

On sacred places:

Whether or not it is a single organism (Gaia), I believe the entire Earth is sacred. Either it is all sacred, or none of it is sacred. I prefer the former.

If all the Earth is sacred, what should we make of it when some speak of particular high places as sacred?

I believe high places in general, and numerous specific high places, are good places for humans to make contact with the sources of power and thereby to gain special benefits for themselves, others and their communities. But those places are not “sacred” in the sense that I understand the word. “Sacred” things are set aside and restricted to some. The Mount Athos monastic peninsula in Greece, where women are forbidden to go, is one example among many.

High places ought to be and remain accessible to any who choose to make the often considerable effort to be on their summits.

from Cry for Luck:

Yurok woman named Ella Norris described its significance in these words:

Red Mountain? Doctor Rock? That's our Holy Land. Everything we done, we went there, for prayer. They'd go there for different things. If you wanted to be a good stick player, or a gambler, [or whatever]. Different places, too. Not just right on Doctor Rock. Doctor Rock is just a place for Indians, for a woman or man that wants to be a doctor. Just like a white man doctor [there are different kinds of doctor]. Some of them is for surgery, [and] some of them is for something else. Well that's the same thing. They go there [to Doctor Rock], and they get their degree. Not only for Indian doctor. Some of them got a special prayer for boils, or for choke, and some of them used to get poisoned. Their stomach would swell up. They got a special song for that. Or a prayer. Or your eyes get sore. Or just a million things. They learn that up there. (interview at Crescent City, November 13, 1979)

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We have previously talked at length about the placatory spirit which permeated the World Renewal rituals and even the medicine making of individuals. The Indians were apologetic toward the animals whose flesh they borrowed, and they were sorry for corrupting the world in general. They saw themselves as the weakest and sole polluting element in a world that was otherwise "perfectly clean." But crying is not a gesture of weakness nor even of shame, so much as a movement toward ecstasy.

And if you ever have the chance to see a Deerskin Dance or a Jump Dance in person, and the men seem to be crying, this is what it means: The singer is not only asking for help, but also being transformed. For the brief duration of a song, he is becoming more like a spirit-person himself.

FROM:

[https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Introductory_Anthropology/Introduction_to_Anthropology_\(OpenStax\)/13%3A_Religion_and_Culture/13.03%3A_Symbolic_and_Sacred_Space](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Introductory_Anthropology/Introduction_to_Anthropology_(OpenStax)/13%3A_Religion_and_Culture/13.03%3A_Symbolic_and_Sacred_Space)

Religious Places

Anthropologists distinguish between **space**, an unmarked physical field on which imagination or action can occur, and **place**, a location that has sociocultural meaning(s) attached. Many religions and religious practices are defined by sacred places that serve as settings for **hierophany**, the manifestation of the sacred or divine. Commonly, the sense of the sacred derives from the prior history and the use of a place. In most religions, sacred places are marked by other symbols. A Jewish home is identified as a special religious place. One way of marking this sacred place is by attaching mezuzahs, small casings containing a tiny parchment with a verse

from the Torah to external and internal doorposts. Placing these mezuzahs at the points of entry mark the place inside as holy, sacred, and set apart. Like most religious places, the Jewish home is a densely symbolic place.

Religious places are part of the built environment, or places that people create as representations of their beliefs. Religious scholar Mircea Eliade focuses on religious places in his work *The Sacred and Profane* (1959), arguing that one “becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane” (11). He identifies three characteristics associated with sacred places:

- *Every sacred place is marked by a threshold*, which separates the two spaces, the sacred inside and the profane outside. It marks a passageway and a new mode of being: “The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier.” It is guarded in various ways and it is an “object of great importance” (25).
- *Every sacred place memorializes a hierophany*, or sacred event, by including an area within the sacred place that is most holy—usually where something sacred has occurred in the past. This is like an umbilical cord (Eliade calls it an *axis mundi*) that connects practitioner with deity and/or spirit, memorializing the occurrence of something special that happened (or happens) here. In many religious places, there will be an altar or some sort of commemoration in this spot.
- *Every sacred place represents an imago mundi*, an image

or microcosm of the world as seen from the religious perspective

. In some religious traditions, sacred places will be decorated with reminders of what is most valued by that tradition, using various types of artworks. In Catholic churches, for example, paintings of the events associated with the crucifixion of Christ, known as the stations of the cross, remind believers of Christ's sacrifice.

Eliade's characteristics of sacred places can be useful tools for beginning to understand the role of a place in a religion or a religious practice that is unfamiliar to us. They prompt us to look at the place through a believer's eyes: What happens here? What are the meanings associated with the different parts of this place? What are the proper ways to enter and exit and show respect? Because religion is heavily symbolic, we must strive to understand these places from inside the religious belief system.
