FORUM

Toward a Geography of "Religion": Mapping the Distribution of an Unstable Signifier

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Recent religious studies scholarship has examined the historical and cultural variability by which "religion" and "the sacred" have been constructed by scholars and by the public. This article argues that geographers of religion must take these deconstructive arguments to heart. Rather than assuming there is a universal feature of human life called "religion," the author argues that the religious and the sacred should be studied by geographers as ways of distributing particular kinds of significance across geographic spaces. Rooted in modern distinctions of religious/secular and sacred/profane and in the Enlightenment urge to classify, constructs of religion are efforts to demarcate, purify, and territorialize. Postmodernization exacerbates the individualization of religion but also destabilizes the boundary between the sacred and the profane. If religion is, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, a "recent invention" that, with a shift in structural relations, might "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea," the elements that have made up this thing called religion will certainly persist in other forms, and it is the task of geographers of religion to trace the changing orchestrations of those significances across space and place. *Key Words: postmodernity, religion, sacred, social construction, space.*

What is religion? More specifically, what is at the center or core of the field of geography of religion? A casual perusal of geographers' writings on the topic shows that the meaning of religion is not often a subject of extensive reflection. If as distinguished a geographer as Yi-Fu Tuan could define religion as "the impulse for coherence and meaning" (1976, 271–72), we might be excused for wondering about the coherence of the subfield studying this impulse. How, for instance, does it differ from the impulses underlying science or art? And what does such a definition exclude (save for the impulse to incoherence and meaninglessness)? Tuan (1976, 271) himself recognized the field's lack of coherence, as have Sopher (1981, 510), Stump (1986), Park (1994, 20), and others.

Lily Kong (2001) has charted out some possibilities for what she calls "'new' geographies of religion," and any attempt to develop the field should begin from her proposals. This article will take up a few of the themes she and others have suggested, specifically regarding the fluidity of definitions of the sacred and secular (Kong 2001, 212) and the multivalence of place, and of sacred place in particular (Kong 2001, 212; see also Eade and Sallnow 1991; Chidester and Linenthal 1995). At the same time, I would like to press further with the deceptively simple question: what is religion? If, as has been argued, religion and the sacred are historically variable constructs, what are the implications of their variability for geographers? Beginning with a brief deconstruction of these terms, this article will suggest that an emphasis on meaning and signification can steer a path away from this terminological snag. At the same time, signification should not be seen in exclusively social constructionist terms. Meanings, I will argue, emerge from the interaction of practices and places/spaces. The geography of religion, in this view, is the geography of specific kinds of practices that happen to have become associated with the historically malleable signs of the religious and the sacred. Its object is thus the practices, the signs, and the contestations that emerge around them, in specific places and spaces.

(Un)defining Religion and the Sacred

Several scholars of religion have argued, in recent years, that there is no stable and historically invariate definition of religion (e.g., Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 1997, 2000; McCutcheon 1997; Dubuisson 2003) and that this point has serious implications for the study of religious phenomena. Both *religion* and *the sacred* are terms that emerged historically as categories distinguishing certain things from others: religion from magic and su-

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perstition, or from science and secularism; *a* religion as an identifiable system of related beliefs and practices clearly distinguishable from other such systems; the sacred as against the profane or secular, and so on. The terms emerge in and through efforts to articulate differences perceived to exist in the world, and in the process become tools to fix and entrench those very differences.

Some, such as Karl Barth and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, have argued that "religion" is too humanistic and anthropocentric a term for what constitutes the religious domain for believers, or it is a modernist concept that enframes and reifies (and thus ultimately threatens) the most private and subjective domains of personal faith (see Schussler Fiorenza 2000). Others have highlighted the role that the concept of religion has played in colonization, where, for instance, indigenous people were first described as *lacking* religion, and later identified as in fact having religion of the most base form (e.g., fetishism). The initial "lack" of religion signified their difference from colonizing Europeans, and later it was precisely the *presence* of religion that signified that difference (see Saler 1993; Chidester 1996; McCutcheon 1997; J. Z. Smith 1998; Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005).

In his genealogical critique of the modern anthropological concept of religion, Asad (1993, 29) wrote that "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes . . . " Such processes, for Asad, are associated with the history of a European Christian world, which, sometime between the late Medieval and early modern eras, separated religion as a category from the categories of politics, law, science, and aesthetics, among others, and which distinguished between religion as a category phenomenon and religions as specific instances of that phenomenon. And in his examination of the history of the terms *religion*, *religions*, and *religious*, J. Z. Smith (1998, 282) concluded that "'religion' is not a native [i.e., emic, or insider's] term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology."

J. Z. Smith's argument may be an overstatement, since the word "religion," whatever its origins, is in wide use today not only by scholars but by believers of many traditions. Nevertheless, as a horizon framing a discipline, "religion" is neither permanent nor especially stable in our time. This horizon has expanded, contracted, and shifted over the years. More importantly, it varies from place to place, context to context, and a nuanced and geographically sensitive approach to religion must take account of these variations and shifts.

We may choose to define religion as worship of a deity or superhuman entity or power, or as a moral system arising from narratives about such superhuman figures, or as a system of ritual or cultic practice that provides an organized community with a sense of social solidarity (Émile Durkheim's definition, 1912/1976), or as a set of cosmological or other propositions to which believers give assent, or as a reasoned response to existential questions of "ultimate concern" (Paul Tillich 1959), or as "webs of significance" connecting human thought and behavior and providing both with the "aura of factuality" that makes life meaningful (Clifford Geertz 1973).[1] But whatever the definition, many North Americans today are not easily classified as members of a clearly defined religion; and yet many would not say they are *not* religious. Surveys have shown a growing preference for identifying oneself as spiritual rather than religious; or as polyconfessional, multireligious, nondenominational, or evolving; or as religious but of no single persuasion, and so on (see Roof 2000; Marler and Hadaway 2002). We might ask whether or to what extent the phenomena of civil religion (Bellah 1967), diffuse or implicit religion (Bailey 1983; *Social Compass* 1990; Reader 1993), nature religion (Albanese 1990), cultural religion (Alderman 2002), and designer religion (Rountree 2002) qualify as religion *tout court* (and see Saler 1993; Chidester 1996).

Similar questions can be raised about "the sacred," a term that has customarily been opposed to the secular or profane (see Gelder and Jacobs 1998). Without the other term in such dyads (sacred/profane, religious/secular) either explicitly stated or understood, the first is incapable of carrying meaning. "The sacred" has been taken as referring to the *classification* of persons, places, and things, involving the regulation of behavior toward those objects through rules, protections, and prohibitions; or to *qualities* emanating from those things themselves; or to an *experience* or *state of mind* marked by specific characteristics (astonishment, awe, terror, etc.) in the face of an object that transcends all expectations or rational capacities. Whereas the second understanding, most closely associated with Mircea Eliade (1959), has been critiqued for harboring the very assumptions it is meant to study, and the cognitivist approach suffers from too little attention to the cultural specificity of the experiences it asserts, it has been the first of these approaches that has been most fruitfully applied in recent studies of sacred space and place. This approach has

appeared under numerous guises over the years, variously emphasizing the social functions of such classifications (Durkheim, 1912/1976; Bhardwaj 1973; Turner 1974) or the heterogeneous discourses that combine to produce and contest them (Eade and Sallnow 1991; Chidester and Linenthal 1995; Graham and Murray 1997; Gelder and Jacobs 1998). Hecht (1994, 222) describes sacred space and time as "situational or relational categories," matters of "setting boundaries and negotiating relationships." Sacred spaces are those spaces *rendered* sacred through practices of sacralization (involving selection, demarcation, design, orientation, ritualization, etc.). But Hubert (1994, 12) asks: "Can we say that something is sacred to someone else but not to us? Is that not the same as saying that it is not sacred?" If the sacred is *not* the domain of the unquestioned, then is it anything more than a relic of a history in which certain things have been designated sacred and others not, but with the meaning of that sanctity so elusive as to be little more than a matter of faith?

Signifying Religion, Without Presuming Original Homogeneity

If geographers are not to take for granted the meanings of these terms, then the phenomena of religion and sacrality ought to be studied (1) as ways of distributing significance across geographic spaces, and (2) as involving the distinction of different *kinds* of significance from among those being distributed. The religious and the sacred, then, are simply two, albeit widespread (and overlapping), forms of significance, alongside the ideological, cosmological, political, and other forms. The question one could pose here is: at what point does the generically cultural become the specifically sacred and (even more specifically) religious? Other questions arise in the wake of this one:

- How does the spatial distribution of *religious* sacrality (and irreligious profanity) map onto the distribution of other sacralities (and profanities), such as the ethnic or national, with their delineation of ancestral homelands, battlefields, monuments, and memorials? How do these map onto the distribution of power and authority, of prohibition and proscription, of heroism and villainy, of nostalgia and desire? Is there a relationship of convergence or of opposition between the centers and margins of political-economic power and the centers and margins of religious "power" and sacrality (as suggested by Turner 1974, 184; and Shields 1991), or are these independent of each other?[2]

- In the desire to access particular places or the meanings, feelings, or powers they embody, how do we distinguish between religious or spiritual desire (for salvation, transcendence, eternal reward, or unity with a deity) and other, more this-worldly forms of desire? At what point does travel become pilgrimage, and the latter become religious? Is there a spectrum stretching from one end to the other, with civil religion found somewhere in the middle? Where on that spectrum would we locate civil war battlefields, Auschwitz, Lenin's Mausoleum (now and before the fall of the Berlin Wall), the Strawberry Fields memorial to John Lennon in Central Park (Kruse 2003), Elvis's home in Graceland (Rigby 2001; Alderman 2002), presumed prehistoric sacred sites such as Mesa Verde or Stonehenge, or the ecstasy achieved in the thrill of a Las Vegas casino or a climb up Mount Everest?[3] Or does the sacred-secular spectrum merely ingrain a dichotomy that is thoroughly modern and ultimately elusive?

But if the religious is thought to differ from the nonreligious only by the meanings produced through the forms of signification that carry it, we risk falling into a dualism whereby systems of signification (or symbolic models) are seen to be separate from, and antecedent to, a world that stands unsymbolized but is always ready to be filled with our meanings. This point can be better explained by examining a few of the more rigorous articulations of a complex, polyvalent approach to sacred space. In one such attempt, Chidester and Linenthal (1995, 18) make the seemingly trivial, but in fact crucial, point that "sacred space is contested for the simple reason that it is spatial." Conflict and competition, in other words, are inherent to spatiality—as, one might add, are collaboration, accommodation, and the negotiation of coexistence. They go on to argue that the sacralization of space involves a multiplication of meanings wherein physical resources are transformed into a "surplus of signification: . . . conflict in the production of sacred space is not only over scarce resources but also over symbolic surpluses that are abundantly available for appropriation" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, 18). It is this *excess of signification* that, for the authors, characterizes sacred places. Drawing on a favorite poststructuralist trope, they write, "Although 'the sacred' might be regarded as an empty signifier, a sign that by virtue of its emptiness could mean anything or nothing, its emptiness

is filled with meaningful content as a result of specific strategies of symbolic engagement" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, 18). These strategies become the essence of sacred space, which otherwise constitutes what Eade and Sallnow (1991, 15) declare to be a void, "a vessel into which pilgrims devoutly pour their hopes, prayers, and aspirations" and which accommodates "the meanings and ideas which officials, pilgrims, and locals invest" in it.

As geographers, however, we might point out that neither sacred places nor *any* places are ever quite empty; like literary texts, places cannot *equally* accommodate all possible interpretations, as they provide specific "affordances" (to use the language of ecological psychologist J. J. Gibson 1979) that render certain interpretations more probable than others. As Ingold (1992, 2000, 153ff.) and others have argued, there is no pure, uninscribed, and unsymbolized world that *precedes* signification, for we are born into a world that is already layered with significances. Places and landscapes are always already constituted in and through histories of interaction involving humans and nonhumans, in specific biophysical, organismic, and cultural topographies and ecologies, upon which we humans are imprinted as much as we imprint that world. Meanings, rather than being imposed onto preexisting external realities, emerge reciprocally with landscapes, cultures, and practices in dynamic historical constellations that, far from being semiotically flat homogeneous surfaces, turn out to be spread in thick layers that are heterogeneous all the way down. It is here that the claims of religious scholars such as Mircea Eliade, who wrote (1959) that "For religious man, space is not homogeneous," or R. J. Z. Werblowsky (1998, 12), for whom "Talking about sacred space . . . means breaking up the homogeneity of space," become tautological. Such claims assume that there is homogeneity to begin with, at least up until religious man, or simply meaning-granting humanity, enters the picture, virgin-born and fully formed; but such is never the case.

As people live in particular places, their activities, including their attempts to anchor their own significances in the landscape, orchestrate those places in particular ways (Coleman and Elsner 1995), shaping them into centers and peripheries, connected into lateral networks, or concentric circles, or stratified into pyramidal hierarchies or whatever else. But the orchestration includes various players—among them nonhuman inhabitants and environmental forces of various kinds—with divergent agendas. *Agency* in this picture is complex and multiple, and is always shaped and influenced by larger social, institutional, historical, and material-ecological processes and structures (Castree and Braun 2001; Ivakhiv 2002, 2003a; Whatmore 2002). The interaction between the local and the global, and between *agency* and *structure* (as these are conventionally called in cultural sociology and geography) is mediated by signs and symbols, images and narratives, and by circulating meanings, desires, power, and so on (Ivakhiv 2001).

What is primary, in such a view, is the process and practice of engaging with spaces, places, landscapes, in ways that distinguish and demarcate, describe and redescribe, deterritorialize and reterritorialize (to use Deleuze and Guattari's terms, 1987). Within this activity, terms such as *religious*, *sacred*, *secular*, and so on, arise as discursive formations within larger dyadic or differential fields. Seeing these differentiations as secondary, not primary, products of human labor, such phenomena as the religious dimensions of Graceland or Strawberry Fields, the commercial values permeating pilgrimages to Fatima or Mecca, and the thorough imbrication of spiritual and secular found in Hindu pilgrimage, all begin to appear not as exceptions to any rule, but as the norm. And the spaces in which the religious domain is clearly articulated as distinct from the secular would then appear as products of a very particular activity, a purification involving practices of sacralization and desacralization, with various supporting mechanisms and ongoing maintenance to keep this separation in place.

The Times and Places of Religion

Space, then, is always already *significant* space, and it is the task of geographers to study the ways in which specific meanings and significations are articulated and spatialized, contested and negotiated, by different human communities (interacting with nonhuman organisms and material processes). But religious communities also interact with spaces and territories in historically variable, and often broadly recognizable, ways. Modernization, for instance, has involved processes that have in effect delinked and disarticulated previously established relations of this sort, and have individualized and subjectified the remainders into competing religious options, and into the notion of religion *as* an individual option. The French Catholic project of a parish civilization (see Hervieu-Léger 2002, 100) and analogous projects of "pastorization" in other parts of the world offer examples of attempts to resist the advance of such secularizing, modernizing processes. Such attempts have failed to the extent that religion has effectively become a separate domain from the scientific, political, juridical, and other spheres of modern life.

Postmodernization may involve an exacerbation of such trends, where religion becomes even more a prod-

uct on offer in a marketplace, and becomes more diffuse and elusive in its meanings—a matter of individual spirituality, for instance. But postmodernization arguably destabilizes the boundary between the religious and the secular even further, which raises questions that geographers may be especially well poised to study. To take an example of such destabilization from my own work (Ivakhiv 2001, 2003b), a kind of postmodernization of the sacred can be found in the red rock landscape surrounding the Arizona town of Sedona. This town has become a site of tourism and postmodern pilgrimage for a variety of reasons, among which are its visual appearance and its representation in photographs and films; the relationship between that appearance and a set of ideas about rocks, nature, "energy," and health; the experiences of some pilgrims and tourists in the canyons surrounding the town, experiences that sometimes reportedly include communication with entities that may or may not be supernatural; and a series of other circumstances. The red rock landscape has become a vessel and nexus of competing significations, but these significations are not imposed onto an empty void; rather, they emerge through the interaction of local communities, global networks, representational and technological media, and the active biophysical (if culturally modified and interpreted) landscape. In opposition to pilgrim-tourists' portrayals of the red rock landscape as sacred, some local evangelical Christians portray that same landscape as demonic (e.g., Scott and Younce 1994). Add the activities of sacred-site tour operators, rock climbers, conservationists, forest service rangers, local artists, nearby Native American groups, the ever-present and intensely active tourist and real estate industry, and the more global political and economic dynamics that affect these local entanglements, and what emerges is a potent mixture of religion (or "religion"), spirituality, art and representation, science and pseudoscience, politics, commerce, desire of various kinds, and visceral conflict.

The geography of religion cannot avoid dealing with any of these dimensions, in part because they affect the very meaning of "religion" and the changes it is and has been undergoing (perhaps since its first appearance). But even if religion might be a word better written in quotation marks, this is certainly no reason for there not to be a robust and flourishing geography of "religion." If the quotation marks surrounding the word religion in our article indicate a hesitation in our research, it is a hesitation that should have the effect of broadening our investigations, and at the same time of thickening or deepening them in the concrete particulars of place and cultural and material location. As such, it would allow us to develop a worm's eye view to complement the god's eye view promoted by the assumption that we know what religion is and that it is *this* and not *that*.[4] Religion can be seen as a marker of identity (like ethnicity or social class), or as a broad category of societal concern (like science, art, or law). From within, it can seem all-important (what else can rival its significance?) or merely redundant (what else is there?). From without, it can appear alien, bizarre, or just an innocuous impediment. The task of studying religion *geographically* is thus one of studying something—sets of ideas, practices, meanings—the substance of which may melt upon contact.

In this sense, religion fits Michel Foucault's (1973, 387) description of the figure of man (*l'homme*), whom he called "a recent invention" that, with a shift in structural relations, might "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea." Whatever happens to this figure of sand called "religion," there is no reason to suppose that the elements that have made it up will not persist in other forms for as long as there is sand, salt, and sea. Tracing the (re)distribution and (re)configuration of those elements is a task geographers may be especially well equipped for.

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Notes

1. See Levine (1986) for a discussion of these and other definitions.
2. Similar questions have been taken up in Kong (1992, 1993a, 1993b, 2001), Chidester and Linenthal (1995), Kedar and Werblowsky (1998), Roberts (2001), and elsewhere.
3. See also Turner (1974), MacCannell (1976), Graburn (1978), Shields (1991), Cohen (1992), Reader and Walter (1993), Chidester and Linenthal (1995), Blom (2000), Rountree (2002), and Digance (2003).
4. On worm's-eye and god's-eye views, see Grimes (1994), C. Smith (1976), and Haraway (1991).

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