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## Religion, neoliberalism, planning: an analysis of Northern Ireland's 'superchurch'

Philip Boland <sup>a</sup>, Stephen McKay <sup>a</sup>, Tristan Sturm <sup>a</sup> and Richard Gale <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article adds to and develops extant work on the comparatively under-explored but important link between religion, neoliberalism, and planning. It is noticeable that mega/giga-churches are recalibrating the religious and physical landscapes of cities around the world; in so doing they raise important implications for professional planners. We focus on Green Pastures Church in Northern Ireland. The church has initiated a significant urban development project that represents something much more than just another new church; indeed, it has been described as a 'superchurch'. The main body of this article focuses on the three separate plans submitted to the local authority, and the attendant contentious local planning issues. Existing research exposes the problematic impact of planning decisions on religious sites for certain religious communities. Our contribution to knowledge reveals new insights concerning the more positive and supportive relationship between planning and religion. We end this article by offering insights into broader debates on the public presence of religion and how it is regulated in the contemporary city.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Religion; neoliberalism; planning; politics; mega-church

## Introduction

Martínez-Ariño (2019, 364) calls for further research into the 'public presence and regulation' of religion, and 'a more systematic understanding of how religion is governed in urban settings'. We analyse professional planners as city actors who perform a critical role in regulating religion. Burchardt (2019) discusses the issues lying behind decisions on planning applications for places of worship in Canada, arguing city authorities are not the only stakeholders involved in the governance of religion. Our study analyses how the relationship between a church and a political party affected the planning process for a major religious complex in Northern Ireland. Specifically, we address Burchardt's (2019, 378) observation that 'scholars have rarely engaged with how urban religious expressions are blocked, transformed, or – conversely – facilitated and encouraged by urban regulations'. Extant studies by UK researchers show planning applications for non-white non-Christian groups are often blocked (Gale 2004, 2008; Gale and Naylor 2002; Greed 2016a, 2016b; Rogers 2013). This article develops our understanding through unpacking how

**CONTACT** Philip Boland  [p.boland@qub.ac.uk](mailto:p.boland@qub.ac.uk)  School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

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a significant planning application for a white Christian church in Northern Ireland was facilitated and encouraged by a powerful local actor. The next section sets the theoretical framework for the article through engaging with the literatures on religious neoliberalism, and religion and planning. The main body focuses on three separate plans submitted to the local authority, and the attendant contentious local planning issues. We end by reflecting on how the findings enhance our understanding of the intersections between churches and political actors and, finally, the article's contribution to knowledge on the *religion-planning nexus*.<sup>1</sup>

## Theoretical framework

### *Religious neoliberalism*

There are established links between religion and economics through the work of Smith, Marx, and Weber (Clark 2019; Zafirovski 2019). Recent debates draw upon neoliberal theory<sup>2</sup> (Hennigan and Purser 2018; Wrenn 2019). Possamai (2018a) posits neoliberalism is taking over religion, Hackworth (2018, 323) highlights 'a religious justification for the largely secular project of neoliberalism', while Burchardt (2018, 437) believes 'neoliberalism, financial capitalism, marketization and consumerism provide the model for how to manage religious groups or traditions'. Commentators claim core neoliberal ideas<sup>3</sup> underpin the belief system of the Religious Right,<sup>4</sup> particularly fundamentalist Christianity, with the Bible invoked to provide theological legitimacy for neoliberalism (Dean 2019; Hackworth 2018). Zafirovski (2019, 32) calls this the 'God and free-market coalition'. For instance, Hovind's (2013) 'Godonomics' elevates God's teaching and wisdom/economic principles of property rights, incentive, and freedom as the Biblical bedrock of capitalism (see also Lehmann 2016 on capitalism and Christianity). This is a striking example of the Religious Right 'framing neoliberalism and Christianity as not only mutually compatible, but mutually supportive' (Hackworth 2018, 323).

One aspect of the neoliberal model for religious groups/traditions is the commodification and commercialisation of God/religion (Hackworth 2010a, 2010b; Possamai 2018b; Spickard 2013). This involves 'blending theology, business and marketplace ideologies' (Yip and Ainsworth 2013, 504). Operating under cultural capitalism, places of worship must 'differentiate their various products and niches in order to survive' (Gauthier, Martikainen, and Woodhead 2013, 6). Hereby, religious organisations turn people into consumers, faith into a product, and use marketisation strategies to win congregations' hearts and minds (Burchardt 2018; Gauthier and Martikainen 2018; Moberg and Martikainen 2018; Silliman, Stievermann, and Santoro 2014). Using economists' language, salvation goods are sold to religious consumers in competitive markets (Possamai 2018a). For our interest, 'megachurches, like malls, stimulate new needs and desires, and exemplify the notion that religion has become a privatised, consumer good' (Connell 2005, 328). For example, religious retail stores stock 'everything from books to clothing to home décor' (Wrenn 2019, 429), while the Internet is a spiritual marketplace<sup>5</sup> (Hancock and Srinivas 2008). Therefore, religious shopping (online or offline) is no different to secular shopping leading to the 'mass marketing of God' (Hunt 2002, 92) and 'globalisation of religion' (Knippenberg 2006, 261). God/religion is a global business. In the United States alone, religion is worth 1.2 USD trillion a year, equivalent to the fifteenth largest economy

in the world, whose monetary value exceeds the annual revenues of the top ten technology companies including Amazon, Apple, Google, and Microsoft (Grim and Grim 2016).

Although we are sympathetic to this theorisation, there are dangers in totalising the impact of neoliberalism. Some religions espouse the individualism and competitive ethos of neoliberalism, e.g. Christian Libertarianism and Prosperity Gospel (Hackworth 2018). In contrast, others seek to ameliorate the deleterious consequences of neoliberalism (Possamai 2018a), e.g. faith-based organisations providing a public good through welfare services for people with housing, alcohol, and drug problems (Hackworth and Gullikson 2013; Hackworth and Stein 2012). Although they provide necessary support for marginalised groups, especially during welfare restructuring, some question whether attempts to help those less fortunate are ‘bulwarks against neoliberalism’ or ‘reproduc[ing] neoliberalism’ (Hackworth 2010b, 750, 752). Thus, ‘religion is as effectively internal to the project of neoliberalism as it is rhetorically oppositional’ (Cooper 2013, 26).

### ***Religion-planning nexus***

Post-secularisation (Baker 2019; Beaumont and Eder 2019; McClymont 2019) and the resurgence/visibility of religion (Baker and Dinham 2017; Martínez-Ariño 2019) created significant spatial manifestations in cities around the globe (Hancock and Srinivas 2008; Holloway and Valins 2002; Luz 2015; Wilford 2012). In the UK since 1980, the emergence of 7,000 new churches created significant ‘spatial impacts/challenges’ (Greed 2016a). As custodians of the design, development, and delivery of urban space, planning professionals must be cognisant of this reality. Linking to debates on religious neoliberalism, a major manifestation of modern religion is mega-/giga-churches<sup>6</sup> (Hervieu-Léger 2002) often led by wealthy rock star preachers<sup>7</sup> (Mattera 2015). Importantly, it is argued that ‘megachurches are changing the global makeup of Christianity’ (Gramby-Sobukwe and Hoiland 2009, 105). In America, for example, they have reconfigured religious and physical landscapes, and represent a serious challenge to smaller churches (Warf and Winsberg 2010).

Manouchehrifar (2018, 655) explains planning is conditioned to ‘the normative assumption of ‘religious indifference’– that is, religion as neither necessarily a burden nor a boon, but simply inconsequential for planning deliberations’. In rejecting the epistemological and ontological basis of religious indifference and an essentialist distinction between planning and religion, he identifies the inextricable links between secularism, including planning as a secular state-sanctioned policy instrument, and religion (see also McClymont 2015). Increasing demands placed upon city planners by different communities for places of worship shifted religion out of the private sphere and into the public realm. Hereby, planners ‘encounter various aspects of religion in their daily practices considerably more often than they do in their theoretical explorations and academic training’ (Manouchehrifar 2018, 658). Given this, ‘planners need to address and to take into consideration the plethora of religious manifestations which are currently influencing cities worldwide’ (Luz 2015, 278). Crucially, local authorities and other institutions, including city planning, are involved in this religious place-making and regulation of religion (Burchardt 2019).

The emergence of professional planning in the UK and elsewhere was connected to religious movements’ ideals, e.g. fairness, justice, compassion, hope, care, faith (Allam

2020; Sandercock 2006). However, planning developed a 'blind spot' towards religion, affected by modernisation and secularisation, which assumes the normative decline of religion/religiosity (Luz 2015, 278). Religion dropped off the planner's agenda following the rise of scientific approaches to planning, feeding the view that religion is not a legitimate land-use or spatial issue (Greed 2016b, 2020a). Relatedly, McClymont (2015) highlights the absence of an adequate religious vocabulary amongst practising planners. Another problem, particularly in England, is the absence of any systematic references to religion in the planning system (Greed 2020a, 2020b). Rogers (2013, 97) finds 'the paucity of reference to faith groups in planning policy inadequate [...] we also find the heading of "equality and diversity" insufficient for capturing the particular contributions and needs of faith groups'. Thus, his recommendation is for local authorities to create faith premises policy guidance.

Certain religious groups' experience of the planning process is concerning. In London, there is deep frustration amongst African migrant communities with planning professionals regarding religious premises. Greed (2016a, 2016b, 2020a, 2020b) cites little sympathy/understanding of the built environment needs of Black Pentecostal mega-churches, while Rogers (2013) uses words such as 'fight', 'challenging', 'problem', 'difficult' and 'nightmare' to capture the negative experience of new Black Majority churches. This is not an isolated phenomenon, geographically or religiously. In Birmingham and Leicester, Gale (2004, 2008, Gale and Naylor 2002) identifies identical problems with non-Christian places of worship, e.g. Muslim mosques, Sikh gurdwaras, and Hindu mandirs. Applications are rejected due to residents' and planning officers' reservations over land-use, building classification, amenity, quality of life, car parking, and noise.<sup>8</sup> This fed suspicion that non-white, non-Christian planning applications were treated differently to those from white Christians.

Debates on religious neoliberalism and the *religion-planning nexus* frame our analysis. The spatial expression of religion is 'fraught with contest' (Holloway and Valins 2002, 7), while 'places of worship have become a thorny issue for urban planning' (Germain and Gagnon 2003, 295). This is particularly true for neoliberal-minded mega-churches (Connell 2005) as they engage in extensive church planning (Gramby-Sobukwe and Hoiland 2009). This article responds to calls for deeper insights into the intersection between religion and planning (Gale 2008) and religious challenges for planning (McClymont 2015). We develop the literature by revealing how a white Christian mega-church experience of the planning process was very different to those above.

### **The Gateway project**

In 2007 Jeff Wright, son of Wrightbus<sup>9</sup> entrepreneur William Wright, created Green Pastures Church in Galgorm near Ballymena, County Antrim, Northern Ireland. The theological vision of his non-denominational church sits within the dual traditions of Northern Irish Evangelical Pentecostalism (Foye 2020). Borrowing from the establishment tradition in Northern Ireland of Calvinist Presbyterianism, and non-denominational Evangelicalism combined with neo-Charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit, the church identifies on its website as a '21st Century contemporary Pentecostal Church'. Also, as stated by the assistant pastor, Jason Kennedy, 'We are a life-giving, Evangelical, Charismatic church. We hold a Biblical worldview on all matters' (Meredith 2017a). Here there is a dual theological

foundation to the individualism of Pentecostalism and the doctrinal literalism firmly rooted in the Bible. Charismatics made up 0.85% of the Northern Irish population in the 2011 census (Meredith 2013). The church developed from a small youth ministry in Ahoghill just outside Ballymena called the Wash Basin. It later took inspiration and guidance from Pastor James McConnell of Whitewell Metropolitan Tabernacle in Belfast (itself allied to the 1915 Elim Pentecostal movement in Monaghan), a Pentecostal church known for interpreting the world apocalyptically, as a cosmological battle between the forces of good and evil (Foye 2020; O'Donnell 2020). Former Northern Ireland First Minister Peter Robinson and his wife Iris were among its regular congregation. In other words, this is an establishment church within the majoritarian mix of political and economic life within Northern Ireland, and in no way on the margins of society like many other Pentecostal movements (Cox 1995). Beyond theological understandings of individual empowerment through the gifts of the Holy Spirit like healing, neo-Charismatic is more a description of Jeff Wright's style of preaching and the neoliberal linking of value to consumption than any relationship to the beleaguered beginnings of the Pentecostal movement (Barker 2007).

Green Pastures' congregation grew steadily from 100 to 1,000 members. To accommodate further expansion, the church is migrating the short distance to a 97-acre plot of land at Ballee, near the southern boundary of Ballymena. The initial fundraising was called Project Nehemiah,<sup>10</sup> while some time later the actual land development would be called The Gateway. Local media labelled it a £100 million 'spiritual and social regeneration project' (Scott 2018, np), 'self-contained holy village' (Meredith 2017b), and 'state-of-the-art super-church' (Belfast Telegraph 2017). The site lies within the inner edge of the settlement limits as defined in the Ballymena Area Plan 1986–2001 (a replacement plan has not been adopted). Most of the site is zoned for housing, the remainder is un-zoned white land.<sup>11</sup> The architects who represented the applicant capture the potentially transformative ambitions of The Gateway:

To bring about transformation through intervention and investment of resources on a scale significantly in excess of anything planned by the public sector, but entirely consistent with locally agreed priorities and objectives. A church-inspired, spiritually-led regeneration partnership[. . .] This project contains an unprecedented development mix and the [. . .] plan [is] to develop unprecedented facilities and ministries specifically designed to effect the transformation sought by multiple agencies and the local communities (HPA Architects, n.d.).

Beyond the religious buildings (e.g. a 1,650 seater auditorium, classrooms, offices, café, recording studios) the plans included a food superstore, petrol filling station, car showroom, restaurants, fast food drive-thru, business park, hotel, nursing home, supported housing, student housing, social housing, training centres, fitness studio, 3G all-weather pitch, and a BMX cycle track (HPA Architects, n.d.). An economic impact of 1,000 jobs is anticipated through 'one of the largest developments in Northern Ireland' (Maxwell 2013). Firstly, this reflects Wilford's (2012, 6) argument that faith-based groups transform 'mundane spaces of recreation, consumption, and labour [. . .] [into] stages for spiritual self-transformation'. Secondly, linking to religious neoliberalism, the project is evidence of how 'mega-churches act as de facto economic development agencies' (Warf and Winsberg 2010, 38). Thirdly, there is also a strong social dimension to Green Pastures. Connecting to the literature, it shows a faith-based organisation providing a public good

through delivering support services for people with personal problems.<sup>12</sup> Balancing the economic (market) and religious (social) dimensions of Green Pastures the pastors were 'adamant that their money-making vision is all in the service of God and the local community', because they were 'propelled by a profound, unwavering sense of belief in the social good they are seeking to do' (Meredith 2017b). Similarly, in downplaying suggestions of a gated community, Pastor Jeff stated, 'We want to do good things for our town and for our people. As far as we are concerned, we are here to help people. It's for the town and will be for the town, not just for the church people' (cited in Maxwell 2013).

The church formed a local partnership to buy the new land and expedite the project: Gateway Spiritual and Socio-Economic Regeneration Partnership (GSSERP) comprised a collection of religious organisations, private businesses, and social enterprises.<sup>13</sup> Here, Green Pastures (via GSSERP) is involved with market and non-market actors. Moreover, its current viability and future success is dependent upon the financial support of partners from the private sector and social economy, with '[...]the Gateway project intended to provide finance for the church's ongoing ministry' (Belfast Telegraph 2017). Thus, using neoliberal language, the pastors were compared to 'multi-million pound property developers' (Meredith 2017b). In 2012 GSSERP bought the land (owned by the Department of Social Development, now Department for Communities) for £4 million, despite an original market value of £75 million. This generated a collective 'raising of eyebrows' (Maxwell 2013). The official line was the land could not be sold on the open market even at a knock-down price of £9 million, so – amidst deflated land values – it was in the Department's interest to accept GSSERP's offer (BBC News NI 2012a). Framed neoliberally, Pastor Jeff explained how market forces determined the land purchase and how close economic ties between Green Pastures and his family's (previously) successful business was a determining factor<sup>14</sup> (importantly, the Wright Group bought the Galgorm building thereby financing the new land deal):

Well that was the asking price [...] We were able to put down a deposit because we were able to sell the (original) church, and now we rent it. Wright's will take this place over, they need the space. That's the reason we were able to get the land (cited in Meredith 2017a).

There are conflicting opinions about the land purchase (BBC News NI 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). The land was originally occupied by a group of landowners, including the O'Hara family who ran a 38-acre farm on the site. In 1970 the government acquired the entire 97-acres through a compulsory purchase order, with the intent of expanding Ballymena. For decades, the land was undeveloped. If the government decides to sell vested land following compulsory purchase, the original landowners can purchase it back for a fair price. In 2007, before the property market crash, the Department of Social Development was offered £50 million for the site by a business consortium. As the Department's valuation was £75 million the bid failed, and the land was placed on the open market with the original owners unable to repurchase it (BBC News NI 2012a). Post-economic crash, in 2011 the land was revalued at £9 million. In May 2012, one month after a deadline passed for sealed bids, the Department had not sold the land; offers were received 'but not near the right price' (BBC News NI 2012b). Four months later, the land was sold to Green Pastures for £4 million (BBC News NI 2012a). The O'Hara family were part of the consortium (with local developers and landowners) that had attempted to

repurchase the land in 2007. Denis O'Hara alleges the Department mismanaged the land sale, which did not represent value for money or an accurate market price:

It's been a shambles from the start. They were offered £37.4 million a number of years ago - they rejected that offer. DSD could have got £6.5 million just over a year ago and now they are accepting £4 million – so even the taxpayer has not got a good deal on this (cited in BBC News NI 2012c).

### **Planning process**

In 2013 Green Pastures submitted three separate planning applications covering a wide range of land-uses and buildings. This tactical manoeuvre (project splitting) emerged because each could have fallen under three land-use headings. Application 1 was commercial, Application 2 mixed use, Application 3 ecclesiastical – the Northern Ireland planning system has a dedicated land-use classification for public worship or religious instruction. Table 1 indicates that religion can be 'a key component of city-wide policy, linked to employment, transport and housing policy, and not an isolated, local-level afterthought' (Greed 2016a, 161). Moreover, the applications represent an extensive example of Burchardt's (2019) religious place-making. Applications 1 and 2 were complex and could have been problematic in satisfying planning policy tests, and Application 3 was more straightforward. If the proposal had been submitted as a single application and any elements of Applications 1 and 2 were refused, then the entire application would fall. By splitting into three applications, even if Application 1 and/or 2 were to be refused, Application 3 could still be approved *per se* and the development could continue whilst remedying issues regarding Applications 1 and/or 2. Thus, Applications 1 and 2 were submitted for outline planning permission, and Application 3 for full planning permission. The former provides approval in principle and requires basic information, hence huge cost

**Table 1.** *The Gateway planning applications.*

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Application 1 (Ref: G/2013/0229/O) | <i>Mixed hub comprising:</i><br>Food superstore and petrol filling station, drive-thru restaurant, family entertainment centre, health and wellbeing centre, 8 commercial units (health centre, pharmacy, taxi office, coffee shop, 4 non-food retail units), 2 restaurants, 3 kiosks, car parking, landscaping and associated site works including part of link road and access arrangements.   |
| Application 2 (Ref: G/2013/0230/O) | <i>Mixed use development comprising:</i><br>Business incubator park, business innovation centre, social economy business park, trade counter and motor village, 60 bed hotel, self-catering accommodation, training academy, 40 bed nursing home, residential development (comprising up to 213 units of mixed supported housing, up to 78 units of student housing units), enhancement and part realignments of the Ballee Burn, car parking and other ancillary development. |
| Application 3 (G/2013/0239/F)      | <i>New church buildings community leisure facilities comprising:</i><br>Main auditorium, classrooms, meeting spaces studio cafe, crèche and ancillary offices; gym and fitness studio, 3 G pitch; wedding chapel; associate car parking, internal access roads including new link road, alterations to a road and roundabout; site preparation works including regarding across site and other ancillary development.  |

Table 1 compiled from data available via the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Planning Committee website. See <https://mea.public-minutes.info/reader/view/27726/1>.

savings on the non-production of detailed plans. Once outline consent is obtained, detailed plans with a higher degree of certainty can be submitted as a reserved matters application (i.e. outline permission and reserved matters permission counts as full planning permission). During the planning process, Applications 2 and 3 were relatively unproblematic; this was not the case with Application 1.

### **Application 1**

Planning in Northern Ireland has been contentious for decades (McKay and Murray 2017). In 1970, due to sectarian discrimination in decision-making by Unionist representatives,<sup>15</sup> the parliament at Stormont in Belfast was prorogued and planning powers were passed to Westminster. Executive planning decisions were taken by a centralised planning authority within Northern Ireland called the Department of the Environment (now Department for Infrastructure). For 45 years local councils had a mere consultative role in planning, leading to accusations of a democratic deficit (Knox 1999). The 1998 Belfast Agreement handed back executive planning powers to local councils. Full transition did not take place until 1 April 2015, as it took time to institute measures to prevent a return to sectarian decision-making. Also, a code of conduct was introduced so that elected members declared an interest and withdrew from a planning committee if they were connected to or had been lobbied to support an application. Applications 2 and 3 were approved in 2014 prior to the devolution of powers to the new local authority;<sup>16</sup> the decision on Application 1 was not taken until 14 May 2015,<sup>17</sup> shortly after the delegation of planning powers. The legislative context is set by Article 54 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 which states that where an application is made for planning permission, the Council or the Department must have regard to the Local Development Plan in dealing with the application. The policy framework was underpinned by regional planning policies:<sup>18</sup> Notably, Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1) set out the general principles on land-use development, while Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5) dealt with retail planning applications.

A major retail proposal contained in Application 1 received 44 objections and 1 letter of support (from the Wright Group). Ballymena already had two large supermarkets located outside the town centre (Sainsbury's and Tesco). Independent retailers feared a 61,000 sq. ft. foodstore would damage the town centre by offering more out-of-town shopping (Maxwell 2013): 'The project has been dogged by complaints from local shopkeepers about its impact on local business' (Stewart 2019). Concerns centred on the scale of trade diversion of comparative and convenience shopping and the detrimental impact on the vitality and viability of Ballymena town centre. The Northern Ireland Retail Trade Association 'strenuously objected' to the scheme; as well as detracting trade from Ballymena they argued it 'breached planning policies' aimed at protecting town centres (Belfast Telegraph 2017). Local trade has been damaged by the two supermarkets, online shopping, and the closure of the two major employers (JTI Gallaher and Michelin tyre plant). Therefore, any initiatives that drew expenditure from the town centre were extremely concerning for retailers.

The applicant must submit a Retail Impact Assessment (RIA) to demonstrate how the proposal would affect the existing town centre. Green Pastures argued the scheme would 'enhance choice and competition' (Campbell 2013). Interestingly, this – neoliberal – expressive individualism is a recognised tenet of post-denominational

Evangelicalism (Wilford 2012). As the Department of the Environment was dealing with this application a specialised retail unit reviewed the RIA: Headquarters Specialist Planning and Development (HQSPD) team. The Department conducted its own independent assessment, and found the cumulative retail impact on convenience and comparison retailing to be 18.4% (£15 million loss to the town centre) and 2.4% (MEABCPC 2015). Although 2.4% for comparison goods was acceptable, the 18.4% convenience figure was unacceptable, contrary to PPS5, and the supermarket was recommended for refusal. The Northern Ireland Planning Service (located within the Department of the Environment) determined:

The proposed food superstore element of the scheme does not meet the locational requirements of the Department's Planning Policy Statement 5, 'Retailing and Town Centres', in that it is likely to have an adverse impact on the vitality and viability of Ballymena town centre and undermine its comparison and convenience functions (cited in Kilpatrick 2015).

Reflecting the religious neoliberalism literature on mega-churches, a GSSERP spokesperson stressed the non-religious economic impact of The Gateway and urged further dialogue with local planners:

We are disappointed with the recommendation for refusal on the foodstore aspect. Retail assessments have indicated that Ballymena town can support a third foodstore and with this aspect comes the provision of hundreds of jobs to locals as well as many financial benefits to the town and borough of Ballymena as a whole [...] We believe it essential that further discussions are had on such an important regionally significant development as this refused element is key to the viability of the overall proposal, key to its social investment, key to new jobs and key in being able to meet the requirements of Ballymena economic development strategy (cited in Kilpatrick 2015).

The recommendation was taken before the Ballymena Borough Council Planning Committee. Rather than supporting refusal, the Planning Committee deferred its decision for further consideration as the applicant reduced the scale of the supermarket to 41,000 sq. ft. The HQSPD team subsequently amended their recommendation from refuse to approve. As justification, the Planning Committee minutes argue the revised proposal posed 'reduced impact in the town centre' coupled with 'the possibility of a major employment boost' (MEABCPC 2015, 5). Recommending approval is surprising, given the impact of trade diversion for convenience goods was still significant at 10.4%. The HQSPD report stated that a figure of 12% or above is unacceptable. A key factor is the report included an assertion regarding Sainsbury's. The supermarket is disconnected from the town centre by a dual carriageway and is approximately one mile from the boundary, so it is regarded as a major drain to convenience goods spending. For the renewed calculation, it was argued that 'by virtue of its location and its functional relationship with the town centre [Sainsbury's] can be said for all practical purposes to operate as a town centre store' (Mid and East Antrim Borough Council 2014, 35). Despite being geographically out-of-town, the supermarket was considered to be economically 'in town'. The figure of 10.4% excludes extant trade diversion from the projected impact of The Gateway and the combined impact would more than double the unacceptable figure of 12%.

When Application 1 first went to Ballymena Borough Council the Planning Committee only had consultative powers, on its return to (now) Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

on 14 May 2015 it had full executive powers. The recommendation of the Planning Department can be overturned by the Planning Committee. Application 1 was met with equally strong support and opposition. Pastor Jeff highlighted significant economic returns for the retail proposal. He cited a lease agreement with an un-named food retailer where ‘the potential income could range from £6–8 million over a 25 year period and this would then give the applicant the opportunity to borrow against the lease contract, thus making the entire project viable’ (MEABCPC 2015, 7). Similarly, Ian Paisley Jr, the local Member of the UK Parliament (MP), argued it was ‘the economic linchpin to make the whole project viable’ (MEABCPC 2015, 6). Contrastingly, Paul Frew, Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly (MLA), ‘believed that it would have a devastating effect on the town centre for many years’ (MEABCPC 2015, 8). Des Stephens, of Matrix Planning Consultancy, represented the Chamber of Commerce and Northern Ireland Retail Trade Association. He questioned the statistical basis of the latest RIA and queried why a proper economic assessment had not been conducted; stating, ‘the application had not been properly considered under a number of areas and could be liable for a legal challenge [...] [because] the proposal conflicted with existing planning policies’ (MEABCPC 2015, 8, 9). These interventions register with Burchardt’s (2019, 384) Canadian study, and the broader religious neoliberalism literature, whereby ‘legitimate economic arguments’ are frequently used to influence planning decisions on places of worship.

The political make-up of the Planning Committee was critical. It comprised a chair (Alliance), vice chair (Ulster Unionist Party, UUP), five Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) members, two from the UUP, and one each from the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and Sinn Féin.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, the dominance of Unionist parties reflects the homogeneity of the area, which is predominantly Protestant.<sup>20</sup> The dominance of one religious-cultural grouping is very distinctive of the political geography of Northern Ireland. Two members of the DUP spoke in favour of the proposal and one member each of the UUP and Sinn Féin spoke against, both highlighted the detrimental impact it would have on the town centre. Councillor Wilson’s (UUP)<sup>21</sup> motion to refuse was defeated by one vote (four in favour, five against), but Councillor Reid’s (DUP) motion to grant planning permission was passed by one vote (five in favour, four against). The Planning Committee minutes show three councillors voted in favour, two voted against (Table 2, columns 1 and 2). The minutes do not reveal the full voting pattern, so we are not informed of the names or political affiliations of others who voted for/against the proposal. This information should be publicly available as it is in the public interest to know who authorised this significant urban development project. There was no request for a recorded vote, so it was

**Table 2.** Councillor voting pattern on the retail proposal in Application 1.

| Voted in favour* | Voted against* | Did not vote* | Predicted vote in favour** | Predicted vote against** |
|------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| R Logan Alliance | J McKeown SF   | B Adger DUP   | AN Other DUP               | AN Other UUP             |
| G Lyons DUP      | A P Wilson UUP | A Wales DUP   |                            | AN Other TUV             |
| P Reid DUP       |                |               |                            |                          |
| S Nicholl UUP    |                |               |                            |                          |

\* Names are cited in the official minutes or have confirmed to us how they voted.

\*\* Names are anonymised as they are not cited in the official minutes or have not responded to our request for information.

Table 2 compiled from data available via the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Planning Committee website. See <https://mea.public-minutes.info/reader/view/27726/1>.

conducted by a show of hands, meaning the full voting pattern was unrecorded. Given this, we contacted every councillor who voted via his/her official Council email address or for those no longer in office via social media. Those whose votes we needed to corroborate either ignored our request for information or confirmed how they voted but were unable to recall the voting of others. Importantly, the vote lacks full transparency, which is precisely what devolved powers were supposed to deliver.

However, we can predict, with a high degree of confidence, how other councillors voted. It would be surprising if the remaining DUP councillor did not follow their two colleagues who voted in favour of the proposal; this ensured the proposal passed with five votes (Table 2, columns 4 and 5). This is a reasonable assumption because the economic, political, and religious leanings of the local DUP<sup>22</sup> are closely aligned with Green Pastures, e.g. white Protestant, biblically fundamentalist, socially conservative, pro-Union, pro-capitalism. Chrisafis (2005) explains 'Ballymena is the buckle in Northern Ireland's Bible belt, the seat of the Paisley family and a place that has been likened to 1960s Mississippi. It is rural, conservative, mainly born-again Christian and predominantly Protestant'. Returning to an earlier point, two DUP councillors – Mrs Wales and Mrs Adger – 'having previously declared interests' linked to Green Pastures, 'removed themselves from the [...] debate' (MEABCPC 2015, 4). Furthermore, Ian Paisley Jr. (DUP MP) revealed, 'he had been proposed by Dr W Wright<sup>23</sup> to go forward to Parliament' (MEABCPC 2015, 6). Relatedly, one commentator suggested, 'It's hard not to draw parallel with another famous son of Ballymena. Like the late firebrand founder of the Free Presbyterian Church, Ian Paisley [Snr.], Pastor Jeff set up the Church from scratch' (Stewart 2019). These are important religious, economic, and political connections between the local DUP and Green Pastures that shaped the planning process for The Gateway. Read in this way, both Green Pastures and the local DUP are firm adherents to Evangelical Protestantism<sup>24</sup> and free market capitalism. These local shared theological and ideological beliefs were a determining factor in facilitating an alliance that led to a contentious planning application being successful.

In May 2018 the retail application was surprisingly shelved. A local media commentator argued Green Pastures were sensitive to local unease that the 'large-scale supermarket element of the plan would attract shoppers and leisure-seekers away from the centre of the mid-Antrim town' (Scott 2018). The financial crisis Wrightbus faced was another factor (McDonald 2019). In late September 2019, 500 former Wrightbus employees demonstrated outside the church after revelations it received £15 million from the company during profitable times (Simpson 2019). More alarmingly, anger at job losses allegedly led to death threats against Pastor Jeff (Stewart 2019). The financial difficulties of Wrightbus came to a head in September 2020 when the entire Galgorm site, including the old church building, was up for sale at £6 million (Canning 2020). At the time of writing, all components of the project are underway except the retail element of Application 1. Jason Kennedy, of The Gateway, explained:

As a Project Team we are continually working to monitor the impact and keep up to date the relevance of the evolving site-wide masterplan, along with the long term vision and needs of the church and its ministries. We have concluded that a large format retail superstore would no longer best serve our long term vision for the site and our desire to ensure that the site and overall project continues to develop as an asset to our town (cited in McKay 2018).

## Conclusions

This article offers a novel contribution to debates on religion and planning. We have interrogated the planning process surrounding Northern Ireland's most ambitious mega/superchurch. The evidence shows Green Pastures is far more than simply another new church. Reflecting the religious neoliberalism literature, it represents a massive urban development project with extensive economic ramifications. On the planning side, existing UK research problematises the blocking decisions from planners regarding places of worship for non-white non-Christian groups. Our contribution to knowledge reveals new insights concerning planners' facilitatory and encouraging role with respect to a white Christian church. Although different, our findings complement established work in this field. We have shown how the planning process for a mega/superchurch in Northern Ireland was not straightforward. Application 1 endured six different stages from initial rejection to final approval (see also Burchardt 2019, on the experience of the Hasidic Jewish community in Montreal, Canada). A key finding is that political support from local dominant political party representatives was a determining factor in securing planning permission. Importantly, the experience of Green Pastures Church in Northern Ireland – white Protestant Charismatic – is quite different to Black Pentecostal mega-churches (Greed 2016a, 2016b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) and new Black Majority churches (Rogers 2013) in London, and Muslim mosques, Sikh gurdwaras, and Hindu mandirs in Birmingham (Gale 2004, 2008) and Leicester (Gale and Naylor 2002). Such evidence adds to concerns over planners' religious 'blind spot' (Luz 2015, 278), raising questions over whether they uphold 'neutral regulations' that 'safeguard religious freedom' and administer equal treatment (Burchardt 2019, 375, 380).

We return to the literature for some reflective thoughts on the religious challenges for planning (McClymont 2015). Manouchehrifar (2018) asks, how should planners think about religion, and how can we rethink the relationship between religion and planning? Sandercock (2006, 66) suggests that – concerning religion– 'we need a different way of talking about planning'. One option is McClymont's (2015, 535) 'municipal spirituality' that draws upon the theological concepts of transcendence and the common good 'to redefine the value of places whose worth cannot easily be made in instrumental terms'. Interestingly, municipal spirituality moves beyond places of worship (McClymont's work includes cemeteries, community assets, and nature) that have important collective, emotional, and memorial, i.e. non-economic, value to groups of people. Additionally, there is Greed's (2016b, 2020b) Religious Planning Toolkit aiming to enhance the thought process, and decision-making, of planners when dealing with religious-based applications:

In order to mainstream religion into planning one needs to ask the[se] sorts of questions. This should not only raise awareness but also provide a path to recognising and planning for religious needs. I mainly refer to Christianity in this illustration, but this schema could be adapted for any main religion depending on the requirements of the locality in question (Greed 2016b, 43).

In conclusion, this article responds to Martínez-Ariño's (2019, 364) call for 'more research on local interactions between religion and politics'. Our study shows the planning process was heavily determined by the theologically and ideologically close connection between Green Pastures Church and a dominant political party. It is clear the

support of the local DUP was instrumental in the church obtaining planning permission. Therefore, we add another dimension to those ‘relations among actors’, ‘actor constellations’, and ‘governance processes’ involved in decision-making for places of worship (Burchardt 2019, 378, 380; Martínez-Ariño 2019, 365). The case reveals ‘emplacements of religion are not only an outcome of the ways in which laws are enacted through urban administrative practices, drawing together religious leaders, neighbourhood associations, local brokers, and elected officials’ (Burchardt 2019, 384). Moreover, reflecting the religious neoliberalism literature it reveals how the economic interests of The Gateway aligned with the (religio-)political agenda of the local DUP (after Martínez-Ariño 2019). Burchardt (2019, 376) calls for ‘new concepts and theoretical innovation to interpret and explain distinct patterns in the urban governance of religion’. We have advanced the *religion-planning nexus* to capture how religious organisations differentially experience the planning process. On this, and connecting back to the literature, we have demonstrated how the ‘agency of religious groups through their engagement with planning procedures’ can ‘influence the processes through which the built environment is materially (re)configured’ (Gale 2004, 30). Finally, these findings contribute to knowledge by adding new insights, depth, and breadth to our understanding of the intersections between religion and planning.

## Notes

1. This research did not invoke the criteria for the requirement of a Proportionate Ethics Review from our university institution. All persons named in this paper are elected political figures and all information about persons in the paper is available in the public domain and therefore did not require consent.
2. Neoliberal theory is both complex and contested; we cannot do it justice here. For recent interventions on rogue, authoritarian and actually existing neoliberalism see Dean (2019), Peck and Theodore (2019), and Peck, Brenner, and Theodore (2018).
3. A minimal state; individual freedom; personal responsibility; minimal social welfare; free competitive markets; incentives for effort, enterprise, and entrepreneurialism; low taxes, private property rights, and wealth accumulation.
4. A varied group of people, faiths, denominations, and organisations (Hackworth 2010a, 2018, 2019). There are three sub-movements. Dominionism is anti-secular state, advocating Christians taking control of government institutions to impose biblical order before Christ’s return (the Rapture). Christian Libertarianism provides a strong biblical justification for neoliberalism predicated on the idea that society should maximise individual freedom. Prosperity Gospel provides the biblical justification for free markets, individualism, property rights, and wealth accumulation (Hackworth 2018; Warf and Winsberg 2010; Wrenn 2019).
5. See online shopping with pastors Jimmy Swaggart ([www.shopjism.org/](http://www.shopjism.org/)), Marcus Lamb (<http://shop.daystar.com/>), and Kenneth Copeland (<https://my.kcm.org/>).
6. Mega-churches have up to 2,000 members, those reaching 10,000 and more are mega-churches.
7. Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, and Jesse Duplantis are multi-millionaires who travel in state-of-the-art private jets.
8. On Kumasi, Ghana see Cobbinah and Korah (2016); on Toronto, Canada see Agrawal (2008), Hackworth and Gullikson (2013), and Hackworth and Stein (2012); on Montréal, Canada see Germain and Gagnon (2003).
9. Wrightbus designed and manufactured buses for the European, UK and Ireland markets, the most high profile are the distinctive red buses in London ([www.wrightsgroup.com](http://www.wrightsgroup.com)). At 1,400 employees, it was one of the largest companies in Ballymena.

10. A fundraising initiative for the church expansion ([www.justgiving.com/fundraising/projectnehemiah](http://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/projectnehemiah)). Its name draws upon the Old Testament figure who is claimed to have rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem during the Second Temple period.
11. Land without any specific proposal for allocation in a development plan, where it is intended that for the most part, existing uses shall remain undisturbed and unaltered though there is a presumption in favour of development within the development limit, subject to compliance with policy and other material considerations.
12. In the UK faith groups provide £3 billion worth of support services (Greed 2016a, 2016b).
13. GSSERP comprises Green Pastures Church, Wright Group, Compassion Ministries, the Wash Basin (Community Care), Getaway Social Investments Ltd, plus other business partners such as Advanced Engineering (HPA Architects, nd; Meredith 2017b).
14. In late 2019 Wrightbus encountered severe cash flow problems and had to find a new buyer to save the company from collapse and loss of 1,400 jobs. Media coverage exposed the complex and controversial financial arrangements of the company, and its relationship to the church and its land (Canning 2019). In October 2019 Bamford Bus Company based in England bought Wrightbus – no financial details of the deal were published (BBC News NI 2019).
15. In 1921 Ireland was partitioned between the six counties of Northern Ireland and the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State, later to become the Republic of Ireland. The creation of Northern Ireland had an in-built Protestant majority that translated into significant political power for Unionist parties.
16. In 2012 plans were put forward to reorganise local government in Northern Ireland and reduce the number of councils from 26 to 11. In May 2015 Ballymena Borough Council merged with Carrickfergus Borough Council and Larne Borough Council to become Mid and East Antrim Borough Council.
17. With the devolution of planning powers to the councils on 1 April 2015, recommendations on planning applications are now voted upon by elected representatives where there have been objections to the proposal by the public. Prior to this, the Planning Service made executive decisions after consultation with elected representatives of the council. Council representatives could ask for a deferral on a decision to allow for further discussion (which is what happened in the determination of Application 1).
18. All PPSs were subsumed into the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) in September 2015: 'The SPPS sets out the Department's regional planning policies for securing the orderly and consistent development of land in Northern Ireland under the reformed two-tier planning system [...] The provisions of the SPPS must be taken into account in the preparation of Local Development Plans, and are also material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals' ([www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/strategic-planning-policy-statement](http://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/strategic-planning-policy-statement)).
19. The UUP, DUP, and TUV want to preserve the union with Great Britain so that Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom and represent the Protestant community who believe themselves to be British. Sinn Féin campaigns for a United Ireland and represents the Catholic community who consider themselves Irish. The Alliance Party is considered cross-community.
20. The 2011 Census shows 65.76% of the Ballymena population is Protestant and 26.71% Catholic (NISRA 2011).
21. Whilst the UUP is staunchly Unionist, it does not share the Evangelical stance of the DUP.
22. The late Ian Paisley, a high profile preacher and politician, founded the DUP in 1971. For many decades, 'the party [...] was controlled by individuals with strongly conservative religious beliefs' aligned to the Free Presbyterian Church – a Protestant Evangelical denomination also formed by Paisley in 1951 (Southern 2005, 130).
23. It would seem he is referring to Pastor Jeff's father whose first name is William. However, later in the minutes Dr W. Wright is cited again but this time clearly Pastor Jeff is being referred to. Notwithstanding this possible inaccuracy, what is clear is that there is a strong personal connection between the Wright family, their company, and the DUP via Ian Paisley Jr.

24. At a broader level, since the change of national leadership and the passing of Ian Paisley Snr the ‘fundamentalist [. . .] Free Presbyterianism is no longer the dominant force it was within the party’ (Tonge 2019, 29).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Philip Boland** is a Reader in Urban Planning, School of Natural and Built Environment at Queen’s University Belfast. He researches and teaches on a range of planning-related topics influenced by critical debates on neoliberalism. These include the economics of religion and planning for places of worship; the economics of drugs and the drugs-planning nexus; city branding and celebrity museumification; and digital technology and public participatory planning.

**Stephen McKay** is a Reader in Spatial Planning, School of Natural and Built Environment at Queen’s University Belfast where he specialises in planning law, practice and digital planning technologies. He is as an Honorary Professor at the East China University of Technology and a Research Associate of the Institute of Irish Studies.

**Tristan Sturm** is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, School of Natural and Built Environment at Queen’s University Belfast. He researches religious, environmental, and conspiratorial apocalyptic geopolitics. Recently he has published on Gaza, Covid-19, climate change, and using New Materialist theories, lead exposure via water pipes in Northern Ireland.

**Richard Gale** is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. He has written and researched extensively on the interface between faith groups and urban planning in the UK. He has recently co-authored work (with Huw Thomas, also of Cardiff University) that adopts a Critical Race Theory approach to evaluating planning policy and practice in the UK context.

## ORCID

Philip Boland  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1011-2447>  
 Stephen McKay  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1580-1287>  
 Tristan Sturm  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5757-0117>  
 Richard Gale  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5027-8102>

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