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Governance of religious diversity: current challenges and approaches to democratic coexistence. Introduction to the monograph

Gobernanza de la diversidad religiosa: desafíos y enfoques actuales para la convivencia democrática. Introducción al monográfico

Nahikari Irastorza, Davinia Gómez-Sánchez & Julia Martínez-Ariño

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Governance of religious diversity: current challenges and approaches to democratic coexistence.

Introduction to the monograph

Gobernanza de la diversidad religiosa: desafíos y enfoques actuales para la convivencia democrática.
Introducción al monográfico

Nahikari Irastorza 

University of Deusto. Spain / Malmö University. Sweden

nahikari.irastorza@deusto.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4498-1798>

Davinia Gómez-Sánchez 

University of Deusto. Spain

davinia.gomsan@deusto.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7058-5356>

Julia Martínez-Ariño 

University of Groningen. The Netherlands

j.martinez.arino@rug.nl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8893-0899>

<https://doi.org/10.18543/djhr.3551>

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Challenges to the governance of religious diversity. 2. The contributions of the special issue. 2.1. Reconceptualizing secularism and questioning state neutrality. 2.2. The governance of diversity. 2.3. Decolonizing human rights frameworks. Concluding remarks. References.

Abstract: This article reflects on the public governance of cultural and religious diversity. Religious traditions have long shaped dominant cultural patterns in Western societies, which now face the challenge of ensuring harmonious coexistence among groups with diverse beliefs and ways of expressing them. In democratic systems where majorities tend to prevail, it is

essential to develop approaches that enable the meaningful inclusion of minority perspectives. Although policymaking in this area is primarily a national or regional level competence, local public institutions —due to their proximity to citizens— are often the first to address demands for religious accommodation, despite frequently lacking the capacity to respond effectively to an increasing religious diversity, and the different customs and practices related to it. This special issue brings together interdisciplinary contributions from the social sciences that pay particular attention to local and regional experiences in the governance of religious diversity and policy innovations across different national contexts and policy fields.

Keywords: Religious diversity, minorities, human rights, public policies, democratic coexistence, inclusion.

Resumen: Este artículo propone una reflexión sobre la gestión pública de la diversidad cultural y religiosa. Las tradiciones religiosas han configurado durante largo tiempo los patrones culturales dominantes en las sociedades occidentales, que hoy afrontan el reto de garantizar una convivencia armoniosa entre grupos con creencias diversas y distintas formas de expresarlas. En los sistemas democráticos, donde las mayorías tienden a prevalecer, resulta esencial desarrollar enfoques que permitan la inclusión significativa de las perspectivas minoritarias. Aunque la formulación de políticas en este ámbito corresponde principalmente al nivel nacional, las instituciones públicas locales —debido a su proximidad a la ciudadanía— suelen ser las primeras en atender las demandas de acomodación religiosa, a pesar de carecer con frecuencia de la capacidad necesaria para responder de manera eficaz al aumento de la diversidad religiosa. Este monográfico reúne contribuciones interdisciplinarias de las ciencias sociales, prestando especial atención a experiencias locales y regionales, así como a innovaciones en políticas transferibles a distintos contextos y ámbitos de política pública.

Palabras clave: Diversidad religiosa, minorías, derechos humanos, políticas públicas, convivencia democrática, inclusión.

Introduction¹

In recent decades, the relationship between religious diversity and democratic values has become a central issue in European public debate. The growing presence of minority religious communities—particularly Muslim and evangelical groups—has prompted social and political reactions that challenge the principles of equality, freedom of worship, and pluralism upon which liberal democracies are founded (Kivisto and Juergensmeyer 2020; Koenig 2023). In several European countries, the rise of Islamophobic discourses and the politicization of religion have also contributed to reshaping the boundaries of citizenship and national belonging, with important consequences for social cohesion and democratic legitimacy (Brubaker 2017; Modood 2019). According to authors such as Juergensmeyer (2019), developments including Brexit or the election of Donald Trump reflect the emergence of a new form of nationalism that has characterized the second decade of the twenty-first century. Much of this phenomenon has been associated with religion and, more specifically, with the Muslim faith, through a process that Cesari (2013) conceptualizes as the “securitization of Islam”.

In this context, the public governance of religious affairs and, more specifically, of religious minorities, including measures to address negative public opinions towards them, becomes of paramount importance to ensure their rights as well as a civic and peaceful coexistence of different groups in democratic societies. As Ruiz-Vieytez (2026) argues, democracy, understood as the rule of the majority, does not in itself resolve the tension between majority and minority cultural identities—and practices—in the public sphere. However, the governance of religious diversity is a challenge faced not only by Western societies. As the contributions in this special issue illustrate, this dynamic is equally evident in a variety of contexts, particularly in those characterized by ethno-religious divides, strong nationalism or secular states accommodating new demographic groups.

The level at which governance of religious matters occurs constitutes another crucial dimension of policymaking and research related to religious diversity. While policymaking in this area tends to be a national or regional level administrative competence, due to their

¹ This introductory chapter was collaboratively written by the guest editors of the special issue. The lead author conceptualized the overall framework and drafted the analysis of the contributions. The coauthors focused on refining and expanding the challenges and conclusions sections.

proximity to citizens, local public institutions are often the first to receive demands for religious accommodation and to mediate their acceptance among other social groups. However, local institutions often lack the capacity to respond effectively and positively to the growing religious diversity within their populations (Ruiz-Vieitez 2026).

Consequently, this special issue aligns with expanding scholarship consolidating a shift from studies focused on macro-level national frameworks towards distinct subnational configurations of religious accommodation (Griera 2012; Dick and Nagel 2017; Martínez-Ariño 2018, 2021; Astor et al. 2019). It underscores the local turn in migration and diversity studies (Poppelaars and Scholten 2008; Hoekstra 2015; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2019) by exploring how different actors manage, negotiate and experience religious pluralism, presenting innovative practices of local mediation and governance designed to navigate complex claims and to balance competing interests.

More concretely, this special issue addresses the above-mentioned challenges by bringing together contributions that propose innovative ideas for policy-making at the local and regional levels in Europe and the Global South. Drawing on fields such as law, political science and sociology, the ten articles offer distinct disciplinary and robust interdisciplinary perspectives to analyze contemporary governance of religion in diverse settings. This special issue starts out from research conducted in the framework of the project “Religious diversity and democratic coexistence: analysis and proposals for municipal policies (DIVERPOMU)”, financed by the Spanish State Research Agency, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (project number PID2023-149877NB-I00). As part of this broader project, the special issue explores how contemporary democracies navigate religious phenomena that transcend the private sphere, thereby challenging traditional governance models in increasingly complex contexts driven by multiple factors.

1. Challenges to the governance of religious diversity

Some of the main challenges to the governance of religious diversity in democratic societies concern the everyday practical interactions between state and non-state actors at the local level. In what follows, we highlight three such challenges, which may vary across contexts and historical moments: a) the representation and representativeness of religious groups; b) the structural tension that

exists in the governance of religious diversity between the recognition and the control of minority groups; and c) finally, the risk of instrumentalizing religious groups and actors.

First, local governance approaches to religious diversity often rely on direct relations between local state administrations, and leaders and representatives of religious organisations and communities. Such collaborations often happen in what has often been called “governance networks” (Martikainen 2016). In such structures, actors from different religious communities tend to often be selected by state actors. This selection of “representatives” comes with several problems. Local administrations tend to select those leaders and actors they know well and who usually come from the more “mainstream” branches of religious groups, especially those considered under the framework of “World Religions” (Bauman and Tunger-Zanetti 2018). This point is particularly challenging regarding Muslim communities, as state actors often fear selecting Muslim representatives whom they might consider inappropriate, based on the belief that they follow more “extreme” versions of Islam or have “questionable” international ties, among other things. This issue with the selection of representatives comes with the problem that the networks and collaborations reproduce inclusion and exclusion dynamics (Martínez-Ariño 2021). Moreover, religious actors often lack representativeness and legitimacy among the community of religionists they supposedly represent (Chapman and Lowndes 2009). The risk of them being approached as representatives is that they become “professional representatives”, which may come with a distancing from their community of origin.

Second, governance of religious diversity often becomes a double-edged sword that offers recognition and exerts control (Martínez-Ariño 2021). On the one hand, policies are often implemented that recognise the variety of religious groups present in a territory. Religious groups, in particular minorities, tend to make claims for their rights to be recognised. This recognition frequently comes with benefits, such as more public visibility as well as legitimacy. On the other hand, recognition often is accompanied by different forms of control, especially in relation to religious minorities. One such example could be the provision of public funding for the cultural activities of a religious group that comes with certain requirements and the supervision of public authorities. While *per se* not always necessarily negative, such forms of control tend to impact purportedly “suspicious” minority groups disproportionately.

Finally, through the governance of religious diversity, religious actors tend to play new roles which may lead to their instrumentalization by

state authorities. In other words, given that religious actors may offer valuable resources to political and administrative authorities (Dinham and Lowndes 2008), their collaboration with them may make of them mere instruments of public policy and publicity. In other words, they may switch roles from being advocates for their religious group to acting as agenda carriers of state actors (Martínez-Ariño 2021). As such, religious actors become valuable not for who they are and who they represent but rather for what they bring to the governance table.

The current landscape of challenges to the governance of religious diversity is further influenced by political and mediatic discourses. While these are most often national-level discourses, they have consequences both at the national and local levels. At the national and supranational levels, such discourses undermine the liberal principles of equality and pluralism of democratic societies by excluding certain minorities from national belonging (Brown 2022). Furthermore, such discourses are meant to shape majority members' attitudes towards minorities, which might, ultimately, also affect the relationship between them at the local level.

Given the fundamental influence of political actors and the media on public opinion, political parties play a central role in articulating attitudes toward ethnic and religious minorities that are rooted in democratic principles and equal rights. The public discourses that gain the most resonance are often those expressing stances against certain national, ethnic, and religious groups. In Europe and North America, a common feature of many of these discourses is what some scholars have called the securitization of Islam—that is, its discursive construction as a threat to Western nations, society, or culture. A political issue becomes a security matter when a “securitizing actor”—a political leader or another type of recognized authority, such as the head of an international organization—presents it as an existential threat to a referent object, such as the state, a nation, a civilization, cultural identity, or the environment. Through a securitizing discourse, this actor seeks to convince an audience that said threat justifies the adoption of exceptional measures that go beyond ordinary politics (Waever et al. 1993; Buzan et al. 1998). In the last two decades, Islam has been framed as being incompatible with modernity and secularism, and subject to an increasing process of securitization within the European public sphere, where issues regarding religion and cultural diversity have come to be treated as potential threats to security and national cohesion (Cesari 2013; 2021; Modood 2019; Kaya 2020). By conceiving Islam as a radical ideology—and thus something that

cannot be treated like other religions— this discourse legitimizes exceptional policy measures.

This discursive link between Islam, immigration, and radicalization has contributed to redefining the boundaries of belonging, eroding the liberal principles of equality and pluralism upon which European democracies are built (Brown 2022). While securitization usually refers to political acts that enable the implementation of exceptional measures —such as increased military presence or police controls— carried out by governments, often in violation of the rule of law to preserve citizen safety, Cesari (2013) argues that beyond the visibility of these exceptional measures, securitization also influences administrative routines and ordinary legislation, negatively affecting the exercise of religious freedom. The result is a state of securitized governmentality, in which Muslim subjects are managed simultaneously and paradoxically as populations to be integrated and as potentially suspicious collectives (Cesari 2013). As an example of this state, Cesari (2018) explains that when Muslims assert their religious affiliation through distinct attire or participation in religious practices in public spaces, they come to be considered politically suspicious and promoters of a global ideology presented as a threat to European nations.

In his comparative study between national populisms in Northern and Western Europe versus those in North America and Central and Eastern Europe, Brubaker (2017) develops a similar argument. He proposes that the rise of right-wing populism in Northwestern Europe has been accompanied by a shift from classical nationalism toward forms of “civilizationalism”, in which Islam is constructed not only as a religious or cultural difference but as an existential threat to a supposedly secular and liberal European civilization. This shift allows exclusion to be articulated in supranational terms, redefining belonging not solely as membership in a nation, but as adherence to civilizational values presented as incompatible with Islam. Reflecting on these ongoing processes, Cesari (2013, 2018) argues that the rising securitization of Islam has empowered governments to implement broader controls over religions, threatening both democracy and religious freedom in Europe. By framing Islam as an exception to the European liberal order, governments are able to justify unique levels of state intervention, regulation and surveillance. According to the author, this process implies a shift from the governance of religious diversity toward its problematization in terms of security, where Islam is no longer treated as just another confession but rather as a special case associated with potential risks to the public order, social cohesion

and democratic principles. This logic of exceptionality not only legitimizes restrictive measures specifically targeted at Muslim populations but also reconfigures the field of religious governance by granting states greater authority to interfere in religious practices, institutions and expressions.

Thus, governing religious diversity today requires navigating not just localized prejudices, but a structured, transnational narrative that aligns immigration and minority religious practices with a civilizational danger, complicating the formulation of inclusive policies for belonging and democratic coexistence. This trend could be exemplified by recent initiatives such as the French Anti-Separatism Law (LOI n. 2021-1109 du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République), which links public funding to a “republican commitment contract”, framing adherence to state-defined values of liberty and equality. Similarly, the 2023 Abaya ban by French Minister of Education in state run educational establishments, reconfigures *laïcité* beyond state neutrality. This civilizational boundary-making is not restricted to direct expressions of faith, it extends to socio-spatial policies and integration development plans. The controversial 2018 Danish housing laws “ghetto package” provides an example of an urban intervention aimed at dismantling what was rebranded as “parallel societies” (based on non-Western background), an ethnic classification that may result in discrimination (ECJ case C-417/23). Furthermore, the Belgian ban on animal slaughtering without prior stunning, upheld by the European Court of Human Rights (2024 case of *Executief van de Moslims van België v. Belgium*), illustrates how progressive secular principles like animal welfare are prioritized over religious freedom.

Besides these considerations, there is a theoretical approach to the governance of religion worth noting, one which looks at whether states opt for the expansion of rights and privileges of majority religions to minorities or, inversely, limit the rights of both minorities and majorities. The first approach, most commonly found in nations in the West where Christianity constitutes the majority, is known as “thickening”. The second approach, which would require nations in the Global South with high levels of religiosity to reduce the power of majority religions for the sake of the protection of human rights, is known as “thinning” (Modood and Sealy 2024). In her review of Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy’s book “The new governance of religious diversity” (2024) included in this special issue, Cristina de la Cruz-Ayuso highlights that such processes of thickening and thinning rights are not fixed or irreversible. Depending on the context, states may tend towards one or the other trends. For instance, when the possibility of

offering religious education in public schools is opened to religious minorities, there is a process of thickening of rights to minorities. When a non-discrimination law is passed that protects against discrimination on religious grounds, there is a thinning of privileges of majority religions that could otherwise see their members privileged. A prime example of this process can be found in the administrative working environment case of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). The CJEU's ruling in *OP v. Commune d'Ans* (C-148/22) determined that a municipal authority could enforce a strict policy of neutrality prohibiting all employees from wearing visible religious signs. By flattening the public sphere, the state effectively trims the expressive rights of all faiths. The opposite is evident in the following example of spatial regulation in Lombardy (regional law modifying L.R. 12/2005 on the construction of places of worship), in conflict with religious diversity. Rigid building and land-use conformity laws result in urban planning used to restrict the construction of places of worship of minorities.

2. The contributions of the special issue

This special issue brings together ten research articles and two comprehensive book reviews that analyze the governance of religious diversity, human rights and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion across distinct geographic and institutional settings. Together, these works problematize simplistic binaries —such as universalism versus relativism or secularism versus religion— though theoretical deliberations, empirical case studies and examples of policy initiatives that address key challenges of today's multi-religious societies at different governance levels.

2.1. *Reconceptualizing secularism and questioning state neutrality*

A set of articles questions the principles, legal structures and institutional practices through which modern states govern diversity. Despite their commitment to pluralism, Benjamin Gregg argues that liberal democracies systematically marginalize nonreligious citizens through structurally embedded theological biases. Integrating political theory with empirical social science research, he analyzes the legal asymmetries, social stigma and symbolic erasure of nonbelievers, arguing that traditional liberal neutrality is insufficient for their

inclusion. To address this, he proposes a model of what he calls “procedural pluralism” that positions atheism as the ultimate test for democratic legitimacy. According to the author, the true core of procedural pluralism lies in designing democratic institutions that ensure equal participation for all moral outlooks, which fundamentally requires recognizing atheism and nonbelief as valid forms of civic and ethical agency. For a democratic community to achieve genuine procedural legitimacy and fairness, nonreligious perspectives must be included in intercultural councils, explicitly protected by anti-discrimination statutes and shielded from social or legal stigma under freedom of conscience guarantees. Furthermore, educational and civic institutions must frame atheism not as a deficit, but as a legitimate worldview capable of grounding a moral life. Ultimately, Gregg contends that unless nonreligious viewpoints are fully acknowledged and permitted to contribute to public deliberation on their own merits—without being forced to translate their ideas into theological terms—pluralism will remain structurally biased toward religious belief, leaving the promise of democratic inclusion unfulfilled.

This conceptual critique of state neutrality relates to the comparative political analysis of Felipe Gaytán, who examines how secularism has been historically instrumentalized by the state as a political project of citizenship in three Latin American countries, whose relevance lies in the singularity of their secular imprint: Mexico, El Salvador and Bolivia. His analysis is based on the reconstruction of two historical moments of laicity. The first one is centered on the separation of church and state in the 19th century, vis-à-vis the influence of the Catholic Church and other denominations. The second moment emerges two centuries later, in contexts of increasing social, cultural and religious diversity, which entail the management and balancing of civil liberties fundamental to the exercise of human rights. Based on a qualitative-comparative methodological approach, which includes the analysis of legal documents, meta-ethnography, and interviews with different stakeholders and academics, Gaytán shows that, historically, secularism in Latin America was not a project for citizenship but a mechanism for the state to gain control of social life—in areas such as education or healthcare—from the Catholic Church. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, regional democratization and civil society pressures shifted secularism toward a new framework focused on human rights and civil liberties. This second historical moment of secularism would be characterized by a transversal tension between two logics of rights: the right to freedom of conscience that claims the individual exercise to decide above moral and religious frameworks—with the State as

guarantor of that self-determination— and the right to freedom of religion that constitutes the demand of confessional groups not to be excluded from the political sphere. On one side, the logic of freedom of conscience has driven the expansion of progressive rights in Mexico and protected indigenous traditions in Bolivia, though it faces deep societal resistance in security-focused nations like El Salvador. On the other side, faith-based groups—both progressive and neoconservative—demand political influence. These religious actors routinely surge into the public sphere during national crises, such as Bolivia's 2019 political fractures or El Salvador's security crackdowns, where authoritarian politics and religious discourse have fused. The author concludes that religious groups offer vital social resources and solidarity and, therefore, they can no longer be excluded from the political arena. The modern Latin American consensus would not be to banish religion from politics, but to integrate it visibly into the social agenda while defending civic ethics and human dignity from religious overreach.

Moving from political philosophy and constitutional law to institutional implementation, Yolanda Alonso Herranz examines the relationship between the right to education and freedom of conscience within international, European and Spanish legal frameworks. Rather than operating as isolated legal domains, the author argues that these two rights exist in a state of reciprocal dependency: freedom of conscience supplies the foundational values and moral convictions of a society, while education serves as the vital prerequisite enabling citizens to exercise their freedom of thought in an informed, critical and responsible manner. In today's increasingly multicultural landscape, this intersection creates distinct structural challenges, demanding that public institutions balance state neutrality and student autonomy with the rights of parents to guide their children's upbringing. To navigate these complexities, Herranz highlights how European and Spanish legal standards frequently clash with practical reality. On one hand, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) mandates absolute state neutrality and a strict prohibition against indoctrination, requiring that any religious curricula be delivered objectively, critically, and pluralistically to protect minority faiths and non-believers. On the other hand, Alonso Herranz's analysis reveals that while Spain's constitutional model of positive secularism attempts to mirror this by establishing cooperation agreements with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Islamic federations, a profound structural asymmetry remains. In practice, the Catholic Church maintains a deeply consolidated presence within the Spanish school system, whereas religious education for minority faiths is highly limited and

geographically fragmented, challenging the country's full compliance with international standards of equality and non-discrimination. To address this issue, Alonso Herranz claims that governing religious diversity cannot be reduced to merely offering segregated, faith-based classes or settling for passive tolerance. Instead, the author advocates for a modern reformulation of educational policy where religion is treated as a historical, cultural and comparative phenomenon. The author concludes that by shifting the pedagogical focus toward intercultural dialogue, critical thinking and the dismantling of stereotypes, public schools could be transformed into spaces of pluralistic coexistence. This approach would ensure that educational institutions remain entirely free from sectarian pressure while vigorously safeguarding the right of every student to embrace a faith, change it, or reject religious belief altogether.

The structural asymmetry between the Catholic faith and religious minorities described by Alonso Herranz is also discussed by Zakaria Sajir, who exposes systemic governance pathologies within Spain's religious diversity regime. Sajir argues that Spain's model of religious diversity governance is marked by a disconnect between formal commitments to pluralism and practices of systemic exclusion, producing what he describes as "stratified inclusion". In this framework, religious minorities receive symbolic recognition but remain structurally excluded from shaping the legal and civic norms that affect them. This dynamic is linked to the enduring legacy of *nacionalcatolicismo* —the fusion of national identity with Catholicism during Franco's rule—, which normalizes Catholicism as part of national culture while framing minority religions as foreign or problematic. His analysis identifies three interconnected governance failures: a paradigmatic failure that treats diversity as a technocratic issue managed from above; a normative failure characterized by selective secularism, whereby Catholicism is redefined as cultural heritage while minority religions —especially Islam— are securitized and problematized; and a territorial failure stemming from Spain's decentralized governance, which produces unequal protections of religious freedom across regions. Sajir further claims that institutional practices and judicial decisions often reinforce these hierarchies, as illustrated by court rulings on religious dress and municipal restrictions. Although formal equality is maintained, minorities are frequently reduced to passive recipients of accommodation rather than active participants in defining their rights. As an alternative to these pathologies, the author proposes a model of "networked governance" based on shared participation and distributed agency, in which religious minorities are directly involved in institutional decision-making. Sajir

concludes that still limited, emerging local initiatives and some judicial developments suggest the possibility of a more democratic and participatory approach to religious diversity in Spain.

2.2. *The governance of diversity*

A second set of articles focuses on the institutional inclusion and exclusion of minorities and the governance of religious diversity, including a wide range of institutional responses to pluralism—from state-sponsored exclusion to local mediation—and suggesting alternative conceptual frameworks to capture complex, intersectional urban realities. José Ramón Intxaurre's review of the edited volume *Religious minorities in pluralistic societies* (2024), coordinated by Roberta Medda-Windischer, Kerstin Wonisch, and Alexandra C. Budabin, outlines how liberal democracies frequently exhibit hesitation when moving toward the institutionalization of pluralism, viewing it as a threat to core values like justice, equality and social cohesion. Through seven empirical case studies across Europe and the Middle East, Intxaurre explains that the book moves past abstract constitutional models to analyze concrete policies. He highlights the chapters by Kyriaki Topidi and Christos Tsevas, which evaluate the complex paradoxes of state-recognized legal pluralism in Western Thrace, Greece, specifically focusing on the ECHR ruling in *Molla Salli v. Greece*. This legal case—revolving around the application of Sharia law to an estate dispute against the deceased's civil will—highlights the dangerous asymmetries that occur when religious legal systems undermine gender equality. While the ECHR held that religious rules are only legitimate if they stem from free individual choice, Intxaurre reports on the profound questions raised by Silvio Ferrari regarding whether states should intervene to “protect women from themselves” when they voluntarily submit to non-liberal norms. To mitigate these frictions, the volume would advocate for a closer integration of international human rights and national law through a process of “constitutional translation” of religious demands.

If Intxaurre's book review shows the dilemmas that democratic states might face when moving toward the institutionalization of pluralism, especially when they perceive diversity as an inherent threat to liberal norms, Khushbu Kumar, M. Belén Blázquez and Belén Agrela provide an empirical case study of state-level institutionalized exclusion in India. They use discourse analysis to explain how Hindu nationalist rhetoric targets Bangladeshi Muslim migrants to legitimize the

systematic exclusion and marginalization of this population. The authors describe that while India was historically seen as a safe haven, the state has undergone a profound shift toward exclusion, leaving millions of displaced people in a legal vacuum because it lacks a national refugee framework and has not ratified the 1951 Convention. This vulnerability would have been intensified under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose majoritarian goal of building a Hindu nation has institutionalized a hierarchy of rights that systematically marginalizes Muslims. According to Kumar, Blázquez and Agrela, this exclusionary vision was legalized through the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019, which weaponizes faith by fast-tracking citizenship exclusively for non-Muslim immigrants from neighboring countries. They contend that this discriminatory double standard violates the secular foundations of India's 1950 Constitution, while official political rhetoric strips Bangladeshi Muslim migrants of their humanity by labeling them "infiltrators". However, the authors also emphasize that this regime has faced powerful grassroots resistance, most notably through the peaceful sit-in led by Muslim women in the Delhi neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh. They describe how this local protest quickly became a national symbol of pluralism, bringing citizens of all faiths together for over one hundred days to defend secular values. Ultimately, the authors argue for a revision of the role of religion in the CAA to ensure that Muslim communities are not deprived of their rights; as well as for extending protection to excluded groups, including Muslims from neighboring countries, Rohingyas and Ahmadis, in line with India's secular constitutional values and international norms.

In contrast to this state-level exclusionary example of the accommodation of diversity but also focusing of migration-driven pluralism, Alexandra Cosima Budabin analyzes a proactive institutional mechanism for managing religious and cultural differences in South Tyrol, Italy, focusing on the implementation of intermediary actors: cultural mediators. The author explains that recent migration flows have introduced significant challenges surrounding cultural and religious differences, leaving new religious minorities to navigate complex legal human rights landscapes while trying to balance social cohesion with both majority and historical minority faiths. In response, diversity governance has increasingly relied on cultural mediators to peacefully mediate these differences. Specifically, the author explores how the role of cultural mediators has expanded to manage religious diversity and argues that this role is significantly enhanced when members of new religious minorities

are engaged as mediators themselves, allowing them to utilize their own transcultural capital. Adopting a socio-legal approach, the author demonstrates how local frameworks can innovatively expand upon national policies. While Italy has only recently recognized its growing pluralism, South Tyrol—predominantly Catholic but with a 10% foreign-born population by 2024—has been the first province to enact specific legislation on cultural mediators. By analyzing legal texts, policy guidelines and long-standing local practices, the author traces how South Tyrol transitioned from an unsystematic training process to a structured, legitimate framework that uses mediation to advance integration, reduce daily tensions and protect minority rights. Budabin concludes that public policies at both the national and regional levels increasingly validate the inclusion of migrants as cultural mediators. This inclusion fosters new modes of civic participation and ensures that minority perspectives are actively embedded in diversity governance. While challenges regarding professionalization and uneven implementation remain, the author maintains that utilizing the transcultural capital of religious minorities bridges critical gaps in public administration, offering a vital mechanism for achieving horizontal, democratic coexistence.

Whereas Budabin focuses on cultural mediation as an institutional tool for managing religious diversity, Mar Griera and Victor Albert Blanco shift attention to the public visibility of religious difference and its regulation in urban settings, analyzing the case of public *iftars* during Ramadan. They argue that public expressions of religiosity serve as a prime lens for understanding how religious diversity is transforming contemporary European cities. They observe a profound urban paradox: while European societies are deeply secularized, they are simultaneously experiencing sustained religious pluralization driven by migration, causing religion to reemerge through highly visible collective practices in streets and squares. According to the authors, these events function as hybrid urban devices that exist at the intersection of four competing regimes: the heritage regime (which translates practices into tradition), the governance regime (or administrative regulation), the relational regime (based on social interaction) and the devotional regime (as a sacred ritual). To analyze these dynamics, the authors utilize a conceptual framework including spatial inscription, governance, social representations and cultural resources like gastronomy and music, drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Madrid and Barcelona. As an Islamic ritual shifted into open public squares, the public *iftar* embodies the complex friction between devotion and

conviviality, administrative visibility and regulation, and institutional recognition and societal suspicion. While these events foster interreligious dialogue, they also expose persistent urban inequalities, as “neutral” public administration often coexists with deeply rooted symbolic hierarchies, meaning that different faiths do not access public visibility on equal terms. The article concludes that by temporarily interrupting the everyday urban order and using sensory mediators like food or music, these public events do more than just reflect diversity, they actively produce, represent and renegotiate the boundaries of religious coexistence and legitimacy in increasingly diverse urban environments.

While the previous articles illustrate how states and municipalities struggle to manage pluralism through rigid institutional structures or localized spatial regulations, Peter Scholten critiques the dominant political discourses of urban crisis and polarization in Dutch cities and proposes Steven Vertovec’s concept of “superdiversity” (2007) as an umbrella framework to explain the intersectional social complexity that characterizes many urban environments. The article is based on the understanding that what political discourses often misinterpret as crisis or polarization is actually a failure to understand the social complexity of superdiverse cities. Using the Netherlands as a primary case study, the author explains that urban diversity is no longer about clearly defined minority groups, but rather an intricate tangle of intersectional factors—including religion, socio-economic status, gender and legal status—making diversity a characteristic of society. When rigid institutional categories are forced onto this fluid reality, it fuels public anxiety and a false sensation of societal fragmentation. To address this challenge, Scholten outlines three core dimensions of public policy that must be restructured. First, policy coordination must shift both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, diversity can no longer remain isolated in a single administrative silo or managed by a standalone minister; it must be mainstreamed across general policy sectors like housing, education, and labor. Vertically, superdiversity requires a local turn toward custom district-level development and municipal autonomy, as seen in the distinct approaches of Dutch cities like Eindhoven or Rotterdam, rather than centralized, one-size-fits-all national mandates. Second, the article advocates for a shift in policy language toward a plural, needs-based idiom. Reviewing the Dutch context, he notes how official terminology has evolved from “guest workers” to “ethnic minorities” and the stigmatizing term *allochtoon*, before the Scientific Council for Government Policy recommended using “citizens with or without

a migration background” in 2016. Scholten argues that instead of automatically using fixed ethnic categories—which pre-problematizes specific groups—policies should use flexible alternatives driven by specific problems. For instance, addressing structural racism requires looking at skin color and origin, while addressing unemployment should prioritize factors like class and parental education. This nuance is especially critical in countries like the Netherlands and Germany, where data is dictated by official state registers rather than self-reported censuses, which can artificially reinforce the illusion of homogenous groups. Finally, superdiversity transforms how institutions must collaborate with civil society. Scholten critiques traditional, exclusive consultation models that rely solely on group-specific ethnic or religious organizations, as this approach forces an “ethnic lens” that blinds policymakers to broader inequalities. However, rather than ceasing cooperation entirely, he suggests embedding these groups within a broader network of neighborhood associations, youth clubs, and anti-discrimination NGOs. Scholten concludes that superdiversity is an undeniable global fact, and managing it successfully requires network governance, flexible categorizations, and localized customization to foster genuine, horizontal coexistence.

2.3. *Decolonizing human rights frameworks*

The last set of papers pushes the borders of the special issue into post-colonial contexts, challenging Western-centric, individualist configurations of human rights and knowledge production. Cristina de la Cruz-Ayuso provides a critical evaluation of Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy’s book *The new governance of religious diversity* (2024). The review notes that the 20th-century Euro-centric secularization thesis—based on a strict separation of religion and politics—has been thoroughly dismantled by 21st-century realities where religion remains a vibrant public force, which requires a more flexible, global framework called “multicultural secularism”. At the heart of her analysis is the book’s novel concepts for analysing how different countries actually manage diversity. Modood and Sealy introduce the concepts of “dominant operative norms” (the foundational laws of a state) and “qualifying operative norms” (the flexible adjustments made in practice). De la Cruz-Ayuso notes that this distinction explains why two officially secular countries can handle religious minorities in entirely different ways. The book applies this across more than twenty

countries, revealing a global divide: Western nations with historic Christian majorities must undergo an institutional “thickening” (expanding existing privileges) to accommodate new minority faiths like Islam, while deeply religious nations in the Global South require a “thinning” or reducing of majoritarian religious power to protect universal human rights. The review concludes that, in a world fractured by migration anxieties and populist politics, Modood and Sealy successfully redefine secularism not as a tool to restrict religion, but as a democratic mechanism to ensure every citizen has a voice.

The post-colonial countries’ struggle to protect universal human rights against inherited, Euro-centric legal structures and majority religious power explained by Modood and Sealy is illustrated by Oluwaseun Olanrewaju in his examination of the systematic marginalization of the Yoruba indigenous religion (Ìṣẹ̀ṣe) in South-West Nigeria. Olanrewaju argues that conventional human rights frameworks, which focus narrowly on individual religious freedom, are structurally inadequate to address the systemic discrimination faced by practitioners of Ìṣẹ̀ṣe. Because Ìṣẹ̀ṣe is not merely a faith but a comprehensive Indigenous Knowledge System with its own ethical, philosophical and historical frameworks, its marginalization constitutes epistemicide, that is, the systematic silencing and delegitimization of indigenous ways of knowing. The author explains that severe demographic decline of Ìṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners in modern South-West Nigeria (1.3% of the population) subjects them to social prejudice from Abrahamic perspectives that reduce their tradition to derogatory labels like “barbarism” or “idol worship”. Institutional exclusion also persists by government policies routinely ignoring the spiritual and cultural dimensions of the tradition, and constitutional protections for religious freedom being rarely applied effectively to its practitioners. Olanrewaju notes that this marginalization is further exacerbated by a leadership vacuum in policymaking, driven by a severe underrepresentation of Ìṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners within government institutions. To resolve these democratic and cultural deficits, the article calls for a paradigm shift from simple legal protections to a framework of epistemic justice by demanding federal and state governments to anchor public policies in an analytical framework that formally recognizes and legitimizes Ìṣẹ̀ṣe as a vital component of Yoruba epistemology. Because the state’s policy responses remain slow and superficial, Olanrewaju concludes that the responsibility for driving this transformation falls on non-state actors, specifically Ìṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners and traditional Yoruba rulers. Through strategic advocacy, these custodians must pressure the state to implement

public re-education and robust policy protections that treat *İşèşe* as a valuable cultural and intellectual heritage.

While Olanrewaju calls for a paradigm shift to rescue minority Indigenous Knowledge Systems from Euro-centric legal limitations, a parallel critique of Western-centric models is developed by Nafiz Absar Mahmood, whose article focuses on the tension between Western rights-based policing models and duty-oriented moral frameworks in non-Western societies like Nigeria, Egypt and India. While liberal democracies prioritize individual autonomy, procedural safeguards, and protection against state overreach, many collectivist societies (influenced by Confucian, Islamic, Hindu or African communitarian worldviews) define justice through social harmony, obedience, and relational obligations. Mahmood emphasizes that these two systems are not mutually exclusive binary opposites but rather poles on a normative continuum. The core problem addressed in the article is that the uncritical imposition of rights-based law enforcement frameworks —often driven by international norms or external actors— frequently faces cultural resistance. The author notes a vital analytical nuance regarding this resistance: while much of it would stem from a genuine misalignment of moral values, some resistance would be instrumentalized by traditional elites, elders and patriarchal authorities to protect their own privilege. Based on a literature review and comparative research design, the article evaluates legal theory, moral philosophy and specific case studies from Nigeria, Egypt and India. It analyzes how informal justice mechanisms —such as *jirgas*, *panchayats* and religious or customary courts— maintain strong local legitimacy. These informal systems would persist because they offer accessibility, familiarity and social cohesion, even when some of their structural practices directly contradict international human rights standards. Rather than falling into a binary of universalism versus relativism, Mahmood advocates for hybrid justice models (such as those in South Africa, Indonesia, and Jordan) and context-sensitive reform strategies that integrate traditional customary laws or informal mediation mechanisms with constitutional human rights, establishing a pathway toward cultural legitimacy without sacrificing fundamental rights protections. He concludes that while the core, non-derogable floor of universal human rights must be strictly maintained to protect women, minorities and marginalized groups from systemic harm, policing reforms must simultaneously engage with and respect local duty-oriented traditions. This could be achieved by embedding universal rights within existing, culturally resonant moral frameworks, in which policing would not be a mere tool of top-down enforcement but a legitimate vehicle for justice in morally plural societies.

Concluding remarks

The contributions to this special issue analyze the governance of religious diversity, human rights and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion across various global and institutional contexts. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical case studies, they collectively dismantle simplistic binaries such as universalism versus cultural relativism, or secularism versus religion, nationalism and confessionalism. Ultimately, the volume explores how contemporary, diverse societies navigate these tensions across different levels of governance to address the challenges of pluralistic coexistence.

In addition to the challenges discussed in the literature review, three additional aspects are identified across the contributions of the special issue: (1) structural biases that favor majority religions, (2) rigid, “one-size-fits-all” policy initiatives that assume homogenous minority groups and (3) Western-centric, individualist human rights frameworks that ignore collective duties and indigenous knowledge and belief systems. Regarding the first challenge, De la Cruz-Ayuso describes Modood and Sealy’s concepts of institutional thickening and thinning to either expand the privileges that Christian majorities have in Western societies to religious minority groups or to reduce the religious power of majorities in the Global South to protect universal human rights. Gregg introduces the idea of procedural pluralism to highlight the necessity to include nonreligious perspectives in intercultural institutions to ensure the equal participation of all moral beliefs, including atheism; whereas Sajir refers to the concept of networked governance as an alternative to technocratic management from above that is based on shared participation and distributed agency, where religious minorities are directly involved in decision-making.

“One-size-fits-all” policy initiatives that assume homogenous minority groups do not always work to address complex societal realities and intersectional inequalities. As a response to this issue, the contributions of the special issues argue that for human rights to possess genuine democratic legitimacy and practical efficacy in pluralistic or post-colonial settings, policies need to be adapted to their respective contexts. As an overarching analytical and policy tool of complex societies, Scholten borrows Vertovec’s Superdiversity framework to propose a shift toward horizontal sector-mainstreaming and a local turn in policy. Intxaurbe’s book review puts forward Medda-Windischer, Wonisch and Budabin’s notion of constitutional translation, which would integrate international human rights with national law through the careful translation of religious demands.

Focusing on the local level, Budabin explains how minority group cultural mediators can be engaged by institutions to address religious and cultural differences and bridge critical gaps in the public administration.

A similar claim for a need for policy adaptation is brought up by Olanrewaju and Mahmood, who argue the imposition of Western-centric, individualist human rights approaches that ignore collective duties and indigenous knowledge systems often triggers cultural resistance or results in epistemicide. Olanrewaju advocates for epistemic justice, as a framework that formally recognizes and legitimizes indigenous epistemologies as valid repositories of knowledge. Similarly, Mahmood, supports hybrid justice models, which would be based on context-sensitive law enforcement strategies embedding universal human rights protections within culturally resonant, duty-oriented moral frameworks and informal justice mechanisms.

Through the contributions gathered in this special issue, the reader is taken on a journey that spans from procedural and normative legitimacy and the legal treatment of religious minorities, moving through the challenges of cultural diversity governance and the protection of identities against processes of exclusion, toward more participatory governance models. Collectively, this work demonstrates that the recognition of cultural and religious diversity is an essential pillar for the stability and strengthening of civil society in the twenty-first century. As discussed in the previous section, all the contributions included in this special issue illustrate that religion is a feature present in the social fabric and the public sphere that cannot be ignored by policymakers. Ultimately, this special issue underscores that democratic stability demands a proactive institutional commitment to incorporating diversity while maintaining a balance between fostering pluralism and protecting fundamental human rights.

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Governance of religious diversity: current challenges and approaches to democratic coexistence.

Introduction to the monograph

Gobernanza de la diversidad religiosa: desafíos y enfoques actuales para la convivencia democrática.
Introducción al monográfico

Nahikari Irastorza 

University of Deusto. Spain / Malmö University. Sweden

nahikari.irastorza@deusto.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4498-1798>

Davinia Gómez-Sánchez 

University of Deusto. Spain

davinia.gomsan@deusto.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7058-5356>

Julia Martínez-Ariño 

University of Groningen. The Netherlands

j.martinez.arino@rug.nl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8893-0899>

<https://doi.org/10.18543/djhr.3551>

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Challenges to the governance of religious diversity. 2. The contributions of the special issue. 2.1. Reconceptualizing secularism and questioning state neutrality. 2.2. The governance of diversity. 2.3. Decolonizing human rights frameworks. Concluding remarks. References.

Abstract: This article reflects on the public governance of cultural and religious diversity. Religious traditions have long shaped dominant cultural patterns in Western societies, which now face the challenge of ensuring harmonious coexistence among groups with diverse beliefs and ways of expressing them. In democratic systems where majorities tend to prevail, it is

essential to develop approaches that enable the meaningful inclusion of minority perspectives. Although policymaking in this area is primarily a national or regional level competence, local public institutions —due to their proximity to citizens— are often the first to address demands for religious accommodation, despite frequently lacking the capacity to respond effectively to an increasing religious diversity, and the different customs and practices related to it. This special issue brings together interdisciplinary contributions from the social sciences that pay particular attention to local and regional experiences in the governance of religious diversity and policy innovations across different national contexts and policy fields.

Keywords: Religious diversity, minorities, human rights, public policies, democratic coexistence, inclusion.

Resumen: Este artículo propone una reflexión sobre la gestión pública de la diversidad cultural y religiosa. Las tradiciones religiosas han configurado durante largo tiempo los patrones culturales dominantes en las sociedades occidentales, que hoy afrontan el reto de garantizar una convivencia armoniosa entre grupos con creencias diversas y distintas formas de expresarlas. En los sistemas democráticos, donde las mayorías tienden a prevalecer, resulta esencial desarrollar enfoques que permitan la inclusión significativa de las perspectivas minoritarias. Aunque la formulación de políticas en este ámbito corresponde principalmente al nivel nacional, las instituciones públicas locales —debido a su proximidad a la ciudadanía— suelen ser las primeras en atender las demandas de acomodación religiosa, a pesar de carecer con frecuencia de la capacidad necesaria para responder de manera eficaz al aumento de la diversidad religiosa. Este monográfico reúne contribuciones interdisciplinarias de las ciencias sociales, prestando especial atención a experiencias locales y regionales, así como a innovaciones en políticas transferibles a distintos contextos y ámbitos de política pública.

Palabras clave: Diversidad religiosa, minorías, derechos humanos, políticas públicas, convivencia democrática, inclusión.

Introduction¹

In recent decades, the relationship between religious diversity and democratic values has become a central issue in European public debate. The growing presence of minority religious communities—particularly Muslim and evangelical groups—has prompted social and political reactions that challenge the principles of equality, freedom of worship, and pluralism upon which liberal democracies are founded (Kivisto and Juergensmeyer 2020; Koenig 2023). In several European countries, the rise of Islamophobic discourses and the politicization of religion have also contributed to reshaping the boundaries of citizenship and national belonging, with important consequences for social cohesion and democratic legitimacy (Brubaker 2017; Modood 2019). According to authors such as Juergensmeyer (2019), developments including Brexit or the election of Donald Trump reflect the emergence of a new form of nationalism that has characterized the second decade of the twenty-first century. Much of this phenomenon has been associated with religion and, more specifically, with the Muslim faith, through a process that Cesari (2013) conceptualizes as the “securitization of Islam”.

In this context, the public governance of religious affairs and, more specifically, of religious minorities, including measures to address negative public opinions towards them, becomes of paramount importance to ensure their rights as well as a civic and peaceful coexistence of different groups in democratic societies. As Ruiz-Vieytez (2026) argues, democracy, understood as the rule of the majority, does not in itself resolve the tension between majority and minority cultural identities—and practices—in the public sphere. However, the governance of religious diversity is a challenge faced not only by Western societies. As the contributions in this special issue illustrate, this dynamic is equally evident in a variety of contexts, particularly in those characterized by ethno-religious divides, strong nationalism or secular states accommodating new demographic groups.

The level at which governance of religious matters occurs constitutes another crucial dimension of policymaking and research related to religious diversity. While policymaking in this area tends to be a national or regional level administrative competence, due to their

¹ This introductory chapter was collaboratively written by the guest editors of the special issue. The lead author conceptualized the overall framework and drafted the analysis of the contributions. The coauthors focused on refining and expanding the challenges and conclusions sections.

proximity to citizens, local public institutions are often the first to receive demands for religious accommodation and to mediate their acceptance among other social groups. However, local institutions often lack the capacity to respond effectively and positively to the growing religious diversity within their populations (Ruiz-Vieitez 2026).

Consequently, this special issue aligns with expanding scholarship consolidating a shift from studies focused on macro-level national frameworks towards distinct subnational configurations of religious accommodation (Griera 2012; Dick and Nagel 2017; Martínez-Ariño 2018, 2021; Astor et al. 2019). It underscores the local turn in migration and diversity studies (Poppelaars and Scholten 2008; Hoekstra 2015; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2019) by exploring how different actors manage, negotiate and experience religious pluralism, presenting innovative practices of local mediation and governance designed to navigate complex claims and to balance competing interests.

More concretely, this special issue addresses the above-mentioned challenges by bringing together contributions that propose innovative ideas for policy-making at the local and regional levels in Europe and the Global South. Drawing on fields such as law, political science and sociology, the ten articles offer distinct disciplinary and robust interdisciplinary perspectives to analyze contemporary governance of religion in diverse settings. This special issue starts out from research conducted in the framework of the project “Religious diversity and democratic coexistence: analysis and proposals for municipal policies (DIVERPOMU)”, financed by the Spanish State Research Agency, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (project number PID2023-149877NB-I00). As part of this broader project, the special issue explores how contemporary democracies navigate religious phenomena that transcend the private sphere, thereby challenging traditional governance models in increasingly complex contexts driven by multiple factors.

1. Challenges to the governance of religious diversity

Some of the main challenges to the governance of religious diversity in democratic societies concern the everyday practical interactions between state and non-state actors at the local level. In what follows, we highlight three such challenges, which may vary across contexts and historical moments: a) the representation and representativeness of religious groups; b) the structural tension that

exists in the governance of religious diversity between the recognition and the control of minority groups; and c) finally, the risk of instrumentalizing religious groups and actors.

First, local governance approaches to religious diversity often rely on direct relations between local state administrations, and leaders and representatives of religious organisations and communities. Such collaborations often happen in what has often been called “governance networks” (Martikainen 2016). In such structures, actors from different religious communities tend to often be selected by state actors. This selection of “representatives” comes with several problems. Local administrations tend to select those leaders and actors they know well and who usually come from the more “mainstream” branches of religious groups, especially those considered under the framework of “World Religions” (Bauman and Tunger-Zanetti 2018). This point is particularly challenging regarding Muslim communities, as state actors often fear selecting Muslim representatives whom they might consider inappropriate, based on the belief that they follow more “extreme” versions of Islam or have “questionable” international ties, among other things. This issue with the selection of representatives comes with the problem that the networks and collaborations reproduce inclusion and exclusion dynamics (Martínez-Ariño 2021). Moreover, religious actors often lack representativeness and legitimacy among the community of religionists they supposedly represent (Chapman and Lowndes 2009). The risk of them being approached as representatives is that they become “professional representatives”, which may come with a distancing from their community of origin.

Second, governance of religious diversity often becomes a double-edged sword that offers recognition and exerts control (Martínez-Ariño 2021). On the one hand, policies are often implemented that recognise the variety of religious groups present in a territory. Religious groups, in particular minorities, tend to make claims for their rights to be recognised. This recognition frequently comes with benefits, such as more public visibility as well as legitimacy. On the other hand, recognition often is accompanied by different forms of control, especially in relation to religious minorities. One such example could be the provision of public funding for the cultural activities of a religious group that comes with certain requirements and the supervision of public authorities. While *per se* not always necessarily negative, such forms of control tend to impact purportedly “suspicious” minority groups disproportionately.

Finally, through the governance of religious diversity, religious actors tend to play new roles which may lead to their instrumentalization by

state authorities. In other words, given that religious actors may offer valuable resources to political and administrative authorities (Dinham and Lowndes 2008), their collaboration with them may make of them mere instruments of public policy and publicity. In other words, they may switch roles from being advocates for their religious group to acting as agenda carriers of state actors (Martínez-Ariño 2021). As such, religious actors become valuable not for who they are and who they represent but rather for what they bring to the governance table.

The current landscape of challenges to the governance of religious diversity is further influenced by political and mediatic discourses. While these are most often national-level discourses, they have consequences both at the national and local levels. At the national and supranational levels, such discourses undermine the liberal principles of equality and pluralism of democratic societies by excluding certain minorities from national belonging (Brown 2022). Furthermore, such discourses are meant to shape majority members' attitudes towards minorities, which might, ultimately, also affect the relationship between them at the local level.

Given the fundamental influence of political actors and the media on public opinion, political parties play a central role in articulating attitudes toward ethnic and religious minorities that are rooted in democratic principles and equal rights. The public discourses that gain the most resonance are often those expressing stances against certain national, ethnic, and religious groups. In Europe and North America, a common feature of many of these discourses is what some scholars have called the securitization of Islam—that is, its discursive construction as a threat to Western nations, society, or culture. A political issue becomes a security matter when a “securitizing actor”—a political leader or another type of recognized authority, such as the head of an international organization—presents it as an existential threat to a referent object, such as the state, a nation, a civilization, cultural identity, or the environment. Through a securitizing discourse, this actor seeks to convince an audience that said threat justifies the adoption of exceptional measures that go beyond ordinary politics (Waever et al. 1993; Buzan et al. 1998). In the last two decades, Islam has been framed as being incompatible with modernity and secularism, and subject to an increasing process of securitization within the European public sphere, where issues regarding religion and cultural diversity have come to be treated as potential threats to security and national cohesion (Cesari 2013; 2021; Modood 2019; Kaya 2020). By conceiving Islam as a radical ideology—and thus something that

cannot be treated like other religions— this discourse legitimizes exceptional policy measures.

This discursive link between Islam, immigration, and radicalization has contributed to redefining the boundaries of belonging, eroding the liberal principles of equality and pluralism upon which European democracies are built (Brown 2022). While securitization usually refers to political acts that enable the implementation of exceptional measures —such as increased military presence or police controls— carried out by governments, often in violation of the rule of law to preserve citizen safety, Cesari (2013) argues that beyond the visibility of these exceptional measures, securitization also influences administrative routines and ordinary legislation, negatively affecting the exercise of religious freedom. The result is a state of securitized governmentality, in which Muslim subjects are managed simultaneously and paradoxically as populations to be integrated and as potentially suspicious collectives (Cesari 2013). As an example of this state, Cesari (2018) explains that when Muslims assert their religious affiliation through distinct attire or participation in religious practices in public spaces, they come to be considered politically suspicious and promoters of a global ideology presented as a threat to European nations.

In his comparative study between national populisms in Northern and Western Europe versus those in North America and Central and Eastern Europe, Brubaker (2017) develops a similar argument. He proposes that the rise of right-wing populism in Northwestern Europe has been accompanied by a shift from classical nationalism toward forms of “civilizationalism”, in which Islam is constructed not only as a religious or cultural difference but as an existential threat to a supposedly secular and liberal European civilization. This shift allows exclusion to be articulated in supranational terms, redefining belonging not solely as membership in a nation, but as adherence to civilizational values presented as incompatible with Islam. Reflecting on these ongoing processes, Cesari (2013, 2018) argues that the rising securitization of Islam has empowered governments to implement broader controls over religions, threatening both democracy and religious freedom in Europe. By framing Islam as an exception to the European liberal order, governments are able to justify unique levels of state intervention, regulation and surveillance. According to the author, this process implies a shift from the governance of religious diversity toward its problematization in terms of security, where Islam is no longer treated as just another confession but rather as a special case associated with potential risks to the public order, social cohesion

and democratic principles. This logic of exceptionality not only legitimizes restrictive measures specifically targeted at Muslim populations but also reconfigures the field of religious governance by granting states greater authority to interfere in religious practices, institutions and expressions.

Thus, governing religious diversity today requires navigating not just localized prejudices, but a structured, transnational narrative that aligns immigration and minority religious practices with a civilizational danger, complicating the formulation of inclusive policies for belonging and democratic coexistence. This trend could be exemplified by recent initiatives such as the French Anti-Separatism Law (LOI n. 2021-1109 du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République), which links public funding to a “republican commitment contract”, framing adherence to state-defined values of liberty and equality. Similarly, the 2023 Abaya ban by French Minister of Education in state run educational establishments, reconfigures *laïcité* beyond state neutrality. This civilizational boundary-making is not restricted to direct expressions of faith, it extends to socio-spatial policies and integration development plans. The controversial 2018 Danish housing laws “ghetto package” provides an example of an urban intervention aimed at dismantling what was rebranded as “parallel societies” (based on non-Western background), an ethnic classification that may result in discrimination (ECJ case C-417/23). Furthermore, the Belgian ban on animal slaughtering without prior stunning, upheld by the European Court of Human Rights (2024 case of *Executief van de Moslims van België v. Belgium*), illustrates how progressive secular principles like animal welfare are prioritized over religious freedom.

Besides these considerations, there is a theoretical approach to the governance of religion worth noting, one which looks at whether states opt for the expansion of rights and privileges of majority religions to minorities or, inversely, limit the rights of both minorities and majorities. The first approach, most commonly found in nations in the West where Christianity constitutes the majority, is known as “thickening”. The second approach, which would require nations in the Global South with high levels of religiosity to reduce the power of majority religions for the sake of the protection of human rights, is known as “thinning” (Modood and Sealy 2024). In her review of Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy’s book “The new governance of religious diversity” (2024) included in this special issue, Cristina de la Cruz-Ayuso highlights that such processes of thickening and thinning rights are not fixed or irreversible. Depending on the context, states may tend towards one or the other trends. For instance, when the possibility of

offering religious education in public schools is opened to religious minorities, there is a process of thickening of rights to minorities. When a non-discrimination law is passed that protects against discrimination on religious grounds, there is a thinning of privileges of majority religions that could otherwise see their members privileged. A prime example of this process can be found in the administrative working environment case of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). The CJEU's ruling in *OP v. Commune d'Ans* (C-148/22) determined that a municipal authority could enforce a strict policy of neutrality prohibiting all employees from wearing visible religious signs. By flattening the public sphere, the state effectively trims the expressive rights of all faiths. The opposite is evident in the following example of spatial regulation in Lombardy (regional law modifying L.R. 12/2005 on the construction of places of worship), in conflict with religious diversity. Rigid building and land-use conformity laws result in urban planning used to restrict the construction of places of worship of minorities.

2. The contributions of the special issue

This special issue brings together ten research articles and two comprehensive book reviews that analyze the governance of religious diversity, human rights and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion across distinct geographic and institutional settings. Together, these works problematize simplistic binaries —such as universalism versus relativism or secularism versus religion— though theoretical deliberations, empirical case studies and examples of policy initiatives that address key challenges of today's multi-religious societies at different governance levels.

2.1. *Reconceptualizing secularism and questioning state neutrality*

A set of articles questions the principles, legal structures and institutional practices through which modern states govern diversity. Despite their commitment to pluralism, Benjamin Gregg argues that liberal democracies systematically marginalize nonreligious citizens through structurally embedded theological biases. Integrating political theory with empirical social science research, he analyzes the legal asymmetries, social stigma and symbolic erasure of nonbelievers, arguing that traditional liberal neutrality is insufficient for their

inclusion. To address this, he proposes a model of what he calls “procedural pluralism” that positions atheism as the ultimate test for democratic legitimacy. According to the author, the true core of procedural pluralism lies in designing democratic institutions that ensure equal participation for all moral outlooks, which fundamentally requires recognizing atheism and nonbelief as valid forms of civic and ethical agency. For a democratic community to achieve genuine procedural legitimacy and fairness, nonreligious perspectives must be included in intercultural councils, explicitly protected by anti-discrimination statutes and shielded from social or legal stigma under freedom of conscience guarantees. Furthermore, educational and civic institutions must frame atheism not as a deficit, but as a legitimate worldview capable of grounding a moral life. Ultimately, Gregg contends that unless nonreligious viewpoints are fully acknowledged and permitted to contribute to public deliberation on their own merits—without being forced to translate their ideas into theological terms—pluralism will remain structurally biased toward religious belief, leaving the promise of democratic inclusion unfulfilled.

This conceptual critique of state neutrality relates to the comparative political analysis of Felipe Gaytán, who examines how secularism has been historically instrumentalized by the state as a political project of citizenship in three Latin American countries, whose relevance lies in the singularity of their secular imprint: Mexico, El Salvador and Bolivia. His analysis is based on the reconstruction of two historical moments of laicity. The first one is centered on the separation of church and state in the 19th century, vis-à-vis the influence of the Catholic Church and other denominations. The second moment emerges two centuries later, in contexts of increasing social, cultural and religious diversity, which entail the management and balancing of civil liberties fundamental to the exercise of human rights. Based on a qualitative-comparative methodological approach, which includes the analysis of legal documents, meta-ethnography, and interviews with different stakeholders and academics, Gaytán shows that, historically, secularism in Latin America was not a project for citizenship but a mechanism for the state to gain control of social life—in areas such as education or healthcare—from the Catholic Church. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, regional democratization and civil society pressures shifted secularism toward a new framework focused on human rights and civil liberties. This second historical moment of secularism would be characterized by a transversal tension between two logics of rights: the right to freedom of conscience that claims the individual exercise to decide above moral and religious frameworks—with the State as

guarantor of that self-determination— and the right to freedom of religion that constitutes the demand of confessional groups not to be excluded from the political sphere. On one side, the logic of freedom of conscience has driven the expansion of progressive rights in Mexico and protected indigenous traditions in Bolivia, though it faces deep societal resistance in security-focused nations like El Salvador. On the other side, faith-based groups—both progressive and neoconservative—demand political influence. These religious actors routinely surge into the public sphere during national crises, such as Bolivia's 2019 political fractures or El Salvador's security crackdowns, where authoritarian politics and religious discourse have fused. The author concludes that religious groups offer vital social resources and solidarity and, therefore, they can no longer be excluded from the political arena. The modern Latin American consensus would not be to banish religion from politics, but to integrate it visibly into the social agenda while defending civic ethics and human dignity from religious overreach.

Moving from political philosophy and constitutional law to institutional implementation, Yolanda Alonso Herranz examines the relationship between the right to education and freedom of conscience within international, European and Spanish legal frameworks. Rather than operating as isolated legal domains, the author argues that these two rights exist in a state of reciprocal dependency: freedom of conscience supplies the foundational values and moral convictions of a society, while education serves as the vital prerequisite enabling citizens to exercise their freedom of thought in an informed, critical and responsible manner. In today's increasingly multicultural landscape, this intersection creates distinct structural challenges, demanding that public institutions balance state neutrality and student autonomy with the rights of parents to guide their children's upbringing. To navigate these complexities, Herranz highlights how European and Spanish legal standards frequently clash with practical reality. On one hand, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) mandates absolute state neutrality and a strict prohibition against indoctrination, requiring that any religious curricula be delivered objectively, critically, and pluralistically to protect minority faiths and non-believers. On the other hand, Alonso Herranz's analysis reveals that while Spain's constitutional model of positive secularism attempts to mirror this by establishing cooperation agreements with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Islamic federations, a profound structural asymmetry remains. In practice, the Catholic Church maintains a deeply consolidated presence within the Spanish school system, whereas religious education for minority faiths is highly limited and

geographically fragmented, challenging the country's full compliance with international standards of equality and non-discrimination. To address this issue, Alonso Herranz claims that governing religious diversity cannot be reduced to merely offering segregated, faith-based classes or settling for passive tolerance. Instead, the author advocates for a modern reformulation of educational policy where religion is treated as a historical, cultural and comparative phenomenon. The author concludes that by shifting the pedagogical focus toward intercultural dialogue, critical thinking and the dismantling of stereotypes, public schools could be transformed into spaces of pluralistic coexistence. This approach would ensure that educational institutions remain entirely free from sectarian pressure while vigorously safeguarding the right of every student to embrace a faith, change it, or reject religious belief altogether.

The structural asymmetry between the Catholic faith and religious minorities described by Alonso Herranz is also discussed by Zakaria Sajir, who exposes systemic governance pathologies within Spain's religious diversity regime. Sajir argues that Spain's model of religious diversity governance is marked by a disconnect between formal commitments to pluralism and practices of systemic exclusion, producing what he describes as "stratified inclusion". In this framework, religious minorities receive symbolic recognition but remain structurally excluded from shaping the legal and civic norms that affect them. This dynamic is linked to the enduring legacy of *nacionalcatolicismo* —the fusion of national identity with Catholicism during Franco's rule—, which normalizes Catholicism as part of national culture while framing minority religions as foreign or problematic. His analysis identifies three interconnected governance failures: a paradigmatic failure that treats diversity as a technocratic issue managed from above; a normative failure characterized by selective secularism, whereby Catholicism is redefined as cultural heritage while minority religions —especially Islam— are securitized and problematized; and a territorial failure stemming from Spain's decentralized governance, which produces unequal protections of religious freedom across regions. Sajir further claims that institutional practices and judicial decisions often reinforce these hierarchies, as illustrated by court rulings on religious dress and municipal restrictions. Although formal equality is maintained, minorities are frequently reduced to passive recipients of accommodation rather than active participants in defining their rights. As an alternative to these pathologies, the author proposes a model of "networked governance" based on shared participation and distributed agency, in which religious minorities are directly involved in institutional decision-making. Sajir

concludes that still limited, emerging local initiatives and some judicial developments suggest the possibility of a more democratic and participatory approach to religious diversity in Spain.

2.2. *The governance of diversity*

A second set of articles focuses on the institutional inclusion and exclusion of minorities and the governance of religious diversity, including a wide range of institutional responses to pluralism—from state-sponsored exclusion to local mediation—and suggesting alternative conceptual frameworks to capture complex, intersectional urban realities. José Ramón Intxaurbe's review of the edited volume *Religious minorities in pluralistic societies* (2024), coordinated by Roberta Medda-Windischer, Kerstin Wonisch, and Alexandra C. Budabin, outlines how liberal democracies frequently exhibit hesitation when moving toward the institutionalization of pluralism, viewing it as a threat to core values like justice, equality and social cohesion. Through seven empirical case studies across Europe and the Middle East, Intxaurbe explains that the book moves past abstract constitutional models to analyze concrete policies. He highlights the chapters by Kyriaki Topidi and Christos Tsevas, which evaluate the complex paradoxes of state-recognized legal pluralism in Western Thrace, Greece, specifically focusing on the ECHR ruling in *Molla Salli v. Greece*. This legal case—revolving around the application of Sharia law to an estate dispute against the deceased's civil will—highlights the dangerous asymmetries that occur when religious legal systems undermine gender equality. While the ECHR held that religious rules are only legitimate if they stem from free individual choice, Intxaurbe reports on the profound questions raised by Silvio Ferrari regarding whether states should intervene to “protect women from themselves” when they voluntarily submit to non-liberal norms. To mitigate these frictions, the volume would advocate for a closer integration of international human rights and national law through a process of “constitutional translation” of religious demands.

If Intxaurbe's book review shows the dilemmas that democratic states might face when moving toward the institutionalization of pluralism, especially when they perceive diversity as an inherent threat to liberal norms, Khushbu Kumar, M. Belén Blázquez and Belén Agrela provide an empirical case study of state-level institutionalized exclusion in India. They use discourse analysis to explain how Hindu nationalist rhetoric targets Bangladeshi Muslim migrants to legitimize the

systematic exclusion and marginalization of this population. The authors describe that while India was historically seen as a safe haven, the state has undergone a profound shift toward exclusion, leaving millions of displaced people in a legal vacuum because it lacks a national refugee framework and has not ratified the 1951 Convention. This vulnerability would have been intensified under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose majoritarian goal of building a Hindu nation has institutionalized a hierarchy of rights that systematically marginalizes Muslims. According to Kumar, Blázquez and Agrela, this exclusionary vision was legalized through the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019, which weaponizes faith by fast-tracking citizenship exclusively for non-Muslim immigrants from neighboring countries. They contend that this discriminatory double standard violates the secular foundations of India's 1950 Constitution, while official political rhetoric strips Bangladeshi Muslim migrants of their humanity by labeling them "infiltrators". However, the authors also emphasize that this regime has faced powerful grassroots resistance, most notably through the peaceful sit-in led by Muslim women in the Delhi neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh. They describe how this local protest quickly became a national symbol of pluralism, bringing citizens of all faiths together for over one hundred days to defend secular values. Ultimately, the authors argue for a revision of the role of religion in the CAA to ensure that Muslim communities are not deprived of their rights; as well as for extending protection to excluded groups, including Muslims from neighboring countries, Rohingyas and Ahmadis, in line with India's secular constitutional values and international norms.

In contrast to this state-level exclusionary example of the accommodation of diversity but also focusing of migration-driven pluralism, Alexandra Cosima Budabin analyzes a proactive institutional mechanism for managing religious and cultural differences in South Tyrol, Italy, focusing on the implementation of intermediary actors: cultural mediators. The author explains that recent migration flows have introduced significant challenges surrounding cultural and religious differences, leaving new religious minorities to navigate complex legal human rights landscapes while trying to balance social cohesion with both majority and historical minority faiths. In response, diversity governance has increasingly relied on cultural mediators to peacefully mediate these differences. Specifically, the author explores how the role of cultural mediators has expanded to manage religious diversity and argues that this role is significantly enhanced when members of new religious minorities

are engaged as mediators themselves, allowing them to utilize their own transcultural capital. Adopting a socio-legal approach, the author demonstrates how local frameworks can innovatively expand upon national policies. While Italy has only recently recognized its growing pluralism, South Tyrol—predominantly Catholic but with a 10% foreign-born population by 2024—has been the first province to enact specific legislation on cultural mediators. By analyzing legal texts, policy guidelines and long-standing local practices, the author traces how South Tyrol transitioned from an unsystematic training process to a structured, legitimate framework that uses mediation to advance integration, reduce daily tensions and protect minority rights. Budabin concludes that public policies at both the national and regional levels increasingly validate the inclusion of migrants as cultural mediators. This inclusion fosters new modes of civic participation and ensures that minority perspectives are actively embedded in diversity governance. While challenges regarding professionalization and uneven implementation remain, the author maintains that utilizing the transcultural capital of religious minorities bridges critical gaps in public administration, offering a vital mechanism for achieving horizontal, democratic coexistence.

Whereas Budabin focuses on cultural mediation as an institutional tool for managing religious diversity, Mar Griera and Victor Albert Blanco shift attention to the public visibility of religious difference and its regulation in urban settings, analyzing the case of public *iftars* during Ramadan. They argue that public expressions of religiosity serve as a prime lens for understanding how religious diversity is transforming contemporary European cities. They observe a profound urban paradox: while European societies are deeply secularized, they are simultaneously experiencing sustained religious pluralization driven by migration, causing religion to reemerge through highly visible collective practices in streets and squares. According to the authors, these events function as hybrid urban devices that exist at the intersection of four competing regimes: the heritage regime (which translates practices into tradition), the governance regime (or administrative regulation), the relational regime (based on social interaction) and the devotional regime (as a sacred ritual). To analyze these dynamics, the authors utilize a conceptual framework including spatial inscription, governance, social representations and cultural resources like gastronomy and music, drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Madrid and Barcelona. As an Islamic ritual shifted into open public squares, the public *iftar* embodies the complex friction between devotion and

conviviality, administrative visibility and regulation, and institutional recognition and societal suspicion. While these events foster interreligious dialogue, they also expose persistent urban inequalities, as “neutral” public administration often coexists with deeply rooted symbolic hierarchies, meaning that different faiths do not access public visibility on equal terms. The article concludes that by temporarily interrupting the everyday urban order and using sensory mediators like food or music, these public events do more than just reflect diversity, they actively produce, represent and renegotiate the boundaries of religious coexistence and legitimacy in increasingly diverse urban environments.

While the previous articles illustrate how states and municipalities struggle to manage pluralism through rigid institutional structures or localized spatial regulations, Peter Scholten critiques the dominant political discourses of urban crisis and polarization in Dutch cities and proposes Steven Vertovec’s concept of “superdiversity” (2007) as an umbrella framework to explain the intersectional social complexity that characterizes many urban environments. The article is based on the understanding that what political discourses often misinterpret as crisis or polarization is actually a failure to understand the social complexity of superdiverse cities. Using the Netherlands as a primary case study, the author explains that urban diversity is no longer about clearly defined minority groups, but rather an intricate tangle of intersectional factors—including religion, socio-economic status, gender and legal status—making diversity a characteristic of society. When rigid institutional categories are forced onto this fluid reality, it fuels public anxiety and a false sensation of societal fragmentation. To address this challenge, Scholten outlines three core dimensions of public policy that must be restructured. First, policy coordination must shift both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, diversity can no longer remain isolated in a single administrative silo or managed by a standalone minister; it must be mainstreamed across general policy sectors like housing, education, and labor. Vertically, superdiversity requires a local turn toward custom district-level development and municipal autonomy, as seen in the distinct approaches of Dutch cities like Eindhoven or Rotterdam, rather than centralized, one-size-fits-all national mandates. Second, the article advocates for a shift in policy language toward a plural, needs-based idiom. Reviewing the Dutch context, he notes how official terminology has evolved from “guest workers” to “ethnic minorities” and the stigmatizing term *allochtoon*, before the Scientific Council for Government Policy recommended using “citizens with or without

a migration background” in 2016. Scholten argues that instead of automatically using fixed ethnic categories—which pre-problematizes specific groups—policies should use flexible alternatives driven by specific problems. For instance, addressing structural racism requires looking at skin color and origin, while addressing unemployment should prioritize factors like class and parental education. This nuance is especially critical in countries like the Netherlands and Germany, where data is dictated by official state registers rather than self-reported censuses, which can artificially reinforce the illusion of homogenous groups. Finally, superdiversity transforms how institutions must collaborate with civil society. Scholten critiques traditional, exclusive consultation models that rely solely on group-specific ethnic or religious organizations, as this approach forces an “ethnic lens” that blinds policymakers to broader inequalities. However, rather than ceasing cooperation entirely, he suggests embedding these groups within a broader network of neighborhood associations, youth clubs, and anti-discrimination NGOs. Scholten concludes that superdiversity is an undeniable global fact, and managing it successfully requires network governance, flexible categorizations, and localized customization to foster genuine, horizontal coexistence.

2.3. *Decolonizing human rights frameworks*

The last set of papers pushes the borders of the special issue into post-colonial contexts, challenging Western-centric, individualist configurations of human rights and knowledge production. Cristina de la Cruz-Ayuso provides a critical evaluation of Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy’s book *The new governance of religious diversity* (2024). The review notes that the 20th-century Euro-centric secularization thesis—based on a strict separation of religion and politics—has been thoroughly dismantled by 21st-century realities where religion remains a vibrant public force, which requires a more flexible, global framework called “multicultural secularism”. At the heart of her analysis is the book’s novel concepts for analysing how different countries actually manage diversity. Modood and Sealy introduce the concepts of “dominant operative norms” (the foundational laws of a state) and “qualifying operative norms” (the flexible adjustments made in practice). De la Cruz-Ayuso notes that this distinction explains why two officially secular countries can handle religious minorities in entirely different ways. The book applies this across more than twenty

countries, revealing a global divide: Western nations with historic Christian majorities must undergo an institutional “thickening” (expanding existing privileges) to accommodate new minority faiths like Islam, while deeply religious nations in the Global South require a “thinning” or reducing of majoritarian religious power to protect universal human rights. The review concludes that, in a world fractured by migration anxieties and populist politics, Modood and Sealy successfully redefine secularism not as a tool to restrict religion, but as a democratic mechanism to ensure every citizen has a voice.

The post-colonial countries’ struggle to protect universal human rights against inherited, Euro-centric legal structures and majority religious power explained by Modood and Sealy is illustrated by Oluwaseun Olanrewaju in his examination of the systematic marginalization of the Yoruba indigenous religion (Ìṣẹ̀ṣe) in South-West Nigeria. Olanrewaju argues that conventional human rights frameworks, which focus narrowly on individual religious freedom, are structurally inadequate to address the systemic discrimination faced by practitioners of Ìṣẹ̀ṣe. Because Ìṣẹ̀ṣe is not merely a faith but a comprehensive Indigenous Knowledge System with its own ethical, philosophical and historical frameworks, its marginalization constitutes epistemicide, that is, the systematic silencing and delegitimization of indigenous ways of knowing. The author explains that severe demographic decline of Ìṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners in modern South-West Nigeria (1.3% of the population) subjects them to social prejudice from Abrahamic perspectives that reduce their tradition to derogatory labels like “barbarism” or “idol worship”. Institutional exclusion also persists by government policies routinely ignoring the spiritual and cultural dimensions of the tradition, and constitutional protections for religious freedom being rarely applied effectively to its practitioners. Olanrewaju notes that this marginalization is further exacerbated by a leadership vacuum in policymaking, driven by a severe underrepresentation of Ìṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners within government institutions. To resolve these democratic and cultural deficits, the article calls for a paradigm shift from simple legal protections to a framework of epistemic justice by demanding federal and state governments to anchor public policies in an analytical framework that formally recognizes and legitimizes Ìṣẹ̀ṣe as a vital component of Yoruba epistemology. Because the state’s policy responses remain slow and superficial, Olanrewaju concludes that the responsibility for driving this transformation falls on non-state actors, specifically Ìṣẹ̀ṣe practitioners and traditional Yoruba rulers. Through strategic advocacy, these custodians must pressure the state to implement

public re-education and robust policy protections that treat *İşèşe* as a valuable cultural and intellectual heritage.

While Olanrewaju calls for a paradigm shift to rescue minority Indigenous Knowledge Systems from Euro-centric legal limitations, a parallel critique of Western-centric models is developed by Nafiz Absar Mahmood, whose article focuses on the tension between Western rights-based policing models and duty-oriented moral frameworks in non-Western societies like Nigeria, Egypt and India. While liberal democracies prioritize individual autonomy, procedural safeguards, and protection against state overreach, many collectivist societies (influenced by Confucian, Islamic, Hindu or African communitarian worldviews) define justice through social harmony, obedience, and relational obligations. Mahmood emphasizes that these two systems are not mutually exclusive binary opposites but rather poles on a normative continuum. The core problem addressed in the article is that the uncritical imposition of rights-based law enforcement frameworks —often driven by international norms or external actors— frequently faces cultural resistance. The author notes a vital analytical nuance regarding this resistance: while much of it would stem from a genuine misalignment of moral values, some resistance would be instrumentalized by traditional elites, elders and patriarchal authorities to protect their own privilege. Based on a literature review and comparative research design, the article evaluates legal theory, moral philosophy and specific case studies from Nigeria, Egypt and India. It analyzes how informal justice mechanisms —such as *jirgas*, *panchayats* and religious or customary courts— maintain strong local legitimacy. These informal systems would persist because they offer accessibility, familiarity and social cohesion, even when some of their structural practices directly contradict international human rights standards. Rather than falling into a binary of universalism versus relativism, Mahmood advocates for hybrid justice models (such as those in South Africa, Indonesia, and Jordan) and context-sensitive reform strategies that integrate traditional customary laws or informal mediation mechanisms with constitutional human rights, establishing a pathway toward cultural legitimacy without sacrificing fundamental rights protections. He concludes that while the core, non-derogable floor of universal human rights must be strictly maintained to protect women, minorities and marginalized groups from systemic harm, policing reforms must simultaneously engage with and respect local duty-oriented traditions. This could be achieved by embedding universal rights within existing, culturally resonant moral frameworks, in which policing would not be a mere tool of top-down enforcement but a legitimate vehicle for justice in morally plural societies.

Concluding remarks

The contributions to this special issue analyze the governance of religious diversity, human rights and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion across various global and institutional contexts. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical case studies, they collectively dismantle simplistic binaries such as universalism versus cultural relativism, or secularism versus religion, nationalism and confessionalism. Ultimately, the volume explores how contemporary, diverse societies navigate these tensions across different levels of governance to address the challenges of pluralistic coexistence.

In addition to the challenges discussed in the literature review, three additional aspects are identified across the contributions of the special issue: (1) structural biases that favor majority religions, (2) rigid, “one-size-fits-all” policy initiatives that assume homogenous minority groups and (3) Western-centric, individualist human rights frameworks that ignore collective duties and indigenous knowledge and belief systems. Regarding the first challenge, De la Cruz-Ayuso describes Modood and Sealy’s concepts of institutional thickening and thinning to either expand the privileges that Christian majorities have in Western societies to religious minority groups or to reduce the religious power of majorities in the Global South to protect universal human rights. Gregg introduces the idea of procedural pluralism to highlight the necessity to include nonreligious perspectives in intercultural institutions to ensure the equal participation of all moral beliefs, including atheism; whereas Sajir refers to the concept of networked governance as an alternative to technocratic management from above that is based on shared participation and distributed agency, where religious minorities are directly involved in decision-making.

“One-size-fits-all” policy initiatives that assume homogenous minority groups do not always work to address complex societal realities and intersectional inequalities. As a response to this issue, the contributions of the special issues argue that for human rights to possess genuine democratic legitimacy and practical efficacy in pluralistic or post-colonial settings, policies need to be adapted to their respective contexts. As an overarching analytical and policy tool of complex societies, Scholten borrows Vertovec’s Superdiversity framework to propose a shift toward horizontal sector-mainstreaming and a local turn in policy. Intxaurbe’s book review puts forward Medda-Windischer, Wonisch and Budabin’s notion of constitutional translation, which would integrate international human rights with national law through the careful translation of religious demands.

Focusing on the local level, Budabin explains how minority group cultural mediators can be engaged by institutions to address religious and cultural differences and bridge critical gaps in the public administration.

A similar claim for a need for policy adaptation is brought up by Olanrewaju and Mahmood, who argue the imposition of Western-centric, individualist human rights approaches that ignore collective duties and indigenous knowledge systems often triggers cultural resistance or results in epistemicide. Olanrewaju advocates for epistemic justice, as a framework that formally recognizes and legitimizes indigenous epistemologies as valid repositories of knowledge. Similarly, Mahmood, supports hybrid justice models, which would be based on context-sensitive law enforcement strategies embedding universal human rights protections within culturally resonant, duty-oriented moral frameworks and informal justice mechanisms.

Through the contributions gathered in this special issue, the reader is taken on a journey that spans from procedural and normative legitimacy and the legal treatment of religious minorities, moving through the challenges of cultural diversity governance and the protection of identities against processes of exclusion, toward more participatory governance models. Collectively, this work demonstrates that the recognition of cultural and religious diversity is an essential pillar for the stability and strengthening of civil society in the twenty-first century. As discussed in the previous section, all the contributions included in this special issue illustrate that religion is a feature present in the social fabric and the public sphere that cannot be ignored by policymakers. Ultimately, this special issue underscores that democratic stability demands a proactive institutional commitment to incorporating diversity while maintaining a balance between fostering pluralism and protecting fundamental human rights.

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