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**RELIGION IN GLOBAL/LOCAL PERSPECTIVE: DIFFUSION, MIGRATION,
TRANSFORMATION**

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SESSION: RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND SYMBOLS IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

Recreating Sacred Spaces: Gardens, Public Parks and Spiritual Connections in Contemporary Cities

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In a context of increasing secularization and pluralization, Portugal is one of the European countries with a solid Christian majority (80% of the population declares itself to be Catholic). Like other European historical churches, the Catholic one has, throughout history, celebrated religious rituals within temples and buildings that sacralise the territory and cities. However, traditional religions are being challenged by non-Christian spiritual rituals and meditation practices outside the walls of official religious buildings. This mainly happens due to a western fascination with oriental religions and their beliefs and rituals, which have practices that value the outdoors and contact with nature, such as yoga, Tai-chi and other forms of meditation. The popularization of Eastern religions, which is consistent with the New Age, and contemporary spiritualities based on the inner self as Paul Heelas states, acquires special adherence with the urban middle class. Actually, the current centrality of environmental issues as well as the resurgence of Neopaganism in the context of the

New Age, have contributed to the sacredness of nature. The Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES) provided by Gardens and Public Parks (GPP), namely those from public access, can contribute to experiences that benefits the relationship between humans and nature, and on the other hand provides spaces for meditation and spiritual practices within nature. In a survey conducted in the city of Porto, Portugal, only 1% of GPP users reported using these spaces for meditation purposes and a study carried out recently in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon revealed that, in what concerns praying practices, oriental type contemplation and meditation do not reach 7% of the population. Regarding the opportunity to perform meditation and spiritual activities in GPP, 77.1% of the users recognize its importance but this was the CES, among many others, which have the lowest median, revealing the indifference of GPP users' to this dimension. Current evidence pointed out some reasons that can explain it, for example, the need to designated specific and quiet areas in GPP for spiritual and religious purposes. However, we believe that further research must be conducted to provide more accurate explanations regarding this issue.