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Sacred Space and Theological Negotiation: Reinterpreting Historical Mosques and Temples in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines theological contestations over sacred space in contemporary Indonesia by analysing five prominent sites: the Great Mosque of Demak, Menara Kudus Mosque, Borobudur Temple, Prambanan Temple, and Besakih Temple. The research question guiding this study is how sacred spaces in Indonesia negotiate religious devotion, state regulation, cultural heritage, tourism, and market commodification within a plural society. This question is important because sacred sites are no longer experienced only as places of worship, but also as public arenas where faith communities, governments, tourists, and cultural industries produce competing meanings of sacredness. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach based on documentary and literature-based inquiry. Data were collected from historical sources, scholarly publications, governmental policies, heritage documents, and contemporary reports, then analysed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model with source triangulation. The findings show that Demak and Kudus reflect Islamic acculturation with Hindu-Buddhist cultural forms, Borobudur reveals tensions between Buddhist pilgrimage and global tourism, Prambanan displays performed sacredness through cultural staging, and Besakih demonstrates negotiation between Hindu devotion and state-led governance. This article proposes the Indonesian Sacred Pluralism Model, which positions pluralism as a force that expands sacredness rather than threatens it. The theoretical contribution of this article lies in extending sacred space theory by showing how sacredness in Indonesia is produced through the interaction of devotion, heritage governance, public religion, and plural social negotiation. At the same time, this model acknowledges that pluralism does not always generate harmony, but may also produce tensions, disputes, and competing interpretations of sacred authority among religious communities, the state, tourism actors, and wider publics.

Keywords: Sacred Space; Theological Contestation; Sacred Pluralism; Indonesian Religion; Public Theology

Introduction

In the world, Indonesia's case of religious pluralism is unique. It has been reported which around 87% percent of the country's population practice Islam but that the also includes Protestants, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and also Indigenous beliefs (Stirling, 2024). While the prevalence of the Islamic majority does not go past the fact that temples dedicated to Buddhism and Hinduism and churches to Catholicism play a key role in the life

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of the nation. That which what is put forth is that Indonesia is a tapestry of diverse religions, where the public spaces for all of these religions' practices are present and they in turn play a role in the country's identify (Hati et al., 2023; Indainanto et al., 2023).

The Great Mosque of Demak, Menara Kudus Mosque, Borobudur Temple, Prambanan Temple, and Besakih Temple are examples of the play out of the many faiths in one space (Hidajat et al. 2021; Supriyadi et al. 2022). In Demak we see the growth of Islam through the use of local Javanese elements, in Kudus we see Hindu and Buddhist symbols incorporated into the concept of tawhid, at the Borobudur and Prambanan Temples we see the struggle between pilgrimage and tourism, at Besakih we see the State's role in the management of sacred sites. These five also are not what one may think as just structures of the past but are instead a reflection of the fact that which we consider sacred is always in the midst of many different cultural and religious ideas.

As for Demak, Kudus, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih we see here the axis mundi which is the point of connection between the human and the Divine. But in the complex reality of Indonesia this axis is not a exclusive element of any single religion instead we see it present at the same time in geography and culture (Fuadi et al., 2024; Pajarianto et al., 2022). What we have in multiple sacred sites in the same setting is in fact a proof that sacredness and pluralism go hand in hand.

In terms of sites which see the play out of religious identity before interfaith audiences. For example Borobudur is a site of Buddhist worship but also a global tourist attraction. Here the sacred is made to engage with conservation, tourism, and cultural politics. Pluralism pushes sacred sites to step out of their exclusive spaces into the public forum of dialogue (Martin Newman, 2023).

This we see in the fact that what is sacred is no longer a preserve of faith. The state puts out tickets for Borobudur by the bucketful, the government re structures the Besakih area, and at Prambanan curators put on Ramayana plays. Also we see that what is sacred is at the pull of devotion, policy, and market forces. Pluralism turns sacred sites into forums for many authorities which often cross over (Chiotti, 2022; Chisale, 2023; Masiola, 2023).

The relevance of Mircea Eliade's concepts of hierophany and axis mundi becomes clearer when sacred space is read within this contested public setting. Hierophany helps explain how the sacred is manifested through architecture, ritual, symbols, and spatial memory, while axis mundi clarifies how particular sites are imagined as points of connection between human communities and transcendent reality (Nuckolls, 2020). In the Indonesian context, however, these concepts must be extended beyond a purely internal religious frame, because Demak, Kudus, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih are also shaped by heritage policy, tourism, interfaith visibility, and public negotiation. Eliade's framework is therefore used not simply to identify sacredness, but to examine how sacred meaning is preserved, contested, and reinterpreted within Indonesia's plural religious landscape.

On the other hand what we see is that which is ideal is how sacredness maintains its authenticity in the face of pluralism. Sacred sites should not be turned into mere tourist draws or economic products. They are to be seen as elements of faith heritage which also play a role in national dialogue. The state, religious leaders, and society must put in place a cooperative structure which allows sacred spaces to retain their sanctity at the same time that they embrace pluralism. In this way pluralism does not wear away at faith but instead it fortifies social cohesion (Janson, 2023; Jones, 2024).

Pluralism also gives birth to what we see in context based theology. In Demak and Kudus we see that orthodoxy which includes old traditions into its practice does not lose the essence of tawhid. In Prambanan and Besakih we see that the sacred does in fact survive in performance and tourist settings. At Borobudur we note that which is holy still thrives in the midst of state

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and market intervention. This play out is proof that pluralism is in fact the soil in which theological innovation flourishes (R'boul, 2021).

The issue of what is considered the sacred at Borobudur is determined by entrance tickets, at Prambanan we see sacred elements brought to life through cultural performance, and at Besakih we see regulation of the sacred through space. Pluralism causes the sacred to coexist with the profane which in turn makes the experience dynamic and ever changing.

In Indonesia we cannot think of sacredness as a single entity because it is a result of the play between plural elements which is in constant flux in response to social, political, and cultural changes. Sacred spaces are stages for both conflict and resolution which see the play between faith, tradition and modernity which in turn marks the health of theological debate in a plural society. In the cases of Demak, Kudus, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih we see that sacredness is preserved while at the same time is made to work with pluralism which in turn gives Indonesia a put forth which may be a model for other countries which are also under the pressure from tourism, modernity and religious pluralism. This research's urgency is in its call to reframe sacred spaces as the sites of theology in plural settings through the use of Eliade, Habermas, and Indonesian context based theologies which we put forth that faith may at the same time exist with pluralism and also play a role in the global discussion of the care of sacred spaces in the modern world.

Although Indonesia provides important examples of religious coexistence, sacred spaces in plural societies should not be understood only through harmony and accommodation. They also involve tensions over religious identity, sacred authority, cultural ownership, state regulation, tourism, commodification, and public representation. This study therefore aims to analyse how five Indonesian sacred sites the Great Mosque of Demak, Menara Kudus Mosque, Borobudur Temple, Prambanan Temple, and Besakih Temple negotiate sacredness within the intersection of devotion, heritage, governance, tourism, and plural public life. The main research question guiding this article is: how do historical mosques and temples in contemporary Indonesia negotiate sacred meaning amid competing claims of religious devotion, cultural heritage, state authority, market commodification, and plural social representation?

Literature Review

This study aims to reanalyze the meaning of sacred space in historical mosques, temples, and temples in Indonesia within the framework of religious pluralism. Mircea Eliade's concept of *hierophany* and *axis mundi* is used to interpret how sacred spaces represent the presence of transcendence, while Jürgen Habermas' theory of public space helps explain how these sacred spaces have now become arenas for interfaith communication (Hoskyns, 2020; Nuckolls, 2020). This approach is reinforced by the perspective of Indonesian contextual theology, which emphasizes that the diversity of local traditions does not diminish sacredness, but rather enriches the meaning of faith. With this framework, the research positions sacred space as a locus for public theology that functions within the context of pluralism.

The theoretical discussion of sacred space can also be strengthened by reading sacredness not only through Eliade's hierophany and axis mundi, but also through debates on heritage, authenticity, public religion, state regulation, tourism, and lived religious practice. Existing studies on heritage tourism and sacred sites show that authenticity is negotiated through the interaction of clergy, tourists, preservation strategies, and public expectations, while studies on religious moderation and cultural heritage in Indonesia indicate that sacred spaces are shaped by plural audiences, cultural memory, and governance structures (Thouki, 2024; Subchi et al., 2022; Supriyadi et al., 2022; Bezklubaya, 2021). This perspective allows the article to read Demak, Kudus, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih not merely as inherited

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monuments, but as negotiated theological-public spaces in which devotion, regulation, tourism, and plural religious audiences continuously reshape the meaning of sacredness.

Börcsök (2023) investigates the revival of forgotten religious heritage sites through the Sacred Past project, using a multiplatform digital approach. The methods employed are based on digital presentation and preservation to showcase lost religious sites to the public. The results demonstrate that digitalization can be an effective strategy for reviving sacred memories. The difference from this study lies in the focus: while this article looks at digital presentation, it re-examines sacredness of space as an arena for theological contestation in Indonesia's plural context.

Burckhart (2025) discusses legal strategies to protect religious sites associated with religious minorities through legal studies and cultural politics. The research found that the protection of intangible heritage and physical sites is heavily influenced by legal frameworks that are often biased toward the majority. This article differs by not solely focusing on legal strategies but also taking into account the theological dimension of sacred spaces managed within the pluralism of religion and culture in Indonesia.

Cisse (2022) investigates the revitalization of religious sites in Timbuktu (mosques and mausoleums) post-terrorism and the Covid-19 crisis with a UNESCO heritage study approach. The research shows the importance of physical reconstruction as well as the restoration of sacred meaning through intercultural dialogue. This study has similarities in viewing sacred spaces as arenas for reconciliation but differs in context, focusing on pluralism in Indonesia, where religious pluralism is the main backdrop in reinterpreting sacred spaces.

Lehuedé (2022) highlights conflicts, negotiations, and religiosity in the relationship between priests and ethnic authorities in the Codpa Parish, 1748. Through historical and social analysis, the study finds that sacred spaces often become arenas of power struggle between religion and ethnicity. This article is relevant as it shows how religious spaces can become points of negotiation for power, although the study focuses on the colonial context in South America. This research differs by focusing on contemporary pluralism in Indonesia, rather than the historical relationship between religion and ethnicity.

The reviewed literature shows that studies on sacred heritage and religious sites generally move across three main debates. The first concerns the tension between sacredness as a transcendent religious experience and sacredness as a cultural-heritage object managed through preservation, tourism, and public policy. The second concerns the question of authority, namely whether sacred meaning is primarily defined by religious communities, state institutions, heritage experts, or market actors. The third concerns pluralism, where sacred spaces may become arenas of dialogue and coexistence, but may also generate disputes over ownership, representation, authenticity, and the limits of commodification. These debates show that sacred space cannot be understood only as a fixed religious location, but must be read as a negotiated field where theological meaning, cultural memory, public governance, and social power intersect.

This article contributes to these debates by bringing Mircea Eliade's concepts of hierophany and axis mundi into dialogue with Habermas' public sphere and Indonesian contextual theology. Unlike studies that focus mainly on preservation, digital heritage, legal protection, or historical conflict, this article reads Demak, Kudus, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih as sacred-public spaces where devotion, heritage, state regulation, tourism, and plural audiences continuously reshape the meaning of sacredness. The novelty of this article lies in proposing the Indonesian Sacred Pluralism Model, which understands pluralism not merely as a background condition, but as an active theological and public force that can expand sacred meaning while also producing tensions, competing claims, and negotiations over sacred authority.

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Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design based on documentary and literature-based inquiry to examine theological contestations surrounding sacred spaces in contemporary Indonesia (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Weyant, 2022). This design was selected because sacredness, pluralism, and religious authority cannot be adequately understood through numerical measurement, but require interpretation of meanings, symbols, historical narratives, and social practices. The study focuses on five sacred sites, namely the Great Mosque of Demak, Menara Kudus Mosque, Borobudur Temple, Prambanan Temple, and Besakih Temple, as representative loci for analysing the negotiation between religious devotion, cultural heritage, state regulation, and tourism. Since this study is based on documentary and literature-based inquiry, it does not claim to provide direct empirical accounts of how religious communities, tourists, or visitors personally experience sacredness. Statements concerning lived religious meanings, community negotiation, public reception, tourism practices, and sacred authority are therefore treated as theological and interpretive readings of documented sources, scholarly literature, policy materials, and contemporary reports. The study should thus be understood as an interpretive theological analysis of sacred space rather than an ethnographic or interview-based study of community experience.

The five sites were selected purposively because they represent different religious traditions, historical periods, forms of sacred architecture, and modes of contemporary public negotiation in Indonesia. The Great Mosque of Demak and Menara Kudus Mosque represent Islamic sacred spaces shaped by Javanese, Hindu-Buddhist, and local cultural acculturation. Borobudur and Prambanan represent Buddhist and Hindu heritage sites where ritual devotion intersects strongly with UNESCO heritage discourse, tourism, conservation, and cultural performance. Besakih Temple represents a living Hindu sacred complex in which ritual authority, state governance, spatial regulation, and religious tourism are continuously negotiated. These similarities and differences make the five sites suitable for comparative analysis because each reveals a distinct configuration of devotion, heritage, state regulation, market commodification, and plural public representation.

The data sources consisted of primary documentary sources and secondary academic sources (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2020). Primary documentary sources included official texts, cultural heritage records, policy documents, conservation regulations, and archival materials related to the management and historical status of the five sacred sites. Secondary sources were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, theological studies, anthropological literature, religious studies publications, credible media reports, and online documentation discussing sacred space, pluralism, heritage management, pilgrimage, tourism, and public theology in Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation by identifying, selecting, classifying, and organising relevant historical, theological, policy-based, and contemporary materials.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data collection, data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification (Miles et al., 2020). Data condensation was conducted by selecting materials related to sacredness, pluralism, religious authority, state intervention, and market commodification. Data display was carried out through thematic tables and analytical narratives to compare the functions and contestations of Demak, Kudus, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih. Conclusion drawing and verification were conducted cyclically to identify recurring patterns in the relationship between faith communities, state governance, tourism, and the reinterpretation of sacred space.

The validity of the data was strengthened through source triangulation and interpretative consistency (Flick, 2022). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing official government archives, cultural heritage documents, academic literature, media reports, and contemporary documentation related to the five sacred sites. Interpretative consistency was

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maintained by ensuring that each analytical claim remained connected to the research focus on sacred space, theological contestation, pluralism, state regulation, and market commodification. This methodological structure enables the study not only to describe historical sacred sites, but also to develop a critical theological interpretation of how sacredness is negotiated within Indonesia's plural religious landscape.

Results and Findings

Reinterpretation of the Theology of Sacred Space in the Context of Pluralism

Sacred spaces in Indonesia have never existed in isolation within a singular faith but have always been present within a plural landscape that brings together various traditions, histories, and contemporary interests. The reinterpretation of the theology of sacred space is necessary because mosques, temples, and places of worship not only function as places of prayer but also as cultural symbols, tourist destinations, and arenas for interfaith dialogue. Sacredness, once understood as exclusive, has now evolved into a negotiated reality within the framework of diversity, allowing sacred spaces to be seen as loci for the convergence of transcendence and pluralism.

Table 1. Sacred Spaces and Contemporary Functions in the Context of Pluralism

No	Sacred Space	Historical Function (Faith)	Contemporary Function (Pluralism)
1	Masjid Agung Demak	Early symbol of Javanese Islam, Wali's da'wah	Place of worship and cultural heritage museum
2	Masjid Menara Kudus	Mosque of Hindu-Buddhist-Islamic acculturation	Place of worship and symbol of cultural dialogue
3	Candi Borobudur	Buddhist site, centre for Vesak rituals	Buddhist pilgrimage site and global tourism destination, conservation
4	Candi Prambanan	Hindu devotion centre, Ramayana reliefs	Hindu rituals and international arts stage (Ballet)
5	Pura Besakih	Main temple for Hindu followers in the archipelago	Place of worship and state-managed religious tourism area

Sacred spaces in Indonesia show a remarkable ability to accommodate pluralism through reinterpretation processes that have lasted for centuries. The Great Mosque of Demak and Menara Kudus are early examples of how Islam in Java did not come with a stance of negating tradition, but instead, it planted tawhid in the idioms of the existing culture (Idham, 2021). The tiered roofs and the temple-like minaret symbolize an acculturation that is not merely aesthetic but also theological: Islam is understood as a faith rooted in revelation but open to absorbing local symbols to strengthen its legitimacy in a plural society.

Borobudur presents a different dimension of sacred reinterpretation. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, it functions as a dual-purpose space: a place of Buddhist ritual and a global tourism destination. The peak of Vesak celebrations affirms the aura of transcendence, but the state's involvement in visitor quotas and conservation management demonstrates that sacredness is now negotiated within a broader plural framework (Damanik & Yusuf, 2022). Borobudur is no longer just a sacred space for Buddhists but belongs to the nation and the world.

Prambanan adds a different nuance by presenting sacredness in the form of performance. The sacred Ramayana reliefs in the text are revived through the Ramayana Ballet, which is attended by audiences from various religions and nations (Prasidya et al., 2025). This

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phenomenon demonstrates that sacredness is not only revived through formal rituals but also through cultural spaces capable of bridging plural audiences. Sacredness does not disappear but changes its medium to reach a wider audience. This point resonates with recent work on Indonesian cultural consumption in the digital age, which shows that cultural products are shaped by access, market logic, identity, and contestation rather than by neutral spectatorship alone (Susilo et al., 2026). Broader Indonesian research on institutional responses to bullying also suggests that plural public spaces require educational and organisational safeguards so that difference is not converted into exclusion or symbolic harm (Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

The Ramayana Ballet at Prambanan also raises a more complex question concerning whether cultural performance preserves, transforms, or commodifies sacred meaning. On one hand, the performance allows Hindu narrative, sacred memory, and temple symbolism to reach plural and international audiences beyond formal ritual settings. On the other hand, the staging of sacred narratives within a tourism-oriented performance may shift sacredness from devotional participation into aesthetic consumption. This creates a tension over authenticity, because religious communities, cultural authorities, tourism actors, and audiences may not interpret the performance in the same way. Prambanan therefore shows that performed sacredness can expand public recognition of religious heritage while also producing ambiguity over whether sacred meaning is being transmitted, transformed, or commercialised.

Pura Besakih, as the main temple for Hindus, illustrates how sacred space adapts to modern governance logic. The government has reorganized the area, providing facilities and regulating access for the safety and comfort of all parties. This action shows that sacredness is not only determined by religious rituals but also by policies that must accommodate the pluralism of visitors: Hindus, domestic tourists, and international tourists (Sasongko et al., 2025). In this context, sanctity is reinterpreted as a combination of devotion and public order.

The reinterpretation of sacred space also demonstrates the dynamics between the sacred and the profane, as Eliade (Giovine, 2021) discussed. Spaces that were once understood purely as transcendent are now influenced by profane factors such as economics, tourism, and regulation. However, in Indonesia, this boundary is not always destructive: it is in the meeting of the sacred and the profane that pluralism finds its way. Borobudur and Prambanan remain sacred, even though they are visited by tourists; Demak and Kudus remain Islamic, even though they are studied as heritage.

Pluralism makes sacredness in Indonesia fluid, dynamic, and adaptive (Subchi et al., 2022). Each sacred space must open itself to the presence of "the other" without losing its core of faith. Demak and Kudus show an acceptance of Hindu-Buddhist influences, Borobudur and Prambanan accept global audiences, and Besakih manages visitor pluralism through state regulation. All of this affirms that sacredness is not just the domain of one community but belongs to all, shaping national identity.

In the context of public theology, this reinterpretation shows that sacred spaces function in dual roles: as centres of worship and as symbols of national identity. Mosques, temples, and shrines are not only heritage of faith but also assets of pluralism that strengthen social cohesion (Pratama & Hs, 2025). Thus, the reinterpretation of sacred space in Indonesia can be understood as an effort to affirm sacredness while making pluralism the foundation of collective life.

The reinterpretation of sacred space in Indonesia can be further understood with Mircea Eliade's perspective on the sacred and the profane (Nuckolls, 2020; Giovine, 2021). Eliade affirms that sacred space is both a separating and connecting point between the transcendent world and the human world. Demak, Kudus, Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih display unique *hierophany*: sacredness manifests in architecture, rituals, and spatial arrangements but also coexists with profanities like tourism, regulation, and commodification. It is precisely in this tension that pluralism finds its articulation because sacred spaces in Indonesia do not isolate themselves from the profane but instead open up a dialogue with it.

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Habermas' framework on public space is also relevant for understanding this phenomenon. Sacred spaces in Indonesia no longer serve only the internal community but also present themselves as arenas for interfaith communication (Hoskyns, 2020; Chisale, 2023; Janson, 2023). Borobudur becomes a meeting point for Buddhists, the state, and global tourists; Prambanan presents sacred performances for a global audience; Istiqlal and the Cathedral are united through symbolic tunnels. All of this shows that sacred spaces have transformed into religious public spaces, where pluralism is not seen as a threat but as a medium to build a collective discourse. The perspective of Indonesian contextual theology further strengthens that sacredness must always be negotiated with tradition and pluralism so that faith remains alive in the reality of a diverse nation.

Contestation of Authority: Between Faith, State, and Market

Sacred spaces in Indonesia not only represent faith but also become arenas for the contestation of authority. Religious communities regard sacred spaces as loci of devotion, the state manages them within the framework of public policy and preservation, while the market views them as economic opportunities within the tourism and cultural industries Bezklubaya, 2021; Damanik & Yusuf, 2022; Sasongko et al., 2025). These three actors often find themselves in opposition when interpreting the meaning of sacredness, so sacred spaces are never entirely free from competing interests. This contestation illustrates that sacred spaces in Indonesia are arenas of negotiation, not just places of worship.

Table 2. Actors and Forms of Contestation in Sacred Spaces

No	Actor	Claim to Authority	Form of Contestation
1	Religious Communities	Sacredness based on faith and ritual	Emphasis on exclusivity and authenticity of faith (e.g., Vesak pilgrimage in Borobudur)
2	State	Regulation, preservation, governance	Visitor quotas for Borobudur, management of Besakih, designation of Demak as a cultural heritage site
3	Market/Tourism	Commodification of culture and tourism	Ramayana Ballet at Prambanan, religious tourism packages, museumification of places of worship

The religious community's power is the earliest element asserting authority over sacred spaces. Borobudur for Buddhists, for example, is not merely an architectural site but a central point for celebrating Vesak. Each ritual ceremony strengthens the claim that the space belongs to the spiritual community, a place of transcendence beyond its profane function (Fischer, 2022; Ghosh & BK, 2024). This claim underscores that sacred spaces are primarily defined by faith, not by external logic.

However, the state brings a different claim. Within the framework of cultural heritage preservation, the state regulates sacred spaces such as Borobudur and Besakih to ensure their physical and functional continuity. Visitor quotas for Borobudur, the management of Besakih, and the designation of Demak as a cultural heritage site show that the state places sacred spaces within an administrative logic. Sacredness in this case is not solely a matter of faith but also a subject of policy that must comply with regulations (Bezklubaya, 2021).

The involvement of the market adds another layer to the contestation. Prambanan, through the Ramayana Ballet, provides the clearest example of how sacred rituals can be transformed into cultural performances for a global audience. On one hand, this demonstrates the vitality of heritage; on the other hand, it raises accusations of profanation, as sacredness is presented through the logic of entertainment. Similarly, the museumification of places of worship, such

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as in Demak, illustrates how sacred spaces are positioned as both places of devotion and cultural attractions.

The meeting between the authority of faith, the state, and the market often does not proceed smoothly. Religious communities seek full freedom in managing rituals; the state tries to balance preservation and public access; the market demands openness for economic growth. A clear example can be seen at Borobudur, where Buddhist communities regard the site as a sacred centre for Vesak ritual, while the state regulates access through conservation policy and visitor management, and the tourism sector promotes it as a global heritage destination.

This creates tension because ritual access, monument preservation, and tourist circulation do not always operate with the same priorities, even though all three actors claim to protect the value of the site in different ways (Damanik & Yusuf, 2022; Belachew & Midakso, 2023). These competing interests result in real tensions, such as debates over limiting access to Borobudur or criticism of the commercialization of rituals at Prambanan. All of this affirms that sacredness is not a static concept but a constantly updated arena of conflict (Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

Pluralism strengthens this contestation. Since Indonesia is home to many religions, every sacred space must face interfaith audiences (Soejoeti et al., 2024). Borobudur is visited not only by Buddhists but also by Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and foreign tourists. Prambanan and Besakih also face similar audiences. This pluralism complicates the claims of authority: no single actor can fully dominate, as sacred spaces have become shared spaces in the context of the nation.

This contestation involves tensions between ritual access and visitor management, religious authority and state regulation, heritage preservation and tourism development, as well as sacred meaning and market commodification, yet it also opens the possibility for dialogue. The state can act as a mediator between religious communities and the market, ensuring that rituals are respected while sacred spaces also function as tourist destinations.

The market can expand access to sacredness for a global audience, though it must be safeguarded so as not to reduce the meaning of faith. Religious communities remain the primary spiritual owners but can no longer close themselves off from pluralism. Thus, contestation can become a pathway toward more inclusive negotiations.

From Mircea Eliade's perspective, sacred space should serve as an absolute boundary between the sacred and the profane (Di Giovine & Choe, 2019). However, the contemporary reality of Indonesia shows that this boundary is continually crossed. The state and the market enter spaces once solely dominated by faith, thereby profaning sacredness to some extent. This contestation proves that sacred spaces are no longer exclusive but are open to negotiations between the transcendent and the profane within the framework of pluralism.

Meanwhile, Habermas' theory of public space helps interpret this phenomenon. Sacred spaces in Indonesia no longer only serve the internal community but now present themselves as arenas for interfaith communication. Borobudur becomes a meeting point for Buddhists, the state, and global tourists; Prambanan presents sacred performances for a global audience; Istiqlal and the Cathedral are united by symbolic tunnels. All of this shows that sacred spaces have transformed into religious public spaces, where pluralism is not seen as a threat but as a medium for building collective discourse.

The perspective of Indonesian contextual theology further affirms that sacredness must always be negotiated with tradition and pluralism so that faith remains alive in the reality of a diverse nation.

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Negotiating Sacredness in Indonesia as a Prototype for Global Dialogue

Sacred spaces in Indonesia are not only relevant to local communities or the nation itself, but they also have global significance. The complexity of religious and cultural pluralism in Indonesia makes mosques, temples, and shrines living laboratories where sacredness is negotiated, preserved, and transformed. This experience positions Indonesia as a prototype that can be offered to the world: how religious pluralism is not only maintained as a social fact but also used as a foundation for the productive management of sacred spaces.

Table 3. Indonesian Sacred Spaces as a Prototype for Global Dialogue

No	Sacred Space	Traditional Sacred Function	Contemporary Function	Global Pluralism Value
1	Great Mosque of Demak	Symbol of early Islam in Java	Museum + historical educational space	Acculturation of faith with local traditions
2	Menara Kudus Mosque	Acculturation of Hindu–Buddhist–Islam	Icon of cross-generational dialogue	Layered sacredness across faiths
3	Borobudur	Buddhist site, centre for Vesak rituals	Heritage + global tourism destination	Negotiating faith, state, and tourism
4	Prambanan	Hindu devotion site, Ramayana reliefs	Cultural performance on the global stage	Sacredness performed for global audiences
5	Besakih Temple	Main Hindu temple of the Indonesian archipelago	Sacred area + modern governance model	Harmony between ritual and policy

Indonesia's experience shows that pluralism does not have to be a source of fragmentation, but can serve as a foundation for innovation in managing sacred spaces. Demak and Kudus, for example, demonstrate how Islamic sacredness can grow by accepting Hindu-Buddhist symbols without compromising monotheism. This model teaches the global lesson that orthodoxy is not always synonymous with exclusivity; it can absorb the cultural pluralistic heritage to strengthen the legitimacy of faith (Seferović, 2021).

Borobudur, as a UNESCO World Heritage site, illustrates how sacredness can be maintained while facing the pressures of mass tourism. Through visitor quotas and conservation measures, the Buddhist sacred space remains alive as both a devotional point and a global destination. This model shows that pluralistic audiences, ranging from pilgrims to tourists, can be managed without entirely reducing the transcendental meaning. Indonesia thus offers a concrete example that negotiation between faith, the state, and the market can result in a functional coexistence (Belachew & Midakso, 2023).

Prambanan adds a different performative dimension rarely found in other parts of the world. The sacred Ramayana ritual is not confined to texts or liturgies but is re-enacted as a cultural performance watched by a global audience. This phenomenon shows that sacredness can be presented in cultural formats without losing its transcendental power. For the world, this serves as an example of how religion can open itself to a pluralistic audience without losing its devotional substance.

Besakih Temple emphasises how state policy can align with ritual to create an inclusive sacred space. The area’s regulation, which prioritises safety and comfort, shows that holiness does not have to conflict with modernity. This model provides global inspiration that sacredness can be preserved through collaboration between religion and the state, as long as policies respect the core of devotion (Chisale, 2023; Janson, 2023). Indonesia offers a prototype where regulation does not kill faith but actually strengthens it.

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Sacred spaces in Indonesia also illustrate how faith and pluralism can interact without leading to destructive conflict. Demak and Kudus accept the Hindu-Buddhist legacy, Borobudur accommodates both pilgrims and tourists, Prambanan opens up to a global audience, and Besakih involves the government in its management. All of this forms a constructive negotiation model where pluralism becomes a medium for expanding sacred meaning, not a threat to its existence. Muslim-Christian relations also form an important part of Indonesia's sacred pluralism, although Christian sacred sites are not examined as separate cases in this article. The symbolic proximity of Istiqlal Mosque and Jakarta Cathedral, including their public association with interreligious dialogue, shows that Muslim-Christian sacred relations also shape the national imagination of coexistence and shared public space. This study therefore does not exclude Christianity from Indonesia's plural landscape, but limits its comparative analysis to five selected mosque, temple, and pura sites in order to examine how Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu sacred spaces negotiate heritage, tourism, state regulation, and plural public meaning (Hati et al., 2023; Indainanto et al., 2023; Janson, 2023).

The global significance of this negotiation lies in its ability to create interfaith and intercultural dialogue through sacred spaces. Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih not only serve as points of internal devotion but also as international symbols that invite audiences across faiths. Demak and Kudus, though more local, still hold a global message that religion can grow without rejecting previous traditions. Indonesia thus demonstrates pluralism that is not just coexistence, but active dialogue.

This prototype is increasingly relevant in the context of globalisation, which often pressures religion into private spaces. Indonesia shows the opposite: sacred spaces remain public, alive, and significant for national identity. As many countries face extreme secularisation or religious conflict, Indonesia offers an example of how pluralism can be managed by integrating faith, culture, state, and market into a constructive negotiation space (Dalimunthe et al., 2025; Subchi et al., 2022).

Thus, Indonesia's experience in managing sacred spaces should be read as a global contribution to the discourse on public theology. Mosques, temples, and shrines do not only function for their respective communities but also offer a model for the world on how sacredness can be preserved and expanded in the era of pluralism. Indonesia's prototype confirms that faith and pluralism are not opposing forces but a shared foundation for building inclusive global dialogue.

Discussion

Sacred spaces in Indonesia demonstrate a fluid and adaptive nature when facing pluralism. The discussion of Indonesian sacred spaces shows that sacredness should not be understood as a fixed quality attached permanently to a mosque, temple, or heritage monument. Theoretically, the dynamic character of sacred space means that sacredness is continuously produced through the interaction between ritual practice, historical memory, state regulation, heritage preservation, tourism, and public interpretation. Sacred space is therefore not only a theological location where transcendence is encountered, but also a public arena where different actors negotiate who has the authority to define, protect, display, and reinterpret sacred meaning.

This reading extends Mircea Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane. Eliade's concepts remain useful for explaining how sacred places become meaningful as sites where transcendence is manifested, yet the Indonesian cases show that the sacred and the profane do not always exist as separate spheres. Ritual devotion, cultural performance, ticketing systems, conservation policy, and tourism management may occupy the same sacred site at the same time. The theoretical implication is that sacredness in Indonesia survives not by escaping public life, but by being continually renegotiated within it.

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Habermas' public sphere helps explain why sacred spaces have become arenas of communication rather than merely enclosed religious territories. Religious communities, state institutions, heritage authorities, tourism actors, and plural audiences all bring different claims into the same space. This does not mean that sacredness becomes purely secular or democratic in a simple sense, but that sacred authority is increasingly mediated through public negotiation, regulation, and representation. Sacred space thus becomes a form of public theology because theological meaning is articulated not only inside ritual communities, but also through broader public encounters.

The Indonesian Sacred Pluralism Model emerges from this theoretical intersection. It proposes that pluralism does not merely surround sacred spaces as external context, but actively participates in shaping how sacredness is preserved, contested, commodified, and expanded. The model therefore moves beyond a simple harmony narrative by recognising that pluralism may generate accommodation and dialogue, but also disputes over authenticity, ownership, access, representation, and sacred authority. Its contribution lies in showing that Indonesian sacred spaces are neither purely religious interiors nor merely cultural heritage objects, but negotiated theological-public fields.

Pluralism, in this context, does not weaken faith; rather, it strengthens social cohesion. Demak and Kudus symbolise acculturation, confirming Islam's ability to embrace local traditions without compromising its monotheism. Borobudur shows the negotiation between pilgrimage and tourism, Prambanan demonstrates the performative presentation of sacredness, and Besakih represents the harmony between ritual and state policy. This harmony, however, should be understood as a negotiated relationship, because state management does not replace Balinese Hindu authority but must interact with ritual leadership, temple custodianship, customary norms, and the religious meanings attached to Besakih as a living sacred complex. The case of Besakih therefore shows that governance can support sacred space only when spatial regulation, visitor management, and tourism development remain sensitive to the authority of Balinese Hindu ritual practice (Sasongko et al., 2025; Chisale, 2023; Janson, 2023). All of this shows that pluralism is the foundation for the continuity of sacred spaces, rather than a threat to their authenticity.

Indonesia's contextual theology reinforces that faith always interacts with tradition and social realities (Stump, 2025). Javanese Islam absorbs Hindu-Buddhist symbols, Balinese Hinduism accommodates state governance, Borobudur Buddhism faces conservation regulations, and all these maintain the core of devotion. Therefore, the theology of sacred space in Indonesia does not reject pluralism, but affirms it as part of living faith. This makes an important contribution to global discourse on how religion functions in multicultural societies.

The contestation of authority also reveals the dynamic nature of sacredness. The state, religious communities, and the market do not always agree, but it is in this tension that new configurations emerge. Borobudur's visitor quotas, Besakih's governance model, or the commercialisation of Prambanan all generate tensions but also open space for negotiation. These tensions show that sacredness cannot be understood as a fixed concept, but as a social process that is always reproduced.

Thus, sacred space in Indonesia is not merely a reflection of faith; it is also a learning arena for global pluralism. Indonesia shows how sacredness can endure without sacrificing openness, how faith can engage with other traditions, and how sacred spaces can be places of meeting rather than conflict. This phenomenon underscores Indonesia's contribution to the global conversation on public theology.

Börcsök's (2023) research on the digitalisation of forgotten religious sites highlights the importance of innovation in preserving sacred memory, while this study focuses on negotiating sacredness in direct plural contexts. Burckhart (2025) discusses legal strategies to protect religious sites of minorities, whereas this research highlights the theological dimensions of the

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contestation of sacred space in Indonesia. The difference shows that this study expands discourse from mere conservation and law to interpreting sacred pluralism.

Cisse (2022), who studied the revitalisation of religious sites in Timbuktu, views sacred space as an arena of reconciliation post-crisis, while Lehuedé (2022) highlights historical conflicts between religious and ethnic authorities in Codpa. Both are relevant as they show sacredness as a locus of power negotiation. However, this research differs by focusing on contemporary Indonesia, offering a model of theological pluralism. Thus, this study adds a new dimension to sacred space studies by placing pluralism at the centre of analysis.

The novelty of this research lies in formulating the Indonesian Sacred Pluralism Model, which can serve as a global prototype. This model is developed by synthesising Eliade's understanding of sacred space as a site of transcendental manifestation, Habermas' view of public space as an arena of communicative negotiation, and Indonesian contextual theology's emphasis on faith as lived within cultural plurality. Through this synthesis, sacred pluralism is not treated merely as peaceful coexistence, but as a theological-public process in which sacredness is preserved, contested, regulated, and reinterpreted through the interaction of religious communities, the state, heritage institutions, tourism actors, and plural audiences. The Indonesian Sacred Pluralism Model therefore extends previous theories by showing that sacred space in Indonesia is neither purely transcendent nor merely public, but a negotiated field where devotion, heritage, governance, and plural social meaning meet. This model affirms that sacred spaces are managed through three axes: devotion of faith (religious communities maintain the authenticity of transcendence), state regulation (the government manages conservation and access), and accommodation of pluralism (interfaith audiences, tourists, and the global community bring new meaning). The interaction between these three elements creates sacred spaces that are not exclusive but inclusive, dynamic, and dialogical. This model significantly contributes to the discourse on public theology by showing that pluralism is not merely a social condition, but a conceptual basis for the maintenance and development of sacred spaces in the era of globalisation.

Conclusion

Returning to the research question, this article shows that historical mosques and temples in contemporary Indonesia negotiate sacred meaning through the interaction of five main forces: religious devotion, cultural heritage, state regulation, tourism, and plural public representation. Demak and Kudus answer this question through Islamic acculturation with local Hindu-Buddhist cultural forms, Borobudur through the negotiation between Buddhist pilgrimage, conservation, and global tourism, Prambanan through the transformation of sacred narrative into cultural performance, and Besakih through the interaction between Balinese Hindu ritual authority and state-led spatial governance. These findings indicate that sacredness in Indonesia is not simply preserved as an inherited religious quality, but continuously reinterpreted through negotiation among faith communities, government institutions, heritage actors, market forces, and plural audiences.

Sacred sites in Indonesia preserve their devotional function while simultaneously operating as cultural heritage, tourist destinations, and symbols of interreligious encounter. The findings show that sacredness in Indonesia is not a static or exclusive category, but a negotiated reality shaped by the interaction between spiritual devotion, cultural memory, state regulation, and market-oriented tourism. The Great Mosque of Demak and Menara Kudus Mosque demonstrate how Islamic sacredness can coexist with Hindu-Buddhist cultural traces, while Borobudur, Prambanan, and Besakih reveal how pilgrimage, performance, heritage governance, and tourism continually reshape the public meaning of sacred space. These cases affirm that pluralism does not weaken sacredness, but becomes a condition through which sacred spaces remain socially alive, theologically meaningful, and publicly relevant.

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This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Its analysis is limited to five major sacred sites, so it cannot fully represent the wider diversity of sacred spaces in Indonesia, including colonial churches, lesser-known Buddhist temples, local belief sites, indigenous ritual spaces, and contemporary interfaith landmarks. The study also relies on a descriptive qualitative design based on documentary and literature-based inquiry, without direct ethnographic observation or interviews with pilgrims, religious leaders, site managers, local communities, and tourists. Future studies should therefore expand the range of sacred sites, employ ethnographic or digital humanities methods, and examine first-hand experiences of how sacredness is interpreted by different actors. Comparative research with sacred spaces in other plural societies is also recommended to test and refine the Indonesian Sacred Pluralism Model as a contribution to global public theology.

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