The legal geographies of places of worship: spatial regulation, governance, and everyday racism in Italy

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to critically examine the regulation of diversity within an emerging political context marked by populist, xenophobic, and racist tendencies. Drawing on a legal geographical perspective (Blomley, 2003, 2012; Delaney, 2004, 2010; Braverman et al., 2014), the study investigates the mechanisms of spatial regulation through which the accommodation of religious diversity in Italy is either enabled or constrained, as well as the socio-spatial consequences of these processes. It does so by focusing on places of worship as contested sites where social anxieties are crystallized and competing identities are articulated (Dunn, 2001; Gale, 2005; Torrekens, 2013; Chiodelli & Moroni, 2017). Empirically, the analysis examines two religious groups – Muslims and African Pentecostals – across two regional contexts characterized by distinct political trajectories.

The dissertation is structured around three articles. The first article considers impermanence as a defining feature of religious minority places of worship in general, and of African Pentecostals in particular. It identifies two primary forces shaping this condition: land-use planning and market pressures, even in locality often described as laboratories of religious governance (Turin, Piedmont) (Griera et al., 2018). The second article turns to what is commonly understood as the normative mode of regulating non-Catholic places of worship in Italy: judicial decision-making through court rulings. Focusing on Lombardy, the analysis reveals a regulatory landscape in which technical matters of spatial regulation are frequently treated superficially by judges. In this context, urban law concepts are mobilized in ways that evoke a form of police rationality (Dubber, 2005; Valverde, 2008), producing a tension – and at times a bottleneck – between regulatory reasoning and rights-based claims. The third article examines the social consequences of this under-regulated and highly discretionary environment. It shows how everyday forms of racism, emerging in interactions between local residents and immigrant religious communities, are deeply entangled with

culturally loaded legal concepts – particularly those related to nuisance and decorum – which are often invoked in processes leading to eviction.

Overall, the findings point to a regulatory landscape in which meaningful change depends on critically reworking urban legal practices that are deeply embedded in social and cultural assumptions. In this sense, the thesis contributes to a reconceptualization of land-use planning law and spatial regulation that takes "race" seriously as a structuring dimension of urban governance.

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