

International Symposium  
*Conceptualizing Sacred Space(s): Perspectives from the Study of Culture*

May 23–25, 2018

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), University of Giessen  
Keynotes by Prof. Birgit Meyer (Utrecht) and Prof. Michael Stausberg (Bergen)

Recent events such as the political struggle and legal disputes over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in the United States have powerfully moved the issue of the “sacredness” of space/place/territory into the center of public attention in America and beyond. Raising awareness about the “desacralization” of “sacred sites” as well as the potential contamination of water, Native American groups were joined by environmental activists worldwide in their public fight against the pipeline’s routing over the territory of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. This nexus of collective imagination, space and social praxis invites a series of key questions concerning the construction and deconstruction of “sacred space” as well as notions of “the sacred”. Moreover, struggles over spatial configurations of the sacred are often closely related to key concerns in the study of culture and connected to issues of power, ownership, authority, identity, mediation, political claims over territory and/or social practice(s).

This symposium promotes the concept of “sacred space(s)” as a point of entry for bringing together recent theoretical work on space and place with the study of culture and the study/anthropology of religion. Furthermore, the symposium explores the changing, and at times conflicting, imaginations of the “sacred” and their role in the making and unmaking of specific spatial configurations and features in past and present contexts. The goal of the symposium is twofold: first, it aims at fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue in the study of spatial(izing) formations of the “sacred” and its cultural dynamics. Second, by focusing on the multiple layers, inner frictions and dynamics of “sacred space(s)”, it attempts to challenge an analytical vocabulary that is based on conventional dichotomies such as religious/secular, traditional/modern or sacred/profane.

Placing “sacred space(s)” at the center of our symposium allows us to study religious phenomena within concrete spatial configurations from several disciplinary angles (e.g. archaeology, art history, study of religion, ethnography, theology, history, study of literature, social sciences, economics) and to address a broad range of subjects. Making theories of space fruitful for the study of religion and vice versa allows us to develop fresh analytical perspectives on established fields of study, such as pilgrimages, sacral architecture and buildings, ritual places and the mediation of the “sacred”. At the same time, however, it also enables us to develop new questions with regard to issues such as the (contested) place of religion(s) in colonial spaces, power and access to the “sacred”, imagined (religious) geographies, religion and migration, aesthetics and experience of space in sacral buildings (temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, etc.), religious spatial imagination and spatial concepts such as hell or underworlds.

We invite proposals on both conceptual papers and more empirically oriented studies that discuss the (un)making of “sacred space(s)” as well as the spatial constructions of “the sacred” and processes of (de-)sacralization over time and space. Among the topics we would like to discuss are the following:

- Imaginations of the “sacred” in specific places/spaces
- Production of “space” through specific notions of the “sacred”/”sacredness”; production of “sacredness” through specific spatial configurations
- Emergence, transitions, transformations of “sacred spaces”
- Desecration, destruction, conflict and “sacred space/s”

- The “aesthetics” of “sacred spaces” across various religious, cultural and social contexts
- Media and “sacred space/s”
- Representations of “sacred space/s” in literature and film
- The politics of “sacred space/s”; gender and “sacred spaces”
- The role of (religious) communities in the production of space (public space, “sacred” space, memory sites)
- The roles of “sacred space/s” in contemporary societies
- Processes of (de-)sacralization beyond (institutionalized) religion (for instance in the field of sports), the notion of a “return” of the “sacred”, politicization of “sacred spaces”, fundamentalism, “public religion”
- Heuristic value of the concept of “sacred space” for the study of culture
- History and meaning of the concept “sacred space” in individual disciplines and interdisciplinary scholarship
- Heuristic tools and methodologies for the study of “sacred space/s” (e.g., scholarship in sound studies, material culture, art history, architecture, design studies, etc.
- The concept of “sacred space” and its relation to other notions such as “lieu”, “espace”, “ritual site”, “Kultplatz”, “Sakralraum”

We invite proposals for papers. Please send an abstract of no more than 250 words and a short CV by Nov. 1, 2017 to Jens Kugele ([jens.kugele@gcsc.uni-giessen.de](mailto:jens.kugele@gcsc.uni-giessen.de)) and Katharina Stornig ([katharina.stornig@gcsc.uni-giessen.de](mailto:katharina.stornig@gcsc.uni-giessen.de)). Participants will be notified by mid-November.

The symposium will take place from May 23–25, 2018 at the GCSC, University of Giessen, Germany. We are currently in the process of securing external funding for our symposium. Pending on approval, travel costs and accommodation will be reimbursed.

Organized by Doris Bachmann-Medick, Mina Ibrahim, Jens Kugele and Katharina Stornig on behalf of the [GCSC-Research Group “Culture & Religion”](#)  
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