Urban Planning and Religious Practice: Three Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Religion in urban planning is conventionally viewed as a non-spatial, pre-theoretical, or extra-legal phenomenon. This view has been questioned recently by research in religious and pluralism studies and by the increasing religious diversity and activism in Western and non-Western cities. Yet, the challenge remains that urban planners usually don't understand how to address religious concerns and practices of urban communities without compromising their statutory and political responsibilities. In this dissertation, I take up three aspects of this challenge.

First, I analyze the conceptual and practical connections between religion, secularism, and urban planning in liberal democracies to argue that understanding religion in urban planning entails understanding religion's constitutive other: secularism. This paper questions the assumption of *religious indifference* as an adopted disciplinary ethos in planning, arguing that this assumption has made it more difficult for planners to confront the ways that the spatial structures of cities are getting reshaped by religious and deep cultural differences. It has also prevented planners from addressing the consequences of a secular process of power for the organization of social life in urban communities.

Second, I evaluate the conception of "religion" incorporated in past international development initiatives. I analyze developmental efforts led by the United States in the Philippines (1898), Albania (2003), and Iraq (2003) to argue that Protestantism has been viewed as the normative template or the "gold standard" against which other religious practices are measured as free, modern, and civil. This view has dragged North American planners working on international development into the age-old missionary conceit of "good vs bad religion" and drifted their attention away from working with local communities to address developmental challenges.

Third, I recognize that religion and urban planning intersect with each other on firm ground, rather than in thin air. I thus propose a theory – i.e., a "weak theory" – of how urban planners can approach religion as lived and experienced in the dynamic interplay of everyday practices, i.e., as "lived religion," rather than as mere belief, pathology, or ideology. This approach, I argue, invites planners to employ ethnography and examine the actual lived situations (in courtrooms, planning offices, or public meetings) wherein competing conceptions of "lived religion" surround specific substantive planning issues, e.g., zoning or public health deliberations.

Committee Chair: Bish Sanyal (MIT)
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**URBAN PLANNING AND THE QUESTION OF RELIGION:
CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES**

Babak Manouchehrifar, MIT

This dissertation grew out of a long-standing interest in understanding how religious beliefs and practices of urban communities influence social and spatial structures of cities and overlap with urban planning processes in both Western and non-Western societies.

I grew up in Iran in the aftermaths of the 1979 Revolution, which replaced the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) with an Islamic government in Iran. We were living in the historic city of Esfahan, which is known for its Islamic architecture. The city had a sizable Jewish and Orthodox Christian minority population and was spatially divided along both the religious and socioeconomic lines – with the lower-income neighborhoods hosting more religious populations and the wealthier parts of the city being home to more secular – in the simple sense of nonreligious – residents. There was no religious conflict in the city, and so, growing up, I became sensitive to the ways in which variations in religious and secular lives could foster harmonious and peaceful urban settings. This sensitivity, however, was soon challenged by the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988), especially as the rhetoric of the war became increasingly entangled with religious doctrine as not only a conflict between a religious government in Iran and a secular state in Iraq under Saddam's rule, but also as a clash between a Sunni-majority country and a Shia-majority one. This rhetoric was in contrast to my observation of religious coexistence in my city and family, which sparked my early interests in understanding the role of religion in daily urban practices at both local and international levels.

By the end of the war, major reconstruction projects were implemented in Iranian cities. Inspired by these projects, I studied Civil Engineering and Urban and Regional Planning and began to work professionally in urban highway projects. It was through these practical experiences that the role of religion in shaping urban development projects became increasingly important to me. This was particularly the case as I noticed that urban politicians had to frequently deliberate on the location of religious spaces, especially mosques, along the highway paths and decide whether they should change the plan of highways and bridges amidst resistance to these projects by local residents who were to be displaced by road construction. While I cherished my engineering and technical skills, I found these skills insufficient to help me understand and address how urban development projects in which I was working affected the social and religious lives of local communities. With this concern in mind, I came to the United States in 2013 to pursue a master's degree in City Planning at MIT and study the connections between urban planning and religious practice more rigorously.

Studying in the U.S. was a unique opportunity for me to pursue my interest in the topic. It also complicated my understanding of the relationship between religion and planning, as I noticed that American cities were more religiously diverse than I had seen in Iran, but also the nature of conversations about religion and secularism were sharper and even more contentious than I had

known. These observations urged me to situate myself within the broader debates on religion and secularism and explore the implications of these debates for planning and social policy. In my master's thesis at MIT, "The Divine Hand of the State? How Religion Has Influenced Social Policies for the Poor in Iran" (2015), I sought to understand why both the pre-Revolution secular state with modernizing goals and the post-Revolution theocratic state with promised egalitarian goals had implemented similar policies that hurt the urban poor. I couldn't find a simple answer to this question. The picture was so mixed and complex that no single explanation properly captured it. In particular, neither the populist argument that religious doctrine had enabled the post-Revolution regime to protect the poor, nor the conventional view that modernization and secularization focuses of the pre-Revolution regime were anti-poor, seemed convincing to me. Skeptical of conventional explanations and the dichotomous religious/secular view, I began to search for new ways to bridge religion and urban planning in my doctoral studies at MIT. I was unable to travel back to Iran to do my fieldworks, and so I decided to explore the emerging scholarship on religion and secularism in the U.S. to enrich my understanding of the topic. I published part of these studies in an article, entitled "Is Planning "Secular"? in 2018, which is included in this dissertation. I also co-edited, with Professor John Forester, an interdisciplinary symposium on "Rethinking Religion and Secularism in Urban Planning," published in 2021.

These personal and academic experiences helped me situate my research at the intersection of three disciplines: urban planning, international development, and religious and pluralism studies. They also defined the overarching problem motivating this dissertation, namely that, religion in urban planning has been conventionally viewed as a non-spatial, pre-theoretical, and extra-legal phenomenon. This conventional view, however, has been questioned recently by research in religious and pluralism studies as well as by the increasing religious diversity and activism in Western and non-Western cities. There is also a growing body of planning research which, over the past few years, has probed this conventional view.[1] Yet, the challenge remains that urban planners usually don't understand how they can address religious concerns and practices of urban communities without compromising their statutory and political responsibilities. To be sure, this challenge is as multifaceted and varied across cultural and historical differences as the interaction between religion and urban planning is. In this dissertation, however, I take up three aspects of this challenge to provide a more nuanced understanding of religion in the planning field, namely:

1. How the relationships between religion and secularism affect urban planning processes.
2. Which conception of religion has been used in past international development programs.
3. How to rethink the conventional relationship between urban planning and religious practice.

Structure of this Dissertation

I have structured this dissertation as three separate, but interlinked papers along with the three challenges explained above. Together, these papers shed light on how the tensions between religious traditions of urban communities and secular principles of urban governance influence spatial planning processes and the management of religion in Western and non-Western cities.

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[1] See, e.g., Boland *et al* (2021); Burchardt (2019), Carta (2022), Kapinga & Bock (2021), Luz, (2022), Morpurgo (2021; 2022), Nawratek (2021), Willson (2020), Allam (2020), as well as Day (2017), Greed (2016), and Chiodelli (2015).

In paper one, *Is Planning "Secular"? Rethinking Religion, Secularism, and Planning*, I ask: What does the notion of secularism mean for the planning profession? I employ genealogy as a mode of retelling history to analyze the conceptual formulation of the relationship between religion and urban planning in liberal democracies. I also examine examples of the interactions between religion, secularism, and urban planning in the United States to put forward two main arguments. First, I argue that urban planning has been conceived under the normative assumption of "religious indifference" – that is, religion as neither necessarily a burden nor a boon, but simply inconsequential for planning deliberations. Second, I argue that secularism in planning has been viewed as a default position, rather than a subject for critical inquiry. This paper questions the assumption of "religious indifference" as an adopted disciplinary ethos in urban planning. I argue that urban planners have primarily relied on the conventional view of secularism as simply the separation of church and state, rather than as a political doctrine that redefines religion through the exercise of the modern state's sovereign power, including urban planning procedures.

My analysis demonstrates that spatial challenges of religious difference in planning practice are caused, not just by religious-secular differences of urban communities, but also, and importantly, by the modern nation-state's management of religious differences through secularism. I argue that urban planners' reliance on the conventional view of secularism has in fact made it more difficult for them to confront the ways in which the spatial structures of cities are getting reshaped by religious and cultural differences. It has also prevented urban planners from addressing the consequences of a secular process of power for the organization of social life in urban communities, including the rising tensions within and between religious and non-religious communities over locational decisions about social activities in cities. Religious differences, after all, do not simply exist *out there* a primordial given; they are also, and importantly, created by relations of power and means of legal codification, including planning procedures. I expand this analysis to the international level in the second paper of this dissertation.

In the second paper, *Protestant Sentiments and International Development: The Case of US Engagement Abroad*, I ask: Which the conception of religion has been incorporated in past international development initiatives as either conducive, even necessary, to nations' paths towards modernity and democracy, or as unfavorable, even harmful, to social and economic modernization facilitated by technological change? I analyze this conception in three specific developmental efforts led by the United States in the Philippines (1898), Albania (2003), and Iraq (2003). This paper puts forward two arguments. First, I argue against the dominant narrative of "the secular" that has long underwritten practices of international development, one that views developmental efforts as being, until just recently, free of religious sentiments. In contrast, I argue that from its early roots in colonialism to its later course shaped by the U.S., "development encounters" have also always been "religious encounters," couched in terms of the hierarchy of nations' civilizational stages. In fact, the hierarchical nature of such encounters has been shaped by two secularized notions: "*conversion* to modernities" and "*redemption* as a state project."

Second, I argue that in past developmental efforts, Protestantism has been viewed as the implicit normative template or the "gold standard" against which "other" religious practices are measured as either free, modern, and civil that merit promotion, or as unfree, unmodern, and uncivil that require "reform." Put differently, privatized, de-politicized, and church-free religion has been viewed as both a precondition and a consequence of creating civil society; and religious activism that addresses social injustice in local communities – e.g., poverty and land dispossession – has

been dismissed as obstructing the functioning of markets aided by technological change. This view has dragged North American planners working on international development into the age-old missionary conceit of "good vs bad religion" and drifted their attention away from working with local communities to address developmental challenges. This paper demonstrates that even though North American development planners have been generally eager to work with local religious communities abroad, they often don't understand that religion as experienced and practiced by such communities can be/is different from how these planners living in the "secular" North America perceive individuals as either religious or secular.

In paper three, I take a more exploratory approach, compared to the explanatory focuses of the first two paper, to analyze the implications of recent debates on the idea of "weak theory" for better understating the relationship of religion and urban planning as two social constructs that intersect on firm ground, rather than in thin air. In this paper, I conduct a conceptual analysis of the underlying ideas of "weak theory" and explore the precedents of these idea in history of planning theory in the United States. This paper demonstrates that "weak theory" suggests ways for urban planners to approach religion as lived and experienced in the dynamic interplay of everyday practices, that is, as "lived religion," rather than as mere belief, pathology, or ideology. A weak-theoretical approach to "lived religion" in urban planning, I argue, urges planners to abandon the myopic view of religion as an extraordinary phenomenon or a "problem" that if planners want to address it, they need first to do intense theological studies and develop rigorous theoretical foundations and then, only then, planners would be able to understand how religious beliefs and practices of urban communities overlap with urban planning processes. From the perspectives of weak theory, "lived religion" is a familiar phenomenon present in cities where planners work, in communities that they serve, and in the classrooms where they study and teach.

Weak theory, this paper argues, is not a substitute or a negation of strong theory. It is, instead, an approach to explore and appreciate unintended consequences and provisional practices that are often dismissed by strong-theoretical habits of thought. A weak-theoretical approach to the study of "lived religion" and urban planning invites planners to examine actual lived situations (in courtrooms, planning offices, or public meetings) wherein competing conceptions of "lived religion" (those, for instance, claimed by citizens, assumed by planners, authorized by the state, or inferred by scholars) surround specific substantive planning issues, e.g., zoning, public health, or neighborhood revitalization. Embracing such an approach entails rigorous ethnography, commitment to specificity, and openness to uncertainty, mess, and inconclusiveness, rather than self-righteousness, overgeneralization, or ideological fixation.

In sum, the three papers comprising this dissertation are three modest interventions against what is considered dominant or conventional, namely:

1. Secularism as a default position in urban planning.
2. International development as blind or neutral to religion.
3. Strong theory as the only "good" theory.

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IS PLANNING "SECULAR"?
RETHINKING RELIGION, SECULARISM, AND PLANNING

Babak Manouchehrifar, MIT

Abstract

Responding to the call for a deeper understanding of the religion in planning, this paper argues that understanding religion in urban planning entails understanding religion's constitutive other: secularism. This position draws on the burgeoning field of secular studies as well as examples of entanglement of religion, secularism, and planning in the United States and France. It problematizes a long-held assumption that good planning is based upon the notion of "religious indifference," for the assumption is conceptually anachronistic and practically untenable. The paper explores the implications of this analysis for planning practice against the backdrop of recent improvements fostered by the American Planning Associations as well as the relevance of this analysis across international contexts.

Introduction

In February 1997, the Supreme Court of the United States heard arguments in *City of Boerne v. Flores*, a case that evolved from a local zoning dispute into intense constitutional debates on key aspects of "secularism" in the United States – namely, the right of free exercise of religion and the delicate balance within the structures of government (especially, between congressional and judicial authorities) in interpreting and enforcing that right (McConnell, 1997). The case arose when the zoning authorities in the city of Boerne, Texas, denied a building permit for the expansion of the St. Peter Church, on the grounds that the city's zoning ordinance regarding historic preservation forbids new constructions in the district where the church was located. Church authorities sued the City by raising claims under the *Religious Freedom Restoration Act* (RFRA). Passed by Congress in 1993, RFRA prohibited government agencies and officials, "at all levels," from imposing a "substantial burden" on a person's exercise of religion, unless the burden was necessary for the "furtherance of a compelling governmental interest" in the "least restrictive" way. Passing RFRA was, in fact, Congress' attempt to overturn the Supreme Court's holding in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990), which had categorically exempted neutral laws of general applicability from constitutional scrutiny, even if they happened to burden religious exercise. In deciding *Boerne*, however, the Supreme Court struck down RFRA, as it applies to the states[2]. In response, several states passed their own version of RFRA. Congress, too, passed a more narrowly tailored statute, The *Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act* (RLUIPA) in 2000,

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[1] This paper has been previously published in *Planning Theory and Practice*

[2] The Supreme Court argued that in passing the Act, Congress had surpassed its enforcement power under the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

applicable to two areas of law – namely, land use and prison regulations – which Congress deemed as particularly susceptible to religious discrimination, hence subject to "strict scrutiny review."

Aspiring to accord religious exercise proper protection from government interference – a pillar of secularism enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution (Sandel, 1998) – these statutes unleashed torrents of cases whereby local planning authorities are challenged for burdening the religious exercise of their constituencies. Not only do these debates highlight a particular way in which religious sensibilities and devotional practices overlap with planning and implementation processes; they also reflect how the basic contours of such overlapping terrains are themselves shaped, and constantly redrawn, by the political-legal praxis of secularism. This latter issue is distinctly salient in liberal-democratic contexts – the prime focus of the present paper – wherein secularism, conventionally understood as the church-state separation, serves as the key doctrinal pillar of political stability and social harmony, shaping, in turn, the broader political economy and institutional structure within which planning is embedded. Such a defining feature of "modern" society gives rise to two lines of inquiry pertinent to planning debates, namely, what the notion of secularism means to the planning profession, and how planners should think about religion, given the exigencies of liberal-secular governance.

The question, *Is planning "secular"?*, is intended to stimulate thinking, in unison, about these two largely unexplored concerns. I pose this question at a particular socio-historical juncture when the political salience of religion seems to be exerting considerable impact on, if not playing a decisive role in, such major events as 2016's Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the 2016 presidential election in the United States (Wood, 2016)[3]. More importantly, this question is raised against the backdrop of the subtle ways in which religion and secularism implicate each other in planning practice (as in building a mosque or a casino, or enacting zoning ordinances for places that are considered sacred by certain communities). Such episodes of secular-religious entanglement "continue" to unfold contrary to the prophecy of classic secularization theories[4] (Parsons, 1960; Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1967), namely that, as modernity waxes, religion – or, at least, its public manifestation – wanes. There is, in fact, a growing tendency – among populations characterized by their religious traditions – to resort to legal proceedings and democratic procedures to assert their sovereignty and constitute themselves as "communities" (Comaroff, 2009; Asad, 1993). There is also a commensurate tendency – within planning cultures characterized by their liberal-democratic traditions – to be more inclusive of and open to populations with varied sensibilities, especially the religious kind (Sanyal, 2016). These overlapping trends have inevitably, though perhaps unwittingly, involved municipal governance in the religious life of communities in its care and control – hence an increasingly difficult challenge for urban planners (Sandercock, 2006; Gale, 2008; McClymont, 2015). These occurrences should spur planners to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the religious phenomenon together with secularism in both their theoretical explorations and practical engagements.

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[3] For instance, the fear of Islam and Muslim immigrants, especially in the wake of recent refugee crisis, was instrumental to, and instrumentalized by, the promoters of the Brexit vote in Britain. A similar issue was also obtrusively manifest in the 2016 presidential campaign period and afterwards in the United States (Marzouki, 2017), an election divided along the lines of religious traditions with a particular significance to conservative Evangelical voters.

[4] The classic secularization theory emerged in the 1960s as a body of Anglophone sociological work based upon particular interpretations of the foundational sociology of Durkheim (1915) and Weber (1930).

This paper does not emanate from a faith perspective, nor does it give *a priori* privilege to religion over secularism[5] – or contrariwise. Rather, I draw on a highly influential body of recent writing in the burgeoning field of *secular studies*[6] – particularly, the works of Talal Asad (2003, 2006), Saba Mahmood (2006, 2015), and Winnifred Sullivan (2005, 2010b) – to inform my analysis. These scholars have challenged the conventional understanding of secularism as simply the separation of ecclesiastical and political institutions (or the church-state separation); they have confuted the categorical assertion that secularism is devoid of religion and, instead, conceptualized secularism as a political doctrine that redefines religion through the exercise of the modern state's sovereign power. These new scholarships pose a challenge for rethinking the relationship between religion and planning. After all, secularism is principally invoked to confer two discrete, but parallel, mechanisms of protection: preserving religious freedom from constraining regularities of *public action* (of which planning is a kind or a part), on the one hand, and preventing religious forces from regimenting the *public sphere* (with which planning is primarily concerned), on the other.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I argue against an essentialist tendency to view planning in epistemological opposition to religion. Planning has been conceived under the normative assumption of "religious indifference" – that is, religion as neither necessarily a burden nor a boon, but simply inconsequential for planning deliberations. Yet, such an assumption in planning – a profession that must deal with norms entrenched in the distinct forms of social life in which it intervenes – reflects more a political aspiration than a social reality. The "religious indifference" of planning, in theory, is to be challenged in practice by "religious differences" of planning constituencies. Second, I argue that even if untenable in practice, this assumption is nonetheless too important to be simply abandoned and too entrenched to be easily revisited. In liberal-secular thinking, the arbitration of religious differences, including the ones that unfold and need to be addressed in planning practice, is considered the prerogative of the modern state and its sovereign power (e.g., state legislation, court decisions, or plebiscites) – not of the planning profession itself. In fact, the planning field seems to have become rather indifferent not just to religion, but to secularism itself, viewing it, all too often, as a default position rather than a subject for critical inquiry. Such an outlook allows too little room for productive engagement, and too much for undue passivity. It behooves planners to critically engage with the notion of secularism when thinking about religion. Put differently, to rethink *the religious* in planning is also to rethink *the secular* in it.

With these considerations in mind, this paper proceeds in six sections. Following a note on conceptual clarification, the paper reviews the existing literature on religion and planning to highlight the scarcity of joint attention to religion and secularism, one that, I submit, should be attributed to the assumption of religious indifference in our field. The third section employs genealogy as a mode of (re)telling history to trace the contingencies that have come together to form an apparently natural development of this self-evident assumption. The fourth section explores examples of interactions between religion and planning in the United States and France to demonstrate how such interactions are basically mediated and conditioned by the regime of secularism. The fifth section argues that rethinking the role of religion in planning entails

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[5] In theological accounts, for example, religion always outshines secularism, whether secularism is bashed (Stark, 1999) or its presence in "the secular city" is acknowledged (Cox, 1965).

[6] "Secular studies" is an emerging interdisciplinary field aiming to scrutinize the manifestations of *the secular* in modern societies. See for example (Agrama, 2012; Asad, 1993, 2003; Connolly, 1999; Mahmood, 2009, 2015; J. W. Scott, 2007; Taylor, 2007).

rethinking secularism. This, in turn, requires that planner go beyond the explanatory social science to determine how they should address the religious concerns of their constituencies without compromising their statutory and political responsibilities. The paper concludes by exploring the implications of this analysis for planning practice in light of recent developments initiated by the American Planning Association as well as the relevance of this analysis across international contexts.

Is planning "secular"? **What does it mean and why does it matter?**

To ask whether planning is secular may seem to conjoin planning's outright openness to the varied forms of social life and secularism's presumptive clarity of meaning and sureness of purpose, implying as well the expectation of rational deliberations conventionally associated with both planning and secularism. *Is planning "secular"?*, however, is not readily answerable; it is but a particular expression of a larger question central to political liberalism, namely, where to draw the *line* between religion and politics so as to protect the cardinal principles of rights and freedom (Agrama, 2012). This latter question is the one that has become increasingly difficult to pass over and yet equally hard to get beyond (Agrama, 2010). The *line*, too, is the one that is no longer assumed as a given; but neither can it be simply given up (de Vries, 2006). On the one hand, the atrocities inflicted by weaving the identity of the state tightly into religious doctrine (manifest, historically, in the Christian Inquisition or the persecution of nonconformists for blasphemy until 1921 in Britain[7]; and, recently, in Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Myanmar, and even India) surely caution us against surrendering the principle of the state neutrality and separation from religion – hence, the ineluctability of secularism. On the other hand, to assume that the praxes of secularism are themselves devoid of any exclusion, intrusion, or violence has proven to be far from an objective and feasible reality – hence, the indeterminacies of secularism (Agrama, 2010).

But even if unanswerable, *Is planning "secular"?* is not a fruitless question. Its relevance for planning debate derives less from the expectation of (rational) answers that we might be able to offer than it does from the kinds of (intellectual and institutional) resistance that we encounter in attempting to answer it. After all, it is when such questions are debated, deflected, postponed, or rejected that we might be able to trace out the contours of the concepts in question (Hirschkind, 2011). It is then, for instance, that we may scrutinize the associations between "the secular," as an epistemological domain of knowledge, and "planning," as an interactive domain of knowledge and action; or between "secularism," as a political doctrine, and planning, as a political activity. Viewed as such, *Is planning "secular"?* is more a provocation than a mere question, one that obliges us to map out the largely uncharted terrain of secularism in our field – or, at least, to draw some preliminary "sketches of [its] landscape," to borrow Wittgenstein's metaphor (1958, p. 5).

The conception of "planning" adopted in this paper does not consider planning activity as limited to the conventional, albeit functionally indispensable, domain of land use decision-making. Nor is planning viewed here "as though it were capable of being understood or represented as a unitary, holistic activity" (Upton, 2015, p. 451). Rather, I follow scholars who conceptualize planning as a political activity contending with the spatial modalities of social interactions, power relations, and political contestations in the public sphere (Forester, 1989; Friedmann, 1993; Flyvbjerg, 1998;

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[7] John William Gott, who led the *Freethought Socialist League*, is the last person imprisoned for blasphemy in Britain, in 1921, for his anti-Christian polemics (Nash, 1999).

Campbell, 2001; Hillier, 2002). To these scholars, the idea of planning – as well as its characteristic subject matter (including religion) – are best perceived as concepts that evolve through historical contingencies and contextual particularities (Healey, 2012; Sanyal, 2005b).

Likewise, this paper does not assume a universal definition of religion – may it be *ideology,* in the classic Marxist sense of masking; *belief* in a set of propositions to which one lends one's assent, in the liberal sense of free choice; or *pathology*, a surrogate for the unbearable character of reality, in the Freudian sense. Such definitions attribute a fixed essence to an otherwise elusive and multifaceted phenomenon that has been historically transformed by relations of power across cultural differences. As Asad (2012) has shown, the *concept* of religion "belongs to certain vocabularies" (p. 39) which bring persons and things, institutions and norms, as well as desires and practices together in particular traditions and in distinctive ways. When definitions of religion are produced or deployed, they endorse or repudiate certain uses of this vocabulary with profound implications for the organization of social life within planning constituencies. What counts as "religion" in planning must therefore be examined and explained in deliberations around specific substantive planning issues, rather than assumed as a given independent variable or taken as the starting point or the bedrock of planning explanation.

Accordingly, the notion of "secular" employed here does not stand in opposition to "the religious." Asad (2003) has shown that the secular is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, not its extended other), nor a simple break from it (that is, not its subtracted other) – the two positions that are entertained, as it were, by (neo-)Hegelian and (neo-)Kantian accounts of secularism, respectively (Scherer, 2011). The secular is rather best conceived as a socio-historical construct which brings together a certain constellation of knowledge, institutions, and affective sensibilities that constitutes a foundational dimension of modern life (Asad, 2003; Connolly, 1999; Hirschkind, 2011). Asad has compellingly argued that it is the negotiations over power and institutional authority that lay down the criteria based on which the categories of the religious and the secular are delimited. By highlighting the blurred and ever-shifting boundaries between the secular and its shadow, religion, Asad (1999) has shown that "the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion" (p. 200) – that religion is secularism's constitutive other. Such formulation of the secular, I contend, is decidedly apt for thinking about religion and planning. It eschews the crippling secular-religious dichotomy and therefore allows for taking full stock of their mutual dependence in planning practice. It also reflects how changes in concepts dovetail with changes in practice and thus appertains to the recursive linking of knowledge to action, broadly defined as planning (Friedmann, 1987).

The secular, thus conceived, is an epistemic category (Asad, 2003), one that stands conceptually prior to its two distinct, albeit related, dimensions of *secularism* and *secularity*[8]. The former "pertains to the modern state's relationship to, and regulation of, religion, while the latter refers to the set of concepts, norms, sensibilities, and dispositions that characterizes secular societies and subjectivities" (Mahmood, 2015, p. 3). They thus refer to two different analytical levels. Secularism is characteristically concomitant with the modern state's sovereign power (Asad, 2006; Agrama, 2012), whereas secularity bears on the modern subjects' attitudes and sensibilities that permeate culture at large (Mahmood, 2015). To be sure, planners, who work at the ever-shifting interface of the civil society, the state, and the market, deal with both concepts at once in their

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[8] There is also another derivation of the concept of secular, secularization, which is a set of both descriptive and normative theories of socio-historical processes.

practices: it is virtually impossible for them to engage with one without involving the other. Acknowledging this distinct dimension of the planning profession, this paper is primarily concerned not with secularity – itself, an important concept yet to be fully explored in planning research – but rather with "secularism."

Religion-secularism-planning: an unexamined triumvirate

The institutional overlap of religion and planning is not a recent phenomenon. Its "modern" expression, for instance, can be traced back to the rise of the Social Gospel movement[9] in the late nineteenth century in the United States (Rauschenbusch, 1907). But it was not until the 1940s that serious attention to religion emerged in planning circles. Lewis Mumford's cautionary remark in his *Faith for Living* is indeed a classic example (Thomas, 2006): "The segregation of the spiritual life from the practical life is a curse that falls impartially upon both sides of our existence" (Mumford, 1940, p. 216). Mumford was not an exception, however. By the end of the Second World War, some prominent scholars, notably Karl Mannheim (1950) and Michael Polanyi (1946, 1958), also attempted to reconsider the role of religion in shaping the moral structures underlying public intervention and democratic planning. The review article, *Planning and Religion* (Eliot, 1943), which emerged against the backdrop of the increasing role of the state during the New Deal, is a telling indication of how the debates between proponents and opponents of planning – or "the great debate" (Klosterman, 1985, p. 5) – entailed discussions of religion as a social force affecting purposeful public action.

Such early engagements notwithstanding, the talk of religion was largely pushed aside in planning by the late 1950s – in the heyday of modernization and secularization theories. As planning became identified, "enchantedly," with rational models of decision-making (as in Herbert Simon's synoptic model, 1957), triumphant rationality was viewed as an emblem of the "disenchanted" world – in the Weberian sense (1930) – in which chance had become tamable and choice liberated from the shackles of the magical, the mythical, and the sacred (Harvey, 1989). Concurrently, secularization theory was gaining a commensurate ascendancy in academia (Masuzawa, 2011) and social science at large (Schmalzbauer & Mahoney, 2012), viewing secularization as both sign and consequence of an inevitable modernity (Cannell, 2010). Yet, the epoch-making changes of the 1980s – especially, but not limited to[10], the rise of Evangelical Christianity in the United States (Kruse, 2015) and the increased anxiety about the place of Muslim immigrants in Europe (Asad, 1997; Calhoun, 2011) – led to new debates on *multiculturalism* (Gilroy, 1987; Taylor, 1994), *public religion* (Casanova, 1994), and *postsecular society* (Habermas, 2002, 2008). Inspired partly by these works and partly by the so-called "resurgence of religion," the topics of religion, spirituality[11], and faith-based community development have gained renewed attention in planning circles since the early 2000s (e.g., Thomas, 1999; Gale & Naylor, 2002; Sandercock, 2006; Gale, 2008; Fawaz, 2009; Beaumont & Baker, 2011; McClymont, 2015).

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[9] The Social Gospel was a Protestant movement aiming to address pressing social issues of the time (such as inequality, poverty, and housing) through influencing public provision policies (Calhoun, 2011).

[10] Other important events include: the rise of Catholicism and the Liberation Theology in Latin America, the prominence of the Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, Iran's 1979 Revolution, and the rise of religion in post-Soviet nations.

[11] Religion and spirituality are not coextensive or synonymous. They refer to two different spheres of social life. For an articulate account of their difference see (Hollywood, 2010).

Despite these efforts, the literature is not yet ripe enough for critical analysis. Seldom has it entered into "planning conversations" – central to the scholarship in the field (Sanyal, Vale, & Rosan, 2012). But planners do encounter various aspects of religion in their daily practices considerably more often than they do in their theoretical explorations and academic training. More importantly, the notion of secular has not been carefully examined in the literature. There is an emerging body of planning scholarship that employs the term "postsecular" as a category to better understand, what these works call, "the return of religion to the center of public life" (Beaumont & Baker, 2011, p. 10) or "the 'rediscovery' of religiosity" in recent times (McClymont, 2015, p. 536). Yet, while these works have been critical of "descriptive" claims of the secularization thesis (that religion would eventually fade away with the progress of modernity), they have been largely insensitive to the crucial powers of the modern state in upholding secularization's "normative" claims (e.g., in order for a society to be (post)secular, the state must confine religion to the private sphere). Further, as much of the critical scholarship suggests (Gorski, 2012; VanAntwerpen, Mendieta, & Calhoun, 2013), the notion of postsecular, especially in its influential formulation by Jürgen Habermas (2008) and its temporal accent on the *post-*, expresses a sense of "surprise" that despite earlier predictions, religion has not withered away or, if it did, is now "back." The postsecular, thus conceived, overshadows the crucial fact that "religion has been a constitutive element of secularism throughout its modern history" (Mahmood, 2015, p. 22) – that there is nothing new about their co-presence. As Asad (2003) argues, "if the secularization thesis no longer carries the conviction it once did, this is because the categories of politics and religion turn out to implicate each other more profoundly than we thought, a discovery that has accompanied our growing understanding of the powers of the modern nation-state" (p.200).

But, if religion and secularism are inextricably linked, then any discipline that seeks to understand religion must also understand its *other* (Asad, 2003). Planning in particular – a discipline that has become increasingly intent on reconsidering the religious phenomenon in its theoretical and practical calculus – also needs to reflect more fully on what is implied in its claim of working at once with(in) communities of varied sensibilities "and" through the structures of the modern nation-state. Inadequate attention to the notion of secular, in addition, belies the intellectual history of planning. After all, the early influential thinkers who in part shaped our field – most prominently, but not exclusively[12], Robert Owen – were also the leading founders of mid-nineteenth century England's "secularist movement" (Royle, 1974)[13] – which coined the term secularism.

Religious indifference in planning: a genealogy

Given this backdrop, we should ask what does account for the scarcity of joint attention to religion and secularism in planning? It is, of course, tempting to seek recourse to the fact that the idea of planning is an heir to the Enlightenment (Friedmann, 1987), which elevated rational reasoning above religious doctrine and intentionality above inevitability. Its broad-brush contrast between a premodern past (the religious, the mythical) and a modern present (the secular, the scientific) feeds into the claim that secularism is devoid of religion. It risks an essentialist interpretation of planning,

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[12] For example, G. J. Holyoake, himself an Owenist convicted for blasphemy, was the leading founder of the *cooperative movement*. He coined the term secularism in 1851 (Royle, 1974).

[13] The *secularist movement* included both negative and positive views towards religion, but Owen and Holyoake were on the positive side, seeking to uncover a new system of moral truth.

as if it has inescapable qualities opposed to religion, and thus allows little room for planners to readjust their theoretical lens as they encounter varied dimensions of religion in practice.

"Religious indifference," I contend, provides a more nuanced, institutional account of the planning field's past approach to religion[14] – the genealogy of which should be traced in part to the early institutionalization of planning within the structures of the modern nation-state; in part to the conventional understanding of secularism as simply the separation of church and state; and in part to the original formulations of planning as consubstantial with its technicalities, aesthetic, and physical regulation.

Against the backdrop of the European Wars of Religion (Habermas, 2006; Taylor, 1998), the modern nation-state emerged by defining a political ethics entirely discrete from religious doctrine and by promising to dismantle premodern forms of hierarchy (the religious kind) in order to construct a polity whose members are all equal before the law (Mahmood, 2006, 2015). Its political rationality was predicated upon constructing political-legal distinctions between private and public spheres, which considered religion as pertaining to the private sphere – the sacrosanct domain of religious belief and individual liberty – while the scope and content of the public sphere was considered primarily the domain of politics and a function of state power. The intention was to protect religion against (state) intervention as well as to prevent religion from exerting any political power in the public sphere – so that religion could neither be coerced nor coercive. Such characterization of the new social order preserved the prerogative of the modern state to serve as the neutral arbiter of religious differences (Cannell, 2010). By virtue of the state's declared neutrality towards specific religious truth claims, and in order to enforce the principle of legal equality, political authorities had to regard religion with *indifference* – so long as religion remains sequestered in the private domain (Asad, 2003, 2004). Politicians and clergies alike were thus expected to exercise their institutional authority through an avowedly secular division of labor: the former, to be involved in the sole matters of *statecraft*; the latter, in the stately manners of *soulcraft*.

Planning emerged within such political-legal arrangements as part of the development of new integrating institutions and programs of social uplift[15] in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (P. Hall, 2002; Sanyal, 2014). As an institution primarily concerned with public affairs (e.g., public health and public provision), planning had to comply with the exigencies of the modern nation-state. "Religious indifference," as such, attended the enterprise from the outset. Early conceptualizations of planning as coextensive with its aesthetics (as in the City Beautiful movement), technicalities (as in rational planning discourse), and spatial regulatory regime (as in land use planning, zoning ordinances, or building permits) further reinforced this assumption by delimiting the world of planning activity from that of religious experience – as two separate, not necessarily opposite, realms of social life. Such formulations, among other things, defined planning as primarily concerned with the material world (Mele, 2000), with materiality perceived as the main attribute of physical space (Lieto & Beauregard, 2016); whereas the normative secular framework was intent on divesting religion of its materiality (Asad, 2012) – leaving religion as a transcendent phenomenon directing subjects' attention to otherworldly concerns.

Yet, the categorical distinction between the urgent world of the political and the elective domain of the religious has been challenged as an artificial, if not fictional, portrayal of historical evolution

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[14] This point has also been made in the special *Interface* of this journal (Sandercock, 2006).
[15] For instance, welfare legislations, public provisions, hygiene systems, and local governance.

(Cannell, 2010). Instances of deprivatized, public religion have also revealed that by relegating religion to the private sphere, the modern state does not simply depoliticize religion, but rather embeds it within the social life of the polity (in the fabric of civil society) (Mahmood, 2015). In fact, to make religious discourses immaterial to the exercises of politics, the state power has to ensure that religion remains confined in its "proper" space and is practiced in its "acceptable" form – that is, as beliefs and sentiments at a personal and private level, not as an organized social entity founded on authority. Put differently, living up to the ideal of religious indifference is contingent upon keeping religion at (private) bay – hence, the political-legal necessity to hold religion in check against its disposition to overreach and capacity to overtake. Yet, in order to properly effectuate such protective purposes (both of and from religion), the modern state must first identify religion itself. To the extent that this work of identification becomes a matter for the law, the state power (whether exercised by a legislator, a court, or an administrative official) takes on a peculiar function: to define religion (Asad, 2006). After all, the state must make a determination as to whether certain practices in question are at once "religiously authentic" (that is, genuine and sincere from the theological standpoint) and "legally religious" (that is, legitimate according to secular law). Stated succinctly, to protect religion is to constantly (re)define it (Sullivan, 2005, 2014).

This quality of secularism, however, appears to be paradoxical: on the one hand, the modern state promises to be neutral towards religion and to disavow it in its political calculus; on the other, it redefines what constitutes religion "and" assumes the power to impose that definition on the subjects in its care – a power that is not considered coercive, but it is undoubtedly intrusive (Asad, 2006). This "double-edged character" of secularism, in fact, redraws the basic contours of the religious life by producing the kinds of subjects who must compartmentalize their religious selves in order to remain law-abiding citizens in modern society (Mahmood, 2015; Asad, 2006). Secularism, thus conceived, is beyond the narrow, formulaic definition of the church-state separation; rather, as Asad (1999) argues, it posits a particular conception of the world, the realization of which requires "redefining religion" through authorizing the proper space it should occupy, the right forms it should take, and the legitimate public role it can play[16].

Religion, secularism, and planning: varieties of entanglement

How do these twirling conceptual funnels hit the practical grounds of the planning profession? In what follows, I explore some purposively selected examples of interactions between religion, secularism, and planning practice in the United States and France – the two key founding contexts of liberal secularism (Taylor, 2010) – and rely on secondary materials, including cases analyzed in planning, law, and anthropology literature as well as stories documented in journalistic work. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully discuss these examples or account for their variations, less so to provide an exhaustive typology of such interactions. My more limited purpose is to leave a few "urban" scratches on an otherwise "urbane" surface of secularism in our field as a means to provoke further discussion on the preconditions and the consequences of secular processes of power for planning practice.

Consider, first, a case in France: the 2004's "Islamic veil affair" (or the headscarf controversy). The French government passed a law banning the wearing of "conspicuous signs" of religion,

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[16] Faith-Based Organizations, for instance, exemplify this state-sanctioned, public role of religion.

particularly the Islamic headscarf, in public schools on the grounds that to demonstrate religious devotion at school is to show a public sign of difference – infringing consequently upon the religious neutrality of the public sphere (Bowen, 2004). The state, therefore, had to decide what counts as religious (that is, "signs" of voluntary belief) and to which space they do not belong (that is, "public" schools) (Asad, 2006; J. W. Scott, 2007). It also required the (minor) subjects under its protective custody to adhere to this "definition," enshrined as the law.

How should (social) "planners" think about the headscarf controversy? As a particular instance of the state-society relationship unfolding outside their disciplinary boundaries and foreign to their disciplinary ethos? Or, as an indication of how sometimes a major planning concern – that is, (re)distribution of public goods, in this case, public education – may also require a principled reference by the state to the proper place of religion in a secular society? More broadly, how should planners think about the issue of identity in public spaces, when the state may try to unify these spaces around a shared identity or a single moral value system, and while the notoriously diverse and morally heterogeneous nature of these spaces oftentimes resists such impositions?[17]

To be sure, law and politics reify planning in different ways depending on temporal and contextual particularities (Upton, 2015). Likewise, neither all liberal states nor all forms of secularism are identical across varying political economies and socio-historical differences. Thus, while the French variation of secularism (*laïcité*) is comparable to the American one in terms of the need to define the proper role and place of religion, they also differ institutionally, in that there is more reliance on court decisions in the United States than there is on state legislation in France. In the United States, such cases are usually litigated by reference to the two "religious clauses" of the First Amendment to the Constitution[18] – namely, the free exercise clause and the establishment clause (Sullivan, 2002). These clauses prohibit the states[19] from making any laws that restrict or support religious activities, respectively. Perhaps no planning issue other than zoning itself – as a special (spatial) regulatory power of local governance – has been subject to as much legal disputation on First Amendment grounds, especially the free exercise clause. This issue has become particularly acute and constantly recurring following the enactment of RLUIPA[20] in 2000 – a federal statute that to its advocates, prevents planners from substantially burdening religious practice, but to its critics (many of whom are professional planners), it substantially burdens planning practice itself (Kingsley & Smith, 2008). Expectedly therefore, the American Planning Association (APA) opposed RLUIPA (and its predecessor RFRA) from the outset, arguing that such statutes effectively change "the playing field in favor of religious institutions" and put local governments "in an untenable position" (Lucero, 2004, p. 14).

RLUIPA cases, however, reflect only one implication of the First Amendment for the planning profession (i.e., the free exercise clause). The establishment clause, too, has been invoked

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[17] Consider also recent controversies about the wearing of *burqini* in French cities' beaches.

[18] The First Amendment reads, in part, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

[19] Note that until the 1940, the First Amendment was applied only to Congress *not* the states.

[20] The *Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act* (RLUIPA) reads, in part, "No government shall impose or implement a land use regulation in a manner that imposes a substantial burden on the religious exercise of a person, including a religious assembly or institution, unless the government demonstrates that imposition of the burden on that person, assembly, or institution (A) is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (B) is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest."

variously in planning-related cases. In fact, many of the (planning) arguments against the constitutional validity of RLUIPA have been framed under this clause (Hamilton, 2004; Ostrow, 2008). But, the ways in which the establishment clause affects planning also go beyond zoning issues and include, for example, the role and place of faith-based organizations – themselves, of recent interest to planning circles[21]. In *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation Inc. (FFRF)* (2007), for instance, the Bush administration's decision to establish the Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) was challenged, but ultimately upheld, as attempting to help religious (Christian) institutions receive government funding (Comaroff, 2009).

As these cases indicate, in a liberal democracy, any interaction of religion and planning is basically subject to secular laws of the nation-state, to which all subjects (including planners) must adhere. But does this also mean that planners should assume as given or unproblematic the claim that given the political will, a democratic government is able to accord full and equal accommodation to "all" religious denominations and unfailingly safeguard religious liberty against the vagaries of democratic politics – even if the U.S. Supreme Court has argued otherwise[22], and even if in protecting religion, the state redefines it? Take, for instance, the *Warner v. City of Boca Raton* case (2001) in Florida, whereby the City was sued on First Amendment grounds (under the state RFRA) for banning the display of certain symbols (e.g., statues and plantings) that their users deemed as "religious" in a public cemetery. As Winnifred Sullivan has shown in her influential book, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), "the principal issue at trial was whether the nonconforming memorial arrangements assembled by plaintiffs were an 'exercise of religion,' and therefore protected by the relevant statutes and constitutional provisions" (p. 2). The court, therefore, had to make a judgment as to whether the beliefs and practices claimed by plaintiffs were "really" religious, and thus effectively, though perhaps reluctantly, define what counts as religious – a kind of definition provided by the state power, not necessarily the "lived" experience of citizens.

Yet, long before, if even ever, a court takes up the question of whether certain exercises count as religious, this question first poses itself upon professional planners, forcing them to arbitrate what they are not supposed to touch. How should have planning authorities, for instance, responded to nine Georgetown University students, who, in 2006, represented themselves as a church, the Apostles of Peace and Unity, to demand exemption from a zoning code that would allow no more than six unrelated individuals to live together in one home, but up to fifteen in a church? Or, how should have planning authorities reacted when in 2016, a (swingers) sex club in Nashville, Tennessee, "turned into a church," the United Fellowship Center, to avoid a zoning code that would not allow their business in a newly purchased plot? At any rate, within the confines of secularism, planners are not authorized to challenge the "sincerity" of religious claims – that falls within the sole domain of the state power. Nor are planners allowed to regard any church as sham – that would push them into the "non-planning" domain of defining what constitutes a church, and, of course, subject them to RLUIPA claims. Planning authorities thus did what they were obliged to do: that is, to "take [the claimants] at their word" (as a zoning administrator frames it, H. Hall,

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[21] See, for instance, (Hays, 2002; Spain, 2001).

[22] The U.S. Supreme Court in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) argued that "it may fairly be said that leaving accommodation to the political process will place at a relative disadvantage those religious practices that are not widely engaged in; but that unavoidable consequence of democratic government must be preferred to a system in which each conscience is a law unto itself or in which judges weigh the social importance of all laws against the centrality of all religious beliefs" (494 U.S. 872, p. 890).

2015), grant their request, and later send undercover code inspectors to the Center's subbasement to garner evidence of code violation – i.e., sexual intercourse (Lind, 2017). Too radical, even exotic, manifestations? Perhaps, but such is the day-to-day reality of planning practice when it comes to dealing with religion under the regime of secularism.

Of course, planners and religious groups are not the only stakeholders involved in such debates; there is always a surrounding community whose rights to have their voices heard and their inputs reflected in decision-making processes is assured in a liberal democracy. This issue, especially when the host community opposes certain (secular) proposals or practices of (different) faith groups, further complicates the relationship between religion, secularism, and planning. Heated debates around the construction of an Islamic center near the Ground Zero, New York, or a mosque in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, which were taken all the way to the Supreme Court, are known examples. But also note that in the sex club case above, neighborhood residents, many of whom were devout Christians, firmly opposed the proposal (symbolized by NSIMBY – No Swingers in My Back Yard) and compelled zoning authorities to introduce a new ordinance banning private clubs of any kind in that plot. The club then rebranded itself as a church, for its lawyer reasoned that if the club cannot defeat powerful and protected religious institutions, "perhaps it should join them" (Guo, 2015). Consider, too, that the Boca Raton municipality was sued again on First Amendment grounds in 2016: this time, not by a religious group, but by local residents; and not because the City had refused to grant a religious exemption, but because it had in fact approved the construction of an orthodox Jewish synagogue (the Chabad of East Boca) – after eight years of negotiations. This decision, however, angered a group of residents who sued the City for not taking their input into account and thus violating their First Amendment rights (Miller, 2016).

But religious-secular entanglements in planning are not limited only to sacred places or houses of worship; rather, such entanglements also occur in urban spaces that, by function or convention, are considered nonreligious. For instance, in disputing the construction of a casino in East Boston, in 2013, neighborhood voters turned down the casino proposal for a host of reasons, such as traffic, pollution, and crime – but also on religious grounds (Seelye, 2013). In fact, religiously motivated residents voiced their concerns and exerted their influence by utilizing particular democratic outlets of participation, *voting* and *public hearings*, required by the Massachusetts General Laws (Chapter 23k §17). But, people of various faiths beyond the surrounding community were also mobilized to persuade residents to cast a No vote (symbolized by *Casi"No"*). To the eminent theologian, Harvey Cox (2014), this is an exemplary episode of an emerging "alliance between the old pietistic approach and the more social-action-oriented people." To the casino officials, it indicates how arbitrary and inconsistent the Massachusetts standards are (Seelye, 2013). To the city officials, who favored the proposal, this is what the democratic urban decision-making entails, nonetheless.

Above all, the relationship between religion, secularism, and planning is not always direct or immediate; nor does it necessarily have a particular spatial manifestation. Rather, such associations are oftentimes "indirect," undercurrent to a wide array of planning concerns. It is difficult, for instance, to think about the notions of community or identity in the present time and neglect the emerging kinds of community that have become most assertive of their sovereignty and identity based on their religious and/or cultural differences (Comaroff, 2009). It is equally hard to think about the issues of gender and sexuality in urban spaces without also evoking the religious and secular discourses underpinning gender relations and sexual ethics, writ large. True, planners are

not always on one side of such disputes. But nor are they supposed to take side in them; they must nonetheless remain "indifferent" all along. But what does such indifference exactly mean for planners whose profession is often so entangled with both secular and religious concerns? More importantly, what exactly are planners supposed to be indifferent to? Religious concerns of their constituencies? entrenched enmity towards religious differences in those constituencies? secular powers of the nation-state? or the workings of representative democracy? On the one hand, serving the "public interest" – even if it is unascertainable – is arguably (Sanyal, 2018) "the central task of planners" (Fainstein & Campbell, 2012, p. 16). On the other, granting religious exemptions – even if the majority of the public opposes it, and even if it risks the charge of unrepresentativeness and the chance of re-election for local authorities – is mandated by secularism. This is not, however, to portray planners as an innocent body of professionals caught unluckily in religious disputes or handicapped ineffectually by secular law. As recent investigative reports (Green, 2017; U.S. Department of Justice, 2016) have shown, land-use discrimination against various faith groups, especially against Muslims, has increased alarmingly in the United States in recent years.

Rethinking religion and secularism in planning

As the stories recounted above demonstrate, dealing with religious concerns has become an unavoidable, though perhaps still undesirable, part of planning's practical reality. Such entanglements have made it increasingly difficult to cling unto the old conceit that religion is (or must be) immaterial to the material concerns of planning, reminding us that in planning's professional ethics and values, "what can be done in logic will not always be done in practice" (Marcuse, 1976, p. 272). Yet, these stories also caution planners against going overboard with religious claims or forsaking the ideal of religious indifference, especially at the time when the animosity extended towards, and borne by, religious differences has gained renewed momentum in the post-9/11 era.

As circumstances change, so should the questions we ask – not simply the answers we offer to certain old questions. Disciplinary questions are the product of their own time, belonging to their own specific "problem-space,"[23] and need to be refashioned to apprehend new realities we encounter (D. Scott, 2004). Instead of asking whether planners must be indifferent to religion, we may ask what the notion of religious indifference should mean at our present time: when we are increasingly confronted with a particular phenomenon to address which our existing theoretical repertoire does not seem to be sufficient. Or, rather than asking whether planning is a secular enterprise, we need to ask how planners should productively attend to religious sensibilities and subjectivities of their constituencies without compromising their professional ethics and responsibilities stipulated by the political-legal structures authorizing planning practice (Marcuse, 1976).

Such a refashioning, however, is no less a pressing issue than it is an unwieldly undertaking. The structure of the modern state requires all social activities, including planning, to seek the consent of the law, and therefore the consent of the nation-state. This renders the relationship between

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[23] The notion of "problem-space" is introduced by the anthropologist David Scott (2004) as "an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such (the problem of 'race,' say), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having" (p. 4).

religion and planning inherently political (therefore enmeshed in power relations) and legal (therefore subject to the legislature's authority). In either case, planners are not presumed to possess much power or knowledge to contribute. Various instances of secular-religious entanglement in planning are thus supposed to be addressed outside of planning procedures (through state legislations, court decisions, or plebiscites). Within an institutional arrangement that asks religion to take the proper form it should have as the condition of its legitimacy, and which expects planners to be indifferent to the proceedings of such a domain, critical engagements with religion in planning might seriously risk provoking the charge of either political illegitimacy (as an infringement upon the secular by the religious) or disciplinary overreach (as undermining the functional demarcation of social spaces – such as law, politics, and religion – upon which the modern nation-state basically functions).

Under such circumstances, rethinking the role of religion in planning requires novel frames of understanding, ones that aim at both "rethinking the norms" (that is, revisiting political thoughts driving planning in action, including secularism) and "normative thinking" (that is, going beyond the explanatory social science to address the *ought to* and *should* questions) (Campbell, 2012). Such reconsiderations, in other words, entail what John Forester (2015) calls "boundary-pushing planning." I will come back to this point in the third chapter of this dissertation. For now, let me explore the implications of this analysis for planning practice and its relevance for international contexts.

Implications for planning practice

The analysis provided above signifies something distinctive about religion, with distinctiveness perceived not in the sense of priority (epistemological, categorical, or otherwise), but in terms of particularity. That something, I contend, is the ideology of liberal secularism and the centrality of the modern state, especially its legal power, for the consummation of this ideology. Stated differently, if religion warrants acquiring a degree of distinctiveness in planning, it is not because of the adequacy of the category of religion itself – which, in isolation, is never an explanation or an independent variable, except for both religious and secular fundamentalists (Sullivan, 2017) – but rather because of a doctrinal category of which religion is a "shadow" and planning a "dutiful step-niece:" *secularism*. For, the interaction of religion and planning is in effect normatively conditioned by the doctrine of secularism in two mutually-reinforcing ways. First, insofar as the role of religion in the public sphere, and thus in planning, is concerned, the modern state is not a mere beholder, but rather a powerful stakeholder with a vested interest – despite, or precisely because of, its claim to neutrality (Sandel, 1998). This interest, often pursued under the aegis of preserving the public order, enables the *secular hand of the state* to not only define, authorize, and regulate religion and its relations to other social activities (including planning) with the aim of remaking certain kind of subjectivities compliant with liberal modalities of political rule (Mahmood, 2006); but also to reserve at its sovereign disposal the sole authority to do so (Agrama, 2010). This normative impetus of secularism is so blatantly direct, albeit institutionally variegated, that overlooking it renders planning inquiry analytically blunt.

Second, a central conceit of liberal secularism is that public sector bureaucrats and their associate professional counterparts (including practicing planners) can, through boundless indifference, not only meet endless religious claims by channelling them to independent centers of adjudication; they can also practically reinforce the principle of legal equality by counting their clients as

equivalents. Yet, as Asad (2004) argues, "when individuals are treated as *really equivalent,* a bureaucrat may judge them as he pleases. In other words, when faced with *substitutables* from among whom he has to choose, his choice is by definition completely free and therefore uncertain" (p. 283). A planner can thus choose a secular over a religious, a Christian over a Muslim, a white Protestant over a black one, or a Jew over an Arab – or contrariwise, "so long as, in each case and on every occasion, the pair are representable as 'equal' in the sense of being *the same*" (Asad, 2004, p. 283). It was, in fact, in the secular conceit of indifferent rationality that Congress found lack of disciplinary neutrality – hence the passage of RLUIPA.

In planning, we seem to have adopted the vision of secular normativity as an ethos, conceding "at once too much and too little to its claims" (Mahmood, 2006, p. 326). We concede too much in accepting at face value the contention that the modern state's sovereign power offers the ultimate practical solution to every episode of religious-secular entanglement in planning; and we concede too little by failing to interrogate the preconditions and the consequences of that power for the dynamics of planning in action and the organization of social life in planning constituencies. The result is a particular case of the gap between knowledge and action in our field, one that has been established politically by secularism and embraced uncritically by planners.

To underscore this gap is not, however, to understate significant improvements effected by professional planning associations, notably by the APA, in narrowing it – spurred on, of course, by the opposition to RLUIPA. Passing a resolution in 2000, the APA Board of Directors established an Amicus Curiae Committee to participate in legal cases. But, the Supreme Court's decision in *Cutter v. Wilkinson* (2005) that RLUIPA is constitutional[24], changed the type of questions APA sought to address: from the initial legal ones, such as whether RLUIPA is constitutional (Hamilton, 2004; Picarello, 2004) to more pragmatic questions, such as how to effectively navigate the renewed legal-religious landscape of the field? As a corollary, since the mid-2000s, the APA's knowledge center, Divisions[25], and local chapters have been offering vital resources to local governments and practicing planners through advisory services (e.g., Essential Info Packages[26]), publications (e.g., books, magazines, and journals)[27], conference meetings, and educational events[28].

While acknowledging these marked improvements, my argument here is intended to extend and amend these attempts in three main directions. First, the prime emphasis of these developments has been almost solely, though importantly, on land use and zoning issues and that too, heavily on legal dimensions of RLUIPA claims. By way of extension, this paper highlights the necessity of attention to also other types of interactions between religion and planning that do not necessarily have a zoning or even a direct spatial manifestation. This, in turn, expands our disciplinary

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[24] At least, as it applies to prisoners.

[25] In particular, the Planning and Law Division.

[26] For instance, the EIP-23, entitled *A RLUIPA Premier* (APA, 2009) published by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), APA's flagship research brand, summarizes the theoretical, legal, and practical debates around RLUIPA.

[27] This includes, for instance, the *RLUIPA Reader* (Giaimo & Lucero, 2009); legal lessons, news, and discussions as well as reflections from practitioners offered in the Planning Magazine and other specialty publications, such as Zoning Practice and Commissioner;; and papers in the Law and Environment journal, but not in the JAPA.

[28] This includes, to name a few, on-demand education, and e-learning materials such as webinars, podcasts, and presentations.

horizons, beyond the conventional view that secular law must be the sole adjudicator for spatial modalities of religious differences, by inviting planners to also consider "the ethical and political questions elided in the immediate resort to the law to settle such disputes" (Mahmood, 2013, p. 67). Second, these attempts have usually focused on offering solutions and tips as to how professional planners can evade religious claims – or, more radically put, "how to avoid a Holy war?" (Weinstein, 2008). While practically necessary and pragmatically felicitous, this approach nonetheless tends to displace, rather than tackle, what has become, by way of unconditional indifference, a recurring and increasingly urgent challenge in planning practice. In response, the analysis offered in this paper aims to expand our existing theoretical repertoire to be better equipped for practical engagement rather than strategic avoidance. Third, despite the improvements, religion is still viewed, rather unflatteringly, as the practical-cultural outsider and secularism, rather sacredly, as the theoretical-political untouchable in planning practice. Challenging this outlook, this paper urges planners to reflect more fully on what is implied in the claim to, on the one hand, submit uncritically to the normative image of a value-free, indifferent practitioner when it comes to religion; and, on the other, embrace the role of a value-committed advocate (Davidoff, 1965; Friedmann, 1992) or an insurgent activist (Sandercock, 1998; Miraftab, 2009; Roy, 2009) helping marginalized communities assert their self-determination vis-à-vis broader totalizing frameworks – when it comes to other dimensions of identity/difference.

Lastly, the implications of this analysis are not limited only to liberal-democratic settings but extend across international contexts. For, even if liberal democracies cannot exist without secularism, neither liberalism nor democracy are of existential significance to secularism (consider the authoritarian, secular state of Syria or former Communist remiges which also abide by the principle of church-state separation). Religious-secular standoffs also exist – and are, in fact, more vitally significant, even as a matter of life-and-death – in non-Western (e.g., India and South Africa), non-liberal (e.g., Russia and China), and non-secular (e.g., Iran, Pakistan, and Egypt) settings – especially those that have gone through, or are undergoing, violent or peaceful epochs of secularization or religious revivalism. Above all, secularism is in essence a universal project, one that like capitalism and modernity, has always been pushed or pursued internationally, yet inconsistently[29] along geopolitical fault lines (Hurd, 2008). Secularism, therefore, warrants special consideration in international planning research not only because of its universality and weighted specificity, but also by reason of the particular problems it poses unto, because aspiring to address in, different planning cultures.

Viewed as such, radical rethinking of religion, secularism, and planning entails transcending the simplistic, yet potent West/non-West dichotomy underlying conventional ideological and (geo)political discourses of both (international) planning and secularism. After all, histories of Western and non-Western societies have been forged, not in vacuum, but in tandem – through colonialism, capitalism, globalization, international development, as well as immigration – for good and ill. This, in turn, entails abandoning, on the one hand, the anemic understanding that views "non-Western" social practices (including religion and planning) as parochial, exceptional, and thus of little relevance for the kinds of problems in Western societies; and, on the other, the pessimistic view that understands of any idea originating from "the West" as surely suspect,

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[29] Consider, for example, the post-9/11 push for secularization as a central tenet of regime change in the Middle East, advanced by the same group, the neo-cons, who "simultaneously sought to legitimize Christian prayer in American public schools" (Brown, 2013, p. 10).

colonial, or subversive. True, conceived within particular normative frameworks, planning ideas and the idea of planning itself carry their own established principles and ideological bents when travelling abroad and encountering different contexts. But how is a strictly secular identification of planning (ideas) to work effectively in non-secular settings – or vice versa?

Conclusion

By raising the question, *Is planning "secular"?*, this paper provokes planners to reflect more fully on what the notion of secularism means to their profession. It problematizes planning's unreflective reliance on secularism, and even perhaps loosens planning's close identity with secularism. But it does so in a spirit that allows for the possibility of novel reformulations of the relationship between religion and planning to emerge. After all, by scrutinizing the truth claims of particular normative regimes, one only deprives them of their alleged innocence or impartiality – not undermining or discrediting them. Secularism, of course, "is not something that can be done away with, any more than modernity can be" (Mahmood, 2015, p. 21). Likewise, religion is *de jure* "special" – the U.S. Supreme Court said in 1968; and it may *de facto* be especially dangerous (Sullivan, 2010a). Yet, in contentious encounters of religion, secularism, and planning, the first two are broadly considered entitled to the principle of the "presumption of innocence;" but planning is often viewed on the basis of the "presumption of guilt."

Religion may not be a certain planner's personal concern. But it is likely to be an important one for communities with/for whom planners work. Religion is also what the secular state constantly (re)defines and regulates with the aim of protecting it. At any rate, the doctrine of secularism posits that the multiplicity of religious beliefs and identities in a modern society can only be achieved and maintained if all subjects (including planners) separate their religious belonging from their political status. This, of course, does not mean that secularism requires planners "to be" secular, but rather "to act" as secular politicians do in liberal democracies – i.e., to be indifferent to religion. Nor does it mean that secularism disqualifies planners from considering the religious life of their constituencies; quite the opposite, secularism obliges planners to ensure that their interventions would not infringe upon the principle of religious liberty – with liberty construed primarily in its negative sense. Herein lies a dilemma, one that remains largely obscured in the emerging planning literature on religion, namely that, the political and legal exigencies of liberal-secular governance at once compel and substantially constrain planners to engage seriously with religion in practice. This dilemma urges planners to make a key political decision whenever they encounter an aspect of religion in practice: to be either "modest" and let the state power handle the case (that is, to cave in), or be "ambitious" and critically engage and contribute to debates around secularism from the planning perspective (that is, to carve out). The first is perhaps unduly pragmatic; the second is arguably long overdue, I submit.

There is no doubt that secularism has been influential in protecting religious minorities' rights and freedom in planning processes. RLUIPA, for instance, has helped minority, less-established religious groups move into and practice within majority, well-established communities, thereby spatially diversifying the religious landscape of localities. But there is always a tension between the ideal of promoting "diversity" and the reality of the enmity towards "differences" (racial, gender, sexual, cultural, as well as religious). Such tensions do not simply vanish by invoking the state power: that power is primarily concerned with "regulating aversion" not with resolving it (Brown, 2006); law, for instance, "never seeks to eliminate violence since its object is always to

regulate violence" (Asad, 2003, p. 8). Whether incarnated as a legislator, a judge, or a President, the state power comes in, intervenes, makes winners and losers, and moves on. Left behind are professional planners and the redrawn, even hardened, communal lines of religious differences, ones that, one may suspect, by being actively indifferent to religion and passively so to secularism, planners might have helped establish, if not perpetuate.

This is not, however, to register a rigid state-centric view of secularism or to express a withering scorn of the role of the state in planning. Planners, of course, must work through the structures of government and fulfill their statutory and political responsibilities. But working through these structures is not tantamount to uncritically relying on them or taking them for granted. Rather, as planners, we should be suspicious of our institutions and their normative preferences when confronted with the lived realities of social practices on the ground. That planning cannot be isolated from either law or politics is a well-known fact in our field. But the connection between them is seldom direct or simple. There is always a tension between the need for outright openness in planning deliberations and the decisiveness demanded by political and legal obligations. This should spur us to cultivate a better understanding of what constitutes continuity and change in social practices we mediate, and what gives our discipline its openness to such practices as well as its authoritativeness *vis-à-vis* the modern state.

Under circumstances in which planning modes of inquiry and theoretical contributions are not widely recognized among scholars of other fields (and politicians alike), reflections on varied episodes of secular-religious entanglement unfolding through the planning field's salient characteristic, "practice," might help us sharpen a much-needed critical edge to our discipline. In so doing, careful examination of secularism as a contingent idea – not as a default position embedded in the field, nor as an automatic mechanism occurring outside of it – seems to be an imperative step, yet to be taken more seriously in planning debates.

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PROTESTANT SENTIMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
THE CASE OF US ENGAGEMENT ABROAD

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the conception of "religion" incorporated in past international development initiatives. It analyzes developmental efforts led by the United States in the Philippines (1898), Albania (2003), and Iraq (2003) to argue that Protestantism has been viewed as the normative template or the "gold standard" against which other religious practices are measured as free, modern, and civil. The paper argues that this view has dragged development planners into the age-old missionary conceit of "good vs bad religion" and drifted their attention away from working with local communities to address developmental challenges.

Introduction

In July 2019, Mark Green, the then Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), addressed the second *Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom*. Hosted by the US Department of State, the Ministerial convened a large group of religious leaders and government officials from around the world to address religious persecution and discrimination worldwide. In his speech, Green affirmed USAID's commitment to promote religious freedom through international development initiatives. This commitment, he emphasized, was not only a recognition of a basic human right enshrined in both US and international law; it was also a natural principle rooted in the "very national DNA" of the American people. Green specifically singled out President Reagan, who, echoing John Winthrop's biblical phrase, referred to "America as a shining city on a hill." Pitting this historical legacy against examples of religious discrimination in the global South, Green assured the audience that USAID "will proudly take up the mission that the world's great faith traditions call for," that is, to live their lives and practice their faiths freely. Although he didn't clarify what he meant by "great faith traditions," Green nonetheless invoked a passage from the Gospel of Luke to indicate that USAID's policy-focus on religious liberty was, in essence, "to share a tunic with him who has none."[1]

This announcement was made in the aftermath of two decades of debates between the proponents and opponents of "engaging" with religious groups in development projects funded by government agencies, including USAID. In particular, American evangelicals acclaimed the USAID's policy-focus as resonating with their "enchanted" view of internationalism and the mission of preaching the "good news" to the world (McAlister, 2008, 2018). Critics, however, argued that engagement with religious groups in development projects undermines the presumed neutrality and secularity of government agencies in matters of religion and lets the "God to play a role in development" (De Kadt, 2009). These debates raise two questions: First, how accurate is the claim that programs of

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[1] See https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/jul-16-2019-usaid-administrator-mark-green-remarks-ministerial-advance

international development, particularly those led by the U.S., have been historically neutral or blind to religion simply because these programs have been focused mainly on trade and economic development? Second, which kind of "religion" has been incorporated in structuring past development initiatives as either conducive to, even necessary for nations' paths toward modernity and democracy, or as unfavorable, even harmful to economic and social modernization facilitated by technological changes?

I pose these questions against the conventional view in development studies that religion has long been "a development taboo" (Ver Beek, 2000), but in the post-9/11 era, "the taboo has been broken" by emerging scholarship on religion and development (Jones & Petersen, 2011, p. 1292). I also pose these questions against the backdrop of the *International Religious Freedom Act* (IRFA) of 1998, which defined the promotion of religious freedom "as a core objective of U.S. foreign policy"[2] and required the government to, among other things, suspend the allocation of development assistance to foreign governments that violate the right to religious freedom (Hertzke, 2004). IRFA was, in fact, a second major religious freedom act – after the *Religious Freedom Restoration Act* (RFRA) of 1993 – which was passed by Congress in reaction to the Supreme Court's decision in *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990), which had exempted laws of general applicability from constitutional scrutiny, even if they burdened religious exercise. Yet, while RFRA aimed to protect free exercise of religion from the powers of government at all levels at home, IRFA granted substantial powers to the government to take punitive actions against foreign governments that are not committed to religious liberty (Mahmood, 2006). To be sure, USAID had worked with religious organizations since its creation in 1961 (Wright, 2009) during the Cold War attempts to combat *godless communism* by promoting global spiritual health, and especially since the early 2000s, in the Balkans and the Middle East (Marsden, 2012). But "engaging with religion" in U.S.-led development efforts goes further back: to nation-building efforts after the occupation of the Philippines in 1898. This long history of "religious engagement" has increasingly challenged American development planners to work with faith communities in other nations whose religious practices are different from how these planners perceive "religion" *at home*.

This paper is not intended to provide a social or a religious history of international development as an idea or a field of study. Rather, I draw on an influential body of recent scholarship in the fields of religious studies and international studies (particularly, Asad, 2003, 1993; Masuzawa, 2005; Bender, 2013; Hurd, 2017; Wenger, 2017; Hurd & Sullivan, 2021; Orsi, 2022) to examine the conception of religion used in U.S.-led development projects focused on issues of religious freedom and pluralism. These scholars have challenged the conventional concept of religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon which could be identified separately from other "modern" domains of activities, such as politics, economics, or law. They have demonstrated that religion as a *category* was invented, rather than simply "discovered," in early modern times, roughly in the 17th century, along with the formation of the notion of "secular" and the emergence of the modern nation-state, as European colonizers and missionaries tried to classify and map rituals of worship in colonies that were different from European Christianity. In fact, the concept of "religion," these scholars argue, has been shaped by Christian thinking and disseminated globally by colonial and missionary classification projects, wherein Christianity, or more accurately, Protestantism, has been the template or the "gold standard" based on which other "religions" could be assessed as either *good* or *bad* religions.

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[2] See https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/2431

My aim here is thus twofold. I first argue against the dominant narrative of "the secular" that has long underwritten practices of international development, one that views developmental efforts as being, until just recently, free of religious sentiments. In contrast, I argue that from its early roots in colonialism to its later course shaped by the U.S., "development encounters" have also always been "religious encounters," couched in terms of the hierarchy of nations' civilizational stages. In fact, the hierarchical nature of such encounters has been shaped by European colonizers' efforts to *convert* non-Western societies into modernity, as well as by the U.S.'s attempts to *redeem* these societies from unfreedom and underdevelopment. Second, I argue that past developmental efforts led by the U.S. in the Philippines (1898), Albania (2003), and Iraq (2003) relied on the *Protestant* conception of religion as a model for engaging and even altering religious practices of local communities. This uncritical conceptual reliance has dragged development planners into the age-old missionary view of "good vs bad religion" and drifted their attention away from working with local communities to address developmental challenges. Overall, my aim is to show that even though North American planners working on international development have been generally eager to work with local religious communities abroad, they often don't understand that religion as experienced and practiced by such communities can be/is different from how these planners living in the "secular" North America perceive individuals as either religious or secular.

With these considerations in mind, this paper proceeds in three sections. I first review the existing literature on religion and development to draw attention to the scarcity of rigorous scholarship on the formation and globalization of the category of religion, one that I explore in the second section. The third section analyzes the concept of religion as embedded in U.S.-led developmental efforts in the Philippines, Albania, and Iraq to argue that contrary to what is commonly assumed, past international developmental efforts, especially those funded by USAID, have never been devoid of religious sentiments. The notion of religion influencing these efforts has relied primarily on the Protestant view that is particular to the American experience. That is, privatized, de-politicized, and church-free religion has been viewed as both a precondition and a consequence of creating a civil society based on "civil religion"; and religious activism that addresses social ills and injustice in local communities – e.g., poverty and land dispossession – has been dismissed as obstructing the proper functioning of markets aided by technological change. In fact, the Protestant conception of religion has served as the core, even if "a suppressed core" (Cannell, 2006a), of the conventional notions of international development insofar as the role of "religion" is concerned.

Religion and Development: A critical review of the literature

Similar to the field of urban planning, development studies have also witnessed a growing interest, recently, in the connections between religious practices and development initiatives. Compared to urban planning, however, the topic of religion had attracted more attention in development studies in the second half of the twentieth century. This was especially the case during the 1970s, when widespread resistance in newly decolonized nations to modernization theories of the 1950s led to important, but brief, deliberations on the relationships between religion and development, as in the debates on Buddhist Economics (Schumacher, 1973) and the notion of *conscientization* (Freire, 1970), culminating in a special issue of a top-rank academic journal, *World Development* (July, 1980), in which Denis Goulet remarked that development practitioners are "one-eyed giants: scientists without wisdom" (1980, p. 481).

Nevertheless, there remains a broad consensus in development studies that from modernization theories of the 1950s to the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and globalization efforts of the 1990s, discussions of religion were deliberately ignored, and even opposed, in developmental discourses (Held, 2004; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997; Selinger, 2004). In the late-1990s, however, increased attention to issues of human/social/sustainable development led to new propositions regarding the rights-based human capability approaches to development (Midgley, 1995; Rajagopal, 2000; Sen, 2000; Tomalin, 2006). The result was an extraordinary increase in scholarship on the role of religious sentiments and faith-based organizations in poverty alleviation, social provisions, environmental protection, and post-disaster relief globally (Alkire, 2006; Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011; Lunn, 2009; Marshall, 2003; Nell & Swart, 2016; Van Der Veer, 2012). These works are generally interpreted as a sign that religion has been "found" or has "come back" in development. Exploring the connections between religion and development is consequently considered "a new academic sub-discipline" with its own abbreviation: *RaD* (Bompani, 2019).

This recent research has attracted criticisms from various angles, however. For example, Neo-secularization theorists have charged that recent interest in religion is merely "a scholarly fashion," which will eventually undermine the steady *progress* of the scientifically-based, unsuperstitious world by re-legitimizing the old notions of the sacred and the mythical (Pinker, 2018; Goldstein, 2009). Others have warned that "the mushrooming trend" of the scholarship leads to confusion rather than clarification (Jones & Petersen, 2013). From a more substantive angle, some have charged that the recent literature offers an instrumental view of religion (Dragovic, 2012; Platteau, 2011); or that the emphasis on non-governmental, faith-based organizations depicts a naively rosy picture of the contentious relations between religious groups and development practitioners on the ground (Cooley & Ron, 2002). Others argued that recent literature ignores the ways that religion is politically appropriated in international politics (Haynes, 2007; Hurd, 2008; Marshall, 2003).

To be sure, development scholars have been aware of the significant role that religion played in major global events after the Second World War. This includes the partitioning of India in 1947 between Hindus and Muslims; the creation of the State of Israel in 1948; the rise of Liberation Theology in Latin America in the 1960s; Iran's 1979 revolution; and the rise of Islamism in the MENA region since the late-1990s. In all these events, however, religion – or, more accurately, *non-Western* religions – has been blamed for war, conflict, or violence. It has been associated with Third-World exceptionalism (Chatterjee, 1998) and underdevelopment (Hyde, 1987); charged for the "bloody borders" of the Muslim world (Lewis, 1990) leading to the infamous prediction of eventual *Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington, 1996); and even with hopeless attempts to resist "progress" and turn back the clock of history (Asad, 1993; Said, 1997). These views, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, led to calls for reinstating secularism in "insufficiently modernized" societies, particularly those in the Middle East (Mahmood, 2006).

Recent body of critical writing, especially in post-colonial and secular studies, have challenged these narratives as historically myopic and Eurocentric. They have shown that the narrow, temporal focus on only the post-WWII period ignores the ways that colonial and imperial conceptions of religion have shaped the foundations of international development based on claims of racial and religious superiority – or rather the presumption of superiority – of the West (Asad, 2003; Chakrabarty, 2008; Mahmood, 2006; Rajagopal, 2003; Viswanathan, 2014; Nandy, 1988; Van Der Veer, 2001). To these scholars, modernization theories of the 1950s – during "the first decade of development" – did not simply ignore religion, but rather had a clear plan for how to

address the role of religion by "modernization *of religion*" based on Max Weber's account (1930) of the role of Protestantism in the formation of Western modernity and capitalism, as well the colonial missionary conceit of the "good/bad religion" (Mamdani, 2005; Orsi, 2022; Taylor, 1998).

The Emergence and Globalization of "Religion" as a Conceptual Category

With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Fountain, 2015; Ivakhiv, 2006), the emerging scholarship on religion and development has primarily viewed of religion as a self-evident phenomenon – or else, approached "religion" by its secondary functions, e.g., its spatial shapes, social values, or cultural meanings. Thus, the concept of "religion" itself, and the ways this concept has been shaped by Christianity and globalized through colonial and imperial projects, remains largely unexamined in the existing literature on religion and development.

Yet, as recent scholarships in the fields of religious studies and anthropology have shown, with new structures of governance and secularity came new concepts of religion. To be sure, "concepts" of religion vary in different time and different context. But the category of religion, as an object of inquiry, is a relatively recent formation, emerging in the mid-17th Europe to unify various denominations of Christianity following the fragmentation of the unity and authority of the Roman Catholic church after the wars of religion and also the Enlightenment's scathing critique of Christianity (Asad, 1993, 2012; W. C. Smith, 1963; King, 1987; J. Z. Smith, 1982)[3]. Through these theological-historical shifts, the Latin word *religio,* which, prior to this time, used to refer to Protestants (Matthes, 2000), became a unifying word for European thinkers and missionaries alike to identify a whole range of rituals of worship that people in "every society" had instituted and practiced. In other words, *religion* was not something only Christians had (Asad, 2012).[4] This was not a mere etymological shift (from *religio* to *religion*), but rather a major *conceptual* one, laying the foundations of dominant universal conceptions of religion that followed, e.g., "natural religion" (Hume, 1907; see also J. Z. Smith, 1998), "secular religion" (Locke, 1955; see also Mahmood, 2009)[5], and "religion as a cultural system" (Geertz, 1973; see also Asad, 1983).

Importantly, that aspect of universality was also reflected in a variety of different concerns and approaches to assimilate *other* ways of thinking and being into the European experience (Asad, 1973; Van Der Veer, 2001; Rajagopal, 2003, 1998). Central to this hegemonic pursuit was a tacit consensus among (a) "liberal philosophers," such as Locke and Kant, who separated the private and the public spheres (*privatized religion*) (Habermas, 2006); (b) "colonial rulers," who wanted to establish national states in colonies as extended adjuncts of the European order by forcing the separation of church and state (*depoliticized religion*) (Casanova, 1994); and (c) "missionaries" for whom the separation of faith and territoriality (*deterritorialized religion*) was a necessary condition for proselytization (Sanneh, 1994).

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[3] Prior to that time, people were being called Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, pagans, etc. (Masuzawa, 2005).

[4] In the Roman Empire, the word *religio* referred to those cults living on the verge of the Roman Empire with a degree of self-autonomy. Initially, *religio* had a particular territorialized connotation, but as the Roman rulers converted to Christianity, the word *religio* lost its meaning as a collective term. It was, then, picked up by the then minority protestant theologians (especially Luther) during the Reformation to affirm their self-autonomy vis-à-vis the institutional Church (Matthes, 2000).

[5] That religion is a feature of all societies, evident in the universality of systems of belief, practices of worship, and codes.

In practice, missionaries and colonial rulers reinforced each other, even if they did not always welcome one another (Comaroff, 1991; Keane, 2007; Sanneh, 1994). Jointly, they not only globalized the Christian *conception* of religion along with its shadow, secularism (Cannell, 2006b), they also projected their tensions between religious and secular commitments within the metropole into the colony (Viswanathan, 2014). As orientalists, Victorian anthropologists, and missionaries offered social accounts of colonial subjects and their "religions" (Asad, 1973; Sahlins, 1985; Said, 1979; Scott, 2004; Viswanathan, 1996), the notion of "the sociology of error" was invented to help explain why people believed irrationally in supernatural causes and were suspicious of modernity. The more such studies became comparative in their geographical scopes, and the more they became historical by benchmarking the developmental trajectory of Europe, the more they distinguished the kind of religion they deemed favorable to capitalist modernity i.e., *Protestantism*, from those they viewed as obstructing the processes of commodification and market expansion, i.e., *backward Oriental religion* (Asad, 2012). Such ideas added scholarly justifications to the missionary distinction of "good/bad religion," a distinction on which modernization theories of the 1950s also heavily relied (Fox, 2004).

Recent scholarship in the field of anthropology of Christianity (Cannell, 2006b; Keane, 2007; Klassen, 2011, 2013) has challenged universal definitions of religion that are based on Christianity, especially with regards to conventional notions of internationalism (McAlister, 2018). This is not to imply that there have been no competing conception of religion, but to underscore that, as Gil Anidjar (2006, p. 59) argues, "one particular religion is the one whose self-identification with, whose understanding and enforced institutionalization of that most Latin of words, shaped the current hegemonic use *and* the dissemination of that very same word and its ensuing division of the real" globally. Jacque Derrida (1998) has called this phenomenon *mondialatinisation,* and Peter van der Veer has referred to it as the "globalization of Christianity" (2014).

Protestantism as the Gold-Standard in U.S-led Developmental Efforts

How have these conceptual formations and historical trends influenced the ideas and practices of international development, particularly those led by the United States? In what follows, I explore three purposively selected examples of U.S.-led development projects centered on issues of religion, freedom, and pluralism in three historical moments: in the late 19th century during the dual project of nation-building and empire-building in the Philippines; in the early-2000s during USAID's efforts to promote religious harmony and make "moderate" religion in Albania; and in the mid-2000s during the reconstruction of Iraq and efforts to "reform Islam" amidst inter-religious conflicts and the rise of Islamic extremism.

Religion, Race, and Empire Building in the Philippines (1898-1905)

> [W]hen that group of islands […] shall have become the gems and glories of those tropical seas – a land of plenty and of increasing possibilities; a people redeemed from savage indolence and habits, devoted to the arts of peace, in touch with the commerce and trade of all nations, enjoying the blessings of freedom, of civil and religious liberty, of education, and of homes, and whose children and children's children shall for ages hence bless the American republic because it emancipated and redeemed their fatherland, and set them in the pathway of the world's best civilization.
>
> *– U.S. president William F. McKinley, February 16, 1899*

With the rise of the United States as a world power in the late 19th century military confrontations with European colonial empires seemed inevitable. This was especially the case as the presence of the Spanish empire in the Caribbean, particularly in Cuba and close to the soon-to-be-completed Panama Canal, threatened the economic interests of the U.S. and led to the war with Spain in 1898. But beyond economic interests, the war with Spain had its roots also in the rise of anti-Catholic sentiments, which entangled with the ethic of "Anglo-Saxon supremacy," sought national glory through war (Lears, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, "in the eyes of a Anglo-Protestant culture" in the U.S., the Spanish empire's "direct assault on the freedom of religion" was rooted in "the tyranny of the Catholic Church" (Wenger, 2017, p. 24). Colonialism was in contradiction with the hard-won republican ideals of the U.S. achieved by the American Revolutionary War against British colonialism (1775-1783). Liberating colonial subjects from the oppressive Spanish rule thus added humanitarian reasons to the war with Spain.

"The splendid little war" with Spain – as John Hey, the then US Secretary of State put it – led to heated debates between the proponents and opponents of annexing Spanish territorial possessions, especially the Philippines, after the war. Interestingly, the belief in American exceptionalism drove the arguments of both sides of these debates. Proponents of the U.S.'s imperial expansion saw American Exceptionalism as an urge to "export" American ideals of freedom and democracy worldwide. Anti-imperialist, however, argued that annexing new territories via war and conquest would only undermine the moral legitimacy of the U.S. and put the nation on the path of European colonial powers (Beisner, 1969; Su, 2016; Tompkins, 1970). Advocates of annexation, in the end, won the day, which led the U.S. to another war, this time with Filippos who had opposed the annexation of their country to another global power after being liberated from the Spanish colonial rule. To provide moral justifications for the Philippines war, President McKinley argued that "after several nights of praying to Almighty God," he had realized that the U.S. had no choice but "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them."[6] For McKinley, conversion and redemption were one, both being carried out by war and conquest.

The dominant assumption underlying the U.S. colonial rule in the archipelago was that "for reasons of race, Filipinos were incapable of self-rule" (Su, 2016, p. 15). American protestant groups particularly supported the imperial turn, as they saw great evangelization opportunities in the Philippines as well as in South and East Asia. These groups turned the progressive ideals of the Social Gospel movement into a theological ground bolstering what Josiah Strong called "the civilizing mandate" of the U.S., forging in turn *theologies of American Exceptionalism* (Sullivan & Hurd, 2020). As a result, the mission of showing "benign American intentions" to Spanish empire gave way to the project of the "benevolent assimilation" of Filipinos after the Philippines War (Miller, 1984). And the humanitarian mission of saving Filipinos from colonial rule became the mission of "saving Filipinos from themselves" (Su, 2016, p. 15). These views, in turn, transformed the self-image of the U.S. as the "shining city on a hill," on which the world would lay its eyes to learn and imitate, into the view of the U.S. as a world power laying its eyes on the world to spread "the American dream" (Rosenberg & Foner, 1982). Similarly, the 1883 World's Columbian Exposition, which aimed to "show" the world the grand civilizational visions of the U.S., became the template for developing *undeveloped* parts of the world according to those visions (Rydell, 1993). Appointed by the War Department, Daniel Burnham thus set to make an

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[6] Quoted in (Su, 2016, p. 15)

"imperial façade" in Manila (Hines, 1972), arguing that "Americans are used to better conditions of living than had prevailed in those islands." (1909, p. 20).

Yet, as it soon became clear, it was one thing to annex a new territory, a whole different thing to rule over it. The challenge was in fact double – both deeply entangled with religion. The northern population of the Philippines were mostly converted Catholics under the spiritual tutelage of the Pope in Rome. The southern population, on the other hand, were mainly Moro Muslims, who under the Spanish rule, had negotiated and achieved a sort of supervised independence. Americans thus adopted two different strategies to deal with each region: negotiating with Spain about the Catholic north and abolishing Muslim independence in the south. Key to both strategies was the separation of church and state to ensure religious liberty in the islands through the disestablishment of the Catholic Church in the north and conquest of Muslim inhabitants who were in rebellion in the south. In the Christian part, this disestablishment involved negotiation with Spain regarding the sale of large tracts of land held by Spanish religious orders between the Holy See and the U.S. colonial government in the Philippines. In the Muslim parts, however, "the forcible reorganization of the political and religious structure of the area by the U.S. military government" required the "pacification and subjugation" of its Muslim inhabitants (Su, 2016, p. 14).

As negotiations with Spain came to halt, the U.S. decided to deal with the Vatican directly. When Theodore Roosevelt became president after McKinley's assassination, he sent a delegation to Rome. The Vatican, too, was interested in negotiations with the U.S.to preserve the Church's land possessions and interests in the islands even under American sovereignty as well as to increase the Church's legitimacy in Europe amidst the rise of anticlerical movements in Spain and France. Roosevelt gave specific directions to the U.S. delegation to Rome. He emphasized that while the "separation of church and state" must be central to these negotiations, the American delegation must "remember that it is a purely *business transaction* undertaken to secure a final settlement of the matter causing most difficult at present with the Philippine government."[7] Negotiations with the Vatican were successful. Pope Leo XIII thus issued an apostolic constitution, *Quae Mari Sinico,* in 1902 which recognized a new autonomous Philippine church hierarchy and endorsed the establishment of American colonial rule in the Philippines (Ofreneo, 1987; Reher, 1973).

While negotiations with Catholics were not theologically perplexing, albeit politically contentious, dealing with Muslims in the southern area appeared a political and theological conundrum. After all, this was the first time that the U.S. had to deal with a Muslim population under its rule. Lacking a reference point to define Muslim's faith practices, U.S. officials resorted to the "good/bad religion" analogies familiar to the Anglo-Protestant culture at home. To these officials, Catholics and Muslims were practicing "bad" religions, i.e., unfree, uncivil, and authority-based religions. As Tisa Wenger observes, "those who identified themselves as Anglo-Saxon Protestants attributed America's freedoms and the American system of government to the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant character of the nation's founders. Thus, they asserted an Anglo-Protestant foundation not only for religious freedom but also for the secular modernity it signified" (2017, p. 16). Moro Muslim, however, were viewed as practicing a *cultish* and *primitive* religion. "Cult" was the term which White protestants in the U.S. were using to mark African-American religiosity "as illegitimate" (Weisenfeld, 2016, p. 12). "Primitive religion" was also the term used in the U.S. to dismiss North

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[7] Quoted in (Su, 2016, p. 25)

American-Indians ritualism as "primal, pre-literate, and tribal" (Masuzawa, 2005, p. 4) practiced by savages "untouched by modern civilization" (Wenger, 2009, p. 8).

Thus, Elihu Root, the then Secretary of War who later became the Secretary of State, argued that using force against Moro Muslims in the Philippines was necessary, not because of their rebellion, but because the "wild tribes" needed to be civilized, the same way that "troubles with the Sioux or the Apaches [within the U.S.] had nothing to do with the suppression of the Southern rebellion," but by bringing them under the fold of civilization (Wenger, 2017, p. 16). Root saw the Christian Filipinos as comparable to the Confederates in the American Civil War: somehow modern and at least potentially within the circle of the civilized. But he equated Moro Muslims with North American Indians: racial-religious savages and "heathen tribes" in need of civilization by conquest and conversion (Wenger, 2017, p. 101). The result was the application of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Cherokee Nation v. State of Georgia* to define the relationship between the U.S. and the Moro "tribes" as one between a guardian and a ward, thus converting a colonial mix of race and religion into an imperial one (see, Gowing, 1968; Johnson, 2018; Su, 2016).

The colonial rhetoric of "good vs bad religion" used in the Philippines did not dissipate after colonialism "officially" ended in the two decades after the Second World War, however. Rather, it continued in new forms and was intensified during the Cold War. Take, for example, the way that the rise of Liberation Theology in Latin America in the 1960s was viewed by many Anglo-Protestants in the U.S. as an unholy blend of Catholicism and Marxism – the two *-isms* that they thought should oppose each another, not to join hand and become political, signaling *bad religion* (Hyde, 1987; Bell, 2001). Or take the case of Iran before the 1979 revolution. As the Pahlavi regime faced increasing pressure by both Marxist and Islamist groups during the 1960s, the U.S. government advised the Shah's regime to give Islamists more freedom so that they would neutralize Marxists, because, again, according to the American experience, no "religion," even Islam, was supposed to be amicable to *godless Marxism* (Shariati, 1980; Rāhnamā, 1998; Abrahamian, 2000).

Religious Pluralism and the Making of "Moderate" Religion in Albania (2003)

> For the first time since World War II, Albanian young people are coming of age in an environment that allows open religious practice. The religious beliefs that they embrace, whether traditional Albanian pluralism or less moderate ideologies, will set the tone for Albania's future of tolerance.
>
> – *USAID RelHarmony Final Report, 2007*

The end of the Cold War ushered in the revival of religiosity and spirituality in post-soviet nations, but it also caused social upheavals and religious strife in the Balkans in the 1990s (Iveković, 2002). In this context, in 2003, USAID launched a new development program, *World Learning Project Fostering Religious Harmony* (*RelHarmony*) in Albania, a nation that seemed important to USAID because, as the project's Final Report stresses, Albania was "the world's only nation ever to have explicitly outlawed religious practice" during the communist rule of Enver Hoxha (1967-1985).[8] Note that when USAID launched *RelHarmony*, there was no inter-religious conflict in Albania. This issue raised questions for Albanians as to why Americans had come to work in their country.

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[8] See USAID's Final Report, entitled "Fostering Religious Harmony in Albania" available at https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACK058.pdf (accessed July 10, 2022)

In response, USAID pointed out that *RelHarmony* was "a preventative project" to address "issues that Albanians did not consider to be *problems*," but USAID apparently did. As the Final Report frequently mentions, Albania was indeed a religiously plural country where interreligious relations "remained strong."[9] But in this plurality, USAID saw a dangerous possibility: "the extremist religious influences might undermine the country's history of religious harmony."[10] Thus, *RelHarmony* aimed "to sustain religious harmony" and bring about "long-term changes in values and tolerance"[11] by training "religious moderates" who would cause "positive change" internal to Albanian religious traditions.

RelHarmony focused on the four main religious communities in Albania (Catholic Christians, Orthodox Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Bektashi) and operated in seven cities: Shkoder, Lezha, Librazhd, Elbasan, Durrës, Kavaja, and Tirana. According to the project's Final Report, *RelHarmony* reached to "over 250 religious leaders and over 1200 believers" as well as "thousands more Albanians through national broadcast of roundtables and documentary films." The program included leadership and conflict resolution training and exchanges for religious leaders, interfaith summer camps, and creating a religion-related database of all religious leaders and organizations in Albania. To USAID officials, "*RelHarmony* sought an impact in the hearts and imaginations of Albanians," and so the project "should be considered a success both in terms of the many interfaith activities realized and in establishing a model of future similar projects." [12] *RelHarmony* became a pilot program that would later on serve as a model or "a success story" to be implemented in Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Throughout the project, USAID officials remained committed to the church-state separation. As the USAID's *Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding Toolkit* 2009[13] emphasizes, USAID "finances only activities and programs that have a *secular* purpose and which do not have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion." But the Toolkit doesn't clarify what counts as a "secular" purpose or a "religious" activity and, instead, assumes that American development planners working in other nations can "naturally" identify and distinguish not just "the religious" from "the secular," but also "moderate" religions from less-moderate ones. One result of this sort of naturalization of religion in the Albanian case was that "USAID and its partners and contractors were forced to discriminate between local groups, selecting for engagement those that represented the potential for Albanian *religious pluralism* rather than *foreign extremism*" so that these planners can empower and educate the former while taming or marginalizing the latter (Hurd, 2017, p. 71). This is not to imply that development planners working in the project were necessarily thinking in religious terms or acting on religious grounds; it is but to indicate that the project justified the legitimacy of USAID's planners to act as a theological authority or a director of religious reform, well-equipped to decide which religions or religious leaders needed "training."

RelHarmony was an explicit case of how the favorable religion assumed in development programs in the one what conforms to the North American experience of religious pluralism and the view of Protestantism as an example of "civil religion." Note that *RelHarmony* didn't find the need to reach out to or "train" Albanian Protestant groups. Nor did it begin with studying Albanian religions and

[9] Ibid., page 2.
[10] Ibid., page i.
[11] Ibid., page 27.
[12] Ibid., pages 26 & 27.
[13] See https://jliflc.com/resources/usaid-religion-conflict-peacebuilding/

their histories, but instead relied on estimates (based on a 1929 survey) to explain the social and religious context of Albania. As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd has shown in her influential book, *Beyond Religious Freedom* (2017), *RelHarmony* was a continuation of long-established "attempts to cultivate forms of religiosity in other countries" which "conform to specific and historically contingent conceptions of what it means to be religious and to be free" (p. 71). Religions abroad, in other words, needed to become more like American religions: freer and more tolerant. In this context it is taken for granted, as Courtney Bender observes of the religious economies model of American religious pluralism (2015, p. 71), that "a plurality of religious groups is needed to indicate a thriving religious freedom, and that the American example presents a clear case of actually free religion". This understanding, which is particular to the American experience and is not universal, Bender explains, is informed by a background assumption in which "free-church Protestantism is the norm against which all other religious groups are measured as capable of being free, and capable of forming the kind of religious actors who can defend *religious freedom*" (*ibid,* p. 70). Thus, in *RelHarmony* "we can most clearly see how US interests draw on the vision of a secular 'open field' of civil society and a thriving religious pluralism as a step toward building the capacities necessary for a viable democracy. In other words, interfaith interaction – pluralism – is a necessary first step toward political stability."[14]

Similar to the Philippines case, *RelHarmony* also relied on the view of "good vs bad religion." But if in the Philippines case, "bad" religion had a particular denominational tone (i.e., Catholicism as a form of tyranny and Islam as a primitive religion), in the Albanian case, the rhetoric of good/bad religion relied on moderate/less-moderate religion. And if in the Philippines, exporting "religious freedom" drove the war against Spain and Filipinos and informed the nation-building efforts that followed, in *RelHarmony,* exporting "moderate religion" and making local religions "free" was the focus of developmental interventions. Both cases, however, shared the urge to promote forms of religion that conform to American understandings of what it means to have a free religion. As Bender argues, this urge in the Albanian case, required religious leaders to not just build "their capacities as civil actors but likewise introduce a range of notions about the proper role of religion in democracy, the proper relations between religious groups, and the kinds of religious actors and groups that might be best suited for such civic-democratic cooperation. But these projects, are taking place in such a way that the translation and transposition of relations is seen as producing a more normalized, neutral set of understandings."[15]

Secular Religion and "Reforming" Islam in Iraq (2003)

> The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity [...] We go forward with confidence, because this call of history has come to the right country [to] bring to the Iraqi people food and medicines and supplies – and freedom.
>
> *– U.S. president George W. Bush, 2003*

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 renewed attention to Islam as a "religion" with potentials for violence and uncivility. But if the "bad religion" view of Muslims in the Philippines was associated with North American-Indian's "primitive religiosity," the view of Islam after 9/11 was largely shaped by the narratives of the *Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington, 1996) and "Muslim rage" (Lewis,

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[14] Courtney Bender, "Secularism and Pluralism" (unpublished manuscript, June 2012), p. 16. I am grateful to Courtney Bender for sharing her unpunished analysis with me.

[15] Ibid page 19.

1990), which stressed on the "hostility" of Muslims towards Western civilization, not because of "what [this hostility] does," but because of "the principles and values" inherent in Islam (Lewis, 1990). Thus, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, calls for establishing secularism in the Middle East, and the view of "Good Muslim/Bad Muslim" (Mamdani, 2005), gained public and political supports (Mahmood, 2006). Note that establishing secularism was not a driving goal in either the Philippines or Albania. In the Albanian case, secularism was viewed as being already in place (the project's Final Report frequently refers to Albania as a largely secular country). But following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, rebuilding the political structures of the country based on the conventional view of secularism as the church-state separation became a high priority. As Saba Mahmood observes, a key component of this priority was the promoting of "secular religion", i.e., "a secularized conception of religion in which religion is understood to be an abstracted category of beliefs and doctrines from which the individual believer stands apart to examine, compare, and evaluate its various manifestations" (2006, p. 341).

To overcome the negative effects of the invasion on the U.S. image abroad, particularly among Muslims, the U.S. launched a series of initiatives to reach out to Muslim communities in Iraq and to engage them in processes of rebuilding their country. One such initiative was the 2003 Muslim World Outreach Initiative. Aimed "to win the hearts and minds of Muslim communities abroad" (Wolff, 2015, p. 5), the Outreach initiative was implemented primarily by USAID which financed a range of programs including training Islamic preachers, establishing Islamic schools that counter the teachings of the fundamentalist schools, reforming public school curriculums, as well as media production in parts of Iraq with majority Muslim populations. The establishment of the Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives within USAID by President Bush's Executive Order in 2003 (Marsden, 2012) was important to these efforts, as it enabled USAID to work financially with religious groups in Iraq – even though this decision was challenged, but ultimately upheld, for violating the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution.[16]

The Muslim World Outreach project was criticized for launching a "campaign of political warfare" aimed at "transforming Islam from within" (Kaplan, 2005). As Saba Mahmood has argued, the project pushed government officials, including USAID staffs and development practitioners, to play a *theological* role on the job in Iraq, i.e., to engage in the project of constantly "unearthing, identifying, and buttressing existing organizations and currents" which "the government deems moderate, tolerant, and prone to democratic values" (Mahmood, 2006, p. 330). Development planners working in Iraq in the immediate years after the invasion were thus inevitably, though perhaps unwittingly, engaged in an ambitious theological campaign aimed at reshaping the religious sensibilities of Muslim subjects with whom they were working. Further, as several studies have shown, the allocations of funds to religious leaders in Iraq overlooked the social and gender inequalities within those groups (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009; Henry & Springborg, 2010) and reinforced the hierarchical structures of religious groups (Cooley & Ron, 2002) by defining people's social life in terms of their level of religiosity. These attempts, in turn, hardened lines of division between communities by defining identities and interests *in religious terms* (Hurd, 2013).

To be sure, USAID's engagements with religious communities in Iraq were not limited to the Muslim World Outreach initiative. Nor have such engagements been solely focused on promoting religious freedom or fostering secular religion. In fact, since the late-2000s, new generation of U.S.

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[16] See Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation Inc. (FFRF) (2007)

policymakers and USAID practitioners have considered the Outreach initiative as short-sighted and ineffective (Wolff, 2015; Barton et al., 2007). They thus introduced new developmental efforts and ways of engagement with religious communities that begin with identifying a "developmental challenge," rather than identifying moderate or less-moderate citizens. These efforts include, for example, Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE) or Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (BNP) programs through which development practitioners collaborate with religious communities and/or faith-based organizations to address developmental challenges, such as poverty or lack of access to water, and help these communities to become self-reliance, without playing a theological role or trying to change the religious lives of local communities. In particular, the SRE report (2020) emphasizes that USAID practitioners should recognize, in the first place, how local religious communities understand the principle of religious freedom, rather than start with their own preconception of what counts as religion or as religious freedom.

Conclusion

Compared to the other two cases analyzed above, the Iraq case may appear to be an exceptional case regarding "religious engagement" in U.S.-led development initiatives, since such engagement was more a matter of national security than it was a mere developmental issue. But similar to the *RelHarmony* project in Albania which aimed at making and exporting "moderate religion," the Muslim World Outreach project in Iraq, too, aimed to foster what is called "moderate Islam," as opposed to the fundamentalist Islam. The problem with these programs was not that they aimed at building religiously harmonious communities in war-inflected contexts, like Iraq, which reside on interconfessional fault lines, or in Albania where there was no inter-religious conflict. Rather, as Mahmood argues, insofar as development projects aim to reinstate or establish certain kinds of secular life familiar to them at home, including "secular religion," in context that are quite different from the secular North America, they in fact engage inadvertently in a project of altering religious sensibilities of local communities – a practice that as I explained in the first paper of this dissertation, is an inseparable aspect of the doctrine of liberal secularism (Asad, 2006; Mahmood, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2015).

This is not to suggest that the U.S.-led developmental efforts in the three cases analyzed in this paper were just "secular" on surface, but religious in roots. Nor does it mean that North American development planners working in these cases breached the separation of church and state. It is but to indicate that the line between the religious and the secular in developmental efforts is neither fixed, nor universal. Nevertheless, as these cases show, North American planners working on international development have largely assumed that, as Bender observes, religion everywhere "is already a part of civil society, not part of the state or connected to it in a fundamentally different way than it is in the United States."[17] In this vein, U.S.-led developmental efforts in the Philippines, Albania, and Iraq, followed a pattern in which "Protestantism is often not understood as a religion but rather as the implicit normative backdrop against which others were deemed to be modern or unmodern" (Hurd, 2021, p. 81). Yet, to assume protestant ideas and institutions as an implicit standard or the horizon against which other practices could be classified as *good* or *bad* religions (i.e., free-freely chosen-civilized vs unfree-superstitious-political) isn't a mere conceptual mistake or a scholarly misstep. It is, rather, a risky endeavor that forced American development planners to take up a peculiar theological role on their jobs to identify, classify, and even alter religious

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[17] Courtney Bender, "Secularism and Pluralism" (unpublished manuscript, June 2012), p. 15.

lives of local communities in other nations. This theological role has drifted development planners' attention away from working with these communities to address developmental challenges specific to these communities as well as the specificities of the social and political context in which these challenges are embedded.

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THINKING SIDEWAYS ABOUT RELIGION AND PLANNING: A PLEA FOR "WEAK THEORY"

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Abstract

This paper examines the implications of recent interdisciplinary debates surrounding the notion of "weak theory" for the study of religion and urban planning. It analyzes the underlying ideas of "weak theory" as they emerged in various fields of study and explores the precedents of these ideas in the planning field. The paper argues that "weak theory," with its focus on specificity, localized purview, and openness to contingency, helps planners conceive multitudes of interactions between religion and planning as two social constructs that intersect on firm ground, rather than in thin air. The paper offers a set of methodological considerations as to how the notion of "weak theory" can help urban planners view religion as lived and experienced in the dynamic interplay of everyday practices—i.e., as "lived religion."

Introduction

In May 2020, the Development & Heritage Committee of the city of Windsor, Ontario, Canada heard arguments on two rezoning proposals for converting single-unit dwellings into multifamily housing. Writing in dissent, the Director of Planning and Physical Resources at the city's Police Service argued that increasing the neighborhood's residential density would endanger public safety in an area that had already reached its "social carrying capacity." In contrast, the Executive Director at the city's Planning Department argued that the correlation between density and safety, and the notion of social carrying capacity, mostly "reside in the mind of police" with no "bearing in planning theory or law."[1] The Committee sided with city planners. Note that the term "planning theory" was invoked in this case by city planners to support their professional judgment, as it was also used in 2017 by a columnist at Edmonton Sun, Canada to disparage planners' ideas as demeaning and patronizing. Railing at a new project to limit car lanes in the city's main street, the columnist accused "anti-car, pro-bike" planners of marketing their "big, fat fail" idea as a roaring success. The planners, he argued, "are sure that their concept is good, [but we] are too uneducated to understand it," because "we didn't study planning theory at university [and] haven't been to planning conferences where giddy hipsterish ideas are shared."[2]

While these cases may be more pertinent to discuss the uses of planning theory, I'd like to take them as an entry point to probe an obliquely related issue: the perception of strength and weakness of planning theory. For, despite their disagreement as to whether planning theory leads to "good" practical judgment, both cases seem to acknowledge a certain sense of "strength" and power of planning theory. In the first case, strength of theory portrays theory-as-wisdom or theory-as-virtue validating planners' expert knowledge. In the second case, however, strength of theory is blamed

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[1] See (Dalson, 2020).
[2] See (Gunter, 2017).

for leading to an attitude of condescension and intimidation that begets defensiveness and wariness. These contrasting cases prompt me to ask: must the strength of theory be viewed as the overarching rationale or the master criterion for assessing the effectiveness of planning theory? What happens, that is, if we let go of strength-in-theory as a perforce good and, instead, rely on a weaker, less ambitious version of theory that humbly acknowledges its restricted domain and omits to subsume varying interactions of social phenomena, including those of religion and planning, under a unified overarching framework?

I pose this question against the backdrop of fierce criticism of the muscular image of planners since the 1960s – be it the view of planners as hardy guardians of the public interest who speak truth to power with "scientific objectivity," or as lordly technocrats who advance the interests of the powerful in the form of urban renewal or regeneration.[3] From this perspective, the image of city planners as strong professionals exhibiting strength should have been relegated to a historical past. But I also raise the question of weakness-in-theory at a time when the global surge of the politics of the strongman, together with increasing threats of climate change and the persistence of anti-Black, misogynist, nativist, and religious violence, urges urban planners to show nothing but strength in the face of "wicked problems" and be more radical and insurgent than humble and pragmatic. These are two competing but equally "strong" claims, one against and the other in favor of "strength." They have charged planners with theoretical dogmatism and bureaucratic overreach, on the one hand, and acquiescent muddling-through and shoulder-shrugging humility, on the other. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the role that recent debates surrounding the idea of "weak theory" might play vis-à-vis the double-edged sword of "strength" in theory, as this relates to the relationship of religion and urban planning.

The term "weak theory" is not a coinage of this essay; nor is it similar to recent anti-theoretical claims, such as "the death of theory" when post-structuralism was in retreat, or "the end of theory" when big-data analytics promised nirvana for every problem.[4] Rather, weak theory is a loose bundle of concepts used predominately in an interdisciplinary body of writings (e.g., Tomkins, 1963; Sedgwick, 2003; Dimock, 2013; Saint-Amour, 2018; Stanley, 2019) to challenge the sovereign hold of strong habits of thought on determining which types of research deserve the label *theoretical* and which ones don't. These scholars have disputed the categorical assertion that only "strong" theory is "good" theory, because of its ability to unify far-flung phenomena and provide an overarching framework to explain social reality. Neither is the strength of a theory its ability to be impervious to criticism or doubt, less so its capacity to function as "a universal solvent of all that resists its sway" (Jay, 2020, p. 16). Proponents of weak theory, instead, define their projects as "accounting for only near phenomena," and their aim as seeking to know, but not necessarily to know preceding their objects of inquiry.[5] Weak theory, so conceived, attempts to look just a little way ahead, behind, and to the sides to appreciate unintended consequences and provisional practices.[6] It thus considers a finite subset of site-specific problems and relationships as its unit of analysis to present what Louis Menand has called "a one-dot theory" of sideways

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[3] See Section Two of three paper below: "Weak Theory and Planning Theory."
[4] See (Anderson, 2008)
[5] This definition of weak theory is from Tomkins (1963) and Sedgwick (2003). See also Saint-Amour (2018, p. 444).
[6] See Saint-Amour (2018, p.445)

movements.[7] Theory, in this vein, operates "more like a flashlight than the sun" – to borrow Charles Hoch's apt metaphor (2017, p. 299).

But insofar as weak theory does "little more than describe,"[8] it is subject to charges of insufficiency and deficiency – note Georg Lukacs's critique that "description is a mere filler" or "a symptom of decadence."[9] Also, insofar as weak theory aspires to "de-dramatize totality without repudiating it,"[10] it faces accusations of quietism or lack of rigor – notice similar charges made against William James's advocacy for tender-minded, as opposed to tough-minded, habits of thought.[11] Further, where weak-theoretical projects heed Wittgenstein's call to focus on concrete cases and refuse abstraction,[12] they become vulnerable to liberal critique of status-quo conservatism. And where weak theorists try to challenge established orthodoxies, not by blasting theoretically, but by "spilling over the edges" of the objects they explain,[13] the way Jane Jacobs did in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, their work risks being dismissed as normatively blunt or anti-intellectual – note Lewis Mumford's gendered depiction of Jacobs' book: "Mother Jacobs' home remedies for urban cancer."[14] Given these charges, why embrace a term of derogation, *weak*, in a weakly theorized field, *planning*? More broadly, at a time when no one needs in-depth theoretical analyses to see religious domination or injustice, what's the point of doubling down on theory, let alone dabbling in "weak theory"?

My aim is not to confront these questions head-on; nor do I give *a priori* privilege to weak theory over strong theory, let alone claim that the time of strong planning theories has passed, and, in its wake, weak theory has dawned. Rather, my goals are threefold. After a brief note on conceptual clarification, I first analyze recent debates surrounding the idea of "weak theory" as they emerged in various fields of study.[15] Second, I explore the precedents of these ideas in the planning field to argue that even though the notion of "weak theory" is considered to be a largely recent theoretical trend in fields that study the conditions of (post)modernity, it has long animated discussions of the "applied" field of urban planning, because of the fields' salient characteristic, *practice*, and its location at the contentious interface of the state, market, and society. In fact, since its pragmatic turn in the 1980s, the field seems to have largely shifted away from abstract theorizing and focused more on relational, contingent, and practice-based approaches to social change. I conclude by

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[7] See (Menand, 2015).

[8] (Sedgwick, 2003).

[9] See Georg Lukacs's *Narrating or Describing* (1970, pp. 110, 132). Note that Lukacs here is arguing about description in the novel and especially criticizes Emile Zola's novel, *Nana.*

[10] See (Lavery & Saint-Amour, 2019).

[11] See William James (1988, p. 491). See James's defense against the charges of quietism and unrigiousness on p. 510-511 and 588-589. For an account of the association of weak theory to William James's ideas, see Kate Stanley's *Tough and Tender* (2019).

[12] See Wittgenstein's *The Blue and Brown Book* (1958b, p. 17). As Hanna Pitkin (1993, p. 91) argues, to Wittgenstein, "the very craving for generality and clarity cuts us off from what would resolve our puzzlement: the messy, confused plurality of other valid examples of the word's use." Instead of "craving for generality," Wittgenstein says, one could also speak here of our "contemptuous attitude towards the particular case" or rather, towards all particular cases but the one, which we take to be general."

[13] See Robert Fulford's essay (1992) on Jane Jacobs's *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961).

[14] The phrase quoted here is a combination of the titles in Mumford's article in the New Yorker (1962): "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies" and its republication in *The Lewis Mumford Reader* (1986, pp. 184–201): "Home Remedies for Urban Cancer."

[15] E.g., in literary studies, modernist studies, ethics, human geography, as well as urban studies.

exploring the possibilities that this shift has afforded us to conceive multitudes of interactions between religion and planning as two social constructs that intersect on firm ground, rather than in thin air. Overall, my aim is to show that "weak theory" helps planners to view religion as lived and experienced by ordinary people in the dynamic interplay of everyday practices – i.e., as "lived religion" – rather than as mere belief, pathology, or as ideology.

The Weak, the Strong, and the Plea: What They Mean and Why They Matter

To call for "weakness" in theory may seem to invite a loaded concept that "sits at the center of a dense array of slurs by which marginal subjects have been kept marginal" (Saint-Amour, 2018, p. 438). To invite this concept would be to give in to the impulses of oppressive structures that employ the term "weak," invariably and normatively, as a synonym for woman, queer, disabled, the poor, and colonized "wretched of the earth."[16] I use the terms "weak" and "strong," however, in their descriptive (i.e., non-normative, non-evaluative) sense, which has to do with questions of range and generality.[17] I follow Eve Sedgwick (2003) and Paul Saint-Amour (2018), who argue that a theory's "strength" in a *normative* sense (its effectiveness, vitality, or explanatory power) is not commensurate with a theory's "strength" in a *descriptive* sense (its breadth of reach, sureness of purpose, or generality of claims). Put differently, what is "weak," and thus effective, about weak theory is its localized purview, limited domain, and openness to contingency, not its lack of rigor or productivity. As Anthony Appiah observes (2021), "a weak theory which makes no claims to certainty and is undisturbed by inconclusiveness and mess can produce strong writing, not to mention vigorous analysis."

Be that as it may, one of the challenges of conceiving "good" planning theory as something other than a "strong" theory in the descriptive sense is that it threatens the hope that in the face of social conflict and oppressive power there can be "strong" planning interventions, in the normative sense. It seems to me, accordingly, that to talk about weak theory in today's planning academia runs a risk. We risk engaging in what Quentin Skinner once called "evaluative-descriptive" speech act, wherein to describe a certain idea or phenomenon is viewed automatically as commending that idea or phenomenon.[18] That is, the act of describing something is viewed as ascribing superiority to that thing. It is for this reason that I have used the noun "a plea" in the title of this essay. "When we plead," J. L. Austin reminds us in *A Plea for Excuses* (1956), there is not only "a genuine uncertainty and ambiguity as to what we mean"; there is also a commonly accepted set of standards below which one's actions or intentions are deemed unacceptable or disallowed.[19] To plead in this context is to at once embrace uncertainty and look for possibilities. I will come back to this point later. For now, let me "describe" what weak theory is, or claims to be.

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[16] See Fanon (1965).

[17] As Saint-Amor argues (2018, p. 438), however, "even the ostensibly non-normative meanings of *weak* – including its earliest sense as 'pliant, flexible, readily bending' – are tinged with its normative ones, as even the non-gendered meanings (for example) bear some memory of, or association with, the gendered ones."

[18] See (Skinner, 1973, p. 298). See also (Mahmood, 2015, p. 21) as well as (D. Scott, 2012).

[19] Austin's *Presential Address* is centered on making a plea in the legal context and jurisprudence. I am grateful to John Forester for brining Austin's article to my attention.

Weak Theory: Analysis of a Descriptive Term

Recent attention to the notion of "weak theory" has been spurred by a series of contributions to the 2018 special issue of the journal *Modernism/modernity* and its Print Plus platform, afterward.[20] As these works have shown, the underlying ideas of weak theory have long existed in various strands of philosophy and social theory, e.g., pragmatism, Marxism, and deconstructionism. Not only does this mixed assemblage of overlapping and contrasting affinities signify the "weakness" of weak theory – again, in a descriptive sense, as diffuse and fragmented rather than fixed or solid; it also makes the act of "defining" weak theory unwieldy, even problematic.[21] But then, how to explain a term that resists fixation, without sliding down the slippery slope of relativism or retrying the tired mantra of "everything goes"?

Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance," I contend, offers a useful framework to approach the messy plurality of debates on weak theory. To Wittgenstein, the conceptual confusions that we encounter when trying to "get clear about the meaning of a general term" arise from "our craving for generality," i.e., the urge to find "common elements in all applications" of a general term – be it beauty, knowledge, or religion (1958b, p. 17).[22] This urge, which is rooted in the idea that the less general is incomplete, fosters "the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case," or rather, towards all but one case that is considered general or representative. Various uses of a general term, Wittgenstein argues, don't share a fixed essence. Rather, they form a network of crisscrossing similarities the way members of a family do: "build, features, color of eyes, gait" (1958a par. 66-67). Perhaps no member of a family has all the features; perhaps some even have contrasting traits.[23] Nevertheless, we recognize them as relatives, because "what runs through the whole thread" is just a "continuous overlapping of its fibers." Games and instances of language form a family, Wittgenstein says. Weak theories, I suggest, form a family too. They share some common "properties" of weakness, but these properties are not "ingredients" of all formulations of weak theory the way "alcohol is of beer and wine" (Wittgenstein, 1958b, p. 17).

For Eve Sedgwick, who draws on psychologist and cybernetician Silvan Tomkins's 1963 book, *Affect-Imagery-Consciousness,* the aim of weak theory is to extend knowledge by means of explanation without extending explanation too widely.[24] The act of theorizing, Tomkins says, involves maximizing positive and minimizing negative affects on the part of the theorist, e.g., excitement or humiliation.[25] Theories that fail to minimize negative affects – to ward off criticism or explain new circumstances – tend to become "stronger" by bringing in a wider array of disparate

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[20] See contributions to the special issue of *M/m* here: https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/39067. See the exchanges in the Print Plus Platform of *M/m* here: https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/responses-special-issue-weak-theory-part-i

[21] To define, after all, is to endorse some things and repudiate other things. Further, to resist the demand of defining theory through some threshold or minimum qualifying traits is itself a stated goal of weak theorists (Saint-Amour, 2018, p. 452).

[22] As Wittgenstein argues, "When Socrates asks the question, 'what is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a preliminary answer to enumerate cases of knowledge. If I wished to find out what sort of thing arithmetic is, I should be very content indeed to have investigated the case of a finite cardinal arithmetic."

[23] Wittgenstein's insights have been subject to numerous interpretations. Here, I draw primarily on Hanna Pitkin's (1993, pp. 64–65) and Stanley Cavell's (1979, pp. 186–187) readings of the notion of "family resemblance."

[24] This phrase is from (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 619). See also (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 136; and Tomkins, 1963, pp. 428–442).

[25] See (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 136; and Tomkins, 1963, pp. 428–442).

objects into their fold to increase their applicability. Strong theories, in other words, get stronger by equating the breadth of a theory's reach with its richness, and the grandness of a theory's claims with its goodness. Advocates of weak theory view this indicative mood of strong theory as monopolistic. They argue that the effectiveness of a theory would increase if we limited its reach, restricted its domain, and localized its purview – i.e., if we practiced "a weaker, lower-level kind of theorizing" (Dimock, 2013, p. 733).

Thus, orthodox Marxism is a strong theory for Sedgwick, when it becomes increasingly totalizing and teleological in opposing an ultimate strong theory: capitalism.[26] High modernism, too, is a "muscle-bound" theory for James Scott, as it looks at everything through the same spectacles (1998, p. 4). So were classic secularization theories of the 1960s[27] for those who saw the imposition of a single moral value system as tautological.[28] True, the act of theorizing, since it is inherently a mode of selective scanning and amplification, is bound to be seen as somewhat tautological to a theory's addressees. It is in part for this reason that to Paul de Man (1986), "resistance to theory" is part of theory itself, emerging automatically along with the claims that a theory makes.[29] But strong theories, with their propensity for generalization and their aversion to criticism, Sedgwick argues, tend to be also strongly tautological, even "paranoid" (1993, p. 136). No wonder that at the end of one of his essays, Freud talks about the "striking similarity" between paranoia and theory, including his own theory and his patient's delusion: "the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our philosophers."

Against the axiom of strong theories, prizing "a future never for a moment in doubt,"[30] weak theory welcomes uncertainty and inconclusiveness. It envisions a different goal for theory than telling what we already know (e.g., the world is a place of domination) or foretelling what we cannot know (e.g., all state-led plans are bound to fail). Note Sedgwick's reply regarding the latter assumption: "they might, but then again, they might not" (2003, p. 124). Weak theory, in other words, settles for a lower level of plausibility and generality to provide a fresh look at certain phenomena that everyone knows something about, e.g., mundane forms of power or everyday practices. It scratches the surface of familiar phenomena to help understand how theory works in action (in actual lived situations) rather than in abstraction. A weak-theoretical work may explain, for example, how modest accomplishments were achieved despite adverse forces, or how local failures occurred despite ample resources. Weak theory, in this view, is neither a substitute nor a refutation of strong theory; it is but an attempt to appreciate specificity and recognize unintended consequences and provisional practices. Stated succinctly, weak theory functions like a wedge under a door, at once resisting closure and leaving open the questions that we thought were settled (see Table 1).

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[26] See (Saint-Amour, 2018, p. 444). See also, Saint-Amour (p. 555).
[27] The classic secularization theory (e.g., Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1967; Parsons, 1960) was a body of Anglophone sociological work based upon particular interpretations of the foundational sociology of Durkheim (1915) and Weber (1930).
[28] See (Gorski, 2003, p. 117).
[29] See also (Jay, 1996) and Gouldner (1973).
[30] See (Dimock, 2013, p. 733).

Strong theory	Weak theory
Propensity for generalization	Emphasis on specificity
Aiming to unmask and decrypt	Aiming to describe and explain
Organizing far-flung phenomena	Accounting for near phenomena
Aversion to surprise and criticism	Openness to doubt and contingency
Making claims to certainty and universality	Embracing inconclusiveness and locality

Table 1: Strong Theory v. Weak Theory

For Kate Stanley (2019), the promise of weak theory is primarily pedagogical. "The aura of difficulty, inaccessibility, or significance" that surrounds theory, she says, prompts students to either attack or retreat from theory – a hindrance to their responsiveness. When a theory's strength is appraised by its ability to intimidate, and its virtue by the capacity to overwhelm, then theory becomes remote or "foreign" for students – and vice versa (Readings, 1990). Weak theory, in contrast, tones down the strong discourse of theory and tempers it into quotidian terms. As a result, students' encounter with theory would become more intimate than intimidating. Further, by foregrounding "the ordinary everydayness of theory," weak theory helps conceive theoretical studies as what Wai Chee Dimock calls "a non-sovereign field" – i.e., as differentially constituted, loosely mediated, and multicentric with no primacy assigned to a genre or an author (2013, p. 738).[31] In this context, weak-theoretical projects draw attention to off-center locations and creative practices whose theoretical and heuristic forces are not registered or reciprocated by strong habits of thought. To Sedgwick (2018), this kind of theoretical exposition has "reparative" impulses and therapeutic effects. It allows us to see what we cannot unsee and hear voices that we didn't know we needed – or whose urgency we didn't feel – until we heard them. Teaching theory, in this vein, is an invitation to relationship with unfamiliar ideas and practices, with different identities and traditions. It is no surprise perhaps that weak theory has gained much traction in fields that address stigma, difference, and inequity, e.g., gender and queer studies.[32]

We might well hesitate, however, before taking weak theory as an unsung hero holding the key to all mythologies of strength. Setting aside "strong" criticism of weak theory as promoting "baggy limpness" in the name of weakness and "emotional slither" in the guise of humility[33] – still, there are risks lurking in weak-theoretical projects. In particular, in trying to oppose strong ideologies with an equally totalizing force, weak theory risks becoming itself strong (and thus ineffective?).[34] The challenge would be to keep one's theory weak rather than allow it to drift towards doctrine or self-righteousness. Marshall Berman calls this kind of drift "a bad faith" in the context of capitalist modernity: radical ideas and movements that "manifest themselves through the media of the market" enable the bourgeois order to become stronger and put themselves "in danger of melting into the same modern air" that dissolves that order (1983, pp. 118–119).

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[31] Also See (Dimock, 2018, p. 588).
[32] Other examples include feminist studies, indigenous studies. (Saint-Amour, 2018, p. 438).
[33] See (Murphet, 2019).
[34] As Tomkins argues, "weak theory must be effective to remain weak."

One way to keep "weak theory" weak is to employ a methodology that is "improvised rather than planned, plural rather than singular, its scope and efficacy still to be tested, but with consequences already discernible" (Dimock, 2018, p. 588). A weak-theoretical method, in other words, is improvisational, pluralistic, and consequence-oriented.[35] In it, intentions don't take precedence over implications; plans don't take the place of possibilities. Weak theory thus "finds its closest kin in pragmatism, that scrubby non-theory of William James and John Dewey, often found wanting, and not deterred by that fact" (Dimock, 2019). Consequently, it inherits some of the signal traits of pragmatism, e.g., searching for the middles, mediating antagonisms, or embracing inconsistencies. But it also falls heir to some of the charges leveled at pragmatism, e.g., quietism, anti-intellectualism, or lack of theoretical "strength."

Weak Theory & Planning Theory: A Conventional but Controversial Relationship

To the planning reader, the idea of "weak theory" described above may seem possibly relevant but not unprecedented in debates of planning theory. My aim here is to probe this precedent, with a focus on the history of city planning in the United States. Planning theory is, of course, a relatively new field, emerging only in the 1950s; and it is a relatively small part of a still relatively small field: city planning. But despite such "smallness" (or perhaps because of it), planning ideas have frequently faced charges of undue strength or weakness as these ideas meet the forces of the state, market, and society in practice. With this consideration in mind, this section explains how the rhetoric of strength and weakness of public interventions shaped the foundations of city planning in the late 19th century and entered planning theory debates since the 1950s.

Narratives of Strength and Weakness in City Planning (1880s-1950)

The idea of planning as a function of state power gained growing interest in the United States in the late 19th century as dreams of national rebirth swept the country following the Civil War. The expanded powers of the federal government, along with processes of secularization,[36] presented new opportunities to tackle entrenched forms of racial and religious hierarchy and meet the challenges of laissez-faire individualism and rapid urbanization through state action. Those who found their sources of power threatened by the moral energies for reform sought to transform these energies into preserving social hierarchy by means of force. The results was "a revived ethic of martial valor" which, entangled with an ethos of Anglo-Saxon supremacy and muscular Christianity, sought national glory through war (Lears, 2009, p. 13). It involved flexing strong muscles at home (as in the racial terrorism of Jim Crow legislation) as well as exercising military force abroad (as in the Philippines). The martial ideal paralleled with planners' imperial view of the ideal city, aptly called the White City in the 1883 World's Columbian Exposition, which drove the 1905 plan for Manila – both being directed by Daniel Burnham, who proposed a strong view of planners as professionals who should make "big plans" that "stir men's blood."[37]

But besides strong muscles, guardians of martial virtue also needed a strong "theoretical answer to the rising criticism,"[38] an answer they found in Herbert Spencer's idea of Social Darwinism as

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[35] See (Gibson-Graham, 2014).
[36] See (Casanova, 1994).
[37] Burnham's quote (Moore, 1921, p. 147).
[38] See (Hofstadter, 1959, p. 46).

the survival of the fittest.[39] Spencer expanded Darwin's theory to human society and the physical world. If evolution was a planless result of gradual change, then purposeful intervention would wreak havoc on the social order: "You can't make the world all planned and soft; the strongest and best survive."[40] While the rhetoric of strength and weakness was not about "theory" *per se*, it enabled Social Darwinists to add theoretical legitimacy to schemes of racial domination, eugenics, and imperialism. David Starr Jordan, the first president of Sanford University, framed poverty and crime as caused by biological deficiency, not by environmental or industrial forces: "it is not the strength of the strong but the weakness of the weak which engenders exploitation."[41] William Sumner, the first professor of sociology, combined evolutionary biology with classical economics and the Protestant ethic to bash protectionism as a "plan for nourishing the unfit," preaching that "waste makes wealth."[42] Charity was fine, so long as it didn't question inequality, but planned action was an evil to be resisted. "The strong and the weak," Sumner argued, were "equivalent to the industrious and the idle." The industrious were "men of the Protestant ideal" who saw "the Ricardian principles of inevitability and laissez-faire [as] at once Calvinistic and scientific."[43] Religion and science were harmonious. "Progress and Providence were one" (Lears, 2009, p. 108).

Social Darwinism, an anti-planning theory of organic evolution, was not the only "strong theory." There were also pro-planning, but equally capacious views of social progress, offered, for example, by Social Gospel Progressives who, joined by John Dewey, sought public policy to end the war between labor and capital and improve living conditions in cities.[44] Lester Ward, a forerunner of social planning and a critic of biological sociology, argued that Comte's idea of "sociocracy" – the planned control of society by society as a whole – was a viable alternative to socialism and individualism.[45] While these progressives aimed to replace one strong theory with another, others sought to challenge mythologies of strength by pitting abstract theoretical claims against the realities of ordinary life.[46] Jane Addams, a feminist settlement-house worker, "disrupted public equation of heroism with manhood"[47] and urged young professionals to seek reform by authentic experience. Likewise, William James argued that reform begins, not by empty formulas or abstract thinking, but by direct observation and specificity. So did W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), an empirically specific account of the plight of African Americans, showing what "everybody knows it exists," but few knew in "what form it shows itself or how influential it is" – namely, "color prejudice" (p. 229). These figures, whom we might call early proponents of weak theory, viewed strong theory as being deployed to justify domination in the name of regeneration, denying that regeneration is rooted in lived experience.

James and Addams were not personally religious. But their interest in lived experience and their familiarity with religious teachings influenced their pragmatic recognition of religion as a form of life authentic for believers. This sensibility helped Addams to occasionally use religious language

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[39] See (Spencer, 1868). Darwin, later on, included Spencer's phrase in new edition of his book *The Origin of Species* but not necessarily in an approving way.
[40] See (Hofstadter, 1959, p. 50).
[41] See (Jordan, 1913, p. 35 cited in Hofstadter, 1944, p. 164).
[42] See (Sumner, 1885).
[43] See (Hofstadter, 1959, p. 51).
[44] See (Westbrook, 1991).
[45] See (Hofstadter, 1959, p. 71).
[46] See (Lears, 2009).
[47] See (Lears, 2009, p. 22).

to work closely with Christian constituencies without resorting to theological or doctrinal debates. James focused more on the individual level to explain how "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their solitude" give meaning to their lives and help them "apprehend themselves in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (1902, p. 34). Addams and James showed that efforts to tackle social problems could be more effective and cooperative if public professionals recognized religion in its practical and material forms, rather than in abstract universal definitions, e.g., *ideology*, in the classic Marxist sense of masking, or *pathology,* a surrogate for the unbearable character of reality, in the Freudian sense.

City planning emerged in this context as a public institution tasked to overcome urban problems of industrialization, e.g., unsanitary congestion and rapid urban growth, through concerted public interventions carried out by a powerful city government. Exhibiting strength, as such, attended the enterprise from the outset and triggered the debates between Benjamin Marsh and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.[48] They both envisioned a "strong" field that could shape the city as a whole. But they disagreed as to whether such "strength" entailed tackling inequality and poverty directly – an activist view held by Marsh; or if it involved adopting a more conservative and technically-oriented approach to manage urban growth by design intervention – a procedural view held by Olmsted.[49] Marsh's activist view was in part influenced by his progressive religious sensibility: "it is blasphemy to preach the gospel of love to a man who is paying rent on exploited land."[50] He believed that "government must prevent what charity can only mitigate," and so he approved of City Beautiful planners' claim to articulate public interest. But he criticized them for focusing narrowly on aesthetics and ignoring *how the other half lives*, as Jacob Riis had shown.[51] Olmsted doubted that professionalism involved activism. He also criticized City Beautiful planners, but for expanding their theory of the "good city" to a visionary and unimplementable level to ward off criticism that planners cannot guard public interest. To Olmsted, Marsh was guilty of theoretical expansionism as well. He thus sought to temper Marsh's view down to a weaker, less ambitious conception of city planning as a "technical art," distinct from social and economic planning.

Olmsted's advocacy for "weakness" ultimately triumphed over Marsh's ideal of "strength," both terms in their descriptive senses. It helped the field to consolidate institutionally and legally,[52] at the cost of leaving social issues, including religion, outside the domain of city planning. Planners became more artists than activist. They didn't need any kind of theory to fulfill their professional responsibilities, as they "used first intuition, then reflection."[53] The Great Depression resuscitated Marsh's ideals, as New Deal planners sought to create a theoretically-solid and socially-oriented field at the urban, regional, and national levels. Cautioning that resistance to national planning in the U.S. risked "a revolution on the French model" (1932, p. 92), Rexford Tugwell proposed a strong view of planning as "the fourth branch of government" (1939). The response of Fredrich Hayek wouldn't be lenient: "it is the resentment of the frustrated specialist" that "gives planning

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[48] See (Peterson, 2009; Birch & Silver, 2009).

[49] To Olmsted, city planning "is a matter of continuous growth and of a certain amount of continuous revision," requiring a "permanent administrative officer" (Olmsted, 1908)

[50] See (Marsh 1905, p 1).

[51] Riss's book (1890) was a pioneering work of photojournalism, documenting the squalid living conditions in New York City slums in the 1880s.

[52] E.g., the establishment of the American Society of Planners in 1917 and the US Supreme Court decision that zoning was part of the constitutional power of local government.

[53] See (P. Hall, 2002, p. 388).

its strongest impetus," making it as dangerous as fanaticism (1944, p. 57). Neither Tugwell nor Hayek succeeded in realizing their contrasting visions. But their debates, like those of Marsh and Olmsted, urged the profession to clarify its scope as somewhere in between opposite views: i.e., as comprehensive but not so progressive; as technical but not so apolitical; and as procedural but not so bureaucratic.

Strong vs. Weak Planning Theory (1950s-Onward)

As this overview shows, the emergence and evolution of city planning has been concomitant with steady efforts to at once strengthen and weaken the field's central term, *planning*. But if prior to the 1950s, these efforts were primarily centered on the professional scope of city planners, the emergence of "planning theory" in the 1950s gave rise to questions of strength- and weakness-in-theory as well. This was particularly the case as many universities began to offer PhD degrees in planning, and many intellectuals sought to lay a strong philosophical foundation for a field that, despite its growing professionalization, was deemed weakly theorized. City planning thus became "an applied social science," concerned, not just with physical design, but also with theoretically-informed social interventions developed in academia.[54] For Peter Hall (2002), this transformation yielded paradoxical results. While it added legitimacy to the field, it sowed "the seeds of [the field's] destruction," as it split planning into two camps: "the one, in planning school, increasingly and exclusively obsessed with the theory of the subject;" the other, in the offices of local authorities, "concerned only with the everyday business of planning in the real world" (p. 386).

As planners' understanding of the complexities of cities grew, so did the strength of the theories they proposed, e.g., rational comprehensive planning, modernist planning, and systems planning. The rise of strong planning theory in the 1960s was concomitant, even perhaps causally entangled, with the rise of strong social theories of the time, e.g., modernization and secularization theories. As planning became identified, "enchantedly," with rational models of decision-making, triumphant rationality was viewed as an emblem of the "disenchanted" world – in the Weberian sense (1930) – in which chance had become tamable and choice liberated from the shackles of the mythical and the sacred (Harvey, 1989). Meanwhile, the new science of cybernetics and feedback-process theories gained increasing attention in planning circles. Yet, it was not the work of Tomkins, a cybernetician at Princeton, on "weak theory" which influenced planning debates, but the work of Norbert Wiener, a mathematician at MIT, which forged the strong theory of *systems planning* to subvert linear processes of comprehensive planning in its Geddesian form. Despite their clashes, strong planning theories shared the tendency to equate the descriptive and normative senses of "strength" of theory – e.g., that the more wide-ranging, muscular, and coherent planning theory is, the more effective and useful it would be.

In the 1960s, attempts to weaken strong planning theory came from several directions. One was the work of "non-specialists," notably, Jane Jacobs. Her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* was not grounded in a theory, but it challenged the dominant theory of her time, rational planning, by explaining its consequences on ordinary life. "Like a true amateur," Robert Fulford says of Jacobs[55] – and a weak theorist, I'd add – Jacobs offered a critical, yet optimistic

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[54] The creation of the new interdisciplinary program in Planning Education and Research at the University of Chicago in 1947 was instrumental to this shift. See (Sarbib, 1983).
[55] See (Fulford, 1992).

description of a phenomenon, the street-life, which many thought they already knew. Her book revolutionized city planning, not because of its theoretical originality, but because of the way it touched the emotions and the minds of the reader by way of surprise. Jacobs, however, didn't keep her theory weak, but expanded it in *Cities and the Wealth of the Nations* (1984) to a general theory of planning at the regional, national, and international scales.[56] Another attempt to weaken strong planning theory came in a series of theoretical and empirical studies by political scientists from the philosophical Right (e.g., Meyerson & Banfield, 1955; Altshuler, 1965; Lindblom, 1959). These scholars argued that city planners' claim to have comprehensive knowledge and power to articulate public interest was detached from the way planning worked in action: as experimental and partial. Planning proposals, they argued, would be more effective if planners narrowed their goals, worked on problems as they arose, and realized that professionals don't rely on theory for practical judgments, but rather "muddle through" and view "incrementalism" as the weak "other" to the strong theory of "comprehensive rationality" (Lindblom, 1959). Anthropologists and sociologists also criticized rational planning for serving the more powerful and neglecting the lives of the poor urban communities (Gans, 1968; Peattie, 1968; Davidoff, 1965).

Against the conservative call for a weaker, lower-level kind of theorizing, John Friedmann argued for an overarching theory of planning that would address social, political, economic, as well as epistemological problems.[57] In contrast, Aaron Wildavsky argued that "if planning is everything, maybe it's nothing" (1973). Albert Hirschman (1970) also criticized "the search for paradigm as a hinderance to understanding" and urged that, instead of "compulsive and mindless theorizing," planners should focus on the particularities of urban problems. From a different direction, Marxist geographers challenged procedural planning theories as narrowly focused on abstract normative questions of what planning *ought to be*, rather than explaining how planners serve capitalism. In this context, Allen Scott and Shoukry Roweis called conventional planning theory as "powerful theory," i.e., as aiming to keep theory "immune to the possibility of empirical refutation" by laying "claims to universal validity" (1977, p. 1098). *Normative* planning theories, they argued, try to "realize themselves as the reality," instead of describing social reality. Their critique of powerful planning theory was in line with Tomkins's 1963 work on weak theory, and it preceded Sedgwick's formulation of strong theory as averse to criticism. But like Jacobs, Scott and Roweis also turned their critique of strong planning theory into their own "viable unified theory of urban planning" (p. 1097).

The debates between proponents and opponents of a strong planning theory, while rich in content, nonetheless left the question of "action" out of equation. This issue became distinctly salient in the 1980s, as public planning came under massive attack by the strong theory of neoliberalism. Several scholars, notably, John Forester (1980, 1982) and Charles Hoch (1984b, 1984a), thus introduced pragmatism to the field to help planners move beyond the dichotomies of *critical vs. pragmatic*, or *doing good vs. being right*. Planning theory, these critical pragmatists argued, had mostly focused on either promising ideas or threatening ideologies. What was missed was a proper understanding of how urban planners worked in action, not how theoretical ideas were conceived in abstraction. No matter how much planners theorize, after all, "somebody still has to do the work" (Forester, 2017, p. 280). Forester and Hoch balanced the normative and descriptive aims of planning inquiries and, in doing so, they also balanced the normative and descriptive senses of the

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[56] See (Hill, 1988).
[57] See (Friedmann, 1969, 1973).

"strength" of planning theory. What they urged was not that planners should give up theorizing, but that they should observe its proper place and practical domain. Their "bias for practice" was shared by equity and advocacy planners, e.g., Paul Davidoff and Norman Krumholz, and it also overlapped with organizational theorists, notably Donald Schon, whose theory of reflective practice explained how professionals learn through a double-loop process (1983).

The pragmatic turn of planning theory in the 1980s drove a major disciplinary shift towards a more modest, practice-focused, and actor-oriented form of theorizing in the field. With the dominant theory of the field "weak" enough, in the *descriptive* sense, to allow horizontal relations, planning theories in the 1990s focused on the ways that planners could work effectively in diverse contexts through negotiation and communicative or collaborative practice.[58] The weakening drift of the 1990s also gave rise to scholarships that questioned the normative sense of "weakness" associated with both theorists and practitioners. Robert Beauregard (1995) urged planning theorists to instead of turning to ontological grounds to make theory "strong," acknowledge their position as "edge critics." This position, he stressed, was not a sign of "weakness," but rather an opportunity "to launch critical incursions and articulate radical politics" from the margin (p. 163). Bish Sanyal, too, criticized the ideological conception of "weakness," which viewed practicing planners' ideas that "don't fit into well-defined theoretical constructs" as "a sign of their intellectual weakness" (2002, p. 118). He urged planning theorists to better recognize that professional planners embrace uncertainty and theoretical inconsistency to develop their theories of action.

As a result, since 2000s, discussions of planning theory have largely moved away from a general theory of planning and focused more on relational and practice-based approaches to social change as well as the ways concepts, e.g., justice, power, or complexity, dovetail with everyday practices. While this move, from the perspective of "strong theory," may seem to have yielded a confusing plurality of ideas, it has, from the perspective of "weak theory," drawn attention to the specificity and fluidity of lofty ideas as evolving through historical contingencies and contextual specificities. Viewed as such, the immanent theory of the field might be said to have become largely "weaker" in the *descriptive* sense (i.e., more diffuse, contingent, and pragmatic), but also perhaps "stronger" in the normative sense (i.e., at once critical, practical, and deliberative). What I mean is that the (sub)field of planning theory over the past two decades has flourished in proportion as the terms *planning* and *theory* have largely softened their definitional gaze and relinquished their tendencies for generalization and abstraction. This shift has, in turn, led to scholarships on storytelling,[59] evidenced-based planning,[60] soft planning,[61] the ways practitioners theorize[62], as well as on the role of religion, secularity, and spirituality in planning procedures.

Weak Theory and the Study of Religion and Planning

What do these ideas and trends suggest for better understanding the relationship between religion and urban planning? In fact, there are concurrent, if not converging, disciplinary trends between, on the one hand, the planning field's shift toward a more subdued and less grandiose theory of the field and, on the other, the religious studies' shift toward a more ethnographic and practice-based

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[58] See, for instance, (Forester, 1989; Healey, 1992; Innes, 1995).
[59] See (Forester, 2013; Sandercock, 2003; Throgmorton, 2003).
[60] See (Davoudi, 2006; Krizek et al., 2009).
[61] See (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009).
[62] See (Whittemore, 2015).

approach to religion. This latter shift has redirected the attention away from universal, sui generis definitions of religion towards the ways that religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationships with the realities of everyday life, i.e., in lived experience of ordinary people[63], their spatial practices[64], as well as their relations to legal and administrative structures of governance[65]. Spurred in large part by the rising significance of ethnography, but also by the broader "spatial" and "practical" turns in the humanities and social sciences[66], recent religious scholarship has shed new light on "how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture" (Orsi, 1997, p. 7) – i.e., "lived religion." These works have shown that religion – approached as "lived" than conceptualized – exists in a dense and diverse array of everyday practices and "in the space between the agent and his or her times, not transcendentally beyond history, but inevitably and ironically within it" (*ibid,* p. 14).

The study of the relationship between religion and planning is therefore at a historical crossroads, wherein new cross-disciplinary possibilities have emerged to conceive religion and planning as two social constructs that intersect with one another on firm ground, rather than in thin air – i.e., in the streets, planning offices, and public meetings, than in sacred texts, zoning codes, or ideology. In this context, weak theory suggests ways for planners to recognize such emerging possibilities and study "lived religion." This is because of weak theory's emphasis on explaining the specificity of social phenomena, as well as its aim to provide a fresh look at mundane and everyday practices without making claims to certainty or being deterred by mess and inconclusiveness. It urges urban planners to instead of looking for the relationship between religion and planning in epistemology, ideology, or theology, adopt a more vigorous ethnographic approach to religion – i.e., a "lived religion" approach – to explain the multiplicity of the interactions between urban planners and faith communities at particular times and places and around particular substantive planning issues. Further, weak theory invites planners to suspend their preconception of religion when encountering an aspect of religion in practice. This involves surrendering the familiar *one-knows-it-when-one-sees-it* standard, and resisting the urge to turn the word *religious* into a qualifying adjective to ask, "whether such-and-such a practice is really *religious*." The aim of a weak-theoretical work, after all, is to know, but not necessarily to know preceding such encounters.

Weak-theoretical works that explain mundane cases of how "lived religion" comes to contact with planning procedures extend knowledge by means of explanation but without turning explanation into generalization. Such works can better "show," than just tell, urban planners that religion is not a fixed or monolithic entity, but a fluid and multifaceted form of life, especially when it comes to the public realm and manifests itself spatially in the built environment. Weak-theoretical accounts, as such, help planners better see, rather than assume, religion in its variegated shapes and lived forms. Such accounts leave open the disciplinary questions that we thought were settled – e.g., that secularism has solved the question of religion for urban planners, or that religion is necessarily either a moral force that promotes social cohesion in cities, or a source of tension that divides urban communities. It may, but then again, it may not – to invoke Sedgwick's reply from the weak theory perspective. A weak-theoretical account in a practical field like planning doesn't need to follow "surface reading" or "thin description" – a move that has recently emerged in literary studies as "the new modesty" (Williams, 2015). Rather, as Gibson-Graham have shown in the context of

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[63] See (D. Hall, 1997; Orsi, 2010; Bender, 2010, 2013; Klassen, 2011).
[64] See (Weisenfeld, 2020; Walton, 2020) as well as
[65] See (Asad, 2003, 2012; Mahmood, 2015).
[66] See (Schatzki et al., 2001; Stern, 2003; Warf & Arias, 2008).

economic geography (2014), weak-theoretical projects should offer "thick description" of their objects of inquiry the way Clifford Geertz did in cultural studies (1973c). The challenge remains, however, that one needs to keep one's account weak through thick description, rather than turning thick description into an overarching theory – again, the way Geertz did in his universal definition of religion as a cultural system (Geertz, 1973b; see also Asad, 1983). The aim of weak-theoretical accounts is to describe and analyze, rather than to make "interventions" of world-historical significance or try to unmask encoded meanings in everyday practices.

Religion in planning assumes an oxymoronic status: it is somehow familiar to individual planners in their personal capacity, and yet largely unfamiliar to them in their disciplinary and professional identities. This status has fostered a myopic view of religion as an extraordinary phenomenon or a "problem" that if planners want to address it, they need first to do intense theological studies and develop rigorous theoretical foundations and then, only then, planners would be able to understand how religious beliefs and practices of urban communities overlap with planning processes. Such a theoretically capacious and methodologically intimidating view has long prevented planners from considering "lived religion" in their theoretical and practical inquiries. From the perspectives of weak theory, "lived religion" is a familiar, near phenomenon, i.e., a quotidian and this-worldly practice which is present in cities where planners work, in the communities that they serve, and in the classrooms where they study and teach. The increasing recognition of the pragmatist premises of weak theory in urban planning helps view the interface of religion and planning as a conjuncture of two lived worlds, two lived experiences, two everyday practices, both being earthly and earthy, rather than unearthly or mythical. There is a reason, after all, why "religion," and particularly "lived religion," are more recognized by planning scholars with a pragmatic bent, Forester and Hoch included, than by those who are committed to grand ideologies, whether on the left or on the right of the political spectrum.[67]

Viewed as such, to study the relationship of lived religion and urban planning requires, not a radical theoretical shift in the field, but a radical rethinking of how religion is "lived" and what it means to be "religious" in diverse urban settings. Such a radical rethinking involves abandoning the dominant view of religion in urban planning as a non-spatial, pre-theoretical, or extra-legal phenomenon. It involves abandoning universal definitions of religion as, for instance, a mere *belief* in a set of moral propositions, and also of *religious difference* as a mere difference between eschatological belief systems. It involves acknowledging that nothing is fixed or static about religion and planning as well as their interactions; there is no single, exemplary case of the relationship between religion and planning that could be isolated, exegeted, or generalized; there is no concept of "religion" that fits every global case, every instance of the overlap between devotional practices and planning practice. In sum, to better understand the relationship between religion and planning is to suspend one's assumptions prior to inquiry, be open to surprise, and resist the urge for closure. Following Dimock's pragmatist methodology for conducting weak theoretical inquiries, in what follows, I suggest five methodological qualities that I consider important for such a radical rethinking.

The importance of ethnography

The first suggestion is to underline the importance of ethnography, a method already used in planning research to provide thick descriptions through "close reading" (Geertz, 1973a). What

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[67] See (Manouchehrifar & Forester, 2021).

needs to be emphasized beyond this explanatory use of ethnography is that ethnography is also a mode of critical inquiry (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), which aims at "the reconstruction of high theory by complexifying the determination of events and actions at any point in an abstractly conceived social order" (Marcus, 1986, p. 177). Such a normative appropriation of ethnography would enrich our understanding of how planners "on the job" encounter, try to navigate, or are hampered by religious or secular discourses. It entails rigorous examinations and comparative analysis of particular circumstances under which the assumption of religious indifference might have institutionally disabled, instead of objectively enabled, planners to address religious and secular concerns of their constituencies. It involves self-critical disciplinary reflections, which, beyond assuming a heroic view of planning as necessarily promoting "progressive" social goals, would instead scrutinize whether and how planners might have contributed to the spatial segregation of religious communities – by either their actions or inactions. Religious segregation is not simply biased towards "the dead" (in religiously separate cemeteries); it also routinely implicates "the alive" (in residential neighborhoods).

Planning intersects with religion more on firm ground than in thin air. As the first two chapters of this dissertation demonstrate, the kind of religion spectacularly manifest in planning practice is not necessarily the one that is philosophically informed or theologically denominated. Rather, it is a varying set of sensibilities and subjectivities embedded in the minutiae of everyday life, taking place even beneath the radar of religious officials and official religions – or what is called the "lived religion" (D. Hall, 1997; Sullivan, 2005; Orsi, 2010). One can grasp the subtleties and intricacies of this kind of religion less in philosophy, law, or theology, and more in ethnography (Sullivan, 2010). In this vein, weak theory helps embracing the conviction that ordinary people do not necessarily define, or even use, the categories of the religious and the secular to represent various aspects of their social lives. It invites us to examine the actual, lived situations (in courtrooms, planning offices, or public meetings) wherein competing and parallel conceptions of religion (those, for instance, claimed by citizens, authorized by the state, pronounced by religious authorities, or inferred by scholars) surround substantive planning issues. Put succinctly, understanding religion in planning depends not only on how planning is conceptualized, institutionalized, and enacted in a certain context, but also on distinctive ways in which religion itself is defined in it.

Asking particular questions

This brings me to the second suggestion concerning the type of questions we should ask in such encounters of religion and planning. This issue is particularly important not only because one's conception of religion (and of secularism and planning alike) determines the set of questions one asks – or thinks are askable at all (Asad, 1986); but also because when these categories overlap, they form uneasy amalgams of the changeable forms of the lived religion, the rigid rules of secular law, and the flexible nature of planning responses. The result is a notoriously varied subject matter, which is as theoretical and controversial as it is empirical and pressing. Such a multifaceted phenomenon cannot be fully explored by merely asking more abstract, theoretical questions; these kinds of question tend to mask the details, where, Stephen Gould reminds us (1981), both God and devil dwell. Nor can it be properly grasped by asking too specific, empirical questions; these questions tend to be biased towards our "own" preconceptions of the religious or the secular (Asad, 2003). Rather, we need to ask a host of particular questions which are "at the same time as detailed and as general as possible" (Flyvbjerg, 2017, p. 166). These types of question are not devoid of

general, theoretical significances. As Albert Hirschman (1967) has shown, "the immersion in the particular proved, as usual, essential for the catching of anything general" (p. 3). To rethink the religious in planning is thus to constantly search "for the Great within the Small, and vice versa" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 134). Such a pursuit entails cultivating a nuanced sensibility that would pause us, every here and there, to ponder "what is the best question to ask in this or that situation" (Asad, in conversation with Bardawil, 2016, p. 158).

Sensitivity towards variations

Asking particular questions itself requires a greater sensitivity towards variations in structure and form. Consider, for instance, a customary representation of three liberal-democratic nation-states. In France, both the centralized state and citizens are considered secular; in Britain, the state is constitutionally (albeit more of a formality) linked to the Established Church, while the polity is assumed as largely secular; and in the United States, the population is considered mostly religious, but the (federal) state is secular. While such synoptic illustrations do reflect variations at the macro-level (e.g., constitutional provisions or majority norms), they nonetheless reduce our analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation-state, thereby vanquishing key internal heterogeneities. After all, stylized facts are also aggregate facts, ones that have lost their particularity and multiplicity through processes of standardization and grouping which necessarily ignore critical distinctions (J. C. Scott, 1998). Seeing the relationship of religion and planning through grand statistical narratives corresponds closely to *seeing like a (secular) state*, that is, to oversimplify complex phenomena for the sake of legibility and ease of societal management. This, in turn, yields to the negation of multiple ways in which the negotiation between religion, politics, and planning works itself out on the ground (at the micro-level). Or take the variation in the planning side of the equation. Planners and their "bosses" are not one single, coherent body acting vis-à-vis political, legal, and social structures. They do not necessarily share similar political attitudes or wield equal institutional power, but rather communicate, negotiate, and respond through different mechanisms and from different power positions. At any rate, municipal authorities are mostly "elected" (political) officials, while planners are usually "selected" or "commissioned" labor forces. The ways in which such variations affect the relationship of religion and planning are not identical – but, nor are they yet well-known.

Acknowledging methodological limitations

The fourth suggestion is to take cognizance of the limitations of the methods we employ and positions we adopt in thinking about religion, secularism, and planning – including the ones used, suggested, or espoused in this dissertation. Think about anti-essentialism, for example. While anti-essentialism helps eschewing reductionist tendencies or fetishistic fixations on an "essence" or a "core" in social practices (as in reducing religion to mere belief), it nonetheless tends to resist comparative studies that seek similarities; after all, anti-essentialism is primarily preoccupied with irreducible differences across contexts (Cannell, 2010). Or take genealogy. While genealogy helps unearthing the contingent underpinnings of long-held positions, genealogy by itself does not address normative questions of what ought to be done. Or consider ethnographic research. While it helps seeing that which is behind the scene, ethnographic accounts carry their own subjective biases in representation; after all, "ethnographic truths," James Clifford (1986, p. 3) reminds us, "are inherently *partial* – committed and incomplete." Or take empirical research. While it helps better grasp what exists on the ground (e.g., lived religion), it is nonetheless bound to the fact that

the relationship between religion, secularism, and planning is not merely an empirical one to be resolved by more intensive fieldwork or archival research (Asad, 2003).

Recognizing the risks and limitations of weak theory

My last suggestion is to recognize the limitations and risks of adopting a weak-theoretical approach to explore the interactions of religion and planning. Consider, for example, the goal of weak theory to produce low-level descriptions of familiar phenomena, rather than to engage directly with grand ideas and threatening ideologies. The risk here would be to simply leave questions of the state, secularism, or capitalism off the table in the name of limiting the scope of the investigation and not expanding it widely. Similarly, to simply avoid addressing *normative* questions of what ought to be done – that "little, dirty secret of planning theory" (Forester, 2017, p. 280) – in the name of offering mere description, thick or thin, risks making planning inquiries practically ineffective. More broadly, I wonder whether the planning field's move away from over-generalization in the past two decades has lent itself to a sort of over-specialization which sequesters religious/spiritual commitments from other planning issues, rather than seeing these commitments in the mix and as overlapping. At any rate, while strong theory is subject to the charge of over-generalization, weak theory is particularly susceptible to the risk of over-specializing.

Lastly, as the history of city planning in the U.S. indicates, if activism is the immediate aim of a planner, weak theory may not be the best way to do it – note the debates between Marsh and Olmsted, or the debates between conservative political scientists and scholars from the left in the 1960s. That said, weak theory does offer opportunities to facilitate self-disciplinary criticism and helps to reckon with religion in urban planning. This is especially because of weak theory's emphasis on providing detailed accounts of certain phenomena that everyone recognizes but that few appreciate as significant (note Du Bois's work). As Sidgwick has argued, the reparative function of weak theory helps us see openings with the hope "that the future may be different from the present," even if that opening of the future means entertaining "such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (2003, p. 146).

To conclude: It is not "a name" for which this essay makes a plea; it is but the content and scope of a way of thinking about "lived religion" and urban planning which embraces specificity and uncertainty, welcomes improvisation, appreciates the proximate and the provisional, and does not try to defend itself at every moment against refutation. This is not to suggest that a weak-theoretical account that focuses on "lived religion" should be considered a vehement negation or a substitute for strong-theoretical accounts that explore the relationship between religion and planning at the philosophical level – as Mumford and Mannheim did. It is, instead, to suggest that such strong theoretical accounts are not the one-and-only "good" ways to help urban planners attend to the religious concerns of urban communities without compromising their statutory and political responsibilities. As William James and Jane Addams have shown us, familiarity with the nuances of religious life breeds trust – not contempt; and trust breeds cooperation which is a perquisite for creating inclusive and egalitarian cities. Such a familiarity, in the practical context of religion and planning, could be furthered by a series of weak-theoretical accounts that provide a new look at what planners think they already know – i.e., "lived religion."

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