SACRED SPACE. A sacred place is first of all a defined place, a space distinguished from other spaces. The rituals that people either practice at a place or direct toward it mark its sacredness and differentiate it from other defined spaces. To understand the character of such places, Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested the helpful metaphor of sacred space as a "focusing lens." A sacred place focuses attention on the forms, objects, and actions in it and reveals them as bearers of religious meaning. These symbols describe the fundamental constituents of reality as a religious community perceives them, defines a life in accordance with that view, and provides a means of access between the human world and divine realities.

As meaningful space, sacred space encompasses a wide variety of very different kinds of places. It includes places that are constructed for religious purposes, such as temples or te-mesoi, and places that are religiously interpreted, such as mountains or rivers. It includes spaces that can be entered physically, as the outer geography of a holy land, imaginatively, as the inner geography of the body in Tantric yoga, or visually, as the space of a mandala. Sacred space does not even exclude nonsacred space, for the same place may be both sacred and nonsacred in different respects or circumstances. In traditional Maori culture, for example, the latrine marks the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead. As such, it is the ritual place at which an unwanted spirit can be expelled or the help of the spirits obtained. Therefore, it is sacred. And it is still a latrine. Similarly, a house is a functional space, but in its construction, its design, or the rites within it, it may be endowed with religious meaning. A shrine that is the focus of religious activity on certain occasions may be ignored at other times. In short, a sacred place comes into being when it is interpreted as a sacred place.

This view of sacred space as a lens for meaning implies that places are sacred because they perform a religious function, not because they have peculiar physical or aesthetic qualities. The tradition articulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher and developed by Rudolf Otto links the perception of holiness to religious emotion. Originally or authentically, therefore, sacred places ought to have had the power to evoke an affective response. And many sacred places do precisely that: The sacred mountains of China, the Gothic cathedrals of Europe, and the sources and the estuaries of India's holy rivers have a beauty and a power that are elements of their religious dimension. But such qualities of place are not inevitable. Many sacred places, even places that are central in the religious life of the community, are unimpressive to someone outside the tradition. The form of the place, without a knowledge of what and how it signifies, may not convey any religious sense whatever. Rādḍhīpur, for example, is the principal pilgrimage place of the Māhābhāīs, a Kṣaṇṭaite Maharashtrian sect. It is the place where God lived in the incarnate form of Gūṇḍām Rāuli, where he deposited divine power, and where he performed acts that revealed his divine nature. It is the place visited by another divine incarnation, Cakradhar, who founded the Māhābhāī community. But Rādḍhīpur itself is completely unexceptional, and the places where Gūṇḍām Rāuli performed his deeds are indicated only by small stone markers. There is nothing there that gives rise to a sense of awe or mystery, and yet the village is revered and protected by religious restrictions. The place is not aesthetically profound, but it is nonetheless religiously powerful.

ESTABLISHMENT OF SACRED SPACE. Both the distinctiveness of sacred space and its reference to the ultimate context of a culture are often expressed in the conviction that sacred space is not arbitrary. Objectively, and not only subjectively, a sacred place is different from the surrounding area, for it is not a place of wholly human creation or choice. Rather, its significance is grounded in its unique character, a character that no purely human action can confer on it.

In traditional societies, the whole land of a culture is normally sacred, and this sacredness is often communicated in the narratives of its foundation. Sometimes the land is uniquely created. The Köjiki and Nihongi record the traditions of the age of the Kami when Japan and its way of life were established. According to these texts, the divine pair, Izanagi and Izanami, looked down upon the waters of the yet unformed earth and dipped a jeweled spear into the ocean. From the brine that dripped from the spear the first island of Japan was formed. The divine couple later gave birth to other deities, among them the sun goddess, Amaterasu, whose descendants rule over Japan. Thus, Japan is
different from all other places: It is the first land, and the
land whose way of life is established by the gods. Or a land
can become sacred because it is given by a god, like the
land of Israel. Or again, a land may be established by ritual.
According to an early Indian tradition in the Satapatha
Brâhmanâ, the land lying to the east of the Sadanâta River
was unfit for habitation by brâhmans. It became fit when the
sacrificial fire was carried across the river and established
in the land.

Similarly, a sacred structure or place within a holy land
possesses something—a character, a significance, or an ob-
ject—that sets it apart. The traditions of the greater Hindu
temples and pilgrimage places declare that they are intrinsi-
cally, not scriptively, sacred. The holiest images of the Saiva
tradition are the esuambhâlingas, images of Śiva that are not
human creations but self-manifestations of the god. Similar-
ly, the holiest places of the goddess are the pûthas, the places
where the parts of her body fell after her suicide and dismem-
berment. In other cases, an object but the very ground itself
fixes the worship of a divinity to a particular spot. Ac-
cording to the traditions of the temple at Sârâgâm, the
shrine originated in heaven. From there it was brought to
earth, to the city of Râma. Râma then gave it to a pious
demon, who wished to take it with him to his home in Sri
Lanka. On the way, however, he put it down near a ford on
the Kâveri (Cauvery) River, and when he tried to pick it up
again he could not move it. The god of the temple then ap-
peared to him and told him that the river had performed aucte-
rities to keep the shrine within her bounds and that the god
intended to stay there (Shulman, 1980, p. 49). The current
location of the temple is therefore where the god, not any
demon or human, chose it to be.

The gods may also communicate the special sanctity of
a place through signs. Animals often serve as messengers of
divine choice. So, for example, the Aztec city of Ténocchitlán
was founded at the place where an eagle landed on a bloomi-
ging cactus, and Acatl followed a pregnant sow to the place
where it farrowed and there founded Alba Longa. The search
for such signs could develop into a science of divination.
Chinese geomancy is just such an attempt to sort out the ob-
jective qualities of a place by studying the contours of the
land and the balance of waters, winds, and other elements.

In other cases, a location becomes holy because of reli-
giously significant events that have occurred there. From
the time of Muhammad, Jerusalem has been a holy place
for Islam. Although various traditions were attached to the
city, it was above all the Prophet’s journey there that estab-
lished its sanctity. One night Muhammad was brought to Jeru-
alem and to the rock on the Temple mount, and from there
he ascended through the heavens to the very presence of
God. The mosque of the Dome of the Rock and the estab-
lishment of Jerusalem as a place of pilgrimage both expressed
and intensified the sanctity of the city. That sanctity was
heightened by the discovery of tokens of Muhammad’s jour-
ney: his footprints on the rock, the imprint made by his sad-
dle, and even the place where the angel Gabriel flattened the
rock before the Prophet’s ascent. And it was further intensi-
ﬁed by bringing other religiously signiﬁcant events into con-
nexion with it. The stories of Abraham and Isaac, of Mel-
chizedek, king of Salem, and of Jacob’s ladder were among
the other biblical and nonbiblical narratives set there. As this
example illustrates, a sacred place can draw a variety of tradi-
tions to itself and thereby become even more powerfully
sacred.

Places may also be made sacred through the relics of
holy beings. A grave may sanctify a place, for the tomb marks
not only the separation of the living from the dead but also
the point of contact between them. In early Christianity, for
example, tombs of martyrs became places of communion
with the holiness of the deceased. Later, beginning about the
sixth century, the deposition of relics became the center of
rites for the consecration of a church. These sanctified
the church and, within the church, the sanctuary where they
were installed.

Finally, the form of a place may give it meaning and hol-
iness. In different cultures, various kinds of places suggest
the presence of deities. As has been seen, the land of Japan
is holy because it is created and protected by the kami. With-
in Japan there are particular places where the kami are mani-
festly present: Mountains, from Mount Fuji to the hills of
local shrines, for example, may be tokens of the presence of
the kami. In India, rivers and confluences are sacred, for pur-
ifying waters and meeting streams suggest places where gods
are present and approachable. In these cases, the shape of
the land suggests meanings to which the sacredness of the place
draws attention.

At the beginning of this section, it was stated that sacred
places are typically not arbitrary. But there are places of reli-
gious activity that are meaningful precisely because they are
arbitrary. If the tendency to institute sacred places is univer-
sal, so also is the tendency to deny the localization of divinity.
The Indian devotional tradition, like other religious tradi-
tions, is pulled in two directions: one toward divinities located
in specific places, the other toward the denial that divinity
should be sought in any place other than within. “Why bow
and bow in the mosque, and trudge to Mecca to see God?
Does Khuda live in the mosque? Is Ram in idols and holy
ground?” asks Kabir (Hes and Singh, 1983, p. 74).

Mosque architecture shows the tension between the
sacrnicication of a place and the denial of any localization of
divine presence. The mosque carries values typical of other
sacred places. The interior is oriented toward a holy center:
The mihrâb (prayer niche) directs worship toward the sacred
city of Mecca. The space of the mosque is differentiated from
other kinds of spaces: Persons must leave their shoes at
the entrance. Within the area of the mosque, the holiest area, the
sanctuary (haram), is clearly marked from the courtyard
(saḥn). Some mosques are pilgrimage places because they are
burial sites of holy men or women who endow them with
spiritual power. The most prominent of these is the mosque at Medina built over the tomb of the Prophet.

At the same time, the architecture can be read quite differently as the meaningful negation of sacred space. The primary function of the mosque is to serve as a space for common prayer. It has significance in Islam because the community gathers and worships there, not because of the character of the place. "All the world is a masjid," a place of prayer, says one tradition (cf. Kuban, 1974, p. 1). In Islamic lands the mosque often does not stand out from secondary buildings or call attention to itself as a holy place. Even the dome, which typically surmounts it and which recalls the arch of heaven, has a generalized meaning of power or place of assembly and does not necessarily designate a sacred place. Neither is that symbolism of the sky pursued within the mosque, nor does it have liturgical significance. While the sanctuary is oriented toward Mecca, the remaining parts of the building do not have any inherent directional or axial structure. Even the minbar, which might be a place of particular holiness, is kept empty, emphasizing that the deity worshiped is not to be located there or anywhere. All this accords with the Islamic view that while God is the creator of the world, he is above it, not within it. The mosque is sacred space according to the definition of sacred space as a place of ritual and a place of meaning. But it is expressive, meaningful space because it denies the typical values of sacred places.

Similar negations of localization occur in Protestant architecture, particularly in the Protestant "plain style." During the Reformation in Holland, for example, larger Gothic churches were not destroyed but were re-created into places of community prayer and preaching. Sculptural ornament was removed, clear glass was substituted for stained glass, the high altar was removed, and the chancel was filled with seats. In short, all the visible signs of the sacredness of a specific location were eliminated. The architecture made positive statements as well, but statements that again located sanctity somewhere else than in place. A high pulpit was centrally situated and became a focal point, but the pulpit was not itself a place of divine power or presence. Rather it pointed to the holiness of the word of God, which was read and preached there. Again, these churches are sacred places by being visible denial that the holiness of divinity is mediated through the symbolism of space.

Functions of Sacred Space. The symbols that give a place meaning typically refer to the religious context in which a people lives. This section examines the ways in which sacred space acts to fix this context and to create interaction between the divine and human worlds. Three roles of sacred space are especially significant, for they are widely attested in religious systems and fundamental to their purposes. First, sacred space is a means of communication with the gods and about the gods. Second, it is a place of divine power. And third, it serves as a visible icon of the world and thereby imparts a form to it and an organization to its inhabitants.

Places of Communication. First, sacred spaces are places of communication with divinity, places where people go to meet the gods. This function is often indicated by symbols that represent a link between the world of humans and transcendent realms. Such symbols might be vertical objects that reach from earth toward heaven, such as mountains, trees, ropes, pillars, and poles. North Indian temples, for example, connect the realm of heaven, symbolized by the amrtakalāta ("jar of the elixir of deathlessness") atop the temple, with the plane of earth. The spires of these temples are also architectural recapitulations of mountains, which are the dwelling places of the gods. The Kailāsa temple, for example, bears not only the name of the mountain on which Śiva dwells, but even its profile. But symbols that express the intersection of realms can be of other forms as well. In Byzantine churches, to walk from the entrance toward the altar is to move from the world of humans toward that of divinity. The doorway between these realms is the iconostasis, the screen between the chancel and sanctuary. As they pass through the doors of the iconostasis, priests become angels moving between realms. The icons themselves provide visual access to heaven. In general, the iconostasis is not a 'symbol' or an 'object of devotion'; it is the gate through which this world is bound to the other" (Galavaris, 1981, p. 7).

Another way of joining gods and humans is through symbols of the gods. A sacred place may include images of the gods or other tokens that make their presence manifest. A Hindu temple is a place of meeting because it contains a form in which the god has graciously consented to dwell. The Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem was the throne of Yahweh, a visible sign of his presence or of the presence of his name. Shinto shrines are dwelling places for the kami, whose material form is a sacred object called a "divine body" or "august-spirit substitute." It is housed within the innermost chamber of the shrine, kept from sight by doors or a bamboo curtain, but whose presence invests the shrine with the presence of divinity. Similarly, a Japanese home becomes a sacred place when it has a kamidana, which enshrines symbols of the kami, and a butudan, an altar that holds both Buddha images and ancestor tablets.

Even without explicit symbols of communication or tokens of the gods, a place may be understood as a point of contact between gods and humans. Islam strongly resists localization or visible symbols of divinity. Although the Ka'bah is the center toward which worship is directed, it does not house an image of God, nor is it the dwelling place of God. Nonetheless, Islamic interpretation occasionally characterizes it as a place of particular access to divinity. A medieval tradition describes the Black Stone embedded in the Ka'bah as God's right hand, "which he extends to his servants (who kiss it), as a man shakes hands with his neighbors," and a 1971 newspaper article urges: "When you touch the black stone and kiss it—you place your love and your yearnings in it and turn it into a mailbox from which your love is deliv-
ered to the creator of this world whom eyes cannot see” (Lazarus-Yafeh, 1981, pp. 120, 123). As these cases suggest, the deity is not exactly present, yet the Ka’bah does become the point of communication between God and humanity.

As a place of communication with divinity, a sacred space is typically a place of purity because purity enables people to come in contact with the gods. There, the imperfections and deficiencies, the “messiness” of normal life, are reduced. The sacred place reveals the ideal order of things, which is associated with the perfect realm of divinity, with life and vitality among humans, or with the values to which people should aspire. The Shinto shrine is a place of purity, for it is a place of the kami and it is a place that excludes pollution, for pollution is decay and death. The shrine’s purity is expressed in the rites of approach to it. Traditionally, an open pavilion with a stone basin provides water for rinsing the hands and mouth, and three streams spanned by bridges lead to a shrine, so that worshipers purify themselves as they cross these streams. Its purity also is expressed in clarity of definition. Tori (Shinto gateways), fences, enclosed spaces, and bridges mark distinct areas and signal the approach to the deity. Other sacred places mark the movement from a zone of impurity to one of purity by defining an intermediate space for rites of purification. Some churches, synagogues, and mosques have such an area at the entrance to the principal space of the sacred precincts.

A sacred place can be a place of communication not only with divinity but also about divinity. For example, a central paradox of religion is that if divinity is everywhere, then it must be somewhere. Even if the whole world is “full of God’s glory,” that glory must be manifest in some place. This paradox is reflected in the Temple at Jerusalem, which contained the Ark of the Covenant, symbolizing the throne of Yahveh, but which enshrined no image of Yahveh. Similarly, in Deuteronomistic theology, Yahveh has made his name but not his person to be present at the Temple. In their different ways, therefore, both the Temple and the text sought to mediate the paradox of the simultaneous localization and universality of Yahveh. Larger Hindu temples, on the other hand, normally have a variety of images of deities. Typically, worshipers will see other gods and goddesses or other forms of the central divinity of the shrine, or they will worship at shrines to other deities in preparation for their approach to the central deity. A Hindu temple thus reflects Indian views of a divine hierarchy, which culminates in a particular divine being. Or, again, in Renaissance churches architectural balance and harmony reflect divine beauty and perfection. In all these instances, the form of the place expresses the nature of the deity worshiped there.

**Places of divine power.** Because it is a place of communication with divine beings, the sacred place is also a locus for divine power, which can transform human life. The nature of this transformation varies according to the religious tradition and reputation of the sacred space. According to a Hindu tradition, pilgrimage places provide bhakti (“benefit”) and moksha (“salvation”). Typically, one benefit is healing. In medieval Christianity, for example, many pilgrimages were inspired by a desire to witness or to experience miraculous cures. Pilgrimage was so closely associated with healing, in fact, that a young man of Warbleton refused to go to Canterbury, “for I am neither dumb nor lame and my health is perfectly sound.” Another person argued, “I am in excellent health. What need have I of St. Thomas?” (Sump- tion, 1972, p. 78). Lourdes remains a place of pilgrimage for millions seeking miraculous cures, though the Catholic church has certified few healings as true miracles. A place may even specialize in its cures. As the location of a manifestation of the god Siva, the mountain Arunâcala heals especially lung disease and barrenness, and two Śaṅk shrines in the Punjab help leprosy and leukoderma (Bharati, 1963). The power of divinity encountered at sacred places may also secure more general goals of physical and material wellbeing. Success in business or in school, the birth of children, or simply the blessing of the deity may all be reasons to visit a sacred place.

Salvation can also be attained at sacred places. According to various Hindu traditions, to die at Banaras, to be cremated there, or to disperse the ashes of the dead in the Ganges at Banaras assures salvation for the deceased. Often salvation is directly related to the purity of a sacred space and its ability to purify those within it. An English reformer, Hugh Latimer, lamented that the sight of the blood of Christ at Hales was convincing pilgrims that “they be in clean life and in state of salvation without spot of sin” (Sumption, 1972, p. 289). The sacred space as an access to divinity thus also becomes a way to the perfection of human life.

**Places as icons of the world.** Sacred space is often a visual metaphor for a religious world. The connection between the ordering of space and the ordering of human life is a natural one. A life without purpose or meaning is often expressed in spatial metaphors: It is to be “lost,” “disoriented,” and “without direction.” Because they are defined spaces, sacred places are natural maps that provide direction to life and a shape to the world. They order space—often geographic space, always existential space—and by ordering space, they order all that exists within it. The Lakota sweat lodge provides a good example of the ordering of space in the image of a sacred place. The outer perimeter of the lodge is a circle. Its frame is created by bending twelve to sixteen young willows from one quadrant of the circle across to the opposite quadrant. According to Black Elk, “the willows are set up in such a way that they mark the four quarters of the universe; thus the whole lodge is the universe in an image, and the two-legged, four-legged, and winged peoples, and all the things of the world are contained in it.” A round hole, which will hold heated rocks for making steam, is dug in the center of the lodge. This center “is the center of the universe, in which dwells Wakantanka [the Great Spirit], with his power which is the fire” (Brown, 1971, p. 32). The center belongs to Wakantanka, for he is the summation of all divine powers.