

Locative versus Utopian: Two Competing Approaches to Sacred Space

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Summary Statement

No one can disagree that Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) is the scholar most famously associated with the term “sacred space.” Indeed many of the participants in the Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality Forum can trace their initial enthusiasm for the topic to their reading of Eliade’s *The Sacred and Profane* (1957) or other of his similarly well-circulated works.¹ And yet, if architects and theorists of architecture continue to appeal with regularity and enthusiasm to Eliade’s work and terminology, scholars of religion have been, since the mid-1980s, far more wary about relying on those terms and the theoretical stance with which they are associated. To be sure, though he remains enormously influential for the academic study of religion, very few scholars have inspired nearly so large a body of criticism as Mircea Eliade.²

Much of the immense, still-growing polemical literature against (and in support of) Eliade is trained on the circumstances of his supposed involvements in Romanian politics during the 1930s and 1940s, and thus is not particularly relevant to ACS concerns. Nevertheless, among the earliest and most high-profile critiques—launched under the catchy rubric of “The Wobbling Pivot” (and discussed momentarily)—was not only aimed specifically at Eliade’s famed theory of sacred space, but, moreover, bears directly on this year’s symposium topic of utopia insofar as it entails accusations that Eliade’s approach to sacred space neglects “utopian worldviews” in favor of so-called “locative worldviews.”

Topic

Regarding the broader target of these criticisms, recall that Eliade’s model of sacred space is predicated on three interrelated propositions: (1) the notion of “hierophanies” wherein “the Sacred” periodically “irrupts” into the profane, thus endowing specific places with a kind of sacred

¹ Among many possibilities, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1959); Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Meridian Books, 1967); Mircea Eliade, “The World, the City, the House”, in his *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 18-31; and Mircea Eliade, “Sacred Architecture and Symbolism,” in Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), 105-129.

² For general overviews on the work of Mircea Eliade, see the paired entries, Joseph M. Kitagawa, “Eliade, Mircea [First Edition]” and Bryan S. Rennie, “Eliade, Mircea [Further Considerations]” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, second ed., edited by Lindsay Jones (Macmillan Reference, 2000), vol. 4, pp. 2753-63. Additionally, among a mountain of relevant possibilities, see *Waiting for the Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective*, edited by David Carrasco and Jane Marie Law (University Press of Colorado, 1991); *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, edited by Bryan Rennie (State University of New York Press, 2001); *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bryan Rennie (Equinox Publishing, 2006); *The International Eliade*, edited by Bryan Rennie (The State University of New York Press, 2007); and *Remembering/Reimagining/Revalorizing Mircea Eliade*, edited by Norman Girardot and Bryan Rennie; a Special Issue of *Archaeus: Studies in the History of Religions XV* (Bucharest: Romanian Association for the History of Religions, 2011).

power that people subsequently “discover”; (2) that many temples and monuments the world over are conceived as “*imago mundis*” or microcosms that replicate the structure of the wider cosmos or macrocosm; and (3) the “symbolism of the center” wherein certain places have the character of “*axis mundis*” or “points of ontological transition” at which people are afforded some special “access to the Sacred” that is not possible in the periphery.³

According to one oft-levied critique, Eliade’s view is limited as a scholarly point of departure insofar as it is a kind of quasi-theological “substantial” (or “essentialist”) view that requires adherence to dangerously large assumptions about the existence and agency of “the Sacred,” and thus the intrinsic sacrality of various places, e.g., pilgrimage destinations. Unwilling to accept those phenomenological presuppositions, many scholars of religion feel compelled to opt for a more sociological or “situational” model wherein supposedly “sacred places” are, ontologically speaking, entirely ordinary locales that owe their perception as extraordinary to socio-economic and ritual processes. From that view, sacred spaces are “created” (or “sanctified”) by human activities rather than intrinsically special places that are “revealed” to (or “identified” by) suitably perceptive audiences.⁴

Scope

It is, however, a rather more specific critique of Eliade’s theory of sacred space—namely, the critical assessment undertaken, beginning in the late 1970s, by historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith—that is more directly relevant to the topic of ACS8, and provides the main thrust of this paper.⁵ Smith’s much-discussed discontents with Eliade depend upon a fundamental distinction between two sorts of religious orientations:

So-termed “**locative worldviews**” are religious orientations that feature a “cosmological conviction,” that is, a confidence in an encompassing cosmic order that pervades all realms of existence. According to Smith, such perspectives are characteristic of stable, sedentary, hierarchical communities (e.g., urban, agricultural societies), and are reflected, for instance, in the design of walled cities and Hindu temples, both of which are frequently featured in Eliade’s writing. Locative views accentuate stability and world order, wherein people often imagine themselves to be living at “the center” of a perfectly homologized universe. In these contexts, the goal of ritual and the construction of “sacred architecture” is primarily to discover, celebrate and affirm one’s place in the cosmic order.

By contrast, Smith defines “**utopian worldviews**” as those religious orientations that feature “perceptions of radical incongruity,” that is, a suspicion that the earthly world is disordered and out of synch with the transcendent world. According to his somewhat atypical use of the term, “utopian views” are characteristic of mobile or nomadic communities (e.g., hunters and diasporic

³ For a summary of Eliade’s model of sacred space, see Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Harvard University Press, 2000), vol. 2, chap. 14.

⁴ For a clear and thoughtful exposition of “substantial” (or “essentialist”) versus “situational” approaches to sacred space, see the editors’ Introduction to *American Sacred Space*, edited by David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot” in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (E. J. Brill, 1978; University of Chicago Press, 1993), 88-103. In the same volume, “The Influence of Symbols on Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand” (pp. 129-146); “The Temple and the Magician” (pp. 172-189); and “Map is Not Territory” (pp. 289-309); also critically engage Eliade’s work on sacred space with reference to “locative” versus “utopian” views. Likewise relevant in this regard is Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 1, “In Search of Place” (pp. 1-23).

communities) and are reflected, for instance, in the design of Protestant churches, revival tents, Jewish synagogues, etc. “Utopian views” accentuate rebellion and escape from a world that is fundamentally flawed; instead of confidence that they occupy “the center,” participants in these views often imagine themselves as living in “the periphery” of an unstable world. Their outlook is characterized by restlessness, enthusiasm for expansive and open space, and freedom from place; adherents to such perspectives imagine that their true “home” is “outside” or beyond this world, and thus they avoid firm ties to any specific land or place. For them, the principal task of human life is to ascend to “another world” of freedom and openness; that is to say, to escape from (rather than to embrace) this earthly world.

J. Z. Smith then argues that Eliade’s model is indeed an accurate and viable way of talking about conceptions of sacred space—*but only in those contexts where “locative worldviews” prevail*. According to that charge, Eliade, by his preoccupations with ancient Near Eastern and South Asian contexts, has, on the one hand, succeeded masterfully in describing one way of conceiving of sacred space; but, on the other hand, both Eliade and many of those who rely on his work have seriously erred in universalizing that model of sacred space to all sorts of historical contexts. In short, Smith argues that Eliade’s revered model does not apply to utopic religious communities.

Conclusions

Of course, the division of all religious outlooks—and thus all approaches to the built environment—between “locative” versus “utopian” is, as Jonathan Smith well knows, too simple. And, moreover, some may find Smith’s characterization of “utopian” very different from what they have in mind for that well-worked term.

Nonetheless this heuristic contradistinction rewards us in two ways: First, as regards methodological self-consciousness, we are cautioned to acknowledge two very different theoretical perspectives—“substantial” versus “situational”—one or the other (but seldom both) of which is at work in nearly every scholar’s approach to sacred space. And second, as regards the interpretation of historical cases, this heuristic distinction urges us to appreciate that while some religious orientations (i.e., locative views) lead to elaborate architectural expressions that do conform to Eliade’s famous model, for other equally religious orientations (i.e., utopian views) architecture and building are simply not important priorities.