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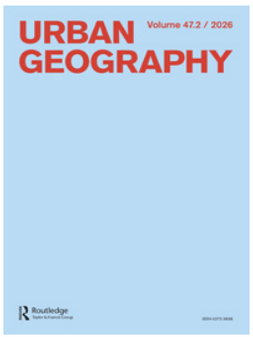

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Giulia Massenz

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Groups on the move. The urban pathways of African Pentecostal churches in Turin, Italy

Giulia Massenz

Inter-University Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), Politecnico di Torino, Torino, Italy

ABSTRACT

Research on the geography of religion has extensively examined the spatial politics of places of worship, yet it has largely treated them as fixed sites, paying limited attention to movement, impermanence, and intra-urban mobility. Despite early calls to study religion through both place and movement, the trajectories through which religious groups move within cities remain under-theorized. This paper addresses this gap by introducing the concept of places-of-worship pathways, adapted from Clapham's (2002) housing pathways framework, as a tool for analyzing religious mobility within secular urban contexts. The concept is developed through a qualitative case study of African Pentecostal churches in Turin, Italy – a city often described as relatively accommodating toward religious diversity, yet shaped by strong legal, planning, and market constraints. The analysis is based on nine in-depth interviews with Pentecostal pastors conducted between 2022 and 2024, reconstructing churches' spatial trajectories and the meanings attributed to relocation. The findings identify three pathways highlighting how socio-economic vulnerability, regulatory frameworks, charismatic leadership, and theological orientations shape patterns of movement. Beyond contributing to scholarship on global Pentecostalism, the paper reveals insights into the relationship between the religious and the secular, showing how urban governance and market mechanisms reproduce differentiated forms of secularity.

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Introduction

The idea that the built environment "places unique stresses and strains on religious praxis" (Woods, 2019, p. 25) has become a central premise within the subfield of geography of religion. A clear illustration of this is the restrictions on access to and use of space that cities impose on different religious groups. Such spatial constraints are generally traced back both to the bureaucratic, and often regressive, frameworks of urban planning (Gale, 2025) and to the neoliberal logics of the market (Woods, 2013, 2019). The entanglement of these aspects is easily detectable in Singapore, where Christian congregations

CONTACT Giulia Massenz giulia.massenz@polito.it

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are compelled to compete with one another in the private market in the search for a place of worship, as planning law seeks to maintain secular balance by allocating equal provision for the four officially recognized religions – regardless of differing spatial needs (Kong, 2002). These logics are closely tied to politics of exclusion that disproportionately affect minoritized groups, who are displaced or marginalized in order to preserve the status quo that particular regimes seek to maintain. In this vein, processes of displacement are observed in debates surrounding mosque construction across Europe (Gale & Nailor, 2002; Gale, 2005; Torrekens, 2013), where planning instruments are strategically deployed to obstruct specific forms of religious placemaking and identity expression.

Despite a growing interest in such *politics of impermanence* (Kong, 2002) among religious groups in multicultural settings – and despite early calls within the geography of religion to examine movement alongside place (Knott, 2005) – spatial dynamism remains largely overlooked in the discipline. Recent studies begin to illuminate the dynamism of religious practice with relation to physical premises and the urban in general (Burchardt & Giorda, 2021; Holmes, 2021) but no systematic effort has yet been made to conceptualize or analyze the intra-urban mobility of religious groups. This paper aims to address this gap by proposing a tool for studying the mobility of urban religions within secular, urban contexts. It adapts the well-established urban studies concept of "housing pathways" (Clapham, 2002) and applies it to the religious domain. Originally developed as a framework for examining the increasingly complex relationships between individuals and their dwellings across the lifespan, the concept has proven valuable for geographical research on specific population groups and has been taken up across disciplines such as architecture and urban planning. Its analytical emphasis on the relationship between agency and structure may likewise offer a productive contribution to religious studies.

In this study, the new concept of *places-of-worship pathways* is employed to examine a specific segment of urban religion: African Pentecostalism. Global Pentecostalism is itself a complex and distinctive phenomenon, characterized by structural features that lend themselves well to the study of trajectories – such as fluid boundaries between churches and denominations, and a strong emphasis on individual agency, including the possibility for believers to split from existing congregations and establish their own (Coleman, 2002; Martin, 2002). Furthermore, and interestingly for our sake, partly due to widespread recognition of neoliberal urban environments as fertile ground for Pentecostal expansion (Meyer, 2007), the movement is increasingly understood in relation to diverse urban contexts. It therefore naturally fits the purpose of the paper of analyzing movement and trajectories, attitude and aspiration of leaders and groups in a specific urban context.

The following text is divided into four sections. The first section includes a brief literature review of the advancements in geography of religion and the development of the concept of places-of-worship pathways derived from the housing pathways' one. The second section presents the empirical part of the work by introducing African Pentecostalism in Italy and the case study of the city of Turin. Following an outline of the methodology, the main findings are presented in the form of storytelling. The third section systematizes the findings by elaborating on three pathways for African Pentecostals and discussing their implications. The fourth section concludes.

Theoretical framework

Recent developments in the geography of religion

Although it has always existed, the geography of religion – a relatively niche subfield within social and cultural geography – has gained momentum over the past 20–25 years (Kong et al., 2025). This resurgence is mostly attributed to changing migration patterns and the associated reconfiguration of state policies, which have increasingly foregrounded issues of religious diversity and multicultural dialogue. However, the vibrancy of the debate is also closely linked to the ways in which religious groups have become increasingly entangled with urban environments. Urban space has thus come to be understood not merely as the backdrop for religious practice, but as a constitutive element in the production and transformation of religious life. This mutually constitutive relationship between the religious and the urban has been conceptualized by Orlando Woods (2019) through the notion of *religious urbanism*. By foregrounding "the resilience of religion in its ability to adapt to the secular hegemony of the urban environment" (Woods, 2019, p. 26), this concept draws attention to the multiple ways in which religious practices are shaped by urban conditions and, in turn, how urban spaces are reshaped by religious presence and activity. In doing so, Woods emphasizes the hybridity of both categories and challenges taken-for-granted assumptions regarding their presumed incompatibility.

In focusing on the "secular hegemony", Woods suggests that it is important to speak of processes of *de-secularization* (see also Dora, 2016), rather than framing these dynamics in terms of the "sacralization of space" by religious actors. This is particularly evident when religious communities deploy strategies that counter the existing structures through a range of spatial practices and performances. Tse's (2014) notion of g*rounded theologies* highlights such specific "performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent" (Tse, 2014, p. 202), emphasizing embodied and situated modes of counter-secular spatial production. Similarly, Wilford (2010) conceptualizes the geographical expressions of counter-secularization strategies in "advanced differentiated societies" as *sacred archipelagos*: dispersed and often fragmented spatial formations that tend to coalesce around the body or domestic space, rather than around formally recognized religious institutions.

The aforementioned hegemony typically operates through two main dimensions: the neoliberal market (Woods, 2013; 2019) and the often restrictive force which is planning practice (Gale, 2025), as well as through the ways these two domains interact. Woods (2018) illustrates this relationship through the case of Singapore, a highly regulated context in which competition among religious groups within the private property market for acquiring suitable places of worship nevertheless remains intense. In this way, he expands traditional religious economy theories, which posit that lower levels of regulation lead to higher levels of competition, understanding instead religious economy as a system in which religious groups compete for resources – such as legitimacy, followers, and, crucially, space – within a regulatory environment shaped by both the state and society (Woods, 2018). The author highlights that often religious economies in secular contexts contribute to the spatial marginalization and displacement experienced by minoritized religious groups. By contrast, Kong and Woods (2018) work on the interplay between transnational religious agency and established local

religious structures in settlement patterns shows that forces other than local constraints alone shape where and how groups reside.

As anticipated in the introduction, while numerous studies examine the spatial dimensions of religion in the city, particularly as embodied in places of worship (Gale, 2005; Gale & Naylor, 2002; Kong, 2002), far fewer focus on mobility and impermanence, rather than on space alone (on this gap, see Sheringham, 2010). This gap is especially striking given the substantial body of work showing how marginalized groups remain in particularly vulnerable positions with respect to places of worship due to planning restrictions in Germany (Jonker, 2005), England (Gale & Nailor, 2002; Gale, 2005), France (Berg, 2019), and Belgium (Torrekens, 2013). Recent ethnographic research has begun to illuminate the dynamism of urban religious practices by focusing on the movement of migrant subjectivities and the transformation of religious practices within the city (see, for example, Liberatore, 2017), including shifts across faith traditions. In parallel, scholarship has begun to explore the location of places of worship in relation to processes of gentrification (Holmes, 2021) and architectural reuse (Burchardt & Giorda, 2021). Nevertheless, no systematic effort has yet been made to conceptualize or analyze the intra-urban mobility of religious groups.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by advancing an analytical tool for examining such mobility. In doing so, it aims to contribute to broader debates on *infra-secular geographies* (Dora, 2016), understood as the "contemporaneous cohabitation and competition between multiple forms of belief and non-belief, as well as the hidden layers of collective religious subconsciousness which underpin contemporary Western European societies" (Dora, 2016, p. 1).

From housing pathways to places-of-worship pathways

In this section, a bridge between urban studies and religious studies is made through the transposition of an urban studies concept – housing pathways (Clapham, 2002), to the religious domain.

Reflecting the discipline's longstanding emphasis on urban transformation, urban studies has frequently focused on the production and consumption of space over time. This is evident, for instance, in urban morphology, which examines streets, public spaces, blocks, plots, and buildings, tracing their historical shifts in form and materiality, as well as in analyses of urban structure and function. It is also apparent in studies of land-use change across multiple scales, which increasingly rely on advanced technologies to detect spatial transformations (Banzhaf & Netzband, 2012; Barnsley & Barr, 1996). More recently, a growing body of research has linked patterns of spatial consumption to processes of gentrification, segregation, and exclusion, highlighting mobility and unequal access to housing and leisure spaces as indicators of broader urban dynamics (Atkinson, 2000; Hochstenbach & van Gent, 2015). Against this backdrop, it appears both logical and productive to apply the analytical toolkit of urban studies to the trajectories of religious groups within urban contexts. Engler and Stausberg's (2022) call to incorporate interdisciplinary methods into the study of religion further underscores the relevance of this endeavor.

Among relevant concepts, David Clapham's (2002) notion of "housing pathways" offers a particularly useful framework. Defined as "patterns of interaction (practices)

concerning house and home, over time and space" (Clapham, 2002, p. 63), housing pathways provide an analytical approach for understanding the social practices underlying household movement through the housing field over time. While the concept has been widely explored and tested since its inception, it is valuable to emphasize here its foundational context and subsequent applications. It was introduced to address the limitations of earlier reductionist housing studies in the UK, which were informing the policies in the country until the 1990s. The framework builds on, yet critiques, concepts like housing histories (Forrest, 1987) and housing careers (Kendig, 1984): the former emphasizing past decisions, and the latter assuming fixed household preferences. Clapham's approach retains a temporal aspect but focuses on subjective perceptions – such as meanings, attitudes, and aspirations – toward housing. His sociological approach also incorporates social constructivism and Giddens' structuration theory (1984), highlighting the interplay of choices and constraints. From social constructivism, Clapham adopts the view that social relationships, such as those with real-estate agents or neighbors, shape decision-making. Structuration theory contributes to the idea of reciprocity between choices and external pressures, as seen when changes in landlord policies affect family decisions and alter housing trajectories. Ultimately, Clapham's pathways emphasize the household's perceptions and attitudes toward adapting its housing situation.

The concept has been applied to various groups and in different geographical areas. In 2014, Clapham et al. analyzed housing pathways among young people in the UK, identifying nine pathways with varying factors influencing housing changes (Clapham et al., 2014). A year later, Hochstenbach and Boterman (2015) expanded Clapham's framework using Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field, showing how various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) affect young people's access to housing in Amsterdam. They identified three main pathways: a linear pathway involving stability in the formal housing sector (such as home ownership or social and private rental), and two chaotic pathways characterized by informal or temporary arrangements. The chaotic pathways differ in motivation: in the progressive chaotic pathway, households use social capital to move within desirable neighborhoods, while in the reproductive chaotic pathway, limited resources constrain them to frequent, often undesired moves.

Clapham's framework can be applied to analyze the production and use of places of worship by religious communities, particularly in light of the complexities of religious economies, which are discussed further below. This conceptual transfer from the field of housing to the religious domain is supported by recent developments in human geography around the concept of home (Blunt, 2005; Schissel, 2006). Within this framework, home is understood as a "highly fluid and contested site of human existence that reflects and reifies identity and values" (Schissel, 2006, p. 12) and encompasses spaces as diverse as homelands (whether indigenous or adopted), embodied spaces (shaped by moral or ableist norms), cyberspace, community, and sites of care (Schissel, 2006). Religious denominations' places of worship can plausibly be situated within this expanded understanding of home, particularly when they function as faith-based communities in post-migration contexts. The hybridity between domestic and religious space is already evident in the notion of "house-churches" (Kong, 2002; Woods, 2013) – churches established within private apartments due to the lack of alternative building types – which are increasingly common in religiously competitive urban environments

worldwide and render the home a key site for examining contemporary geographies of religion. By replacing "households" with "pastors and communities" in Clapham's definition, *places-of-worship pathways* (from here onwards POWs pathways) become the analytical frameworks examining the social practices shaping religious communities' movement through the production, use, and distribution of worship spaces throughout communities' lifespan.

While inspired by Clapham's model, POWs pathways cannot be a mere replication; distinct differences emerge in the shift of domains. To understand these differences, it is necessary to first outline the key characteristics of religious communities and the ideal trajectory associated with two of them, especially in Western cities. Three types of communities can be distinguished: established religions, diaspora communities, and emerging spiritualities, each employing distinct spatial strategies in relation to places of worship. The first group is typically associated with "place-keeping", the practice of preserving places of worship, while the other two groups are more likely engaged in strategies of "place-making" and "place-seeking", practices related to the production of space and the quest for it, respectively (Becci et al., 2016). For these latter groups, an ideal trajectory of community establishment can be traced. Initially, communities grow out of small congregations of people gathered around one or a few leaders, usually in private properties. Driven by the spiritual need for proselytism, the community then expands, entering a second phase where public rituals require a suitable and accessible space. As they find a definitive, large enough, and well-located place of worship, the community also formalizes the religious group juridically. This trajectory enhances the conditions for performing rituals and amplifies their collective dimension, albeit at different paces. However, the process can encounter various forms of resistance which are strictly connected to the most salient features of secular environments, namely the market and planning. This also happens because, as noted by Kong and Woods (2018), the integration of a foreign belief in a society "is not normative; often, it is the exception rather than the rule" (Kong & Woods, 2018, p. 159). In the following paragraphs, such resistances will be presented.

Pathways resistances

The first set of resistances concerns the relationship between religious groups and the state in specific national contexts. Even in formally secular countries, when this relationship is politically strained or institutionally uneven, the ideal trajectory could be importantly restricted, particularly through building regulations and planning compliance requirements that are common in Western cities.

The Italian case is illustrative. Although freedom of worship is constitutionally guaranteed, the practical acquisition of places of worship remains extremely difficult for vulnerable and recently established groups, especially those with migratory backgrounds (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2017; Morpurgo, 2021). This difficulty is closely linked to the hierarchical structure of the Italian religious field, which is regulated through an "agreements regime" between the state and religious denominations (Bossi & Giorda, 2019). Within this framework, the Catholic Church occupies the top position of an implicit hierarchy, followed by the thirteen denominations that have signed an *Intesa*[1] with the Italian state, and then by thirty-six groups recognized as *Culti Ammessi*.[2] All other religious groups

and spiritual practices may organize themselves through alternative legal forms provided by the civil code, or remain informal. Although no explicit restrictions are imposed on these groups and only legal recognition is formally required to pray collectively, municipal offices and planning authorities tend to privilege denominations located at the top of this hierarchy when allocating public places of worship (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2017). Moreover, land quotas designated for religious use in local planning instruments are, in most cases, already occupied by Catholic churches (Bolgiani, 2013), making any reallocation particularly difficult, in light of the long procedure involved in the modification of local plans.

This regime also creates implicit competition among religious groups, as the Catholic Church and denominations that have signed an Intesa with the state are entitled to substantially higher levels of public funding through the 8×1000 mechanism, which allocates a share of taxpayers' income tax to recognized religious institutions. By contrast, groups without an *Intesa* can only access much smaller allocations – typically through the 5×1000 scheme, amounting to 0.5% of individual income tax (IRPEF) (for further details on the topic see Giorda & Vanolo, 2019).

A second set of resistances follows in a cascading manner and concerns economic constraints. Entry into the hierarchical regime described above effectively presupposes both political and financial capital. Resource-poor groups are therefore often compelled to register as cultural associations or remain informal, pushing them into competition within the private real estate market. While changing the designated use of a building is theoretically possible in the private domain, it is often time-consuming and costly. As a result, many groups operate in a mismatch between the declared use of a premises (commercial, residential, or other) and its actual religious function, exposing them to sanctions or eviction by local authorities. This also exposes groups to informal arrangements with landlords, which can give rise to opaque practices, including negotiations conducted behind the scenes and, in some cases, illicit financial exchanges.

Economic constraints also shape the location strategies of religious groups. Because congregations typically rely on donations from their members, the socioeconomic profile of attendees directly influences financial sustainability. Affordable premises are often found in areas that conflict with a group's preferred spatial strategy, forcing communities to prioritize cost over accessibility or visibility. As with any rental or purchase, interactions with external actors – such as real estate agents or property owners – can further influence outcomes, sometimes reflecting biases against religious activities. This dynamic does not apply, however, when international headquarters or foreign states provide financial support to sustain particular communities.

The third set of resistances is practical in nature. Relocation itself can disrupt the typical trajectory of community development. Moving large quantities of furniture and religious artefacts is logistically demanding, particularly when distances are significant. For this reason, decisions to relocate must be carefully justified. Moreover, relocation may alter participants' mobility patterns, leading some members to disengage or join other religious groups. Here again, location strategies can be undermined by contingent opportunities, such as the possibility of expanding through the acquisition of an adjacent property, even when relocation to a more strategic area had been previously envisaged.

While these forms of resistance and their effects are well documented in the housing literature, extending the analysis to the religious domain introduces important additional complexities. In particular, internal resistances emerge – those originating within

religious communities themselves and often grounded in theological or spiritual considerations. Decisions to establish, relocate, or close places of worship may be shaped by doctrinal principles or by the personal relationship between religious leaders and the divine. Through privileged forms of divine communication, leaders may claim to receive indications concerning the appropriate physical location of the community, often interpreted through signs or apparitions and taken seriously by congregants. In such cases, the credibility of leadership is at stake, as relocation may conflict with previously established location strategies and disrupt congregational cohesion. Nevertheless, divine guidance is frequently followed, even when it entails long-distance mobility. In other instances, location strategies are imposed by transnational religious organizations, as in the case of the popular Pentecostal church named The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), whose doctrine promotes the establishment of multiple churches within each city, ideally within walking distance of one another.[3]

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that applying the concept of places-of-worship pathways requires accounting for influences that extend beyond the secular and material constraints typical of the housing field, incorporating instead the role of beyond-human agency in shaping spatial trajectories.

Toward African Pentecostal POWs pathways in Turin

African Pentecostals in Italy between mobility and vulnerability

The POW pathways outlined above would benefit from empirical application to a specific social group. This paper focuses on African Pentecostals in Italy, as this community is particularly well suited to such an analysis, given both the structural characteristics of the Pentecostal movement and the specific features of African Pentecostal communities within the Italian context. This section, therefore introduces these two dimensions. While remaining attentive to the distinctive "practices, ideas, theologies, and interpretations of reality revealed in the Pentecostal experiences of African people and people of African descent (i.e. Black)" (Wariboko, 2017), this discussion is intentionally kept at a general level, in line with the scope and audience of this journal.

Pentecostalism is a relatively recent religious phenomenon, commonly traced to North American Protestantism, from which it began to expand globally in the early twentieth century. This expansion has been exponential: in the 1970s, Pentecostal adherents numbered approximately 58 million worldwide; today, estimates reach around 664 million (Zurlo & Johnson, 2025). Despite this rapid growth, Pentecostalism does not constitute a single, unified tradition, nor can it be defined through a fixed set of theological criteria (Anderson et al., 2010). However, Pentecostal movements are often classified into four broad and frequently overlapping categories. The first comprises "classical" Pentecostal churches that emerged in the early twentieth century, alongside independent Pentecostal churches that developed during the same period, particularly in Africa and Asia, which form the second group. Statistical and classificatory accounts frequently extend the category further to include a third group of "charismatic" movements that emerged within older Christian denominations from the 1960s onward, among which Roman Catholic Charismatics are as numerous as classical Pentecostals. Finally, Pentecostalism also encompasses what is arguably its fastest-growing segment: independent charismatic

megachurches and so-called "neocharismatic" or "neopentecostal" movements that began to emerge in the mid-1970s. These are often associated with the promotion of the "prosperity gospel," a doctrine that links material wealth to divine favor (Anderson, 2020).

Pentecostalism is constitutionally informal and fluid, challenging conventional categorizations. Doctrinally, its core principles include the supremacy of personal religious experience over established doctrine, the centrality of the Holy Spirit, the recognition of charismatic gifts, and the personal acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior, often expressed through adult baptism (Martin, 2002). Central to Pentecostalism is the conversion experience, which drives the movement's numerical growth; indeed, anyone who receives a "call from the Lord" can establish their own church (Anderson, 2004). Also for this reason, organizationally, Pentecostalism is characterized by a decentralized configuration, consisting of simple networks of local congregations with similar orientations, contrasting sharply with the hierarchical, pyramidal structure of the Catholic Church. Moreover, through international associations of churches sharing the same or similar denominations, Pentecostalism adopts a robust transnational approach, constructing a new social imaginary founded on shared languages and narratives that are adaptable to diverse contexts (Coleman, 2002).

Often associated with globalization, this movement has been examined through kaleidoscopic lenses in religious studies, particularly in relation to transnationality and media usage. Over time, and partly due to the recognition of urban neoliberal environments as fertile ground for its expansion (Meyer, 2007), however, Pentecostalism has also been increasingly studied in connection with cities, especially in the Global South. This shift is largely explained by the prominent role of Neopentecostal megachurches in processes of city-making in sub-Saharan Africa (Lanz & Oosterbaan, 2016; Millington et al., 2024). Marshall's (2009) analysis of urban Nigeria, for instance, illustrates how religion intersects with urban governance as a means of coping with the insecurities of postcolonial Nigerian life, conceptualizing people engagement with the supernatural as a practice of power, a "form of socio-political action on the world" (Marshall, 2009, p. 105). Along similar lines, studies of Pentecostal churches with a migratory background in European cities have interpreted the appeal of Pentecostal doctrine as a search for empowerment within contexts marked by deprivation and insecurity (see, for example, Costantini, 2021).

Italy is one of the contexts in which such a dynamic is visible, with African Pentecostal imaginaries and aesthetics often contrasting with the Catholic one, especially due to the distinctive rituality made of long and loud chants and choirs (Butticci, 2016). Present in Italy since the early twentieth century, it was only from the first migration flows from the 1980s onwards from Asia, Latin America and especially Africa that Pentecostalism has growingly expanded. The distinctive aspects of African churches have drawn the attention of scholars such as Enzo Pace and Annalisa Butticci (2010), who use the term diaspora to describe the dynamic relationships between these churches and their countries of origin. These relationships are evident in the case of churches on Italian territory founded by individuals who are in the country to extend their mother-church, also known as missionary pastors. Conversely, the formation of their own churches by African migrants, often due to their diasporic condition, is less apparent but equally significant. Pace and Butticci (2010) identify mobility and vulnerability as key characteristics of Nigerian and Ghanaian diaspora churches, the most numerous ones. Mobility

is closely tied to structural issues and is particularly pronounced within the Italian context, leading to significant territorial movement. Vulnerability arises from a combination of the socio-economic status of participants and the intricate urban-legal framework associated with places of worship.

With respect to socio-economic vulnerability, existing research shows that most African migrants in Italy experience significant structural disadvantage (Ambrosini, 2008; Panichella, 2022). While earlier phases of large-scale migration were characterized mainly by economic migration into Southern agriculture and Northern industrial sectors, contemporary African migration occurs through multiple channels, including family reunification and asylum, with forced movement along "irregular" routes remaining common and restrictive immigration regimes further limiting opportunities for socio-economic mobility. African migrants frequently encounter a labor market that falls well below their expectations. Data from Panichella (2022), reported in the latest IDOS report, highlight persistent employment inequalities, showing that Africans have a significantly lower probability of securing employment or avoiding de-skilled positions compared to other migrant groups, with penalties of −6% and −31% for men and an even more pronounced disadvantage for women (−26% and −36%). When employment is obtained, it is largely concentrated in forms of work described as precarious, physically demanding, dangerous, poorly remunerated, and socially devalued (Ambrosini, 2008), conditions that are closely intertwined with racial stigmatization affecting African migrants across socio-economic strata, particularly in regions dominated by xenophobic political forces (Butticci, 2016).

Socio-economic vulnerability plays a significant role in shaping religious groups' ability to secure appropriate spaces for worship. Religious buildings in Italy are governed by a fragmented, multi-scalar legal framework operating across national, regional, and municipal levels, intersecting with urban planning regulations and zoning standards (Bolgiani, 2013). Within this framework, as noted above, religious groups operating under concordatarian agreements with the Italian state are de facto privileged in accessing the very limited land allocated for the public provision of places of worship. African Pentecostal communities, by contrast, are largely excluded from this regime due to their limited financial resources and institutional capital. Unable to compete for access to publicly designated spaces, most Pentecostal churches therefore turn to the private real estate market, renting or purchasing premises originally intended for residential, industrial, or storage use. These arrangements frequently expose congregations to regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles, particularly in relation to change-of-use compliance. The lack of sufficient financial and legal capacity to regularize such spaces often results in evictions. Moreover, because rental and maintenance costs are collectively borne by congregants, their widespread economic precariousness further heightens the risk of displacement or even institutional dissolution. This dynamic underscores the close relationship between socio-economic vulnerability and the territorial instability of Pentecostal churches. This dynamic will be studied in the city of Turin.

Setting the context: African Pentecostals in Turin

Located in northwestern Italy and renowned for its industrial heritage, Turin is one of the country's most densely populated cities, despite its relatively modest territorial extent of

130 km^2. This density largely reflects successive waves of migration: initially internal migration from southern Italy, followed by international migration during the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, the metropolitan area of Turin now hosts the third-largest population of foreign residents in Italy (135,753 individuals), after Rome (385,559) and Milan (262,521). Foreign nationals registered with municipal offices currently account for 15.8% of the city's total population, with 60.7% originating from outside Europe. Among the largest and most established groups are Romanians (87,702), followed by Moroccans (22,333), Chinese (10,670), Albanians (9,182), Peruvians (8,869), and Nigerians (7,864)[4] (ISTAT, 2023). These demographic transformations have contributed to a particularly vibrant religious landscape, shaped by the spiritual needs of newly arrived populations – a dynamic that continues, as evidenced by the growth of the Nigerian population in the city from 6,050 in 2021 to 7,864 in 2023 (ISTAT, 2021; 2023).

While the Italian context of ethno-religious spatial accommodation is often described in the literature as highly constrained (Morpurgo, 2021) – especially due to a generally hostile political climate – Turin is widely recognized as a best-practice case with regard to the governance of religious practices linked to migration (Bossi & Giorda, 2019; Griera et al., 2018). This trajectory, enabled by a relatively favorable and continuous local political orientation, began in the 1990s with municipal support for bureaucratic procedures concerning the change of use of private premises rented or purchased by Muslim groups, who were widely perceived as the primary targets of political opposition. Municipal officers were trained to pre-empt potential objections by carefully crafting administrative documentation and regulating spaces in ways that made them as legally defensible as possible. Through the coordination of multiple municipal departments, including the police, a form of institutionally supported process emerged, sustained by ongoing dialogue between the municipality and some religious and migratory background associations (Bossi, 2024).

Nevertheless, due to national-level legal bottlenecks, the municipality was never able to actively provide public places of worship for religious minorities. Instead, it effectively endorsed private initiatives operating within the real estate market. This governance model intensified competition for suitable worship spaces, as many religious groups were drawn to Turin by its comparatively open local environment, especially when contrasted with other Italian regions. As a result, a general shortage of appropriate spaces emerged, accompanied by increasing real estate speculation targeting the most vulnerable groups (Bossi, 2024). In this context, while Muslim communities could rely on political capital accumulated through sustained municipal engagement since the 1990s, other religious groups – such as African Pentecostal churches, characterized by a lack of institutional, financial, and organizational resources – could not. Consequently, despite the city's generally welcoming stance toward religious diversity, these churches have been more frequently exposed to precarious conditions, including unfavorable treatment by property owners and the risk of eviction due to planning and building non-compliance.

Yet these constraints have not halted the growth of the denomination in the city, which has expanded alongside the increasing presence of sub-Saharan African migrants. While in 1997 only three Pentecostal churches in Turin were led by and attended by Black congregants (Berzano, 1997), by 2017 this number had risen to 18 (Berzano et al., 2017). These figures continue to evolve, reflecting the inherently temporary and fluid nature of many Pentecostal congregation.

Methodological account

The study is based on nine in-depth interviews with religious leaders of selected African Pentecostal congregations, conducted as part of an extensive fieldwork carried out between December 2022 and December 2024. The fieldwork also included participant observation within the churches and their surrounding neighborhoods. Interviews were conducted with the following pastors: Joel (The Christian Pentecostal Ministry), Francis (Christian Family Pentecostal Church), Banji (The Redeemed Christian Church of God), Joseph David (The Seed of Christ Gospel Ministries International), Jessica (The Grace of God Ministries), Harriston (The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Ministries), Edwin (Divine Grace Mission), Martins (Zoe Pentecostal Mission), and Steve (Jesus Foundation Ministries). Conversations lasted between twenty minutes and one hour, depending on the pastors' availability and willingness to share, and were conducted in either English or Italian. All conversations, except those with Francis, Edwin and Harriston, were recorded. Verbal consent to use the material and publish the findings was obtained and documented in the recordings, as written consent could not be requested in order to preserve a trusting relationship with the participants. Contacts with pastors were maintained throughout the study to monitor the highly temporary and unstable situations they experienced.

Discussions focused on church histories, relocations, and the factors contributing to displacement. Key information was visually mapped using dots and arrows to represent church movements, alongside qualitative data drawn from the interviews, in order to identify the main trajectories. The use of in-depth interviews is consistent with Clapham's (2002) methodological approach to housing pathways, as it enables a detailed examination of spatial trajectories and decision-making processes; selected excerpts from these interviews are presented in the following section.

Fragments of intra-urban trajectories

This section brings into focus selected fragments of churches' trajectories through the city, beginning with two paths that intersected for a time. Francis and Joel arrived in Turin in the early 1990s, in a period when praying in English was still largely absent from the city's everyday religious life. Together with an initial core group, they first gathered in an apartment in the San Donato area. They later approached the priest of a Waldensian church located near the central station, who agreed to host their meetings in the hope of reaching a growing number of believers. After a few years, in line with the fluidity of the Pentecostal movement, Francis split from the other founders to establish his own congregation, the Christian Family Pentecostal Church. From that point on, Francis moved repeatedly between more established Christian churches that granted him temporary hospitality – first a Baptist church and later a Catholic one. He recalled this period as particularly troubling, as captured in the following excerpt:

> You know, in the first place we stayed, there were some sabotage attempts against us. The priest would come inside and yell "police, police" just to scare us. (…) In the Catholic Church, we also had problems. For instance, they started the renovation of the room where we were meeting without telling us, so that we entered the room and saw that the entire floor had been removed, so that we really exclaimed: "Oh, but right here were we pray to God?" It was embarrassing that they hadn't warned us in advance (Pastor Francis, interviewed in February 2023).

After several years, Francis managed to purchase a space of his own: a semi-underground former storage facility, which he transformed into a designated place of worship through formal building and bureaucratic procedures, with the assistance of a real estate agent. He soon acknowledged the constraints that this ownership entailed: "I am now stuck down here. I tried to relocate, but I cannot do it unless I sell this place, and nobody wants it. But this is what God wants for us, and that is okay (sigh)" (Pastor Francis, interviewed in February 2023).

By contrast, Joel remained at the Waldensian church for sixteen years. He eventually relocated the Christian Pentecostal Ministry to the outskirts of the city, at the cost of losing many attendants, as he felt a certain pressure from the Waldensian religious authorities, as reflected in the following quote:

> It's not really that they told us to go, they did not send us off, they did not tell us pack away from here, but we saw that there was need to do that. We understood that inconveniences might have happened, [if we did not go away] (Pastor Joel, interviewed in January 2023).

Other trajectories intertwined in a different way, through the occupation of the same urban block over time by multiple groups. Originally an industrial site dedicated to textile production, the complex gradually became a hotspot for Pentecostal churches and eventually hosted more than fifteen congregations, distributed across different premises and levels of the site. Pastor Joseph, from Seeds of Christ Gospel Ministries International, and Pastor Jessica, from Grace of God Ministries, both worshipped there at the time of fieldwork. When recounting the history of his church, Pastor Joseph placed strong emphasis on the regulatory frameworks shaping its recognition and operation, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> Every child of God may have a calling, and when God calls you and gives you the right to go and preach the gospel, He also makes provision. (…) So the church was not founded by me; it was founded by God. I was only given the name to establish and to set up a place. (…). This is not my country; here there are Catholic churches. I know this place is not [registered as] a place of worship, and I think there is a complex process to follow. At the moment, the place is registered [as an association], and the Italian government is aware that we are doing our stuff. So if the police were to come, they would not arrest me or fight me; the only thing they could say is that this place is not meant to be a church and ask me to leave. But we are not fighting here, we are not practicing evil; we are just preaching the word of God. So I believe that if God has given us this place, knowing that this is not a place for a church, I trust that we are fine. (Pastor Joseph, interviewed in March 2023).

While his words articulated a strong conviction that preaching the gospel offered protection, the narrative was nonetheless permeated by a sense of instability, closely entangled with his condition as a migrant. A similar orientation emerged in the account of Jessica, pastor of Grace of God Ministries since 2013, as reflected in the following response to a question about the possibility of expanding her church:

> Well, I wish, but that's may be too much. Because, you know, we are simple individuals, here is not our place, our country, and life is not easy here. A lot of people are barely managing to live. I don't see the possibility. Unless, by His grace, we can win a lottery. Jackpot! Then we can do it. (Pastor Jessica, interviewed in April 2023).

Pastor Martins, from the Zoe Pentecostal Mission in Turin, was the first to begin gathering in that same block in 2000. He recalled remaining there for thirteen years, before eventually being forced to relocate due to serious health and safety concerns associated with the underground premises:

> There was a laundry above us, and at times, water would leak and ruin all our instruments, and the landlord always refused to pay or repair our things. He just wanted the rent money, so we looked for somewhere else and ended up here. Even here, we feared we might have a bad landlord who could treat us the same way, so we were hesitant. But in the end, by His grace, we had the perfect relationship (Pastor Martin, interviewed in March 2024).

The fieldwork revealed that the entire former industrial block was owned by a single landlord, a figure known in local newspapers for exploiting vulnerable migrants, particularly in the housing market. It was therefore not coincidental that he also owned the premises where the Lord Jesus Foundation Ministries met weekly. The experiences of this community were not without difficulties, especially with neighbors who openly opposed the establishment of the church, as the leading pastor admitted:

> In general, everyone around us bullied us. They poured water on us or threatened us, but we had to make peace; as Christians, we never respond to kind of offenses. So if someone insults you, you cannot insult back. And we did receive many insults. But despite the challenges, I decided to stay, because somehow the landlord is protecting us. In the beginning, when we first moved in, we told what we were going to do here, and ask if we would have had problems in his opinion. He assured that since he owned all the buildings around he could have protect us from any complaints. At a certain moment, however, he suddenly threatened me to leave. In a way, I thought it was a good idea and I started looking for other places that might be better than this one. But I found nothing like this place, it was a terrible situation. Now we are fine again with him, so we stay. He is a powerful person, and I decided to stay with him (Pastor Steve, interviewed in February 2024).

This extract pointed to a particularly strategic but controversial relationship with the landlord, shaped by both the shortage of available space and ongoing conflicts with neighbors.

Such conflicts emerged as a recurrent feature in churches' trajectories. Banji, pastor of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, recalled repeated threats by a neighborhood committee and frequent police interventions at one of the church's three headquarters in the city. In this context, he emphasized his commitment to formal procedures aimed at securing legal recognition of the premises as a place of worship: "In this way", he claimed, "there will be nothing that the neighbors could do against us" (Pastor Banji, interviewed in March 2023). He framed this determination as part of a broader moral and social mission:

> [That particular] headquarter was very important for the surrounding area. Because the church wants to promote unity and peace from which all the neighborhoods could benefit from. Also, with this church I want to change the narrative of Nigerians in the city, especially in relation to prejudices regarding drug dealing, crime and prostitution. (…) And the narrative is already changing! Recently, the municipality contacted us to host women who are in prostitution in our church! And our idea is to do even more with the municipality (Pastor Banji, interviewed in March 2023).

"His proactive attitude really impressed me", I noted in my field diary after one of our conversations.

The same question regarding relations with neighbors was downplayed by Harriston, from the Lord's Chosen: "You know, we are located on the outskirts; here nobody really cares about us." (Pastor Harriston, interviewed in April 2023). I soon learned that Harriston had only recently arrived in Turin and did not know how long he would remain: "This church here is structurally like that: we move around; so I foresee being transferred to Britain, India, or the US. This is my life" (Pastor Harriston, interviewed in April 2023). When asked about possible future movements, he commented that this was "none of his business" and recalled that the congregation had worshipped in the same premises since around 2012. He mentioned having received a video of a potential new location in Milan, while stressing that only his spiritual leader in Nigeria could decide such movements.

A similar trajectory characterized Edwin's church, the Divine Grace Mission, located nearby. Unlike Harriston, Edwin was not dependent on a transnational spiritual authority, having founded his own church in Turin in 2006. Yet this autonomy did not translate into a stronger concern for regulatory compliance or long-term spatial consolidation. When asked about the legal status of the premises, he responded without hesitation: "This does not really matter; even if we are not complying precisely with the rules and the municipality tells us to go, God will guide us elsewhere" (Pastor Edwin, interviewed in April 2023). As in some previous encounters, questions regarding the future location of the church were treated as out of place, revealing an orientation toward mobility and divine providence rather than institutional permanence.

POWs pathways of African Pentecostals in Turin

These extracts highlight divergent attitudes and aspirations, pointing to distinct trajectories.

A sense of resignation toward both social condition and spatial location characterizes the narratives of Francis, Joseph, and Jessica. Owing to repeated relocations, Francis is acutely aware of his marginal position within the religious field; this awareness is shared by Joseph and Jessica, all three explicitly linking their constrained situations to their socio-economic status, which effectively anchors them to their current positions. Fear and hesitation also emerge as a common thread in their experiences and extend to the accounts of Martin and Joel. Martin is explicit in stating that, following his initial negative encounter with a landlord, he feared facing an even worse situation while being unable to respond or seek redress. Joel, by contrast, attempts to counter such fears through a posture of confidence and pride; nevertheless, the conversation revealed that his relocation entailed significant difficulties, most notably the loss of a substantial number of congregants. Overall, these trajectories are marked by a degree of disillusionment and a limited capacity to counter external constraints.

By contrast, Banji and Steve display more reactive and strategic orientations. Steve, despite ongoing challenges, chooses to remain in place by leveraging his relationship with a powerful landlord. This figure is crucial for the survival of the church and he admits it firmly. Banji adopts an even more proactive stance, seeking to secure the most legally compliant position possible, even in the presence of negative externalities embodied by the neighbors which directly opposed him and his community. Beyond this, he aims to

demonstrate to the surrounding community that the church contributes positively to collective well-being, thereby explicitly challenging prevailing negative perceptions.

A third, contrasting stance is embodied by Edwin and Harriston. Both appear largely indifferent to the uncertainties surrounding location, as they can rely on relocation as an integral component of their religious mission. Although this orientation is mediated by different authorities – spiritual leadership in one case and divine guidance in the other – both position their trajectories as guided by a will external to themselves and to the surrounding environment, whether that of a religious leader or of God.

These trajectories, initially delineated through attitudes, are further substantiated by the relationship between choices and constraints as they unfold through patterns of movement. In the cases of Francis, Joseph, Jessica, Martin, and Joel, constraints overwhelmingly shape mobility, leaving limited scope for agency. Even Joel – who appears to exercise comparatively greater control over relocation – ultimately remains unable to manage its consequences, resulting in adverse outcomes. This set of experiences is therefore conceptualized as an "erratic pathway", highlighting the forced, unstable, and reactive nature of movement under conditions of constraint. At the other end of the spectrum, despite operating under similar structural conditions, Steve and Banji demonstrate a stronger exercise of agency. Steve successfully negotiates with a landlord who is fully aware of the complaints directed at the church, thereby avoiding eviction. Banji, meanwhile, pursues the most legally compliant course of action possible, framing this effort as divinely guided and remaining willing to engage higher levels of municipal governance to secure recognition and stability. This trajectory is defined as an "assertive pathway", underscoring the capacity to mobilize agency even within comparable constraints. Finally, for Edwin and Harriston, constraints related to location are largely inconsequential, as their churches are structurally mobile by design. In this case, spatial stability is neither sought nor required, and agency is not primarily exercised in relation to territorial claims. This trajectory is therefore described as an "unrooted pathway", emphasizing its deterritorialized character. Figure 1 summarizes the different trajectories with different colors.

Across all pathways, the findings reveal persistent resistance to the idealized developmental trajectory of religious communities in a specific religious' economy. More broadly, they confirm that integration is far from a straightforward process (Kong & Woods, 2018), even within contexts that are relatively receptive to religious diversity. A recurring challenge for African Pentecostal churches concerns economic constraints, particularly given that no Pentecostal denomination with a migratory background has entered into an agreement with the Italian state. Most churches are formally registered as cultural associations, while functioning primarily as religious entities, a legal ambiguity that renders them vulnerable to permanent closure by public authorities. This institutional fragility is compounded by the precarious economic conditions of congregants, which increases the risk of eviction due to unpaid rents. As illustrated clearly in Steve's account, informal practices between landlords and renters further exacerbate this vulnerability, especially in situations where property owners exploit communities with limited familiarity with local legal frameworks. Finally, the cases show that locational strategy is rarely proactive; instead, spatial choices are typically the outcome of compromise, shaped by economic constraints and the need to remain close to previous locations.

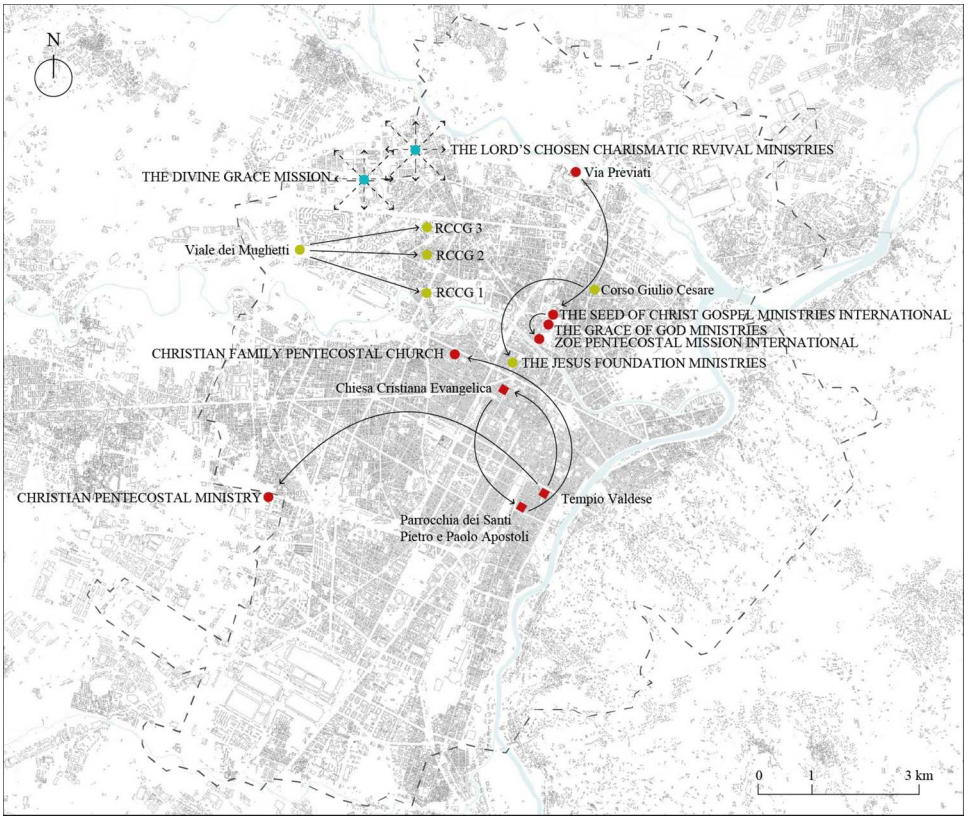

Figure 1. Overview of the trajectories of churches in Turin. In dotted line, the boundaries of the municipality. In red churches in the "erratic pathway", in yellow the ones in the "assertive pathway", in blue the churches in the "unrooted pathway". Personal elaboration.

Finally, internal forms of resistance are particularly salient in the case of the protagonists of the "unrooted pathways", whose trajectories are driven by a distinct set of logics that are largely detached from conventional understandings of agency and structural constraint. In the case of the Lord Chosen, in particular, it is clearly a matter of transnational agency (Kong & Woods, 2018).

In a similar vein, the POW pathways illuminate a key feature of the Pentecostal field that shapes internal resistance across pathways: the perceived integrity of the religious leader in the eyes of the congregation. Within Pentecostalism, leadership occupies a central position, to the extent that it is commonly described as "charismatic". This characterization underscores how maintaining credibility among the faithful is crucial, not only for sustaining authority but also for rendering displacement and spatial reconfiguration acceptable. This dynamic is clearly illustrated by the case of Pastor Joel of The Christian Pentecostal Ministry. His decision to relocate from a centrally located Waldensian church to a peripheral area risked undermining his credibility and, consequently, the loss of followers. It can therefore be argued that the centrality of charismatic leadership constitutes a critical element shaping Pentecostal POW pathways, influencing both the feasibility of mobility and the internal cohesion of congregations.

Conclusions

In contrast to prevailing approaches that analyze urban religions through a static focus on places of worship, this paper takes mobility and dynamism seriously. By introducing David Clapham's (2002) notion of housing pathways and carefully transposing it to the religious domain, the paper employs mobility as a central analytical dimension and foregrounds the interplay between choice and constraint in shaping religious trajectories. In doing so, it responds directly to calls to examine urban religions through integrated accounts of (transnational) agency and local structures (Kong & Woods, 2018). Empirically grounded in the case of African Pentecostal churches in Turin, Italy, the analysis contributes to scholarship on Global Pentecostalism – where impermanence and mobility are particularly salient due to the movement's structural characteristics – while also offering a conceptual approach applicable beyond this specific field.

The analysis identifies three pathways through which churches navigate the urban environment, differentiated by pastoral orientations toward agency and constraint: an *erratic pathway*, in which constraints overwhelmingly shape church trajectories; an *assertive pathway*, in which pastoral agency plays a dominant role; and an *unrooted pathway*, in which mobility and spatial detachment are doctrinally embedded. Most trajectories confirm the difficulty these communities face in remaining in a single location, largely due to socio-economic vulnerability, but also to regulatory frameworks, charismatic leadership, and theological orientations. All in all, these pathways function as flexible, non-reductionist analytical categories able to reveal underlying complexities.

Indeed, the analysis brings to light dynamics that would likely remain obscured in more place-bound approaches. The trajectories of Banji and Steve, for instance, foreground the role of everyday racism in shaping neighborhood-level interactions around places of worship, with reactions ranging from subtle forms of intimidation to explicit opposition. Simultaneously, Francis's trajectory illustrates forms of competition and asymmetry within the Christian field itself, where shared worship spaces expose power relations between denominations and often result in renewed displacement. These findings resonate with Knott's (2005) observation that attention to location, space, and place frequently produces unexpected insights, while also demonstrating that such insights are further amplified when spatial analysis is explicitly combined with a focus on mobility and movement.

A further contribution of this mobility-centered perspective concerns the role of the city itself, and more specifically, the ways in which secular institutions mediate religious practices. The case of Turin shows that even in contexts widely regarded as relatively progressive in accommodating ethno-religious diversity, urban environments continue to impose significant constraints on religious groups, including those whose practices foreground impermanence. While local governance seeks to mitigate planning obstacles and facilitate accommodation, it remains bounded by national-level legal standards and implicit hierarchies. In the absence of public provision for places of worship, religious groups are therefore pushed into competition for suitable locations within the private real estate market – a dynamic that particularly disadvantages African Pentecostal churches, given their limited institutional and financial capital and their lack of sustained dialogue with municipal authorities. In this respect, Turin's religious economy displays notable similarities with that of Singapore, despite differences in regulatory frameworks

and political rationales, particularly in the ways religious groups are pushed into competition for suitable locations through reliance on the private market. In the Turin case, however, this market-driven configuration is accompanied by the emergence of informal landlord-renters dynamics, which can become central to the everyday functioning of religious communities. Such an under-layer underscore how, beyond formal regulatory arrangements, market mechanisms shape religious trajectories in ways that sit uneasily with ideals of institutional consolidation and stability.

Finally, this case offers insight into the nature of secularity in contemporary Italy. The production of constraints for non-Catholic groups through the entanglement of planning regulations, legal hierarchies, and institutional practices – situated between restrictive national frameworks and comparatively open local governance – points to a form of secularity in which Catholicism continues to play a structuring role. This finding aligns with theories of multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt, 2012), which emphasize historically and contextually differentiated configurations of secularism rather than a single universal model. Viewed through the pathway framework, these dynamics reveal a specific configuration of infra-secular geographies (Dora, 2016), in which a Catholic "subconscious" surfaces not only in legal provisions but also in everyday governance practices.

Notes

1. The list of denominations who obtained this type of agreement (*Intesa*) can be found online at this link: https://presidenza.governo.it/usri/confessioni/intese_indice.html. This recognition includes specific legal obligations for the parties, and gives access to an economic contribution from the Italian taxpayers, among other things.
2. The list of denominations recognized as *Culti Ammessi* under Law 1159/1929 can be found online at the following link: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_di_enti_di_culto_non_cattolici_disciplinati_dalla_legge_1159/1929. It is important to stress that only seven out of the 36 denominations listed have a migratory background.
3. "Churches within five minutes walking distance and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries" "Our Vision Mission Statement", Author and Date Unrecorded (official RCCG webpage) http://www.rccges.org/page20.html [Accessed on February 2022].
4. This data elaboration from ISTAT (2023), reported in the following report: https://prefettura.interno.gov.it/it/prefetture/torino/notizie/presentato-rapporto-2023-dellosservatorio-sugli-stranieri [Accessed on January 2026].

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ORCID

Giulia Massenz http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8296-0416

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