

Sacred and civic spaces in religiously plural communities are peacefully shared all the time, yet we rarely hear about such places. In this book, Anna Bigelow offers a finely grained study of Malerkotla, a town in India where the Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu residents have coexisted for centuries, worshipping at the same sacred site in the heart of the town—the tomb shrine of the Sufi saint who founded the settlement. Malerkotla is situated in Punjab, the region most severely affected by the violence of India's partition and independence; its case illuminates the microstrategies of accommodation that make interreligious relations possible.

Peace is a process involving a great deal of work, and Bigelow explains how shared sacred sites, social spaces, and collective memories ground the experiences of residents and forge a vision of Malerkotla as a zone of peace and an idealized example of Indian secularism. The stories Malerkotlans tell themselves and those that others tell about Malerkotla combine to make sense of the anomalous peace it experienced during Partition and provide a basis for continuing community engagement and interreligious harmony.

Combining archival and interview material, this study offers an important counterbalance to many conflict studies and a corrective to portrayals of Islamic cultures as militant and intolerant. Malerkotla thus becomes an object lesson in how a complex, multireligious society is imagined, produced, and perpetuated.

Anna Bigelow is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at North Carolina State University.

“Religion is all too often described as a force that legitimizes violence and conflict in the world today. Anna Bigelow’s masterful work, meticulously researched and historically contextualized, opens a new chapter in letting us see how religion can also be, and has been, a powerful social force for good. If you have ever wondered how the same religious system that inspires some to hatred can also inspire whole communities to live in peace with their neighbors, read this book!”

—Omid Safi, author of *Memories of Muhammad*

“*Sharing the Sacred* is a landmark in the study of religion in South Asia. By providing concrete examples of the way in which serious, positive connections exist across religious lines, it provides a crucial alternative to the narrative of religious conflict that is all too common—and which is all too often employed for opportunistic purposes. But this is not a mere sentimental assertion of universal brotherhood. It is a well-thought-out critique of how communities actually handle and make sense of conflict.”

—Carl Ernst, author of *Following Muhammad*

“In this important monograph, Anna Bigelow explores how a large Muslim-majority town in eastern Punjab managed to escape the violent mayhem of the 1947 Partition, which split British Punjab between India and Pakistan. Based on sixteen months of field research and using both historical documents and oral interviews, the author shows how, in 1947 as well as in subsequent decades, the collective memory of several decisive moments in the residents’ shared past served to promote society-wide stability. The book will be of special significance to students of Islam, comparative religion, and the history of modern South Asia.”

—R. M. Eaton, Professor of History,
Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Arizona