

Freedom of religion or belief in urban planning of places of worship

An interreligious participatory mechanism in Manizales, Colombia

John F. Osorio¹

Abstract

Freedom of religion or belief can be violated in different spheres of people's lives, such as schools, homes, hospitals or workplaces. This article considers issues in urban spaces, where planners make decisions that may affect the establishment and development of worship in the places designated for it. In Manizales, a Colombian city, an interreligious participatory mechanism was created to help identify these issues in greater detail. The article discusses how this mechanism helped to generate some proposals for the prevention of violations of freedom of religion or belief in urban planning.

Keywords interreligious dialogue, freedom of religion or belief, urban planning, places of worship, participatory action research, contextual theology.

1. Introduction

Decisions made by urban planners can directly or indirectly violate the freedom of religion or belief of those who establish places of worship in urban spaces. Identifying and understanding the factors related to such violations is especially important in situations where religion is not an important concern for planners (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2013). Since 2016, I have been observing places of worship in various countries, seeking to understand their relationship with the surrounding environment. From 2017 to 2019, I led the participation of religious entities in urban planning in Manizales, Colombia, which allowed me to understand that multiple related factors are involved in these situations.

In Morocco, Islamic places of worship have many privileges over others, as they are established even in airports and marketplaces and are part of the social fabric

¹ John F. Osorio was leader of Public Policy on Freedom of Religion or Belief for the Municipality of Manizales, Colombia from 2017 to 2020. Currently, he leads the urban planning project for places of worship in the Colombian Directorate of Religious Affairs. He holds two master's degrees, one in humanities and theology (Catholic University of Manizales) and the other in environment, development and civil engineering (National University of Colombia). Article received 2 July 2020; accepted 27 May 2021. This article uses American English. Contact: jfosorioc@unal.edu.co.

in a deeply rooted way. In contrast, the relatively few Christian places of worship are continually fighting for recognition of their religious freedom. In the United States or South Africa, the urban setting is very different, and one finds places of worship of various religious entities located almost naturally in the urban landscape. Places of worship appear in tourist areas such as New York's Fifth Avenue or in commercial areas of the streets of Durban. Unfortunately, due to concerns about religious extremism, rules for establishing mosques have been debated in generally free countries such as the United States (Lugo 2016) and Spain (Rodríguez 2017).

One way in which freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) could be violated is through zoning laws that prohibit places of worship in some areas. For example, in Montréal, Canada, tensions have arisen due to zoning restrictions that are incompatible with the appearance of new religious expressions in the territory. In 2011, the Superior Court of the province of Québec ordered the Church of God Mont-de-Sion to move its place of worship to another neighborhood, because it was in an area authorized for commerce and not for religious use. The Badr Islamic Center was threatened with a similar fate, but the Superior Court declared the zoning regulations inapplicable because it viewed them as violating the FoRB of the members of this religious group.

Guardia (2011) argues that places of worship should not be located far from communities, such as segregated commercial areas, but should be part of residential sectors, since proximity to religious services is one attribute of decent housing. Other factors such as public transportation should also be related to FoRB. In this regard, Ponce and Cabanilas referred to a situation in Mississippi, USA, where a Muslim group could not find adequate conditions to establish a place of worship near the urban center. The authors stated: "By making a mosque relatively inaccessible within city limits for Muslims who do not have a car, the city restricts the exercise of their religion" (Ponce and Cabanilas 2011:37).

Although this issue is a topic of increasing debate, there are few examples in the countries discussed above where the interreligious community participates in urban planning. Religious entities can help to identify ways in which FoRB may be violated. In Manizales, Colombia, an interreligious participatory mechanism was created to assist in identifying factors in planning processes, including natural risk management, road signs, urban safety, public lighting, georeferencing and zoning, that may affect FoRB. This article describes how that participatory mechanism was constructed, as well as factors identified and interventions proposed to improve the urban planning of places of worship in Manizales.

2. The state, urban planning and freedom of religion or belief

In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which contains a guarantee of freedom of religion. Many



Figure 1. Examples of places of worship in urban spaces. From left to right: **(1)** The Heritage Mosque Masjid Maryam, Durban, South Africa, in front of a housing facility and adjacent to an office area; **(2)** the Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International in Montreal, on Rue Sauvé E close to the metro station, markets, shops and schools; **(3)** places of worship on corridors of Jemaa el Fna Square in Marrakesh, Morocco; **(4)** St Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, New York, in a popular tourist area. Source: Author.

other countries have adopted the UDHR and have committed themselves to guaranteeing FoRB (as it is now widely called) to their people. Over the years, FoRB has come to be understood as a multifaceted and multidimensional right that encompasses different spheres of human life, such as the guarantee of religious practice in all types of places of worship.

Because they are physical structures located in urban spaces, these worship places are regulated by urban planning, which deals not only with places of worship, but also with educational, safety and health facilities, among others. Urban planning implies an exercise of state intervention, since it constitutes “a regulatory, bureaucratic and procedural activity” (Tewdwr-Jones 1999:123). The question arises: to what extent can or should a state guarantee FoRB through the urban planning of places of worship?

Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2013:222) affirm that religion is not greatly considered in planning, and they describe this as an “unfortunate neglect.” They add that due to secularization, the role of religion is often overlooked, but that there are many reasons why it should be understood and included in urban planning. Bielefeldt, Ghanea, and Wiener (2016) reflect on the secularity of the state and argue that it has been understood in two ways: in a positive sense, related to a state's commitment to FoRB as part of religious pluralism, or negatively as an antireligious attitude.

Depending on their conception of the state, urban planning may seek to benefit all religious entities equally, or it may not seek to benefit any. The approach is related to the state's approach to religious neutrality, which theoretically can be understood either as non-intervention in religious matters or as offering support to all religious entities without taking into account the prevalence of Anyone of them and without favoring any particular religious group.

To enjoy the positive sense of secularity, various authors have recommended that the state, while not identifying itself with any particular belief group (political secularism), should also differentiate itself from “doctrinal secularism.” Manouchehri-far (2018) describes secularism in planning from a positive perspective, calling on planners to separate their personal religious affiliation from the political status they hold as planners so that the accommodation of a multiplicity of religious beliefs and identities can be achieved. In addition, he believes that secularism forces planners to ensure that their interventions do not infringe upon FoRB, and he advises planners to be self-critical of government structures.

Bielefeldt, Ghanea, and Wiener (2016) also presented a general criticism of the states, arguing that none of them comply or even attempt to comply, in practice, with the norms of normative universalism. They emphasize that FoRB must protect the rights of members of both large and small communities, as well as minorities. Thus, the state must guarantee through urban planning the FoRB of religious communities, regardless of the size of their religious buildings or how long they have been there. These authors also point out that FoRB cannot have the status of a human right unless it shares a universalist character, which defines the UDHR’s approach to human rights in general. To reflect the universalist character of FoRB, urban planning must grant inclusive treatment to the different religious entities that establish their places of worship in urban spaces. Bielefeldt et al. add that “respecting the self-understanding of all human beings must remain the starting point and a guiding principle for any universalistic conceptualization of Freedom of Religion or Belief” (2016:19).

The foregoing discussion implies that planners must know the religious panorama of the territory where their work is carried out. To achieve this goal, it is advisable to carry out an interreligious dialogue that listens to the different voices of local residents and groups. If we start from the postulate that respect for self-understanding is the first step toward guaranteeing FoRB, then we could deduce that any urban planning policy that does not know the self-understanding of religious entities is at risk of violating the FoRB of these religious entities. In fact, Bielefeldt et al. affirm that the state, as part of its responsibility to protect human rights, must provide an adequate infrastructure to make rights effective and must carry out various actions, including the promotion of “interreligious dialogue initiatives” (2016:34).

The exercise of listening to communities through participatory mechanisms in order to grasp their self-understanding in urban decisions is known as Participatory Urban Planning (Oliveras 2008). In the case of places of worship, interreligious dialogue is important not only for this purpose, but also to guarantee FoRB in its universalist conceptualization. Taking into account that urban planning is also “the set of social mechanisms and processes through which different behaviors

and movements affect the transformation of the city, are consciously controlled and determine its development” (Ledrut 1985:43), I propose the following compilation of the above-mentioned principles:

The state must implement participatory mechanisms based on interreligious dialogue within urban planning in order to guarantee FoRB from its universal perspective. In this way, a positive sense of secularity is established in the state, allowing religious entities to participate, to present their self-understanding of how they and their places of worship inhabit the territory, and to propose urban planning solutions.

I emphasize the word “mechanism” because interreligious dialogue must entail more than a simple meeting of people and must be established as a fundamental urban element within planning processes.

3. The Colombian context

Colombia belongs to the UN General Assembly and was a signatory of the UDHR in 1948. Later, it signed the American Convention on Human Rights in 1969 and included the protection of FoRB in its 1991 constitution. Afterwards, Law 133 of 1994, or the Law of Freedom of Religion or Belief, was enacted.

Subsequently, Colombia passed Law 388 of 1998, which establishes the conditions for planning a territory but does not require the participation of religious communities to make decisions about places of worship, neither are there any binding policies that ensure the inclusion of the perspective of religious communities in the planning of their places of worship.

According to Open Doors (2016), Colombia is the only country in Latin America in the top 50 of countries with some level of persecution of Christians. In 2018, the Public Policy of Freedom of Religion or Belief was decreed in Colombia, and in the same year, Manizales became the first city in the country to adopt a policy to protect its inhabitants’ FoRB. Between 2017 and 2019, the Interreligious Dialogue for Urbanism (INDIUR) was created in Manizales as a mechanism to guarantee FoRB in urban planning.

4. The methodology for developing the interreligious participatory mechanism

Manizales, founded in 1849 and located in the western part of Colombia, has 430,000 inhabitants and is highly multi-confessional (Moreno 2012). It has 65 religious entities, including Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, among others. Of these religious organizations, 45 participated in this research (69 percent); these participants have a total of 160 places of worship in Manizales.

Before selecting a methodology, the initiative first needed to identify the scope and objectives of the project. The participants decided that they wanted a mechanism, composed of different religious entities, that could influence state decisions concerning places of worship based on the self-understanding of each religious group. In other words, we wanted not just to establish an interreligious dialogue, but also a participatory mechanism in urban decision making.

Having clarified our purpose, we selected the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, which Park (1992:137) describes as “an intentional way of empowering people so that they can take specific actions to improve their living conditions.” PAR is a qualitative method that combines study and action. As those involved carry out collective actions, participation itself becomes the research activity, since participants go from being research objects to research subjects. According to Gonzales-Laporte (2014), this methodology was promoted in Colombia in the 1970s by researchers such as Borda and Rahman (1991), who saw participatory research as a way for the social sciences to apply knowledge for the purpose of human transformation. This methodology has transcended borders and has been used with great effectiveness in North America, Latin America, and Europe.

Some features that characterize the application of PAR are continuous and participatory observation; experiential, active, and dynamic techniques; a focus on self-description; and the systematic return of the knowledge obtained to the studied group with ongoing feedback (Borda 1992; Murcia 2002). In this research, information gathering entailed six focus groups, two interviews, two surveys, one exercise of social cartography, and theological reflections. Finally, our methodology included a documentary review of theology related to interreligious dialogue, which was subsequently discussed with the INDIUR team.

5. Contributions from theology to the construction of INDIUR

How does one establish an interreligious dialogue that can serve as a mechanism for the urban planning of places of worship? This question involves not only sociology, but also theology. Debates have persisted for centuries over how a dialogue between religions can be not only initiated but sustained over time. Theology is related to the PAR methodology, as long as it is done in a contextual manner (Meza, Suárez, and Martínez 2017).

Contextual theology refers to doing theology not with dogmatic exclusivity but in relationship with social problems and situations. There exist, for example, feminist, ecological, indigenous, African American, black, Amerindian, interreligious, intercultural, and economic theologies (Vélez 2005). In this regard, Lonergan (1972:9) states:

Talking about contextual theologies implies definitively changing the conception of theology. It cannot continue to be understood in its classical sense as a reflection

on God, but as a mediation between a certain cultural matrix and the meaning and value of a religion within that matrix.

The dialogue conducted at INDIUR is social and political in nature, seeking to investigate and intervene in urban matters. Pannikar's reflection is very appropriate here: "Interreligious dialogue does not only take place within religious institutions. The religious dimension of human beings permeates each and every political activity." (2017:224).

In a context such as INDIUR, all participants must sense that their spiritual identity is respected, since otherwise they will not return and the interreligious dialogue will not last. Torradeflot (2012) explains that the dialogue does not imply the mixing of religions or the loss of their individual religious identity. Pannikar (2017:126) says, "Apologetics has its own function and place, but not here, in the encounter between religions."

Instead of discussing beliefs, INDIUR became a place to build consensus regarding ways to ensure FoRB for all. As Knitter (2007:103) states, "Interreligious dialogue can be used for common social, environmental or even political concerns, so that different religions can cooperate with each other creating a social or political space, a more specific place in which to live."

Knitter describes four models of interreligious dialogue. He begins with the model of substitution, in which each participant seeks to prevail and persuade the other through theological argumentation. That is not what happens at INDIUR. Instead, the activity there is closer to Knitter's acceptance model, which recognizes that "the religious traditions of the world are really different and we have to recognize and accept those differences" (Knitter 2007:330).

Implementing the acceptance model allows us to create a welcoming and respectful setting for interreligious dialogue. However, that alone is not enough, since the purpose of INDIUR is also to reflect on and act in relation to FoRB in urban planning.

Therefore, the acceptance model is complemented by the Global Ethic Project of Küng (1998), who allows us to reflect on places of worship as contributors to change within an area, regardless of the religious beliefs held. There are ethical values or a "global ethos" that must be known in urban planning so that better projections can be made as to how land use will impact urban space. Küng (1998:80) explains that in all religions there is a "Golden rule" equivalent to that of Christianity: "Do to others what we want them to do to us." In this way, common points can be found in which the religious entities are in solidarity with each other in the search for respect of FoRB, without this collaboration implying the loss of the identity of each one.

Based on this commitment to an “ethical model of acceptance” and a participatory approach to urban planning, along with other theological reflections, the following guidelines were adopted for INDIUR:

1. Understand that other people’s places of worship have a sacred character to them, even if it does not for you.
2. Allow other individuals to be themselves in their urban space and respect their way of inhabiting the territory.
3. Accept the religious identity of one another while firmly retaining your own identity.
4. Acknowledge the areas in common with others without entering their private space to try to convince them of your belief.
5. Achieve interreligious cooperation to identify global ethical values that are taught in places of worship and that impact each territory where they are located.
6. Serve as mediators in urban planning before government entities.
7. An impartial actor can be invited to the Dialogue who takes the reflections of religious entities and helps them turn these into public actions.

6. The identification of violations of the freedom of religion or belief in urban planning

For this exercise, religious entities were represented by their leaders. A diverse set of techniques were applied over a two-year period. First, a preliminary survey helped us identify the situations about which religious leaders were most strongly concerned. Eighty percent of respondents expressed concern about safety and inadequate lighting in the area around their places of worship. One religious organization said that the number of believers attending one of their churches had dropped from 200 to 100 in the past year because the surrounding area had become unsafe, showing a close connection between security and FoRB in urban spaces. Likewise, 60 percent indicated that the state had not provided sufficient road signage around their places of worship, causing a heightened risk of accidents, especially as people were arriving at or departing from worship. Several other concerns were expressed by between 20 and 30 percent of respondents: external noise affecting their services, the absence of parking areas, or interruptions caused by traffic authorities during worship times. Finally, between 10 and 20 percent noted concern about physical damage to their places of worship, the high cost of renting property, and exposure to natural risks such as landslides and fires.

Focus groups were convened to discuss these issues and understand the perspectives of religious leaders more deeply. For example, some minority communities expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that in urban spaces, small places

of worship are often compared to garages, with the result that many Colombians somewhat contemptuously call these fellowships “garage churches.” They emphasized that their facilities are places for religious celebrations and not garages! It was also noted that urban planners required places of worship to provide the same number of parking spaces as for shopping centers. The leaders expressed the view that these two functions are very different: whereas shopping centers receive people 14 hours a day throughout the week, many places of worship are open only two days a week for 2 hours each.

The focus group discussion also highlighted the experience of one place of worship, located on a mountainside, that had to be evacuated as a preventive measure due to the risk of landslides. The participant suggested that such risks should be mitigated in order to enable the church to continue holding worship services.

Moreover, it was found that the municipal government had identified only had 72 places of worship, whereas in reality there were more than 180. Therefore, urban planners have been making their decisions based on their knowledge of fewer than half of all existing places.

These observations showed that FoRB in a particular location is related to natural risk management, urban safety, signage, and georeferencing, among other factors.

A social mapping exercise was carried out with the religious leaders who have their places of worship in the 11 districts of the city, in which these leaders located on a map their places of worship, as well as nearby schools, transportation routes, business districts, areas of poor security, and anything else they considered important. This helped to understand the ways in which the religious entities function in their communities. Among the most important observations, the leaders confirmed that places of worship are places of social cohesion. Many relationships exist between these places of worship and their environment – they are not isolated points in the urban space, but rather they coexist with commercial establishments, houses, schools, and the places of worship of other religious organizations, among others. We found that religious leaders are interested in making their places of worship visible in their local communities and that they seek to select locations in areas of high population density. Therefore, it can be deduced that any urban planning activity that prevents the location of places of worship in these spaces, would ignore these characteristics, interests and self-understanding.

INDIUR participated in the elaboration of the city’s land use plan, which is updated every 12 years, and discovered that a restriction had been adopted declaring that places of worship should be located more than 50 meters away from games of chance or gambling places. But in Manizales, there are about 300 gambling sites, distributed throughout all the neighborhoods. This means

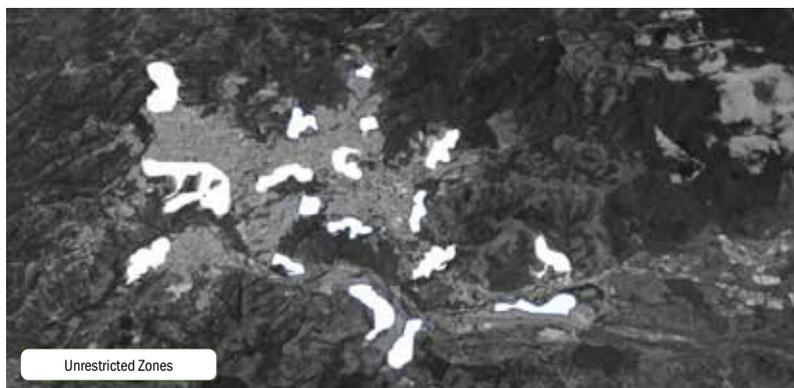


Figure 2. Unrestricted zones. Source: Prepared by the author.

that the restriction would leave very few options available for the location of new places of worship. Figure 2 shows (in white) the only areas that would have been available to locate places of worship had this restriction been approved.

Finally, interviews were conducted with the religious leaders of the INDIUR team, who were asked why they were attracted to their particular urban location. The result of this inquiry is perhaps the most important part of this research, since we learned that many religious entities locate their places of worship as a direct consequence of their religious beliefs. For example, some religious entities choose central sites in the city because they affirm that God is at the center of everything, while others are located high in the mountains because they consider that God is in the heights. Most of the religious organizations are located in urban spaces according to their characteristic doctrinal criteria. For example, the Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International believes it has a message from the Holy Spirit to establish a place of worship in every neighborhood. That is why it is of great interest to this religious organization to be able to locate its places of worship in any area of urban space. The Hare Krishna community and the Anglican community, for their part, seek to locate their places of worship, exclusively in vulnerable areas, because they believe that the poor are those in greatest need of God's help. Roman Catholics and Orthodox located their main places of worship in the center of the city because they think that God must be close to everyone. Therefore, from this research we observe that if urban planning makes decisions without taking these religious beliefs into account, then it can violate FoRB through these urban decisions.

Situation Places of Worship (PW)	Places of Worship by year				Entity in charge
	2017	2018	2019	2020	
PW in landslide risk areas	2	0	0	0	Risk Management Unit
PW at risk from fire	15	15	15	15	Firefighters
PW with high insecurity	21	19	17	17	Secretary Government
PW with moderate security	24	24	20	20	
PW with poor road safety	55	48	44	39	Secretary Traffic
PW far from public transport route	25	27	25	25	
PW with low public lighting	18	10	8	8	INVAMA
PW with blows or graffiti	4	7	7	5	Secretary Government

Table 1. Situations faced by places of worship. Source: Municipality of Manizales.

7. Proposals for the prevention of violations of freedom of religion or belief

Below are the most outstanding accomplishments of INDIUR:

- The team succeeded in including Line 4 in the Public Policy on Freedom of Religion or Belief of Manizales, “Inclusion of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Urban Planning.” It contains such actions as carrying out a security assessment of places of worship and developing a road safety plan to protect believers from the risk of traffic accidents (Municipality of Manizales 2018).
- INDIUR managed the construction of two retaining walls to stabilize the slope of two places of worship, which were at high risk of suffering landslides.
- A protocol was developed for giving priority attention to places of worship that are exposed to fire risk because they are made of wood, straw, bamboo, or other flammable materials.
- With the help of the Secretary of Traffic, the team posted signs at 12 places of worship that were at high risk due to frequent traffic accidents. The signs contain the national logo, but it was modified to be neutral for all religious entities.
- As for the city’s land use plan, the team presented its concerns regarding the number of parking spaces required and managed to extend the condition of building a parking space for every 40 square meters of worship area to one parking space for every 50 square meters. It also secured a provision indicating that the construction of parking lots is required for places of worship greater than 200 square meters in size (Municipality of Manizales 2017).

- The team helped to create a table of indicators that allow citizens to monitor the actions carried out each year by the local government for the benefit of places of worship (see Table 1).

8. Conclusions

Many factors have been identified by religious entities as related to violations of FoRB in urban planning. They include:

- Failure to locate places of worship on the cartography of the city.
- Failure to identify places of worship in areas facing natural risks such as landslides.
- Not having a protocol of attention for places of worship in case of fire.
- Not managing urban safety around places of worship through such actions as good public lighting and the nearby location of police facilities, among others.
- Not providing proper signage and signaling on roads near places of worship so as to prevent traffic accidents, especially when worshippers are arriving or leaving.
- Not guaranteeing access roads or transport routes and platforms wide enough for people to reach the place of worship.
- Equating places of worship with shopping centers with regard to requirements for parking.

Theology enables important reflections so that interreligious dialogue does not remain at the level of transitory encounters but becomes a lasting and transforming mechanism in which the self-understanding of each person is acknowledged, the identity of all participating religious entities is respected, and cooperation between participants is promoted. In addition, theology has provided some useful parameters and guidelines that would facilitate the application of a similar mechanism in other locations to help in guaranteeing FoRB in urban planning. The discovery that theology can make an important contribution to urban planning was itself significant.

The most interesting contribution of this initiative, in my opinion, was the awareness that religious entities located in an urban space have operational criteria specific to each religion. Much research has been conducted on how theology and doctrine are reflected in the architecture of places of worship, but little is known about how theology and doctrine affect the choice of a worship location in an urban area. This is an important point to consider in urban planning so as not to violate the FoRB of any citizens.

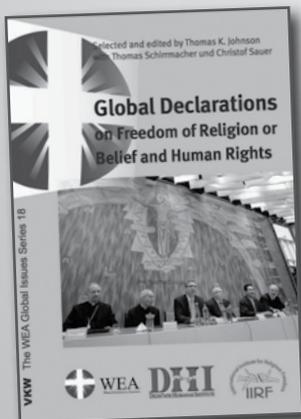
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Global Declarations on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights



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