The Myth and Meaning of Sacred Space

Senior Religion Thesis
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Introduction

The setting was Jackson Lake Lodge in Grand Teton National Park in early June 1999. I was a bit nauseous from a bumpy flight into Jackson, Wyoming and more alone than I had ever thought possible. I had arrived to begin work and service with *A Christian Ministry in the National Parks*. Halfway across the country from my family in a strange new state, I was committed to a ministry that seemed bigger than I could handle. I did not know anyone, and was going to be starting my job in the hotel laundry--not a job I was thrilled to be doing. I walked to the lodge patio and saw the Teton Range for the first time, beginning what will be a lifelong love of mountains. My eyes were opened to a new and incredibly beautiful part of creation and I realized that God, who made the mountains, made me. God had called me here would be with me. At that moment, the profile of Mount Moran and the surrounding peaks symbolized a God more enduring and more secure than the oldest mountains. This moment and its memory help define who I am, and how I understand myself within the world.

People frequently attempt to define the place where they live—to "know their place." Americans travel to national parks in drove-like numbers that alarm environmentalists. People from around the world make pilgrimages to places like Disney World and the Mall of America. Why is this? What is it that people are looking for? Perhaps they are seeking something that transcends ordinary experience, something more meaningful than the everyday events of life. Perhaps they are looking for something that they cannot name, and when they find it they will remember when and where that happened. This paper is an exploration of the *where* of that experience. Sacred space is

the place where one encounters the divine, or that which transcends ordinary experience. It includes the setting of an experience that becomes symbolic of the transcendent. I propose that by naming a space as sacred, one makes that place, and what is or was experienced there central to an understanding of the world and one's place within the world.

Why is an understanding of sacred space important? In *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, Robert Wuthnow claims that a common understanding of spirituality has changed in America. "People have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe."[1] He claims that today in America, "spirituality" often implies seeking something. This is reflected by churches that offer a variety of worship styles, and special programs in the hope of offering a different answer for what each person is seeking. People commute, rather than reside in community, and as people move from place to place, job to job, and even marriage to marriage, they lack a solid understanding of spirituality. This is a spirituality of seeking; it is an experience of being "between sacred spaces" rather than inhabiting one space.[2] The phrase "finding oneself" resonates with the spirituality of seeking, although it is not the self that people truly seek, but rather place—one's place within the world. The phrases 'place in the world' or 'world-view' represent one's self-conception in relation to the surrounding world. Additionally, skeptical modernists now require that "God's presence has to be verified with special appearances."[3] In spite of all this seeking, it seems to me that many people are looking for an answer in all the wrong places.

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[1] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1998) 3.
[2] Wuthnow, 7.
[3] Wuthnow, 8.

If I look to the popular culture, I can see how I, as a young woman, should be defined: successful, beautiful, thin, sexy, rich, perfect. Consumerism and media forces create ideals of who I should be. Life should be based upon something more meaningful and more permanent than on the shifting ideas of the mass media. I suspect that the seeking spirituality that Wuthnow describes is founded in a deep-seeded and perhaps unrecognized dissatisfaction within American culture with the way consumer and advertising forces attempt to define us. Rather than letting media determine life, we need something better. "For the believer, the sacred is the source of belief, emotion, and action, what is good and what is right; it *determines* life," writes Jack Turner. "This is vital religion, lived belief."[4] Life anchored in the sacred is filled with intrinsic value that cannot be sold by advertisers or determined by what American society deems appropriate.

Experiencing the sacred as more important than other influences, even the most important force in one's life, can bring an end to the seeking, unsettledness of life in this culture. As the place where the divine presence may be experienced, sacred space is part of what many people are seeking. It is one facet of the direction that spirituality is taking, and part of an examination and conversation that should be ongoing within the religious community—understanding and meeting the needs of people.

I will show how naming and understanding sacred space is important to an understanding of the world. First, I will put Mircea Eliade's definition of sacred space into conversation with Belden C. Lane's understanding, elucidated in his axioms for the study of sacred space. Second, I will explain how sacred space, and the narratives of sacred space symbolize a meaning beyond their surface appearance. Finally, I will

[4] Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild*, (Tucson AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1996) 23.

examine four sacred spaces to determine if the axioms and theories of sacred space are sufficient, and explore how these places function as a basis for understanding the world. If sacred space is part of how people understand the world they live in and their own place within the world as I propose, then having an adequate concept of sacred space is critical. Sacred space is one component of many religious (in the broadest sense of the word) symbols that give meaning to the way the world works-- specifically, how it works in a religiously informed consciousness to give meaning and order to life.

Characteristics of Sacred Space

What is "sacred space?" What makes a place sacred? It is difficult to define something of such an elusive nature, but one way to define something is by showing what it is not. "The first possible definition of *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane,*" writes Mircea Eliade in the introduction to *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion.*[5] For Eliade, the profane is the ordinary "natural" world. It is not ordinary, not found in everyday life or the in world at large. The sacred, is entirely separate from the natural world, but it is also "absolute reality."[6] Thus, the normalcy of life in the profane world is non-real, while the rarely seen sacred is the ultimate reality.

For Eliade a sacred space can be defined as that place where the sacred breaks through into the profane. In this encounter, people may have a sense of experience that is more authentic than their ordinary commonplace experiences. Because the sacred is reality, sacred space is "the only *real* and *real-ly* existing space."[7] It is in these places that one understands there to be a reality that is distinct from one's own, separate from day-to-day life. Humans long for these sacred spaces because they wish to experience reality, even seek it out, but the sacred only breaks through to the profane when and where it chooses. [8]

If, however, one believes that the divine sacred power is part of the world, or at least active in the world, then it becomes significantly more difficult to distinguish between the "reality" of the divine and the "non-reality" of the ordinary, profane world.

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[5] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 1959) 10, 11.
[6] Eliade, 11.
[7] Eliade, 20.
[8] Eliade, 24.

In contrast to Eliade, Belden C. Lane believes that the sacred must be recognized within the ordinary.[9] Lane recognizes what he calls "the sharp paradox of God's mysterious presence in the world."[10] He identifies the ordinary as a mask of the holy that both identifies and hides what lies beneath. Thus he says, "Standing knee-deep in miracles myself, I often glimpse only a world of profane commonness." [11] There must be a shift in perception to bring the sacred into clear view.

There may be nothing significant physically or geographically that sets the sacred space apart from the surrounding landscape. Rather, it is an "ambiguous experience" that lays the foundation for narrative and "a quest for the holy that is fulfilled finally in accepting the ordinary."[12] It is in the context of the ordinary experiences and the places that the sacred can be seen within the profane. In Lane's view, the profane and the sacred not only co-exist but also cannot be separated from one another in practice or experience. In my experience, this concept of the sacred more adequately describes the experience of sacred space.

Eliade and Lane see the sacred in a very different manner—absolutely other versus absolutely present. This difference affects how sacred space can be known. For Eliade, the divine must choose to break into the profane world, and does so in specific locations that seem to be selected by the gods' whims. In Lane's writing, the sacred may simply be recognized as part of the everyday world. In spite of this significant difference, Eliade and Lane explain the effects of sacred space in similar ways. The

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[9] Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) 20-21.
[10] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 41.
[11] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 37.
[12] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 14.

major difference between these two is a matter of understanding either that the sacred is separate from the world or within it.

In encounter, sacred space cannot be broken apart, but in it is necessary to begin by categorizing sacred space if it is to be studied. Lane offers four axioms to assist the examination of spaces that are recognized as sacred:

1. *Sacred space is not chosen, it chooses.*
2. *Sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary.*
3. *Sacred place can be tred upon without being entered.*[13]
4. *The impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal.*

1. Sacred space is not chosen, it chooses.

Lane agrees with Eliade when he writes, "Sacred space is not chosen, it chooses." It is not the place that a pilgrim seeks, but the place that calls one to it, "whispering beyond all previous, conscious efforts to locate and fix the place of power."[14] For Lane the divine may be present in and with the ordinary, but it is not limited or constrained by the world in which it is found. Eliade writes of "hierophanies" where "something sacred shows itself to us."[15] In this view, humans do not find or discover the sacred, rather it is the sacred that takes the action in revelation. The idea that the divine selects where to reveal itself is foreign to the western, post-Enlightenment, rationalist influenced way of thinking. This axiom also raises the question of places that are humanly selected with no

[13] Lane uses *tred* rather than *tread* or *trod*. I keep this spelling here, and will maintain it throughout the paper for the sake of consistency.
[14] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 15.
[15] Eliade, 11.

obvious revelation, for example the building of many American churches. A new worship space is desired, so a congregation builds where land may be available. How is this place doing the "choosing?" [16]

2. Sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary

Both Lane and Eliade affirm the role of ritual in consecrating a holy place, but in very different ways. Ritual involves acting in such a way as to commemorate an event or evoke the sacred presence. If, as Eliade writes, "A religious moment implies a cosmogenic moment,"[17] then the religious ritual is a reproduction of the action of the sacred. Ritual activities invite or invoke the presence of the sacred to the ritual place. The church is in some sense a ritual recreation of the world as it was originally created. As an example, the Byzantine church symbolizes the universe.[18] Through the ritual act that parallels the cosmogenic act, people trust that the divine will do its equivalent part in the sacred realm and accept the invitation to manifest itself in that place. For Lane, the ritual acknowledges, rather than recreates, the holiness of a place, for sacred space is "a function of the religious imagination, not a quality inherent in the locale as such."[19] Ritual involves entry not to the place itself but to the presence of the divine. The different role of ritual in Eliade and Lane's books reflect their opposing understanding of the location of the divine.

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[16] This axiom, as well as Eliade's *heirophany* (the sacred breaking through to the profane world) does not seem to speak to sacred spaces deliberately created or selected by humans, such as churches, temples or shrines. I address this issue further in chapter 4.

[17] Eliade, 30.

[18] Eliade, 61.

[19] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 25.

Sacred spaces have boundaries or borders that separate them from the world around them. Some places have physical boundaries. For example, a cathedral has solid stone walls that physically designate the place of worship but also symbolically differentiate the inner sanctuary from the external and worldly affairs. The two areas do not mix; one cannot see into the cathedral through the walls, but must actually enter through the door to experience the sacred inner sanctum. The door serves as a portal, as the access to the divine. It is symbolic of the passage that humans must make entering from the ordinary world to the sacred. Spaces that are not architecturally defined have boundaries also, although they may not be visible. The horizon, a natural object such as a river, hill or tree, or even an imagined line may serve as the defining boundary of a sacred space.

Boundaries imply that sacred space must be entered, or accessed in some way. Architect Anthony Lawlor suggests that gates and paths often serve this function in sacred architectural structures.[20] We have seen this with the example of the cathedral or church doorway. It is also true of the garden gate or the approach steps in a temple. The way that one approaches the sacred area mirrors the inner journey of seeking and approaching the sacred. The journey involves a desire to find the sacred and an intention to reach it, even going through doorways and passages to achieve that end. The sacred must be approached ritually and carefully, and with full intention.

3. Sacred place can be tred upon without being entered

[20] Anthony Lawlor, *The Temple in the House: Finding the Sacred in Everyday Architecture* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994) 15.

In this axiom, the ordinary has nothing to distinguish it spiritually from that surrounding it, also ordinary. When the sacred shows itself as something distinct from the ordinary it distinguishes the place of manifestation as unique. This place is "qualitatively different from others."[21] This is highly paradoxical: the ordinary is more-than-ordinary, and the entire profane world is potentially sacred.

One can be in a place without really being there. "Being bodily present is never identical with the fullness of being to which humans can be open in time and space,"[22] writes Lane. When an "ordinary place" becomes a place of exceptional significance, consciousness is changed in some way.[23] This change makes one more aware of the surroundings, and more attuned to the sacred found there. If one is not looking, listening or attuned to what is present in that place, then it would be very easy to be on sacred ground, so to speak, without being in it. In some cases, the presence of the sacred may be so obvious that one cannot miss it. For example, a burning bush that is not consumed and a voice calling to Moses, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3: 2-6). In other instances, the sacred encounter is subtler. In my experience at Grant Teton National Park, I doubt that other tourists were having the same experience that I was. My previous beliefs about God and my need for comfort may have opened my eyes—caused a shift in perception that allowed to me to see the presence of God in the world. A person may need to be in the right frame of mind or, if the sacred encounter is being sought, then through the seeking the pilgrim attains a heightened sensitivity to the presence of the divine.

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[21] Eliade, 20.
[22] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 25.
[23] Belden C. Lane "Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for Understanding American Sacred Space," *Religion and American Culture* 11, no. 1 (2001): 1.

Often (but not always) an encounter with the sacred is sought out, as a pilgrim seeks a holy site, for understanding of what it may impart. Even if the movement to the sacred site involves little or no physical movement, the site must still be entered and the sacred must still be approached. What of when a sacred space is not an architecturally defined place, separated from the world by walls, gates or doorways? Even then, the space is entered through a specific approach. The pilgrim must compose his heart and mind to the proper attitude to encounter the sacred in that place.

What separates sacred space from non-sacred space, from ordinary space? What makes it different from that which surrounds it? The place is the location of an encounter with the sacred; it is not necessarily the most beautiful place or anything special to an outside observer. It is, in fact, the located setting of one's encounter with the sacred or the divine. We find that the place itself is not what is special about a sacred place. We understand it to be something that is qualitatively different from ordinary life and the ordinary places of life.

4. The impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal

Sacred space includes tensions. There is a desire to remain in the place of divine revelation in a place where understanding may be easier or the world makes more sense. Or the place may also serve as a home base of sorts, a point of departure. It offers a known point in an unknown world. The security offered by sacred space highlights the tension between the need for security and the desire for novelty and adventure. Then again, the idea that the sacred is only located in this specific place may be limiting. The

outward movement may include a sense of revolt against what others have set as the place of divine encounter. Lane refers to the Great Awakening as a representative example, with revolt against established religion, and a sanctioning of the divine "only in the proper place" (the parish church). Rather, "the outpouring of God's grace might be felt anywhere...."[24] Yet, sacred spaces draw inward as well. In fact, they center the world in which one lives.

Sacred spaces are unique because they are the places that ground one's understanding of the world, but they also form such an understanding because they are unlike other places. They are absolutely ordinary and simultaneously extraordinary. Sacred spaces are specific (local), but uncontained (universal). Awareness of the tensions within sacred space may help point beyond what is easily recognizable to their more profound significance.

I am surprised that Lane does not include myth or story as an axiom for sacred space. He uses narrative in his writing, and in fact devotes a large portion of *Landscapes of the Sacred* to narratives as a way to communicate the meaning of sacred space. I believe that myth and narrative are critical to a complete understanding of sacred space.

Sacred space is ultimately an experience of encounter with the sacred. Categorizing aspects of experience and analyzing them can limit the full effect of sacred space. Yet categorizing and analyzing can bring a deeper understanding of the role that sacred space plays in the religious consciousness. Stories and myths acknowledge sacred space as something more than an interesting topographical and psychological phenomena to be picked apart. Stories give absolute value to the experience, and acknowledge that each encounter with the sacred is unique and unclassifiable.

[24] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 32.

The Meaning of Sacred space

I have proposed that sacred space plays a role in the formation and renewal of an understanding of the world. Here "world" refers not to the planet, but to places that one knows and understands, as when someone talks about "their world." It includes conceptions of the way the things are, and perhaps even ideological viewpoints.

To further explain how sacred space functions in understanding the world, I explore Eliade's concept of sacred space as the *axis mundi* and attempt to re-appropriate this concept through an investigation of the conceptual and relational response that people have to place. I explore the role of narrative and myth as way to communicate the meaning of space, and how it may symbolize an insightful understanding of the world. Finally, I address how return to sacred space is part of spiritual practice; "knowing" place and "dwelling" within space are experiences that come from an intentional and recurring encounter with the sacred.

Axis Mundi, the Center of the World

Eliade suggests that the world is founded in the experience of sacred space. The sacred interrupts the "formless fluidity of profane space," bringing order into chaos, and the real into the unreal.[25] At this interruption of "reality," the world came into being. Sacred space serves as the center of the world, the *axis mundi*--a pillar that supports heaven and has its base in the underworld. At the pillar communication is possible

[25] Eliade, 63.

between the realms.[26] For Eliade, the sacred realm is real and the profane unreal; thus the place where the sacred connects to the profane world, the *axis mundi,* is the most 'real' place in the world. People long for this reality, to live as close to it as possible. They chose to dwell within the limits of their world, where they understood their place.[27] Eliade describes and draws examples from "traditional societies" in an attempt to elucidate some fundamental characteristics of the human religious condition.

Thus he draws the conclusion: "*the world becomes apprehensible as world, as cosmos, in the measure in which it reveals itself as a sacred world.*"[28] That is, only as the sacred is seen in the profane, can the profane be understood. Here again, there is some tension between this conclusion that Eliade draws, and my reading of him that the sacred is absolutely separate from the profane. A world that is 'more' understandable, by this reasoning, would have a greater presence of the sacred within it.

If the sacred and the profane are entirely separate, as Eliade suggests, then the sacred space, as *axis mundi*, is the location where communication between realms is possible. However, if one accepts what Lane says, that the sacred must recognized in the ordinary (as I do), the *axis mundi* cannot serve as the *sole* location of communication between realms. The idea that sacred space is the center of the world doesn't resonate well with today's understanding of the nature of geography and topography. However, the concept of *axis mundi* can be appropriated to our culture and world understanding, serving not as a physical center, rather as the symbolic center of understanding.

The sacred space may be a representational center of the world. It symbolizes a profundity of meaning that becomes central to one's conception of the world and of self.

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[26] Eliade, 36-37.
[27] Eliade, 42-47.
[28] Eliade, 64.

Perhaps Lane's phrase "the anchor of human existence" is closer to how sacred space functions for people today.[29] With the sacred space as the center (or anchor) it can be inferred that something is non-centered. Something lies at the periphery, even outside of the known and ordered world. Jonathan Z. Smith says that the chaotic is "a creative challenge" and "source of possibility" in opposition to the ordered and known sacred.[30] It is this tension between center and periphery that gives significance to the idea of center. The place itself can orient one geographically, but the importance of the place, the greater meaning it has for an individual or a community, plays a role in orienting spirituality and worldview.

The role of myth and narrative as symbol

Myth is "a narrative (story) concerning fundamental symbols that are constitutive of or paradigmatic for human existence."[31] Myth and narrative point to something beyond themselves, to a greater reality. They bring together meanings of many symbols contained within. Tillich states, "Myths are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters."[32] Myths not only contain symbols, but they themselves are symbols of something more profound. As symbols, they participate in creating a "people's ethos" and "their most comprehensive ideas of order."[33] This is "constitutive to human existence" according to Batto. Tillich, in the same vein though perhaps not quite

[29] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 16.
[30] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 97.
[31] Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in The Biblical Tradition*, (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 11.
[32] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957).
[33] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, New York: Basic Books (1973) 89.

as emphatically states that myths are "present in every act of faith."[34] In each encounter with the sacred myth or narrative is then present. If Batto's statement is accepted, then Myths are not only present in and connected to the encounter in sacred space, but they are necessary for human existence. At the least, myth articulates the significance of sacred encounter.

Narrative carries a meaning beyond the simple facts of the occurrence. The symbols of myth or narrative do not create the meaning, but without them, how could meaning be retained or communicated with another? If the symbol of the cross did not exist, and Christians did not know the gospel accounts of the Good Friday story, how could the meaning of that event be transmitted from one generation to the next, or even shared within the community?

Places of importance necessarily have stories or myths attached to them. Stories are the best way to make an experience understandable. The meaning of sacred space comes primarily from the experience; narrative may explain an experience more fully than can any other means. Myths acknowledge the meaning of a place. In fact, Lane says, "Particular locales come to be recognized as sacred because of the stories that are told about them."[35] Story exercises a power on the imagination that is beyond a simple cognitive exercise. Through the imagery of language, it is storytellers and poets who can most easily touch the on imagination, interpretation and experience. Symbols within myth carry meaning that establishes ideas about order. Myth gives a window into another dimension of sacred space, beyond events and geographical descriptions.[36]

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[34] Tillich, 49.
[35] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 11.
[36] Lane, "Giving Voice," 11.

Just as myth participates in the deeper meaning of sacred space, likewise the sacred space itself serves as a symbol for the meaning. Ultimately, it is the understanding gained from the divine encounter that is the true meaning of sacred space. The myth is distinct from the place and the place is distinct from the sacred or the divine. Theoretically, the symbolic elements can be extracted and even examined; yet they cannot practically be separated. The entirety of symbols and experience transmits the meaning in its most profound manner. The effective symbol points to truth beyond itself. If the truth beyond the symbol is not accepted as real, the symbol holds no meaning for an individual. This is, of course, simplified by assuming that each symbol points to only one underlying truth, but in application symbols may hold a multiplicity of meanings, some appearing more valid than others. Similarly, if the reality that sacred space or myth represents is not acknowledged, the place can hold no symbolic meaning. However, one may recognize that narrative or place holds no meaning for one personally, yet acknowledge and respect that it represents something greater to others who understand it in a more profound way.

Symbols cannot be abstracted from the complex setting in which they exist. Clifford Geertz states that cultural and social activities contain and shape symbolism. Pre-existing notions shaped by culture, experience, family, and beliefs are captured in symbols and myths. These ideas serve as "models *of* reality and models *for* reality." In other words, life shapes the understanding of symbols at the same time symbols shape life.[37] Certain expectations or conceptions lie within the cultural consciousness, influencing the experience of sacred space, yet being shaped by it at the same time.

[37] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 91-94.

Myth about place often brings a sense of "power and awe" and opens the "deepest levels of mystery and meaning."[38] Yet in order to use the power of myth and story to attempt to understand sacred space, they cannot simply be left as a mystical aura. Examination of narrative or myth may destroy the complete experience and understanding that they are trying to share, yet they must be looked at critically to find the next level of meaning, followed by return to the meaning of the narrative or myth as a whole. "Only then will we grasp the full significance of the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place where God is met."[39] And so I will draw on myth and narrative as I further explore how sacred spaces shape the world.

Defining a World View

One orients oneself geographically through an understanding of place. People think of places in relation to one another. For example: I was raised in northern Minnesota, and I attend school southwest of the Twin Cities. All other locations can be understood by their relationship to one of these two places. For example, this past summer I worked in Colorado, which is west and south of St. Peter, about a twenty-hour drive away. We orient ourselves this way on a small scale also: On the Gustavus campus, Old Main is *near* Christ Chapel and *up the hill* from Rundstrom. Even on the micro scale we locate things by relationship. The answer to the question "Where are my glasses?" would likely be "*Next to* the lamp, *on* the table." Not only do places give relationship to one another, but people also understand themselves in relation to location. If you think

[38] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 19.
[39] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 21.

about where you are at this moment, you will almost certainly use relationship words to describe being *near* your desk, *in* a certain room, and so on.

The concept of placement and orientation by relation to other things, when applied to sacred space, is not limited to only physical implications. In naming a place as *sacred* space, one implies the presence or revelation of the sacred. When space is named or recognized as sacred, the understanding of place within the world takes on new significance. According to Robert Wuthnow, "to live without a sense of sacred space is to fear that the world has succumbed to monolithic secularity."[40] This is the fear of loosing, or never even finding, a connection to the transcendent. When this connection is lacking, the implication of a reality greater than every day experience is diminished or even lost. If the sacred presence is accepted, the supernatural reality takes its place in the world and in one's life.

I suggest that sacred spaces serve not only to orient one geographically, but the experience of connection to the transcendent orients one's spiritual geography as well. Smith states that religion is "the power to relate ones domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee that ones existence 'matters.'"[41] Sacred space connects the different spheres of life in one place, making life matter. If religion is a map for comprehending and negotiating place within the world, then sacred space, as the locational aspect of a religious experience, becomes a geographical and symbolic representation of this map of the world. The significance of the transcendent or divine encountered within sacred space is what actually affects one's understanding of the world and one's place within the world. The place symbolizes the

[40] Wuthnow, 49.
[41] Smith, 291.

divine, the encounter with the divine, and the insight gained there. In sacred space, a conceptualization of the world, and the world itself meet; orientations and classifications are grounded in reality,[42] and the understanding gained has the authority of the divine to support it. Again, sacred space only has this power if the reality that myth points to is accepted and believed.

Geertz states that for a people, "world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order."[43] Religious symbols, representing these ideas of order, motivate human action, or at least inform the way people feel they ought to act. The symbols, in this case sacred space and its associated myth, suggest a certain life and outlook, backed by the perceived authority of the greater reality the symbol represents.[44] Humans need congruence between the reality of the universe and the way the world appears such that life and worldview support one another, each giving meaning to the other. The myth, the place, and the symbols support (or perhaps change) perceived ideas about the world.

When we see a familiar landscape in an entirely new way, as an encounter in sacred space may make us do, it is not only the familiar landscape that is seen differently, but we also think differently about ourselves. As relational beings, we are defined by our connection to the surrounding environment, and to the source of sacred. When that relationship has been in someway altered, we must necessarily redefine ourselves a bit. In this way, each encounter with another person shapes who we are, and each encounter

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[42] David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, Introduction to *American Sacred Space*, ed. Chidester and Linenthal, (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) 12.

[43] Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, New York: Basic Books (1973) 127.

[44] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 112.

in sacred space helps us to understand how we relate to the sacred, how the sacred relates to us, and how we fit into our environment. The place "participates with us in the creation of meaning and the mystery of experience."[45] We respond to the place, and to the experience of the sacred encountered there to recreate our self-understanding. Sacred space participates in confirmation of the way one knows the world to work, or it affects one so profoundly that the conception of the world must be changed. In this way, sacred space recreates or reaffirms life in the world.

One does not always remain within the sacred space. One ventures beyond the borders of the location, into the outside world. Again, this draws on the tension between known and unknown, or the center and the periphery. Each aspect of place plays a role in understanding sacred space. The ability to leave the sacred space offers freedom. A self-understanding may ground one and give a center so that the universal, outward motion component of sacred space (as in Lane's axiom four) has a beginning and point of return.

In the Christian church, this is the ideal: that the church serves as a space where the believer understands him or herself in relation not only to God, but also to the world. It is the experience of relationship with God that occurs, in part, within the church. It serves as the center of the believer's life, and as the beginning point for journey into the world. It also serves as a point for return and renewal. In this case, as with all sacred spaces, the physical church is simply representational of something more profound, yet the place, the building, takes on significance because of what happens there. In spiritual practice, one may return continually to the sacred space—to a place that one knows, where one feels at home. Multiple encounters with the sacred bring deeper understanding, a sense of dwelling within and knowing the place.

[45] Lane, "Giving Voice" 2.

Knowing and Dwelling

Sacred spaces are often sought out and returned to in an attempt to recreate the divine encounter, and to bring the understanding gained there more fully into one's life. Frequently visited sacred space becomes known to the pilgrim, and sacred space within the circle of daily life brings a sense of dwelling. These two related concepts contribute to a deeper understanding of how sacred space may lie at the conceptual, if not literal, center of life.

The words "home" and "homecoming" have profound emotional affects. They imply a place of familiarity, a return to a place that one knows. Homesickness is a deep longing for the place where one dwells; it is to be separated from one's unique place where the world makes the most sense. Separation from one's home, or from one's conceptual world can lead to bewilderment and disorientation, or at least to a sense of being unsettled.

Dwelling has the opposite effect of homesickness. Dwelling is being comfortable, at ease with the sacred as seen or revealed in the profane world. More than simply inhabiting a certain location, dwelling implies a deeper understanding of the home, the neighborhood, and one's role there. Sacred spaces bring a depth of awareness of place that ever increases what one reflects upon, or knows about oneself. Sacred spaces bring out questions about the divine encountered there, but also questions of self-identity and purpose. Dwelling in the deepest sense of the world can only occur where there is recognized, familiar sacred space. Dwelling also requires the sacred to be open to reflection, not demanding or forceful. Wuthnow writes, "A place that lacks depth, that does not encourage self-reflection, and that requires conforming to social expectations

can of course be a stifling place to live, rather than simply a comfortable dwelling."[46] To be familiar and comfortable with the sacred space of a location is to know the place.

Stories of place that are passed through generations contribute to a framework of reference and a sense of belonging to and dwelling in the land. Vine Deloria Jr. gives an example of a Crow chief who refused to recognize government control of his land "because the first several feet down consisted of the bones of his ancestors." The chief said the government could claim the land, but only where his ancestors' contributions ended. A sense of owning and belonging to the land is substantive to the sense of identity for this chief and his people. Prolonged dwelling brings about a feeling of unity to the land that is rarely achieved or recognized in our quickly changing and highly mobile American culture.[47]

To know a place is to have more information about it, to understand it more fully than a casual visitor. Information and a deep understanding set the context for a place, heightening awareness and potentially leading to a profound emotional experience in the sacred space. Within a group or a community, literally dwelling in one place for multiple generations brings a fuller knowledge of the place and a more insightful knowledge of the community in relation to the land. The continuing community relates the myths and stories that communicate the place to the succeeding generations.[48]

Therefore, to know a place is to be more than a casual tourist. Knowing comes through participation with the land, adjusting to it and responding to it in each situation. Thus, the more often one returns to a sacred space, the more influential it becomes in

[46] Wuthnow, 41.
[47] Vine Deloria Jr., "Reflection and Revelation: Knowing Land, Places and Ourselves," in *The Power of Place: Sacred Ground in Natural and Human Environments*, ed. James A. Swan (Wheaton IL: Quest Books, 1991) 31.
[48] Vine Deloria, Jr., 32, 34-35.

one's self understanding and the importance of what is learned there takes on greater importance for those who know the space. Dwelling in the land, a person learns and knows his location and in turn learns and knows about himself from the sacred space there.

Some people choose to regularly and deliberately enter into sacred spaces. In spiritual practice they "attempt to understand the ultimate source of the sacred in their lives."[49] This requires reflection upon past events, upon how they have previously encountered and understood the sacred. Spiritual practice requires sacred space, which may actually be created or set aside for the purpose of practice. They reach beyond the place of sacred space to the source of the sacred, where the ultimate significance and meaning is found.[50]

Buildings such as churches and temples are created intentionally as sacred spaces. Especially in newer churches, the site is not "revealed" as Eliade would say, but rather selected by a building or grounds committee, or given to a worshiping community. These buildings, or rather those who build and administer them assume that people will find them to be sacred spaces set apart from what makes up the profane world. They intend to offer a chance to connect with the ultimate source of the sacred. As noted in the introduction, Wuthnow states that Americans seek spirituality. He goes on to state that buildings such as churches exemplify a desire to know the sacred space and dwell in or near it.[51] The church and temple symbolize the belief that God will be present in that

[49] Wuthnow, 16.
[50] It occurs to me that within the Western world, especially in America it may be that people have several sacred spaces, none of which have ultimate significance, each of which lends to a multi-faceted and many dimensional understanding of the world of the self.
[51] Wuthnow 6.

place. People select these places, contrary to axiom four that "sacred space is not chosen."

Some sacred spaces may be revealed and not chosen, but others seem to be deliberately selected. Vine Deloria defines sacred places by two types: reflective and revelatory.[52] Most sacred space is reflective. This type of sacred space gives a sense being part of something greater than the self. In them "we begin to meditate on who are, what our society is...and what it all means." In contrast, revelatory experience gives information that cannot be known by any other means. Revelatory places cannot be selected for their emotional appeal, scenic beauty or for any other reason.[53]

The distinction between reflective space and revelatory space makes the effect of sacred space easier to understand. In revelatory sacred space, the sacred is distinct from the world, and definitely present. Demands are clear, and the gods dictate action. In reflective experience of place, understanding and interpretation may change, and the way the experience affects one's understanding of the world may be subtler. Revelatory experiences are frightening; reflective experience may be comforting.[54] This distinction also applies to the narratives and myths of sacred spaces explored in the next chapter.

[52] Deloria 28-29.
[53] Deloria, 29-30.
[54] Deloria, 33.

Sacred Space Through Narrative and Myth

While nothing can substitute for the complete experience of being within a sacred space, these narratives embody the effect of that experience, and communicate it in a way that little else can. These narratives give a deeper sense of the place, in a way that a picture or topographical map could not. Myth symbolizes several layers of meaning, including: the sacred space, the divine or sacred, the understanding or insight gained because of the sacred space.

I have selected four sites to examine in detail: Mount Kailas in Tibet, the site of the massacre at Wounded Knee creek, Mount Sinai, and the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Through the stories of these places, we may be able to come to deeper understanding of the nature of sacred space, and to then see how these actual places fit with the theories of sacred space from Eliade and Lane. I use Vine Deloria's distinction between places of reflection and revelation. This distinction allows the sacred the power to reveal itself when and where it chooses, but it also recognizes that humans often select or create sacred spaces.

Sacred Space of Reflection

Mount Kailas

Eliade interprets the mountain as an image that shows the connection between heaven and earth. It rises from the earth to touch the heavens, marking the highest point in the world and the place where one can be closest to the gods. From there one may

even be able to reach heaven.[55] In the high mountains, one feels a greater sense of immediacy. The sky is closer, the colors appear more vivid, and the air is sharper. All of life takes on a deeper intensity. As one climbs a mountain, one ascends quickly through varied strata of plant and animal life, each more sparse than the last. Finally, one emerges above tree line to find only the mosses, a few hearty flowers, and the sky. This climb may symbolize the layers of distractions that a pilgrim discards on the journey, to reach the summit, closest to God. There, one is confronted with intense light (or intense storms if one was foolhardy enough to climb despite meteorological warnings) and the power of the wind unchecked by landforms.

Mount Kailas, a 28,028-foot peak in the Ngari region of Western Tibet, is "Asia's most sacred mountain."[56] Pilgrims come here to circumambulate the thirty-two mile path around its base. They represent four religions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Bonpo.[57] Each step they take is imbued with sacred, mythic meaning. For example, to the Bonpo, the towering granite rocks at the Lha Chu valley are manifestations of the gods, and Buddhists seek out the footsteps of the Buddha.

For Hindus, the entire Himalayan range represents the divine. Kailas, known as the throne of Shiva, and the presence of nearby Lake Manasarovar give authority and sanctity to the entire Ngari region. To Tibetan Buddhists, Mount Kailas is known as *Kang Rinpoche*, the 'Precious Snow Mountain', the holiest mountain. Rishabanatha, founder of

[55] Eliade, 38-39.
[56] Russell Johnson and Kerry Moran, *The Sacred Mountain of Tibet: On Pilgrimage to Kailas* (Rochester VE: Park Street Press, 1989) 9.
[57] Bonpo is also identified in my sources as Boen or Bön.

the Jain religion, found spiritual liberation atop its peak; and to the Tibetan Bonpo, Kailas represents the soul of their place.[58]

In this high, barren and desolate region, immense space surrounds one and silence ever-present. "Here, if anywhere on earth, the gods exist as an immediate experience, a tangible presence in the pure thin cold air."[59] The intensity of the light, altitude, and barrenness give evidence of a greater presence.

Mount Kailas physically embodies the mythical mountain of Meru, standing 84,000 leagues at the center of the universe. The earthy mountain matches the description of Meru, with its four sides and permanently snow-capped peak. Meru has four faces oriented to the four directions, one each of crystal, ruby, lapis, and gold. The heavenly bodies rotate about Meru; it serves as their central axis. Atop its mythical peak, the Ganges River falls from heaven and divides into four great rivers flowing to the four corners of the earth. On or near Kailas, four of Asia's major rivers have their beginning: the Indus on the north, the Brahmaputra on the east, the Karnali (that flows into the Ganges) on the south, and the Sutlej, (which eventually joins the Indus) on the west.[60] Myth and geographical reality intertwine here in a mysterious and powerful way.

Pilgrims have journeyed to Kailas for over a thousand years. Those who come today hike the same path that their faithful ancestors walked. The faithful that went before might have spent up to a year just to reach the mountain. Today pilgrims arrive by truck to the town to Tarchen, or trek across the Tibetan border. They encounter the same

[58] Mount Meru is described in the Hindu *Vishnu Purana.* Johnson and Moran, 9-11.
[59] Johnson and Moran, 10.
[60] Johnson and Moran, 11-12. Freeman Michael, "Moving Mountain. (Mount Kailash)," *Geographical Magazine* 70 (1998) 42.

mountain as all other pilgrims, yet the experience here is intensely personal. It is rarely recorded.[61]

Following the Cultural Revolution in China, the Chinese government closed the Tibetan border to Hindu pilgrims from India. At the same time Buddhist monasteries were destroyed, and displays of faith were outlawed. Pilgrims were forced to walk the path about the mountain in a single night to avoid detection. While the government was able to destroy the monasteries and monuments, it could not destroy people's faith in the affective power of the mountain's holiness.[62]

Mount Kailas exemplifies the symbolic meaning that myth can impart to sacred space. Belief that the place is holy acknowledges the sacred power found here. Geertz writes that symbols (specifically religious symbols) induce "pervasive...moods and motivations" that lend a "chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience."[63] This holy mountain affects those who visit it in deep and varied ways, but all are motivated to acts of devotion by the power of the mountain. Kailas has no narrative, per se, just mythological meaning imbedded in the religions of the region. Pilgrims arrive with a variety of motivations and faiths, but they are all seeking the reality that has motivated them to action. Mount Kailas embodies this reality as the center of their spiritual world.

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[61] Johnson and Moran, 14.

[62] In 1981, Hindu pilgrims were once again allowed to journey to Kailas. Religious freedom has recently increased. In 1987, more than five thousand made the pilgrimage about its base. Ten monasteries have been rebuilt with governmental support and pilgrims may again leave prayer flags along the route. Johnson and Moran, 15.

[63] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" 94, 95.

Wounded Knee

On December 29, 1890, near the military encampment at Wounded Knee Creek, Colonel Forsythe's soldiers massacred a band of Minneconju Sioux. In 1868, The Treaty of Fort Laramie was signed between the Lakota people and the United States government. One of the provisions of this treaty included: "The restoration of peace between the Sioux and the United States and the setting aside of the present day State of South Dakota west of the Missouri River, where the Sioux were to live."[64] In 1877, Congress enacted an "agreement" that took the Black Hills (7.3 million acres) from the Lakota. This "agreement" was signed by less than ten percent of the Sioux, although the signatures of three quarters of the adult males were needed to implement any changes, as required by the 1868 treaty. In 1889, the reservation was broken apart into small chunks, with the desirable land again being ceded to the United States. The Lakota were compensated 25,000 cows and 1,000 bulls for the loss of eleven million acres of the most desirable land. The Sioux tribes agreed to sell much of their land because they were told that if they did not sell, the government would simply take it.[65]

According to Gonzalez and Cook-Lynn, there was much resistance to the government actions, but the Sioux nations had little hope of defying the actions of the government and its representatives.[66] The Lakota people were being forced onto increasingly smaller lands, the last buffalo hunt was several years past (1883), food was short; people were discouraged and wary of the United States and its army.

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[64] Mario Gonzalez and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *The Politics of Hallowed Ground: Wounded Knee and the Struggle for Indian Sovereignty*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1999) 258.

[65] For a detailed history of the treatises, agreements, selling of land, and makeup of the Sioux Reservation see Gonzalez and Cook-Lynn appendix D, 257-291.

[66] For example the Sioux Commission recommended, "withholding of rations, annuities, and all benefits under former treaties until all requirements are complied with; and refusal to recognize the chiefs as competent leaders." Gonzalez and Cook-Lynn, 270.

In this condition, the people grasped onto a new hope that was offered to them from the West. In Nevada, a Pauite named Wovoka, known as the Indian Messiah, was teaching a Ghost Dance. This dance promised to bring back the dead warriors and strengthen the sick. By the time the grass was knee high the next spring, the whites would be buried and the buffalo would return. So rather than fight back, honoring their agreement of peace, the Sioux danced for hope. Across the nation in 1890, "from Dakota to Arizona, Indian Territory to Nevada," Native Americans were Ghost Dancing.[67] The Ghost Dance led the local press to accuse the Sioux of preparing for an uprising. The government order came that they were to stop dancing, but they would not. Then on December 15, 1890, Sitting Bull was killed in a scuffle while he was being arrested. Despair and tension ran high among the Sioux. It is in this tense situation that Big Foot decided to lead his band to the Pine Ridge Reservation in search of safety.

On December 28th the band met a cavalry unit and were escorted to the encampment at Wounded Knee Creek. Sentinels were posted and two Hotchkiss guns were set up on a rise overlooking the camp. The next morning the Sioux were disarmed, but Colonel Forsyth was unsatisfied with the number of guns surrendered, so he ordered his men to search the tepees for more weapons. Big Foot was lying sick with pneumonia, and some of his band were standing near him. Black Elk, a holy man of the Oglala tribe says of the event:

> *"An officer came to search them. He took the other man's gun, and then started to take Yellow Bird's. But Yellow Bird would not let go. He wrestled with the officer, and while they were wrestling the gun went*

[67] Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970) 435.

off and killed the officer. Wasichus [white men] *and some others have said he meant to do this, but Dog Chief was standing right there, and he told me it was not so. And soon as the gun went off, Dog Chief told me, an officer shot and killed Big Foot who was lying sick inside the tepee."*[68]

Once the shot was fired, soldiers immediately began firing upon the mostly unarmed Sioux, who ran in an attempt to escape. Many were unsuccessful. There were 153 known dead, and one estimate places the number of dead as high as 300 of the approximately 350 Sioux camped there.[69] This number includes women and children who tried to flee up the gully, but were killed as they ran.

In his youth, Black Elk had a vision dream of his people. The dream included a sacred hoop that represented his people and their way of life. In reflection up the events of December 29, 1890, he recognized the massacre as the pivotal moment when his people lost a sense of themselves, of who they were as a people.

"...I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

And I, to whom so a great a vision was given in my youth—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is

[68] John G. Neihart, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, (1932 Reproduction with an introduction by Vine Deloria, Jr., Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979) 260-261.

[69] Dee, *Bury My Heart and Wounded Knee*, 444.

broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."[70]

The site of the massacre at Wounded Knee is not a place where the divine was revealed, or the sacred broke through into the profane world. Rather, the sacredness of this place comes through remembrance of the massacre, and the determination of a people not to let that memory die. The massacre took hundreds of lives. It also destroyed hope and national pride, yet this place continues to be sacred to the Lakota people.

Today the Lakota people struggle to find their unique corporate identity as dual citizens of the United States and as an autonomous nation within a nation. The site of the massacre has taken on significant meaning to them. It is not simply something to be forgotten, nor is it a tourist site. The Wounded Knee massacre symbolizes the historic and on-going struggles between the Lakota and the United States government. It also represents the colonizing attitude that white men and the government have toward Native Americans in general.[71] The Wounded Knee Survivor's Association, made of descendants of those who escaped the creek, would like recognition that their ancestors were not hostile. The Lakota struggle with the federal government, seeking a sincere apology for the massacre and a national monument of memorial at the mass gravesite. Their refusal to let this place be forgotten by others is their refusal to accept racism and

[70] The hoop, the sacred circle is sacred to the Lakota people for it is the symbol of the things of nature, of the world and of time. By saying that the hoop had broken, Black Elk means that the world the Lakota knew and understood had ended. P. Radin, *Primitive Man as a Philosopher*, quoted in Geertz, 128.

[71] I use "colonizing" in the sense that Turner depicts. Colonization "privileges one description of the world and excludes others." He notes that the Sioux claim the Black Hills as sacred land, but this is not supported by the language of property law. "...The Supreme Court tends to protect religious belief but not religious practices in a particular place." Turner, 62.

colonization that are being foisted upon them. Wounded Knee Creek gives meaning and definition to the lives of the Lakota.[72]

SACRED SPACE OF REVELATION

Mount Sinai

In the Old Testament, Mount Sinai is referred to as "the mountain of God" (for example: Exod. 3:1, Exod. 24:13, 1 Kings 19:8) or the "mountain of the Lord" (Num. 10:33).[73] This naming implies that God lives there or that it belongs to God. Yet in "Some Biblical Concepts of Sacred Place," Sarah Japhet notes that each of three times that the Lord is revealed at Sinai, he descended to the mountain, presumably from heaven.[74] The holiness of the mountain is established by virtue of God's presence. Divine presence on the mountain may be impermanent, but the sense of sacredness remains after the revelation is finished. Japhet writes that "even the revelation itself is temporary and transient, and only the element of worship at the place of revelation endows that sanctity with some aspect of permanence."[75]

I agree that worship, as a ritual act, does give permanence to the sacred place, but I would add that the narrative of revelation gives continued meaning and power to this sacred place. The narrative gives others a small sense of how the Lord was revealed

[72] The event of December 29, 1890 was not "a battle," but an attack upon unarmed peoples by hung over, revenge seeking soldiers, in defiance of a legally binding treaty of peace—and that it should rightly be termed "massacre." What they seek has less to do with words of apology or a memorial, and more to do with acknowledgement that the United States broke its own law, and that the sovereignty of the Sioux has been ignored or downplayed throughout United States history. See Gonzalez and Cook-Lynn.

[73] The mountain is called "Mount Horeb" in this text.

[74] Sarah Japhet, "Some Biblical Concepts of Sacred Place," in *Sacred Space: Shrine City, Land*, ed. Benjamin Z. Kedar and R.J. Zwei Werblowski (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 66.

[75] Japhet, 69.

there. "What Israel receives of God can be appropriated only by the retelling of the stories...."[76] So let us look at the narrative.

The record in Exodus 3 tells us that Moses went to the mountain where he encountered an angel and a burning bush. Immediately, the reader understands that this is no ordinary occurrence and no ordinary place. Then, the Lord told Moses to "remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (v. 5 NRSV). This established the sacredness of the place, and required Moses to take off his sandals in order to acknowledge the holiness. The Lord then revealed who he is saying, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," (v. 6) and sent Moses from the mountain with a specific task, "to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (v. 10).

When Moses returned to Mount Sinai, this time with the Israelites, the Lord required that the people ritually prepare for when "the Lord [came] down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people" (Exod. 19:11). Part of this preparation included setting distinct physical boundaries. In this case, one could not "tred upon" the sacred space "without entering" as Lane supposes; the Lord declared, "You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death'" (v. 12). This place was so holy that to set foot upon it without permission brought death. Twice more the Lord warned that the people should not approach, so the people stood outside the boundaries, and Moses and Aaron, with the Lord's permission, entered into the holy place.[77]

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[76] *The New Interpreter's Bible: A commentary in Twelve Volumes.*

[77] The people should not approach seen in verse 21, "warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look; otherwise many of them will perish," and verse 24, "The Lord said to him, 'Go down, and come up bring Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord;

The encounter with the Lord at Mount Sinai established the nature of the relationship between the Lord and the Israelites. As the chosen people, they were at *the place* where the Lord revealed himself. We see that the mountain is not ordinary. It is holy, "the place where the ordinariness of human, earthy life has contact with the holy that destabilizes and consequently transforms."[78] This narrative transforms meaning and understanding of the Israelite people's sense of self.

Lane's first axiom, that "sacred space is not chosen, it chooses," holds particularly true in this narrative. The Lord declared the ground around the burning bush to be holy. God specifically "descended upon Mount Sinai" (Exod. 19: 20) in order to reveal himself to Moses and the Israelites; Moses ascended the mountain to reach God, going literally and figuratively closer to the Lord. Presumably, the heavens were farther from the mountaintop than is the surrounding land, but Moses still had to do his part in order to encounter the Lord on behalf of the people. This may be seen as part of the ritual approach that one must make to prepare oneself for encounter within a sacred space.

The Lord is not always manifested on the mountain; there is impermanence to the sacral nature of the Mount Sinai. Yet after the Lord gave the commandments and laid the foundation for the way Israel was to live and worship, the people make a sacrifice. It is ritual remembrance or of revelation and worship of the deity that "endows that sanctity with some aspect of permanence."[79] Once again, the place is ordinary, ritually made extraordinary. The revelation was temporary, but its effects are far-reaching. The story

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otherwise he will break out against them.'" That Moses and Aaron had special permission to approach seen in verse 20, "When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top f the mountain, and Moses went up," verse 24 as quoted above. It appears that the prohibition of setting foot upon the mountain only holds true when the Lord has descended to Sinai.

[78] *New Interpreter's Bible.*

[79] Japhet, 69.

recorded the memory of the sacredness of the place, and gives it meaning today. Without this continued remembrance, this storied place would not have the holy aura it does today.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

The shrine of Out Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City is the most visited Marian shrine in the world, recording some twenty million pilgrims and tourists annually. Why does this site attract so many people? As with other sacred sites, the shrine has a story that explains its origin of sacredness.

An Aztec peasant by the baptismal name of Juan Diego saw the Virgin and convinced the bishop of Mexico to build a shrine on the site of her choosing. On a Saturday in December in 1531, Juan Diego was walking to Mass and religious instruction. He heard singing coming from the Hill of Tepeyac, the former site of the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin. Juan Diego followed the leading of the voice up the hill, where he saw a stunning vision of the Virgin. She spoke to him in his own language, identifying herself as the "Father of our true Lord." She asked Juan Diego to go the bishop, Juan de Zumárraga, and ask that a temple be built in her honor at that very site so that she may bless the people.

Juan Diego went directly to the bishop, requested an interview and explained his tale. The bishop listened to his words, and asked Juan Diego to return later so that he might contemplate this request. The peasant returned to the hill to report his failure to the Virgin. He begged that she send someone else saying, "I am the tail, I am a leaf, I am of the little people, and you, my child, the youngest of my daughters. Lady, you send me to

a place where I do not walk and where I cannot stop."[80] But she sent him back to the Bishop the following day. On this second visit Diego wept and pleaded for the bishop to believe him, but the bishop demanded a sign to verify the presence of the Virgin on the hill. The following day, Monday, rather than return to Tepeyac, Juan Diego sat by the bedside of his dying uncle Bernardino. Eventually, Juan went for a priest to give last rites to his uncle, but to retrieve the priest, he had to pass by the hill where he had encountered the Virgin. Thinking to evade her, he passed around the base of the hill, but she descended the hill to speak with him again. She then promised to cure Bernardino, and sent Juan Diego up the hill to pick the flowers growing on top. Some of the flowers are reported to be European in origin, rather than native Mexican flowers. Additionally, the encounter took place in December, and the flowers were blooming out of season. He retrieved the flowers, and the Lady arranged them with her own hands in Diego's *ayatl* (cactus fiber) cape. Juan took his cape of flowers to the Bishop's palace, where after much harassment by the bishop's attendants he finally gained an audience with Zumárraga. As he opened his cape, the flowers fell to the floor. Zumárraga was amazed to see an image of the Virgin imprinted upon the cape. She was wearing a sash that indicated her pregnant state.

At the time when the Virgin promised Juan Diego that his uncle would be healed, she appeared to Bernardino, healed him and revealed the name by which she would be known: Guadalupe.[81]

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[80] This quote is from the *Nican Mopohua* by Laso de la Vega, quoted in D.A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries*, (Cambridge, UK: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001) 85.

[81] There is considerable controversy over the origin of the name "Guadalupe," as that is the name of a Marian apparition in Spain. It is possible that the Virgin said an Aztec name to Bernardino, and somewhere in translation it changed to the Spanish name. Some possibilities include: *Tequantlanopeuh*: She Whose Origins Were in the Rocky Summit; *Tequantlaxopeuh*: She Who Banishes Those That Ate Us;

In 1533 a sanctuary was erected on the site of Juan Diego's encounter with the Virgin of Guadalupe. In 1709 a basilica was erected; it was replaced in 1976 by a new basilica, where many people still come to pray or give thanks. It attracts twenty million visitors per year, more than any other Marian shrine in the world. Juan Diego's cloak, on which her image can still be seen, in near original condition, remains central to the New Basilica, where it is housed today. A cloak of cactus fiber should have disintegrated after twenty years, yet the cloak has not cracked or faded. The cape has become a visible sign of an invisible belief -- perhaps this is one reason why this place is so popular. Even non-believers have to wonder at what they see. As Jeannette Rodriguez notes, "The question as to whether the apparition did in fact occur is inconsequential: for those who believe no explanation is necessary; for those who do not believe, no explanation will satisfy."[82]

The Virgin of Guadalupe is an excellent example of how story or narrative gives great meaning to a place. Were it not for the image on the cloak, which proves to the faithful that the Virgin was in that place, the site would have no significance. As the tale is told and retold, it grows in the people's hearts and minds giving cultural and communal significance to one man's experience.

Yet, the significance and the power of this Marian apparition are not contained by the place in which it happened. The Virgin, specifically this manifestation "forms and supports both cultural and religious identity."[83] How is it that an event that occurred so

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and *Coatlaxopeuh*: She Who Crushed the Serpent's Head. Ana Castillo, introduction to *Goddess of the Americas, La Diosa de Las Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe* ed. Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996) *xvi*.

[82] Jeannette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1994) 127.

[83] Rodriguez, 127.

long ago can have such an enduring effect for the people? Many believe that Mary not only appeared, but she also remained to guide and protect her Mexican children. Rodriguez asked an indigenous woman why this apparition was so special. The answer: "Se quedó"—"She stayed."[84] The manifestation of something holy, not simply at one moment, but beginning with Juan Diego and remaining with the people throughout time.

This place influences a way of seeing the world, affected by the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The image of the Virgin has become a symbol of Mexican identity. Rodriguez's analysis focuses specifically on Mexican-American women. She concludes that through the story of the Virgin appearance to Juan Diego and her continuing presence with the people, "the marginalized have a special relationship with God.... In this relationship women are not subordinate but rather are invited into a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity." As a result, the women "feel comforted and this change allows them to *make sense of their world.* With this empowering feeling comes the ability to theologize and be active."[85] In short, she assists the women to understand their place within their culture(s) and to live accordingly. The Virgin of Guadalupe plays a role in shaping their worldview.

The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe has a power not only in the place where she was manifested, or even within a certain radius. The character, the myth, and her meaning have grown beyond place, yet the place itself remains of vital significance, for millions continue to journey there. It is a reminder of what began in one location; this sense of sacred that revealed itself in the mundane world cannot be contained by mere place. La Señora is not content to be limited to her original apparition. Rather she reigns

[84] Rodriguez, 128.
[85] Rodriguez, 139. Emphasis mine.

in the hearts and minds of many people. Juan Diego and the resulting temple allowed her to gain entrance into the world and into the culture. The Basilica serves today as the focal point of a wide-ranging sacredness attached to the narrative of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Bringing it Back Together

Human experiences are located within time and space. The spatial component gives a sense of place. By claiming a place as "sacred" space, one implies that the divine is encountered there in some way. Sacred space affects one's religious outlook, and the way one sees oneself within the world. Robert Wuthnow proposes that people are seeking the sacred; my casual observation of the world around me supports this idea. If this is true, if people are trying to find significance in life and attempting to discover how they fit into the world around them, then sacred spaces will play a role in that search. Sacred space is one component of a complex system that contributes to a person's worldview.

Lane builds upon Eliade's highly influential foundation in his writings on sacred space. He moves beyond Eliade's dichotomy of sacred/profane to bring out the symbolic aspect of place. Lane also draws upon the power of myth to communicate meaning. In the continuing conversation about sacred spaces, we can move beyond these two writers. The next step should be clarification of the role that humans play in creating the meaning of place. Influences outside the sacred space, such as culture, history or previous knowledge, affect the creation of symbolic meaning. The need for this next step is seen when one applies Lane's axioms for the study of sacred space to the narratives from the previous chapter.

1. The four sacred spaces sketched in the previous chapter do not support Lane's first axiom, *"sacred space is not chosen, it chooses."* He relies upon Eliade in

formulating this axiom. Eliade sets up the sacred and profane at opposite poles, "absolute reality" versus "nonreality."[86] Theophanies, where the sacred breaks through to the profane, bring order and meaning to the unreal world. By locating the sacred outside the world, breaking in only when and where it chooses, Eliade neglects human agency as a key factor. All impetus and action must come from the sacred realm. His formation makes humans passive recipients of holy revelation. It forgets "the hard work that goes into choosing, setting aside, consecrating, venerating, protecting, defending and redefining sacred places."[87] Certainly, human effort is involved in the effort at Wounded Knee to bring recognition of sacredness to the site. Even in the narratives of revelatory sites, the people needed to acknowledge the revelation and act upon it. Moses had to ascend the mountain to meet the Lord, and the Israelites needed to ritually prepare for the Lord to speak. The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe resulted from human response to the Virgin's request.

Eliade writes that when people locate sacred sites, they seek divine signs as confirmation of their choice. When no signs are given, signs are "provoked" from the divine.[88] Contrary to what he seems to be saying elsewhere, provoking or evoking a sacred sign puts the initial action in the people's hands. Contrary to what he writes elsewhere, here Eliade acknowledges the role of human action, even if it is only to seek divine guidance in the selection of a sacred site. The sacred, the profane, religion, culture, and preconceived notions about the world overlap to form human experience.[89]

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[86] Eliade, 21.
[87] David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, introduction to *American Sacred Space* ed. by David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) 17.
[88] Eliade, 27.
[89] Lane, *Giving Voice*, 3.

Lane does not locate the sacred fundamentally outside of the profane world, as Eliade does. Rather, he describes the profane as a mask of the sacred. In the article *Giving Voice to Place*, he acknowledges, "places themselves participate in the perception that is made of them."[90] The sacred and the profane may co-exist in Lane's writings. This understanding is more in line with the sacred spaces of reflection, Kailas and Wounded Knee. Even in the spaces of revelation, the continued sacrality present within the symbolic elements and myth is not separate from the profane. However, Lane confuses the sacred and the place when expanding upon the meaning of the first axiom. He gives active power to the place, rather than the sacred or the profane; he equates the sacred space with the sacred, characterizing the place as having sought him out. He moves from "sacred space chooses" to "God chooses to reveal himself only where he wills."[91] The place chooses; the sacred chooses. The line between place and the sacred is blurred. The symbol shows meaning, but is not itself the meaning. A more clear distinction should be maintained between the divine and the sacred space.

The sacred may choose to reveal itself, as at Sinai or Guadalupe. But, people may take the initiative, as when churches are built, or people may make pilgrimage to a mountain, or fight for the sacredness of part of their heritage. In none of these latter cases is the *place* choosing, although it may influence the selection, or affect the way one understands the space.

With casual consideration it seems that churches and shrines cannot be categorized as reflective sacred places. However, the possibility remains that they do not fit either category: revealed, or those of reflection. Perhaps they need their own category.

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[90] Lane, *Giving Voice*, 3.
[91] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 15.

This investigation does not include places that are built or created specifically to be sacred sites. Created places should be examined to gain better understanding of the role of each component of sacred space: the divine, the person, and the place.

I believe that Lane's other axioms do not work with this axiom. Ritual, treding and entering space, and the local/universal effects of sacred space all imply human action in the creation or recognition of sacred space. This is discussed in further depth later in the chapter.

2. Each location gives credence to the notion that *"sacred space is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary."* Rituals of pilgrimage and remembrance intertwine with myths to maintain the importance of these sacred spaces. Moses returned to Mount Sinai with the Israelites to worship there. The *Sitanka Wokiksuye* (the Big Foot Riders) retrace the Wounded Knee journey to "reclaim their spiritual selves" and to remember their story.[92] Ritual acknowledges the meaning of the place, allowing the believer to connect to the sacred. A pilgrim walking about Mount Kailas leaves a bit of clothing or a drop of blood at *Shiwa Tsal* to aid the spirit after death.[93] But these acts of devotion are impelled by recognition of the sacred and knowledge of the myths that symbolize the power of place.

3. *"Sacred Place can be tred upon without being entered."* Simply stepping upon sacred ground does not guarantee recognition of the sacred, or understanding the deepness of the place. At the new Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, tourists can enter the space without having a sense of wonder that a devout Catholic pilgrim might. At Wounded Knee, the story place and the continuing memory give the place its sense of

[92] Gonzalez and Cook-Lynn, 81.
[93] Johnson and Moran, 98.

sacredness. I would venture to say that if one did not know what had transpired there in December 1890, the place would not have the hallowed sense that it does for those who are aware of the deaths that occurred there.

The example the Lord's revelation to the Israelites at Mount Sinai contradicts the second axiom. There the people were warned not to set foot upon the mountain; retribution for an infraction was death (Exod. 19:12). Yet, this is a rare exception. The other examples here support this axiom, and it seems that this injunction applied only to the time that the Lord was present upon the mountain. Today monks inhabit its hillside at the Monastery of St. Katharine, and tourists come to see the holy peak. As at the Basilica of Guadalupe, Wounded Knee, or Kailas, simply being at that place does not guarantee an encounter with the sacred.

Sacred spaces consist of more than place. They are by nature experiential, but also include multiple layers of symbolic meaning. If the symbolism is lost the meaning changes or vanishes completely. It is easy to miss the details that may give hints to a more profound force at work. In the rush of life, it is all too uncommon to make time to see the details of what Lane calls the sacred mask. Entry into sacred space requires the proper attitude and preparation, as with a pilgrim seeking the sacred. Unexpected entry to sacred space may come though alertness and openness to the sacred waiting just below the surface of every day life. A disposition of openness and awareness may add to the ability to enter sacred space and not just walk upon its ground.

4. The final axiom, *"the impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal,"* speaks of the nature and effect of sacred space. "Centripetal and centrifugal" describes the pull that sacred spaces have upon a person.

They draw one in, calling out to them, but then they push away again, sending the person back into he world. "Local and universal" describes the way sacred space affects people. The experience and the place are highly personal, unique to the place and the person. At the same time, that experience plays a role in the way the person will view the world. It will affect not only that one person, but also the way they relate to those around him or her.

This axiom is not obviously seen within the Sinai narrative, yet hints of it are present. In Exodus 3:12, the Lord states the universal nature of God's presence, that "I will be with you" (apparently irregardless of the Israelites location). But he also says that as a sign of this, they "shall worship God on this mountain." Mount Sinai, and the Israelites worship there, became symbolic not only of their liberation, but also the role the Lord played in it. The revelation at Sinai is specific, but the impact has had far-reaching effects. Moses' experience at Sinai was local and universal, self-changing and then universally applied. He was, after all, sent forth from the mountain for the purpose of leading the Israelites from Egypt. The Israelites' experience, via Moses at mountain, could also be read in a similar manner.

For the devout pilgrim to the Basilica at Guadalupe, the image on the *ayatl* cape, and a connection to the sacred may certainly send him or her into the world, with renewed sense of self and purpose. It is likely that the tourist would not have the same impression of the Basilica. The same could be said about Wounded Knee. For some this place endowed with meaning would be both highly personal, and fill their existence in the world with significance. But sight-seekers would likely not encounter it in the same manner.

The narratives in the previous chapter each point something beyond themselves. They represent sacred spaces, the divine encountered there and the worldview that results from such an encounter. Similarly, the sacred spaces they describe symbolize multiple meanings beyond themselves. Sacred space may be a personal experience; however, the sacred places in this examination were selected because many people consider them holy. As places of corporate sacredness, they each play a role in shaping a corporate identity. Mount Kailas is important to Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Bonpo pilgrims. The Lakota people share the history of Wounded Knee Creek and fight together to officially recognize and preserve it as formative to their current corporate identity. Mount Sinai represents the establishment of Israel's identity as a people and the specific guidelines that identified them as such. Our Lady of Guadalupe has special meaning for her Mexican children; they believe that she is present with them.

Each of these sacred places serves as an "anchor of human existence" for those that believe in the sacred power found there.[94] It allows security amidst challenging and insecurity. A rock climber uses an anchor to secure to the rock face to have a safeguard in spite of risk taking or a boat anchors to not drift into the unknown; likewise, sacred space anchors life to the divine, providing security and the known within a changing and insecure world.

Lane's axioms have been helpful for this discussion of sacred space. Although I rejected the first axiom the place, or even solely the divine selects the place and the nature of the encounter, this axiom caused me to consider where the experience

[94] Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 16.

originates. There is an intersection of sacred presence, human reaction, and sense of place that create the entire experience. The other three axioms clarify the necessity to recognize human action in sacred space. Ritual signifies our human invocation of the divine to the profane world (Eliade), or acknowledgement of the sacred presence within the world (Lane). The final two axioms, that space can be tred without being entered, and the local and universal nature of sacred space both necessitate the interaction of sacred and human. It may be God's action and reaction, or perhaps the action is mutual. In either case, both God and I are both key to my experience of sacred space.

A continued discussion of sacred space should acknowledge and draw from Eliade because his work recognizes trends in sacred spaces across many cultures, and because his influence on this topic cannot be ignored. Yet the complete separation of the sacred and profane realms is not supported by the examples in this paper, nor my own experience of sacred space. The ideas that Lane puts forth can be used further, especially his use of myth and narrative to communicate a more profound meaning. I would add to Eliade and Lane's ideas Vine Deloria Jr.'s distinction between places of revelation and of reflection, with the possible addition of a category for created sacred space. Again, these are only categories, but ones that Eliade and Lane neglect. This distinction will likely result in a deeper understanding of the role that humans play in shaping the meaning of sacred space. Finally, the continued exploration of sacred space will include further application of these categories and descriptions to actual places, testing and re-testing the theories against practice.

Continued analysis may offer more support for these axioms and categorizations, but the effect of sacred space is found in the experience of place, not in analysis. Once

sacred spaces have been broken apart into categories and symbolic meanings, the experiential aspect needs to be put back together again. The lasting impact is a combination of all the smaller categories and symbols, returned to their overarching impression. When these broken myths are reassembled, we can return to the original wonder and meaning with a greater appreciation for the sacred mystery experienced there. I have focused on the meaning of these four sacred spaces in a corporate sense. Yet, sacred space gives meaning and order to life on an individual level as well. I hope that you, the reader, have gained an appreciation for the significance that these places play in creating order and worldview. Kailas, Sinai, Wounded Knee, or Guadalupe may not be the sacred spaces that bring meaning into the world for you, but there are places that do so. If we can recognize the places where we encounter the sacred, perhaps we can begin to understand who we are, and how we are shaped by the sacred in our own lives.

This investigation of sacred space came about because of my own fascination with places in my life. I intuitively knew why Grand Teton National Park played (and continues to play) such a meaningful role in my life. It was not the steep glacier covered peaks, beautiful waterfalls, or delicate alpine flowers, but rather what those things meant to me. They pointed beyond themselves to a God of everlasting power, continued renewal, and delicate intimacy. They represent an ordered world where God is strong, forgiving and loving. In this worldview I find place and purpose. The mountain is not God, but it reminds of God and how I relate to God. This is the role that sacred space plays—to participate in creating and reaffirming the order of the world and meaning of life within that world.

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