

# RELIGION AND POLITICS: NEW RELIGIOUS SITES AND SPATIAL TRANSGRESSION IN ISRAEL\*

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**ABSTRACT.** In order to view the establishment of new religious centers and how they are received by local populations, I analyze such basic geographical concepts as scale, space, location, and image. I see how these can alter the perception and further refine the concept of spatial transgression in three case studies in Israel: the building of the Mormon Center in Jerusalem, the establishment of the Bahá'í Gardens in Haifa, and the struggle to build a mosque in Nazareth. In this article I seek to identify the factors influencing the presence or absence of conflict to help explain the different “stories” revealed. The article also constitutes an addition to the literature on Israeli (and Palestinian) religio-geographical controversies by focusing on nonmainstream or nondominant cases and by comparing the relative roles of different factors that shape the success or failure of spatial transgressions in religious geography. *Keywords:* Israel, politics, religions, spatial transgression.

In the introduction to a special issue of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* James Proctor opines that, although “religion appears to play a prominent role in the contemporary political and cultural landscape[,] . . . relatively few geographers are contributing [to] a better appreciation of this phenomenon” (2006, 165; see also Park 1994; Kong 2001; Timothy and Olsen 2006). Proctor goes on to suggest that it is time for geographers to explore the challenges and opportunities that the realm of religion opens to them in terms of spatial transgression.

No place offers a more highly charged setting in which to consider spatial transgression and the geography of religion than Israel. Not only is the religious landscape imbued with tension, but the politics of religion in Israel is closely associated with real estate or land. The broader question of the West Bank and settlements is well known, but smaller—yet equally important—land conflicts involving religious minorities are prominent as well. For example, the construction of a complex in Jerusalem by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, or “Mormon”) was a major controversy throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Olsen and Guelke 2004). Likewise, the erection of a mosque near the Basilica of the Annunciation in the Arab city of Nazareth was a major political issue from the end of the 1990s into the 2000s. In both cases the development of new religious structures proved an ideological and political threat to local residents and served to complicate even further the contested geography of religion in Israel. Still, conflicts over the religious politics of space are not limited to Israel or Ireland. Religion and the expansion of religious sites across the built environment have long caused conflict around the world, ranging from major metropolitan areas like London to rural sites such as

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