

How to Read a Church

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After houses and retail stores, one of the most abundant and ubiquitous features of the built landscape of the United States is its churches—or, more broadly, houses of worship. From giant metropolises like New York and Los Angeles to tiny crossroads hamlets such as McGonigle, Ohio, one or more church buildings are virtually essential to bestowing ontological status on a place; without a suitable site for public worship, a gathering of buildings is simply that—a nameless cluster—rather than something that can be experienced as a community. Like houses and stores, though—and perhaps even more so—not all churches are alike. They differ considerably in such particulars as size, shape, style, siting, age, ornament, interior arrangements and furnishings, and the materials from which they are constructed. In both their general patterns of construction and distribution as well as in their individuality, churches can be interpreted as markers of a community's social, cultural and historic identity. To understand their significance, one must learn to read them—to see them not just as generic icons of religiosity, but rather as particular embodiments of that cultural impulse, simultaneously unique and representative. This essay is an attempt to provide the beginnings of a vocabulary and grammar for such a task of reading—primarily of Christian churches, which dominate the American landscape, but also of Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist houses of worship which increasingly compete for visual attention in a nation in continual demographic transformation.

At the most basic level, churches (a term I shall use generically to mean “buildings for worship”) are physical constructions; whatever their metaphysical

implications, they are necessarily built—literally from the ground up—out of components such as brick, stone, wood, glass, concrete, and the like. The catalogue of components that make up a church is inconclusive in itself, but can provide some preliminary clues as to the building's character and context. Wood, for example, is usually cheaper than stone, unless the latter is unusually plentiful (and/or the latter scarce) in a particular region. In many circumstances, then, a wooden church is a sign that the congregation that erected it is of modest size and means. The local abundance of a particular material may also lead to some interesting regional stylistic variations; where the Gothic style in Europe was usually executed in stone, in parts of the United States brick or wood may be a substitute. Such adaptation is usually more a matter of necessity or opportunity than intention, but the results—such as the “carpenter Gothic” style popularized by the Anglican architect Richard Upjohn during the mid-nineteenth century—can be dramatically innovative and aesthetically pleasing. It may also come to constitute a regional style that transcends denomination, visually linking together churches ranging from Eastern Orthodox and Episcopalian to Methodist and Baptist. (This frequently happened in the American West during the later nineteenth century.) In more developed and prosperous urban situations, congregations may rise above such exigencies and build grander churches of stone, even when that material has to be imported at considerable cost.

Scale and siting are two other related physical characteristics of a religious building that need to be factored into any informed “reading” of a church. “Scale” is more or less synonymous with “size,” although it implies that size has to be gauged in relationship to other structures in the vicinity or to similar structures elsewhere. Together, these factors have considerable impact on how a church is experienced by those in visual contact with it. A diminutive parish church sandwiched between larger

buildings in the midst of an urban residential or commercial block, for example, sends a different message about its status and role in its community than does a giant cathedral sited in lonely splendor on a hilltop. The message here may be as much one of intention as of means: Roman Catholic churches erected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in cities, were often deliberately overbuilt—designed on a much larger scale than their constituencies required—in order to make a political statement about the actual and hoped-for role of the church in the community.

Denominational rivalry and status anxiety have sometimes egged religious groups on in trying to establish a more imposing local presence than that of their counterparts.

Another motive for, or result of, building on a grand scale is the possibility of programming in ways that smaller or even medium-sized congregations could not afford or sustain. Another important material clue here is not just the size and character of the worship-space itself, but that of the entire plant which accompanies that space. Only the very smallest churches usually provide only space for worship. Most also provide office space for clergy and support staff; an assembly hall for congregational functions, such as community meals and meetings, often accompanied by a kitchen; educational facilities, ranging from one or two classrooms to entire wings or buildings filled with such spaces; nurseries and other places for day-care for children too young to attend regular worship or instruction; auditoriums for lectures or dramatic productions; and, in the largest sorts of complexes, gymnasiums, bowling alleys, and other large-scale recreational facilities. Apart from the main plant may be auxiliary structures such as housing for clergy (variously known as the rectory, parsonage, or manse); elementary schools (favored by Catholics, Missouri Synod Lutherans and, in more recent years, various evangelical groups); housing for their personnel (e.g., convents for teaching sisters assigned to staff Catholic parish schools); burial grounds,

especially in the country; park-like areas with grottoes or religious statuary; and, more mundanely, parking lots. In this latter connection, siting can also be logistically significant; many larger recently-built evangelical churches are located near the exit ramps of interstate highways, in the hope (frequently fulfilled) of drawing a constituency not simply from a local “parish” area but from an entire metropolitan complex. (Fleets of school buses have yielded to vast parking areas as evangelicals have risen on the socio-economic scale.)

Even signage can be revealing. More traditional churches generally have a prominent but discrete signboard in front giving the church’s name, denomination, times for worship, and possibly the names of the clergy. Many evangelical churches use more conspicuous signs—sometimes moveable—which, in addition to basic information, display a Bible verse or clever saying with a religious message. Active evangelism and disdain for the norms of middle-class taste both seem to be at work here. The names of churches are also significant. Roman Catholic churches are generally named after saints or some aspect of the divinity, e.g., “Holy Trinity.” Episcopal churches follow a similar practice, though usually confining their repertoire of saints to biblical figures and those associated with the British Isles, e.g., St. George. Mainline Protestant church names usually avoid suggestions of the holy and are more geographically descriptive, e.g., “Oxford Methodist Church.” Numerical designations, usually “First” or “Second” (occasionally down to “Fourth” or more, as in Chicago’s “Fourth Presbyterian”), are often employed by denominations in the Reformed tradition, such as Presbyterians, Congregationalists (United Church of Christ), and Baptists, to indicate the order in which that church was founded in a particular community. Lutherans have their own usages, often favoring names such as “Zion,” “Faith,” or “Christ.” Evangelicals often avoid the term “church” preferring terms such

as “tabernacle,” “temple,” or, more recently, “Christian Life Center,” on the theory that only the congregation itself is the “church.”

The size and character of a parish plant can tell us a great deal about the nature of the community that has built and now supports it. (“Parish” is used here specifically to refer to the entire membership and physical apparatus of a local religious community rather than simply a building for worship.) At one extreme, Christian Scientists have traditionally built only an auditorium for public readings and testimonials, with few additional facilities to sustain a broader communal life. At the other extreme, many of the Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, and other evangelical “megachurches” built during the last few decades include extensive facilities for educational and recreational activities. Some, such as the prototypical Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, which resembles a shopping mall more than a traditional house of worship in its overall contours, even includes a food court. The “institutional churches” of mainline Protestantism—for example, Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian or Cleveland’s Pilgrim Congregational—built in many cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the predecessors of today’s megachurches; though their scale was not quite as grand, their strategies of drawing in congregants through elaborate programming, often as much recreational as formally religious, anticipated in many ways those of their latter-day evangelical counterparts. The elaborate K-12 educational programming of pre-Vatican II Catholicism was aimed not so much at bringing in newcomers through evangelistic outreach as it was designed to keep those already in the faith, especially recent immigrants, from succumbing to the allures of Protestant religion and/or secular society. On the other hand, the relatively modest efforts at mounting programs beyond worship and the correspondingly modest plant size of contemporary “mainline” Protestant churches indicate a high level of comfort with the

surrounding social order, although the sometimes dramatic attrition in membership experienced by those denominations—American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, ELCA Lutheran, Presbyterian (PCUSA), United Methodist, and United Church of Christ—in recent decades may have resulted in part from that very sense of being “at ease in Zion.”

Considerations of siting may include relative positioning within a community—on downtown street corners, in residential neighborhoods, at interstate exits, and so forth—as well as the kinds of communities in which denominations choose to locate. Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, for example, not surprisingly tended to build churches in urban working-class neighborhoods during the period of the New Immigration (ca. 1870-1917), while Methodists had earlier erected their own often modest frame structures in every rural small town and crossroads that the traffic would bear. Church location, also not surprisingly, has tended to follow demographic shifts; many once-grand downtown Protestant churches have since World War II either closed down, adapted to new ethnic constituencies, or sold their plants to Asian, African American or Hispanic newcomers as their traditional patrons abandoned the cities for the suburbs. (Roman Catholics have done the same, often consolidating two or three parishes in response to population change as well as an acute clergy shortage.) Concomitantly, the suburbs, which now contain a majority of the nation’s population, have seen extensive new religious building since World War II, first among Catholics, mainline Protestants, and Reform and Conservative Jews and, more recently, among evangelicals of every stripe. Although some older urban churches remain prosperous, others have been abandoned, razed, “recycled” by newer groups, or converted to secular uses. (One former Catholic church in Pittsburgh is now a brew pub.)

Along with scale and siting, architectural style is a significant component of a

religious building's identity. Although in recent years some local religious communities, such as the previously cited Willow Creek Community Church, have deliberately tried to shed an identifiably religious visual identity, most American religious groups have consciously designed their buildings in a manner evocative of a specifically religious tradition. In colonial North America, this often involved an adaptation—usually a down-scaling and vernacularization—of styles then in fashion among coreligionists in the mother country. Anglican churches along the eastern seaboard during the eighteenth century, for example, reflected the Wren-Gibbs neoclassicism that had been so successful in London following the Great Fire of 1666 which had wiped out much of that city's medieval building. Before long, Puritan Congregationalists, Baptists, and other dissenting groups were in turn adapting the styles that had been introduced by what they had perceived as an oppressive, worldly and heretical elite. During the nineteenth century, religious groups of all sorts, from Jews to Catholics to Methodists to Swedenborgians, joined in the national enthusiasm for one stylistic revival after another, beginning with the Roman and yielding successively to the Greek, the Romanesque, and the Gothic (with even the Egyptian making occasional inroads). For Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, the medieval revivals made a certain amount of sense, since these communities had historical lineages and liturgical practices consonant with these styles. For Baptists and Methodists, though, neither of these continuities could be plausibly argued; the appeal was instead to fashion, to solidarity with the iconographical expression of the identity of the broader community, or in some cases to shifting notions of the meaning and character of worship.

During the twentieth century, style in religious buildings has gone in two different directions. Southern Baptists, at one end of the spectrum, have deliberately

opted for a “retro” style—usually colonial revival—which is symbolic of patriotism, rootedness in the American landscape, and “traditional family values.” Other conservative groups, such as the Willow Creek Community Church cited earlier, continue the old auditorium style as well, but housed in an outer shell that might be mistaken for a shopping mall, conference hotel, or suburban office park. Some wealthier and more sophisticated congregations have turned to “signature” architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Kahn, to design structures in a “Modern” or “Post-Modern” style, with little reference to the traditional symbolism of Christianity and a reliance on the play of shapes, material, and light for setting a religious tone. Most post-World War II Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, for which worship patterns have converged, have developed a standard suburban profile, blending tradition and the techniques of Modernism to accommodate the post-Vatican II emphasis on interactive worship (new for Catholics) and a more elaborately ritualized liturgy (new for Protestants) in structures that either adapt the traditional rectangular church shape or introduce a semi-circular groundplan.

In addition to exterior style, the interior apparatus of a church plant can be very revealing of a congregation’s character. The most elaborate plan is characteristic of traditional Catholic, Episcopal, and some other churches whose worship involves an elaborate, formal liturgy. Such churches are generally rectangular in shape, reflecting a hierarchical arrangement of the space inside, and, where American circumstances permit, literally oriented, with the altar facing east, the direction in which the sun rises and which, according to tradition, Jesus would return again. In this plan, which is not often used for newer churches, the building for worship is formally divided into several areas, each with a similarly formal, Latinate name:

1. Narthex. The narthex is the space one enters when one steps through the main

entryway, and is fundamentally a vestibule, or transitional area between outdoors and indoors. Here can be found coat racks; pamphlet stands; candles to light for special intentions; containers for holy water, into which worshipers may dip their fingers as an act of ritual purification upon entering; and other features which are preparatory for worship. This is a space in which greeters may be positioned to welcome newcomers, and worshipers mill about and converse quietly before worship begins.

2. Nave. The nave is in the worship area proper, and is usually entered through a set of doors separating it from the narthex. (The name comes from the Latin navis, or ship, which the interior of a church may resemble in inverted form, or which might be a metaphor for an interconnected community.) This is the space in which worshipers sit during the worship service itself, and usually is outfitted with horizontal rows of slip pews. (Some colonial-era churches still have box pews, designed to accommodate a family, which are rectangular and have hinged doors on one side. Other alternatives are cathedral seating—moveable banks of attached chairs—or, in some old-style Eastern Orthodox churches, no seats at all.) The seating in the nave is usually divided by a central aisle, which is used by the congregation for access and by those leading the worship—clergy, assistants, choir—for processions.

3. Sanctuary and choir. The sanctuary (from Latin sanctus, “holy”) stands at the far end of the nave, and is usually separated from the rest of the worship space by a set of steps. The altar itself, on which the communion service is conducted, may further be separated by a low railing. (Some Anglo-Catholic churches emphasize this separation by a medieval-style altar screen between the nave and choir, while Eastern Orthodox churches have a set of “royal doors” through which the priest disappears for the most solemn part of the consecration.) Only the celebrant and his or her assistants (acolytes) are usually permitted in the sanctuary. Some churches also designate an area between

the nave and sanctuary, the choir, to accommodate the singers—descended from medieval monastic choirs, the members of which sat facing one another in front of the sanctuary. Cushions for kneeling in front of the altar or in the pews may feature embroidered designs with Christian motifs.

4. Chapel. The term “chapel” denotes a place for worship smaller than a church. This may take the form of a niche to the side of the main altar, in which a smaller altar dedicated to a particular saint, such as the Virgin Mary, may be placed; to an additional worship space outside the main church set aside for private devotions or small services; or to a place for worship in an institution such as a prison, boarding school, college, hospital, asylum, or airport. (In Britain, the term is used by dissenting groups wishing to distinguish their places of worship from those of the Church of England.)

Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic Episcopalian, and Eastern Orthodox churches may also utilize a variety of other aids to the sacramental worship which characterizes their traditions. The latter tradition is notable for its use of icons, that is, stylized two-dimensional paintings of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints which are placed in a specified order around the walls and in the dome of the church as well as on the altar-screen, or iconostasion. The other Catholic traditions utilize paintings and or sculpture in the sanctuary, as well as the Stations of the Cross, a set of fourteen paintings or sculptures on the themes of the narrative of the Passion of Jesus, arranged in order along the walls of the church and used for Lenten devotion.

In addition, all of these traditions employ what Anglicans call “liturgical stations”: physical aids to conducting necessary parts of worship. These include the baptismal font, which ranges in scale from a simple basin to an elaborate marble or carved wooden structure with a wooden cover of Gothic design. (This may be located in the gathering, or expanded narthex, of a modern Catholic church; immediately inside

the entrance to the nave; or adjoining the sanctuary). Next to it may stand a paschal candle, lit for the vigil of Easter. Other stations are a reading desk or lectern, from which scripture is read; a pulpit, from which the sermon, or interpretation and application of the Word, is delivered; and the already-mentioned altar, traditionally a block of marble, on which the elements (bread and wine) of the Eucharistic service are consecrated. (More recently, many churches utilize instead a moveable wooden table.) An array of implements of ceramics, metal, or other materials may also be employed in the preparation and distribution of the Eucharist, such as a chalice, or cup with a base, for the communion wine. Hosts (pieces of communion bread or wafers) which have been consecrated but not consumed during a Eucharistic service may be kept in a receptacle known as a tabernacle (Roman Catholic) or aumbry (Anglican), usually accompanied by a lit candle or bulb. A cross or crucifix and candles (torches) mounted on wooden poles may be carried in processions. During the service, the priest and other participants wear vestments—ceremonial garments derived from ancient Roman usage, with corresponding Latinate names—together with similarly color-coded (for the liturgical season) paraments (or frontals) which are hung over the altar, pulpit, and desk. Special garments and hangings used during the service are stored in an adjoining room known as the vestry or sacristy. (Eastern Orthodox use Greek terms for many similar items.) Lutherans and, more recently, other mainline churches such as Methodists and Presbyterians, utilize some of the same material apparatus for worship, though usually in less elaborate form.

The arrangement and contents of a church such as that described generically above are geared to an ideal of worship based on the regular celebration of the sacraments, that is, rituals originating in the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles and intended to mediate divine grace, or saving power, in material form through ritual

action. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox count seven sacraments, although they differ slightly in this enumeration. Anglicans and Lutherans, following Protestant custom, restrict these to two—Baptism and Eucharist—as the only ones specifically instituted by Jesus, although Anglicans designate the other five rituals recognized by Roman Catholics as “sacramental actions.” Whatever the differences, the underlying concept behind this sort of worship is the notion that material objects and gestures, together with verbal formulas, are the basis through which humans encounter the divine. As a result, the physical setting for worship is taken very seriously, and employs both spatial arrangements and material accompaniments that are designated by a precise vocabulary as well as strict directions for implementation. (The amount of beeswax in altar candles and the specifics for the cloth draped over the altar are variously stipulated by Roman Catholic and Anglican manuals.)

At the other end of the liturgical spectrum, churches in the Baptist, Holiness and Pentecostal traditions usually are devoid of this elaborate array of spatial divisions and liturgical implements. The emphasis in these services is usually on the preached Word, vocal music with instrumental accompaniment and, frequently, testimonials by members of the congregation. Although such worship generally follows traditionally prescribed if only implicitly acknowledged patterns, emphasis is often put on spontaneity rather than formality. Congregational seating may take the traditional form of slip pews, but often is modeled on that of theaters, beginning with the “auditorium church” of late nineteenth-century American cities in which fixed, adjoining, folding, cushioned seats (“opera seating”) were arranged in curved tiers, providing a good view of the stage for the entire assemblage. Opposite the seating was a raised platform, or stage, with a dominant pulpit front and center. In front of the pulpit would be a table for the administration of communion (with the wine often in small individual glasses

arranged in a circular tray with suitable openings to be passed among the congregation). Behind the pulpit might be seating for the choir, with a large pipe organ providing a backdrop. In Baptist churches, the platform might also contain a concealed tank (baptistry) in which baptism of adult believers by complete immersion could be practiced at appropriate times.

Although Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Methodists often built in this form in its heyday a century or so ago, these denominations have largely abandoned the auditorium church for one more suited to a formal liturgy. Evangelical groups today still utilize it in modified form, with an array of instruments and amplification devices often replacing the pipe organ of old. The Victorian decor, such as heavy wooden pulpits and stained-glass windows, may be gone, but the essential form of the auditorium church still persists, with the traditional Protestant focus on the spoken and sung word. Evident also is the aniconic tradition of Reformed Protestantism, which, from the time of its founders Calvin and Zwingli, adopted the Old Testament prohibition on “graven images” and thus banished virtually all forms of visual arts from the place of worship. During the past century or so, this prohibition has been modified to some degree through the introduction of pious portraits of Jesus, such as the once-ubiquitous rendering by Warner Sallman.

One way of understanding the contrast in these physical settings for worship is through the typology of church versus meeting house. Another way of making the same distinction is through the Latin phrases domus dei—“house of God”—and domus ecclesiae, or “house of the congregation.” The first model fits the elaborate house of worship described first above, and suggests that the building utilized for worship is in some way a sacred place itself, and has to be treated with proper respect. Ceremonies of consecration (and, occasionally, deconsecration, when a church is turned over for

secular use) utilized by Roman Catholics and others emphasize that such structures have a special character that sets them aside from “secular” structures, such as houses, stores, and offices. (Houses may in fact be blessed and contain special places for the display of religious objects, but cannot ordinarily be utilized for formal public worship.) On the other hand, reformers such as Calvin and Zwingli in Reformation-era Switzerland rejected this model for worship entirely, and declared that any appropriate setting could be utilized for Word-centered Christian worship—an attitude adopted by the Puritan movement in Elizabethan England and shortly thereafter translated to New England as well. Puritans in the latter colonies devised a new kind of structure, which they called the meeting house, for their own notion of worship, which was the forerunner in essentials of similar places used by many evangelicals today. The meeting house was explicitly not a place where divinity resided, but rather a setting in which a congregation of believers gathered to hear the Word preached. The same space could be, and was, used by townspeople for “secular” functions such as education, government, and even defense against Indians.

Although this distinction in places for worship held fairly true along Catholic/Protestant lines through the nineteenth century, and is still reflected in many churches remaining from that era, it is now true primarily at the extremes of the spectrum: Anglo-Catholic and Eastern Orthodox at one end, and Southern Baptists and Pentecostals at the other. Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, and many mainline Protestants have converged in their approaches to worship and corresponding notions of proper space for worship in recent decades, and the contrast between their churches built since World War II is consequently much diminished. Typologies for thinking about “sacred space” and for categorizing types of religious space should thus be utilized with care, since many places for worship do not fall cleanly into one or the

other of these pairs of opposites.

We have already seen that religious buildings are primarily designed to provide space for worship suitable to the liturgical needs of particular traditions, even though the boundaries of some of these traditions may have begun to blur in recent decades. We have also seen that many churches provide not only worship space, but also facilities for a potentially wide variety of activities that constitute a congregation's programming. In addition, there are still other identities and activities associated with religious buildings and their constituents that need to be discussed in order to provide a fuller sense of possibilities of "how to read a church."

Especially in areas of early European settlement—for example, the Atlantic seaboard and the Southwest—churches may possess the identity of historic buildings, and may be included on the National Register of Historic Places. (Whether religious buildings should be subject to preservation ordinances designed to protect the character of historic sites is currently the subject of considerable legislative and judicial controversy.) The historic character of a particular building might have to do with its being the oldest representative of a particular tradition in a given area; its association with historic events and personalities within a denominational tradition; or, in the case of the Old South Meetinghouse in Boston, its having served as the site of important "secular" activities, in this case the events leading up to the American Revolution. (Many colonial churches, such as New England meetinghouses and Spanish missions, served civic as well as religious functions and still often help constitute civic landscapes.) Churches may call attention to their historic status by displaying plaques, offering tours, and even maintaining gift shops where the visitor may purchase coffee mugs, tote bags, note cards, and the like with suitable illustrations. Tours conducted by parish volunteers should often be taken with a grain of salt, since such guides

frequently stress what is oldest, largest, and most expensive to the detriment of more insightful historic interpretation.

A church may also be notable for its architecture and/or art. Some architects of note specialized in ecclesiastical design—Ralph Adams Cram, Patrick Keeley, Richard Upjohn, and Henry Vaughan, all practitioners in different versions of the Gothic revival mode—and their work is notable both as aesthetically accomplished and as influential in promoting particular styles as normative for subsequent religious building. In the latter category one might add the handful of churches by H.H. Richardson, such as Trinity Episcopal in Boston, which, though few in number, nevertheless established the “Richardsonian Romanesque” as a distinctive American Victorian style for civil as well as religious building. Other “signature” architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Philip Johnson have designed religious buildings, but their attention and influence have generally been elsewhere. On the other hand, many structures designed not by professional architects but rather by local builders, such as those that bedecked countless New England town greens beginning in the eighteenth century, have survived as masterpieces of excellent design as well as historic and civic icons.

Churches are sometimes repositories of religious art as well. Roman Catholics have led the way here, since their tradition has always valued the material expression of religious themes for liturgical and devotional usage. As soon as American Catholics became wealthy enough to afford religious art and architecture (such as that of Patrick Keeley, mentioned above, who designed hundreds of Catholic churches during the later nineteenth century), their churches frequently overflowed with paintings, sculpture, wood-carving, and other ornament. Some of this was imported from France and not of high aesthetic quality; others, such as innumerable stained glass windows crafted in Munich, remain treasured. The 1950s saw a flurry of indigenous design with the

liturgical renewal movement that helped inspire the worship reforms of Vatican II; the latter ecumenical council's dictates led to the renovation of the interiors of many American Catholic churches and cathedrals to adapt them to a more participatory mode of worship, with mixed aesthetic results.

Within the (loosely designated) Protestant traditions, Anglicans led the way in the North American colonies through the introduction of architectural design based on the modes of London—often creatively adapted to colonial circumstances—and also in the introduction of liturgical art in the form of communion silver sets, many of which were donated by Queen Anne and still on display, especially in Virginia. Stained glass did not become common until after the Civil War, when work by Tiffany Studios and John LaFarge, among others, created an opalescent glass style of great beauty. (This glass was sometimes introduced into the windows of older churches, with a striking, not to say incongruous, stylistic contrast as the result.) During the early twentieth century, Connick Studios of Boston revived the very different mode utilized in medieval cathedrals, which suited well the architectural design of contemporary medieval revivalists such as Ralph Adams Cram. Cram and other revival architects also took advantage of the availability of European craftsmen, and set them to work creating fine pieces in metal, wood, and other media. Where Catholics and Episcopalians generally stayed close to medieval tradition, some Protestants ventured farther afield in their attempts to depict contemporary religious heroes—in the case of the First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., an image of “Mister Average Baptist” in stained glass.

Cathedrals, which began to proliferate among Catholics and Episcopalians in the rapidly growing cities of the post-Civil War era, have emerged as particularly prominent examples of the coming together of sacred art. Catholic cathedrals generally tend to commission art specifically for their own use. Episcopalians have in some

cases—such as St. John the Divine in Manhattan and Grace on San Francisco’s Nob Hill—utilized cathedrals as veritable art museums, incorporating into their liturgical decorative schemes a wide variety of both contemporary and historic art works, often the result of munificent wealthy donors. The stained glass in these cathedrals may also combine the traditional panoply of saints with newer themes, such as images of Albert Einstein and John Glenn in the glass at Grace and a piece of moon rock in a specially designed window at Washington’s National Cathedral.

Just as churches may serve as art galleries, so also do they sometimes serve as concert halls. Much colonial religious music consisted of unaccompanied congregational singing, especially in New England, where Puritan theology forbade the use of hymns of human composition. (Psalms, presumably of divine inspiration, were the crucial exception.) By the time of the revolution, most religious communities had overcome any early antipathies towards hymn-writing and singing as well as instrumental music, and the pipe organ began to become a common piece of church furnishing. After the Civil War, Protestant urban “auditorium” churches modeled on theaters or concert halls featured vast organs as the backdrop to the pulpit platform, which latter also was often spacious enough to accommodate a sizeable choir. Professionals were sometimes employed (and still are) as “ringers” to set the pace and pitch for volunteer singers.

African Americans developed their own tradition of choral music, with the Fisk Jubilee Singers leading the way in adapting the spirituals of slavery to more European musical standards, and Thomas A. Dorsey and others in the twentieth century creating the gospel music now performed by vested choirs in many black churches. White southern evangelical churches developed their own gospel tradition, often performed by male quartets. (Such churches frequently have percussion instruments available on

stage together with the usual organ or piano.) The Mormon Tabernacle Choir in Salt Lake City gathered an ecumenical following in its rendering of Christian standards such as Handel's Messiah. Other churches incorporate secular classical pieces into their services as preludes and postludes, and open their facilities for chamber music concerts and similar recitals by their own organists or other musical professionals. Since many churches have suitable acoustics, seating, and instruments, especially organs and pianos, their use for the presentation of appropriate (according to their tradition) musical pieces seems reasonable enough.

The earlier-cited National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., begun near the turn of the twentieth century and not completed until 1990, also illustrates some other functions which churches and cathedrals may exemplify. The National Cathedral was envisaged as a "house of prayer for all people," a church that transcended denominational identity and which could thus serve as a setting for events, such as sermons by and funerals of prominent figures, that would help create a national religious culture. (St. John the Divine in New York aims to serve a similar role for the arts and for social causes.) Bishops as well as ministers of prominent individual churches—Jerry Falwell of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia; Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem; Martin Luther King (both senior and junior) of Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta; and Cardinal John O'Connor of New York's Saint Patrick's Cathedral—have served as prominent spokespersons for their religious communities on public issues, and their cathedrals or churches have become closely identified with them as civic centers. Urban churches, beginning with the Social Gospel movement in the late nineteenth century, have also frequently sponsored social ministries, providing shelters, soup kitchens, and other means of relief for the homeless, drug addicts, and others in need of assistance. (The

narthex of the elegant St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church on Manhattan's Park Avenue has at times been lined with cots for those with no other shelter.)

Yet another function of religious buildings is to function as burial sites. In colonial or later rural churches, parishioners were often buried in plots immediately adjoining the church. In some cases, interment has actually taken place within the house of worship itself on the medieval model; the mortal remains of Woodrow Wilson, for example, reside in an aisle of the National Cathedral, and many churches especially in the South have walls bedecked with commemorative plaques sacred to deceased congregational members, even though their actual bodies lie elsewhere. Another approach involves the columbarium—from the Latin for “dove cote”—in which the ashes of the deceased repose in small cubicles within the parish plant. In a few cases, such ashes may be collectively buried in a plot next to the church building. In most cases, though, the remains of the deceased in whatever form are buried in cemeteries, whether denominational or non-sectarian, which are often arranged in a park-line atmosphere reflecting new attitudes towards the dead and the natural order generated by early nineteenth-century romanticism.

So far, we have been using the word “churches” ambiguously—mainly to speak of houses of worship generically, but, as the word itself usually suggests, places of Christian worship. Even the latter, as should be clear by now, are by no means homogeneous, but run the gamut from domus dei to domus ecclesiae, from Russian Orthodox to Pentecostal, with quite a number of variations in between. However, even though the population of the United States had always been predominantly Christian, other religious groups with the own distinctive places for worship have gradually augmented the nation's religious landscape. Although there is not space here to discuss every group represented in the nation—nearly all are—it may be worth noting a few of

the more distinctive features of those religious traditions that have made a significant mark, from Jews—present in small numbers from the beginning—to Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus, who have arrived in significant waves primarily since the revision of immigration quotas in 1965.

Jews in the United States (and to a lesser degree elsewhere) have divided themselves into three major denominations, or traditions—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—and do not agree on terminology for their places of worship. The two latter, and more traditional, groupings use synagogue, a Greek-derived word adopted during the time of Jewish dispersion among the Hellenistic Empire and signifying a place of public assembly (though some Orthodox congregants still refer to the actual edifice using the Yiddish designation, shul). More liberal Reform Jews, on the other hand, deliberately chose in the nineteenth century the term temple, even though their places of worship have little in common with that built by Solomon in ancient Jerusalem. They use the name rather to make the point that the normative condition of Jews is diaspora, or dispersion throughout the world, and that the ancient dream of restoring the Jerusalem temple should be abandoned. In American practice, this verbal distinction has not been reflected in architectural expression. The latter, however, has been problematic since Jews, so long accustomed to living amidst gentile host cultures, have never developed a distinctive architectural style. Rather, beginning with the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1763, American Jewish building has adapted the styles of their Christian neighbors. By the mid-nineteenth era, urban synagogues/temples were often designed in an eclectic combination of Gothic, Romanesque, and Moorish (that is, Mediterranean Islamic) elements. Since World War II, new Jewish construction, overwhelmingly suburban, has employed the techniques of architectural modernism and, in keeping with Jewish aniconic tradition, avoids the

representation of the deity in material form. In terms of interior design, more traditional Jewish houses of worship, beginning with the Touro Synagogue and continued especially among ultra-Orthodox or Hasidic Jews, segregate women in balconies, sometimes even with porous screens, while men are seated on the ground level. While seating arrangements vary somewhat among Jewish groups, virtually every synagogue or temple has a bema, or reading platform; an Ark of the Covenant, in which are kept the sacred Torah scrolls when not in liturgical use; and a Ner Tamid, or eternal light.

If Christians of all stripes are counted together, Jews have for long been the second largest religious community in the United States. Recently, however, immigration from the Middle East and south Asia has increased the American Muslim population to a number approaching and possibly exceeding that of American Jews. As with other religious newcomers, American Muslims have often adapted to American circumstances by converting any conveniently available space, such as a house or storefront, into use as a mosque, or place for worship. As the Muslim community has grown and prospered, however, it has erected mosques specifically designed for the purpose of Islamic worship. On the exterior, such mosques frequently incorporate the traditional elements of design utilized in Muslim countries, such as a dome and minaret, or tower from which the call to prayer is issued five times daily (where local practice permits). The interior of the mosque is an open area where believers may prostrate themselves in prayer. As in Judaism, figural representation is prohibited, but the walls may be decoratively inscribed with geometric designs or verses in Arabic from the Qu'ran. Also as in the most traditional forms of Judaism, space is separated along gender lines, with women often relegated to a basement level. The only other features are likely to be a minbar, or pulpit, oriented to Mecca, and a mihrab (or qiblah), that is, a niche indicating the direction of Mecca, the holy city of Islam, and thus pointing the

faithful quite literally in the right direction—a particularly important reminder in a non-Muslim society such as the United States. Facilities for ritual ablution and temporary storage of shoes may be found at the entrance to the worship space. Accompanying the mosque may be an Islamic center—similar to Jewish community centers—which provide educational and recreational facilities for an area’s Muslim community. Since in larger metropolitan areas that community is likely to be drawn from a wide variety of Muslim countries, the style of design may represent an accommodation to these distinctly North American cultural circumstances.

The same is true of Hindu temples in the United States, which have in recent years begun to appear in many major metropolitan areas—usually suburbs—but which differ in some important ways from their South Asian prototypes. Typical American temples may include a gorupa, or tiered gate, suggestive of the Himalayan mountains, and a garbha-griha (literally, “womb-house”), which contains images of a variety of Hindu divinities. A major different between North American and South Asian temples is that the latter are usually dedicated to a particular deity associated with a particular place; the former, much like Muslim centers, have to accommodate immigrants from all across India, and therefore often feature a wide variety of images. These are usually found along the periphery of an open hall; instead of communal worship, priests are generally engaged by individual families to perform rituals (pujas) in front of favored images or else in homes.

Buddhist temples in North America vary considerably, given the wide variety of ethnic groups which practice particular sorts of Buddhism as well as a multitude of native converts usually attracted to Zen or Tibetan varieties. A Zen meditation center will generally have no images, but rather feature an open space for the practice of zazen. Temples in traditions that emphasize devotion rather than meditation may

feature a prominent image of the Buddha on a central altar, which becomes a focus for chanting. Flanking this central figure often are subsidiary images of various “saints” such as arhants and bodhisattvas. Nichiren temples will have an altar featuring a copy of the Lotus Sutra, a particularly sacred text for them, while Tibetan temples may have prayer wheels as an aid to meditation. The interior of some older Pure Land temples may resemble a Christian church, with pews, an organ, and hymnals, although the image of Buddha Amitabha and murals of the Pure Land, though similarly placed, differ markedly in content from those that might be found in a Christian church. Also prominent in Japanese Pure Land temples are images of the denominational founders, such as saints Honen and Shinran. Exteriors may reflect a variety of national styles, including a pagoda-shaped or egg-shaped (stupa) elevation on the roof.

Still further discussion could be given to other recent religious imports, such as Jainism and Sikhism, or to the distinctive iconography of Latino Catholic churches; the variety of American religious design, like American religions themselves, is endless. We might end with a few more generic thoughts about the levels of interpretation that might profitably be brought to bear on any particular example of religious architecture:

1. Material. All religious buildings are made of specific materials, and sited in particular settings. This material level of composition is the most basic, and tells us significant things of an economic and geographical sort.

2. Functional. Religious buildings are erected as appropriate shelters for particular forms or ritual activity, as well as related educational, charitable, and other works mandated by particular traditions. Reading the interior layout of a building and inventorying the liturgical apparatus that accompanies it can give us a good sense of which tradition is being served and what its physical needs may be.

3. Stylistic. All buildings beyond shacks and hovels possess some sort of design,

however rudimentary, which is seldom entirely original. The sources of a particular building's design may include particular national and ethnic as well as religious traditions, and may also reveal linkages to either "high style" or vernacular building modes in the "secular" realm.

4. Symbolic. A religious building may symbolize a number of things, from the relationship of its worshipers to what they regard as the sacred to their relationship with the broader social and political community in which they are situated. Religious symbolism may be overt, as in the use of stained glass images or crosses atop a steeple, or indirect, as in the absence of such overt symbols.

Further Reading

The author's bibliographical essay on American religious building compiled for the Material History of American Project Newsletter is available on the Web.² In the area of styles and elements, Paul and Tessa Clowney's Exploring Churches is British-oriented but provides a useful guide to style, ornament, and implement, as well as a brief history of Christian religious building.³ Marcus Whiffen's, American Architecture Since 1780 is useful in identifying the major styles of American building, including churches and synagogues.⁴ A more extensive discussion of architectural styles in American historical context is Alan Gowans's Styles and Types of North American Architecture.⁵ Sarah Hall's The Color of Light, is a good introduction to stained glass.⁶

There are two general surveys of American architecture and religion. The author's Houses of God: Region, Religion and Architecture in the United States surveys the development of American religious building from a regionalist geographical perspective, stressing the impact of ethnicity.⁷ Marilyn J. Chiat's America's Religious

Architecture discusses representative buildings in every state.⁸ Both contain extensive bibliographies. In addition, a few significant studies have been produced recently that are not cited in the bibliographical essay.⁹

Religious buildings, like other sorts, are complex and condensed sources of meaning and need to be consciously interpreted, using a variety of tools derived from liturgical theology as well as from social and architectural history. That act of interpretation may in turn reveal a great deal about a particular house of worship and its builders and users, possibly more than they ever consciously intended.

NOTES

1. The author wishes to acknowledge valuable suggestions from Grant Barber, Aaron Hughes, Jeanne Kilde, Alan Miller, and Liz Wilson.
2. See "The Built Environment of American Religion: The State of the Art," at <http://www.materialreligion.org/journal/archbiblio.html>.
3. Paul and Tessa Clowney, Exploring Churches (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1982).
4. Marcus Whiffen's, American Architecture Since 1780 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).
5. Alan Gowans, Styles and Types of North American Architecture: A Cultural History (New York: Icon Editions, 1992).
6. Sarah Hall, The Color of Light (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago Liturgy Training Publications, 1999).
7. Peter W. Williams, Houses of God: Region, Religion and Architecture in the United States (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
8. Marilyn J. Chiat, America's Religious Architecture (New York: J. Wiley and Sons, 1997).
9. See Karla Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Paul Eli Ivey, Prayers in Stone: Christian Science Architecture in the United States, 1894-1930 (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1999); David Kaufman, Shul With a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999); Jeanne Halgren Kilde, Church Becomes Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century

America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).