

PART I

Understanding Conflicts over Sacred Spaces

Chapter Two

WHAT IS SACRED SPACE?

Small roadside chapels are sacred, yet so are cathedrals. Synagogues are sacred, yet so is the city of Jerusalem. Shintoists worship the spirits residing in rocks and trees but also worship Mount Fuji. How can we make sense of this variety in sacred places? In this chapter, I seek to introduce a semblance of order into the subject matter by circumscribing and classifying sacred space.¹

The Phenomenon of Sacred Space

Emile Durkheim, among the first sociologists to study religion, argued that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is the basis of all religious movements.² All religious beliefs, rites, and places express either the nature of sacred things or the relationship between sacred and profane things. Religious phenomena, according to Durkheim, thus divide the universe into two classes, sacred and profane, that embrace all that exists but exclude one another. Other students of religion have noted the prevalence of sacred places across religions and have concluded that sacred space is an essential, perhaps the most essential, component in all religious traditions.³

Yet defining sacred space is difficult given the diversity of such spaces as displayed across the great religious traditions. Some sacred sites, such as temples or shrines, are constructed. Others are natural sites, like mountains or

caves, that are made sacred by means of interpretation, not construction. The sanctity of a place may be communicated by the gods through a special sign, as with Mount Sinai, or the location may become holy because a religiously significant event took place there, as with the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem.⁴ It may have been imbued with sanctity because of the presence of relics, like the catacombs in Rome or the Shi'a shrines in Najaf and Karbala, or because it seems to reach toward, or reflect, the realm of the gods, like sacred rivers, mountains, forests, and lakes. Given that different religious traditions employ radically differing conceptions of time and space, it is not entirely surprising that they also exhibit sacred spaces that vary in shape, location, importance, and purpose.

Consider the following three sites, separated by continents, oceans, and centuries: the Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, the Temple of Apollo in Delphi in Greece, and the Harimandir in Amritsar in India.⁵ Though the three differ widely in their specific characteristics, all provide the same essential religious functions that, in all cases, give rise to similar tensions.

The Bighorn Medicine Wheel is located on Medicine Mountain in Wyoming at an altitude of nearly ten thousand feet. Of all the medicine wheels in the Americas, it is the best preserved and arguably the most significant.⁶ It is a stone circle, 80 feet in diameter and 245 feet in circumference, composed of a cairn (a stone pile that functions as the center point) and twenty-eight radiating spokes. Six small stone piles, set along the rim, are aligned with the rising and setting of the sun and other bright stars at significant times of the year. The wheel is sacred to Plains Indian tribes such as the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Cree, Crow, Dakota, and Blackfoot. It is over seven hundred years old.

Some six thousand miles east, above the Gulf of Corinth, in the shade of Mount Parnassus, lie the ruins of Apollo's Temple at Delphi. For about a thousand years, before the site was abandoned in the fourth century CE, pilgrims would make the journey to Delphi to consult the Pythia, the prophetess of Apollo, the most famous oracle of the ancient world. Seated atop a volcanic fissure, said to contain the remnants of the slain dragon-snake Python, the oracle would utter incoherent riddles, interpreted by the priests of Apollo. All who wished to consult the Pythia underwent ritual purification in the Castalian Springs and then ascended the slopes of Parnassus, along the Sacred Way, through the *temenos*, the sacred area. The path was lined with statues, shrines, offerings, temples, and treasuries donated by victorious Greek leaders and communities in thanks for prophecies fulfilled. It led, in a zigzag manner, glittering with marble and bronze, to the temple. Visitors were taken to the main part of the temple, the *cella*, and thence into the inner



4. The medicine wheel in Bighorn National Forest, Wyoming. Native American worshipers have attached prayer ties to the ropes surrounding the wheel. A Christian visitor has provocatively placed a Bible inside the stone circle. Photo copyright Ron E. Hassner.

Sacred places, then, are characterized by an extreme duality. Because they are attractive, they are coveted. Because they offer access to the divine, they pose the risk of desecration. Because they form social centers, they offer temptations to those who wish to control social groups. And because they offer terrestrial evidence of divine presence, they become arenas for competition between religious groups, each wishing to assert its ownership, rights, and rituals at one and the same site. Sacred space and violence go hand in hand. This violence is very real and can be measured in hundreds and thousands of lives.

The Three Functions of Sacred Space

Although the dialectic nature of the sacred is at the core of this book, we can certainly say more about these sites beyond recognizing their “awesome” nature. One means of reaching beyond Durkheim’s rather vague conception of the sacred to arrive at a clearer definition of sacred space is to examine the functions that sacred space fulfills for believers. Mircea Eliade, sociologist of

religion and one of the foremost students of the sacred, adopted an interpretivist approach of this sort in his study of sacred places. He took the intuitive experiences of believers as his starting point in attempting to arrive at the essential meaning of sacred space.

According to Eliade, sacred places fulfill three primary functions for believers.⁷ First, they act as places in which worshipers can communicate with the divine, whether through prayer, ritual, or contact with an image of the gods. Second, sacred places seem to contain a permanent divine presence. Worshipers thus approach sacred places with the expectation of receiving blessings, healing, forgiveness, spiritual merit, or salvation. Finally, in their layout and design, sacred places provide meaning to the faithful. They evoke passages from history, social structures, or religious precepts and, ultimately, hint at the underlying order of the cosmos by reflecting it, metaphorically, through forms, actions, and objects. The art, architecture, music, and drama that embellish these places represent an ideal of that religion in its purest form.

In identifying these key functions, Eliade and his students focused on three different attributes of sacred places: behaviors attributed to the gods, the behavior of the worshipers at these sites, and the physical design of these sites. These functions combine to form a definition of sacred space: sacred spaces are religious centers at which the heavenly and earthly meet, sites that act as bridges between the human and the divine worlds. They are the locations at which the divine ruptures through the mundane and reveals itself to humans.⁸

The opportunity to communicate with the divine, receive gifts, and gain insight into greater meanings turns all sacred spaces into religious centers for their believers. Mount Meru to Hindus, Mount Gerizim to the Samaritans, and the Temple Mount to Jews are all historical, spiritual, and cosmological centers. Believers often associate these places with the act of creation, the beginning of time, or the end of days. By virtue of providing a two-way channel between the present world and a world removed, the sacred spaces act as the world axis, or *axis mundi* in Eliade's terminology. This axis connects heaven and earth but also functions as a spiritual pivot around which the world revolves.⁹

Pilgrims who journey to sacred places thus travel toward the center, seeking in the sacred space a microcosm both of the universe and of the specific religion it represents. All three sites examined at the outset of this chapter act, or have acted, as destinations for pilgrimage. Native Americans come to the Bighorn Medicine Wheel from across the plains in order to perform fasts and spirit quests, hold councils and sacred dances, offer gifts of thanks to Mother

Earth (often in the form of a buffalo skull placed at the center of the wheel), or pray for healing, atonement, and guidance. Because the wheel is aligned with the stars and represents the lunar calendar, it symbolizes time as well as space. Worshipers enter the wheel to determine the seasons but also to transcend the constraints of time and space by means of prayer and meditation.

The pilgrims who came from across the Roman and Greek empires to consult the Pythia recognized Delphi as the center of their world. According to Greek mythology, two ravens, instructed by Zeus to fly from opposite ends of the earth to its center, met in Delphi. The city's position as the Greek center of the universe was visually represented by means of an *omphalos* or "navel," a decorated stone marker placed inside Apollo's temple. It was said to have been the first place to emerge from the waters after the primordial flood receded.

Similar stones mark different *axis mundi* around the world: Jews pray toward the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and identify the rock at the center of that platform as the former location of the Jewish Temple and "foundation stone" of the world. This stone, too, is associated with the aftermath of a great primordial flood, in this case the flood survived by the biblical patriarch Noah and his family. Muslims pray toward the Black Stone, a meteor embedded in the Ka'ba, the large cuboid structure in the center of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. This stone is said to mark the very first place of prayer, erected by Adam. Once the devout Muslim completes his pilgrimage and arrives in Mecca, his directed prayer is translated into movement as he circumambulates the stone. Orthodox Christians recognize the *omphalos* in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem as the center of the Christian universe. Located halfway between the site of the crucifixion and the site of the resurrection, it symbolizes the most important moment in Christian history as well as a crucial location, the midway point between death and the conquest of death.

In Amritsar, the representation of sacred space as center takes the form not of a stone but of a sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib. The book, a collection of poems, prayers, and hymns composed by the first ten gurus of Sikhism, contains the tenets of the faith. The tenth and last leader of the faithful bestowed the title "guru" on the text itself, at which point it became the eternal guide for all Sikhs. Placed in the heart of the Golden Temple, at the center of the Pool of Nectar, which in turn is in the center of the temple complex, the Guru Granth Sahib is sung continuously from dawn to sunset, to the accompaniment of flutes, drums, and strings. Pilgrims can cross the causeway to circumambulate the text or hear the enchanting verses while circling the pool.

In all these cases, the pilgrims' journey to the sacred site is also a journey to the center of the universe, where they can expect to see a representation

of their spiritual world and conduct exchanges with the gods. It is toward these centers that *gurdwaras* (Sikh shrines), temples, synagogues, mosques, and churches are oriented and prayer is directed. In cultures across the globe, that journey toward an origin is often represented by a labyrinth, a circuitous route that leads, through twists and turns, to enlightenment. Intended for meditation, the maze also functions as an aid to believers who cannot travel to a sacred site and wish instead to reenact symbolically the arduous pilgrimage toward the center.

The Institutionalization of Sacred Space

Differences in geography, technology, and social structure go a long way toward explaining variation in sacred places across religions and regions. But if all sacred places provide the same three functions for believers, how can we explain variation in sacred places within a given region and religion? The answer has to do with the processes of institutionalization that all sacred spaces undergo over time. Even within one and the same religion, sacred spaces at various stages of institutionalization exhibit different traits, levels of importance, and, as I will argue later in this chapter, different likelihoods of becoming embroiled in conflict.

I have already argued, with Eliade, that sacred sites offer believers a pure and unmediated experience of the sacred. By visiting a sacred place, visitors can witness the divine, converse with the gods, receive blessings or relive an event of historical-religious significance. Given the risk of desecration, however, these visits and experiences must eventually undergo regulation by the community of believers. The community must define the boundaries of the sacred place to delineate where, precisely, the unique rules regarding access and behavior apply. The community must then supervise entrance as well as worship at the site. The rules and definitions then grant the site a social and, as I will show, architectural permanence. I refer to the process by which a religious community gradually assumes control over a sacred site and implements specific rules and restrictions as the *institutionalization* of sacred space.¹⁰

Before this institutionalization takes place, the sacred place is highly unstable, that is, very much prone to destruction or desecration. Taking some liberty with the work of the German sociologist Max Weber, we can compare such sacred places in their natural state to authority in its natural, or “charismatic,” state.¹¹ Much like sacred space, charisma is a projection of the divine into the human sphere. In the case of charisma, we learn from Weber, the divine manifestation takes the form of the gift of leadership. In both cases,

In the absence of an underlying sacred place, the likelihood of and risks accompanying desecration are reduced. As a consequence, the rules that govern access to and behavior at these shrines can be partially relaxed and the need for direct priestly supervision is diminished. The multiplicity of small and localized houses of worship pose far less attractive targets for outsiders intent on attacking the financial or political core of a community. Indeed, the mirror site may shed its external structure altogether and become no more than a provisional location for group prayer. Multiple religious movements, including branches of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, pronounce any site of assembly for worship to be temporary sacred space, thus eliminating the problem of desecration altogether.

Though in appearance and daily administration these mirror sites retain but a faint echo of the original, they continuously invoke the temple, cathedral, or grand mosque that inspired their construction. The house of worship may face toward the temple or its layout and physical components may represent the abstracted design of the temple. Just as the synagogue recalls the design and functions of the Temple in Jerusalem, so the church echoes the Holy Sepulcher, the mosque faces Mecca and derives its layout from the first mosque in Medina, and the gurdwara evokes the Harimandir in Amritsar. The symbols that adorn the house of worship will emulate either the form of the temple, the shape of ritual objects located in the temple, or the very symbols that adorned the temple. Rites performed in the house of worship are stylized variations on rituals performed in the temple, conducted at parallel points in the religious calendar. The link between the two sites is constantly underscored in prayers, rituals, and invocations. In all these, the modern house of prayer constantly conjures up the image of the original temple.

Evaluating the Importance of a Sacred Site: Centrality

The process of institutionalization that sacred sites undergo can explain how sites within one and the same religious movement can differ so dramatically in size, design, and social function. At the same time, institutionalization also drives two important parameters of sacred places, *centrality* and *vulnerability*, that permit an assessment of the importance of a sacred place to believers. The significance of a site can, in turn, indicate the believers' willingness to engage in violence in order to protect or conquer a given site.

The first parameter, *centrality*, locates the space in the spiritual landscape of the group. The centrality of a place to a group depends on its relative ability to fulfill the three crucial functions listed above. The stronger the group's

belief that the site provides communication with the divine, divine presence, and meaning, the more important the site is for believers. At the most central of sites, the believer can hope for the clearest and most unmediated exchange with the gods. The Jewish tradition of placing notes with prayers between the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, for example, rests on the belief that this wall, a retaining wall of the former Temple, contains remnants of the *shekhinah*, the divine presence that once resided in the Temple. In other words, some Jews believe that their prayers are more likely to be answered at this site because God's presence is more intense there than it is elsewhere. The Temple in Jerusalem is more central in Judaism than a synagogue, just as the Holy Sepulcher is more central to Christians than a local cathedral and Mecca is more central to Muslims than the largest of city mosques.

Reports of a prior revelation at a site provide the greatest support for the centrality of a shrine, particularly if there is physical evidence for that revelation. Muslims worship at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem because they believe that Muhammad prayed on that rock and ascended from it to the heavens. They point to his footprint and head print in the rock as confirmation for that event, a visible manifestation that the rock provides direct access to the heavens. Gaya in India is sacred to devotees of Vishnu because the god is said to have visited the site, as evidenced by the large footprint found there. Similarly, Christians revere the footprint of Christ in the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem, as do Buddhists who venerate Buddha's footprints across Asia. In all instances, the site takes on a particular importance in the religion's hierarchy of sacred places because the divine presence in it is more immediate.

A second source of evidence for the centrality of a shrine is the record of favors granted to believers at the site. Pilgrims healed of physical afflictions at sacred shrines often leave visible testaments to their miraculous experiences at these sites. These may take the form of *ex votos*, votive offerings such as descriptive plaques, food, or donations. They may assume the shape of *miragros*, casts or miniature copies of the body parts that have been healed or even discarded crutches and braces. These items convey the believer's thanks for a prayer fulfilled and at the same time confirm the value of praying at this specific site for other worshippers.

Healings, miracles, and intercessions of this sort are usually linked either to evidence that a revelation occurred at a sacred place or to the presence of a miraculous relic. The Hazratbal Mosque is the most central Muslim shrine in Kashmir because it holds the *Moi-e-Muqqdas*, the Sacred Hair of the Prophet Muhammad. The shrines that house the relics of the Buddha (his teeth, hairs, robe, and bowl) are the most central Buddhist shrines in their respective countries and among the most important Buddhist shrines in Asia.

Most religions, then, offer a hierarchy of sacred sites, representing a scale of what I have termed centrality. Although all sacred places are centers, some bring believers closer to the divine than others.¹³ Shrines within Japanese homes or the trees and rocks in which local deities reside are inferior to Ise, the central shrine at which the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, protector of the Japanese nation, resides. Christian pilgrimage shrines may attract visitors from nearby villages, the entire region, the country, or the entire globe.¹⁴ In mountainous regions, such as the Himalayas, where villagers are dispersed in small communities, worshipers conduct minor pilgrimages to valley shrines, common to all who reside in the valley. These shrines provide greater contact with the gods than the small shrines in the villages.

Believers will conduct longer and more arduous pilgrimages, at more important occasions, to regional or national shrines. Navadvip attracts Hindus from throughout Bengal, whereas Varanasi draws devotees of Shiva from throughout India.¹⁵ Ayodhya draws over a million pilgrims every year, from across sects and regions, because it is believed to be the birthplace of the god Ram and, according to some, the center of creation.¹⁶ Worshipers from across Mexico are drawn to the Basilica of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in Mexico City, just as Polish Catholics travel to Jasna Gora. The miraculous Marian images in these two shrines are said to offer greater access to the divine than any image found in the believers' town or village churches. Some shrines gain such notoriety among believers owing to the magnitude of the miracle or revelation said to have occurred there that they attract believers worldwide. Bodh Gaya, Haifa, and Karbala draw Buddhists, Baha'is, and Shi'a Muslims respectively from around the globe. The ill and afflicted come to the basilicas of Loreto, Compostella, and Fatima from across the Christian world. Lourdes, a French town of eighteen thousand inhabitants, attracts some five million Christian pilgrims every year.¹⁷

A religious movement's conception of the respective centrality of its sacred sites can be implicit or very explicit. The Mishnah, for example, offers a clear ranking of Jewish sacred places based on their proximity to the center of the Temple Mount.¹⁸ From there, sites radiate out in decreasing importance: the boundaries of the Temple Mount, the boundaries of Jerusalem, the boundaries of Israel, and so on. A Muslim tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad assigns the following enhanced values to a single prayer based on its location: in the Holy Land, five hundred prayers; in Jerusalem, a thousand prayers; in Medina, ten thousand prayers; in Mecca, a hundred thousand prayers.¹⁹ Similarly, medieval pilgrims knew that they would earn discrete merits toward a plenary indulgence by visiting sites of differing centrality. A pilgrimage to

Rome, for example, was worth twice that of a visit to a regional shrine, such as St. David's in Pembrokeshire, Wales.²⁰

Evaluating the Sensitivity of a Sacred Site: Vulnerability

Though *centrality* offers a good measure for the importance of a site to the body of believers, it does not offer a sufficient estimate of the likelihood of conflict over a site. After all, a site of significant centrality is unlikely to lead to friction between believers if it is inaccessible to believers or, conversely, if it is welcoming to all visitors irrespective of creed, appearance, or behavior.

Mount Kailash, for example, is of utmost sanctity for the members of four religions (Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Tibetan Shamans), yet, at twenty-two thousand feet in the Tibetan Himalayas, its peak is one of the least visited sacred sites in the world. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah, on the other hand, while central to the religious beliefs of Catholics and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, respectively, are easily accessible to tourists of all faiths, with few restrictions on access, dress, or behavior within their boundaries. At the same time, there are areas in both St. Peter's and Temple Square that are entirely inaccessible except to a select few. Finally, some marginal sacred sites, such as monasteries or convents, are governed by strict rules that constrain both access and action. The likelihood of friction over rights of access and the free exercise of religion at these sites is therefore relatively high.

To estimate the likelihood of conflict over a site then, we must consider a second parameter in addition to centrality, one that estimates the extent to which access to the site and behavior within it are circumscribed, monitored, and sanctioned. That parameter is the site's *vulnerability*. Members of a religious community are likely to control access to and behavior in their sacred space precisely because of the dangerous aspects of the sacred. To prevent worshippers from offending the divine presence by inappropriate dress or behavior, that is, to prevent sacrilege and ensuing penalties for the offender and the community, those responsible for maintaining the site will want to regulate who enters, how they enter, what they wear, and how they conduct themselves within the shrine.

As a rule, centrality and vulnerability go hand in hand. The more sensitive the site to sacrilege, the greater the restrictions on access and behavior. For example, only Muslims may visit Mecca and Medina, the two sacred cities in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the Saudi government has paved so-called non-Muslim

roads around the cities and enforces a ban on the presence of non-Muslims within fifteen miles of either of those cities. Monasteries and convents, on the other hand, limit access to members of a specific gender. Some sacred sites, such as Mount Athos in Greece, are limited to members of a particular caste. Though Temple Square in Utah is open to all tourists, only members in good standing of the church are permitted into the temple in the center of the square. In rare cases, access to a sacred site is restricted to select individuals at specific times. The Jewish high priest was the only individual allowed into the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, and only on a single day of the year, Yom Kippur.

Beyond limiting access, the rules governing sacred sites may dictate “gestures of approach,” actions that must be taken by believers upon approaching and entering the site. In Judaism and Sikhism, these entail covering the head. In Christianity, the head is uncovered, whereas in Islam and Sikhism the shoes are removed. Muslims wash and Hindus bathe before approaching a shrine.²¹ At the entrance to Shinto temples, believers are required to rinse out their mouths. Members of certain Maori tribes from southern New Zealand are said to remove their clothes before entering a sacred place.²² These actions are taken on the threshold of the sacred place and emphasize its distinctiveness. Other religious codes may delineate dress and prohibit a narrow range of activities within the sanctuary or permit only a narrow range of behaviors.

To summarize, the more central the site to the identity of the religious community, the more likely the community is to take action in response to challenges to the integrity of the site. The more vulnerable the site, the greater the risk that foreign presence or conduct will be interpreted as an offensive act.

Predicting Conflict

The institutionalization of sacred places drives both the centrality and the vulnerability of sacred sites. As the site moves from space to shrine and then to temple, it assumes a more central role in the narrative of the religious community. At the same time, with institutions in place to detect and punish transgression, the sensitivity of the community to desecration goes up. Temples, and their parallels in other religions, thus tend to be the most central and most vulnerable sites in any given religion. This process can be uneven across religions and across sites in a particular religion, since institutionalization itself is driven by a variety of social, economic, and political factors.

The escalation of centrality and vulnerability can be even more erratic as mirror sites to the temple are produced, because this shift places the

All this begs the question: Why do sacred sites, of all sites available, make tempting targets of conflict for sectarian rivals or political entrepreneurs? I examine that question in detail in the next chapter but have already provided the key to the answer. The phenomenon of sacred space concretizes religion, giving it a worldly, material facet. In sacred space, religious ideas become tangible: they can be owned, built upon, dug in, fought over. At the same time, the control exerted by a community over their sacred space assumes political dimensions. It involves defining the boundaries of the sacred space, patrolling those boundaries, and policing behavior within them.

These actions, though derived from religious reasoning, are ultimately political. They call to mind the control by modern society over its most central and vulnerable of secular spaces, the state. Dominion over sacred space, like sovereign control over territory, requires the ability to monitor entry and exit and regulate behavior within clearly defined boundaries. "Ritual rights," as Friedland and Hecht aptly put it, "require property rights."²⁴ In sacred space, religiously motivated actors translate the inherent characteristics of the sacred into political, and often violent, action.