

Jerusalem: the problems and responsibilities of sacred space

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ABSTRACT *Focusing on the central role the city of Jerusalem plays in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, this paper addresses the question of what makes particular cities 'holy' and sacred to people, the meaning and responsibilities that this 'sacredness' entails and whether this 'sacredness' in fact affects the conduct of politicians when determining the fate of a sacred city such as Jerusalem. Answers to these questions are found deep in the human psyche, in what historians of religion have called a 'sacred geography' and in the sense of exile from a holy place that makes it that much more precious to the people attached to it.*

For many people in the Western world, the idea of a holy city is a contradiction in terms. How can a place that is teeming with the most unholy activities, and which is crowded, dirty, noisy and filled with unhappy and even violent people be sacred? Many of us prefer to go to the countryside when we need to replenish ourselves spiritually, since we feel closer to the divine in places that are unspoiled and which have not been polluted by human occupation. Yet the present struggle over Jerusalem shows that the idea of sacred space is not about the future of a city that is holy to all of them: Jews, Christians and Muslims. Their attachment to Jerusalem is not simply dictated by strategic or economic considerations. All insist that the city is sacred to them, crucial to the identity of their state, and that no compromise is possible. What do people mean when they claim that a city is 'holy' to them? Does the sacredness of a location bring only privilege and joy, or does it carry certain responsibilities? Can the sacred nature of Jerusalem in all three of the monotheistic faiths throw any light on the conduct of politicians and their duty to the sacred pact?

I had originally assumed that a holy city was usually associated with formative events associated with the origins of a particular religious tradition. In the case of Jerusalem, this certainly works with Christianity, since it is the place where Jesus died and rose from the dead. But it is not true of either Judaism or Islam. Jerusalem is never mentioned explicitly in the Torah, the first five and most sacred books of the Hebrew Bible, and when it is first mentioned in the books of Joshua and Judges it appears to be alien, enemy territory (Josh. 15:63; Judg. 1:21). Jerusalem has no connection with the events of the exodus from Egypt: why should Mount Zion in Jerusalem be the most sacred place in the Jewish world rather than Mount Sinai, where God made a covenant with the people of Israel and gave them the Law? Similarly, the crucial events associated with the beginning of the Muslim tradition occurred far away in Arabia, in Mecca and Medina, the first and second holiest places in the Islamic world.

It seems that devotion to a special place is rooted deeply in the human psyche. Long before men and women began to chart their world scientifically, they developed what

historians of religion have called a 'sacred geography', in which certain sites were felt to be closer to the gods than others.¹ Sometimes a rock or a waterfall stood out dramatically from the surrounding terrain, speaking, therefore of something else, and thereby transcending mundane reality. Mountains were often a focus for this sense of transcendence: on their summits, midway between heaven and earth, people felt that they had risen above their earthly concerns and had come half-way to meet their gods. Sometimes a deity was said to have appeared in a certain place, and thus marked it out as his own. Historians tell us that devotion to a holy place is one of the most universal and most ancient of all religious activities. It is often linked to the myth of a golden age at the dawn of time, when human beings lived in harmony with nature, with one another and with the gods. It represented a vision of wholeness and harmony which people believed to have been the proper condition of humanity.² Today psychologists associate this myth with our prenatal memories of the womb, or our mother's breast. Like the yearning for paradise, the devotion to a holy place takes us back there symbolically, and articulates our desire to recover that lost sense of harmony and completion. Today people seek this experience in other ways: in art, sex or drugs. This momentary recovery of a sense of harmony assuages the consciousness of separation, which lies at the root of so much human pain and hence at the heart of the religious quest. We know that in Jewish, Christian and Muslim mythology, Jerusalem has been associated with the Garden of Eden and with Adam. For centuries, pilgrims repaired there to experience once again—if only momentarily—the lost paradise, helped by the carefully designed rituals, architecture and art of its various shrines.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Jerusalem has always become more precious to Jews, Christians and Muslims after they have lost it and been forcibly separated from Jerusalem's holiness. The state of exile taps into that sense of separation and loss which makes us feel alienated from the whole world. Jerusalem did not become truly central to the piety of the people of Israel until Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city and destroyed it in 586 BCE, and took a large number of the Israelites into exile. The Christian devotion to Jerusalem became much more aggressive after the emperor Julian, as part of his attempt to restore the old pagan religion to the Roman empire, promised to return the holy city to the Jewish people and gave them permission to rebuild their Temple. When Julian died in 363, the Christians vowed never to permit the city to fall into enemy hands again, and began feverishly to build new shrines, creating facts upon the ground, in an attempt to make their possession of the city permanent.³ In rather the same way, Jerusalem became a much more vehemently Islamic city after Saladin reconquered it from the Crusaders in 1187. Hitherto the Muslims had never built any shrines in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem and the Western Hill. From the time of 'Umar's conquest in 638, Jerusalem—or al-Quds, as the Muslims called it—had been a city with a Christian majority. Muslims had been content to live at the base of the Ḥaram al-Sharīf, the third holiest place in the Islamic world, and worship in the Dome of the Rock and in the communal mosque of al-Aqṣā. After the Crusaders' bloody conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, however, relations between the three monotheistic faiths were never quite so harmonious again, and the Muslims immediately began to convert some Christian sites into mosques and Ṣūfī convents in order to assert their presence and their determination to stay in possession.⁴

The devotion to sacred space becomes particularly problematic when people feel threatened, because when they visit their shrines, they not only believe that they are meeting God there; they also have a moving encounter with their deepest selves. This should not be surprising, since in all the world faiths, the divine or the sacred is not

merely a transcendent entity 'out there'; it is also a presence in the depths of the self. The history of Jerusalem has revealing instances of this profound identification. In 180 BCE, when Seleucus IV, the Syrian ruler of Palestine, raided the coffers of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish citizens of the city responded to this assault as though it had been a rape. People were overcome with horror, according to the author of the book of Maccabees; the High Priest became deathly pale and trembled convulsively; women ran through the streets, clad in sackcloth, and young girls leaned out of their windows calling upon heaven for aid (2 Mac. 3:15–22). The integrity of the Temple seemed essential to the very survival of the nation, so deeply entwined was it with the people's identity and sense of self. Jews would react instinctively in this manner whenever the sanctity of the Temple came under threat. In 26 CE, for example, when Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, ordered his soldiers to bring standards sporting the bust of the divine emperor into the Holy City, there was an immediate outcry, even though the offending standards remained in the Fortress of Antonia and did not violate the Temple area itself. Thousands of Jews marched to Pilate's residence in Caesarea and camped outside it for three days, and even when the Roman soldiers advanced upon them with drawn swords, they cried to a man that they would rather be killed than break their laws, which forbade any pollution of their sacred space.⁵

The identification with Jerusalem could also be healing. When, at the behest of the emperor Constantine, the Christians unearthed what they believed to be the tomb of Jesus in 327, the find shook the entire Christian world. Hitherto, Christians had had little interest in Jerusalem. They believed that they had developed a more sophisticated, spiritual religion that did not depend upon such primitive enthusiasms as the devotion to sacred space. It was only Jews or pagans, in their view, who imagined that it was possible to find God in a human building or a dusky cave.⁶ But when they saw the little rock tomb, which had been buried under the pagan Temple of Aphrodite, it seemed an emblem of their very selves. Christians had just emerged from three centuries of persecution at the hands of the Roman empire. Constantine had made Christianity *religio licita*, one of the officially legitimate faiths of the empire, and for the first time the Church was able to own property and build churches and shrines. For the first time they had a political stake in this world. The eminent historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who witnessed and chronicled the discovery of Jesus's tomb, and had been particularly scathing about the devotion to holy places, was forced to change his mind. He described the little rock tomb, emerging from the ruins of a pagan temple, as repeating the miracle of Christ's resurrection from the dead; it also mirrored the Christians' own resurgence and unsought triumph over paganism.⁷ In 1967, when the Israelis conquered the Old City and were reunited with the Western Wall (the last relic of the Temple built in the first century BCE by King Herod, which they had not been permitted to visit while the Old City was occupied by Jordan), they also described their encounter with the Wall as a meeting with a *doppelgänger*. They too had emerged from a period of savage persecution, and saw the Wall as a survivor like themselves, since it had endured two thousand years of turbulent, bloody history in Jerusalem.⁸

A holy place like Jerusalem is thus bound up with a people's sense of self. The very architecture of the temples, mosques and churches in the city through the ages was designed, in different ways, to mirror the worshipper's interior approach to the divine; it reflected the pathways of his own soul. This identification makes it well nigh impossible for people to be objective about Jerusalem. If their hold upon the city is imperilled, they feel that their very selves are in jeopardy. This is why the

future of Jerusalem is such a painful issue today. Two peoples and three faiths are now contending for the possession they all feel more strongly than ever. The Jewish people are in the first flush of their enthusiasm for the city; which they had not controlled for almost two thousand years. They have identified with Jerusalem at a profound level, seeing Jewish Jerusalem rising phoenix-like from the ashes of Auschwitz. But the Palestinians, Christian and Muslim, who daily feel Jerusalem slipping from their grasp, also feel renewed passion for the city, which, surrounded by the towering, powerful Jewish settlements, has become an emblem of the beleaguered Palestinian identity. When people feel their identity to be threatened, they are not likely to make concessions.

But the cult of a holy city is not simply a matter of propping up our sense of self; nor can religion ever be merely a question of enjoying a warm glow when we visit a holy place. From the earliest period, even before the city's conquest by King David in about 1000 BCE, the cult of Jerusalem carried a responsibility and was inseparable from the quest for social justice. In the pagan perspective of the ancient world, all cities were holy. People wanted to live as closely to the gods as possible in the hope that they would impart their strength to the fragile urban enterprise. Life was dangerous. Enemies could easily annihilate these early attempts to build a civilization, and the first requirement of any ruler was to give his citizens security. Building strong fortifications was a sacred duty. But it was no good erecting mighty walls to keep an external enemy at bay if the city's own governors made enemies within by an iniquitous social system. The practice of social justice was thus crucial to the notion of a holy city. A king vowed to care for the poor and the oppressed, not to allow the strong to exploit the weak, and to make his city a haven of justice, a refuge for the poor and vulnerable.⁹ Only then would the city be holy, peaceful and secure.

This pagan concern was brought into the early Israelite cult of their God on Mount Zion, as we can see from the Hebrew psalms, many of which echo phrases from the liturgy of Baal, the Syrian deity, which has been discovered on tablets in Ugarit, in what is now Lebanon. At his coronation, an Israelite king vowed to 'defend the poorest, save the children of those in need and to crush their oppressors' (Ps. 72:4), just like the kings of the surrounding countries. Jerusalem was to be a city of *shalom* (peace), but it must also be a city of *tseddek* (justice).¹⁰ During the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, the prophets who reformed this ancient Hebrew religion insisted that a cult of sacred space which neglected the social duties of justice and compassion was worse than useless. The prophecy of Isaiah opens with an oracle which makes God fulminate against the injustice that he sees in Jerusalem. God says that he is sick of people trampling over the courts of the Temple and nauseated by the stench of the burning flesh of the sacrificial victims. Instead he wanted justice for the poor and oppressed (Is. 1:11–12, 16–17). The prophet Amos made God roar aloud at the injustice he saw from his sanctuary in Mount Zion throughout the Middle East: God did not want strumming on harps or the burning of incense, but justice for the disadvantaged and the vulnerable (Amos 1:2; 5:25–7). This included gentiles. In Jewish law, the people of Israel are commanded to treat the 'stranger' with absolute respect: 'If a stranger lives in your land with you, do not molest him ... You must count him as one of your countrymen and love him as yourself—for you were once strangers yourselves in Egypt' (Lev. 19:33–4).

The message was that Israelites must remember their own past suffering, when they were vulnerable exiles, enslaved and oppressed by the pharaohs, in order to empathize with the strangers in their midst, who now lived as vulnerable resident aliens in their own country. The Jewish cult of the holiness of the city demands that Jerusalem be a

city of justice; Jewish scripture makes it clear that a city can be made holy or unholy every day by the behavior of its inhabitants. It is no use for the State of Israel today to insist that the city is too holy to relinquish, if the Palestinian 'strangers' (who belong to a different ethnic, religious and ideological group) are not treated with decency and respect.

Some of the worst atrocities in Jerusalem's tragic history have happened when people have felt so possessive about its holiness that they have put their yearning to own or to gain access to its great sanctity ahead of this concern for justice and equity. The holiness of Jerusalem is not simply a prize to be gained, but an imperative to righteous and compassionate action. The city must be an objective correlative on earth, of the justice of God. In many ways, Jews, Christians and Muslims have celebrated the holiness of Jerusalem in a remarkably similar fashion, but there is one striking difference about the Islamic conception of sacred space. In Hebrew, the word for 'holy' (*kaddosh*) means 'separate'. Jews traditionally celebrate the sanctity of objects by separating them from one another: milk from meat; the sabbath from the rest of the week; Jews from gentiles. The holiness of Jerusalem also was experienced as a series of graded separations. No Jew was allowed to enter the Temple area in biblical times if he had not undertaken the ritual purifications, which set him apart from the mortality and contamination of daily life. The Temple was designed as a series of courts, each more holy than the last, and each, therefore, banned to an increasing number of people. On the outer rim of holiness was the Court of the Gentiles: inscriptions banned non-Jews on pain of death from venturing any further into the Temple buildings. Next came the Court of Women, who were also excluded from the central sanctities of the Jewish world. Male Jews in a state of ritual purity could enter the Court of the Israelites and watch the ceremonies there, but they were forbidden to go into the Court of the Priests, who were the descendants of Aaron. No layman could enter the Cult Hall (*Hekhal*), which was served by the priests, and which led into the holiest place of all: the *Debir*, a dark empty room which was barred to all except the High Priest, who was himself only permitted entrance once a year on Yom Kippur.¹¹

Christians also cultivated an exclusive vision of Jerusalem's holiness. The Christian Byzantines, who governed Jerusalem from the fourth to the early seventh century, would not allow Jews to reside permanently in the holy city; the site of the Temple (destroyed by the Roman armies in 70 CE) was left in ruins as a symbol of Judaism's defeat; in the last years of Christian sovereignty, the Temple Mount became the city's garbage dump.¹² Western Christians were more murderously exclusive. When the Crusaders from Europe conquered Jerusalem in 1099, they slaughtered the 30,000 Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of the city in two days. An exultant eyewitness noted that on the Ḥaram al-Sharīf the blood came up to the knees of the horses.¹³ The conquest of Jerusalem was hailed by the learned scholar monks of Europe as the triumph of Christianity,¹⁴ the greatest event in world history since the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁵ It is a chilling reminder of the atrocity that can occur when the possession of Jerusalem's holiness is prized more than the equally sacred rights of its inhabitants.

Muslims, however, had a rather different conception of sacred geography, because in Islam there is no essential dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. The aim of the Muslim community was to achieve such integration and balance between human and divine, interior and exterior, that such a distinction becomes irrelevant. Everything must be made to realize its sacred potential. No one location, therefore, was holier than another—at least in principle. In practice (since Islam is such a practical faith) Muslims did regard three cities as centers of holiness, because they recognized that human

beings needed symbols that would help them to cultivate a sense of the sacred. The three cities were Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Nevertheless, there was never any attempt to cordon off the mosque from the rest of life. Even in Medina, there was no separation of the sacred from the profane, the spiritual from the sexual, the religious from the political, in the Prophet's day. Muhammad and his wives lived in small huts around the courtyard of the Prophet's mosque; public meetings to discuss social, political, military and religious matters were held there. The whole of life was to be brought into the ambit of holiness as an expression of *tawhīd*.¹⁶ It is a principle that continues to this day. Trees, which had been prohibited on the Jewish Temple Mount, are encouraged in a Muslim sanctuary, such as the Ḥaram al-Sharīf; mosques can be full of lights; birds can fly around during the communal prayer. The world must be invited inside the mosque, not left outside. These principles also prevailed in Muslim Jerusalem.

Even though the Muslim armies did not conquer Jerusalem until 638, some six years after Muhammad's death, Jerusalem had been holy to Muslims from the very beginning, since it had been the first *qibla*, the first direction of prayer. When Caliph 'Umar captured Jerusalem from the Byzantines, he was conscious of its sacred past, but he was faithful to the inclusive vision of Islam. Muslims did not attempt to exclude others from Jerusalem's holiness. While he was in the Holy Sepulchre Church on the day of the conquest, the time for prayer arrived, and 'Umar was invited by Patriarch Sophronius, who was escorting him round Jerusalem, to pray beside the tomb of Jesus. 'Umar refused. Had he not done this, he explained, Muslims would have erected a mosque on the site of the first Islamic prayer in Jerusalem; it was essential that the Christians retained possession of their holy place.¹⁷ Next 'Umar invited the Jews, who had been forbidden to reside permanently in the holy city for over five hundred years, to return to Jerusalem. Seventy Jewish families came from Tiberias and established a quarter for themselves at the foot of the Temple Mount, which now became the Ḥaram al-Sharīf.¹⁸ 'Umar had been horrified to find that the Christians had desecrated the site of the great Temple, built by the Prophets David and Solomon. He and his soldiers had cleared Herod's huge platform, which was piled high with charred masonry and stinking refuse, with their own hands,¹⁹ and 'Umar erected a simple wooden mosque at the southern end, on the site now occupied by the Aqṣā Mosque. In the light of the present conflict, it is ironic that this project of building and reclamation was greeted by Jews with gratitude and acclaim: some even hailed the Muslims, who had purified this sacred site, as the precursors of the Messiah.

The same generous pluralism is evident in the story of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem and his Ascension to Heaven from the Temple Mount. The first account of this profound mystical experience is found in the biography of Muhammad ibn Ishaq, written in the middle of the eighth century CE. It tells us that Muhammad was miraculously conveyed from Mecca to Jerusalem in the year 620, in company with Gabriel, the angel of revelation. When he arrived at the Temple Mount, the Prophet was greeted by all the great prophets of the past, who welcomed him into their midst, and Muhammad preached to them. Then, he began his ascent to the divine presence, through the seven heavens; at each stage he met and conversed with major prophets: with Jesus and John the Baptist, Moses and Aaron and Enoch, and, at the threshold of the divine sphere, he met Abraham, the father of Jews, Christians and Muslims.²⁰ Muhammad did not therefore arrive on the Temple Mount as a solitary worshipper, but was warmly greeted by his prophetic predecessors. The Islamic vision of Jerusalem was warmly affirmative of other traditions, as is the Qur'ān, which repeatedly states that the revelation to Muhammad does not cancel out the revelations

made to other prophets in the past, but is a continuation of a universal religious quest. Muhammad's Night Vision is a vision of harmony, as he and his fellow-prophets confirm one another's insights. The dramatic story of the Prophet's journey from Mecca to Jerusalem also shows Muhammad's longing to bring the Arabs from far-off Arabia, which had hitherto seemed off God's map, into the heart of the monotheistic tradition. It is the same yearning that was expressed in his choice of Jerusalem as the first *qibla*. We know that before the coming of Islam, Jews and Christians used to taunt the Arabs because God had not sent them a prophet or scripture in their own language. They felt left out of God's plan. By reaching out to Jerusalem, Muhammad and the first Muslims were seeking to end their lonely isolation and join the monotheistic family, certain of receiving a welcome. It is ironic to look back on this from the perspective of today's conflict, when, instead of being a city of unity and inclusiveness, Jerusalem has become one of the most bloodily contested and sectarian cities in the world.

It is also interesting that the Muslims, who pursued in the main a tolerant and inclusive policy in Jerusalem, maintained control of the city longer than either Jews or Christians, whose exclusive vision actually jeopardized their rule. In times of crisis, it is often healing to look back at our roots and discover from the wisdom of the past some lessons for the future. One of the great tragedies is that Jerusalem, the city of peace, should so often have been a city of war, atrocity and injustice—no more so than today. Far from replicating the harmony of the earthly paradise, as a holy city should do, Jerusalem is daily becoming an inferno of hatred and sectarian violence. When they lay claim to Jerusalem's sanctity, Jewish Israelis and Christian and Muslim Palestinians have to decide whether their celebration of Jerusalem's sanctity is to mean dispossession, ethnic cleansing, killing, suicide bombing, jealousy, injustice and exclusion, or whether it is to mean social justice, peace and concord. From the very earliest days of the city's history, the holiness of Jerusalem was seen as a summons to justice and compassion, to a recognition of the sacred rights of others. Today we need a vision like the Muslim vision, which does not deny the presence and devotion of others, but which honors their rights and celebrates plurality and coexistence as essential to the holiness of Jerusalem.

NOTES

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard J. Trask (New York, 1959); *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London, 1958), 1–37, 387–8.
2. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 382–5.
3. Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine: a political history from the Bar Kockhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Oxford, 1976), 185–204.
4. Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: one city, three faiths* (New York, 1996), 297.
5. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 8:3.
6. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3:37; 7:35; *First Principles*, 4:2:1; 4:1:3; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Proof of the Gospels*, Preface 2; 1:6:42; 3:2:10; 8:3:11–12:5.
7. Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Life of Constantine*, 3:27–36.
8. Meir Ben Dov, *The Western Wall* (Jerusalem, 1983), 148.
9. J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ, 1969), 164, 178; John Gray, 'Sacral Kingship in Ugarit', *Ugaritica*, 6 (1969), 295–8; John C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh, 1978), 102–7; Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: the ancient roots of apocalyptic faith* (New Haven, CT, 1993), 138.
10. Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 139.
11. M. Keliju, 1:6–9.
12. Guy Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems: a description of Syria and the Holy Land from AD 650–1500* (London, 1898), 141.

13. Raymund of Aguiles in August C. Krey (Ed.), *The First Crusade: the accounts of eye-witnesses and participants* (Princeton, NJ, 1921), 266.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Robert the Monk in Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (London, 1987), 140.
16. Clinton Bennett, 'Islam', in: Jean Holm with John Bowker (Eds), *Sacred Place* (London, 1994), 88–9.
17. Eutyches, *Annals*, 16–17.
18. Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634–1099*, trans. Ethel Broido (Cambridge, 1992), 70–2, 636–8.
19. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, 1139–43.
20. Muhammad ibn Ishaq, 'Sirat Rasul Allah', in: A. Guillaume (Trans. & Ed.), *The Life of Muhammad* (London, 1955), 186.

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