

1 Article

2 Multi-Faith Spaces Uncover Secular Premises Behind 3 the Multi-Faith Paradigm

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7 **Abstract:** Multi-Faith Spaces (MFS) are a relatively recent invention that quickly gained in
8 significance. On the one hand, they offer a convenient solution for satisfying needs of people with
9 diverse beliefs in the institutional context of hospitals, schools, airports, etc. On the other hand, as
10 Andrew Crompton pointed out, they are politically significant because the multi-faith paradigm “is
11 replacing Christianity as the face of public religion in Europe” (2012, p. 493). Due to their ideological
12 entanglement, MFS are often used as the means to promote either a more privatised version of
13 religion, or a certain denominational preference. Two distinct designs are used to achieve these
14 means: negative in the case of the former, and positive in the latter. Neither is without problems,
15 and neither adequately fulfils its primary purpose of serving diverse groups of believers. Both,
16 however, seem to follow the biases and main problems of secularism. In this paper, I analyse recent
17 developments of MFS to detail their main problems and answer the question, whether the MFS, and
18 the underlying Multi-Faith Paradigm, can be classified as a continuation of secularism.

19 **Keywords:** multi-faith spaces; secularisation; multi-faith paradigm; unaffiliated; multi-belief
20

21 1. Introduction

22 The notion of progressive “secularisation” has been an intellectual commonplace in Western
23 Europe since at least the nineteenth century (Norris and Inglehart 2005, p. 3). Secularisation assumes
24 that the processes of modernity will result in the final “disenchantment of the world” (Weber 1958,
25 p. 133), and the gradual disappearance of religion will follow. As Jeffrey K. Hadden put it, “[i]n due
26 course the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm” (1987, p. 598).
27 However, systematic challenges put a strain on that theory (for Europe see e.g. Casanova 2006).
28 Already Hadden claimed that secularisation was only an “orienting concept grounded in an
29 ideological preference” (1987, p. 587). Some, like Pippa Norris and Roman Inglehart, built upon this
30 claim, asserting that its traditional version needs corrections, and should be considered a tendency
31 rather than “iron law” (2005, p. 5). Others, like Peter Berger, took the critique even further, and argued
32 that secularisation should be rejected as “essentially mistaken” (1999, p. 2).

33 A different perspective was offered by Silvio Ferrari (2012), who argued that secularisation was
34 not only a descriptive, but also a normative concept. It served as a purposeful policy of making the
35 public sphere truly neutral and impartial, which could only be achieved by making it secular, that is,
36 by making all public decisions on the basis of rational rather than religious principles (p. 356).
37 However, Ferrari claimed that secularism was not as neutral as it advertised itself. Quite the contrary,
38 it favoured some religious traditions, while imposing constraints on the other (p. 359). Ferrari drew
39 the line between “two different ways of conceiving and experiencing religion, [the favoured] one
40 more focused on the *forum internum* and the other on the *forum externum*” (p. 367). These distinct ways
41 led to two alternatives in thinking about religion, both equally unsustainable. Either the emphasis
42 was put on the freedom of choice and the public sphere was accessible rather to those religions that
43 based their membership solely on individual conscience, or the emphasis was put on the “identitarian
44 and cultural value of religion”, which reserved public sphere predominantly for traditional religion
45 (p. 370).

46 Both alternatives are, however, unsustainable due to a rapid change in the religious landscape
47 of Europe throughout the twentieth and the early twenty-first century. Factors such as an influx of
48 migrants, the birth of New Age movements or the loosening of denominational association among
49 many Christians resulted in the rising multi-religiosity and the development of non-institutional
50 forms of religion (Davidsen 2012, pp. 554-555). Western Europe has the highest percentage of the
51 unaffiliated, who account for more than half of its population (WIN-Gallup International 2012, p. 17).
52 However, the majority of those still hold some religious beliefs (Hackett and Grim 2012, p. 24), with
53 77% of Europeans believing in some spiritual reality (European Commission 2010, p. 381). This
54 complexity will progress till 2050, when the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist populations are forecasted
55 to double (Hackett et al. 2015, p. 147).

56 The so-called “multi-faith spaces” were developed in response to this rising multi-religiosity. At
57 first these spaces were an answer to the diverse religious needs in the institutional context of public
58 facilities, such as schools, hospitals and airports. Recently, however, the MFS began to move away
59 from such institutions and emerged as standalone projects. In Berlin a priest, a rabbi and an imam
60 decided to erect a joint church of three monotheistic religions under the name “House of One” (House
61 of One 2017). More recently, Copenhagen City Hall allocated funds for the construction of the first
62 multi-faith church (Nilsson 2016), and the first religion-neutral cemetery was created in Borlänge,
63 Sweden (Ago 2016).

64 In this paper, I plan to review the developments of MFS up till now to detail their main problems,
65 and, further, analyse the extra-institutional developments to answer the following questions: (1) does
66 MFS theoretical orientation, multi-faith paradigm, share common features with secularism; (2) do
67 MFS confirm that this paradigm is biased as Ferrari proposed; (3) do all of these spaces fall into the
68 general trend? Due to the limited examples in Western Europe, I will focus on the three already
69 introduced initiatives which seem to capture two above-mentioned attitudes towards the multi-faith
70 trend.

71 2. Definition and Problems of Intra-Institutional MFS

72 Although some spaces were shared by different religions in the past, the phenomenon of the
73 MFS is quite recent. As Terry Biddington noted, the first explicitly all-inclusive “Andachtsraum”
74 appeared at Vienna Airport only in 1988 (2013, pp. 316-17). Because of their novelty, MFS are still not
75 well-defined. “The Multi-Faith Spaces” exhibition evidenced that even the naming convention was
76 not congruent, ranging from “inter-faith chapels” to “retreat lounges” (Brand, Crompton and
77 Hewson 2012), which resulted from the strive to attract wide audiences (Crompton and Hewson 2016,
78 p. 83). MFS are designated for various spiritual activities and should address both the religious’ and
79 the non-religious’ needs, without a bias towards any worldviews. And while their emergence was a
80 consequence of both grassroots initiatives and voluntary decisions of facilities’ management, MFS
81 began to be promoted and recommended, among others, by government agencies in Europe (e.g. in
82 the UK, see Collins and others 2007, pp. 168-170 or in Spain, see Diez de Velasco 2011).

83 There are no architectural guidelines for the construction and design of MFS. Nonetheless, most
84 of the existing spaces follow similar style patterns. Andrew Crompton (2013) noted that there were
85 two basic types of MFS: negative, shared by a majority of such places in Europe and the USA, and
86 positive (p. 479). A “windowless white room with a few religious texts on a shelf and the
87 paraphernalia of religion, when not actually in use, kept out of sight in boxes” (p. 474), all made from
88 unobtrusive materials is the most common type of the negative design. As Crompton argued, this is
89 the architectural equivalent of an “ambient-noise” (p. 491). The positive style is often described as
90 ‘unity by inclusion’, where the artefacts of different faiths are on display and the spaces are visibly
91 occupied by different groups (p. 479). Regardless of their style, some MFS are established in
92 reappropriated Christian chapels, but most are built from scratch (The Economist 2013).

93 The evaluation of MFS varies significantly. On one hand, they are praised as the “new level of
94 religious harmony” for their positive role in the facilitation of religious practice, the promotion of
95 tolerance, and the balancing of religious and secular provisions (Crompton and Hewson 2016, p. 77).
96 On the other, they often evoke equally strong negative reactions, especially regarding Islam. Some

97 secularists accused MFS of serving as “hidden mosques” that “creep into the public spaces, cloaked
98 behind political correctness” (The Economist 2013). Others see MFS as a threat to their national values
99 and traditional religion. This is why Marie Krarup, the Danish People’s Party member of parliament,
100 wanted to close a multi-faith retreat room at the Søndre Kampus of the University of Copenhagen
101 (Ravn and Schmidt-Mikkelsen 2016). Meanwhile, many Muslims reject the multi-faith facilities,
102 requesting for a dedicated space and, on some occasions, even protesting in the streets (Taneja 2010).

103 The problems seem to come from what Adam Dinham (2012) called the muddle of the ‘multi-
104 faith paradigm’, which concealed two contradictory understandings of religion. On the one hand,
105 religions were treated as heroes of social cohesion that could bring different social groups together;
106 on the other, as villains that radicalised individuals (p. 577). Thus, the multi-faith paradigm and the
107 accompanying activities served a dual purpose: to use different religions to bring tolerance and sense
108 of togetherness, and, simultaneously, to fight religion, introducing a preference for a more privatised
109 faith (p. 588).

110 Most MFS tilt the scale towards the latter by adhering to the negative design. That is why
111 Crompton and Hewson (2016) argued that MFS “follow the modern preference for ‘faith’ rather than
112 ‘religion’ and facilitate personal acts of worship”, acting “as a benign form of social control, treating
113 religion as a disorder to be tidied away” (pp. 80-81). However, such an approach generated multiple
114 problems. Aiming at everyone resulted in a home to no-one and a sense of impermanence (p. 82). It
115 put everyone at a disadvantage, but some more than others. Those, who needed objects, set activities
116 and control over their surroundings in their religious practice, were discriminated against, while
117 those who could pray anywhere were clearly favoured (p. 85). As Crompton and Hewson summed
118 it up, “[m]ulti-faith design is a provisional business, an act of casuistry rather than synthesis.
119 Although it aims at equality of opportunity users can never truly be served equally” (p. 84).

120 On top of that, a truly negative design is hard to achieve. As Francisco Diez de Velasco (2014)
121 noted, a “neutral arrangement” gave upper hand to the unaffiliated and the non-believers (p. 4). As
122 an all-inclusive space, it needed an extreme amount of maintenance. Thus, based on several case
123 studies, Diez de Velasco tried to develop guidelines for MFS administration. The rooms had to be
124 spacious, soundproof and preferably circular, although a hexagonal design would work too. A
125 scrupulous timetable should be maintained by an appointed inter-faith minister(s), as there should
126 not be any simultaneous sharing by the groups. The rooms had to be spotlessly clean and the
127 furniture easily removable for swift rearrangement of the carpets. However, even those rules did not
128 solve all the problems that occurred amid increased religious activity, such as coincidental festivities
129 of two religious groups (2014, pp. 5-7).

130 In fact, the more distinctiveness MFS accommodate, the better they work. This is well illustrated
131 by a review of policies adopted by the UK universities. As Jonathan D. Smith (2016) pointed out, they
132 presented two different attitudes (p. 1). The best performing facilities, represented by most
133 universities from the Russell Group, adopted the attitude of “pragmatism + public religion”. They
134 implemented the pragmatic recommendations of researchers like Diez de Velasco, introduced
135 separate rooms for Muslim prayers, and recognised religion as an important and positive addition to
136 their campuses, maintaining MFS as a space for the cultural exchange (p. 5). On the other side of the
137 spectrum were those spaces, that promoted a more privatised faith, rejecting religion as an
138 unnecessary and unwanted problem, with minimal, bland design and a lack of supervision (p. 8).
139 They repeatedly gained negative media coverage due to the clashes between different faith groups
140 and the perceived inadequacy to the needs of their users.

141 Hence, MFS may reach the opposite of what they aim for. At the very least, as Dinham pointed
142 out, “multi-faith practices risk constituting a parallel world running alongside ‘real’ faith
143 communities, seeming to respond to policy hopes but unable to bring constituencies of faith with
144 them. To this extent the multi-faith paradigm remains a construct of policy hopefulness” (2012, p.
145 586). MFS may generate conflicts and introduce inequality and discord. In the cases where former
146 Christian chapels were converted, as Sophie Gilliat-Ray has noted, they may have even become a
147 flashpoint of intra-institutional tension, especially between Christians, who were afraid of the exodus
148 of their tradition, and Muslims, who use MFS more often, due to their daily prayers (2005, p. 300).

149 Diaz de Velasco argued that, in fact, MFS can be classified as a part of “the diverse phenomena
150 involved in redefining religious identities on an individual and collective scale that some have
151 attempted to group beneath the umbrella term of secularization” (2014, p. 3). And indeed, most of
152 them fit well into Ferrari’s definition of secularisation: they favour those religious beliefs that focus
153 on the *forum internum*, and disadvantage those that entail external manifestation. Even though some
154 MFS serve as supplementary facilities for a social exchange, rather than a main place of religious
155 observance, a vast majority of MFS are organised around two notions: “choice” and “private
156 religion”. The “choice” lies behind the negative design, which embodies a reconfiguration of an old
157 policy and hopefulness for secularism. On the contrary, “private religion” entails the positive design,
158 a post-secular way to harmonise plurality of beliefs. Since the standalone MFS seem to be the next
159 step of multi-faith paradigm, they may rely on the experience of previously established spaces. This
160 reliance will be the focus of the next section.

161 3. Shift to Extra-Institutional MFS

162 In September 2016 Copenhagen City Hall agreed to allocate five million Danish crowns in their
163 forthcoming budget for the building of what has been called by the media the first “Faith-Neutral
164 Church” (Sputnik International 2016). The idea for what might better be named a ceremony room
165 surfaced in 2008, in response to a recurring struggle of non-religious people for an alternative to the
166 church and the town hall. A group of people proposed a neutral place for believers and non-believers
167 alike, where they could celebrate various rituals and rites of passage in the design of their favour
168 (Voller 2008). A preliminary project of the facility was commissioned already in 2013, and Svendborg
169 Architects proposed to convert the unused part of columbarium at the Bispebjerg Cemetery
170 accordingly (Nilsson 2016).

171 The new building was designed as a 20-meter high circular block, made of glass slats with a big
172 window in the ceiling, and water seeping down from it for light to easily permeate the whole interior.
173 The inside had to be neutral, and concurrently accommodating to everyone’s needs. However, the
174 reference to the church in media coverage was not ungrounded. As the architects admitted
175 themselves, they were highly inspired by churches in their project, especially with regards to light,
176 space, openness and acoustics. Like the religious temples, this building was designed to be both
177 respectable and sublime (Faerch 2013).

178 While the “Ceremonirummet” is still in progress, its similarity to the intra-institutional MFS is
179 conspicuous. The preliminary design fits well into the “best practices” recommended by, among
180 others, Diaz de Velasco and Crompton. The building has a circular shape and is made of simple and
181 neutral materials, with a good lighting and easily reconfigurable interior. With references to nature
182 in the form of water, it constitutes a perfect example of MFS negative design. Moreover, with the
183 religiously unaffiliated as the main group of potential users in mind, it even embodies the idea behind
184 such spaces - a visible preference for an individual choice and faith rather than religion.

185 Stora Tuna Cemetery in Borlänge, Sweden, is a religion-neutral burial ground of a similar
186 character. The local teacher applied for its foundation to the Church of Sweden, which, while no
187 longer a part of Swedish State, still retains some public responsibilities, like provision and
188 maintenance of burial grounds (The Local 2016). In spring 2016, all details were agreed upon and part
189 of the cemetery was dedicated for a new, neutral graveyard. It is maintained by the local parish,
190 which is not otherwise involved. And, again, negative design is the method of choice for the open
191 character of the space. Everyone, regardless of own belief, is allowed to get their resting place there,
192 as long as they refrain from exhibiting any religious, ideological or nationalist symbols on custom
193 tombstones (Mankefors 2016). Those who want to be buried at a new ground, can use a mortuary
194 chapel, and have access to the fully optional regular service of a priest. Although the space is currently
195 empty, the cemetery authority has already noted high interest (Ago 2016).

196 Scandinavian examples come from countries that either still have (Denmark) or, until very
197 recently, had (Sweden) state churches that for a long time had a decisive voice in the sphere of public
198 religion. This is where, according to Peter Lüchau, the ‘Scandinavian Paradox’ emerged from: although
199 population of Scandinavia is deeply secular when it comes to beliefs, the membership rates in the

200 national churches are very high (2009, p. 177). The new initiatives aim to counteract this paradox and
201 make place for the rising numbers of “unaffiliated”. It was especially clear in the “Ceremonirummet”
202 case, whose initiators, for that very reason, wanted to secure at least partial state funding (Faerch
203 2013). Concurrently, one of the project’s main supporters, The Danish Atheistic Society, ran a
204 campaign encouraging renouncement of church membership (Sputnik International 2016).

205 However, while these initiatives counteract the influence of national churches, they can have a
206 paradoxical effect. As Flemming Pless, a Christian vicar from Christianshavn in Copenhagen has
207 noted, soon, at last, there will be an alternative for those who want to mark important transitions
208 without reference to God and Christian tradition. Thus, he will no longer be obliged to enable it in
209 his church (Bangslund 2016). This solution not only liberates people from the church domination, but
210 also sets churches free from the state imposed obligations.

211 In Germany, multi-faith movements have different character and aims than in Scandinavia, due
212 to historical differences between their religious landscapes. For most of modern history, the latter
213 was almost uniquely Lutheran, while the former has been religiously plural. Already in 1524, the first
214 “Simultankirche” was erected in Bautzen for the shared use of Catholic and Protestants, and in 1732
215 the King of Prussia set up an Islamic Prayer room in Potsdam (Biddington 2013, p. 316). Later, the
216 trauma of the Second World War only strengthened the need for tolerance and an inter-religious
217 cooperation. This laid firm foundations for the so-called “House of One”, which emerged in 2011 as
218 a grassroots initiative of representatives from the three religious communities: Evangelical Parish of
219 St. Petri–St. Marien, Jewish Community of Berlin and the Muslim initiative for dialogue Forum
220 Dialogue e.V. While the funds are still being collected, its architectural basis has already been chosen
221 in an international competition in 2012. Contrary to the above-mentioned spaces, it employs a
222 positive design to harbour three distinct temples under one roof: a Christian Church, a Jewish
223 Synagogue, and a Muslim Mosque, accompanied with a communal room, designated for inter-faith
224 meeting space. Thus, every religion has its own place and is respected for its distinctiveness, but
225 remains open to “the others” and common dialogue (House of One 2017). Therefore, it is not fully
226 inclusive, like most MFS, but rather focuses on certain religious traditions and adheres to the needs
227 of the local population.

228 Although this will be the first building to house three temples at once, similar designs were
229 introduced in the past. Crompton showed two such examples: Brandeis University, where Catholic,
230 Protestant and Jewish Chapels stood side by side around a pool, and Coventry University Hospital,
231 where separate mono-faith rooms for Catholic, Anglican, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim visitors are joined
232 by a hallway, which, as Crompton suggested, became a true multi-faith space. As the distinctiveness
233 of all these religions is satisfied, believers are more inclined to contact each other. These distinct
234 spaces “begin to resemble each other” to the extent that they become “difficult to tell apart” (2013, p.
235 486). The same principle applies to the “House of One”. While the distinction of three religions is
236 ensured by individual architectural form, the general aesthetics and building materials of the
237 respective spaces remain the same.

238 Both the “House of One” and the “Ceremonirummet” are still in the conceptual phase. Despite
239 their contradictory designs, it is hard to determine if they will suffer from the design-specific
240 problems of the intra-institutional MFS. The religion-neutral cemetery, an already functioning space
241 of negative design, has run without problems so far. Unlike the intra-institutional MFS, these spaces
242 have a supplementary character. Therefore, while they follow the general directions of MFS in
243 Europe, these spaces, contrary to their often-muddled predecessors, clarify two distinct purposes,
244 both founded upon the notion of “distinction”. On one hand, the negative design is introduced in
245 those places where the unaffiliated and the believers need to be distinguished from the mix of a
246 “traditional religion”. On the other, the positive design is used to enforce the cohesion between
247 already distinct religious traditions. The future research should address the following question: will
248 extra-institutional MFS influence the public debate? It seems that their introduction may have a
249 threefold outcome. They may either (1) polarise the public debate into the pro and contra-religious,
250 (2) discharge the tension and transform the state-entangled religions, or (3) fail to enter the public
251 debate.

252 **4. Conclusions**

253 Peter Berger argued that “[m]odernity is not necessarily secularizing; it is necessarily *pluralizing*”
 254 (2008, p. 23). However, as I aimed to show in this paper, the general direction of the majority of MFS
 255 in Europe strives to make these two notions interchangeable. With the increasingly plural Europe,
 256 the original form of secularism became unsustainable. Thus, to a certain extent, it was transformed
 257 into the “multi-faith” secularisation, or, in other words, “Secularism 2.0”. By adherence to privatised
 258 faith rather than to organised religion, negative MFS became a new form of disenchantment,
 259 confirming and bringing out the biases noted by Ferrari.

260 However, some spaces present a different attitude towards the multi-faith paradigm. A positive
 261 design is employed to facilitate openness and mutual understanding of religious traditions’
 262 distinctiveness. While the new standalone initiatives draw upon their predecessors, and do not
 263 introduce any revolutionary solutions, their supplementary character alleviates potential tensions.
 264 As they can openly support either individualised faith or religious traditions, they receive a new
 265 character and clarify two distinct attitudes towards MFS. The difference between these attitudes is so
 266 big that it calls for their separation. Accordingly, two alternative names could substitute the term of
 267 “multi-faith spaces”: the “multi-belief spaces” for the negative design (Diez de Velasco 2014, p. 2)
 268 and the “multi-religious spaces” for the positive design.

269 Unlike Dinham, I would argue that the notion of “multi-faith paradigm” is not a muddle, but
 270 rather an umbrella term for the transformations within the religious landscape of Europe. Crompton
 271 argued that “Multifaith is politically significant because it is replacing Christianity as the face of
 272 public religion in Europe” (2012, p. 493). Indeed, both attitudes towards religion, described by Ferrari,
 273 seem to change accordingly. The emphasis on choice and individual conscience became a part of this
 274 paradigm, and the privilege and domination of the traditional religions seem to fade away. Is it
 275 possible that the latter will be replaced by an inter-religious cooperation? Are the positive and the
 276 negative design bound to ultimately clash? These questions would require further investigation.

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