

Landscapes of Religious Pluralism: Understanding Difference and the Common Good

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Summary Statement

The two paths to accommodate religious pluralism in America—either dissolving theological difference to find commonality, or removing religion from the public square to preserve theological difference—have long been acknowledged in theological scholarship. Since the mid-twentieth century, design responses to religious pluralism have opted toward the commonality approach. As has been studied in detail within recent sacred space scholarship, architects employ light, water, nature, universal geometries, and contemplative environments to invoke the numinous in shared religious spaces. This was true of Eero Saarinen's MIT Chapel in 1955, and is true of SANAA's just completed Grace Farms in New Canaan, Connecticut. For decades, getting at an expression of the sacred within one building that satisfies multiple religions at once (a perhaps utopian aim) has occupied the lion's share of study and practice of sacred space in the effort to realize religious pluralism.

This paper considers the lesser studied and practiced approach to realizing religious pluralism—how to express true theological difference while still preserving religious pluralism as a foundational component of the American project. We consider here conceptual, theological, and practical concerns. We appreciate the suspicion with which philosophers of religion have come to view phenomenological methods that presume the existence of “the sacred” that merely awaits our discovery and description. And we investigate the relevance for public space of interreligious hermeneutics, theologies that seek to maintain divergent truth claims without surrendering substantive public dialogue. We also consider what we call “landscapes of religious pluralism” that we believe allow theological difference to exist while still enacting pluralism in public. This broadens the conversation of how to realize religious pluralism architecturally from specific design or liturgical approaches toward thinking of religious pluralism as a visible system. Finally, we see this aim of preserving theological difference as fundamentally engaging politics in, at times, uncomfortable ways. We consider here specifically how our current era's most pressing challenge is the incorporation of Islam into America's pluralist landscape.

Topic

Our topic is the built environment as a venue for negotiating religious difference toward the common good. Such a manifestly public endeavor cannot be adequately studied, interpreted, or enacted if limited to individual buildings or sites. The inherently interdisciplinary and interreligious nature of the topic also suggests the need for a similar broadening of perspective. Accordingly, we advocate an approach that incorporates particular conceptual, theoretical, and practical concerns. Each of these inform the scope of this work.

Scope

Conceptual

When applied to religious sites or experiences, phenomenology has often presumed the reality of “the sacred” as something beyond human existence, yet this presumption has undergone substantive critique for decades now (e.g., Smith 1987, arguing that human actions at least help to constitute “the sacred”). Furthermore, phenomenological descriptions often flatten true theological difference. Here the work of Ann Taves (2010) is promising as it reconsiders the concept of “the sacred” in a way that seeks to reconcile the phenomenological tradition in religious studies with advances in neuroscience that help to explain the ways in which we set apart certain places or objects as special—even sacred.

Theological

Many theologians and philosophers of religion have addressed the challenges of religious pluralism, from John Hick’s proposed reconciliation of competing truth claims (Hick 2004) to Hans Küng’s advocacy of a cosmic spirituality (Küng 1988, 1991). Scholars of secularization have recast the meaning of religion in pluralist societies, from Talal Asad’s genealogical analyses (Asad 2003) to Charles Taylor’s exploration and vision of a secular spiritual pluralism (Taylor 2007). But a persisting challenge in the public sphere (or across multiple publics) is to reconcile the values of a pluralist society with the broad range of enduring religious difference. To this end the recent emergence of “interreligious hermeneutics” among theologians is promising insofar as it aims to retain the constitutive character of religious differences in the midst of substantive and open interreligious encounters (e.g., Cornille, et al., 2010; Hustwitt 2014). Equally important is a viable theory of religion underlying any appropriation of theological method for architectural discourse. The recent work of Thomas Tweed (2006) is especially valuable in this context because his conception of religious beliefs and practices emphasizes the dynamic, spatial, and material implications of the ways in which people find religion meaningful.

Practical

To address the fully public aspects of religious pluralism as it is manifest in the built environment requires an inclusive approach that is closer to material culture than to traditional architectural history or theory. The appropriation of material culture for the study of religion is relatively recent: the journal *Material Religion* celebrated its first decade just two years ago and helped establish the field’s identity (Meyer, et al 2014). Other significant sources for orientation include McDannell (1995), Morgan, et al. (2011), Nelson (2006), and Bender, et al. (2010). It is in this context that we propose to focus upon what we call “landscapes of religious pluralism,” which would include buildings within the broader and more diffuse experience of architecture publicly beheld. As Sally Promey (2001, 48) puts it, “...the visible display of religion allows individuals and groups to approach and to imagine perspectives different from their own. Visible religion takes on an active cultural role: rehearsing diversity, practicing pluralism.”

Intended Conclusions

In addition to offering a possible alternative to interpreting religious pluralism through singular architectural settings of shared sacred space, attention to landscapes of religious pluralism makes use of diverse perspectives upon the particular phenomena that give religious architectural settings their meaning for human experience. It holds in tension particular religious identities and the broader public arenas of their interaction. We intend to demonstrate that this is a productive tension, well suited to contemporary challenges and opportunities.

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