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Notes on researching religious plural spaces

*As part of the Global Religious Pluralities project, LSE Religion and Global Society have published a new report on **Researching religious plural spaces**. In this blog, the report's author Chris Chaplin gives an overview of the key insights.*



In 2021, LSE Religion and Global Society (LSE RGS) embarked on a three-year global initiative to better understand the role of faith and religious communities in relation to environmental change, conflict resolution, and the creation of grassroots interfaith plural spaces. As part of this project, researchers at LSE RGS collaborated with the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) at Gadjah Mada University (UGM), and the Center for the Study of Religion and Democracy (PUSAD Paramadina) to discuss religious freedom and the role of the university campus as a space for building new forms of religious plurality. The results of this collaboration have informed a range of publications, including our most recent report 'Researching religious plural spaces.'

Studying religious pluralism

Religious pluralism is neither a new nor particularly radical idea. For decades – if not centuries – pluralism has been promoted as a social, legal, and political idea to maintain peaceful relations within nation states. In Indonesia, home to over 209 million Muslims, 23 million Christians, and over 10 million combined Buddhists, Hindus, and Confucians, religious diversity is a celebrated part of national identity. In the UK, religion may play a less significant role in public life, but the country is nonetheless home to an increasingly diverse population of differing faiths and cultural backgrounds.

Yet in recent decades, the foundations upon which traditional strategies of interfaith cohesion are based have come under increasing strain. On one hand, the rise of anti-immigrant religious and ethno-nationalism in the US, India, Europe, the UK and Indonesia has increasingly usurped more conciliatory calls for tolerance and understanding towards minority faiths. On the other, social media and global technology have increased the reach of religious scholars preaching much more sectarian and divisive ideas, often transcending the physical spaces in which faith communities operate.

Adding to these external challenges are a range of conceptual problems that have hindered the notion of pluralism. While pluralism may be celebrated as part of a modern national identity, there remains relatively little agreement as to what plural values are, where they may emerge from, how difference may be ascribed and accepted, and what the limits of pluralism may be. Take, for example, modern liberal readings of pluralism (such as the promotion of multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s). The idea that different cultures can co-exist may be unproblematic on the surface, but without addressing inherent socio-economic and political imbalances, pluralism may run the risk of codifying difference, essentialising ethnic, cultural and religious groups, or reinforcing the hegemonic position of a dominant culture within a state.

In response to these political and conceptual shortcomings, LSE RGS, ICRS and PUSAD Paramadina held a one-day workshop in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2023. Focusing on the finer methodological and conceptual questions relating to the study and promotion of religious plurality, we brought together twenty expert researchers, religious practitioners, and civil society activists from across Indonesia and the UK to discuss the complexities that arise within differing approaches to pluralism within the social sciences, and how best to promote local and organic approaches to diversity within a university setting.

A grassroots research agenda

Focusing on the university as a plural space is pertinent. Although the purpose of a university – in both Indonesia and the UK – may be changing as we shift to neoliberal educational models, it remains a transformative space for young adults, many of whom encounter new nationalities, religions, and ideas for the first time in their lives.

A campus can shape attitudes and influence students and staff in numerous ways. These can be organic in nature; fostered through the unexpected encounters of living or studying with individuals. They can equally stem from the administrative environment of a university, or from the inspiration of lecturers, movements or a particular class or focus of study or one encounters.

In this regard, universities represent a space in which ideas of diversity and plurality are both studied and simultaneously experienced through everyday encounters. Debates pertaining to 'free speech', decolonisation, war (and potential war crimes) in Ukraine and Palestine, can inform the idea of community and society we aspire to as much as the academic frameworks we are taught to articulate the significance of these encounters. These everyday moments intersect with, but often challenge broader normative ideas of pluralism, diversity, and equality. They can, for instance, raise difficult questions pertaining to what form of demonstrations (or counter demonstrations) are acceptable, or how to implement government policies relating to religious moderation or to the identification of 'extreme' views.

A practitioners guide

These latter examples speak to the increasing difficulty of managing the rich plurality of experiences, backgrounds, and ambitions within the university. So how should we come to study the emergence of religious plurality with the contemporary university campus, and what type of interventions can foster true religious plurality? It is with this question in mind that we launch our practitioner's toolkit. While we do not pertain to hold any concrete catch-all answer, we believe that a starting point is to recognise, simply, that there are multiple ways we can view and study plurality. Within our toolkit we identify four aspects to increase understanding of plurality.

Firstly, to be meaningful, a focus on plurality must reflect the lived experience of individuals and communities themselves, and account for the multivarious ideas, forces and agents who operate within both 'secular' and 'sacred' spaces. The university is not just a plurality of ideas, entities or organisations, but a plurality of spaces and experiences through which communal sociality can be reimaged. The emphasis on understanding the contours of such plurality requires one to view plurality as an experience rather than a positivist aspiration (a pluralism), and to take account of the relations through which new ideas of religious belonging are discussed, and through which borders between believer/unbeliever redrawn.

The second part of studying plurality is to recognise that plurality and pluralism are never value-neutral. We require careful reflection as to our own ethical, political, and methodological standpoints, as well as broader scrutiny of the language, terminology and political economy we operate in when promoting pluralism. There is no single way of defining plurality – it can be intentionally sought, it can reflect a lived reality, or even both. Moreover, plurality necessitates borders (religious, ethnic, national, or other), which are always in contestation, and so we must recognise who dictates the contours of what is acceptable or not. This is especially true in our contemporary political climate, where there are well documented cases showing how programmes

such as the UK's Prevent strategy have been used to disproportionately target Muslims as well as a broader set of individuals with non-violent political **beliefs**.

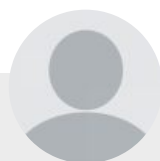
This attests to a third aspect within our toolkit; recognition. In a world where politicians seek to create and exploit difference, recognising why pluralism may be promoted, or why it is not, or who is not included, are important. In a research specific context, we must also ask who we do and do not interview and how we ensure that our exploration of plurality is a participatory act, following principles of co-production. Moving beyond a dichotomy that relies on pluralism 'experts', we need to engage with students and individuals that occupy diverse spaces as co-creators of knowledge. Additionally, plurality implies disagreement as much as agreement. To paraphrase **Singh (2011)**, an 'agonistic intimacy' is required, one based on the existence of both conflict and cohabitation.

A final interlinked dynamic of studying plurality is to understand the spaces and geographies within which interfaith or plural engagement takes place. As **Lefebvre (1991)** notably emphasised, space can be conceptualised in relation to its physical attributes, its mental dynamics, as well as its social significance. This complicates our perception of the university and other plural spaces. Houses of worship, campus chaplaincies and centres of religious life, as well as religious study circles, are not merely spaces in which programmes can be run but they exist in a wider political geography of competing interests, resources, and governing bodies. Space is perceived, conceived, and lived at the same time, and this leads to a complex and ever-evolving landscape in which pluralism and pluralities emerge.

With these four aspects in mind, this guide offers methodological suggestions for practitioners and researchers wishing to expand their collective understanding of the conditions within which interfaith dialogue arises. In a world where terms such as religious 'pluralism', 'moderate religion', 'interfaith' and even 'freedom of religion or belief' lend themselves to institutional programmes rather than grassroots initiatives, this feels ever more necessary. But researching the environments and spaces in which plurality emerges is not simply an academic endeavour. It speaks to a broader need to connect our inquisitive gaze with a social purpose.

*The **Global Religious Pluralities** research project explored the critical intersections of religious pluralism with gender, climate change and the role of institutions such as universities. The **Researching religious plural spaces** report is the latest publication from LSE RGS. [Download the full report here.](#)*

About the author



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Chris Chaplin is the Research Director at LSE Religion and Global Society. His research explores the convergence between global Islamic doctrines and local understandings of piety and faith, and how these come to inform civic activism, religious belonging, and political solidarity in Southeast Asia.

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