

Religious Heritage: Sites, People, Challenges

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Religious heritage can be understood as an intricate synthesis of both tangible and intangible dimensions. From hermitages and chapels to churches, mosques, synagogues, convents, and monasteries, physical sites – often deeply embedded in urban, peri-urban or rural contexts – serve as vessels for spiritual practices, craftsmanship and oral traditions. These structures and customs, together, represent deeply histories of belief, identity, and community.

Historically, religious heritage has contributed significantly to shaping cultural, social, environmental and economic values – from monastic agriculture and water systems to community-centered festivals and urban planning models anchored in sacred sites. Yet, today, it faces critical challenges: natural (e.g. climate change, flooding, decay) and human-driven (e.g. secularization, rural depopulation, abandonment). Thousands of religious buildings and their surrounding lands risk obsolescence. As such, a renewed interdisciplinary dialogue is urgently needed to reassess their meaning and futures.

The Special Issue “Religious Heritage: sites, people, challenges” draws its title from the closing round table of the 4th international conference “Architectures of the Soul: Religious Heritage: Understanding the Past, Shaping the Future”, held at Batalha Monastery (a UNESCO Site) in October of 2023¹. The panel featured six professionals engaged in the management and reuse of former monastic buildings, or in the design of new ones – ranging from local initiatives to international case studies – and helped spark the editorial vision presented here.

Comprising twelve contributions – including selections from key conference speakers – this Special Issue brings a pan-European and interdisciplinary perspective that spans historical inquiry, contemporary challenges, innovative methodologies, and applied case studies on the understanding, preservation, reuse, and reinterpretation of religious heritage. The articles cover a wide range of topics, from material culture and sacred landscapes to community-led initiatives, digital tools, and policy frameworks. Together, they highlight how religious heritage remains a living, evolving field shaped by people, memory, and place.

The first set of contributions examines how tradition, sustainability, and landscape play a central role in shaping **contemporary religious heritage practices**. Carlos Azevedo explores how the architectural, artistic and liturgical legacies of religious orders – especially in Southern Europe – can be revalued and reconnected through interdisciplinary approaches. Peter Doll highlights how

¹ Coordinated by Rolando Volzone, João Luís Fontes, and Joaquim Ruivo, the international conference was organized by four research centers – DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte | ISCTE-IUL, IEM | NOVA FCSH, CHAIA | UÉvora, and CEHR | UCP – in collaboration with the host institution, Batalha Monastery. The event also received support from several partners, including Future For Religious Heritage, Batalha Municipality, CEPAE, ESACH, FLAD, Centro Studi Cherubino Ghirardacci, and GECORPA, as well as media partners Pedra & Cal, THEMA, EHT, and Espaço de Arquitetura. More information is available at: <https://www.dinamiacet.iscte-iul.pt/architectures-of-the-soul-2023>

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Norwich Cathedral reclaims its Benedictine identity through the restoration of historic spaces and the revitalisation of its foundational principles: spiritual devotion, education, and hospitality. Henrik Lindblad examines Sweden's ecclesiastical heritage, where dwindling church membership and rigid conservation frameworks have produced "zombie-churches" – well-preserved but unused. Mónica Monteiro, in turn, studies Catholic pilgrimage shrines in Portugal through a typological and geographic lens, advocating for holistic protection strategies that respect both landscape and liturgical form.

From there, the focus shifts to **digital innovation and cultural mapping** with two articles that show how new tools reshape our understanding of sacred spaces. Mafalda Pacheco, Ana Paula Falcão and Rolando Volzone use GIS-powered cluster analysis to explore the legacy of traditional vaulted systems in Southern Portugal and generate thematic cultural itineraries that support regional regeneration. Meanwhile, Raffaella De Marco applies georeferenced 3D modelling and participatory storytelling to document and interpret *maqamat* – multi-faith shrines in the Levant – as sacred and community-rooted landmarks.

Addressing **changing uses and emotional geographies**, two further articles examine both practical and affective responses to the decline or transformation of religious buildings. In Salerno, Giulia Neri, Pasquale Cucco and Anna Gallo propose an integrated strategy for adapting decommissioned worship spaces to civic functions. In Finland, Visa Immonen, Niko Hakkarainen, and Anna Sivula explore the concept of "anticipatory grief" as a way to understand the cultural loss experienced when modernist churches are demolished.

The volume also includes **visual narratives and heritage voices**. Sebastiano Raimondo offers a photographic essay, capturing sacred architecture and landscapes in Northern and Southern Portugal, contemplating how space, symbolism, and memory intertwine. In conversation with Henrik Lindblad, Rolando Volzone, and Rocío Sánchez, Luc Noppen reflects on the role of community-led reuse, equitable funding, and the evolving meaning of church buildings in Quebec.

Finally, two book reviews establish **dialogues with recent literature** on the topic. Paulo Cavana discusses Davide Dimodugno's legal analysis of Catholic churches reuse in Italy, while Ioannis Poullos engages with *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe*, noting its innovative methodology and inclusive approach to heritage in a pluralist context.

Collectively, the contributions in this Special Issue underscore that religious heritage is not a static legacy, but rather a dynamic and evolving field shaped by communities, technologies, policies and emotional connections. It moves continuously between state of preservation, reuse, and at times abandonment. This fluid condition calls for thoughtful reflection and meaningful action: scholars, practitioners, and communities must work together to envision new forms of engagement and stewardship.

As guest editors, we hope this issue stimulates continued dialogue, inspires innovative research, and encourages sustainable practices that honour religious heritage as both a historical legacy and a resource for the future.

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