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On Sacred Space

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From Paleolithic antiquity to our own time human beings have marked out, set aside or constructed definite places as sacred: cave chambers at the end of tunnels in the earth or hilltop enclosures circled by great rocks, great halls of soaring gothic or crystal cathedrals or urban store-front churches, mosques or synagogues, quiet, pristine groves in a forest or a space marked out in a vacant parking lot. Sacred space has always accompanied human habitation on earth.

But in our time, in our condition, in what we call “modernity”, every incidence or experience of a space considered “sacred” or “holy” is a counter-cultural assertion, an affirmation that can be of great importance for human well-being. There is a dimension that, though not material, is nevertheless real and of ultimate significance for us. Those things celebrated in that space, – whether justice or love, compassion or piety, peace or the existence of the soul – are not mere figments but are as necessary to life itself as eating, sleeping, begetting or gain.

But in our time, for the first time in history, a worldview that all that exists is matter and nothing else dominates the mentality of multitudes: only that which can be weighed, measured or quantified is real. How that mentality has come into being is not the subject of this essay. It follows, however, in this worldview (which philosophically is called "materialism") that any thing to which no numerical value can be attached simply has no value. To use a current colloquial expression: “no matter; it doesn’t count”.

Counter to this view, the driving impulse behind every sanctuary ever constructed is to create a sacred space to be kept inviolate from the desecration that can result from heedless materialism. The real foundation of every sanctuary is the conviction that there is a dimension of reality that transcends matter, which we call the Sacred or Spirit or, indeed, the Transcendent. As a child crossing the threshold of a synagogue, I knew that I was in a different dimension – different sacred language and sounds, different sacred dress, different behavior, rituals, art, decor, symbolism – all extra-ordinary.

Every human being lives in three dimensions. From the moment of birth we live in time, in space and in relationship with others. From a Jewish religious perspective all three dimensions are God-given. “The earth is the Lord's and the followers thereof. The world and they that dwell in it.” (Psalms 24.1) Or put another way, the transcendent is prior to

matter. These dimensions, then, are in themselves, sacred. But each can be desecrated by greed. The beautiful earth is exploited, wasted as a mere source of profit or as a money-saving dumping ground for pollutants. Time and relationship too, are continually profaned by exploitation for our own material benefit, which is ultimately the worship of the self, the source of idolatry.

So we set aside certain time, relationship and space as sacred. Human beings have set aside time for a reverent celebration or commemoration that has nothing at all to do with using time for material gain. Holy time is in itself a proclamation against the worst appropriated use of time: "Time is money."

All cultures have designated certain relationships as especially sacred, set aside, not to be violated, such as parent-child, husband-wife (or spousal) and teacher-disciple. In the same manner, lest we lose the sense of the sacred entirely, places and structures have been set aside to preserve the sense of a sanctified space – a sanctuary of life-giving value and of life itself, to be protected, preserved, and revered. In a world where the miraculous wonder of creation is daily desecrated, sacred space protects us against the mentality that views any and all space as a means to material gain. Such an attitude regenerates reverence for all dimensions of creation and, in the living soul, of the sense of "the Sacred" itself.

Sacred space is a representation of that place at which the transcendent – for theists, God – manifests itself. Such is the place where Al'lah commanded Ibrahim and Ismail to build the Kabba marked by a "break-through" from another "upper" realm (the black meteorite is set into one of its corners). Everywhere the Hebrew Scripture is read, interpreted, taught, even in a temporary gathering of people (in Greek, synagogues) is Sinai. Every hall or temple where there is meditation on the teaching of the Buddha is the sacred grove at the forest of the Bo tree. Every place where a cross is raised around which the believers gather to seek salvation through Gospel or Communion is the place of the original and present Christ-event. Indeed as the parchment scroll of the "Five Books of Moses" is raised before the standing congregation, the Rabbi or Cantor proclaims "This is the Torah which Moses at the word of God placed before the children of Israel".

The place connecting heaven and earth is Jacob's dream vision at the summit of which was God. That dream was of a "ladder" planted on the earth but reaching into heaven with the angels as figures of communion between "up-there" and "down-here". The place was a hillside on which Jacob lay down to sleep with a pillow as a stone. That stone became an altar and the place itself becomes Beit-El "The House of God" (Genesis 35.7).

In ancient agricultural cosmologies the central temple was actually the place of origin of Creation around which all creation circles and from which – through rituals of conflict with chaos, sacrifice and enthronement – the Divine Sacred King regenerated the cyclic order of creation itself. In the lore of the Abrahamic traditions, Jerusalem – even on Medieval maps – is the actual center of the world. The altar rock to which Abraham brought Isaac (or Ishmael) to be offered to God and from which Muhammad, in Islamic lore, ascended to Allah, is also (as in the ancient rabbinic teaching) the foundation stone of heaven and earth. It holds back the water of chaos that could destroy the world. Through the temple rites, at the Holy of Holies, it was the moral order of the world which was to be regenerated through commitment to the sovereignty of God. In each sacred space through similar archetypes – unique for each spiritual tradition – the sanctity of life is regenerated.

So, according to ancient archaic cosmologies, humans could make contact with the transcendent, "The upper world" by ascending a tower, a hill, or a temple (the location of

the central sanctuary) which was conceived to be at the very center of the world itself. Here at the proper time, and in a proper way, were enacted the religious rituals that were thought to give order and meaning to earthly life. In the process the order of the cosmos and cyclical time itself was renewed. In modernity, "modern man" endlessly climbs towers, forever seeking, whether in technology, sensation, therapy or fad, the same kind of contact. Sadly, for this purpose his technologies, therapies, passions and fads, seem to be entirely useless.

A meditation, derived from a Jewish religious point of view but applicable to all spiritualities, puts it this way:

The world of God is great and holy.

In all the world, the holiest land is the land of Israel.

In the land of Israel, the holiest city is Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, the holiest place is the Temple.

And the holiest place in the Temple is the Holy of Holies

All peoples are holy.

The people of Israel were called upon to be holy

The holiest of the people of Israel were to be the Levite.

The holiest of the Levites, the priests

And of the priests, the High Priest.

All the year of three hundred and fifty days is holy.

Of these the holy days are holiest.

The holiest of these, is the Sabbath.

And the holiest of the Sabbaths,

The Day of Atonement, the Sabbath of Sabbaths.

Hebrew is a holy tongue.

The holiest words in Hebrew are the Torah.

The holiest words in the Torah are The Ten Commandments.

And the holiest word in the Commandments is the name of God.¹

Whenever any person stands to lift his heart to Heaven, that place is the Holy of Holies. Every human being created by God in the Divine Image is a High Priest.

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Notes 1 This version is from "The Dybbuk" in Gallancz, Man and God (Cambridge and Boston) 1959 p. 275.

