

Sacred Space

URSULA RAO

University of Leipzig, Germany

Mircea Eliade (1961) begins his classical study of the sacred and the profane with a chapter on sacred space. He conceives of sacred spaces as opposite to profane spaces. They consist of spiritual centers that break up the homogeneity and neutrality of geographical space and by doing so provide nodal points around which cultural universes can be constructed. Sacred spaces are ambivalent. They are located in the here and now and at the same time function as openings, thresholds, portals to another world, a world of gods and spirits, a larger universe, the cosmos. This formulation encapsulates the conflicting conceptualization of religious sites as simultaneously places and spaces. In social geography space and place are posed as opposites. Places are demarcated locations that result from homemaking activities. People inscribe their individual or collective selves into a territory and thereby create meaning and identity. In contrast space is conceived as nonmaterial and expansive. It is unspecific, unmarked and boundless. While religious space is often identified with concrete places it is also endless, extending the human world into another realm. Religious action demarcates sacred sites. The latter root people and divine powers in a shared territory. However, while they belong to people, they are not constrained by the limits of the human world. In order to comprehend the ways in which spiritual power is enshrined in landscapes it is useful to consider their association with material objects, collective rituals, and bodily orientations.

Religious sites, buildings, and landscapes

Architectonic constructions, such as temples, churches, synagogues, mosque, or shrines are the most obvious permanent markers of sacred space. Other material manifestations of divine power are natural environments that are reserved for spiritual activity. Sometimes trees, stones or the presence of particular animals can indicate the special religious status of a site. Sacred sites are identified or made following complex communication between human and nonhuman agents. For example, among Hindus dreams play a significant role. Believers speak about nightly visions in which they saw particular sites, were informed about divine manifestations, and instructed to build a temple. A different example comes from Iceland, where local inhabitants blame unusual occurrences and accidents at construction sites on elves. Human activity is said to have trespassed on sacred territory, disturbed nonhuman inhabitants, and thus invited misfortune. These two examples illustrate different types of sacred sites. They may be known, demarcated or even embellished, or they could be unknown, hidden, and secret. To identify and appropriately treat sacred sites often requires mediation. Mediums channel

The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Edited by Hilary Callan.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1713

divine instructions about sacred sites, priests consecrate temples or churches, shamans put to rest disturbed sacred territories, and elders define rules for appropriate behavior. Because religious sites enshrine higher powers and communicate essentials about the cosmos, their making is often troubled. The example of contemporary European mosque architecture may illustrate the point.

The desire for a religious infrastructure that caters to the growing number of Muslim citizens in Western Europe creates significant unease. Mosque building activity meets opposition, because it creates a home for unwanted migrants, undermines Christian dominance, or enrages those who identify Islam with violence. Critique is targeted not only at the transformation of visual space but also the infringement on the soundscape. For example, by invoking laws against sound pollution the call for prayer has been banned in several cities in the Netherlands. It has prompted architects to install light signals that emanate from the minaret during the call for prayer (Tamimi Arab 2014). The Muslim community is divided over whether such an innovation is legitimate. Sound has a special meaning in traditional Islam. The spoken word of the Koran is believed to touch the heart and create a pious disposition via the evocation of religious emotions. Vision has no such effect, although some assert that the translucent light is an appropriate representation of God's mysterious presence. Such disagreement highlights crucial characteristics of sacred spaces.

While they are created through human agency, they are also entangled with the meaning, presence, and nature of another power. Because they evoke this power and symbolize a larger unity, they must be adequately structured to fulfill such a task. This situation may cause substantial disagreement. Thus, Brahmin priests in India complain about modern Hindu temples defying all rules laid out for temple architecture in the ancient scriptures; the Catholic church has at times refused popular pilgrimage sites an official recognition as sacred territory; and, in a slightly different context, aboriginals have protested against the making of modern infrastructure, such as a bridge, on their sacred/secret territories. These battles of authority over cosmological orderings reveal the social dimensions of religious space making. As people create sacred landscapes they construct and define communities of believers and demarcate them from nonbelievers. Religious ritual is central to this activity. It roots the sacred in the midst of human community.

Ritual action

Collective rituals enliven religious territory. They may be essential for maintaining the religious aura, even of permanent religious buildings. This point is suggested by the example of abandoned churches that can—once religious activity ceases—be desacralized and then reused as galleries, restaurants or production sites. The status of tourist destinations seems more ambivalent. Sites such as the Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Mesoamerican pyramids, and Stonehenge in England no longer enjoy the regular patronage of a specific religious community and yet the aura of past activities lives on in the notion of religious heritage. These exceptions define the rule that sacred sites are maintained and honored by ritual activities. These manifest in form

of weekly services, seasonal festivals or life-cycle rituals. They are typically associated with cyclical sacred time.

Ritually created spaces can expand and often do so during major celebrations of the ritual calendar. Ritual place then links to religious routes, sacred landscapes, or mediascapes. Typical examples are processions. They spill into the territory outside a demarcated religious site to encompass a larger territory than that belonging to the religious community. Mines (1996) discusses the case of the Beeri Chettiars, a wealthy trader community in Madras, India. The community manages a caste temple in George Town, the community's traditional habitat. It is dedicated to the god Kandasami. During the annual spring festival, the god is taken on a procession starting from the main temple and then touching all lanes and streets inhabited by Beeri Chettiars. The itinerary visually circumscribes the community and articulates relations of power by giving prominent place to important caste leaders who escort the god into the areas of their followers. Through the procession god, temple, community, leadership, and territory are symbolically folded into a hierarchical unity. The temporal presence of the god sanctifies the ground of the community as well as reaffirming divine tutelage and human patronage. In keeping with the changing residential patterns of the community, the procession route has changed several times in the course of history. Periodically, when residential patterns have changed, Beeri Chattiars would enter into tense negotiations with neighboring communities to secure an optimal route that would embrace the community without infringing on the sacred territory of an alien group.

Processions and also pilgrimages resemble religious buildings in that they fix—at least temporarily—an identifiable sacred territory that is distinct from the secular. However, there are also more inclusive notions of sacred space. For example, animistic worldviews construct the entire land as sacralized through the permanent presence of spirits who share a living space with humans. Piers Vitebsky (1993) studies ancestor worship among the eastern Indian tribal community of Soras. After their death, ancestors are believed to continue to live on the land, albeit in another state of being. They nurture the descendants through their spiritual energy that transforms the land and the grain that feeds humans. Yet, ancestors can also trouble their kin by transferring negative experiences of pain and death onto them. Rituals stipulate routines for communicating with the dead. They regulate the joint living of humans and ancestors on the sacred homeland. Such notions of the world as sacralized by the omnipresence of spirits can be found across the world, such as among Siberian adherents of shamanism, Native Indians in American, East Asian Buddhists, or Australian Aborigines. It persists in thoroughly modernized and secularized spaces, as illustrated by the Hungry Ghost Festival in Singapore. On the night of the festival, inhabitants light candles at former burial sites. These are no longer visible to the physical eye because they are covered with modern architecture. Yet, despite urban development the spirits of the dead are believed to linger on. The ocean of candles pacifies the ghosts and invokes an alternative sacred geography that exists beneath the built environment.

We can take the notion of sacred space another step further, beyond its association with territory. This is evident from a whole set of more recent studies of mediatized religion. Religious radio, devotional films, cyber temples, and online prayer meetings extend the religious into virtual space. Ritual action in cyberspace creates religious

mediascapes and can have consequences also for the physical environment. For example, the mushrooming of temples dedicated to the Goddess Santoshi Mata in India is a direct outcome of the depiction of her life story in a popular feature film. In a very brief time the film catapulted the little-known regional goddess to national fame and fueled the making of a new religious cult with its own infrastructure of mythologies, fasts, and religious sites. Mayfair Yang (2004) too describes the imbrication of virtual and physical sacred space. Her case is located in East Asia. In the year 2000, a pilgrimage took Taiwanese devotees of the Goddess Mazu across the internationally contested terrain of the Taiwan Straits to the goddess's central shrine in Meizhou Island (Chinese Fujian Province). The popular pilgrimage was widely publicized by Taiwanese media. The broadcast also reached homes in mainland China, a country that, owing to state censorship, is less exposed to religious television. The popular consumption of the unusual event created a unified religious space that transcended the political enmity between China and Taiwan.

All three perspectives on sacred space as site, territory, and landscape illustrate the political nature of religious activity. The effect of religious space making can be counterhegemonic, as shown in the cases of Singapore, China, and Taiwan. It also typically roots diasporic communities in foreign countries, such as when Nigerian Pentecostals create a religious home in a foreign territory through the importation of their inherited religious music, or when on Sundays Catholic Filipino housekeepers in Israel cook, eat, and pray together in a shared Asian space in the heart of Tel Aviv, away from their usual residences in the houses of their Jewish employers. Subversive religion or minority observances are but two variants of a range of political statements espoused through religious action. Typical is the association of sacred space with power. For example, religiously sanctioned royal lineages maintain elaborate spatialized rituals that link territory to power. An example is Clifford Geertz's (1980) study of the historical state of Negara. A series of ritualized gift exchanges during calendrical celebrations link the royal family to their tutelary deities, the community, and territory. By overseeing and orchestrating the renewal of relations between humans, environment, and gods, Balinese royalty act out their superior status and reconfirm their right to domination. On a grander scale these royal rituals do what caste possessions achieve in Madras. They refresh and order relations between human and nonhuman agents and inscribe them into space. Thereby they bless the community, nurture collective memory, and shape relations of power and identity.

Considering the intimate relations between power and sacred space, it is not surprising that war and enmity also shape religious spaces. History is strewn with examples of new reigns seizing sacred spaces in occupied territories. Iconoclasm or the destruction of ritual sites is only one option to demonstrate the beginning of a new order. There are also frequent examples of appropriation of spiritual places through reconstruction or ritual reuse by the new sovereign. In plural societies groups may compete for religious sites. For example, India has a long history of Hindu/Muslim riots triggered by conflict over ritual space, such as when a Muslim procession has trespassed visually, orally, and materially on the sacred ground near a temple or when Muslims dressed in pristine white on their way to Friday prayers have been assaulted with color during the Hindu

Holi celebration when people throw powdered dyes and colored water at each other and Muslims are seen as fair game as soon as they leave their houses.

Spiritual bodies

A community is made up of individual bodies and the making of sacred space is thus contingent on their engagement. Bodies channel religious experience and communicate about it. A ritual is made up of concrete physical bodies. People make gods and spirits present by fulfilling roles as priests, spirit media, or members of a congregation. Consider the example of temple dancers in Orissa, India, analyzed by Frédérique Apffel Marglin (1985). The ritual dedicated to the God Jagannath begins with a dressing up routine. It prepares the body of the dancer by cladding her in the bridal outfit of the Goddess Lakshmi. It effects a transformation that sets the stage for the dance. Using a refined vocabulary of gestures and postures the *devadasi* purifies her body–emotion–thoughts during the dance. She distances herself from her own subjectivity and becomes the goddess herself. Attentive devotees partake in this transformation. Through visual engagement they “taste” the divine or they can also roll on the ground that is soaked with the holy sweat of the sanctified body of the dancer goddess. The case illustrates the role of the body as medium. It is the vessel that receives the divine and sanctifies the ground. If the body can transform space, making it sacred, then sacred space too can transform the body. Kathryn Rountree (2002) provides an example. She recounts women’s experiences of self-healing during visits of sacred sites. Women of the Goddess Movement—a modern pagan movement—undertake pilgrimages to archaeological sites and museums endowed with objects associated with ancient goddess worship. They admire the voluptuous bodies of fertility goddesses, circumvent historical altars, and enter Neolithic cave temples. By doing so, they absorb the sacred energy of these sites. Such action engenders a strong emotion of being part of a larger cosmological order that leads to spiritual liberation.

Focus on the body as medium for religious communication draws attention to the relational quality of sacred space. Sacred space emerges in between landscape, object, and body. It can be created ad hoc by orienting the body toward Mecca, performing a yogic pose, opening a holy book, or sprinkling sacred water onto a new car. Nicole Karapanagiotis (2010) describes Hindus in New Jersey who turn a computer into a sacred space by closing all windows before opening the portal of a virtual temple. More enduring is the placing of objects in rooms according to spiritual regulations, such as Feng Shui. The body–object–space relation manifests in time. Sacred sites can have a permanent quality when they store the accumulated energy of a history of past worship, as evidenced by the aforementioned examples. At the other end of the spectrum are spontaneous religious experiences as part of the flow of everyday life. Julian Holloway (2003) shows how adherents of New Age spirituality situationally wrestle sacred space from ordinary space. In line with Marglin’s (1985) study of the sacred gesture she demonstrates how practicing meditation, focusing the mind, or acting ethically can sanctify space-time.

The space-time of the here and now links the individual body to a broader all-encompassing timeless sacredness. Holloway describes an informant who sought to align her lifestyle with a larger cosmological order. The informant recounted the events surrounding the visit of a friend who needed to be picked up from the bus station. After some time the informant gave up waiting at home and drove to the city for her usual shopping trip, when she accidentally stumbled upon her friend just as the friend arrived at the bus stop and was about to ring her. Holloway argues that in this moment of the surprising encounter the informant glimpsed her participation in a larger cosmological order. Her life seemed in line with a sacred rhythm. The here and now became sacred when she realized that things are as they ought to be. Through ethical conduct her life had become part of the cosmological rhythm. However, comprehending the sacredness of ordinary life is contingent on a rupture during which the deeper truth of alignment is brought to consciousness.

This example of time-space alignment takes us back to the initial definition of sacred space as a place that is located in the here and now and simultaneously an endless universe, which expands into both space and time. When analyzed through the lens of bodily practice, sacred space is not constructed in Eliade's sense from an outside position. It is not inserted into a profane space, breaking up its homogeneity, but emerges from within the ordinary. It is always already there. Its experience is mediated by the individual and collective body and hence sacred space is "bound to the ego," as Yi-Fu Tuan (1979, 404) observes. However as "mythical-conceptual space ... it [also] extrapolates beyond sensory evidence and immediate needs to a more abstract structure of the world"; it is conceived as centered on the world so that the human is at the core of an endlessly expanding, complex sacred whole (Yi-Fu Tuan 1979, 404). To grasp the sacred, cultures rely on bodily experience and derive images from physical engagement with space and direction for depicting expansive sacred space.

SEE ALSO: Animism; Built Environment; Christianity; Color; Consciousness, Altered States of; Hunter-Gatherer Cosmologies; Landscape; Phenomenology of Space and the Environment; Pilgrimage; Religion and Economy; Ritual; Sacred Time; Sense of Place; Settlement Patterns; Shintoism; Symbolic Power; Tourism, Travel, and Pilgrimage

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