

Conceptualizing Sacred Space(s). Perspectives from the Study of Culture

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The connection between the concept of ‘sacred’ and the physical settings to which this notion is connected has long been discussed in studies of religion and ritual, as well as other related disciplines. The issue has been approached from a number of disciplinary, theoretical and methodological standpoints, and exemplified through a variety of case studies stemming from different cultures. The international and interdisciplinary symposium aimed to focus on sacred space in a self-reflexive way by bringing into dialogue the multitude of topical and disciplinary perspectives and relating them to the most recent theoretical works on the subject. In line with the concept-based approach to research of the Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen), the invited contributors were encouraged to transcend their disciplinary backgrounds and conventions by focusing on specific concepts, whether by affirming their viability in the study of culture or questioning their analytical rigidity. The intentionally open-ended theoretical scope of the symposium thus enabled scholars of religion and culture, historians, architects and archeologists to jointly examine manifold ways in which these disciplines use the term „sacred“ beyond their respective jargons of specialization. Situated in a spacious room beneath big light bubbles hanging from the roof, the terms that were spoken about – the sacred and, not less obscure, space, place and (sound-, smell-) scapes, detached themselves from texts and names of reference to freely float about participants’ heads, „turning“ around and showing themselves from unknown sides.

In his opening remarks, JENS KUGELE (Giessen) elaborated on the Centre’s concept-

based research of culture, and presented the difficulties of designing the symposium poster, thus relaying the organizing board’s thought process of visualizing the conceptual approach to sacred space(s). The process began with elimination of what was undesirable in presentations of the sacred (in particular a mono-religious approach and common spectacle). Among the questions the board had posed in the process were the following: How to avoid reification and reduction? How to represent/portray absence? How to challenge the dichotomies between the transcultural and the local, the traditional and the modern, the sacred and the profane? Finally, reflecting on various media through which these dichotomies may be negotiated, he brought up the role of text and social media in the understanding of sacred spaces.

In the part of the symposium that was dedicated to rituals, BEATRIZ CATÃO CRUZ SANTOS (Rio de Janeiro) focused on the constitution of public space and performances implemented to render it sacred. More specifically, she probed the role of the *Corpus Christi* processions in 18th century Porto, which originally took place in the streets, but in the mid-18th century were enhanced with the presence of awnings and columns produced by city traders and artisans. The role of the municipal council in their negotiations with the Catholic Church, citizens and gentry brought to the fore the intermingling of various communities in the (re-)construction of public sacred space. By reducing the procession’s mobility to more fixed positions, crowd control and security of the city were facilitated. Since these transformations took place simultaneously in multiple cities, the turn towards greater fixity became an issue of state power and control. NADEZHDA RYCHKOVA (Moscow) attended to clashes between the secular and the religious on Pushkin Square in Moscow. The clash affected two communities – a secular one, to whom the Square was a place of everyday practice, and a religious one, founded in 2006 with the goal of reconstructing the Strasnoi Monastery at its original site. Performing rituals and perpetuating narratives of sacredness, the actors broached the dichotomies of the visible, continuous secular and the invisible, fragmented

sacred space. This spurred the question of what it takes to make a place religious or sacred, and what it takes for this religiousness to be desecrated or destroyed. DIANA HITZKE (Giessen) referred to Foucault's seminal 'Of Other Places' and De Certeau's oft-quoted „Space is a practiced place“ to bridge the arguments of two papers that strongly centered on ritual. She emphasized their performative aspect through comparison to more radical examples, such as Pussy Riot's questioning of sacredness of Russian Orthodox churches. Furthermore, she juxtaposed the performative power of praying with the de-sacralization that might be found in secular acts, such as dancing or kissing. During the discussion, the question emerged on how changes to ritual structure affected architecture, especially its ability to be controlled, as well as what kind of performance was constitutive of sacred spaces (ceremony or ritual), and if these were signs of society's re-sacralization or rather of citizenship gaining agency.

Regarding the peculiarities of archaeological research of sacred spaces, THOMAS MEIER (Heidelberg) pointed out that studies of religion are most often conceptualized as studies of entangled discourses, but the issues occur when there are no linguistic expressions preserved. This problem is often resolved by turning to analysis of material culture, yet even such findings will inevitably be discursive and situational, just like texts. What appears sacred to archaeologists might as well have been, for instance, a prop of a theatrical comedy or of an unknown sports game. Archaeologists thus always have to „tell stories in a controlled way“ – being aware of their own inevitable function as storytellers, filling the gaps in knowledge by narration. He also elaborated on contextually conditioned fluidity of interpretations of material culture by referring to often contradictory criteria employed by archaeologists in ascribing sacredness to specific sites, ranging from natural beauty, long-term usage, to irrational purpose. On the other hand, RUTH BEUSING and KERSTIN P. HOFMANN (both Frankfurt am Main) focused on a specific site, Tara in Ireland. They relied on Lefebvre's triadic theory of space, scrutinizing both pre-

historic and modern practices of spatial marking, naming, mapping, maintaining and protecting. By such comparative and praxeological approach, they argued for acknowledging temporal plurality in constituting a „deep history“ of sacred sites. The commentary by ISABEL TORAL-NIEHOFF (Berlin) and the subsequent discussion drew attention to pitfalls presented by the commercialization and tourist-oriented commodification of sacred spaces that occurs in the recent era.

MARTIN RADERMACHER (Bochum) applied sequential analysis and objective hermeneutics to his investigation of how religious attributes emerge in specific communities, and the role that physical space plays in this process. His two case studies represented the opposite ways in which such socio-spatial arrangements can be constituted. In the case of religious service being performed in cinema, it is the ritual that affects the space, whereas with the event „Songwriter's Church“ in Aachen, it is the opposite (religiously connoted space affects the concerts taking place there). MINA IBRAHIM (Giessen) focused on methodological issues occurring during his ethnographic study of spaces of Christian Copts in Egypt. In his research, he tried to go beyond usual sacred spaces reserved for this minority, and instead wanted to portray them in more „profane“ settings, free of identitarian baggage produced by religious elites, as well as to show the tactics used by Copts in order to be invisible if they needed to be. In his commentary, ANDREAS LANGENOHL (Giessen) pointed out that both papers implicitly pronounced, without mentioning it explicitly, the issue of the very existence of the public sphere. The question was posed if there could ever be a social consensus on the sacredness of a certain spatial setting. The matter of interconnectedness of the processes of sacralization and securitization of space was also brought up. During the discussions, the problems of positionality of the researcher and the (dis)advantages of the emic and etic perspectives were also tackled.

The lecture by MICHAEL STAUSBERG (Bergen) dealt with the emergence of sacred spaces through traumatic events of the 20th century. He provokingly applied the notion

of „sacredness“ to Auschwitz in order to depict the ungraspability of this place, as a symbol of the ineffable. Even the culprits of genocide used metaphors of sacred/profane while „cleansing“ cosmic or racial „impurities“ on a scale transcending the individual lifeworld. By dehumanizing – thus desacralizing – their victims, the Nazis were able to sacralize their imagined ethnic „body“. Some of the topics touched upon during the symposium were revisited, such as the issue of consensus on place’s sacredness, and differing visions of that sacredness (exemplified by contrast between Jewish and Catholic discourses and practices of remembering Auschwitz). Stausberg also drew a distinction between the adjective „sacred“, which has no connection to morality and stands in dichotomous juxtaposition to „profane“ – unlike the term „holy“ which is of a more religious character and can be used in a gradient context.

What makes a place „sacred“ might be the „auratic effects“ of architectural spaces and of works of art. JOHANNA SCHERB’s (Giessen) paper on the display of Gerhard Richter’s *48 portraits* (1972) led the attention away from the singular artwork itself to its arrangement in rooms and halls, which, as an act of composition, brings forth the „aura“ of art, meaning its mood or impression. Critics of the exhibition called it „pseudo-sacral“, but the aura of an artwork, both its „object and medium“, its ability to activate the „energy“ of social values, provides its capability to gain possession of us, which might make art itself one of the modern sacred spaces. In the same panel about visible and invisible imaginations of sacred space, MUHAMED RIYAZ CHEN-GANAKKATTIL (Delhi) presented a more explicitly religious example of „thin places“, wherein the dichotomy of visible/invisible is „eroded“ when worlds of human and non-human beings meet. He elaborated on Jinn Mosques in Delhi, religious sites out of official use, but still visited by Muslims and Hindus alike, to leave handwritten and very personal petitions to deities and spirits. The „aura“ of these places is enacted as religious and „sacred“ not only by visual means, but by stimulations of all senses. In her response to the issues of visibility, invisibility and imagination, DORIS BACHMANN-MEDICK

(Giessen) concluded that sacredness of a place is – as a specific kind of aura – not inherent, but always mediated. She gave the example of the artistic installation *Holy Land* by Kader Attila (2006), to show that the liminal moments of a gaze constitute a sacred space, over-determined with expectations. A hidden reality is meant to be translated into everyday reality. Space thus becomes sacred when it makes the invisible visible and starts to represent the un-representable, whether through art or through haunted ruins.

While discussing architecture and infrastructure of sacred spaces, NENETTE MARIE ARROYO (Charlottesville) presented the artworks of California’s missionary buildings, focusing on how native religions are subversively woven into the texture of a place built and supervised by Christian missionaries to replace them. Their authority thus becomes contested by continued indigenous practice in private places next to churches. To whom a building is sacred was addressed in the presentation of BEATE LÖFFLER (Duisburg) on secular Japanese wedding chapels. More specifically she asked what is sacred about chapels enacting pseudo-Christian wedding ceremonies, as well as the role of architects as experts in manipulating spatial experience. On the other hand, BENJAMIN BRENDEL (Giessen) presented the example of the Grand Coulee Dam to connect the cult of modernity and of „electrical enthusiasm“ with the sacredness of the historically charged space in which the dam was constructed. KATHARINA STORNIG (Giessen) responded by juxtaposing *construction* as such (building techniques) to *constructedness*, both of space and of its sacredness. Focus should thus be on social processes and unequal power relations, wherein associations of places and spaces with sacredness are often political and even deliberate acts of human actors. A central aspect of these processes is the transformation of (religious) identity: „Pagans“ becoming Christians, weddings becoming romantic, and modernity becoming sanctified.

From the hereby presented selection of papers delivered at the symposium, the event eventually focused on the pragmatic importance of reflecting and even deconstructing widely used analytical terms, while continu-

ing to work with them. Interdisciplinary research proves an imperative for operating in such fields, because of the possibility to translate the work to a broader academic audience, as well as for the sake of moving a discipline forward. Another generally acknowledged conclusion was that the „sacred“ – not identical, but related to the „sacral“, the „holy“ or „religiously significant“ – is not simply the opposite of „profane“ or the „immanent“. Giving physical form to the notion of sacred in general, „sacred places“ are the realms of condensed meaning, the situations of multi-layered acts referring to themselves and to many other themes, from most concrete to cosmic. Thus, they do not only contain overdetermined symbols, but are themselves symbolic.

Conference Overview:

Doris Bachmann-Medick / Mina Ibrahim / Jens Kugele / Katharina Stornig (all Giessen): Welcome & Opening Remarks

Panel: Ritual, Power, Performativity, and the Politics of Sacred Space

Beatriz Catão Cruz Santos (Rio de Janeiro): From the Dances to the Awnings and Arches. The Corpus Christi Procession of the Portuguese Empire in the Eighteenth Century

Nadezhda Rychkova (Moscow): Strastnoi Monastery Vs. Pushkin Square. Struggle for the Sacred Space

Response: Diana Hitzke (Giessen)

Keynote Lecture

Birgit Meyer (Utrecht): Religious Matters in Urban Environments. Space and the Study of Co-Existence

Panel: Canon, Legitimacy, Order

Christian Stadelmaier (Giessen): Sacred Space and Its Implications in the Works of Walahfrid Strabo

Margriet Hoogvliet (Groningen): Religious Reading and Sacred Books in the Late Medieval Household. An Approach to Religious Places and Spaces

Todd Klaiman (Hong Kong): Construction of Sacred Space and Religious Legitimacy. Enshrinement of a Qing Imperial Canon

in Southeast Asia's First Chinese Buddhist Monastery, 1891-1906

Response: Matthias Schmidt (Giessen)

Panel: Place, Site, Space, and the Location/Archeology of Sacred Space

Thomas Meier (Heidelberg) / Petra Tillessen (Bonn): Making Sites Sacred in Archeology

Ruth Beusing / Kerstin P. Hofmann (both Frankfurt am Main): Archeology and Sacred Space: Modern and (Pre-)Historic Medial Practices in the Tara Landscape (Ireland)

Response: Isabel Toral-Niehoff (Berlin)

Panel: Secular/Urban and the Production of Sacred Space

Martin Radermacher (Bochum): Religious Agency of Built Space Vs. Social Construction of Sacred Space? A Case Study on Catholic Liturgy in Familiar and Unfamiliar Places

Mina Ibrahim (Giessen / Beirut): My Parish, My Coffeehouse. The Making of a Christian Space in Egypt

Response: Andreas Langenohl (Giessen)

Keynote Lecture

Michael Stausberg (Bergen): Sacred Space(s) in the 20th Century

Panel: Visible / Invisible and the Imagination of Sacred Space

Johanna Scherb (Giessen): Gerhard Richter's „48 Portraits“ and Their Auratic Impact

Muhammed Riyaz Chenganakkattil (Delhi): Thin and Invisible Sacred Spaces. Obsession With Imagined Sacredness and Jinn Mosques in India

Response: Doris Bachmann-Medick (Giessen)

Panel: Architecture, Infrastructure, and the Construction of Sacred Spaces

Nenette Marie Arroyo (Charlottesville): The Shifting Sacred. Ritual and Art in the California Missions

Benjamin Brendel (Giessen): Modernity Built on „Indian“ Graves. Visions of Sacredness and Power During the Building of the Grand Coulee Dam (1933-1941)

Beate Löffler (Duisburg): Built Dreams. Architectural Spaces and the Promise of Immanent Transcendence

Response: Katharina Stornig (Giessen)

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