the presence of Christians was strong, especially among the upwardly mobile, for whom the embrace of modern Hindu piety is a key to their quest for respectability (see Chapter 1, “Spatialities”).

Relatively little work has been done so far on the way religious materiality, processions, public ritual, and religious community institutions durably mark and define distinct urban spaces. However, popular experiences, narratives, myths, and urban legends are richly woven around particular sites of particular power, sacred power, such as sites of death and sacrifice, cemeteries, haunted houses, graves of saints, and so on (see contributions in Gomez and van Herck 2012, and Burton 2001).

### FROM ETHNICS TO ETHICS: THE CITY AND THE QUEST FOR UNIVERSALITY

Conspicuous, diverse, and highly public religious institutions, processions, sounds and signs have, in other words, shaped life for more than a century in large cities in the colonial and postcolonial world. Now, similar configurations of diverse religious and ethnic communities, jockeying for space and public expression, increasingly define the urban experience across Europe and North America. Distinct religious communities promote certain codes of conduct, styles of dress and comportment, distinct public lives and styles of consumption, segmented institutions, forms of leisure and performances – often investing heavily in shutting out unbelievers, or merely those who are different from themselves in taste, class, and disposition.

At the surface of things, this seems to conform entirely with the urban ethnicity hypothesis that anthropologists and sociologists have developed over decades: urban life, and the intimate encounters with many and powerful others in the city, spurs a certain generalization and homogenization of multiple discrete local traditions and customs. These dynamics create a form of urban ethnicity that is broad but “thin,” hinging on a few and easily shareable traits – language, styles of food, skin color, recognizable dress codes. This dynamic of “cultural abstraction” seems to be analogous with more general logics that, for Henri Lefebvre, constitute the heart of modernity and the capitalist city: the abstraction and objectification of labor, commodities, media images, space, dwellings, rhythms of work and movement, and so on. Many of these logics of standardization, and even a certain “theological simplification,” also apply to religious life in their modern and mediatized form where the face-to-face dynamics of congregations or collective prayer are substituted by televised images, sermons and speeches on radio, tapes, and other media (e.g. Meyer and Moors 2006).

However, none of the recent work on religious practice and identification suggests that the seriousness with which people hold religious beliefs are lessen-

ing, or that attachments are getting more superficial. Quite to the contrary. What does change is the nature of these beliefs, and the objects and practices through which religious attachment is formed. With modern and more abstract interpretations of religion – less tied to specific places, customs, spatial contexts, and existing communities – religious belief, practice, and identification are more easily portable and adaptable to new contexts. If older ritual practices were contextually “thick,” i.e., doing the right thing at the right time and place, modern religion seeks to be less context-bound and instead be embedded in the sincerity of the attachment to the religious community and the seriousness of the re-enactment or interpretation of ritual practice. It seeks instead a certain measure of “ethical thickness.”

Today, it is neither tradition nor ethnicity but the new and decidedly modern interpretations of religious idiom that provide the most appealing and successful styles of ritual and belief across the world. The fastest growing and most powerful religious movements in the twenty-first century – evangelical Christianity, modern Islamism, and modern Hindu movements – are decidedly pitched against habitual “traditional” practice, which they deride as soft, formless and without rigor, contaminated by cultural accretions. Many religious modernists criticize the “ethnic” model of religious belief and attachment as insincere, as unreflexively conflating traditions and habits of certain communities and proper religious injunctions. One classic example is the modern Islamist critique of Sufi-oriented rituals and beliefs among Muslims in South Asia. Many Islamists regard the worship and offerings at *dargahs* (graves of Sufi saints) and the belief in the healing powers of certain verses of the Quran as abominations, “grave worship,” and superstition imported from Hinduism, and excessive “cultural” pollution of the purity of the doctrines and truths of Islam. Similarly, evangelical movements in Africa campaign against “heathen” practices as well as the local forms of African Christianity as somehow polluted, unclean, too embedded in cultural traditions and worship of false gods, if not the devil (Meyer 1999; see Chapter 24, “Pollution”).

Instead, these movements promote the idea of modern piety as a break with the past, as radical self-invention, internal purification, bodily self-containment, and all the other markers of classically modern virtues. In short a form of “ethicization of religion” that pitches religion as a register of ethical certainty against the proliferation of another version of the modern self – the self-reflexive, ironic, and hedonistic self that constantly seeks fulfillment and expansion of desire. So we are moving from ethnics to ethics: from religious identity articulated through a host of other cultural markers (ethnicity) towards religious identification as a more purified, universalized and ethical set of propositions, and “values” – the latter being a flexible metaphor for any kind of modern conviction.

A word of clarification on what the term “modern” may stand for and signify in the context of the modern city. Following Talal Asad’s critique of Clifford Geertz’s idea of “religion as meaning” as a peculiar Protestant rendition of what may constitute religion (Asad 1993), much work has gone into denouncing and critiquing the “Christo-centric” understanding of religion as such in the

social and human sciences. This has pertained even more pointedly to the overly Protestant connotations attached to the notion of “modernization of religion,” understood as a move that makes religious practice more scriptural, abstract and conceptual, and less embodied, ritualized and material. While there is much value in discerning how a legacy of Christian theology informs many concepts and practices considered generically modern, it is equally indisputable that religious practices across the world, and certainly in cities, are generally rendered ever more abstracted, dis-embedded and portable, often ethical in orientation. This process of dispersal and portability can be directly linked to trade, movement, cultural interface, and entrepreneurship as pointed out, for instance, by the historian Nile Green. In his book *Bombay Islam* he shows how Muslim traders based in Bombay also spread distinct styles of Islam across the Indian Ocean space in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Green 2011) (see Chapter 2 and 14, “Flows” and “Global Systems and Globalization”).

Such media-borne religious practice and doctrine may be portable but they are as intensely believed and embodied as older forms of ritual. In a widely cited work, Saba Mahmood (2005) argues that religious practices and aspirations among Muslims in Cairo, adhering to the modern piety movement, are profoundly pre-occupied by questions of proper bodily disciplines, comportment, and other practical/material aspects of life. For Mahmood, these practices, rather than metaphysical principles, constitute the heart of her interlocutors’ attachment to being proper and pious subjects. Yet, it is equally clear, if not highlighted by Mahmood, that her interlocutors also attach enormous importance to the actual “words” of the Quran and the hadith, and that the meanings of these words remain enormously important. These words may not be conveyors of healing in a direct sense as in Sufi practice, but they are conveyors of meanings and deep ethical import that must be contemplated by the individual believer. Piety is to be achieved in the combination of contemplation of meaning, and sincerity of practical effort (Mahmood 2005). In a similar vein, Charles Hirschkind in his *The Ethical Soundscape* (2006) attributes the force of listening to cassette sermons to their sonic and sensory power, rather than to the meaning of the injunctions issued by the preachers. Yet, his interlocutors in Cairo are emphatic in insisting on the moral weight and fear that the very meaning of the sermon’s words and parables instill in them. Meaning and interpretation seem to be at the heart of the “ethical thickness” promoted by the piety movement (Hirschkind 2006).

The growing scholarship on the global Pentecostal and evangelical revival movements among both Catholic and Protestant Christians make it clear that the force of these movements has two sources. On the one hand, Pentecostalism derives force from a simplified theology that allows the force and word of God to be abstracted into an omnipresent, versatile, and ever mobile healing and redemptive Spirit. This portability and the emphasis on the lay preacher make Pentecostalism endlessly flexible and open to vernacular interpretation and re-enactment in virtually any context. On the other hand, Pentecostalism also promises bodily immediacy and somatic authenticity, such as when the spirit possesses believers and makes them speak in tongues, when misfortune and

social conflict gets somaticized as a bodily symptom and healed by the pastor and the congregation, and when bodies and homes are purified through prayer. Along with these somatic practices comes a powerful promise of this-worldly deliverance (e.g. riches, success).

In a not dissimilar way, many neo-Hindu movements such as ISKCON, Ramakrishna Mission, Sai Baba as well as the Swaminarayan sect of Gujarat mix both the logics of modernist “abstraction” of texts and doctrine with embodied practice. Hindu myths and teachings are turned into easily portable and translatable forms of everyday ethics and lifestyle advice that are embedded in new and reformed regimes of healthy living, bodily balance, vegetarianism, yoga, and so on.

In some cases, this translates into globalized forms of unexceptional lifestyle communities fueled by the economic enterprise and commercial empires of modern gurus (Sai Baba being the paradigmatic example) (McKean 1995). In other cases, such “lifestyle religions” are mapped directly onto regions with a long and entrenched history of Hindu–Muslim conflict, such as Gujarat. In the latter case, as Ghassem-Fachandi (2012) shows in compelling detail, the ethical-religious commitment and aesthetic preference for vegetarianism produces profound forms of disgust and fear vis-à-vis non-vegetarians (Muslims and lower-caste Hindus) which easily can be turned into solid audiences for militant Hindu nationalism. As Ghassem-Fachandi points out, the religiously infused injunction against meat has, in cities like Ahmedabad, been turned resolutely spatial, dividing whole sectors of the city into meat-free zones, defined by the upper-caste Hindu residents as “safe” and modern zones for “good people” of clean and rational habits, unlike the older, and “dirty” zones of the old city, dominated by minorities and their “backward” and “fanatical” attachment to traditional religion and community identity (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; see Chapter 23, “Food and Farming”).

Similar dynamics can be observed in contemporary Mumbai, where the remaking of the city by powerful real-estate interests has enabled upper-caste and upper-class residents to purge entire housing colonies and residential areas of non-vegetarians by making vegetarianism a precondition for entry into certain residential areas. This de facto social and communal segregation is enacted and justified in the name of religious sensibilities and sentiments, attachments that are regarded as publicly legitimate and protected by the Indian constitution.

I hesitate to call these developments mere symptoms of the “modernization of religion.” Religious life has been an inextricable part of what we call modernity from the very outset. We are now at a stage where we can acknowledge that the Weberian model of “modernization of religion” (i.e., Protestantization) is a deeply flawed model. Protestantism is rapidly becoming dominated by charismatic tendency and with that comes magicality, the force of the spirit, and the focus on embodied, healing, and material aspects of ritual that Protestant theologians and scholars have denounced for several centuries. Modernity does not produce secularity *tout court*, and modern cities do not only produce secular, homogeneous spaces but a multiplicity of voices, configurations, and

tendencies. What is happening globally seems to be that many religious communities are aiming at a measure of abstraction and universality: translatability, portability, and applicability across national, cultural, and linguistic borders, promoting “ethical values” as well as lifestyles. Many religious movements and communities have today explicitly global and universalist aspirations and their messages are culturally “thin” and ethically “thick” (see Chapter 17, “Transnationality”).

Such religious discourses, symbols, and meanings are always embedded in dense webs of lifestyle and markers that include material objects, commodities, architectural forms, and spatial limits that also can be violated by other sensory means. In Rio’s *favelas*, and in urban Ghana, competing church communities engage in sonic wars across neighborhoods, asserting dominance and ownership of space and people (Osterbaan 2008; de Witte 2008). In northern Nigeria, in Durban, and across India, the use of loudspeakers for the *azaan* or for preaching and singing in open air Christian services remain deeply controversial, at times triggering physical confrontations in the streets. In Kuala Lumpur, Dubai, Teheran, and London, a multi-billion dollar (US) halal certification industry is taking its cues from the global kosher market and is rapidly expanding into new realms – halal garden centers, halal services of all kinds, as explored by Johan Fischer (2011) in a string of studies. Here, religious injunctions of ritual purity and observance are commodified and turned into consumer choice, style preferences and markers of lifestyles, albeit lifestyles whose ethical injunctions are detailed and comprehensive, reaching into the most intimate dimensions of life, producing an exclusionary lifestyle that at the end is rather close to the “traditional” ethnicized communities that religious reformers sought to denounce (see Chapter 23, “Food and Farming”).

For all its paradoxes, it seems increasingly clear that with respect to the public life of religion in urban space, the modern postcolonial city sets a global pace. Its deep divisions of segmented communities; its deep and fine-tuned sensibilities and hostilities around different and adjacent lifestyles and aesthetic regimes, sounds, smells and bodily styles; its durable marking and privatization of public spaces in colonies and malls; and its apprehensive sharing of sparse if richly marked and contested public space, are now becoming the global norm.

If so, religion in the city and the question of how the sacred appears, how it is revered and articulated in urban space will have to move right to the center of the research agendas of the twenty-first century.

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