

# **Society, Spatiality and the Sacred: A Methodological Proposal**

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## **Abstract**

This paper makes a constructive proposal for a methodological approach for studying the relationship between the sacred and the social. It draws on the discussion about the methods of social scientific analysis of the sacred and argues many existing approaches do not adequately address the spatial dimensions of social relations in searching the sacred. It emphasises the need to consider the sacred such that it is socially and spatially constructed and suggests adopting a spatial approach to help correct the tendency to interpret the relations between the sacred and the social with limited consideration of spatial discussions. It concludes that only a social scientific approach that reflects upon the spatial dimensions of social relations enables genuinely understand the relationship between the social and the sacred.

[ **Key words** ] : Sacred, Spatial, Social, Social Science, Spatial Approach, Sacred Place

## **Introduction**

The notion of sacred has engaged the attention of a large circle of scholars studying religion, religions, and religious phenomena. Therefore, much of the existing scholarly discourse surrounding the notion of sacred has largely been confined to studies of religion, with the result that the sacred has long been perceived as being inseparable from its expressions through religion. Moreover, for many scholars, for this reason, there is nothing inappropriate about conflating the sacred and religion, and the sacred itself has not been pursued further as an essential aspect of social scientific investigation. According to Fitzgerald (2009, 34), this problem draws on an ontological tradition from Otto onwards, which perceives the sacred as an inward sensation of transcendence and thus conceptualizes religion as a manifestation of such sensations (Eliade [1959] 1987, Otto [1917] 1976, Wach [1944] 1962). The underlying assumption of this tradition is that, ontologically, the sacred lies at the heart of religion, and so it is perceived as a kind of universalistic *sui generis* phenomenon (Anttonen 2007, 272). I would argue that this conventional perception accounts for the reason as to why the sacred is used in many different contexts that it is too indefinite to have any analytical value for social scientific investigation.

Yet, as Stark (2001, 102) argues in his critical appraisal of the ambiguities in the usage of religion in social theory, the real theoretical problem arises from a Durkheimian tradition. For Durkheim, religion is more than a transcendent spirituality or experience as perceived in the ontological view; rather, it is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Durkheim [1912] 2008, 47). According to this definition, there seems to be a mutual overlap between religion and the sacred, but unlike the ontological tradition, it is still possible to claim that there may be something sacred even if there is no religion. For Durkheim, what defined the sacred can only be its radical otherness compared to all other profane categories because he believes that a satisfactory identification can only be possible with a categorical distinction between two domains of the world: the sacred and profane. As Crippen states (1988, 328), this is the point that Durkheim comes to the idea that religion is based on the sacred, but the problem here is that this sacred can mean anything or be an appellative designation for anything which is “set-apart and forbidden.”

Turning back to Stark's critique, it would, therefore, be accurate to contend that Durkheim's sacred is such a vague term that can be understood as referring to religion, but not necessarily confined to it. Thus, it allows different and even competing explanations.

Despite its vagueness and lack of clarity, the Durkheimian approach to the sacred is widely accepted among theorists concerned with the significance of the sacred within the changing structure of society (Alexander 2003, Anttonen 2007, Lynch 2012, Paden 1992). This is because Durkheim's analysis reveals that the sacred is not only related to different types of spirituality, gods, or transcendence but also to social relations; and religion usually acts as a form of social cement holding everyone within these relations to the sacred (Possamai 2012, 44; Turner 1991, 45–6). Yet, both Durkheim and his followers have been well aware that one of the primary yet still debated features of the society is that it has been secularised; thus, the role and the significance of the sacred within social relations can always be more abstract and weaker than estimated. But, unlike the conventional understanding of Durkheim's formulation, neo-Durkheimian tradition argues that whilst religion may decline, the sacred never leaves us entirely (Francis and Knott 2015, 45; Hammond 1985, 4). Therefore, as Alexander states in his conversation with Lynch (2013, 256), an adequate understanding of the notion of sacred with regard to social relations has always been necessary for possessing a comprehensive understanding of society. However, since the sacred is everywhere, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, and existing as a latent force, as an ever-presented thread in social life (Chidester 2015, 89; Lynch 2012), a social scientific analysis on any issues pertaining to the notion of sacred — from religious to secular and beyond — comprises a variety of arguments involving rich digressions (Francis and Knott 2015, 45–7; Knott 2010a). Therefore, the question of how the sacred relates to wider social scientific discussions is much more complex than it first appears.

I argue that this complexity is further exacerbated by many studies of the sacred, as they have much to say about the relations between sacred beliefs or practices and social structures, but surprisingly little to say about the significance of the spatial existence of these relations. Many scholars, such as Bellah ([1970] 1991) or Douglas ([1975] 2003), embrace Durkheim's unbounded theorization and proceed to discover the sacred without ever providing a discussion on the role of places from which the sacred arises or is practiced. Moreover, although there are some notable exceptions (e.g. Holloway and Valins 2002, Stump 2008), many of the studies paying attention to the significance of spatial dimensions are limited to specific topics such as the pilgrimage to sacred places (e.g. Fernandez-Gimenez and Huntsinger 2000, Graham and Murray 1997). As a result, their contribution to the literature remains limited and empirical rather than theoretical or methodological. Further, I would argue that they hesitate to take part in the discussion of the fruitful works on the sacredness of place of other scholars from social sciences. However, as Lane (2001, 57) states in his evaluation of different approaches to sacred places, to attain a comprehensive examination of the specific questions related to the relation between the society and the sacred, it is necessary to be conversant with the existing scholarly debates concerning the spatial dimensions. In this article, my aim is, therefore, to stimulate the discussion on the significance of spatial approach in analyzing the notion of sacred, which I think, for the current literature, might help correct the overused tendency of interpreting the complex relations between the sacred and the social with limited consideration of spatial discussions.

### **In Search of the Sacred: Why Do We Need a Spatial Approach?**

Thanks primarily to the pioneering works of Lefebvre ([1974] 1991), Soja (1989), and Harvey (1989), the significance of spatial dimensions of social relations has been recognized for more than three decades in social theory. However, while the spatial dimensions have been recognized for more than three decades, their significance in analyzing the relation between the sacred and social remains relatively neglected. Interestingly, some of the clear examples of this neglect can be observed in the

studies conducted by social or cultural geographers who contribute considerably to the general body of knowledge on sacred places. While they attempt to explore the construction of the sacred meanings of different places through a wide range of economic, political and cultural variables (see Braun and Castree 2001, Gregory and Barnes 1997, for a range of examples from different researchers), only rarely do they engage with wider theoretical and methodological discussions on the significance of place in constructing its own sacredness (see Park 1994, for a panoramic view; see Kong 2010, Yorgason and Della Dora 2009, for a critical review). In considering the notion of sacred concerning spatial dimensions, many of those scholars often use the work of Mircea Eliade ([1959] 1987), and so fail to understand and explain identities, meanings, values, and boundaries of different sacred places through descriptions of their own spatial dimensions.

There is a prevailing consensus among scholars studying sacred places that Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* ([1959] 1987) laid significant foundations for the discussion of the significance of spatial dimensions (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, 3–5; Nelson 2006, 3; Della Dora 2018, 50). He notably provides a theoretical and conceptual frame of reference for scholars interested in studying sacred places. He contends that a sacred place is recognized as manifesting its own inherent power and numinosity and thus remains set apart from the ordinary (Eliade [1959] 1987, 20–6); or in his own words, it is a place of "hierophany." Therefore, many scholars devote particular attention to exploring how a profane place becomes a sacred place and suggest, following Eliade, that the sacredness of a place reveals itself as a sort of timeless essence (Kinnard 2014, 3). As Sheldrake (2007, 243) states, such an approach has the advantage of perceiving the nature and dynamics of sacred from within, but there is no doubt that it also creates a radical opposition between sacred places and everyday social relations. Therefore, criticizing Eliade for his approach to the sacred as something numinous and inherent in the place itself, some scholars adopt a Durkheimian approach that attributes the sacredness of place to various social relations. This is because, while Eliade identifies the sacred as an uncanny, powerful manifestation (see Rennie 2017 for a detailed discussion), Durkheim emphasizes that the sacred is not a concept for mystery or power, nor is it something that manifests itself ([1915] 2008). For Durkheim, it is something that emanates from social relations.

The Durkheimian approach shifts scholarly attention from the spiritual or divine revelation of the sacred to its social construction. Therefore, it directs the scholarly inquiry towards how the sacred is situated at the nexus of social relations (Paden 1999; Anttonen 2000, 2007; Knott 2005). In their insightful book *American Sacred Space* (1995), Chidester and Linenthal name this approach as situational, as opposed to Eliade's substantial or essential inquiry of the sacred (5–6). What they refer to as a situational approach considers that the sacredness of a place is tied up with, and draws meaning from, social relations. This enables us to move away from the Eliaden substantial understanding of sacred place as an ontological given towards its situational conceptualization as a social construction. However, in situations where the poetics and politics of a sacred place entwine, there is a risk of discounting the significance of the place. This is because the situational approach to the sacred rarely recognizes the place as a participant in the social construction of its sacredness. There are only a few exceptions (Sinha 2003, Binte Abdullah Sani 2015) that emphasize "a complex uncovering of social processes" (Marti 2014, 507), taking place itself into account. As a result, the valuable insights of the Durkheimian situational approach into the relationship between social, spatial and the sacred remain under-utilized by many scholars studying sacred places.

As Soja reminds us, sacred places are doubly constructed: They are built or in some way physically carved out, but at the same time, they are always interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined (Soja 1996; cited in Gieryn 2000, 465). It is, thus, possible to argue that the social relations or interactions construct not only the sacredness of places (Sayer 1985, 57–60) but also their physical characteristics within which the sacred flows into existence. Therefore, I argue that the Durkheimian situational approach can be extended to involve the analysis of place as settings for social relations, which are, in turn, reproduced by the place itself. After all, the primary concern

of situational analysis of the sacred is not to provide a sort of ontology of what the sacred is, but to research what the sacred does by locating that in places. Therefore, the studies of the sacred phenomena need more analyses that emphasize the complexity of social processes that can include physical places as socially constructed structures (Reichmann and Muller 2015, 2-23). This reflects the crux of my argument in this article, namely that the studies of sacred remain incomplete so long as they separate the sacred from the social and spatial dimensions. I further argue at this point that these dimensions are inadequate by themselves in exploring the sacredness of any places. To grasp the significance of the interactive relation between these dimensions, we can consider, for instance, Jerusalem's Western Wall.

The sacred at the Western Wall appears in various forms and different degrees according to the multiple senses of being constituted within Jewish, Christian, and Muslim groups. Even within the Jewish community, there are diverse interpretations of the Wall and how its sacredness is experienced, occasionally constituting a source of conflict between Orthodox Jews and secular groups (Orr 1983, 193). One of the primary sources of the conflicts between these groups is the negotiation processes over the control and use of the Western Wall's spatial location, regarding its sacredness. Therefore, without analyzing the spatial dimensions of its sacredness, it is not possible to highlight, for instance, how the Jewish interpretation of the Wall was shifted from a religious to a nationalist sacred. It can be read in several British Mandate documents that with the increased centrality of the Wall for Jews during the beginning of the twentieth century, new symbolic meanings were attached to its sacredness. For instance, the District Officer Cust stated in 1929 that "in certain Jewish circles the right to pray has (...) become linked with the claim to actual ownership of the Wall" (Cust 1980, 45). At the same time, a delegation from the Zionist Commission, led by Chaim Weizmann, already visited the Wall, planning to purchase the site and making it Jewish national property. It is possible to argue that it was an attempt to provide incontrovertible proof of Jewish rights to control the use of a physical, tangible sacred heritage or symbol. However, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the sacredness of the Wall was primarily religious, and some secular Zionists even found praying at the Wall redolent of backwardness (Hertzberg 1996, 15). When we take a closer look at such changing views about the values embodied by the Western Wall's sacredness, it is possible to comprehend how the sacred at the Western Wall is tied to both social and spatial dimensions. This means that the changing politics of the sacred at the Western Wall can easily be traced by investigating the discussions surrounding its spatial existence.

I do not contend that such a spatial analysis does eliminate the complexity of the Western Wall's religious or historical sacredness. What I argue is that it does help to illuminate its spatial location within which the events and practices associated with the Western Wall's sacredness emerge, and in doing so, help to circumscribe the phenomena associated with the sacred. Thus, for instance, one can find answers to the controversy that long existed over the political and practical status of the sacred at the Western Wall by investigating the various plans and proposals for the development of the area surrounding the Wall since the Six-Day War of 1967 (e.g. Cohen-Hattab 2016). It is possible to raise also crucial questions such as how the sacred at the Western Wall reflects national values when framed from such a spatial perspective. Considering the significance of this perspective, there are already a few valuable studies providing theoretically driven analysis of specific cases of the sacredness of places, aiming to clarify the existing theoretical and conceptual vagueness (e.g. Chidester and Linenthal 1995; Day 2008; Gilliat-Ray 2005b, 2005a). However, since such sacred places are open to endless (re)interpretation from different perspectives with different social and political histories, it is necessary to balance the complexity of conceptual and theoretical questions with a clear methodological and analytical construction of the studies of the sacred. This requires turning theoretical and conceptual arguments into a single theory and then a workable methodology for the analysis. Therefore, in the following section, drawing on the discussion on the significance of spatial perspective, I attempt to provide a constructive proposal for further discussion

on the possibility of a spatially integrated methodological approach for studying the relationship between society spatiality and the sacred.

### **Advancing the Methodology: Spatial Analysis of the Sacred**

Suppose the significance of spatial perspective in social science can be linked to a particular idea developed earlier. In that case, a triad of categories proposed by Lefebvre, including “spatial practice,” “representations of space” and “spaces of representation,” might be at the centre. Whereas space had long been conceived as an absolute, Lefebvre's categorization facilitated a reinvestigation of space as a valuable component of understanding the social and cultural (Harvey 2009, 141–7). However, while the concept of space has been recognized for more than decades in social theory, the spatial approach's usefulness in analyzing sacred places remains relatively neglected. An effort to apply Lefebvre's insights specifically to the concept of sacred emerged only in the 2000s, most notably in the earlier works of Knott (2005, 2010b). Drawing upon Lefebvre's ([1974] 1991) categories, her studies have had the effect of opening avenues of inquiry focusing on the sacredness of places and related practices. A methodology for the study of the sacred, Knott argues, requires interpretive analyses, thinking first about the location of the sacred in a given place with spatial considerations, then in relation to its social dimensions (Knott 2009, 156). Such a methodological approach can provide a lens through which to explain social practices and discourses, as well as the emergence and reproduction of social structures institutionalized in the constitution of places. It also enables the navigation of the spatial perspective prompted by scholars such as Lefebvre, Harvey, or Soja to capture the various spatial frameworks in analyzing the sacred. More importantly, Knott's argument emphasizes the necessity of revealing how and when spatiality provides a fundamental category for analyzing the relation between the sacred and social relations in order to develop a set of spatial tools that can be used to investigate sacred places.

In his short article, “The Sociology of Space: A Use-Centered View,” Gans (2002, 329) argues that the fact that social relations are spatial does not demonstrate how and when the categories of space offer insights in research. He, therefore, cautions against simply reifying space. In his “A Space for Place in Sociology,” Gieryn (2000, 482) takes a similar stand, using the concept of place instead of space. Tracing different examples of placemaking, he argues the centrality of place in analyzing social relations. These analyses, however, are difficult to follow in part because most of what they describe as place can also be perceived as space and vice versa. Therefore, one can raise the question of the significance of the distinction between space and place as an analytical tool in spatial approach. Following Hubbard and Kitchin (2010, 6), I simply argue that a place can be described as a distinctive type of space or as achieved in the process constituting relational space. In other words, I assert that a place is more an event than a thing to be assimilated to known categories (Casey 1997, 24–6). Therefore, minding Gans's cautionary words, tracing how a place is produced, constituted, or made meaningful enables us to uncover the spatial formations. Moreover, the objects and ideas directly related to these formations frame broader social and political discussions, establishing the material context. In the case of the Western Wall, for instance, the spatial formations of place can be used as an analytical tool to show how the competing groups produce sacred meanings in order to retain control over the ancient structure.

It is clear by this point that the primary method of analysis I propose requires a specific focus on how the sacred is (re)constructed within various social and spatial aspects. However, I also assert that these aspects are inadequate by themselves to bring out the complexities surrounding the notion of sacred. For this reason, my suggestion is to cross disciplinary boundaries and build a methodological approach based on an amalgamation of the analytical tools used in the studies relevant to the social and spatial dimensions of the sacred. To do so, I suggest extending the spatially integrated methodological approach, drawing on the various methodological strengths of the relevant social science disciplines. Therefore, I propose, first, to derive conceptual and theoretical discussions on the notion of sacred from sociology and anthropology of religion. This is where the sacred is

analyzed as both a unique phenomenon transcending the ordinary world – such as Otto's “numinous” or Eliade's “hierophany”– and a social phenomenon making the social world – such as Durkheim's analysis of sacred as a contagious configuration set apart from the ordinary rhythms of life, but set apart in such a way that it stands at the centre of social construction.

Second, I argue that it is helpful to draw on the analyses of the cultural and historical studies and adapt their concepts appropriate to the intricate social, cultural, and political contexts in which the sacred is embedded. This is of significance because, as Smith (1978, 88) states, a sacred place often entails “the cultural labour of ritual, in specific historical situations, involving the hard work of attention, memory, design, construction, and control of the place.” It is, therefore, also valuable to note, here, the significance of the cultural analysis that developed within the discipline of religious studies, particularly the works of Smith. He draws from the ontological and phenomenological conceptualizations of the sacred and place, and then re-engages these conceptualizations with social and cultural constructionist perspectives through scholars such as Durkheim, Wheatley, and Geertz. Hence, he provides a constructionist approach to the sacred and contends that a sacred place is more than a natural or material place. Instead, it is lived and socially organized and takes shape based on socially constructed beliefs and practices.

The conceptualization of sacred through socially constructed beliefs and practices has reviewed and extended by later scholars whose focus is on the sacredness of the place rather than on beliefs and ritual practices. For instance, Barbara Metcalf, in her introduction to the edited collection, *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (1996, 3), notes that the majority of essays in the collection emphasize that it is the sanctioned practice that is prior and that creates Muslim place in different parts of North America and Europe. Similarly, in her case study of sacred landscapes in Sapmi and the northern region of contemporary Norway, Kraft (2010, 59) introduces the idea of ritual rules and regulations that she argues are crucial for the sacredness of a place to be both expressed and maintained. It is apparent that Smith's cultural constructivist analysis significantly influenced Metcalf's and Kraft's exploration of how an ordinary place becomes sacred. On the same basis, Chidester and Linenthal (1995, 9-10) also argue that the “situational, relational, and frequently, if not inherently, contested” character of sacred place is an outcome of the process of social, cultural, and political constructions. But, it should be noted that this construction process itself is contingent upon embodied spatial practices.

For this reason, finally, I suggest referring to Soja's argument (2000, 7), taking place seriously, and pulling together a conceptual and theoretical framework to rethink the notion of sacred such that it is both socially and spatially constructed. I argue that this should be foundational to the theoretical, methodological, and empirical questions of social scientific analysis of the notion of sacred, as the sacred is experienced and rendered sensible by social actors and relations in places. To conceive these actors and relations concerning the notion of sacred is to acknowledge the complexity. But, this is where, I think, my argument becomes powerful, as the theoretical background and the developing methodological tools of the spatial approach can render the complexity manageable in a variety of ways. For example, one path might involve examining the social process of (re)constructing the sacredness of places. What do individuals, communities or groups believe a sacred place can or should do for them? How do their beliefs vary across social structures? Do they make decisions about the sacredness of places? Who has a stake in determining the faith of the sacred at specific places? A second approach could involve investigating the construction, history and status of particular places. How does an ordinary place become sacred? How do the surrounding structures of a place shape its sacredness? How about the use, control, and organization of sacred places? These two broad approaches are just part of a series of questions and methods that could develop if the notion of sacred was analyzed with a consideration of socio-spatial dimensions. This means that extending the analysis of the sacred by employing a spatial approach could produce exciting research opportunities further to understand the notion of sacred within its socio-spatial existence.

## Conclusion

Social scientists have not often acknowledged the significance of the spatial dimensions in search of the sacred. Therefore, there is a lack of understanding of how the multiple layers of social relations (re)produced in relation to the sacred influence and are influenced by these spatial dimensions. If we look at the relationship between the sacred and the social, we find that the two phenomena are, at least in several key instances, interrelated and that they interact through the places. Several scholars, such as Knott or Soja remind us that the spatial dimensions of these places are where research attention deserves to be directed. We can understand the notion of sacred better when we see its interconnections with social and spatial aspects together. However, the spatial approach, which helps examine these interconnections, has not yet significantly influenced the social scientific studies of the sacred. There is still a need for methodological advances that foster the application of this approach in the study of sacred, in particular the sacred places. In this paper, to contribute a methodological advance on the analysis of the sacred, I have suggested that we need to draw appropriate analytical implications of various social science disciplines on the spatial dimensions of social relations and build a socio-spatial analysis of the sacred. I have discussed such an analysis as an alternative to the conventional examination of the sacred and concluded that only a social scientific approach that reflects upon the spatial dimensions of social relations enables scholars of religion to genuinely understand the nature and politics of the sacred.

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