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# Why Urbanists Need Religion

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Spring 2009

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Newsletter of the Urban Politics Section

# URBAN NEWS

American Political Science Association

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## 2009 AWARDS COMMITTEES

**1. The Best Dissertation Award** for the best dissertation on urban politics completed and accepted in the previous year. Hard copies (or electronic, if preferred by committee member) of dissertations completed and approved in 2008 should be sent to each committee member by **March 1, 2009.**

**Chair: Reuel Rogers , Northwestern  
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**2. The Best Book Award** for the best book on urban politics published in 2008. Hard copy of books should be sent to each committee member by **March 1, 2009.**

**Chair: Martin Horak, University of Western  
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**3. The Best Paper Award** is given for the best paper given at an Urban Politics Section panel at the previous year's APSA Annual Meeting.

Copies of papers presented at the APSA Urban Politics panels in 2008 should be sent electronically to the committee members by March 1, 2009.

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**4. The Byran Jackson Dissertation In Ethnic and Racial Politics Research Support Award** is given to a graduate student studying racial and ethnic politics in an urban setting. Hard copies (or electronic, if preferred by committee member) of approved dissertation proposals should be sent to each committee member by **March 1, 2009**.

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Matt Thomas, California State University at Chico  
[mothomas@csuchico.edu](mailto:mothomas@csuchico.edu)

### **5. Norton Long Career Achievement Award**

The Norton Long Award is presented biannually to a scholar who has made distinguished contributions to the study of urban politics over the course of a career through scholarly publication, the mentoring of students, and public service. Nominations and 2 supporting letters

submitted to all committee members by **March 1 2009:**

**Chair:** **Marion Orr, Brown University**  
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## **Why Urbanists Need Religion**

Joshua D. Ambrosius  
University of Louisville

This essay summarizes a conference paper presented at the October 2008 Society for the Scientific Study of Religion meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. The paper was reviewed by several leading scholars, including one who urged me to publish this summary in *Urban News*. I am grateful to those who offered comments or assistance.

\*

Political scientists studying urban politics (UP) have done a great deal of scholarly soul-searching over the past few years, manifested by three articles in the field's flagship journal, *Urban Affairs Review* (UAR; Judd 2005; Sapotichne, et al. 2007; Sharp 2007), and several panels at American Political Science Association (APSA) meetings. This self-reflection is not new to UP (Jones 1989; Swanstrom 1993). Building on this reflective work, I argue that a major thorn in UP's side is the rejection of religious research. I test my thesis through a review of APSA organized section cross-memberships and an analysis of search terms in political science (PS) subfields' highest-ranked journals. I further theorize why this rejection is so engrained in the fabric of UP. Finally, I introduce five "pillars" of a research agenda.

Sharp's (2007) critique of UP's rejection of cultural research opened my eyes to the wholesale dismissal of religion by UP; and accumulating work reflecting on the subfield caused me to consider urban studies' place in PS and the broader social sciences. A brief comparison with sociology is

appropriate. While membership in the American Sociological Association's (ASA) religion section grew by one-fourth between 2004 and 2007, APSA's religion section also grew by over one-fifth during the same period. It is clear that religion is growing in interest to social scientists across disciplines. However, urban research is another story entirely. While ASA's urban section grew by ten percent over these three years, APSA's urban section declined by over ten percent—evidence that UP may be, as Sharp believes, finding itself on the periphery of PS. Bridging the connection between 'this-world' (the urban) and the 'beyond' (the religious) may just be what UP needs to truly become "born again" (Judd 2005, 120).

I hypothesize that (1) scholars of UP (urbanists) are less interested in religion than political scientists working in other subfields; and (2) this disinterest results in less references to religion in urbanists' publications, when compared to other subfields. I operationalize the first hypothesis as: members of the APSA's Urban Politics section are less likely to jointly hold membership in the Religion and Politics section than members of other Americanist and internationalist/comparativist sections. The second hypothesis becomes: the top two journals in UP (UAR and *Journal of Urban Affairs*, JUA) publish less research citing major Western religious terms in the titles and abstracts than the top journals in other PS subfields (from Garand and Giles 2003).

Americanists and internationalists/comparativists are indeed more interested in religion as a political variable than urbanists, if my analysis of APSA section cross-memberships is a true indication (Table 1). The only subfield ranking below UP is Political Economy, which is likely in that position for the same reasons. In my journal article search, UAR ranks dead last in both annual title and abstract citations (Table 2). JUA performs slightly better, although it still appears near the bottom.

Why is this? I provide three possible explanations: (1) urbanists' long-standing reliance on structural Marxism (Tabb and Sawers 1978; Swanstrom 1993; Sapotichne, et al. 2007); (2) the dominance of "economism" and the rejection of culture by UP (Swanstrom 1993; Sharp 2007); and (3) pronounced academic prejudice (Rothman, et al. 2005; Ebaugh 2002, 387). Dependence on Marxism and political economy since the 1970s has

made religion an untouchable topic. If religion is unimportant to UP, graduate students and assistant professors will surely "turn the other cheek." Given Sharp's (2007) arguments in favor of culture and McKinnon's (2005) reading of Marx's "opium" as "medicine", I believe these three explanations need not deter serious work on religion by urbanists. I present five original reasons 'why urbanists need religion' based in urban theory, current events, and my own empirical research. All five are important connections between UP and religion. I encourage others to ponder these and other outlets for research on urban politics and religion.

I. *Urban demographics and religiosity.* While urbanists have embraced race research more so than other political scientists (Wilson 1985; Smith 2004; Wald and Wilcox 2006), they have not fully acknowledged a well-established fact—African-Americans are more religious than other races (e.g., Taylor, et al. 1996). My own analysis of religiosity in Louisville confirms this—finding that 'black' is the most-important determinant of desiring to become more religious. Furthermore, I find that religious affiliation remains a significant predictor of local politics. Specifically, Baptists and Catholics are less likely to support consolidated government in Louisville, *ceteris paribus*. Urbanists should investigate such differences.

II. *Faith-based urban policy.* Due to prejudice and misperceptions, few scholars outside the sociology of religion have studied the Bush Administration's Faith-Based and Community Initiative (FBCI). Persons (2004, 76) claims the FBCI "disproportionately benefit[s] citizens of urban communities" and qualifies as national urban (though "stealth") policy. I confirm her assertion, finding that residents of Kentucky's five cities over 40,000 received twice the FBCI grant dollars per capita than the statewide average (FY07). Urbanists should analyze the current FBCI policy before recommending any shifts to the Obama Administration.

III. *Church-based organizing.* Ramsay (1998) argues that traditional institutions of the political Left—parties and labor unions—have been undermined by post-Cold War restructuring. Churches—"the only stable neighborhood institution remaining in cities" (619)—now take the lead in community activism. A University of Louisville community partnership exemplifies this claim (Gilderbloom and Mullins 2005). This

knowledge should inform two strains of urban research: (1) urban social capital and (2) deconcentration of poverty, particularly given Putnam's observations on churches.

**Table 1: APSA Section Members also in Religion & Politics**

Section	Total Members	Percent in R&P
Political Parties	624	8.17%
Presidency	447	7.16%
Foreign Policy	643	7.00%
Legislative Studies	636	5.66%
Public Policy	894	5.59%
Comparative Politics	1622	5.36%
Public Administration	568	4.93%
<b>Urban Politics</b>	<b>417</b>	<b>4.32%</b>
Political Economy	688	3.49%

Source: APSA website (2004).

IV. *Rise of megachurches.* Megachurch research is the single most-important link between the sociology of religion and urban politics, via urban regime and growth machine theory. Megachurches, congregations exceeding 2,000 weekly attendees, are a distinctly urban phenomenon—with half of the 1,200 US megachurches located downtown or in inner-ring neighborhoods (Thumma and Travis 2007; Karnes, et al. 2007). Based on my own observations in Louisville, I posit that: (1) suburban, majority-white megachurches support the growth machine but concentrate their political attentions on primarily-national social issues (Newman 1991; McCann 2002); and (2) downtown, largely-black megachurches seek representation or acknowledgement in governing coalitions while concentrating on local issues, like urban redevelopment and education (Chaves 2006, 337; Stone 2005, 317). These claims represent a potential research agenda for urbanists. We have much to learn from these massive, highly-successful organizations.

V. *Religion's global perseverance.* The United Nations (2007) reported that a surge of religious belief—not secularization—accompanied the recent wave of global urbanization. I construct a regression model predicting weekly religious service attendance in 61 countries throughout all regions. I find a significant positive effect for recent urbanization, but no effect for (presumably-negative) urbanization in general. Following pioneers like Savitch (1988), urbanists have embraced comparative urban development—but confined mostly to post-industrial cities. UP should capitalize on the rising interest in the developing (urbanizing) world. A research agenda could examine the role religion plays in contemporary urban development in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

I conclude with two recommendations. First, I urge more research on religion and its impact on UP by social scientists of all denominations. More work at the intersection of the urban and the religious should hopefully bombard urban journals and build demand for more published work at this crossroads. Second, editors and reviewers of UP journals must be more sympathetic to this important work. Most urbanists working in religion apparently shun the urban journals and instead publish their work in cognate and interdisciplinary journals covering policy, administration, and nonprofit studies. These fields have awakened to religion as of late. For example, all seven articles published in *Public Administration Review* featuring one of the religious search terms in the title are dated within the past seven years. The rise in religious research in policy and administration coincides with the advent of welfare reform's Charitable Choice provision and the FBCI. UAR and JUA should take note of this paradigm shift and its impact on cities' provision of social services and governance coalitions.

I hope this brief essay opens the eyes (and hearts) of urbanists, including journal editors and reviewers, to the past dismissal of religious research and the present opportunities. It is long past due to move beyond religious metaphors (which urbanists are clearly fond of) and take the urban religious experience seriously in our studies of UP in the US and worldwide.

**Table 2: Ranking of Subfield Journals by Annual Rates of Religious Terms**

Rank	Journal	Annual Title Rate	Journal	Annual Abstract Rate
1	PSQ	0.89	PP	1.54
2	PP	0.77	JPAM	1.41
3	CP	0.29	PSQ	1.22
4	APSR	0.26	PAR	1.05
5	JPAM	0.19	APSR	0.38
6	PAR	0.16	WP	0.31
7	JPE	0.13	JUA	<b>0.25</b>
8	JUA	<b>0.08</b>	LSQ	0.23
9	WP	0.07	CP	0.21
10	LSQ	0.04	UAR	<b>0.19</b>
11	UAR	<b>0.02</b>	-	-

Notes: Eleven total journals were searched, including the top ranked journal from each subfield in Table 1 along with APSR and two journals representing UP. JPE does not have abstracts. JPAM abstract searches include full-text results. Searches are current through 2007 unless recent issues are excluded from a database.

Search terms: Catholic; charitable choice; Christ; Christian; church; congregation; evangelical; faith-based; God; Protestant; religion; religious; spiritual

*Joshua Ambrosius is a PhD fellow in urban and public affairs at the University of Louisville. He holds a MPP from the Johns Hopkins University. He previously authored a report on faith-based initiatives for the US Department of Labor and an account of megachurch outreach activities for the Southern Growth Policies Board. To request the full paper, please email jdambro1@louisville.edu.*

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### Member News

Richard Feiock has been named Director of Florida State University's newly established Sustainable Energy & Governance Center (<http://seg.fsu.edu>). The Center's 1.5M budget is focused on research investigating the role of government and governance institutions in shaping sustainable energy outcomes at the state and local level, particularly legal and institutional barriers to policy innovation, and factors that shape sustainable energy adoption, diffusion and implementation.

## IN MEMORIAM



**Gary L. Gaile, 1945-2009**

Gary L. Gaile was born in Cleveland, Ohio on August 3, 1945 and died on February 13, 2009 with his wife, Susan Clarke, his son, Jeff, and his family at his side. Gary's life on this earth ended after surgeons successfully removed a tumor on his brain the previous day, only to suffer a brain hemorrhage, blood clots, and cardiac arrest. Gary's life with us, however, will transcend not only his friends' lives but the lives of this and future generations of scholars. For his intellect and productivity were enormous and his humor nonpareil.

Gary held academic appointments at Northwestern University, the University of Connecticut, and since 1983 the University of Colorado at Boulder. He secured visiting appointments at what he considered the "trifecta" of academia, Cambridge, Oxford and LSE. He was also proud of his affiliation with the University of Nairobi. Gary was a consummate scholar and published a prodigious amount of scholarship on Africa, micro finances, development, and spatial statistics. With

Susan Clarke, he coauthored the influential book, *The Work of Cities*, published in 1998; in 2006, he coedited an 820-page tome *Geography in America at the Dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, published by Oxford University Press; the Association of American Geographers awarded him Distinguished Honors in 2001. And he was most proud of his membership in the Century Club, for people who have visited at least 100 nations around the globe.

For such an accomplished scholar, Gary also had a sense of proportion. His autobiographical website at the University of Colorado stated it succinctly: “He’s also large and has a unique sense of humor.” An understatement. Who else could possibly have conceived of, and published in an academic journal, an article titled “The Geography of Furniture Mobility” featuring an ironclad theory of migration (“people follow furniture”) and Table 1 showing a table with a sandwich, or recommend an article related to food, regardless of the academic subject matter, such as the “The Geography of Italian Pasta”? Gary was, in all senses of the word, unique.

Since 2001, Gary was a most delightful and gracious editor of *Urban Affairs Review* (UAR). His insight and perspective on urban issues, especially involving space and numbers (he considered himself the “last logical-positivist”—tongue-in-cheek, of course—well, I think so) will be missed. Indeed, Gary will be missed. His intellect, scholarly impact and humor touched us deeply and will sustain us. When you turn on an Oldies station and hear “Time Won’t Let Me” by the Outsiders, remember Gary who was an early member of the group and who also helped write the song. However we remember Gary, it will not be difficult; for his witticisms, intellect and insight will not be forgotten. He touched all of us in his own way.

Michael A. Pagano  
Co-Editor, *Urban Affairs Review*  
Dean  
College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs  
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### **Urban News**

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