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Religious Heritage and the Governance of Living Sacred Space: A Multi-Religious Perspective

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Abstract

Religious heritage occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of sacred practice and cultural governance. While existing scholarship often interprets conflicts surrounding religious heritage through value pluralism or sacred–secular opposition, less attention has been paid to how heritagization reshapes religion within regulatory regimes. Drawing on 39 in-depth interviews conducted across Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, and Confucian contexts in South Korea, this article examines how religious practitioners and heritage experts conceptualize living religious heritage and negotiate governance structures. The findings demonstrate that stakeholders frequently challenge the binary opposition. Instead, they articulate a relational continuum in which ritual continuity sustains heritage significance and historical depth legitimizes religious practice. Tensions arise primarily from regulatory rigidity, fragmented institutional authority, and procedural exclusion rather than doctrinal incompatibility. Heritage designation emerges as an institutional process that contributes to reconfiguring religious authority, spatial control, and public legitimacy within secular administrative frameworks. By conceptualizing religious heritage governance as a site of negotiated rearticulation rather than value conflict, this study contributes to debates on sacred–secular entanglement, religion and governance, and the institutional reshaping of religion in contemporary societies.

Keywords: religious heritage; living heritage; heritage governance; religion and secularism; negotiated governance

1. Introduction

Religious heritage occupies a distinctive position within heritage studies because it simultaneously embodies cultural–historical value and functions as a living locus of religious practice (Stovel et al. 2005; Meyer and de Witte 2013). Recent scholarship has highlighted how processes of heritage-making in secular societies contribute to the “culturalization” of religion, reframing religious sites as symbols of collective identity beyond doctrinal belief (Burchardt and Ural 2024). This perspective situates religious heritage within broader debates on secularism and affective nationalism. Unlike secular heritage sites, religious heritage remains embedded in ongoing rituals, communal life, and systems of belief, making it particularly resistant to monument-centered preservation frameworks.

This study starts from the problem that living religious practice and heritage governance frameworks often operate according to different institutional logics. While religious communities emphasize continuity of ritual use, heritage systems frequently prioritize



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material conservation, regulatory consistency, and public accessibility. This divergence produces practical tensions in the management of sacred sites, particularly where bureaucratic preservation frameworks intersect with ongoing religious functions.

Existing scholarship has conceptualized religious heritage through living heritage and value-based approaches emphasizing practice and community use (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013; Fredheim and Khalaf 2016). However, two critical gaps remain. First, much of the literature operates at a conceptual or normative level, while comparatively little attention has been paid to how stakeholders themselves understand and negotiate religious heritage in practice. Second, conflicts surrounding religious heritage are frequently framed as value-based tensions between religiosity and heritage value, obscuring the institutional and governance conditions under which such tensions actually arise (Astor et al. 2017). This study addresses this limitation by examining how governance arrangements structure the relationship between religious practice and heritage value in everyday institutional settings. These gaps are particularly salient in multi-religious contexts, where diverse religious traditions coexist and interact with shared heritage governance frameworks. As discussed in studies of heritage and religion in East Asia (Wang et al. 2020), religious plurality in the region has often been mediated through centralized heritage governance systems.

The structural distribution of nationally designated religious heritage in South Korea further illustrates the asymmetry embedded within the governance system. According to internal statistical data from the (Korea Heritage Service 2026), approximately 87% of state-designated religious heritage properties are affiliated with Buddhism, while Confucian, Catholic, Protestant, and other traditions collectively account for a comparatively small proportion. This concentration reflects both historical accumulation and institutional prioritization within national heritage policy frameworks. Such structural asymmetry provides important contextual grounding for examining how governance tensions unfold across different religious traditions.

South Korea provides a particularly relevant empirical context due to its coexistence of multiple religious traditions within a centralized heritage administration system. The institutional concentration of designated heritage within Buddhism reflects both historical trajectories of state–religion relations and the cumulative effects of earlier preservation priorities. Examining this context makes it possible to analyze how governance structures shape differentiated experiences of religious heritage across traditions within a formally unified regulatory framework.

Against this backdrop, this study adopts a stakeholder-centered perspective to examine how religious practitioners and heritage experts conceptualize living religious heritage and where governance-related tensions and coordination mechanisms emerge. By shifting attention from abstract value debates to everyday governance practices, the study contributes to ongoing debates on living heritage and heritage governance (Aas et al. 2005; Waterton and Smith 2010).

RQ1. How do stakeholders conceptualize religious heritage as living heritage?

RQ2. How do stakeholders perceive and negotiate the balance between religiosity and heritage value?

RQ3. Where do governance-related tensions and coordination mechanisms emerge in stakeholder discourse?

Rather than treating heritage governance as a technical administrative matter, this study argues that heritage designation constitutes a transformative moment in the public life of religion. When sacred sites enter heritage regimes, religious authority, ritual continuity, and spatial control are rearticulated within secular regulatory frameworks. Religious heritage governance thus operates not only as cultural policy but as a modality through which religion itself is institutionally redefined.

By focusing on stakeholder perceptions, this article shifts attention from abstract value debates to the everyday interpretive and institutional processes through which religious heritage is governed. In doing so, it makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides rare comparative evidence from a multi-religious context. Theoretically, it advances a continuum model of religiosity and heritage value. Analytically, it demonstrates the potential of qualitative, interview-based stakeholder research for understanding religious heritage governance.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Building on these research questions, this section constructs an analytical framework that conceptualizes religious heritage as a form of living heritage governed through institutional arrangements rather than through inherent value opposition. Drawing on critical heritage studies and governance theory, the review identifies three key analytical dimensions: (1) the conceptualization of religious heritage as a distinct domain within heritage studies, (2) the role of practice in constituting living heritage value, and (3) governance structures as mediating mechanisms shaping the relationship between religious authority and cultural policy. This framework allows the study to move beyond descriptive typologies of heritage value toward an institutional analysis of how religious meaning is negotiated within secular regulatory regimes.

2.1. Religious Heritage as a Distinct Field of Heritage Studies

Religious heritage has increasingly emerged as a distinct field within heritage studies, reflecting recognition of its dual character as both cultural heritage and sacred resource (Stovel et al. 2005). Recent theoretical reflections further argue that heritage itself operates as a category through which religious meaning is rearticulated in contemporary societies, reshaping how sacred objects and spaces are publicly interpreted (Burchardt 2025). Scholars emphasize that religious heritage cannot be adequately understood through monument-centered or materialist paradigms alone, as it remains embedded in belief systems, ritual practices, and community life (Niedźwiedź 2024). In this study, religious heritage is defined as heritage in which religious meaning, ritual practice, and institutional governance intersect, producing a hybrid category simultaneously embedded in belief systems and public cultural policy.

Recent studies highlight that religious heritage encompasses both tangible structures and intangible practices, challenging earlier approaches that privileged architectural fabric while marginalizing living religious functions (Meyer and de Witte 2013). Moreover, debates on cultural heritage and human rights underscore that religious communities' access to sacred spaces and continuity of practice are integral to the protection of cultural rights (Silverman and Ruggles 2007). The notion of a "religious heritage complex" further underscores the coexistence of religious and heritage value systems, revealing convergences and collaborations rather than merely tensions between them (Isnart and Cerezales 2020). This critique resonates with Smith's (2006) concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), which demonstrates how expert-driven definitions of heritage have historically privileged material authenticity while marginalizing alternative forms of meaning rooted in practice and community use.

Taken together, these studies indicate a shift from object-centered preservation toward interpretive frameworks emphasizing the social production of heritage value. However, existing literature has paid comparatively limited attention to how this shift affects religious actors operating within institutional governance settings, leaving a gap concerning the interaction between religious authority and heritage regulation.

2.2. *Living Heritage and the Centrality of Practice*

The concept of living heritage has become central to contemporary heritage scholarship, particularly in relation to religious sites (Stovel et al. 2005). Living heritage refers to heritage that derives significance from continued use, transmission, and practice by communities rather than solely from historical age or material integrity (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013). Studies of East Asian religious heritage similarly emphasize that the significance of religious heritage is closely linked to shared civilizational continuity and collective cultural transmission beyond purely material attributes (Kim 2018). Following Smith (2006) and Harrison (2013), living heritage is understood not as a static attribute of heritage objects but as a relational condition sustained through ongoing social practice, intergenerational transmission, and community recognition.

In the context of religious heritage, continuity of ritual practice constitutes a core dimension of heritage value. Preservation, therefore, aims not only to stabilize physical fabric but to sustain conditions that allow religious life to continue (Fredheim and Khalaf 2016). Tensions arise when conservation frameworks rooted in material authenticity constrain adaptive change required for living religious practice, often producing conflicts interpreted as religiosity–heritage opposition.

This tension reveals an unresolved theoretical problem within heritage studies: while living heritage theory recognizes the centrality of practice, conservation frameworks often remain structurally oriented toward material authenticity. The persistence of this discrepancy suggests the need for analytical approaches capable of integrating practice-based value theory with governance-oriented institutional analysis.

2.3. *Beyond Value Conflict: Governance and Negotiation*

More recent studies suggest that religious heritage conflicts are better understood as governance problems rather than intrinsic value conflicts (Astor et al. 2017). Recent legal scholarship further emphasizes the need for clearer juridical definitions of religious cultural heritage, arguing that ambiguity in legal categorization often generates governance inconsistencies and regulatory friction (de Aquino and França Filho 2025). Heritage designation restructures authority, reallocates decision-making power, and introduces regulatory regimes that reshape relationships between states and religious communities (Aas et al. 2005; Waterton and Smith 2010). The concept of heritage religion suggests that heritagization may not secularize religion but rather relocate sacredness within new institutional frameworks (Burchardt and Ural 2024; Niedźwiedź 2024). Governance is conceptualized here not merely as administrative regulation but as a field of power relations through which authority, legitimacy, and interpretive control over heritage are negotiated among state institutions, religious communities, and heritage professionals.

The concept of heritagization refers to the institutional process through which cultural or religious phenomena are reclassified as heritage, thereby becoming subject to specific regimes of conservation, interpretation, and public value production. From this perspective, religious heritage becomes a field of negotiation among multiple actors, where governance arrangements determine whose interpretations of heritage gain legitimacy. Building on this scholarship, the present study adopts a continuum model of religiosity and heritage value, treating them as mutually constitutive dimensions negotiated through governance processes rather than opposing poles (Fredheim and Khalaf 2016). Importantly, this shift from value opposition to governance design also repositions religious heritage within broader debates on secularization. Rather than signaling the decline of religion, heritagization may represent a process of institutional relocation, in which sacred authority is embedded within administrative and legal frameworks. Governance, in this sense, becomes a site where religious meaning is renegotiated rather than diminished. Through

heritagization, religious sites are translated into categories compatible with secular cultural policy, enabling state institutions to intervene in the management of sacred space while simultaneously reshaping the conditions under which religious authority is exercised.

This study positions itself at the intersection of three strands of scholarship: living heritage theory, critical heritage governance, and recent debates on sacred heritage in secular societies. While earlier work has emphasized value typologies and authenticity frameworks, more recent studies have highlighted the entanglement of religion and heritage and the politics of heritagization in secular governance regimes. By empirically examining stakeholder discourse in a multi-religious context, this article contributes to these debates by reframing religious heritage conflict as a question of governance design rather than inherent value opposition.

While recent scholarship increasingly acknowledges the entanglement of religion and heritage governance, empirical research examining how stakeholders interpret and operationalize these relationships remains limited, particularly in multi-religious contexts. Addressing this gap requires shifting analytical attention from abstract value typologies to institutional processes through which religious heritage is negotiated in practice.

Based on this review, the present study conceptualizes religious heritage governance as an institutional field structured by three interacting dimensions: practice-based heritage value, regulatory authority, and interpretive legitimacy. Interpretive legitimacy refers to the socially recognized authority to define the meaning and appropriate use of heritage. Rather than treating religiosity and heritage value as analytically separate variables, the framework adopts a continuum perspective in which religious practice and heritage significance are mutually constitutive. Governance arrangements are therefore treated as key mediating mechanisms shaping how this relationship is stabilized, contested, or transformed within secular policy environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine stakeholder perceptions of religious heritage governance in South Korea. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to exploring meanings, interpretations, and experiential knowledge embedded in stakeholder discourse (Creswell 2013), especially in the context of living heritage, where value and practice are relational and context-dependent.

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, combining deductive coding informed by existing governance and value-based heritage frameworks with inductive coding derived directly from the empirical material. This hybrid strategy enabled systematic engagement with established theoretical debates while remaining attentive to patterns emerging from stakeholder narratives.

Analytical rigor was enhanced through iterative coding, reflexive memo-writing, and cross-religious comparison, strengthening the credibility, coherence, and transparency of the interpretive process (Creswell 2013).

This study involved interviews with adult professionals and did not collect sensitive personal data. According to institutional research ethics guidelines, the research qualified for exemption from formal ethical review. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews.

The research process proceeded through five sequential stages: (1) identification of relevant stakeholder groups within religious heritage governance, (2) purposive selection of participants, (3) semi-structured interviews and transcription, (4) iterative coding combining inductive and deductive strategies, and (5) interpretive synthesis linking empirical findings to theoretical debates on living heritage and governance. This structured

progression ensured coherence between research design, analytical procedure, and theoretical framework.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted with religious practitioners from Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Confucianism, as well as heritage experts and policy-related specialists involved in religious heritage management. Interviews explored participants' understandings of religious heritage, experiences with heritage designation and regulation, perceptions of religiosity–heritage relationships, and views on policy and governance. All interviews were conducted by the author, recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in religious heritage governance, including religious practitioners, administrators, scholars, and heritage professionals. Snowball sampling was additionally employed in limited cases to identify specialized experts with relevant institutional experience. Selection criteria included professional engagement with heritage designation, conservation practice, religious administration, or policy-related advisory roles.

From July to December 2025, a total of 39 individual interviews were conducted with religion-specific cultural heritage experts. Of these, 26 participants (66.7%) were associated with Buddhism, 3 (7.7%) with Catholicism, 2 (5.1%) with Confucianism, and 2 (5.1%) with Protestantism, while 6 participants (15.4%) provided perspectives addressing religious heritage governance in a general or cross-religious capacity. The predominance of Buddhist participants reflects the structural prominence of Buddhist heritage within the national heritage system and its extensive exposure to regulatory processes. The comparatively smaller representation of other traditions reflects differences in institutional scale and governance engagement rather than analytical significance. This distribution enables comparative analysis across traditions while illuminating asymmetries in governance experiences within a unified regulatory framework. Interviews were conducted either in person or online depending on participant availability, and each interview lasted approximately 60–90 min. Interviews were conducted in Korean and subsequently translated into English for analytical purposes. The predominance of Buddhist participants reflects the structural concentration of designated religious heritage within Buddhism in South Korea, where Buddhist temples constitute the majority of nationally protected religious sites. As a result, the sample distribution mirrors the empirical configuration of the national heritage system rather than a priori sampling bias. Nevertheless, this asymmetry limits statistical comparability across traditions, and comparative interpretations should therefore be understood as analytically indicative rather than proportionally representative.

The 39 interviewees represented diverse professional backgrounds within the field of religious heritage. Sixteen participants (41.0%) were ordained religious leaders, including 12 Buddhist monks, 2 Catholic priests, and 2 Protestant pastors. Among the Buddhist participants ($n = 26$), 13 were affiliated with traditional temples legally designated as *jeontong-sachal* (traditional temples), while 11 were religious practitioners serving at temples inscribed on the World Heritage List. This internal distribution reflects the differentiated regulatory environments experienced within the Buddhist community itself, particularly between nationally designated traditional temples and internationally recognized World Heritage sites.

Nine participants (23.1%) were practitioners or policy-related experts directly involved in heritage management, including 7 administrative professionals and 2 individuals affiliated with ICOMOS or UNESCO-related activities. Eight participants (20.5%) were affiliated with academia or research institutions, comprising 5 university professors and

3 researchers from specialized institutes. The remaining six participants (15.4%) were museum professionals, including curators and administrators responsible for the operation and interpretation of religious heritage collections.

This professional distribution ensured representation of theological, administrative, academic, and curatorial perspectives, enabling a multi-layered analysis of how religious heritage is conceptualized and governed across institutional contexts. The inclusion of both traditional and World Heritage Buddhist temples further strengthened the comparative dimension of governance experiences within the largest religious heritage sector. Given the higher representation of Buddhist participants, comparative findings should be interpreted as analytically indicative rather than statistically representative, reflecting structural differences in the distribution of religious heritage within the national designation system.

3.3. Data Analysis Process

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analytical process involved iterative engagement with the transcripts, moving between close reading and conceptual abstraction to identify patterns across stakeholder narratives. The coding process followed three analytical stages: (1) open coding to identify meaningful units related to perceptions of heritage value and governance experience, (2) thematic clustering to group codes into broader analytical categories, and (3) interpretive synthesis to identify cross-religious patterns and governance implications. Initial familiarization was achieved through repeated readings of the transcripts, with particular attention to the distinct institutional and theological characteristics of each religious tradition.

Open coding was conducted manually to identify meaningful units of analysis, focusing on expressions of tension between preservation and practice, interpretations of authenticity, and perceptions of regulatory experience. These codes were then clustered into broader thematic categories that captured recurring patterns across cases. Three overarching themes emerged: (1) the conceptualization of religious heritage as living and performative, (2) the articulation of a religiosity–heritage value continuum, and (3) governance-driven tensions shaped by regulatory structures and institutional arrangements.

A comparative analysis across religious traditions was subsequently undertaken to distinguish shared governance challenges—such as regulatory rigidity and limited consultation—from tradition-specific concerns, including spatial management issues in Buddhist temples and demographic pressures in Confucian heritage sites. This cross-case comparison enabled identification of both structural asymmetries and differentiated governance experiences within a unified national regulatory framework.

3.4. Rigor and Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted multiple strategies consistent with qualitative research standards. First, analytical triangulation was achieved through systematic comparison across religious traditions and professional roles, allowing identification of both convergent patterns and divergent perspectives. This cross-group analysis strengthened the robustness of thematic interpretations.

Second, elements of member reflection were incorporated through repeated advisory meetings with representative religious organizations involved in the broader research process. These consultations provided opportunities to assess whether the emergent themes resonated with participants' lived experiences and institutional realities. While not constituting formal respondent validation in a positivist sense, this iterative feedback process contributed to interpretive transparency and contextual accuracy.

Together, these measures reinforced the coherence, credibility, and contextual validity of the analytical conclusions. As the researcher was directly involved in the broader policy

research project from which the interview data were generated, reflecting the researcher's prior engagement with national heritage policy discussions. Reflexive memo-writing was used to maintain analytical transparency and to distinguish empirical patterns from normative policy considerations.

4. Results

The four analytical themes are structured sequentially rather than descriptively. First, stakeholders conceptualize religious heritage as living heritage grounded in ongoing practice. Second, this practice-based understanding produces a continuum perspective in which religiosity and heritage value are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. Third, tensions emerge when governance frameworks structured around material conservation encounter practice-based value formation. Finally, comparative analysis demonstrates that these governance tensions manifest differently across religious traditions depending on institutional structure, spatial configuration, and historical state–religion relations. References to continuity of ritual practice appeared in 31 of the 39 interviews, while concerns regarding regulatory rigidity were raised by 28 participants across all religious traditions. This distribution indicates that governance-related concerns are widely shared rather than confined to a specific religious group. The analytical structure of themes and sub-themes is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical themes and sub-themes.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Empirical Focus
Living religious heritage	ritual continuity	heritage value produced through practice
religiosity–heritage continuum	relational authenticity	mutual constitution of religious and cultural value
governance tension	regulatory rigidity	administrative constraints on practice
negotiated governance	consultation deficit	demand for participatory decision-making
comparative variation	institutional asymmetry	differentiated governance experience

4.1. Religious Heritage as Living and Performative

Across all stakeholder groups, religious heritage was consistently framed not as static cultural remains but as living heritage sustained through continuous religious practice. Participants emphasized that heritage value does not reside solely in material fabric or historical age, but is continuously produced through ritual performance, worship, and communal use.

Religious heritage was frequently described as a “shrine for worship” and as an “integrated space where daily life and spiritual cultivation coexist.” Stakeholders stressed that religious heritage differs fundamentally from secular heritage in that its significance depends on ongoing use—the fact that it is actively used in everyday religious life. As one participant noted, religious heritage is “a living product of the faith community,” and “unlike secular heritage whose use-value may have expired, religious heritage remains functionally valid through prayer, worship, and rituals.”

This emphasis on present use highlights a performative understanding of heritage, in which continuity of practice constitutes a defining condition of heritage existence. As one Buddhist participant emphasized, “religious heritage is not something that simply remains from the past, but something that continues to exist because religious practice is carried out every day” (Buddhist practitioner, interview). Another interviewee explained that religious

heritage “is a space where religious acts continue and where both the practitioner and the practice remain present” (heritage practitioner, interview).

These accounts indicate that stakeholders conceptualize heritage not primarily as an object of preservation but as an ongoing socio-religious process. Living heritage, therefore, functions as an interpretive framework through which continuity of practice becomes the primary criterion of heritage significance.

4.2. Perceiving a Religiosity–Heritage Continuum

Stakeholders largely rejected a binary opposition between religiosity and heritage value. Instead, they articulated a relational continuum in which religious practice and historical depth mutually reinforce one another. Ritual continuity was repeatedly identified as central, with one practitioner stating that “ritual is the most important element; without it, the heritage loses its meaning.” One expert noted that “religion includes ritual, scripture, believers, and ritual tools; therefore religious heritage should be understood as an integrated system linking tangible and intangible dimensions” (academic expert, interview).

At the same time, a recurring tension emerged between original form preservation and living convenience. Heritage experts tended to emphasize material authenticity, arguing that “authenticity is inseparable from the original form.” In contrast, religious practitioners advocated for a more flexible approach, contending that “strict material preservation that restricts daily ritual practice ultimately undermines the heritage’s living value.” A practitioner further explained that “without ritual context, individual objects lose their religious meaning” (religious practitioner, interview).

These contrasting emphases did not amount to value-based conflict but reflected different positional perspectives on how the balance between preservation and practice should be operationalized in everyday management. The continuum perspective challenges conventional analytical distinctions between religious and cultural value by demonstrating that stakeholders perceive these dimensions as co-produced through institutional and ritual practice. This finding suggests that the boundary between religion and heritage is not ontologically fixed but administratively negotiated.

4.3. Governance-Related Tensions and the Emergence of Negotiated Governance

Conflicts surrounding religious heritage were overwhelmingly identified as governance-driven rather than value-driven. Stakeholder concerns clustered around regulatory rigidity, institutional misalignment, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Participants frequently emphasized that “even minor repairs such as installing toilets or improving living quarters require complex administrative procedures, creating significant practical burdens” (temple practitioner, interview).

First, participants criticized what they described as structural irrationality arising from dual administrative oversight by the Korea Heritage Service and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. This arrangement was said to generate “unclear authority, administrative inefficiency, and a lack of policy consistency,” complicating both preservation and religious use. Another interviewee noted that “policies are sometimes developed without sufficient consultation with religious organizations, leading to a perception that religious actors are ‘passed over’ in decision-making processes” (religious organization representative, interview). These tensions reflect structural misalignment between regulatory frameworks designed for monument conservation and the spatial and temporal flexibility required for living religious practice. Institutional rigidity therefore operates not merely as administrative inefficiency but as a factor shaping how religious authority is publicly articulated.

Second, many stakeholders reported being excluded from policy formulation. Religious organizations were often described as being “passed over” during decision-making processes, with policies finalized before consultation occurred. Participants consistently called for systematic mechanisms to incorporate religious communities’ opinions. This governance tension also reflects the dual character of religious heritage as both spiritual hub and public cultural resource, a dynamic that often generates friction between devotional continuity and cultural-touristic utilization (Fernández-Álvarez et al. 2022).

As a result, stakeholders expressed a strong demand for a shift from command-and-control regulation toward a negotiated governance model. Rather than acting solely as a licensing authority, the state was expected to function as an “adjustment partner,” enabling co-management frameworks that recognize religious communities as essential partners in sustaining heritage. These dynamics resonate with recent analyses of contested sacred spaces, where state power, spatial politics, and heritage tourism intersect to reshape religious landscapes (Zhu 2025).

4.4. Comparative Analysis of Religious Traditions

While broad governance concerns were shared across traditions, each religious community exhibited distinct structural conditions and specific “blind spots” within the national heritage system. Differences between religious traditions can be partly explained by variation in institutional organization and historical relations with the state. Buddhist temples often operate within monastic administrative hierarchies embedded in long-standing heritage protection systems, whereas Protestant churches frequently function as independent property-based organizations operating within urban planning regimes. Confucian heritage sites, in contrast, often lack stable practitioner communities, producing governance challenges related to demographic sustainability rather than regulatory restriction.

Buddhism was characterized by a pronounced protection blind spot, with approximately 94% of temples excluded from formal legal protection. Stakeholders emphasized that point-based designation of individual structures fails to capture the spatial and functional reality of Buddhist practice. They advocated a shift toward area-based management encompassing entire temple grounds, reflecting the integrated nature of ritual, residence, and daily life within temple complexes. As one monk explained, “point-based designation does not reflect the reality of temple life, because the entire temple compound functions as an integrated religious environment” (Buddhist monk, interview).

Catholic stakeholders highlighted the “spontaneous history” of the Korean church, which developed through lay initiative rather than missionary-led establishment. They emphasized the sacramental character of Catholic heritage, noting that religious meaning is realized through ongoing sacramental practice. A key dilemma concerned public access requirements following heritage designation. Mandatory public opening was perceived as potentially conflicting with the secluded and contemplative nature of certain spaces, such as seminaries, revealing tensions between heritage visibility and spiritual privacy. A Catholic participant described religious heritage as “the product of a faith community accumulated through long-term practice and sacramental tradition” (Catholic practitioner, interview).

Confucian heritage was marked by a distinctive management vacuum resulting from a rapidly aging practitioner population and limited generational succession. Unlike other traditions seeking greater autonomy from regulatory frameworks, Confucian stakeholders expressed an urgent need for government intervention and specialized management personnel to prevent the physical and cultural deterioration of hyanggyos (local Confucian schools) and seowons (private Neo-Confucian academies). One participant highlighted the urgency of institutional support, noting that “due to aging practitioners and lack of

successors, heritage sites risk deterioration without government intervention” (Confucian practitioner, interview).

Protestant stakeholders emphasized challenges associated with dense urban contexts, where heritage designation often triggers conflicts related to development restrictions and property rights. They also pointed to the relative absence of a clearly defined legal framework for Protestant and Catholic heritage compared to the long-established regulatory systems governing Buddhist and Confucian sites. A Protestant stakeholder observed that “urban churches often hesitate to pursue heritage designation due to development restrictions and property-related limitations” (Protestant representative, interview).

Taken together, these differentiated experiences demonstrate that governance tensions do not manifest uniformly across religious traditions. Rather, they are mediated by theological orientation, spatial configuration, demographic structure, and institutional positioning within the national heritage regime. This comparative perspective highlights how a formally unified regulatory system produces uneven governance effects across religious communities.

These variations indicate that governance tensions are not solely the product of regulatory design but also emerge from differences in theological orientation, spatial organization, and institutional continuity across religious traditions. Comparative findings therefore demonstrate that religious heritage governance cannot be adequately understood through a single universal model but requires context-sensitive analytical frameworks.

5. Discussion

The discussion interprets the empirical findings through the theoretical framework developed in the literature review, particularly the interrelationship between living heritage theory, heritagization processes, and governance-based approaches to religion. By demonstrating that tensions emerge primarily from institutional arrangements rather than doctrinal incompatibility, the findings extend critical heritage studies by specifying governance design as a key explanatory variable in religious heritage conflict. This regulatory dimension reflects the broader policy logic that cultural heritage administration inherently involves regulatory mechanisms due to the hybrid status of heritage as both public resource and privately held asset (Chae 2019).

5.1. *Reconceptualizing Religious Heritage Conflict: From Value Conflict to Governance Issues*

The findings of this study challenge dominant interpretations of religious heritage conflict that draw on notions of “dissonant heritage,” where competing meanings of the past generate tension (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). The continuum articulated by stakeholders can be interpreted as an empirical extension of relational value approaches in heritage studies, which emphasize that heritage significance emerges through ongoing social practice rather than pre-given material attributes (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013). Rather than positioning religiosity and heritage value as competing categories, the findings suggest that religious practice functions as a constitutive condition of heritage significance. In this sense, ritual continuity does not merely coexist with heritage value but actively produces it. This interpretation challenges preservation paradigms that implicitly prioritize material authenticity over lived religious experience and instead supports process-oriented understandings of heritage value formation.

Conceptualizing heritage governance as a regulatory technology of religion situates the findings within broader sociological debates on governance and secular regulation. Rather than merely preserving material fabric, heritage designation establishes administrative categories that define legitimate forms of religious practice, acceptable spatial modification, and permissible forms of public access. In this sense, heritage governance operates as a

classificatory mechanism through which the state indirectly shapes religious continuity, institutional authority, and spatial control.

Stakeholders across all religious traditions largely rejected a binary opposition, instead perceiving these dimensions as an empirically overlapping value formation. As articulated by practitioners, religious practice animates heritage, while the historical depth of heritage provides legitimacy and continuity to religious practice. The statistical predominance of Buddhist heritage within the national designation system underscores that governance tensions unfold within an already asymmetrical institutional landscape.

This perspective resonates with value-based heritage approaches that emphasize relational and practice-based value formation. However, the empirical evidence presented here demonstrates that tensions arise not from ideological incompatibility but from institutional misalignment within existing governance frameworks. This perspective aligns with scholarship in sociology of religion suggesting that modern states increasingly regulate religion through indirect administrative instruments rather than explicit doctrinal intervention. Heritage designation exemplifies such indirect governance, as it transforms sacred sites into objects of cultural policy while maintaining formal commitments to religious neutrality. Religious heritage governance therefore operates as an intermediate regulatory field linking secular administration and religious authority.

The primary source of conflict lies in institutional inflexibility and structural contradictions embedded in the current governance system. Stakeholders repeatedly cited the excessive administrative burden associated with minor repairs or adaptive modifications—such as installing toilets or renovating residential quarters (*yosachae*)—as critical points of friction. These experiences lead religious communities to perceive heritage designation as a form of command-and-control regulation that constrains living religious practice rather than as a supportive framework for sustaining heritage.

By shifting analytical focus from value conflict to governance failure, this study reframes religious heritage conflict as a problem of institutional design rather than cultural opposition. More fundamentally, these findings suggest that heritage governance functions as a regulatory technology of religion. By defining what aspects of sacred sites are to be preserved, accessed, or modified, the state participates in shaping the conditions under which religion is publicly recognized and authorized. Religious heritage conflict, therefore, reflects struggles over the institutional framing of sacred space rather than disagreements over belief.

The findings empirically demonstrate that heritagization does not merely preserve religious meaning but reorganizes the institutional conditions through which religious authority becomes publicly legible (Burchardt and Ural 2024; Niedźwiedź 2024). Heritage governance thus operates as a classificatory regime that redefines the boundaries between sacred and cultural value. The tensions identified by stakeholders therefore reflect not only practical regulatory constraints but broader processes through which religious meaning is translated into publicly legible heritage categories.

5.2. *Living Religious Heritage as Negotiated Governance*

Building on scholarship that conceptualizes heritage as a field of negotiation, this study advances the concept of negotiated governance to capture how living religious heritage is managed in practice. The empirical findings reveal significant structural barriers to effective governance, including dual administrative oversight by the Korea Heritage Service and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, as well as the absence of systematic consultation mechanisms.

The concept of negotiated governance contributes to existing scholarship by emphasizing that governance arrangements do not merely regulate heritage but actively structure the

conditions under which religious practice becomes publicly recognized as heritage. In this respect, governance can be understood as a structuring condition through which competing interpretations of authenticity, authority, and use are reconciled. Rather than representing a fixed institutional arrangement, negotiated governance describes an ongoing relational process shaped by asymmetries in legal authority, administrative competence, and symbolic legitimacy. This perspective aligns with critical heritage governance approaches that conceptualize heritage management as a site of power negotiation rather than technical administration (Waterton and Smith 2010).

Stakeholders consistently reported that religious organizations are “passed over” during policy formulation, resulting in diminished trust, limited cooperation, and heightened perceptions of regulatory injustice. This gap between participatory rhetoric and actual power-sharing reflects broader critiques in heritage governance literature, where community participation often remains procedural rather than substantive (Chirikure et al. 2010). Such procedural exclusion undermines the sustainability of heritage governance, particularly in contexts where continuity of practice is central to heritage value.

Transitioning toward negotiated governance requires redefining the role of the state from a mere licensing authority to an adjustment partner. This entails establishing permanent consultation bodies and co-management frameworks that recognize religious communities as essential partners in sustaining heritage. Effective governance, from this perspective, prioritizes relational and processual decision-making over static regulatory models and explicitly acknowledges ritual continuity as a core heritage value rather than a secondary consideration.

These findings also resonate with debates on post-secular governance, which highlight the continued public relevance of religion within formally secular institutional frameworks. Religious heritage governance demonstrates how secular administrative systems do not eliminate religion from public life but reorganize its modes of visibility and legitimacy. The governance of sacred sites therefore provides an empirical lens through which to examine how religious authority is rearticulated within contemporary regulatory regimes. Negotiated governance therefore functions not simply as a normative recommendation but as an analytical category describing how authority is distributed and stabilized within multi-actor institutional environments. By foregrounding negotiation as a structural feature rather than an ad hoc solution, the study identifies governance design as a central variable shaping the sustainability of living religious heritage.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that religious heritage governance frameworks require institutional mechanisms capable of incorporating stakeholder participation at early stages of decision-making. Establishing permanent consultation bodies, flexible conservation guidelines for living heritage, and clearer coordination between administrative agencies may reduce regulatory friction while maintaining conservation accountability. Governance reform should therefore prioritize procedural inclusion and adaptive regulatory design rather than relying exclusively on technical conservation standards.

5.3. Comparative Implications in a Multi-Religious Context

The multi-religious context of South Korea offers comparative insights into how different religious traditions experience a unified national heritage system. Recent scholarship on multi-religious spaces suggests that religious cultural heritage cannot be reduced to either symbolic identity markers or utilitarian public assets, but instead requires governance models capable of balancing plural religious meanings (Fabretti 2025). While stakeholders across traditions shared concerns regarding administrative complexity and regulatory rigidity, each tradition exhibited distinct governance “blind spots” shaped by theological, spatial, and demographic conditions.

The comparative findings indicate that governance tensions vary systematically according to differences in institutional structure, spatial organization, and historical relations with the state. Traditions characterized by centralized monastic systems tend to encounter regulatory tensions related to spatial management, while decentralized congregational traditions experience tensions associated with property rights and urban regulation. Traditions facing demographic decline exhibit governance challenges related to institutional continuity rather than regulatory restriction. These patterns suggest that religious heritage governance produces differentiated effects depending on the organizational form of religious communities.

For Buddhism, stakeholders highlighted a pronounced protection blind spot, noting that approximately 94% of temples remain excluded from formal legal protection. They strongly advocated a shift from point-based designation of individual objects to area-based management encompassing entire temple landscapes, reflecting the spatial reality of living temples.

Catholic discourse centered on the tradition's "spontaneous history" and sacramental continuity. A key dilemma concerned mandatory public opening following heritage designation, which was perceived as potentially conflicting with the secluded and sacred nature of spaces such as seminaries.

Confucian heritage was marked by a management vacuum resulting from a rapidly aging practitioner population and limited generational succession. Unlike other traditions seeking greater autonomy, Confucian stakeholders called for urgent state intervention and the deployment of specialized management personnel to prevent the physical and cultural decay of *hyanggyos* and *seowons*.

Protestant stakeholders emphasized tensions arising from dense urban contexts, where heritage designation often triggers conflicts over development restrictions and property rights. They also noted the relative absence of a dedicated legal framework for Protestant and Catholic heritage compared to the long-established regulatory systems governing Buddhist and Confucian sites.

Together, these findings extend international debates on living heritage by demonstrating that effective governance strategies must be sensitive not only to national contexts but also to the specific theological, spatial, and communal characteristics of different religious traditions. In line with Winter (2014)'s argument that heritage governance increasingly operates within shifting global power configurations, these comparative findings highlight how national regulatory systems intersect with transnational heritage norms.

The South Korean case demonstrates that heritage governance does not operate uniformly across religious traditions but interacts with theological orientation, spatial configuration, and demographic structure. This suggests that heritage regimes may produce differentiated religious subjectivities, shaping how communities articulate claims to sacred space and public legitimacy. While the comparative analysis highlights distinctive characteristics across traditions, the uneven distribution of interview participants suggests that these findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative patterns. Although the empirical material derives from the South Korean context, the identified governance patterns are not contextually unique but reflect broader structural characteristics of religious heritage management in secular administrative systems. Similar tensions are likely to emerge wherever living religious practice intersects with regulatory frameworks designed primarily for material conservation.

Enhancing community participation is particularly important in the context of living heritage, where continuity of practice constitutes a central dimension of heritage value. Participatory governance does not imply deregulation but rather recalibration of institutional

authority to ensure that regulatory frameworks remain responsive to the social conditions sustaining heritage significance.

6. Conclusions

This study reconceptualizes religious heritage conflict by shifting analytical attention from presumed value opposition to governance design. Rather than reflecting an inherent clash between religiosity and heritage value, tensions arise from regulatory rigidity, fragmented authority, and uneven participation structures. Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted in a multi-religious context in South Korea, the findings show that stakeholders understand religious heritage as living and performative—sustained through ongoing ritual practice rather than preserved as static fabric. Governance tensions therefore stem not from doctrinal incompatibility but from institutional arrangements that structure authority, authenticity, and participation. Together, these findings reframe living religious heritage as a field of negotiated governance grounded in the lived realities of religious communities (Stovel et al. 2005; Fredheim and Khalaf 2016).

Three key conclusions emerge from this study. First, stakeholders across religious traditions reject a binary opposition between religiosity and heritage value. Instead, they articulate a continuum logic in which heritage value is realized through ritual continuity, while religious practice derives legitimacy from historical depth. This relational understanding challenges preservation paradigms that implicitly privilege material fabric over present use and supports a practice-centered reconceptualization of living religious heritage.

Second, conflicts surrounding religious heritage are primarily governance-driven rather than value-driven. Stakeholders rarely frame tensions as ideological clashes between religion and heritage. Instead, dissatisfaction centers on procedural rigidity, fragmented administrative authority, insufficient consultation mechanisms, and tourism-oriented utilization policies. These findings reframe religious heritage conflict as a problem of institutional design and power relations, not doctrinal incompatibility.

Third, the study underscores the importance of negotiated governance. Effective religious heritage management requires moving beyond hierarchical regulatory model toward relational and iterative co-management frameworks that recognize religious communities as essential partners in sustaining heritage value. Negotiated governance is not synonymous with deregulation; rather, it entails recalibrating regulatory structures to accommodate ritual continuity while maintaining conservation accountability.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the study of religion by demonstrating that heritage regimes function as arenas in which religion is publicly reorganized. Rather than viewing heritage as an external cultural overlay, the findings show that heritagization reshapes religious authority, spatial control, and ritual legitimacy. Governance design thus becomes central to understanding how religion persists and adapts within secular cultural frameworks.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis draws on data produced within a specific national policy context, which may shape the range and framing of articulated concerns. In addition, while the study captures diverse stakeholder perspectives across religious traditions, it does not examine site-specific practices in depth. Future research should explore how negotiated governance operates across different secular and post-secular societies, particularly in contexts where global heritage regimes intersect with local religious authority structures. Comparative case studies at the site level would further illuminate how governance arrangements are enacted in everyday practice.

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