The Bloomsbury Reader in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture

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Sacred Space

It is not uncommon to walk into a space and feel that it is in some way different from other spaces. Maybe it's the lighting (or lack of lighting); maybe it's the sounds (or lack of sounds). Maybe it is what other people are doing (or not doing) in that space. Traditionally, the space has been connected to religion—cathedrals are famous for eliciting these kinds of feelings, as are other large houses of worship and shrines—but in the modern world, sometimes it's not. Maybe the space is related to temporal power, like legislative or judicial buildings, or patriotic memorials, or locations connected to cultural heroes, like sports and media celebrities. Maybe the space is outdoors and connected to a sense of natural power. Whatever the type of space, it is quite common for those who experience it as indescribably different to designate it as "sacred," by which (at the very least) they mean that they want to separate it from other, seemingly less important places. At the very most, those who designate a space as "sacred" are communicating something about the space as "space beyond space," or space that, by virtue of something extraordinary having happened there (often involving contact with powers beyond human), has been reconceived from being space that is useful (i.e., "full of uses") to space that is meaningful (i.e., "full of meaning"). Its "meaning" is now not only greater than other, more "use-filled" spaces, but it is world orienting, at least for those who experience it as sacred.

Central to the notion of sacred space is its difference from profane (mundane, or what we might consider ordinary) space; boundaries between the profane (ordinary) and the sacred—and the thresholds people cross over to get from one to the other—are often the focus of scholarly analysis. Often these boundaries are easiest to identify by our experiences of them when we have crossed from one state into the other. To put it in visual terms, in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), viewers know that the beginning of the story is filmed in black and white but may only realize how stark are the differences between Dorothy's life in Kansas and her adventures in Munchkinland when she opens the door, and everything is in color. Often it is only after we have entered into a different kind of space that we notice the difference; the contrast with what we just left brings it to our attention. That's why we often don't consider where we live—the actual place of our habitation, wherever we are already—to be sacred space; we live there, so we rarely cross a profane/sacred threshold. Even Dorothy must venture all the way to Oz just to find out that "there's no place like home." We may readily admit that there are people who live in sacred spaces, but we usually are quick to point out that they are often religious folks themselves: Ethiopian monks, for example, who live on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, one of the more sacred Christian

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shrines in Jerusalem. But most of us are not monks, and so while most of us may visit sacred places, we don't live in them. Or so we tell ourselves.

Maybe this is why identifying as sacred the places that we visit—what we might call "non-residential" spaces—is easier than identifying as sacred the places in which we ("normal" folks, not monks) live, and thus a "durable form" in the study of religion and popular culture. We can go to locations in the natural world—Niagara Falls, for example—and be so overwhelmed by their grandeur and beauty that it seems obvious why some might consider them sacred (see Sears 1989). We can visit religious sites—even ones that are sacred to religions that are not our own, like the Mahabodhi Temple, in Bodh Gaya (India), where the Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment—and be so awed by the piety of others there that we can feel why it is sacred. We can travel to secular sites—maybe the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York City—and sense the power of a modern shrine. We can go on a journey to a sacred city in a distant land—Bodh Gaya, Jerusalem, Mecca, Varanasi (also in India), Vatican City—and appreciate its atmosphere of sacredness. But most of us don't live in these cities, and so "sacred space" seems to remain a category of some place you go to rather than some place where you already are.

There is no doubt that "sacred space" is one of the foundational categories in the academic study of religion, and a quick internet search will reveal that, even in the case of a nontraditional spaces, it is not overwhelmingly difficult to make a case for the sacredness of "shrines" like Elvis's Graceland, or Chicago's Wrigley Field. It would seem that, in the study of religion and popular culture, it is a greater challenge to consider the sacredness of the spaces where we are, to make sense of our own spaces, where the sacred may seem foreign and the mundane might seem overwhelming.

Space as Map

If we were to go to a "sacred" city like Mecca and look around, we would see the people who live there; like any city, it has residents who live there, who work there, who sleep, and eat, and bathe, and engage in other societal and bodily functions there. Because non-Muslims are prohibited from entering Mecca, and this city is the holiest in Islam, they live every day knowing that their city is a sacred city, yet (one imagines) they also worry about buying groceries, paying the rent, being late to work because of traffic, and so on. To some extent, the presence of the profane is part of every sacred space. It would seem reasonable to assert, then, that sacred space—of almost any size—is layered space, and one of the layers is the not-sacred lives folks live as they do or do not function in the sacred layers. The presence of the profane (non-sacred or mundane) does not negate the sacredness of a location; instead, it introduces to us the possibility that the sacred may coexist within nonreligious spaces, even those of more recent, nontradition-based vintage.

One of the more gripping stories retold by Eliade in his 1959 classic *The Sacred and the Profane* is of the Achilpa, a nomadic people who wander according to the seasons and the movement of food supply across the Australian Outback (1959: 32–4). According to Eliade, these people take with them a sacred wooden pole—representative of their community's encounter with the divine, the beyond-human—wherever they go. When they settle for a period of time, they plant the pole as the center of their dwelling space and organize their village according to

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the cardinal directions around it. If we leave aside any prejudice we might feel toward a culture identified as nomadic—particularly ironic given most Americans' genealogical roots in cultures from other places, as well as our own political history of "westward expansion" and modern mobility—we see that the habit of organizing our living space like the Achilpa is not so unusual. The streets of Manhattan form a directional grid, as do the streets of numerous other American cities and towns. If the Achilpa (and, by extension, planners of cities around the world) are any indication, then sacred space is not only layered space, but it is also "mapped" space—space that is a diagram of how the world (not only profane but sacred as well) should be organized, and orienting us in the whatever cosmos is "layered" on the same (or overlapping) space.

There's another issue to consider. According to Eliade, at some point the Achilpa pole broke, and the members of the community "wandered about aimlessly for a time, and finally lay down on the ground and waited for death to overtake them" (33). The broken connection between the land they occupied and their beyond-human source of meaning meant that the people were both religiously and literally lost, even if (by virtue of being nomads) they were not physically lost. Again, this does not, on its face, seem far-fetched. On one level, we often succumb to the "poetry" of the sacred and romanticize the religious behaviors of others, particularly if (on some level) we admire their "simpler," more devout lifestyle. Eliade's retelling of the Achilpa story is so nearly mystical that we *want* to believe it, to believe that there are still people in the world whose attachment to their religious ideals is so profound that they're willing to do what we all know we should do if we believe something is so important, so central to our way of understanding the cosmos. On another level, we live among people who have—metaphorically, at least, or historically—experienced something similar to the breaking of the Achilpa sacred pole: Native Americans who were forcibly relocated onto lands designated for them by the American government, and Africans forced into slavery in countries across the Middle Passage. Like the Achilpa, these peoples were torn away from their sacred poles—the lands where they were in direct contact with their divine energies—and as a result have experienced geographic dislocation and cosmic disorientation within their world.

Politics of Sacred Space

But sometimes the near-mystical nature of sacred space—and our desire to believe in its reality—blinds us to the reality of the world and how it often works despite the high ideals of the pious. First, at least one person chose not to lie down to await death: the person who related the story to the explorers whom Eliade quotes. Second, why do we assume that the people who lay down to await death actually waited that long? Maybe they waited for what they felt was an appropriate length of time—an hour, maybe two—before getting up and getting another pole, fixing the one they had, or settling for the larger of the two remaining pieces. It is a desire to see space as sacred—and therefore, to treat it in the way that we feel it should be treated—that leads us to believe (naively) that these people would rather die than to believe that, like most of us, they'd actually just deal with the situation and move on.

The disjunction between what we want to believe and what might actually be the case is part of the debate of sacred space generally. One side, most often represented by Eliade, conceptualizes sacred space as *sui generis*, as being of its own existence, inherently sacred; in other words, sacred space is sacred space because it is . . . well, sacred. Some who follow

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this argument, like Belden Lane (2001), argue that the relationship between a particular space and a particular person (or group of people) is dynamic, and that this dynamism (possibly experienced at some times and not at others) is what makes the space sacred. The other side of the sacred space argument, often traced to Emile Durkheim (1912/1995), might agree (to a point) with scholars like Lane—that the relationship between the space and the person is dynamic—but would certainly disagree that the two elements (person and space) are equal participants in that dynamism. Durkheim—and those whose arguments follow from him, like Jonathan Smith (1987) or David Chidester and Ed Linenthal (1995)—argue that spaces become sacred as a result of social processes which are engaged for very specific purposes: affirmations or contests over power, or meaning, or significance of a space and what it means or reflects about those engaged in the conflicts.

The Durkheim-related argument illustrates what some call the "politics of the sacred." If sacred space is both layered and mapped, it is almost inevitable that there will be conflicts at the edges of the layers, and over the meaning of the maps that are the result of declaring a space sacred. While some might consider a space to be sacred, others might consider it to be just a space like any other; or "Group B" might find a space to be sacred, but for reasons entirely different from those of "Group A"—reasons that might discount, or even refute, the reasons of "Group A." Thus not only is there a level of subjectivity in determining the sacred, but there is also the potential for conflict over that space, either between folks who see a space as sacred and those who do not, or between those who see it as sacred for one reason and those who see it as sacred for another. The very act of identifying a location as sacred is itself an assertion of power over that space; analyses of "sacred" spaces from Jerusalem to Mt. Rushmore bear this out.

But the conflict does not necessarily have to be obvious—or even visible—in public, and the presumption that it must be is a misreading of this argument; the lack of any appearance of conflict does not negate that space's chances of being considered sacred. It is unlikely that one could find a space that was not party to some kind of conflict—tension might be a better word—even if it is only within the minds or psyches of those who consider it sacred. Graceland is a good example; the property was purchased and owned by Elvis Presley, and while there may be some neighbors who wish it did not attract as many visitors as it does, they are hardly noticeable at the location. Rather, the "conflicts" that make this final home and resting place sacred for the thousands of fans who visit it every year are the larger, cultural tensions over what Elvis might have represented, to the fans and to the culture in which both Elvis and those fans functioned. Did Elvis's music sound "too Black" (the reason for which his music was initially banned from "Whites' only" radio stations)? Was he "too sexual" (the reason he was not permitted to be filmed on early television appearances)? Was his music (rock 'n' roll, in the general sense) blasphemous? These were important questions surrounding those who adored him, as well as those who abhorred him; his home is simply the focus of the tensions between them (see Doss 1999).

Durable Form: City as Sacred Space

According to historian Karen Armstrong (2005), Jerusalem was a city nearly 2,000 years before the Common Era (BCE). By the time we encounter it in the Tanakh (Hebrew

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scripture, roughly comparable to the Old Testament in Christianity), it is a city within—but not controlled by—the Tribe of Benjamin also known as "Jebus" because it was controlled by the Jebusites (see Judg. 19:7-12). David, whose initial capital was Hebron (II Sam. 2:1), takes Jerusalem after he is recognized as the King of Israel and Judah (meaning all of the Tribes; see II Sam. 5:3-9). The city becomes both the political and the religious capital of the kingdom when David's son Solomon is empowered to construct the Holy Temple there (I Chr. 28:3-6). In 586 BCE, that Temple is destroyed and the city is conquered by the Babylonian Empire, which less than a century later is in turn defeated by the Persian Empire, whose king (Cyrus) permits the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple (II Chr. 36:23), which is destroyed by the Roman Empire in the first century of the Common Era. In 637, only five years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim Empire under Caliph Umar takes the city from the remnants of the Roman Empire and holds it until 1099, when Christian Crusaders capture it. It is retaken by the Muslim Empire in the middle of the thirteenth century, with whom it remains (for the most part) until the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War.

The city most familiar to nonresidents today is known familiarly as the "Old City," the area within thick walls constructed in the mid-1500s under the direction of Suleiman the Magnificent. It is, in many ways, a strong example of what we might expect in a "sacred" city. It is subdivided—uneven geometrically, but most precariously balanced politically—into four "quarters": Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Armenian, with each "quarter" centered on a site of central sacredness to that community. The Muslim and Jewish "quarters" are adjacent to the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif' (where stood the Holy Temple, and now stand the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock [mosque]), and the Christian "quarter" contains the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is the center of the liturgical universe for Jews (who pray in the direction of the city and whose prayers still recall a return to Jerusalem; see Psalm 137), the third holiest city in Islam, and a Christian pilgrimage destination since before the Muslim conquest. For some, it is sacred because of its contents: for Jews, it is a city built upon the cornerstone of the world, beneath the remnants of the First and Second Holy Temples; for Muslims, it is built on the location where Muhammad ascended to heaven during his "Night Journey" from Mecca; and for others, it is where Jesus entered the last part of his ministry on Earth, where he was arrested, crucified, entombed, and transcended death. It is an ancient city in the midst of a modern city, the "City of Peace" in the midst of the most difficult of conflicts.

Maybe because Jerusalem has been, for many people, a tradition-based sacred space that they might visit rather than the city in which they live, it became a transferable model—a symbolic, layered map—of sacred space. This is particularly true for Protestants in the New World, who were removed from the city by centuries of Muslim control. Puritans, who saw themselves as the new generation of Hebrews escaping enslavement in Pharaoh's Egypt (England) by crossing the Red Sea (the Atlantic Ocean), understood North America to be the new Promised Land. But while the Puritans (and early colonists) understood this comparison figuratively—as a metaphor for the people occupying the land and their religious mission related to it—others understood it literally. The Book of Mormon, the central scripture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, describes a family's journey from Jerusalem to the New World in the sixth century BCE, before the Babylonian destruction of the city and the Holy Temple therein. Transferring the sacred geography of the Middle East onto the New

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World, Mormons physically remapped both the beginning and end of all of human history onto Missouri: the Garden of Eden was determined to be located in Spring Hill (see Doctrine & Covenants 116), and the New Jerusalem—the land of Zion, the land promised by God to Abraham and his descendants, wherein the faithful would be gathered and made a great nation—was determined to be located in Independence (see Doctrine and Covenants 57: 1–3). By late summer 1833, Mormon leader and prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. had authorized a plan for the "City of Zion," arranged very much like the Achilpa encampment: oriented to the cardinal directions, square city blocks making square city neighborhoods, all sounding the city's Mormon Temple, which would be its geographic and spiritual center. Smith's lynching in 1844 precipitated the Mormon relocation to the basin of the Great Salt Lake and the remapping of the Promised Land from Missouri to the Utah Territory. Like the Puritans (and their model, the Hebrews), the Mormons settled the land and gave the spaces names with which they were familiar: drawn from important members of the Mormon community (such as Brigham City, Cannonville, and Heber City), figures from the Old Testament (such as Canaan Mountain, Eden, Hebron, Jordan River, and Moab), and figures from the Book of Mormon (such as Bountiful, Kolob Canyon, Lehi, Manti, Moroni, and Nephi). Unlike the Puritans—who in Protestant fashion saw the New Jerusalem not as a location but as a metaphoric reference to God's elect—but very much like the Hebrews, the Mormons established Salt Lake City as their New Jerusalem, both the political and the sacred center of the Mormon cosmos. Streets and plazas, secular and sacred structures would be organized according to a grid pattern aligned to the cardinal directions, with the Mormon Temple at the conceptual center (i.e., the point at which the streets converge) if not the geographic center. Encouraging visitors to the Chicago World's Fair to venture westward, an 1893 pamphlet published by the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad Company made the connection explicit, describing how, as you travel from Denver,

> you behold the silver sheen of Utah Lake, the great body of fresh water which is the sea of Tiberias in the Promised Land. Its outlet is the Jordan River, which empties into the Great Salt Lake and completes the strange parallel which exists between the ancient Canaan and the modern Deseret. (20)

If the words were not enough, the pamphlet included an image comparing the Great Salt Lake and Utah Lake on one side and the Sea of Galilee and Dead Sea on the other, with a caption reading "A Striking Comparison! The Holy Land and Utah" (15).

But as much as Mormons may have intended to emulate Jerusalem, Salt Lake City seems to emulate the capital of the nation with whose powers the Mormons were—for the first century of their existence—in increasing tension. The City of Washington, in the District of Columbia, was officially created out of nothing by Article I, section 8 (clause 17) of the Constitution of the United States. It was envisioned as a perfect square (10 miles by 10 miles), at the near center of the new Republic much like Jerusalem had been at the near center of the land controlled by the Twelve Tribes. Unlike Jerusalem, Washington did not require conquering—there had been a native presence, but it was long pacified by the presence of numerous forts, as well as the villages of Georgetown and Alexandria. By carving the capital city from Maryland and Virginia and making it a federal district rather than a city within a state, the planners hoped to avoid the territorial power issues that David could avoid by placing Jerusalem in a conquered Jebusite city. The city's design was a blend of influences, including Greek, Roman, and French, the latter providing the model for the city's street-level

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atmosphere. Drawing from the model as old as the Achilpa, the streets of Washington were organized according to the cardinal directions. Numbered streets were to go north-south, lettered streets to go east-west, all of which were focused by a crosshair created by the intersection of North, South, and East Capitol Streets—with what would have been "West Capitol Street" being cultivated into the Mall. All of the numbers and letters increased from the central point, the Capitol Building on Capitol Hill, the American "sacred pole" by which the American people mapped their cosmos. This sacred center—of Washington, DC, and American democracy—reaffirmed the supremacy of the legislative branch (and within it the "People's House," a reference to the House of Representatives who were, originally, the only element of the federal government directly elected by "the people"). The Mall, which today takes one from the base of Capitol Hill to the Potomac, is a celebration of human—but mostly American—accomplishments contained in the various buildings of the Smithsonian Institution, as well as the most profound recognition of American greatness as represented in the monuments and memorials also situated thereon.

Layers, Maps, and Tensions

It is useful to remember the lessons of feminist and orientalist scholars who have brought to our attention the importance of including not only the voices of those who have been marginal (or marginalized) but also the views of them among those who have considered them, or kept them, or made them marginal. Conversations about Jerusalem, Salt Lake City, and Washington, DC, are no different. All three—sacred in their own way, yet profane, ordinary cities in which people live everyday lives—have characteristics drawn from an Eliadean vision of sacred space. Not least of these is the sense that believers—adherents of the Abrahamic faiths, Mormons, and patriotic American citizens, respectively—sense the sacredness of these cities as virtually inherent in their very existence. Yet all three function as temporal power centers, capital cities of Israel, Utah, and the United States. All three retain in their sacred memories the tensions that are understood to be at the core of their being, be it between Jews and non-Jews (or, in the same space, Muslims and non-Muslims, and Christians and non-Christians), Mormons and non-Mormons, or (more complicatedly) between different understandings of who is an authentic "American." Together they are home to millions, yet the "sacred" narratives of each of them rely on one group's ability to overwhelm another. Studies of the sacred nature of Washington, DC, for example, are rich, maybe because they take into account the complex nature of the city's role in American culture. It is not coincidental, for example, that Washington came to more closely resemble an Eliadean sacred space as its role in the American political and cultural power structure expanded. Disaster and war—and the power of the federal government to respond to them—played an important role. Having given the section south of the Potomac back to Virginia before the Civil War, the District was better able to realize many of the original plans for the city after the conclusion of the Civil War—that is, after the federal government exerted its authority over renegade states. Many of the solemn and celebratory edifices on and around the Mall were the result of building projects sponsored by the federal government in response to the Great Depression and the Second World War. Even the highway system that rings the city—reinforcing the intentional space of the District by circling the square—

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was not fully realized until after the Second World War. One could argue that the sacredness of the nation's capital increased not only as a direct result of its growing role in national and international affairs but also on the backs of those who were defeated.

If we can do this with Jerusalem, Salt Lake City, and Washington, DC, then we can do it with almost anywhere people live. Eliade argues that one of the powers of the sacred is that it defies geometric limitations: "Whatever the extent of the territory involved, the cosmos that it represents is always perfect" (1959: 42). In other words, the "sacredness" of a space is not diminished by expanding that sacredness into larger spaces. The Kaaba, the structure considered by Muslims to be the center of the cosmos and the cornerstone upon which the foundation of the world was built, is undeniably sacred. But so, too, is the Masjid al-Haram (the Sacred Mosque), the complex of buildings of which the Kaaba is a part. And so, too, is the entire city of Mecca wherein one finds the Masjid al-Haram, and the Kaaba therein. Not only are non-Muslims prohibited from approaching the Kaaba, not only are non-Muslims prohibited from entering the Masjid al-Haram but so, too, are non-Muslims prohibited from entering Mecca. The city is, in a very real way, just as sacred as the smaller areas within it. With each expansion of space there is an equal expansion of the sacred—it is neither diminished nor diluted. This means that, at least according to Eliade, while the shrine, and its building, and its city, are concentric circles of expanding geographic space, each expanding circle is nonetheless equally sacred to the previous one.

Maybe this is the case for Washington, DC, home of many "sacred" shrines and spaces; it must also be the case for other dwelling areas. Among the more obvious targets for such analysis are those cities built specifically to be a nation's capital—"purpose-built" cities, like Brasília (see Tauxe 1996). But so are other "intentional" (if temporary) "cities," like Black Rock City, home of the Burning Man Festival, or "the Land," (in Oceana County, Michigan), the site of the now-defunct Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. However, there is always the danger of overextending the analysis; sometimes spaces are just spaces that may not withstand scrutiny for any level of sacredness. Even meticulous intentional planning does not automatically make a city sacred; in 1958, California City, California, was carefully plotted, and its streets marked out over an area larger than Chicago, but today it is a near ghost town (Budds 2017). All too often—particularly in an attempt to define a novel space as sacred—researchers overlook an important element; while the definition of "sacred" may be subjective, it still helps if it is seen that way by more than just the investigator. In their sacred space analysis of Walt Disney World, Eric Mazur and Tara Koda acknowledge the conference participant who, upon hearing a presentation of their work, noted that she did not consider the place to be sacred, even after numerous trips there (2011: 321 n2). This does not necessarily mean the analysis is flawed; it just proves that sacred or not, spaces large and small are subject to differing interpretations because they are not "obviously" sacred.

Postscript

This chapter was written as governments around the world were responding to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. One way that governments responded was by ordering people to "shelter in place," requiring them to become near shut-ins to help lessen the spread

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of the coronavirus. Most of those who fell under these orders were Christians and Jews who were about to celebrate the holidays of Easter and Pesah, two holy days that require engagement—in church or at home—with fellow adherents. Those who could—students, teachers, and those who worked in information-related industries—reorganized their lives by relocating their work, prayer, and even communal rituals and meals onto online platforms like Zoom and Google. These platforms (and others) facilitated not only the exchange of information and ideas but also the possibility of "real-time" classes, meetings, rituals, and social gatherings that were now prohibited by local, state, and federal authorities in accordance with medical experts who were advocating physical distancing. It seemed that lives that were no longer permitted in physical space were now relocated into the "virtual" world; even religious institutions reconfigured rituals to accommodate the new circumstances.

Studies of whether and how the sacred might exist in cyberspace date back to the early years of the Internet age. The reality of being homebound provided a keen reminder that, regardless of one's knowledge of, or experience with, social media platforms before the rise of the pandemic, with no other alternatives, those who sought the sacred either had to do without, or they had to make their own. The fact that some chose to do so—and could—online and from home reminds us that the category of sacred space is not only mapped, layered, and a location to confront tensions but also transferrable.

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