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*Article*

# Is Multi-Faith Paradigm Secularism 2.0? On the Extra-Institutional Development of Multi-Faith Spaces

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**Abstract:** The Multi-Faith Spaces (MFS) are a relatively new invention, and yet they quickly gained in significance. On one hand, they are a convenient solution for satisfying needs of people having diverse beliefs in the institutional context of places such as hospitals, schools, airports and the like. On the other hand, as Andrew Crompton pointed out, they are politically significant because the multi-faith paradigm "is replacing Christianity as the face of public religion in Europe" as successor of secularism (2012, p. 493). Due to their ideological entanglement, however, they are often used as the means to promote either a more privatised version of religion, or a certain denominational preference. Two diverse kinds of design are used to achieve these means: negative in the case of the former, and positive for the latter. Neither is without problems, and neither adequately fulfils their primary purpose of serving diverse groups of believers. Both, however, seem to follow the biases and main problems of secularism. In this paper, I analyse recent developments of the MFS to detail their main problems and answer the question, whether the MFS, and the underlying Multi-Faith Paradigm, can be classified as a continuation of secularism.

**Keywords:** multi-faith spaces; secularisation; multi-faith paradigm; unaffiliated; multi-belief

## 1. Introduction

The notion of progressive "secularisation" was one of the intellectual commonplaces in Western Europe at least since the nineteenth century (Norris and Inglehart 2005, p. 3). Secularisation assumes, that the processes of modernity will result in the final "disenchantment of the world" (Weber 1958, p. 133), and the gradual disappearance of religion will follow. As Jeffrey K. Hadden put it, paraphrasing C. Wright Mills (1959), "[i]n due course the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm" (1987, p. 598). However, systematic challenges put a strain on that theory (for Europe see e.g. Casanova 2006). Some, like Peter Berger, argue that secularisation should be rejected as "essentially mistaken" (1999, p. 2). Other, like Pippa Norris and Roman Inglehart, assert that its traditional version needs corrections, and should be seen as a tendency rather than "iron law" (2005, p. 5). Another, like Hadden, claim that it is only an "orienting concept grounded in an ideological preference" (1987, p. 587).

Silvio Ferrari (2012) argues that secularisation was rather a purposeful policy of making the public sphere truly neutral and impartial. As the argument of its proponents goes, this can be done only by making it secular, i.e. by basing all public decisions on rational rather than religious principles (p. 356). However, Ferrari claims, secularism is not as neutral as it advertises itself. Quite the contrary, it favours some religious traditions, while posing greater demands on the other (p. 359). He tentatively draws the line between "two different ways of conceiving and experiencing religion, [the favoured] one more focused on the *forum internum* and the other on the *forum externum*" (p. 367). This is why there seem to be two alternatives in thinking about religion, both equally untenable. Either the emphasis is put on the freedom of choice and the public sphere treats favourably these religions, that restrict the membership on no other basis than individual conscience, or the emphasis is put on the "identitarian and cultural value of religion", which in turn results in the strict domination of traditional religion (p. 370).

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They are untenable, for the religious landscape of Europe changed significantly throughout the twentieth and the early twenty-first century. Factors such as an influx of migrants, the birth of New Age movements or the loosening of denominational association among many Christians resulted in the rising multi-religiosity and the development of non-institutional forms of religion (Davidsen 2012, pp. 554-555). Western Europe has the biggest percentage of the unaffiliated, who account for more than half of its population (WIN-Gallup International 2012, p. 17). However, majority of them still hold some kind of religious beliefs (Hackett and Grim 2012, p. 24), with 77% of Europeans believing in some kind of spiritual reality (European Commission 2010, p. 381). And this is going to deepen till 2050, as the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist populations are forecasted to double (Hackett et al. 2015, p. 147).

This prompted the creation of what is generally called the "multi-faith spaces" (hereinafter MFS). At first these spaces were an answer to the diverse religious needs in the institutional context of public facilities, such as schools, hospitals or airports. Recently, however, the MFS began to exit the context of institutions and pop-out as standalone projects. In Berlin, the founding committee comprising of a priest, a rabbi and an imam decided to undertake a building of a joint church of three monotheistic religions under the name "House of One" (House of One 2017). More recently, Copenhagen City Hall allocated funds for the construction of the first multi-faith church (Nilsson 2016), while in Swedish Borlänge the first religion-neutral cemetery was created (Ago 2016).

In this paper, I plan to first, review the developments in the MFS until now to detail their main problems, and, second, on that base analyse the extra-institutional developments and answer the following questions: may the MFS be classified as a part of secularism; do they confirm that it is biased in the way proposed by Ferrari; do these spaces fall into the general trend or do they propose any novel solutions? Due to the limited examples in Western Europe, I will focus on three above-mentioned initiatives which, in my opinion, aptly capture two different attitudes towards the multi-faith trend.

## 2. Results

Although some spaces were shared by different religions in the past, the phenomenon of the MFS is quite a recent invention. As Terry Biddington notes, the first explicitly all-inclusive "Andachtsraum" appeared at Vienna Airport only in 1988 (2013, pp. 316-17). Because of their recentness, they are still not well-defined. "The Multi-Faith Spaces" exhibition notes that even the naming is not congruent, ranging from "inter-faith chapels" to "retreat lounges" (Brand, Crompton and Hewson 2012), which reflects the strive to appeal to as wide audience as possible (Crompton and Hewson 2016, p. 83). They are spaces designated for a spiritual activity of different sorts, designed to be suitable for both the religious and the non-religious, without a bias towards any convictions. And while their appearance was an effect of both grassroots initiatives and voluntary decisions of facilities' management, they began to be promoted and recommended i.a. by government agencies in Europe (e.g. in the UK, see Collins and others 2007, pp. 168-170 or in Spain, see Diez de Velasco 2011).

There are no architectural guidelines for the way in which the MFS should be built and furnished. Nonetheless, the direction of the most seems quite congruent. Andrew Crompton (2013) notes that there are basically two types of MFS: negative, shared by a majority of such places in Europe and USA, and positive (p. 479). The most common type of the former is a "windowless white room with a few religious texts on a shelf and the paraphernalia of religion, when not actually in use, kept out of sight in boxes", all made from banal materials (p. 474). As Crompton argues, this is the architectural equivalent of an "ambient-noise" (p. 491). The latter is often termed the 'unity by inclusion', where the artefacts of different faiths are on display and the spaces are visibly occupied by different groups (p. 479). In some cases, former Christian chapels are re-appropriated, yet in most cases they are built from scratch (The Economist 2013).

There seems to be a discrepancy in the evaluation of the MFS. On one hand, they are praised as the "new level of religious harmony" for their positive role in the facilitation of religious practice, the promotion of tolerance, and the balancing of religious and secular provisions (Crompton and

Hewson 2016, p. 77). On the other, they often evoke equally strong negative reactions, especially in reference to Islam. Some secularists accuse them of being "hidden mosques" that "creep into the public spaces, cloaked behind political correctness" (The Economist 2013). Meanwhile, Marie Krarup, the Danish People's Party member of parliament wanted to close a multi-faith retreat room at the Søndre Kampus of the University of Copenhagen in the name of Danishness and Christianity (Ravn and Schmidt-Mikkelsen 2016). Finally, many Muslims reject the multi-faith facilities, requesting for a dedicated space and protesting in the streets (Taneja 2010).

The problems seem to come from relying on what Adam Dinham (2012) calls the muddle of 'multi-faith paradigm'. Two contradictory understandings of religion hide under this name. On one hand, religions are treated as heroes of social cohesion that can bring different social groups together; on the other, as villains who radicalise individuals (p. 577). Thus, multi-faith paradigm and the accompanying activities serve a dual purpose: to use different religions to bring tolerance and sense of togetherness, and to fight religion, introducing preference for more privatised faith (p. 588).

By the adherence to the negative design most MFS tilt the scale towards the latter. That is why Crompton and Hewson (2016) argue, that they "follow the modern preference for 'faith' rather than 'religion' and facilitate personal acts of worship", acting "as a benign form of social control, treating religion as a disorder to be tidied away" (pp. 80-81). However, this creates multiple problems. Aiming at everyone, it is home to no-one, creating a sense of impermanence (p. 82). Consequently, everyone is disadvantaged, but the most hindered are those who need objects, set activities and control over their surroundings in their religious practice, while those who can pray anywhere are clearly in favour (p. 85). As they sum it up, "[m]ulti-faith design is a provisional business, an act of casuistry rather than synthesis. Although it aims at equality of opportunity users can never truly be served equally" (p. 84).

Moreover, a truly negative design is hard to achieve. As Francisco Diez de Velasco (2014) notes, already a "neutral arrangement" gives a preference towards the unaffiliated and the non-believers (p. 4). And the all-inclusive space needs an extreme amount of maintenance. Based on the case studies, Diez de Velasco tried to come up with some guidelines for the MFS. The rooms have to be spacious, soundproof and preferably circular, although a hexagonal design works too. A scrupulous timetable has to be maintained by an appointed inter-faith minister(s), as there should not be any simultaneous sharing between the groups. The rooms have to be kept spotlessly clean and the furniture easily removable for carpets to be rolled in their place. And nonetheless it is not enough amid increased religious activity, for example during coincidental festivities of two religious group (2014, pp. 5-7).

In fact, the MFS work the better, the more they make room for distinctiveness. This is well illustrated by the review of policies adapted by the UK universities. As Jonathan D. Smith (2016) points out, they present two different attitudes (p. 1). The best performing facilities, represented by most universities from the Russell Group, adapt the attitude termed by him "pragmatism + public religion". They implement the pragmatic recommendations made by researchers like Diez de Velasco, introduce separate rooms for Muslim prayers, and see religion as an important and positive addition to their campuses, maintaining the MFS as a space for the cultural exchange (p. 5). On the other side of the spectrum are those, that prefer a more privatised faith, rejecting religion as unnecessary and unwanted problem, and preferring minimal, bland design without any supervision (p. 8). These are the ones, that constantly gather negative media coverage due to the clashes between different faith groups and inadequacy to the needs of their users.

Dinham concludes, that "multi-faith practices risk constituting a parallel world running alongside 'real' faith communities, seeming to respond to policy hopes but unable to bring constituencies of faith with them. To this extent the multi-faith paradigm remains a construct of policy hopefulness" (2012, p. 586). Yet, as we have seen above, this is the least of worries, as the MFS can constitute the opposite of what they aim for by generating conflicts and introducing inequality and discord. In the cases where former Christian chapels are converted, as Sophie Gilliat-Ray notes, they may even become a flashpoint of intra-institutional tension, especially between Christians, who

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are afraid about the disappearance of their tradition, and Muslims, who due to their daily prayers spend there the most time (2005, p. 300).

Diaz de Velasco argues, that in fact the MFS can be classified as a part of "the diverse phenomena involved in redefining religious identities on an individual and collective scale that some have attempted to group beneath the umbrella term of secularization" (2014, p. 3). And indeed, most of them fit well into the definition of secularisation put forward by Ferrari: they favour those religious beliefs that focus on the *forum internum,* and disadvantage those that need external manifestation. Thus, two key notions around which they are organised are "choice" and "private religion". However, this is only a part of the story, as there are those MFS that serve as supplementary facilities for a social exchange, rather than a main place of religious observance. Therefore, the first is a reconfiguration of an old policy and hopefulness of secularism. The second, however, is a post-secular way to harmonise plurality of beliefs. The question then regards the direction chosen in, as it seems, the next step of multi-faith paradigm, i.e. the standalone multi-faith spaces.

## 3. Leaving Institutions

In September 2016 Copenhagen City Hall agreed to allocate five million Danish crowns in their forthcoming budget for the building of what has been called by the media the first "Faith-Neutral Church" (Sputnik International 2016). In fact, the idea for what is rather a ceremony room was in play since 2008, when it was initiated by a recurring problem of non-religious people having hard time to find an alternative to either the church or the town hall. A group of people came up with the idea of a neutral place for believers and non-believers alike, where they could celebrate various rituals and rites of passage in the design of their favour (Voller 2008). A preliminary project for the facility was commissioned already in 2013, and Svendborg Architects proposed to convert the unused part of columbarium at the Bispebjerg Cemetery (Nilsson 2016).

The new building is supposed to be a 20-meter high circular block made of glass slats with a big window in the ceiling, and water seeping down from it for light to easily permeate the whole interior. It is a strong prerequisite for the inside to be neutral, but simultaneously capable of accommodating everyone's needs. And the reference to the church in media coverage is not ungrounded. As the architects admit themselves, they were highly inspired by churches in their project, especially when it comes to light, space, openness and acoustics. Similarly to the religious temples, this building was designed to be both respectable and sublime (Faerch 2013).

While the "Ceremonirummet" is still in progress, it is hard not to notice its similarity to the intra-institutional MFS. The preliminary design fits well into the "best practices" recommended by i.a. Diez de Velasco or Crompton. The building has a circular shape and is made of simple and neutral materials, with a good lighting and easily reconfigurable interior. Adding the references to nature in the form of water, it constitutes a perfect example of the MFS negative design. Moreover, having in mind the religiously unaffiliated as the main group of potential users, it even shares the idea behind such spaces - a visible preference for faith rather than religion, as well as an individual choice.

Stora Tuna Cemetery in the Swedish Borlänge is of a similar character, but in this case, it is about a religion-neutral burial ground. The local teacher put forward the formal application for its foundation to the Church of Sweden, which, no longer a part of Swedish State, still retains some public responsibilities, i.a. provision and maintenance of burial grounds (The Local 2016). In the spring 2016 all details were agreed upon and the part of the cemetery was designated for a new, neutral graveyard. It is maintained by the local parish, but without any further involvement. And, again, negative design is the method of choice for the open character of the space. As its aesthetic character is fully dependent on individual tombstones, anyone is allowed to get their resting place there, in any shape they want, and no matter of what belief, as long as they will refrain from manifesting any religious, ideological or nationalist symbols (Mankefors 2016). Those who want to be buried at a new ground, can use a mortuary chapel, as well as have right to the regular service of a priest, but this remains completely optional. And although the space is empty for now, the cemetery organisers already noted high interest in it (Ago 2016).

Scandinavian examples come from countries that either still have (Denmark) or, until very recently, had (Sweden) state churches that for a long time constituted a decisive voice in the sphere of public religion. From that emerged what Peter Lüchau calls the 'Scandinavian Paradox': although population of Scandinavia is deeply secular when it comes to beliefs, the membership rates in the national churches are very high (2009, p. 177). The new initiatives therefore want to counteract and 'free' people from that domination, opening towards the rising numbers of "unaffiliated". This is especially clear in the Copenhagen case. One of the main backing institutions, The Danish Atheistic Society, simultaneously runs a campaign convincing people to renounce their church membership (Sputnik International 2016). Also, this is why the project's initiators took as an important part of their agenda to have it at least to a certain extent state funded (Faerch 2013).

But while they act against the influence of national churches, these initiatives can have a paradoxical effect on them. As Flemming Pless, a Christian vicar from Christianshavn in Copenhagen notes, finally there will be an alternative for those who want to mark important transitions, but without any mentioning of God and not in compliance with a Christian tradition. Because of that, he will no longer be obliged to enable people to do that in his church (Bangslund 2016). It therefore not only frees people from the church domination, but also the churches from the state imposed obligations.

Germany is disparate in that matter. Since the Reformation what later became the German Federal State was much more plural than almost uniquely Lutheran Scandinavia. Already in 1524, the first "Simultankirche" was erected in Bautzen for the shared use of Catholic and Protestants, and in 1732 the King of Prussia set up an Islamic Prayer room in Potsdam (Biddington 2013, p. 316). And the trauma of the Second World War only strengthened the need for tolerance and an inter-religious cooperation. This laid adequate foundations for what started in 2011 as a grassroots initiative of the religious representatives from the three religious communities: Evangelical Parish of St. Petri–St. Marien, Jewish Community of Berlin and the Muslim initiative for dialogue Forum Dialogue e.V. While the funds for what is called the "House of One" are still being collected, its architectural basis was already chosen in an international competition in 2012. And unlike the above-mentioned spaces it employs a positive design to maintain three distinct temples under one roof: a Christian Church, a Jewish Synagogue, and a Muslim Mosque, joined by a communal room, designated for inter-faith meeting space. Thus, every religion has its own place and is respected for its distinctiveness, but remains open to "the others" and common dialogue (House of One 2017). Because of that it is not fully inclusive, like the most MFS, but rather focuses on certain religious traditions, corresponding to the needs of the local population.

And while this will be the first building to house three temples at once, similar designs were put in place in the past. Crompton shows two such examples: Brandeis University, where Catholic, Protestant and Jewish Chapels stand side by side around a pool, and Coventry University Hospital, where separate mono-faith rooms for Catholic, Anglican, Hindu, Sikh and Muslims are joined by a hallway, which as he points, became the true MFS. Because the distinctiveness of all these religions is satisfied, they are more inclined to enter into the relationship with each other. As he points out, the distinct spaces "begin to resemble each other" to the extent that they become "difficult to tell apart" (2013, p. 486). The same applies to the "House of One". While the distinction of three religions is ensured by individual architectural form and religiously conditioned space orientation, their general aesthetics and building materials remain the same.

Two out of three of the above examples are still in the conceptual phase, and it is hard to fully assess if they will generate the previous problems associated with the MFS. The positive design has a high chance of success if the experience gathered by the positive MFS is applicable. The already functioning negative design, a religion-neutral cemetery, until now ran without problems, and it seems probable that this will be true also for the ceremony room. Unlike the intra-institutional MFS, these spaces will be supplementary, an option among many alternatives. Therefore, while they are grounded in the general directions of the MFS in Europe, unlike their often-muddled predecessors, they clarify two distinct purposes, both founded on the notion of "distinction". On one hand, the negative design is put in place where there is a need to distinct the unaffiliated and the believers from

the muss of a "traditional religion". On the other, the positive design is used to enforce the cohesion between already distinct religious traditions. The question for future research remains: will they polarise the public debate into the pro and contra-religious, or quite the opposite, will they discharge the tension and bring the refreshment from the state-entangled religions?

## 4. Conclusions

Peter Berger argues, that "[m]odernity is not necessarily secularizing; it is necessarily *pluralizing*" (2008, p. 23). However, as I aimed to show in this paper, the general direction of the majority of the MFS in Europe strives for making these two notions interchangeable. With the increasingly plural Europe, the original form of secularism became untenable. Thus, to a certain extent, it was transformed into the "multi-faith" secularisation, constituting "Secularism 2.0". By the adherence to the privatised faith rather than organised religion, the negative MFS became a new form of disenchantment, confirming the bias noted by Ferrari, much less visible before.

Simultaneously, however, the minority of spaces present a different attitude towards the multi-faith paradigm. A positive design is employed to build openness and mutual understanding with respect to the distinctiveness of different religious traditions. And while the new standalone initiatives are deeply grounded in their predecessors, and do not introduce any radically new solutions, by becoming supplementary they alleviate potential tensions. By not having to hide their preferences, they receive a new character and clarify two distinct attitudes towards the MFS. And these attitudes are different to such an extent that it is probably a good idea to differentiate them. Referring to negative MFS design, Diaz de Velasco pointed that it would be more accurate to call them the "multi-belief spaces" (2014, p. 2). Thus, in contrast, the positive design could be called the "multi-religious spaces".

Unlike Dinham, I would like to argue, that the notion of "multi-faith paradigm" is not a muddle, but rather a term jointly describing the transformations taking place in the religious landscape of Europe. Crompton argues that "Multifaith is politically significant because it is replacing Christianity as the face of public religion in Europe" (2012, p. 493). And indeed, both of the attitudes towards religion described by Ferrari seem to be changing with it. The emphasis on choice and individual conscience became a part of this paradigm, and the privilege and domination of the traditional religions seems to be gradually vanishing. Is it possible that the latter will be replaced by the inter-religious cooperation? Will the positive and negative design ultimately clash? These are the question that will have to be answered in the further research.

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