

SACRED SPACE I

“Sacred Space” is not a new concept or idea, it is something that is cherished by many religions, and which emphasize the importance of sacred spaces, places set aside as holy and used for worship, prayer, meditation, and rituals. Christians have churches, Jews have synagogues, Muslims have mosques, and Buddhists and Hindus have temples, and other religions have theirs as well. A sacred place is first of all a defined place, a space distinguished from other spaces.

However Sacred Spaces are not limited to the places set aside by those who participate in organized religion. Most of us can probably identify several places that are sacred for us, places where we like to return to connect with the spiritual world, and that which means the most to us in life. They can also be places where special memories have been made—often having shared them with friends or loved ones

What makes a place sacred? Some of the common characteristics of such places are natural beauty, peacefulness, places made holy by the sacrifices people have made there, news articles about D-Day refer to the “hallowed grounds” of the beaches of Normandy, or Ground Zero after the attacks of September 11th on the twin towers..

Faith and religious worship are traits common to all human cultures. As individuals and communities seek meaning beyond their daily lives, they project their faith onto their physical environment. They link faith to place. On a global scale, the world's major religions all recognize and revere sacred places, a few of them visited by millions of pilgrims.

An additional common thread among communities of faith is to regard the *journey* to a holy place as sacred: the act of traveling to a religious destination is itself an act of devotion. For example there is a sacred place or *pilgrimage* for five of the world's great religions: Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism.

Mecca: Islam: the Hajj. It is the duty of all able, adult Muslims to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives..

India: Hindu: The city most revered by Hindus embraces a broad curve of the great river Ganges in north-central India. A series of *ghats*, whose broad stone steps provide access from the cramped city streets to the Ganges, stretch for several miles along the river.

Spain: Christian: The Way of St. James. For centuries the faithful have travelled the Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St. James, from locations throughout western Europe to the ornate Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in north-western Spain. According to tradition the remains of St. James the Great, one of the apostles of Christ, were brought from Jerusalem in 813 and buried on the site now occupied by the Cathedral.

Jerusalem: Judaism: The Western Wall

Jews have made pilgrimages to the Western Wall for centuries. Many believe that prayers made at the Wall have heightened power because of the proximity to the site of the Second Temple. Each year more than a million written prayers are placed in the wall's seams and cracks.

Nepal: Lumbini: Buddhist

According to Buddhist legend, Siddhartha Gautama was born in the sixth century BCE in what is now southern Nepal, and became Gautama Buddha, founder of the Buddhist faith.

For countless centuries distant shrines have beckoned. The urge to demonstrate devotion, to seek meaning in sacred places, to step away from daily routines to pursue a deeper purpose, persists despite the advent of jet travel, digital technology, and global communication networks. That craving will, no doubt, stir the souls of generations to come.

Why Sacred Spaces? First, sacred spaces are places of communication with divinity, places where people go to meet the gods; a point of contact between gods and humans. The sacred place reveals the ideal order of things, which is associated with the perfect realm of divinity, with the values to which people should aspire.

Because it is a place of communication with divine beings, the sacred place is also a locus for divine power, which can transform human life. The nature of this transformation varies according to the religious tradition and reputation of the sacred space. In medieval Christianity, for example, many pilgrimages were inspired by a desire to witness or to experience miraculous cures. Lourdes remains a place of pilgrimage for millions seeking miraculous cures.

Sacred space is often a visual metaphor for a religious world. The connection between the ordering of space and the ordering of human life is a natural one. A life without purpose or meaning is often expressed in spatial metaphors: It is to be "lost," "disoriented," and "without direction." Because they are defined spaces, sacred places are natural maps that provide direction to life and a shape to the world.

In our context we are looking at the concept of "Sacred Space" as a place of encounter with the Divine, with God as Father, as Son and as Holy Spirit.

With your focus on meeting and spending time with God:

- **What places help you to be in touch with God?**
- **What places water your soul and restore your well-being?**
- **Do you make time to visit those places?**