

The Territorial Expression of Religious Identity: A Case Study of Catholic Communities

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Abstract : The influence of the 'cultural turn' movement and the consequent deconstruction of scientific thought allowed geography and other social sciences to open or deepen their studies based on the analysis of multiple identities, on singularities, on what is particular or what marks the difference between individuals. In the context of postmodernity, the geography of religion has gained a favorable scientific, thematic and methodological focus for the qualitative and subjective interpretation of various religious identities, sacred places, territories of belonging, religious communities, among others. In the context of 'late modernity' or 'net modernity', sacred places and the definition of a network of sacred territories allow believers to attain the 'ontological security'. The integration on a religious group or a local community, particularly a religious community, allows human beings to achieve a sense of belonging, familiarity or solidarity and to overcome, in part, some of the risks or fears that society has discovered. The importance of sacred places comes not only from their inherent characteristics (eg transcendent, mystical and mythical, respect, intimacy and abnegation), but also from the possibility of adding and integrating members of the same community, creating bonds of belonging, reference and individual and collective memory. In addition, the formation of different networks of sacred places, with multiple scales and dimensions, allows the human being to identify and structure his times and spaces of daily life. Thus, each individual, due to his unique identity and life and religious paths, creates his own network of sacred places. The territorial expression of religious identity allows to draw a variable and unique geography of sacred places. Through the case study of the practicing Catholic population in the diocese of Coimbra (Portugal), the aim is to study the territorial expression of the religious identity of the different local communities of this city. Through a survey of six parishes in the city, we sought to identify which factors, qualitative or not, define the different territorial expressions on a local, national and international scale, with emphasis on the socioeconomic profile of the population, the religious path of the believers, the religious group they belong to and the external interferences, religious or not. The analysis of these factors allows us to categorize the communities of the city of Coimbra and, for each typology or category, to identify the specific elements that unite the believers to the sacred places, the networks and religious territories that structure the religious practice and experience and also the non-representational landscape that unifies and creates memory. We conclude that an apparently homogeneous group, the Catholic community, incorporates multitemporalities and multiterritorialities that are necessary to understand the history and geography of a whole country and of the Catholic communities in particular.

Keywords : geography of religion, sacred places, territoriality, Catholic Church

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