

SPECIAL SECTION: SITING PLURALISM**Introduction****Religious Plurality, Interreligious Pluralism,
and Spatialities of Religious Difference**

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■ **ABSTRACT:** The introduction to this special section foregrounds the key distinction between ‘religious plurality’ and ‘interreligious pluralism’. Building from the example of a recent controversy over an exhibition on shared religious sites in Thessaloniki, Greece, we analyze the ways in which advocates and adversaries of pluralism alternately place minority religions at the center or attempt to relegate them to the margins of visual, spatial, and political fields. To establish the conceptual scaffolding that supports this special section, we engage the complex relations that govern the operations of state and civil society, sacrality and secularity, as well as spectacular acts of disavowal that simultaneously coincide with everyday multiplicities in the shared use of space. We conclude with brief summaries of the four articles that site religious plurality and interreligious pluralism in the diverse contexts of Brazil, Russia, Sri Lanka, and the Balkans.

■ **KEYWORDS:** interreligious pluralism, public religion, religious difference, religious plurality, space and place, spatial practices, tolerance

In late September 2017, a mixed-media exhibition entitled “Koinoi Ieroi Topoi” (Shared Sacred Sites) opened in Thessaloniki, Greece. The exhibition encompassed a variety of venues, each of which explored legacies of interreligious devotion among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in common spaces and sites across the Mediterranean Basin and the Balkans.¹ By and large, it was greeted with enthusiasm and admiration, not least by Thessaloniki’s mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, who has made reckoning with the city’s multi-confessional past (Mazower 2004) a signature of his administration (Walton 2016b). However, not all reactions were so sanguine. In December 2017, several posters for the exhibition near one of the venues, the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, were targeted for defacement: spray paint partially blotted out the Star of David and the crescent moon on the poster, leaving only a cross unscathed.

As this brief anecdote suggests, religious difference incites a plethora of strong reactions in the contemporary world, ranging from aspirational advocacy and nostalgic romance to jittery

anxiety and jingoistic denunciation. Liberals of various stripes salute the social fact of theological, ritual, and communal differences—what we call, for shorthand, ‘religious plurality’. From their perspective, the social fact of religious plurality requires protection and support through cultural and political projects—what we term ‘interreligious pluralism’. The “Shared Sacred Sites” exhibition exemplified the relationship between plurality and pluralism that informs liberal advocacy. Interwoven histories of religious difference within common social spaces (religious plurality) are understood to warrant endorsement, representation, and publicizing (interreligious pluralism). Following Pamela Klassen and Courtney Bender (2010: 8), we might say that interreligious pluralism consists of two moments (what they call “burdens”): the “descriptive” identification of religious plurality, and the “prescriptive” program for its preservation and flourishing.

Critics and antagonists, by contrast, tend to collapse the distinction between religious plurality and interreligious pluralism. From their vantage, the social fact of religious difference is an inherently treacherous quandary that must be monitored and, if need be, curtailed. Interreligious pluralism, with its promotion of a diversity of equal religious communities, is anathema from such a perspective. This is especially true in contexts where immigration has complicated taken-for-granted hierarchies and histories of religious belonging (Baumann 1999). Nor is it a coincidence that interreligious pluralism is embattled in contemporary Thessaloniki, one of the major destinations and sites of transit for migrants and refugees on the ‘Balkan Route’ since the middle of this decade. Moreover, as the defacement of the “Shared Sacred Sites” exhibition poster illustrates, it is insufficient for adversaries of interreligious pluralism to erase religious difference entirely. The precedence of one religion can be (re-)established only through the explicit subordination of others *within* the same physical or social space. In the defaced poster, this point is conveyed literally: the symbols of Judaism and Islam remain visible but blighted, clearly subjugated to the visually purified Christian cross.

For the theorist of religious difference(s) in the present, neither liberal celebration nor illiberal condemnation will suffice. The reason for this is simple: both liberal proponents and illiberal opponents of religious difference obscure the protean, distinctly modern relationship between religious plurality and interreligious pluralism. Liberals reify religious plurality as a simple, pristine social fact, ostensibly rooted in theological differences, which necessitates the affordances of interreligious pluralism and tolerance. Such a “primordial” image of authentic religious plurality (Walton 2017b: 19) obscures the textured histories that produce difference(s) both within and among communities of practice and affiliation. Even more misleadingly, this liberal romance neglects the power of discourses of interreligious pluralism, religious freedom, and tolerance in the contemporary world (Brown 2006; Hurd 2015; Sullivan 2005), which increasingly structure and mediate recognizable, legitimate modes of religious plurality. From the opposing camp, opponents of interreligious pluralism ironically draw on a comparable reification of religious difference. For them, theological differences are matters of universal truth and falsehood that translate directly into social and political hierarchies, which, in turn, demand rigid maintenance.

The distinction between religious plurality and interreligious pluralism, which serves as the leitmotif for our special section, “Siting Pluralism,” navigates between the pitfalls of liberal romance and illiberal disdain. Without wading into the deeper waters of debates over the universality of the concept and category of religion,² we acknowledge forms of religious plurality that extend across a wide range of socio-historical contexts. Even more strongly, we maintain that such plurality is formative. As Steven Wasserstrom (n.d.: 4) has memorably remarked in his theses on the study of religion: “Religion is always inter-religion.” In a plethora of polities and eras, including the Achaemenid (First Persian) Empire, the Eastern Mediterranean of late

antiquity, South Asia during the reign of Emperor Ashoka, seventeenth-century Amsterdam, the Ming dynasty, and the Muslim states of al-Andalus, Fatimid Egypt, the Mughal Empire, and the Ottoman Empire—to take but a few prominent examples—‘interreligion’ has been a key thread in the fabric of many societies. Rather than simply praising or condemning religious plurality, we insist on an approach that plumbs the modes of reasoning that religious actors have marshaled to grapple with the social fact of religious plurality across epochs and environs.³

Interreligious pluralism, on the other hand, is historically specific in a manner that religious plurality and interreligion are not. With its characteristic image of discrete, homogeneous religious communities that warrant legal equality and extra-legal accommodation, interreligious pluralism is a definitively modern dispensation, inseparable from the consolidation of secularism as a strategy of governance. From the modernist perspective, religion is an abstract, iterative category into which a variety of theologies, communities, and practices can be ‘slotted’ (cf. Trouillot 2003). As Bruno Latour (1993) and Webb Keane (2007) have cogently argued, this notion of religion is inseparable from the ‘purification’ of worldviews and social realms that saturates and subtends modernity. In what Charles Taylor (2007) has memorably called the ‘secular age’, theological, ritual, and social differences have been reified into purified forms that are easily legible by and attuned to the means and ends of secular governance (Asad 2003). Furthermore, as Winnifred Sullivan (2005) and Thomas Kirsch and Bertram Turner (2009) have shown, law and juridical reason play a key role in establishing the place of religion in liberal polities by rendering religious models of sovereignty amenable to modern political ends (see also Mahadev 2013; Marshall 2009; Schmitt [1985] 2005). Interreligious pluralism flourishes on the discursive terrain established by the modern governance of religion. Yet it also gestures to the limits of a state-focused approach to liberal secularism, as its image of religious difference has “gone global” (Klassen and Bender 2010: 8) to inspire an array of both state and non-state actors and projects.

When we historicize interreligious pluralism in this manner, we necessarily reorient our approach to religious plurality in the contemporary world. Rather than hypostasizing a halcyon scene of religious heterogeneity that must be preserved (the liberal romance) or an anxious conflict between ‘true’ and ‘false’ religion(s) (the illiberal dystopia), we open questions that can be addressed only through precise studies of historical and social contexts: How do the practices and ideology of interreligious pluralism, and their discontents, empower and frustrate specific religious and non-religious actors? What narratives about religious pasts are sanctioned by interreligious pluralism?⁴ Which institutional, social, and discursive spaces provide the crucibles for both religious plurality and interreligious pluralism in the present? It is this final question, above all, that anchors and unites the contributions to this special section.

Spatial Practices of Plurality and Pluralism

To return momentarily to our opening anecdote, the most striking feature of the assault on the “Shared Sacred Sites” exhibition was not merely its rejection of interreligious pluralism, but its interrogation of ‘spatial practices of pluralism.’⁵ The exhibit explicitly publicized and theorized the connection between religious plurality and space; fittingly, its posters and materials featured the familiar tripartite representation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam by way of the Star of David, a cross, and a crescent moon. The poster thus constitutes a spatial diagram—an ‘indexical icon,’ in the semiotic language of Charles Sanders Peirce (1992)—of religious plurality and equality (see also Silverstein 2004; Yelle 2016). Just as the three symbols are depicted together, so too can practices and communities from the three religions co-exist harmoniously in shared

spaces. The vandals who disfigured the exhibition poster (fig. 1) rejected this spatial diagram of equality among religions and sought to replace it with a diagram of Christian precedence by tarnishing the symbols of Judaism and Islam. And yet, on another level, the poster and its defacement were comparable spatial practices: they both took ‘place’ in the busy public space of central Thessaloniki and addressed the anonymous public of urban passersby.

This brief analysis suggests that any discussion of interreligious pluralism is inseparable from its multiple spatial logics, practices, and ideologies. On the first level, we can point to the myriad spatial practices of religious plurality. How, indeed, are sacred sites shared among religious communities in various times and places? Is such sharing a matter of theological congruence, practical accommodation, or both? Does spatial proximity between religious groups tend to produce modes of harmonious mutuality, or is it more frequently characterized by ‘antagonistic’ forms of tolerance, as Robert Hayden (2002) has argued? On the other hand, how might we theorize spatial practices of religious separation and segregation? Finally, and perhaps most challengingly, how do the spatialized political theologies and cosmologies of specific religious traditions inform spatial practices of religious plurality?

Secondly, we must disentangle the spatial practices of religious plurality, with their variegated genealogies and histories, from characteristically modern spatial practices of interreligious pluralism. By and large, spatial practices of interreligious pluralism are part and parcel of what José Casanova (1994) has called ‘public religion.’ Especially within liberal democracies, religious communities and the spaces they inhabit necessarily abide by a nested set of expectations and demands: they should be discrete and identifiable; they should not interfere with the (equally discrete and identifiable) spaces and practices of other ratified religious communities; they should enter and affect the broader public sphere only under the condition that they refrain from coercion and spatial monopolization.⁶ The spatial practices of interreligious pluralism converge with those of liberal secularism in general, and necessarily exert pressure on what we might call, following Hussein Agrama (2011), ‘asecular’ spatial practices of religious plurality. Discourses of interreligious tolerance, as Wendy Brown (2006) has powerfully argued, are especially productive in this respect. When religious groups fashion themselves as both subjects and objects of tolerance, the spaces they inhabit become sites of representation with imagined audiences that extend far beyond the communities themselves (see Walton 2015, 2016a).

Finally, we can interrogate the “representations of space,” in Henri Lefebvre’s ([1974] 1991: 38–39) sense, that interreligious pluralism entails and naturalizes. Religious actors in today’s world seek reconciliations between traditional images and practices of religious plurality and the imperatives of interreligious pluralism. For instance, as both anthropologists (Geertz 1971, 1980) and historians of religion (Eliade [1957] 1987) have argued, religious power and political sovereignty often coincide and mutually reinforce each other in ‘exemplary centers’, especially in urban contexts. While such sacrosanct centers would seem to lend themselves to ideal-typical political systems of theocracy and cosmocracy (Obeyesekere et al. 1972), they are inseparable from the ideological imperatives and complex networks of power that are operative within modern states.⁷ Several articles in this section complicate received notions about the singularity of ethno-religious subjectivity within the bounds of the state. In doing so, they illustrate how religious actors reimagine and represent ritual, social, political, and ontological/cosmological space in unanticipated ways. More generally, representations of space that emerge from formations of religious plurality in the age of interreligious pluralism are a crucial topic for further ethnographic examination, certainly beyond the remarks we offer here. For it is in these commensurations of spatial practices and images of space that ‘top-down’ approaches focusing on state constructions of religious diversity and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to protean forms of religious plurality necessarily meet and mingle.



Figure 1: The defaced poster for Thessaloniki's "Shared Sacred Sites" exhibition. Photograph © Jeremy F. Walton

A Brief Survey of the Landscape Ahead

We have opted to begin on a programmatic note precisely because the issues that we have raised—the relationship between religious plurality and interreligious pluralism, and the spatial embodiments and entailments of this relationship—are so ripe for further study on the part of scholars of religion. Each of the four articles that constitute this section grapples with these issues through specific ethnographic and historical study. Although they are not written explicitly on the basis of the conceptual apparatus we have introduced here, they each resonate with it in ample, multiple ways.

Our first article, Elina Hartikainen’s “Adjudicating Religious Intolerance: Afro-Brazilian Religions, Public Space, and the National Collective in Twenty-First-Century Brazil,” examines a complex, compelling context of religious plurality, where Afro-Brazilian religious practices co-exist alongside Catholicism and the expanding influence of Evangelical Christians. Against a historical backdrop of prejudicial state practice and ideology, Hartikainen evaluates the contemporary Brazilian legal terrain in relation to Afro-Brazilian religions and religious plurality in general. Her survey encompasses the outcomes of three specific court cases: (1) a suit arising from the demolition of a Candomblé temple in the city of Salvador, which, Candomblé practitioners and sympathizers argued (unsuccessfully), constituted an act of religious discrimination; (2) the uproar resulting from a federal judge’s ruling that Afro-Brazilian traditions do not qualify as ‘religions,’ which occurred in the context of a case lobbying for the removal of bigoted videos about Afro-Brazilian practices from YouTube; and (3) the legal and political controversy over protections for Afro-Brazilian animal sacrifice and religious freedom in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. In each instance, Hartikainen persuasively argues that legal adjudications of Afro-Brazilian religions necessarily occur within, and recapitulate, the ‘problem space’ of secularism, within which the relationship between the religious and the political is both overdetermined and subject to constant interrogation (Agrama 2012). Moreover, her diligent attention to both the legal and social spaces within which these cases have taken shape complements and supplements recent literature on the politics of religious freedom (e.g., Hurd 2015; Mahmood 2015; Sullivan 2005).

Melissa Caldwell’s article, “Sacred Spaces and Civic Action: Topographies of Pluralism in Russia,” shifts hemispheres, taking us to a rich context of post-socialist religious transformation and pluralization—that of contemporary Moscow. She begins with the highly publicized arrest of members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot, who were brought to trial for blasphemy after they entered Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior without authorization to offer a subversive “Punk Prayer.” Rather than focusing on the Orthodox Church’s and Russian state’s responses to the “Punk Prayer,” Caldwell takes Pussy Riot’s intervention as an invitation to explore a broader geography of religious spatial practices in the city. She illustrates how various religious actors transform shared religious spaces throughout the city of Moscow—both churches and more ‘secular’ settings—into sites of activism that are often oriented toward social justice. Moving beyond the din of explicit political controversy, she traces the transpositions of single spaces that alternate daily between various religious and faith-based activist groups, many of which include ethnic minorities and immigrants. Over the course of a day or a week, a single space may contain religious groups with political orientations ranging from conservative to progressive—an empirical reality that, she contends, is evidence of high levels of interreligious tolerance and a strong interface between secular and religious bodies in contemporary Russia. Nevertheless, Caldwell is emphatic that, in order to pursue this mix of religious dedication and progressive politics within the bounds of a state that is widely believed to deploy the residual surveillance technologies left behind by the Soviets, Russian religious activists must carefully follow state-sanctioned scripts for worship and political activism. Here, the very conditions of

religious plurality and interreligious pluralism depend on a relatively diminished role for religious diversity in the public sphere at large.

Neena Mahadev's article, "Post-war Blood: Sacrifice, Anti-sacrifice, and the Rearticulations of Conflict in Sri Lanka," pursues the politics of interreligious pluralism in a context where political—and ritual—bloodletting remains a topic of keen debate and anxiety. According to the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist nationalists, who triumphed in the civil war against Tamil insurgents, the time for shedding blood in Sri Lanka is over. As Mahadev argues, the post-war religious and ethnic geographies of Sri Lanka are shifting. The binary image of a 'Tamil north' and a 'Sinhala south' may be in decline, and there appears to be an increase of co-pilgrimages on the part of Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus to shared sites. On the other hand, there has also been an uptick in interventions by ethnically Sinhalese Buddhist reformers against various forms of ritual slaughter. Criticism of blood sacrifice allows Buddhists to assert their moral and aesthetic superiority over Sri Lanka's two primary minority religions: Islam and (certain strands of) Hinduism. Mahadev hones in on the worship of Bhadrakali—a Hindu goddess who is also subsumed within the Buddhist pantheon under the authority of the Buddha. Forging a relationship with the goddess typically involves sacrifices of animals on the grounds of her shrine situated at Munneswaram, Chilaw. These animal sacrifices are carried out not only by Hindus, but also, in seeming contradiction, by certain subsets of Sinhala Buddhists. Mahadev points to how, despite the efforts of Buddhist moral reformers and politicians to ban animal sacrifice and engage in vigilante acts to put a stop to the practice among Tamil Hindus and Sinhala Buddhists alike, Sinhala Buddhist politicians are known to transgress the injunctions against sacrifice in order to increase their power and political prowess. She demonstrates that these nationalistic interventions by Buddhist reformers amount to a 'rearticulation of conflict'. Ultimately, Mahadev highlights how majoritarian nationalist interventions and censure against blood sacrifice are sited in ways that symbolically assert the bio-moral purity of the Sinhala Buddhist cause, and attempt to retain Buddhist sovereignty over the country's post-war future.

Our final article in this special section, Jeremy F. Walton and Piro Rexhepi's "On Institutional Pluralization and the Political Genealogies of Post-Yugoslav Islam," examines the politics of religious pluralization in relation to Muslim institutions and communities in the western Balkans. 'Balkanization' as a scholarly concept (see Todorova 1997) suggests that successive political regimes—the Ottoman Empire, followed by the Habsburg Empire, twentieth-century experiments in republicanism, monarchism, fascism, and socialism, and, finally, UN humanitarian interventions—created fractures among Balkan religious communities that eventually gave birth to new states along the fault lines of ethno-religious difference. This legacy ostensibly ravaged the conditions of possibility for interreligious pluralism in the post-Yugoslav milieu. Against this line of commonsensical wisdom, Walton and Rexhepi analyze the transformations that Islamic institutions have undergone in the decades following the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, adding nuance to the picture of pluralism in four Yugoslav successor states—Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Slovenia. These transitions illuminate how the governing practices of religious institutions, amid radical political changes, have determined the shapes and textures of pluralism and Muslim belonging in each of the successor states they examine. Rather than accounting for 'sectarian' difference, they document "genealogies of divergence, formations of plurality, and minority traditions *within* religious communities."

Winnifred Sullivan concludes our special section with her trenchant, panoramic reflections. She focuses our attention again on the "glimpses ... of religious life lived in the in-between spaces of formal policing efforts, whether of church or state" that each of our essays offers. These in-between spaces, and the "stubborn and protean creativity" of the religious practices, communities, and lives that occupy them, form a key thread that courses through our collection.

Whether in Brazil, Russia, Sri Lanka, or the successor states of Yugoslavia, the shifting sands of religious plurality, interreligious pluralism, and their discontents are inseparable from the spaces and places through which religious differences and their attendant politics achieve expression. Practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil face both prejudicial preconceptions about the nature of religion and brute material limitations as they seek space(s) within the city. Churches in Moscow house a spectrum of religious activists whose co-presence is largely tranquil, if not necessarily symbiotic. In Sri Lanka, the ritual convergence of Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus in shared sites may ironically strengthen the asymmetrical power of majoritarian Sinhala nationalism. Islamic institutions in the Balkans have become sites for a new minority politics of recognition that could not have been anticipated in socialist Yugoslavia. In each of these contexts, and beyond, sites of religious practice are equally sites for negotiation over the politics of interreligious pluralism. Accommodations, entrenchments, and syntheses of religious plurality constitute the landscape of religion today. Their voices demand to be heard in relation to the spaces and places that are their crucibles.

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NOTES

1. For this exhibition, the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art featured a synthesis of anthropological displays and artistic works related to contemporary shared sacred sites. The Thessaloniki Museum of Photography exhibited artistic and documentary photography from a wide range of places categorized according to themes such as ‘walls’, ‘caves’, and ‘islands’. Finally, the Yeni Camii (New Mosque), a site of religious syncretism in its own right during the final decades of Ottoman Salonika in the early twentieth century (Baer 2010: 36–43; Walton 2016b), offered a comprehensive historical portrait of religious intersections in Thessaloniki itself.
2. Debate over the universality or particularity of the category of religion and its sibling, the religious, has energized and occasionally divided scholars of religion in recent decades. Rather than rehashing and extending these crucial debates, we prefer to remain strategically agnostic in relation to them, even as they shadow our analyses. A few of the key voices and arguments in these debates include Asad (1993), Smith (1998), McCutcheon (2003), Masuzawa (2005), and Orsi (2005). For a salutary summary, see King (2013).
3. Wasserstrom’s (1995) *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam* is an exemplary study in this respect.
4. Nostalgia for bygone interreligious tranquility, especially in Muslim polities—the *convivencia* of Muslim Iberia, the supposed harmony of the Ottoman *millet* system, the pre-colonial interreligious goodwill of Mughal South Asia—is an especially common trope of interreligious pluralism. For a review and critique of such nostalgic narratives in relation to al-Andalus and the Ottoman Empire, see Walton (2017a).
5. We refer to spatial practices in the spirit of Henri Lefebvre’s ([1974] 1991) and Michel de Certeau’s (1984) pioneering work on space and place.
6. As Talal Asad (2003: 183) has memorably written in response to Casanova: “When it is proposed that religion can play a positive political role in modern society, it is not intended that this apply to *any* religion whatever, but only to those religions that are able and willing to enter the public sphere for the purpose of rational debate with opponents who are to be persuaded rather than coerced.”
7. Stanley Tambiah’s (1977) famous thesis on ‘galactic polities’ bears this point out evocatively and thoroughly.

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