Urban public space as multi-religious space

Huge cities are inherently linked to social diversity. Not only do they attract and accommodate people of various backgrounds, but the urban public space itself serves as a fabric of difference and social innovation. In his classic manifesto on urban studies, Simmel (1976) describes the individual's daily struggle against an overload of impressions and information, which results in the evolution of unique personal identities. The concentration and heterogeneity of people, ideologies, skills and goods that are immanent to the urban public space, cause a dense interplay that constantly creates new cultural and social formations (Mumford 1937; Wirth 1938). Nowhere does this contingency become as manifest as in the urban public spaces, where social heterogeneity and the liberties tied to anonymity are most extensive and serve as the foundation for a multitude of simultaneous processes of social adaptation and individualization. Simply said, people who otherwise would not have interacted with each other do so in a city’s public spaces on a regular basis (Sennett 1991).

The public in secular societies is prototypically conceived as the sphere of reason (Calhoun 2008), which implies limitations to religion. Nevertheless, numerous authors (most notably Casanova 1994) have over the years pointed out a continuous presence of religion in the public sphere in a variety of secular national contexts. While religion can be detached from societal spheres as politics and economics in a formal sense, its factual embedment in society unfolds in the public in alternative ways. On the one hand, religious institutions maintain their importance in secular societies due to historically developed structures, strategic partnerships with political and economic actors, and legal agreements within the hosting states. On the other hand, religiosity remains an impartible attribute of many of the individuals who constitute society and is reflected in their social practices, since freedom of belief comes along as an accompanying feature of secularity. While religious subjects find themselves in a situation in which they cannot evict the secular principles on which society is founded, at the same time society has to accept the rootedness of their worldviews in the sacred (Calhoun 2008, p. 10).
In urban public space, secularity does not necessarily mean the absence of religion, but in some sense even quite the contrary. While secularity abolishes religious hegemony in society by setting limits to the overall importance of one dominant religion, at the same time it opens up the possibility of religious co-presences and thereby competition, which can be quite stimulating for the religious field as such. Whereas large-scale religious activities usually require the approval of regulatory political bodies, the religiosity of individuals—as a personal liberty—is out of reach and therefore relatively free to manifest in urban public spaces. Thus, religious presence occurs as a side effect of the general religiosity in society, but as well as a consequence of intentional action, since public space poses a valuable resource in order to reach people (Delgado 1999). In contrast to most places of worship, which are homogeneous in terms of religion, urban public space enables interaction with outsiders, and thereby with potential converts. Proselytization may be considered a general aim of most religions who hold claims to absolute validity. Interactions in the public space usually imply a low level of commitment, which enables an unconstrained mode of communication and proselytization.

The retreat of religion into the private sphere is often pointed out as the crucial element of secularization theory, since it was assumed that religion would vanish in the long term if it is first isolated from society (Casanova 1994, pp. 19ff.). A religion that is an integral element of public life, will, on the contrary, steadily take part in the reproduction of society. Consistent with Arendt’s (1958) notion of the public as a common project resulting in a durable whole, mere access guarantees the continued existence and evolution of religions. While religious heterogeneity in a society implies a plurality of religious symbolic systems in the public space, secularity—the absence of a hegemonic religion—unfolds in a setting of contingency and personal insecurity (Delgado 1999, p. 151), which ultimately favours individual approaches to religion.

To illustrate this argument, I will use empirical data from Guayaquil, Ecuador, where the traditionally dominating Catholicism is challenged by a rising Evangelicalism. The crucial role of urban public space in spreading the respective religious agendas translates into a considerable presence of both denominations. The interplay of different, yet similar symbolic systems enables religious exchange and adaption, which cause the emergence of individual syncretic beliefs. The data consists of observations in the city during five months in 2013 and interviews with its residents as well as representatives of different religious communities and the municipality of Guayaquil.

**Multiple religious participation**

Intricate religiosity, which goes beyond the beliefs and practices of one clearly defined denomination, currently enjoys rising interdisciplinary attention. Since singular religious affiliations prove to be inadequate to understand individual action and broader social patterns in an increasing number of cases, academic fields like political science (Putnam and Campbell 2012), sociology (Wuthnow 2005; Sigalow 2016), religious studies and theology (Cornille 2002; Rajkumar et al. 2016) engage in a more differentiated understanding. Spatial approaches giving insight on conditions and modes of the interactions between different religious systems (Burdick 1996; Orsi 1999; Knott 2005), however, are rather scarce to date although interest is growing.

The diversification of religion on a global scale (Pew Research Center 2017) can be attributed to an increased mobility and interaction of religious subjects, but also the continuous process of global urbanization that leads to a pluralization of lifestyles (Brenner...
and Keil 2014). All of these processes correspond with widespread tendencies towards increasing acceptance of religious diversity (Chaves 2013). As an illustration, while at least 90% of Latin America’s population was Catholic until the 1960s, by 2010 the share was less than 70% (Pew Research Center 2014). The considerable number of people joining Evangelical and other Protestant churches or rejecting organized religion altogether opens up spaces for religious identities that are in between the established denominations and cannot entirely be grasped by the concept of conversion.

‘Conversion’ traditionally refers to the swap of one singular religious involvement in favour of another (Gillespie 1991). It includes a major alteration in one’s worldview and a fundamental change of the religious habitus that implies a reorientation in the mental and social life of the believer (Edgell 2012, p. 254). In this respect, DeGloma (2014, pp. 13ff.) differentiates a three-step narrative consisting of ‘a past state of “darkness,”’ a ‘discovery and personal transformation’ and the achievement of a ‘state of “light.”’ On the other hand, multiple religious participation was perceived as a modification or even lesser version of conversion for a long time (Thatamanil 2016, p. 10; Lynn Carr 2017, p. 61), since it requires the combination of different (and often even competing) religious systems. Multiple religious participation is based on the addition of external religious practices and beliefs, while at least parts of the former are retained. Thereby, the mending of different religious systems takes place within the spiritual life of a single person.

Concepts to grasp multiple religious participation are manifold. Some authors pursue approaches that limit themselves on the hybrid practices of believers. The particular manifestations in this case are attributed to a multiplicity of separate original traditions as forms of ‘lived’ or ‘everyday’ religion and interpreted as an incoherence between the formal doctrines and actual everyday practice (Hall 1997; Ammerman 2007, 2013; McGuire 2008). Accordingly, religious subjects in pluralistic societies are able to draw elements from a variety of religious systems more freely (Lyon 2000; Partridge 2004), to switch codes depending on the circumstances (McAlister 1998) or even to translate religious concepts into different frameworks (Murphy 1988). Other concepts favour the idea of individualized sets of beliefs and practices as religious systems in their own right. Despite remaining ties, ultimately they overwrite the original religious identity in favour of a new one. In this regard, ‘syncretism’ poses the most popular and yet a very fuzzy term. Even though numerous attempts to clarify the definition were made in the past (for example Pye 1971; Colpe 1977), there is considerable disagreement and the term continues to be used in a loose manner.

The term ‘syncretism’ was originally applied to the persistence of autochthonous religious practices and beliefs despite a concluded Christian proselytization in (post)colonial contexts (Kraemer 1954; Anacin 2015). In its contemporary form, it refers to a dynamic process, which is caused by the overlap of different religious systems and a social adaptation (Pedrucci 2016). This poses a renunciation to the original meaning, which implied a diminution or the jumbling up of religion (Pye 1994). One can speak of syncretism if elements, clearly recognizable belonging to at least two religions, merge. They exceed the addition of different religious elements and ultimately lead to their coalescence into something new. The process includes practices, beliefs and religious communities (Sigalow 2016). Considering the fact that by this definition in essence any religion is a product of syncretism, in order to maintain the raison d’être of the term Pye (1994) argued for a distinction between synthesis and syncretism. While he understands the former as the conclusion to a process and the stable formation of a new religion, the latter is characterized by its processual nature. Pye (1994, p. 222) highlights that in syncretism:
The close association of elements of diverse origin is commonly more complex than a mere mixture and is not necessarily stable or permanent. It is noteworthy that closely associated traditions may rediverge after some time, with a reassertion of distinct strands of meaning.

He names three characteristics of syncretistic patterns: they are coherent for the person concerned at the time, they are ambiguous in that they usually combine divergent meanings, and they are temporary in that the ambiguity tends to some kind of resolution. In her work on the United States, Sigalow (2016) identifies four conditions that determine the emergence of syncretism: the similarity of the merging religions, the historical and social tensions between them, the compatibility of symbols and practices, and the level of constraints and encouragements towards syncretism.

Despite the sophisticated theoretical differentiation, it is necessary to point out that these approaches ultimately still pose generalizations in order to ease understanding, while religion may take even more individual forms than they allow (Bellah and Madsen 1996, p. 221).

**Interdenominational syncretism in Guayaquil**

The Ecuadorian Constitution passed in 2008 is often considered the most secular in Latin America and even the world (Asamblea Constituyente 2008). While freedom of religion has existed in Ecuador since the end of the 19th century, laicism and secularity are now highlighted as core foundations of the state, while the Catholic Church—despite its historical and structural relevance—and even God, are not mentioned explicitly anymore. The constitution grants absolute religious equality and extensive rights to religious practice. Religious plurality is pointed out as a key attribute of the Ecuadorian society and national identity. Nevertheless, restrictions to religious activities in the public space can be applied in cases of offences towards religious liberty and diversity as well as security and traffic concerns.

Guayaquil has a population of about 2.5 million people and a reputation for very vivid public spaces. They are traditionally the location of social, political and commercial life (Andrade 2006, pp. 174ff.). Guayaquil accommodates the seat of an archdiocese and contains approximately 200 Catholic Churches (Catholic Hierarchy 2015). The official share of 85% of the population being Catholic in 2013 seems exaggerated, since infant baptism and the Catholic Church’s involvement in state services such as education and health care inflate the numbers. In fact, the reach of Catholicism diminishes constantly and especially among the youth who have become more and more alienated by the Catholic Church (P Pierre 2013, personal communication, 28.09). Nevertheless, the urban space is considerably shaped by Catholicism, in the form of iconic churches, statues, murals, the naming of the streets, etc.

Non-Catholic religions started to gain notable presence in Guayaquil from the 1960s onwards and are exclusively associated with Christianity. Various Evangelical churches make up the bulk nowadays, while there are also smaller groups of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons (Holland 2009, pp. 11ff.). The estimated share of Evangelicals in the population of Guayaquil is 10–20%, depending on the sources. Even though the exact number is hard to determine for reasons that will be clarified, it is known that in 2011 there were more than 2,000 evangelical congregations in the city (Gestdepro 2011). While some are integrated in larger associations, 40% act independently, often competing with each other, which fuels the quick growth.

Two convictions of the Evangelicals are crucial to their presence in Guayaquil’s urban public space. On the one hand, they cherish an individual approach to interpreting the
Bible, which—in opposition to clerical authorities—is perceived as the chief God-given truth and imperative to everyday life (Smilde 2007). On the other, they are characterized by an intense commitment to preaching the gospel. Missionary work does not aim primarily for the achievement of formal conversions, but rather for spreading the wider idea of a personal and intense relation to God. The public spaces are essential in this respect, since they offer access to the whole of urban society and therefore many persons who are dissatisfied with their religious lives and open to new ideas (Delgado 1999, pp. 141ff.). Therefore, most of Guayaquil’s squares, parks and street-corners are crowded with Evangelical lay preachers who share their thoughts on biblical contents and their implications. Furthermore, Evangelicals often organize open air round tables to discuss the Bible and distribute pamphlets, which spread spiritual and mundane messages. Collective activities in the public spaces such as masses and processions, which demand permits, are usually negated by the municipality on grounds of a disproportionate obstruction of traffic (F Loor 2013, personal communication, 12.06).

The preachers are from heterogeneous social backgrounds, perform expressively and use various kinds of auxiliary means, such as microphones, music, costumes and assistants, which are helpful to attract attention. Sometimes they limit themselves to re-narrating classical Biblical motives, but mostly they turn to practical matters of everyday life, such as sexuality, family, children, politics, poverty, violence, crime, drugs and alcohol. Put simply, the Evangelical gospel highlights the advantages of a devout life and lays out a vision of an alternative society in which prosperity will come to true believers and inequalities of ethnicity and gender will be abolished eventually (Smilde 2007). It offers an ethical framework for society and normative ideals for individual conduct, which are presented as cornerstones of a true faith. This stands in opposition to the critique of a fading Catholicism whose incoherence and heresy are blamed for the pathologies in society. A direct linkage between religious life and secular matters increases the relevance of the Evangelical gospel and expands its reach, while efficient networks of mutual solidarity within the Evangelical communities seem to confirm the spiritual claims.

Evangelical presence and religious discourse are the foundation of the rapid growth of the denomination and large numbers of conversions at the expense of Catholicism. The search for a personal relation to God, the appeal of religious services in the congregations and the emphasis on ethics in everyday life pose the main motives (A Ordóñez 2013, personal communication, 16.09). Despite all mutual criticism and conflict between both denominations this dynamic is supported by the common Christian roots of Evangelicalism and Catholicism (C Parra 2013, personal communication, 24.07). The similarities deriving from a shared holy scripture, the same central figures and events, ease the swap of religions, but also allow people to transcend the dividing lines between the two denominations. As one interviewee states:

I used to do it [use a crucifix and participate in processions], like every Catholic should. Lately . . . I diverged from religion. But now, when I have the time, I visit the Evangelical temples on weekends. No one really knows if I am Catholic or Evangelical. I am what I am. I do have an inner faith and I think that the religion is not that important. The person is. And if someone tells me that I am a Catholic, I just respond that I believe in God. In the end, all of those religions helped me to understand the word of God. The Catholic religion could not have done this alone, but that does not mean, that I have to enrol to another religion. I am Catholic since I was born.

(Street interview 2013, 10.09, own translation)
In between the adaptation and the refusal of a belief, the public space offers a mode of interaction that is fuelled by the co-presence of divergent yet similar religious discourses and symbols that are non-coercive at the same time. The circumstances initiate mundane conversations about ethics and the condition of society, but also on strictly religious matters such as the importance of belief, the role of clergy, the sacredness and significance of biblical figures, and the use of statues and crucifixes. In the absence of a religious hegemony, people are able to reach individual positions through these interactions, rather than reproduce pre-made ones. As another interviewee says:

Catholics believe ... I believe in the almighty God, in his son, the virgin Mary and the Saints. The Evangelicals don’t, they only believe in God and his son. I talk to them, I am Catholic but I just like religion ... when I listen to the Evangelical religion, everything that deals somehow with God is good ... I respect their religion and they have to respect mine. After all, we have freedom of religion. Instead of claiming, that the things are like this or that, it is better to talk. Concerning religion, you have to talk to each other to learn something.

(Street interview 2013, 09.09, own translation)

The blurring between the two denominations is put into practice predominantly by people departing from Catholicism. One Evangelical official confirmed that some Evangelical communities consist in great quantities of believers who still consider themselves Catholics (F Loor 2013, personal communication, 12.06). Since a majority of Evangelicals in Guayaquil used to be Catholics at some point in their past, their conscious choice of religion in combination with adult baptism cause a stronger rootedness in Evangelicalism. Additionally, the high intensity of religious life in Evangelical communities and the discourse against Catholicism hinder religious openness in the other direction. Still, a position in between the denominations in some cases appeals even to Evangelicals, e.g. to worship the Virgin Mary, which officially is frowned upon. Furthermore, the intersections between the denominations enable people to choose their religious identity depending on how the communities respond to them. As one tells me:

There are also homosexual persons like myself. And the Evangelicals ... instead of including the people, they push them away and hide them in some corners, where they don’t have to see them, so that they can have only the decent people in their temples ... That’s why I prefer to go to the Catholic Church. Things are different there, not that repressive, way more relaxed.

(Street interview 2013, 13.09, own translation)

While the phenomenon of interdenominational syncretism applies to a limited number of people, the process of merging in the public spaces is more advanced in reference to religious symbols. The paramount importance of the Bible in Evangelicalism causes a symbology based on text and quotes. Phrases like ‘Dios guía mi camino (God leads my ways),’ ‘Christo, te amo! (Jesus, I love you!’ or passages from the Bible are ubiquitous in Guayaquil as graffiti, decorating public transport and private cars, clothing, shop signs and so on. Due to their popularity and presence in the public spaces, they have gradually spilled over into the Catholic community (C Pienchester 2013, personal communication, 13.06). Today, they are hardly of use in identifying Evangelicals, but rather serve as a common denominator with Catholicism. Another example is the habit of permanently carrying around a Bible, which originally used to be associated exclusively with Evangelicals. However, the same applies for traditional Catholic characteristics, like the religious greeting
‘Dios te bendiga! (God bless you!),’ or kneeling or carrying a veil in churches among woman, which nowadays can be observed in both communities. The merging manifests most in the offers of street vendors of religious items who do not aim to cater for the needs of a particular denomination. The most iconic Catholic habits like the use of statues, crucifixes and rosaries pose an exception and are usually condemned among Evangelicals. Thus, the shared symbols pave the way for further interactions between the two denominations and clear the way for the evolution of religious identities. Here as elsewhere, Evangelical elements are more likely to be universalized, while Catholic ones are considered with somewhat more skepticism among Evangelicals.

**Political factors**

While the spiritual foundation of Catholicism in Guayaquil is fading, the Catholic Church can build on a favourable relation with the political leaders of the city. After a century of grave instability, the Social Christian Party (PSC) has managed to stay in power continuously since 1992. Its political success is possible due to an alliance with the Opus Dei led archdiocese of Guayaquil, which is illustrated best through personal overlaps on various levels. For example, the urban police force and the military frequently support Catholic events, representatives of the archdiocese are always present in municipal events, and the long-term major—and member of Opus Dei himself—Jaime Nebot, is often the honorary guest in religious gatherings. The Church systematically incites its followers to support the traditionalist agenda of the PSC and in exchange benefits in many ways (Andrade 2006, p. 162).

Regarding the emergence of interdenominational syncretism two points are crucial. On the one hand, the Catholic Church has unrestricted access to the city’s public spaces and uses them for larger activities on a regular basis. On the other hand, Catholicism is the central element of the political discourse on values in society and identity—which is of particular significance considering Guayaquil’s long-lasting demands for autonomy and its competition with the country’s capital Quito. As a consequence, the Catholic Church can present itself as an object of political relevance and incarnation of local tradition (G La Mota 2013, personal communication, 08.08). Processions and open air masses in public space are perceived as events of general interest and attract people from the entire urban society. The scope is boosted by live music, dancing and firecrackers, so that the events regularly include persons of other beliefs as well as non-believers.

It is common for political symbols like national and regional flags and even logos of the PSC to be used in combination with Catholic symbology in processions. Furthermore, the political symbols decorate Catholic Churches on secular holidays. Numerous Catholic monuments along with the principal churches remain Guayaquil’s landmarks and objects of great historic relevance. They are located in the most appealing places in the city, which enhances the visibility of Catholic core elements and promotes them as part of the daily routines of the urban population. In exchange, the Catholic Church campaigns for statues honouring past political greats of the PSC—like the controversial León Febres Cordero—pushing the merger of denomination and city even further. The ties between Catholicism and Guayaquil are reflected also in the naming of informal residential areas, like Ciudad de Dios (City of God), La Trinidad (Trinity), Monte Sinai (Mount Sinai), Voluntad de Dios (Will of God), Casa de Fe (House of Faith).

Regardless of the secular constitution, Catholicism thus holds a state-religion-like status on the urban level, with implications for the political identity and social environment of Evangelicals and non-religious persons. Self-identifying with Guayaquil to some extent
equals a self-identification with the Catholic Church, as is illustrated by the following quote of a municipal official (M Marriott 2013, personal communication, 18.06): ‘It is beyond doubt, that Catholicism is the central element of identity in cultural, historical, sociological, spiritual and ethical regards, in Latin America, in Ecuador and as well in Guayaquil.’ While Evangelical symbology became popular as universal symbol of religiosity in Guayaquil, Catholic symbology is ubiquitous even beyond the religious. Consequently, crucifixes, rosaries and respective tattoos are not only signalling devoutness or an affiliation to the Catholic denomination, but in many cases they pose as symbols of popular culture and fashion (Street interviews 2013, 09.09–13.09). Nevertheless, they manifest performativity in favour of Catholicism and contribute to the dispersion of Catholic beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

Competition and conflict are an inherent part of the religious co-presence of Evangelicalism and Catholicism in the public spaces of Guayaquil. They are fought out mostly with words, but occasionally build up into violence. While it is often the differences which trigger the conflict, the reasons for the competition can really be found in the similarities. Evangelicals reject the use of statues and a clerical hierarchy; Catholics reject lay preaching and an alleged fanaticism. Still, it is the commonality of holy scripture and central theological elements that are a threat to the denominations as religious entities in their own right. Even though the very existence of the denominations may not be at stake, the dynamics of conversions and multiple religious participations are proof of a given vulnerability. Consequently, the natures of the opposing communities are rarely the subject of church debates, other than in a demonizing manner (P Pierre 2013, personal communication, 28.09). This substantiates Sigalow’s (2016) suggestion that a compatibility and similarity of practices and tenets in the original denominations favours the emergence of syncretism.

Given the condition of religious freedom, the urban public space enables the interaction of different religious practices, symbols and associated meanings. It facilitates urban dwellers’ ability to interact with religion in a nonchalant manner, which neutralizes the initial hurdle. While the religious habitus within any denomination can be assumed as heterogeneous (Tse 2013), the circumstances of urban public space considerably augment its contingencies. Religious subjects’ capability to handle their own religiosity in flexible and reflexive ways (Mellor and Shilling 2014) has the potential to blur the dividing lines between denominations and produces new syncretic identities, even though they are confined to a minority.

The general notion of monolithic religions has deficits for understanding certain particularities of individual religious lives in the context of post-modernity. Syncretism remains a valuable concept in this regard, since it acknowledges the possibility of temporal and unique religious identities. More work needs to be done to grasp the extent of syncretism and the religious and secular foundations enabling it. However, the significance of syncretism for the further evolution of the original denominations as well as new religious systems potentially evolving from it make it worth the effort.

References


Emergence of interdenominational syncretism