

# I

## A Method for Thinking about Power Dynamics in Christian Space

Religious space is dynamic space. Religious spaces house religious ritual, of course, but they do far more than simply provide the setting within which ritual takes place. They contribute in important ways to the very meaning of ritual practices and to the shape and content of religious systems themselves. Consider Christian churches, for instance. Church buildings influence worship practices, facilitating some activities and impeding others. They focus the attention of believers on the divine, and they frequently mediate the relationship between the individual and God. They change with religious activities over time. They contribute to the formation and maintenance of internal relationships within congregations. They designate hierarchy and they demarcate community, serving a multiplicity of users with a host of objectives. They teach insiders and outsiders about Christianity, and they convey messages about the religious group housed in the building to the community at large. Indeed, church buildings are dynamic agents in the construction, development, and persistence of Christianity itself.

This dynamic character renders religious space a particularly complex subject. The diversity among types of church buildings; their multiple functions and various users; their embedded layers of religious, social, and cultural meaning; and their tendency to change dramatically over time create real challenges for those who wish to augment their understanding of Christianity with a knowledge of the architecture of worship. The purpose of this book is to provide

a method for sorting through this dynamism, a set of questions and categories that can guide a systematic analysis of space. Although we will be focusing on Christian architecture, this method can also be applied to other traditions and thus provides a foundation for comparative work across religions.

The following chapters will demonstrate this method with a brief tour through the historical development of Christian church buildings, beginning with the earliest Christian worship spaces described in Christian scriptures and proceeding chronologically through history to the present day. In each period under discussion in this admittedly rapid survey, we will examine some of the fundamental features of churches, with an eye toward unpacking the meanings within them. Along the way, we will trace the general patterns of change in Christian church space and worship practices over the past two millennia. By the end of the book, readers will have seen a specific set of categories and accompanying questions applied to a variety of buildings existing within a host of social, cultural, political, and religious circumstances. Having completed this introduction, readers will be well equipped to think critically about the dynamism of Christian space and to pursue much more detailed analyses of not only the spaces and buildings of Christians, but those of other religious groups as well.

### Three Types of Power in Religious Space

Religious space is powerful space. Within it the awesome power of the divine is often understood to dwell. Proximity to this power is deemed to yield authority and spiritual empowerment to individuals. The power of religious leaders is made manifest within religious space, their authority indicated in various ways. Similarly, the relative influence of ordinary believers is embedded in religious space as are profound personal experiences of the divine. Power, then, comes in three different categories: (1) divine or supernatural power, or that attributed to God; (2) social power, or that pertaining to a variety of social, particularly clerical, hierarchies; and (3) personal power, or the various feelings of spiritual empowerment that individuals derive from an experience of the divine. This categorization of power, which will provide the methodological foundation of our study of Christian space, draws upon almost three generations of scholarly work on religious space.

The most familiar way of thinking about religious space was elaborated by noted history of religions scholar Mircea Eliade in his landmark book, *The Sacred and the Profane*. In this book, Eliade explores how cultures sense and respond to the presence of divine power within certain spaces. For Eliade,

“every sacred space implies a hierophany” or an “irruption of the sacred.”<sup>1</sup> Places are deemed sacred precisely because a divine or supernatural power dwells in them. These powerful places help to center the community, orienting its members to the rest of the nonsacred, or profane, world. These holy centers orient individuals and groups “vertically,” creating a spatial link between heavenly power above and the more problematic, even evil, power of the underworld below. They also orient groups “horizontally,” dividing the landscape into sacred centers and profane fringes, imprinting a hierarchy of meaning onto the very earth itself. The presence of the divine, this *axis mundi*, or world center, broadcasts spiritual meanings that provide context for all other spaces and knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Eliade’s view is termed *substantive* because it emphasizes the substance of the supernatural or divine presence and views certain spaces as being inherently sacred due to that supernatural presence within them. This perspective, of course, is how believers have looked upon the sacred spaces of their cultures for eons. From indigenous peoples of the world to the ancient Greeks to the early Jews to many present-day Christians, many religious groups have believed and do believe that particular gods or powers exist or reside within certain places. Frequently, groups mark those places with buildings. A *temple* is the quintessential building created to house a god. Hindu temples shelter stone or bronze sculptures (called *murti*), which the deities have been invited to inhabit. Within Hindu temples, priests perform numerous rituals, including the daily waking, bathing, and feeding of those deities, as well as the offering of prayers and praise. Worshippers bring offerings of food and materials for the god and perform other acts of worship called *pūja*. Similarly, ancient Greek temples such as the Parthenon housed mammoth statues of gods—Athena, for instance, in the Parthenon—which were also understood to be inhabited by their divine presences. The Jewish Temple of Solomon can also be included in this category as it was constructed to house both the Ark of the Lord, the symbol of the covenant between the people and its G-d, as well as the divine presence, or Shekhinah. In contemporary times, similar perspectives remain central to the beliefs of many groups. Many Native American groups, for instance, base moral and legal claims to certain lands upon a substantive understanding of an indwelling spiritual essence within them. Similarly, Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, invest their temples with the belief that the divine is particularly present within.

Although many religious groups firmly believe in the physical presence of the divine within certain spaces, others have viewed the supernatural “presence” within sacred spaces as metaphorical—although there is often a very fine line between “real” presence and metaphorical presence. In Christianity, the

language of “real presence,” of course, echoes language used to describe Jesus’s presence in the elements of the Eucharist, and, in many ways, the situations parallel one another. For instance, Roman Catholics, who believe in the real (substantive) presence of the Lord in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist meal, similarly tend to believe in a real divine presence within their churches. One feels close to God, many Catholics feel, within a shrine, church, or cathedral. Many believe that the grotto at Lourdes, for instance, commemorating the three appearances of the Virgin Mary to St. Bernadette beginning in 1858, is infused with the healing power of her continued, holy presence through the water that flows from the spring within it. In contrast, many Protestants, although seeing churches as places of great spiritual importance, view neither the buildings nor the bread and wine of the communion service as necessarily filled with a real presence of God. Buildings shelter the worshiping community but are not necessarily infused with the divine. As we shall see, there are many perspectives on this question of the presence of divine elements within churches.

Although Eliade linked sacred space to the presence of the divine, others have suggested that such a view is too narrow to account for the many human understandings of religious space. Scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith discusses a variety of attributes of Christian sacred space in his book *To Take Place*, an exploration of ancient Jewish and early Christian understandings of religious spaces. Smith points out that various types of sacred space carried various meanings. For early Christians, the idea of space being imbued with holiness, or the presence of the divine, is illustrated in attempts in the fourth century to memorialize places important in the life of Jesus, including his birthplace and his tomb, venerated in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, respectively. Early Christians believed that these places, linked closely with crucial events in the life of Christ, were permeated with divine power.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Smith argues, these memorials also demonstrate the opposite idea that societies *create* their sacred spaces, ascribing sacred meanings to spaces and places that previously had no such meanings ascribed to them. To illustrate this, he traces the processes through which such places were identified as important in the life of Jesus centuries after his death. We should keep in mind, then, that although the idea of an indwelling sacred presence appeals to insiders, or believers, within a religious tradition, those on the outside of traditions tend to be more aware of how people within traditions work to establish and then maintain the sacred meanings they generate and connect to places, that is, how they work to *sacralize* certain places.

Along these lines of the human production of sacred space, a variety of processes and dynamics can be seen to contribute to the sacralization of certain places. For instance, Smith argues that the distinctive ways in which religious sites organize or arrange the people who use them constitute an important component of the perceived holiness of a place. Using the instructions for building a temple that appear in the book of Ezekiel as his example, Smith shows that the spaces of the temple were organized hierarchically along the longitudinal axis that ran from the exterior spaces of the building through the interior rooms to the *holy of holies*, the place where the godhead was believed may dwell. The social hierarchy was mapped onto these spaces from the least sacred outer areas that were open to nonbelievers, through the more important semi-exterior spaces reserved for lay believers, to the interior spaces reserved for different levels of the priesthood, to the holy of holies reserved exclusively for the High Priest.<sup>4</sup> Following a similar logic, historian and archaeologist Peter Richardson has used archaeological evidence to discuss the hierarchy of spaces associated with the Second Temple in Jerusalem, outlining a similar ranking of space based upon proximity to the holy of holies.<sup>5</sup> In these cases precise differentiation of space articulated the ranked authority of the several groups. In turn, the very sacredness ascribed to each space rested in part upon its function in defining those ranks, its holiness varying with the ranks themselves.

The relative position of different groups within religious spaces, then, and the power and influence those positions signify, constitute an important defining feature of religious spaces. Indeed, unlike the differing views on whether the presence of the divine is a necessary characteristic of sacred space, the spatial organization of *people* in specific ways is a characteristic shared by all sacred and religious spaces. How people organize themselves and behave within specific places imbue those places with sacred importance. In this view, space is sacralized by human action and behavior, and certain spaces become sacred because people treat them differently from ordinary spaces.

Thus, Smith's analysis of the importance of relational placement points to a significant conclusion: that places are sacred because they are made so by human beings. Places are not inherently holy in Smith's view; sacredness is *situational*, or dependent upon the situation or treatment, not on a substantive indwelling of the supernatural. Groups of believers create holy places by investing certain places or spaces with religious meanings and then acting upon those meanings. Just as many Protestant Christians do not believe that Jesus physically exists within the Eucharist elements, though they still ascribe strong religious meaning to ordinary bread and wine under certain circumstances and through certain actions (e.g., the communal celebration of the Lord's Supper),

places, in this view, are similarly redefined under certain circumstances and through certain actions. In effect, people sacralized certain places, thereby literally creating sacred space.

This view significantly challenges the Eliadian perspective of an indwelling divinity as the key feature of sacred space. Although in many cases believers within a religious system do, indeed, reflect the Eliadian interpretation, believing the supernatural to be present in certain places, nonbelievers or outsiders looking in do not see an indwelling supernatural force but rather human behaviors that heighten the meaning of certain spaces, behaviors that, in effect, sacralize space. As students of religious space, part of our challenge will be to negotiate between these perspectives, retaining the analytical character of the situational view while remaining cognizant of the power of the substantive view.

Locating the creation of sacred space within the realm of human activity helps us focus on those behaviors that sacralize certain places. As Smith's analysis of the hierarchical placement of specific groups within relative proximity to the holy of holies in Ezekiel's Temple suggests, much of this behavior has to do with acknowledging and expressing reverence for different types of power. Certainly, a temple constructed to house a god and the ritual activities performed there acknowledge and reverence the divine or supernatural power of the god him- or herself. Many societies have believed that expressing proper reverence toward supernatural power brings positive outcomes whereas the absence of such reverence courts disaster.

But in addition to supernatural power, other types of power are also acknowledged and revered as believers sacralize certain spaces. As we have already seen in Smith's and Richardson's work on the Jewish temples, acknowledging and reverencing the power of individual people or special groups of people—that is, the formation of social power—is accomplished through rules pertaining to the proper location of believers vis-à-vis the location of perceived supernatural power. In the Second Temple, only the High Priest was allowed into the holy of holies (the *devir*) and only on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and his occupation of that space both announced and helped to maintain his religious authority. Ritual actions performed before entering the holy space, such as washing and purifying the body and donning special clothing, further underscored the social power of the highest priestly office. Lay believers and neophytes, allowed only in the courtyard, easily understood the messages about power articulated symbolically by such actions and such spaces. Similar patterns are found in other temple traditions. The assigned locations and actions indicate, maintain, and ultimately help to naturalize hierarchical systems of human rank. Those with higher rank wield greater

power over not only religious matters but also, frequently, social and civic ones as well. Thus, the demarking of social power among the clergy, patrons, and ordinary people is frequently part of the sacralization process.

Just as with the variety of understandings of supernatural power, Christianity also exhibits a wide variety of articulations of social power within religious buildings. Some groups rigidly demark spaces. For example, Orthodox Christians allow only clergy or other religious leaders to enter their church sanctuaries, which are fully or partially screened from the eyes of ordinary worshippers by an iconostasis, whose doors are opened only at certain points in the service, allowing a restricted view of the altar and actions of the priest. On the other end of the spectrum, many contemporary Quaker meetinghouses make no distinctions among worshippers, identifying no leaders, and placing all who gather for worship in undifferentiated space and on the same level vis-à-vis social power. Church buildings indicate social power, then, as a means of articulating and lending legitimacy to the organizational structures of the religious group. The isolated chancel or sanctuary indicates the special knowledge and power of the priest. The elevated pulpit indicates the special knowledge and power of the preacher. By indicating the importance of these and other religious offices, churches are created and treated as “special,” or sacred, places.

In addition to these ideas of the relational placement of groups, historians David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, following Smith, have noted a number of means by which groups sacralized space situationally. For them, one of the most important catalysts for the sacralization of space is conflict, or in their terminology, “contestation.”<sup>6</sup> Sacred space is not placid; it often exists at the heart of tumultuous controversies. An example is the Dome of the Rock, the sacred mosque erected in Jerusalem in the seventh century on the ruins of the Jewish Second Temple. For Jews, this place, as the site of both Solomon’s and Herod’s temples is the holiest place in the world. For Christians, the site figures in the life of Jesus and particularly in his crucifixion. For Muslims, the site is the third most holy place in the world, following Mecca and Medina. Struggle among these groups over this meaningful place has heightened its importance and sacredness. In these ways, then, social power—evident in hierarchies and in relations among different groups—informs religious spaces.

Lastly, in addition to supernatural power and social power, we must also keep in mind the very individual, personal empowerment that is frequently associated with church buildings and sacred spaces. Individuals connect profound spiritual meanings to specific places, including buildings and landscapes, and personal feelings of spiritual empowerment often result from connection to those spaces. From a substantive perspective, a pilgrimage to

a holy site such as the Lourdes grotto empowers believers with grace through the presence of the Virgin. A situational view might focus attention on the way in which the ritual of the pilgrimage journey draws the believer's attention to the spiritual and thus empowers him or her through active participation in and expression of his or her understanding of the divine.<sup>7</sup> Upon arrival at the site, an individual's status as a pilgrim locates him or her within both human and divine hierarchies and defines a set of traditional behaviors or activities for the pilgrim. Threat or contest may also function to sacralize this space in ways that empower individuals. For instance Lourdes, a healing site, is fraught with misery even amidst hope for cures. Here the threat is internal, as ill health and physical suffering challenge individuals' faith. The hope believers place in the grotto and its healing water, as well as their sacralization of the grotto through their various activities, are direct results of personal claims to power in the face of adversity.

Such places make the connection between human life and the divine concrete, tangible, palpable. Most believers rarely stop to reflect on just how these connections are made, how personal empowerment is achieved, but this category of personal empowerment will be brought to bear in our study of church spaces in order to remind us of the power that church spaces afford the faithful. Throughout this book, then, attention to divine, social, and personal power will guide our questions as we consider Christian spaces. Awareness of the various means through which individuals and groups attribute meanings to specific spaces and thus participate in the sacralization of them will also inform the following pages.

Sacred space, then, including the Christian churches that are the focus of this book, should be understood as powerful space. The following chapters explore how power works within churches in an effort to illuminate the meanings of Christian buildings through the centuries. To accomplish this, the book closely examines the relationship between specific spaces and the religious practices and behaviors that invest them with meaning. We will be examining the function of power within the various aspects of Christian life, specifically with respect to Christian thought or *creed*, Christian ethics or *code*, and Christian practice or *cultus*. As a result, this study is as much about Christianity as it is about buildings. Indeed, one of the goals of the book and of the method presented is to use buildings and spaces to shed light upon Christianity itself.

This book, then, is an extended essay on the form, function, and meaning of Christian worship spaces, how they have changed over time, and what we can learn about Christianity by looking at the places in which it has been practiced. As a brief survey, however, it can only scratch the surface of the

many extraordinary buildings and groups discussed here. But it can provide readers with a set of categories and questions that they can employ as they look more deeply into the buildings and meanings that interest them.<sup>8</sup> By offering a look across the sweep of two millennia of Christian architecture, it exposes several patterns and meanings that are inherent in Christianity, but which have often been neglected precisely because they are so deeply embedded in architecture and space.