

There is no such
thing as sacred space
religion essay



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To be sacred is to be set apart from the ordinary and entitled to veneration and awe. The word comes from the Latin *sacer* meaning to make holy. The Oxford English Dictionary defines sacred as “ Consecrated to; esteemed especially dear or acceptable to a deity, dedicated, set apart exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose” (<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi>). Most cultures have within them a concept of sacredness and although beliefs and practices differ across cultures most contain spaces that are held apart from the profane and marked as sacred. These spaces can be natural or built, their significance arising from revelation, an event or a history of worship and ritual. In human encounters people evaluate and interpret their experience and location to create a perception of place or a place-view. These judgements are fashioned from a personal understanding and value system. This assignment will argue that a space only has an identity through human interaction; it is through human belief or creation that sacredness is defined and valued. Thus, through the exploration of differing and sometimes changing understandings of religion and places, from ancient megaliths to a modern city, it will be attested that sacredness is not an inherent attribute but rather a quality imbued upon a place either by the individual or collectively by a society through their particular place-view and is determined by their sensitivities, beliefs and values.

All societies have some form of religion. Irrespective of differing theologies and philosophies religions have a role in society that allows believers to be undertake the pursuit “ of activities for their own sake, because they are worth doing, just in themselves” (Pike, J. and Price, C. (2008), pg. 4). Through practice and pilgrimage religions can allow believers the opportunity to reach

for eudiamonia. This was the word used by the ancient Greeks to describe the state of happiness and well-being that according to Aristotle (384-322BCE) was the objective of human life.

Within religions this pursuit for eudiamonia can be linked to a belief in hierophanies or rites and the places where these manifest or are performed. Historian of religion Mircea Eliade asserts that “ man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself” (Eliade, 1961, pg. 202 cited in Harvey, G. and Bowman, M., (2008), pg. 39). This religious explanation defines the sacred as something which is found and not created, which is innate and discovered and which is completely separate from the profane. However opposing theorists such as Kim Knott contend that “ nothing is inherently sacred” but places are interpreted and explained within a cultural and religious context and thereafter invested with sacredness (Knott, 2005, pg. 221 cited in Harvey, G. and Bowman, M. (2008), pg. 40). This is illustrated in the differing understandings of sites such as Chalice Well, Glastonbury which is “ sacred to some for its association with the Holy Grail (its red waters said to represent the blood of Jesus shed for humanity), while others insist it is the menstrual flow of the Goddess” (Harvey, G. and Bowman, M. (2008), pg. 53). A further example being Midsummer Boulevard in Milton Keynes which fails to attract the same solstice celebrations as those which take place at Stonehenge, despite the mirroring alignment. The need to signpost the position of the street to the public with “ the plaque in Queen’s Court in the shopping building which shows the alignments on midsummer and midwinter sunrise and sunset” (Sacred Space and Landscape, (2008), DVD Video) evidences perhaps that sacredness must be recognised to be experienced.

Even when a space is identified as sacred it is almost impossible for a place to exist totally set apart and disconnected from the ordinary as sites require management and maintenance. Religious rituals themselves require preparations which involve the labours of those involved. Places which are invested with sacredness can have multiple meanings and understandings. Their significance for some may be archaeological or aesthetic. They are often recognised as worthy of preservation and protection by local tradition and in many cases national governments and global organisations. Thus the acknowledgment of both the archaeological significance and the sacredness of the combined World Heritage Site of Stonehenge and Avebury by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation) in the description of these as both being “ among the most famous groups of megaliths in the world” and as “ holy places” (UNESCO (1998-2008) “ Stonehenge, Avebury and associated sites” cited in Harvey, G. and Bowman, M. (2008), pg. 43). In a similar way Glastonbury is a mixture of cultures with different groups forming their own connections and understandings of the place. As explained by Palden Jenkins “ This is a genuine multi-faith centre and community. First of all, you have Christians, of whom there are Anglicans and Catholics and radicals. Then you have traditional religions such as oriental religion; you have pagan types of people, there’s a very strong collection of druids and green types; and there’s a particularly, an emphasis on what you could roughly call independent spirituality” (Sacred Space and Landscape DVD). Faith and tradition intertwine the location with the activities and places become sacred to those who are proponents of a certain belief system. Many sacred sites are the focus of pilgrimage or spiritual tourism and people visit to take part in rituals or as an act of

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devotion. For others who are not believers the beauty or history of these places can hold an attraction to visit that is purely secular. They can provide an escape from reality because through tradition they have been set apart from the ordinary.

These different understandings and the connections they create can generate discord. The objectives of the secular or indeed alternative religious perspectives can be at variance and therefore cause conflicts as different place-views collide. As explained by Dr. Robert Wallis the clash between the police and the pagan New Age Travellers in Battle of the Beanfield in 1985 is an example of how separate interpretations of a sacred space can cause tension and disputes (Sacred Space and Landscape, (2008), DVD Video). The solstice festival at Stonehenge demonstrates how there can be many and sometimes diverse perceptions and interests in a sacred space and of the social and power dynamics that can converge in one location. Glastonbury, in a similar fashion to the city of Jerusalem or Ground Zero in New York, evidences how differing assessments of sacred sites are explained. As claimed by John Eade and Michael Sallnow these spaces are “ vessels into which pilgrims devoutly pour their hopes, prayers and aspiration” (Eade and Sallnow, 2000, pg. 15 cited in Harvey, G. and Bowman, M., (2008), pg. 53) therefore sacredness is a quality crafted through human intervention. In contrast the ‘ Elidian’ view held by earth mysteries writer Anthony Roberts that the “ holy ground of Glastonbury holds many strange secrets” (Roberts, 1992, pg. 18 cited in Harvey, G. and Bowman, M., (2008), pg. 54) asserts that the place itself is intrinsically sacred.

From ancient to modern times people have constructed spaces to serve a contemporary need. We can today only guess at the motives of the Neolithic people involved in the construction of Stonehenge. “ The true meaning of this ancient, awe-inspiring creation has been lost in the mists of time. Was it a temple for sun worship, a healing centre, a burial site or perhaps a huge calendar?” (<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk>) Whatever the purpose may have been; from the labour required for its construction it can be construed that this landscape was a place of significance and importance. This creation of a place-view can also be seen through the works by Alexander Keillor at Avebury. There the re-erection of stones and demolishing of buildings fashion a particular vista and restore “ more of a feel of a pre-historic landscape” (Sacred Space and Landscape, (2008), DVD Video). As explained by Dr. Robert Wallis what people see and connect with today is this particular place-view of the village created by Keillor. Similarly Derek Walker, Milton Keynes first chief architect and planner, moved away from the sociologist Melvin Webber’s vision of a non place urban realm. He endeavoured instead to create a different place with a connection to past cities incorporating streets and gates and sacred spaces. The location of Milton Keynes was based on meeting the 1960s access and development needs. However, Walker also strove to create a city that would not exist as a settlement dependent on technology for communication but would in fact be a community serving the spiritual as well as the secular needs of its inhabitants. This was realised through the inclusion of built structures like the ecumenical church of Christ the Cornerstone and also the religious influences used in the landscaping of public spaces such as Belvedere Park.

Neither is society static and the flux created as the social order is made and remade can generate alternative interpretations of place and create new attachments or understandings of locations. Religion and spirituality too are dynamic and changes in beliefs and value systems can be reflected in the way sacred sites are viewed and regarded. Although we do not know who actually created the landscape at Stonehenge or for what purpose; today members of the New Age movement have interpreted the site and created connections that link with their spirituality and beliefs. Now, especially at the solstice, their rituals and practices have invested the space with a sacred identity.

A case in point of how sacredness can be constructed and discarded by evolving societies can be seen from the study of ancient Romans life. Roman religion was polytheistic; many deities were worshipped, each with a specific area of influence. Although many sites are not complete the study and interpretation of what remains including surviving art and literature indicates that Roman society incorporated both public and private sacred spaces. Shrines, such as the shrine to Venus from the House of Meander (A100, Illustration Book, 2008, Plate 4. 3. 1), were used in Roman homes to create a personal sacred space. The symbolism used in the decoration demonstrates the life-style ideals aimed for by the upper strata of Roman society. For the Roman elite the villa provided a space which allowed literary pursuits, meditation and contemplation. The mirroring of the qualities of sacro-idyllic painting in representations of villas as seen in the Stabiae wall paintings (A100, Illustration Book, 2008, Plate 4. 3 5-7) demonstrate the spiritual significance of not only the buildings but also of the vista (James, P. and

Huskinson, J. (2008), Pg. 77). Two thousand years later these seaside retreats continue to attract scholars and tourists but while many appreciate the symbolism and cultural meanings of what remains the sacredness which the Romans strove to create has been lost.

As societies and religions evolve connections to places are made and remade. Perspectives and interpretations are subjective and influenced by cultural heritage and understandings. Spaces are created and read through human interaction. The belief in manifestations or symbolism that generates spiritual and emotional attachments to a space will always be personal. A space that is for some venerated and the focus of religious life can be for others a workplace or tourist attraction or for some individuals can be all of these. Both the coexisting identities ascribed to a space and the varying interpretations concurrent and over the passage of time demonstrate that sacredness is not inherent but is a quality designated by human intervention.