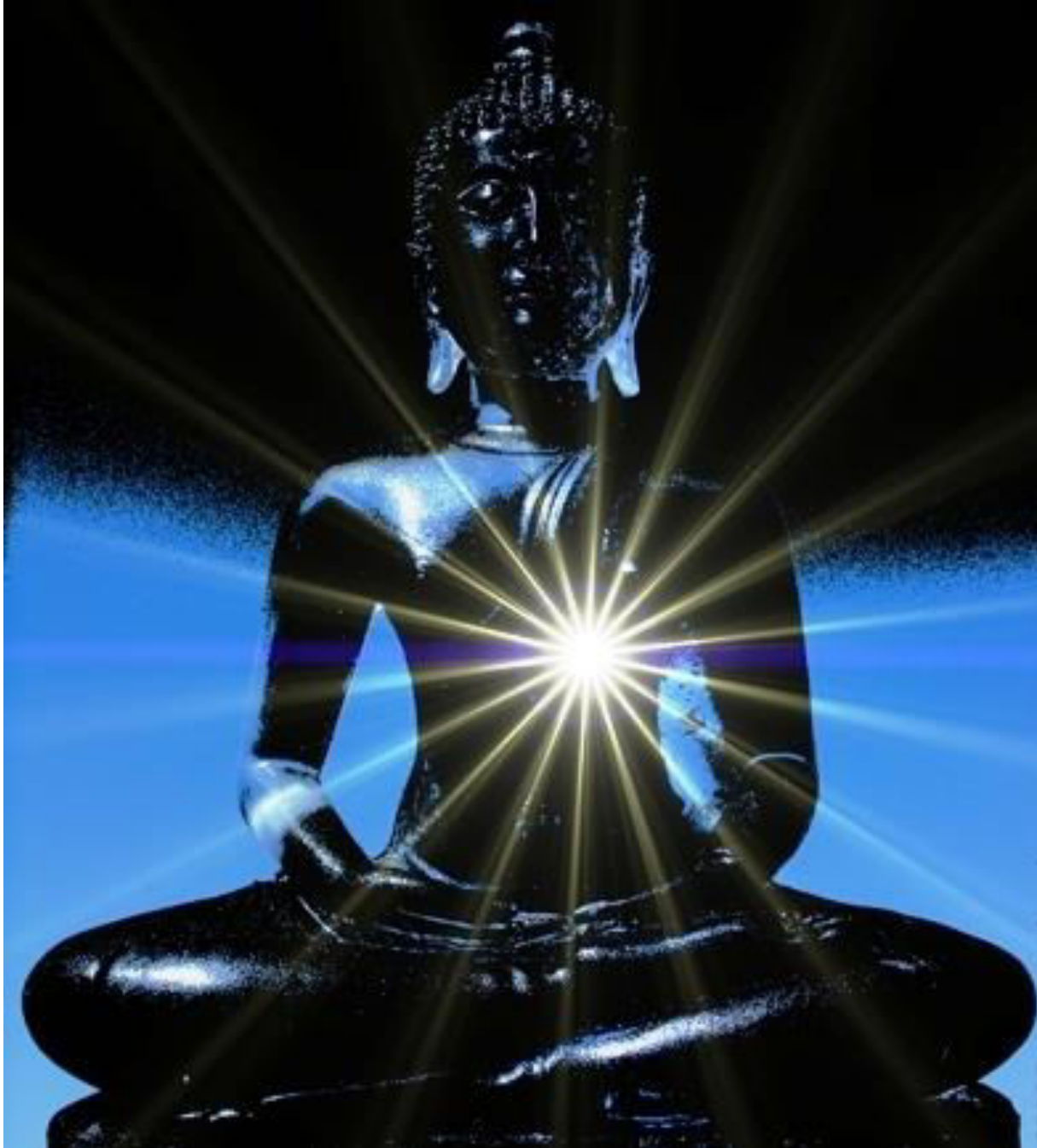


SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF LIGHT

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Abstract. Light is fundamental to religious experience, and its symbolism pervades the geography of sacred landscapes. As sun, fire, ray, color, or attribute of being and place, light serves as a bridge between interpretation of landscape and religious experience. To see the light cast upon places orients believers in otherwise undifferentiated space, grounding them in context of home. As sacred places are created, an inner light outweighs outer darkness, and a spiritual journey commences.

Keywords: hierophany, light, religious symbolism, sacred landscape

Life's universal cycles ebb and flow through tides of darkness and light. However varied in interpretation, light is envisioned as the essence of life, whereas darkness echoes inevitable death. In biblical creation. Fiat Lux eradicates darkness from the face of the abyss. It is no accident that "seeing the light" heralds emergence from a murky ignorance. Absence of light and dark precludes biological existence, and light may have stirred life from the primordial ooze. Shelter is in part a structured differentiation between light and dark, and the interfacing of the two is integral to notions of place. Manifestations or evocations of light in particular may be associated with holiness and are critical aspects of sacred place.

Understanding how specific environmental objects, landscapes, and structures are invested with holiness is critical to the geography of religion (Kong 1990). Intrinsic to religion and associated with its spectrum of sacred rites are sound, smell, color, and light (Fickeler 1962). To many, the phenomenon of light bridges the interpretation of landscape and religious experience. In this article I first consider the diverse expressions of light and then explore its role in the experience realms of the sacred.

The presence of light in the manifestation of the holy spans multiple religions. Light, through presence or absence, sets apart the sacred from the profane and, in its cognitive, aesthetic, and symbolic forms, reveals and delineates the world, fosters sensual and emotional awareness, and gives life a literal focus and meaning (Tuan 1978; Kepes 1986). Color, as affirmation of light, reveals and defines relative purity, sanctity, and supremacy (Fickeler 1962). Pervading both religious landscapes and movements, light is fundamental to religious experience, evoking varied responses and representations both among and within particular belief systems.

In at least four ways light is integral to sacred landscapes: as the sun or some other celestial body; as fire, the sun on earth; as light rays or beams and color; and as an attribute of sacred beings and places. Each of these affects how a local geography is perceived.



Figure: 1 Le Mont Saint-Michel



Figure: 2 Sun Temple in Konark



Figure:3 Machu Picchu

Celestial Bodies

The sun is the supreme cosmic power. Denoting centrality of existence, it is the heart of being. To Amerindians it is the universal spirit and the focus of the Sun Dance. The sun is the light of Buddha and the "eye of the universe" for Hindus; it is the all-seeing and all-knowing eye of Allah to Muslims. The sun is a symbol of divine will and guidance for Jews and the Sun of righteousness for Christians (Cooper 1978). Helios (sun) worship became the fastest-growing cult in the Roman Empire, threatening Christianity in its infancy. In pagan times, France's Mont Saint Michel was known as Dinsul, the holy Mount of the Sun (Mann 1993)

Ancient monuments like Stonehenge were constructed as solar and lunar observatories; the prediction of celestial activity built social order by synchronizing sentient beings with celestial rhythms (Sharkey 1975)- The geometry of solar observation is remarkably cross-cultural. A sacred Greek stone called the benben was first worshipped at Heliopolis, where the sun's initial rays fell. The obelisk evolved as not only a symbolic tree of life and axis mundi but also a literal finger of the sun (Lurker 1994) (Figure 1). Temples at Konarak in India and at Macchu Picchu in Peru are well-known earthly artifacts dedicated to the sun.

The sun is also fountainhead for a global array of divinities. Amaterasu, sun goddess of Japan, Inti, sun god of the Incas, and Maui, son of the sun in Polynesia are but three of a long list of solar deities. A pantheon of the pagan Baits, Russians, Slavs, and Siberian and North American tribal peoples focused on sun goddesses (Baumgartner 1984; McCrickard 1990). In Gaelic, the word for sun is grian or griene, from Dia Griene, or sun goddess. Ancient times witnessed sun vigils and bonfires to foster the sun's



Figure: 4 A Holy Well in Ireland



Figure: 5 God of Nataraj

appearance. Water was often employed to catch rays, and in Ireland even today many holy wells and springs are associated with Griene (McCrickard 1990). Planetary symbolism, in a lovely Copernican irony, was ultimately adopted by the Christian Church, and the sun came to be associated with Christ. In the Western catechism, Christmas Day was fixed on the Feast of Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun (Warner 1983). Dionysius the Areopagite saw the sun as a divine illumination, the irradiance of universal origins (Duby 1981). To Dante, the sun was without peer as a symbol of God (Cooper 1978). Planetary symbolism, in a lovely Copernican irony, was ultimately adopted by the Christian Church, and the sun came to be associated with Christ. In the Western catechism, Christmas Day was fixed on the Feast of Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun (Warner 1983). Dionysius the Areopagite saw the sun as a divine illumination, the irradiance of universal origins (Duby 1981). To Dante, the sun was without peer as a symbol of God (Cooper 1978).

By the Middle Ages, the moon, perceived as a life-nourishing feminine force, was associated with the Virgin Mary. Mary, through her lunar grace, interceded between penitents and Christ the Savior. And through her moonbeams, she deflected the purifying solar light of Christ upon them (Warner 1983).

With its waxing and waning, the moon is the embodiment of earthly rhythm, universal becoming, and cyclical time (Cooper 1978). Buddhist, Jewish, and Islamic calendars are lunar, and in the Muslim world, the crescent moon stands for divinity and sovereignty. According to the Upanishads, the moon is the door to heaven and changes in concert with the vital breath of those who leave the world.

Fire

Fire is another expression of light that is significant in sacred landscapes. Fire symbolizes creation, destruction, transformation, transcendence, purification, and renewal. Fire, as the dwelling place of the Great Spirit, is sacred to the medicine lodge of many Amerindians. In a Parsee temple, as in the candle flames of a Catholic church, fire is the sacred center; it burns as divine light in the human soul. Fire is often seen not only as sacred but also as the manifestation of all-powerful divinity (Cooper 1978).

In the Vedic religion of the Aryans, sacred fire was both focus and vehicle for ritual activity. Construction of a fire altar replicated the construction of the world by Prajapati, the primordial creator. The Vedic fire altar is an imago mundi, with the fire of the god Agni rising heavenward, passing from darkness to light, from death to immortality (Cooper 1978; Eck 1981). By its orientation eastward to the rising sun, the fire altar signals a new beginning.

In Hinduism, fire ultimately represents transcendental light and knowledge. As a ring of fire around Shiva, the god of destruction and regeneration, fire and its illumination symbolize either the cosmic cycle of creation and dissolution or Sam-sara, the earthly cycle of birth and death (Figure 2). Fire can also be viewed as a horrific aspect of Hindu avatars—the earthly appearances of gods—Kali, embodiment of the force of destruction, or Shiva's wife Durga, a protectress with warlike dimensions. More positively, it can represent the Puranic god Krishna's vital fire residing in all living things.

Once established as organized religions, Judaism and Christianity ultimately rejected the fire cults of the competition, Mithras and Zoroaster. Nevertheless, Christian worship remained filled with the symbolism of fire and light, and, like ancient Roman temples, all churches contained a perpetually burning altar fire. Subsequently in Western Europe, fire was given a significant role: to instill and reinforce fear of purgatory and hell through public burning of witches, heretics, and others presumed deserving of the consequences of God's wrath (Goudsblom 1994). All

Though fire also appears as a sign of divine power through which the Lord is revealed to earthly beings, it sometimes rages as divine anger.

Related to fire is lightning, historically perceived as evidence of celestial power. Consequential devastation or conflagration on earth validated fears of a heavenly scourge (Krupp 1991)- Held in supreme spiritual regard by Christians and Jews alike, the gift of God's Commandments were delivered to Moses in the midst of smoke, thunder, and lightning.

Light and Color

Light symbolizes holiness and is a common element in sacred visions. For example, the Marian apparitions at Fatima, Lourdes, and San Damiano were all accompanied by visions of bright light (Zimdars-Swartz 1991). Christian history is replete with circumstances in which light and color in brilliant, radiant, and lustrous glory disclose events and messages from beings supreme. The pervasiveness of dramatic light and color in Christian visionary experience led to a theology of light and color. Much Christian discussion centers on the meaning of these phenomena, which ultimately make manifest humanity's encounter with the divine (Benz, 1977).

Christians described conversion as illumination. The presence of light proved the eternal presence of an immaterial God. The Christian process of becoming and appreciating this pervasive force involved their extricating themselves from worldly desires and stepping beyond into the light (Sennet 1994). In the Scripture, divine words were Logos, words upon which divine light had been cast. Natural light, deftly manipulated, reveals, clarifies, and structures emanations of the divine in sacred places. At once awed and mystified by light and shadow, supplicants are inspired to commune with the holy. In the Christian realm, the sacred is evoked through the glitter of jewels and Byzantine mosaics, the luminosity of gold-leaf embellishments, the soft, rich sheen of marble, and the heady colors of artistic endeavors. In many of the best-loved paintings of Velazquez and El Greco, it is lambent beams that most draw the eye.

Twelfth-century cathedral technology of vaulting and flying buttresses permitted the inclusion of enough light to present a new and kinder concept of humanity and its relationship to the realm of the holy (Anderson 1985). Jerusalem, the fabulous bejeweled Celestial City of the Book of Revelation, was to be replicated in the cathedral (Duby 1981). In the Gothic church, the clerestory derived from the French *clair*, meaning light. Sunbeams were permitted to enhance the darker nave below (Whone 1990). Richly colored stained-glass windows dramatized the effect of incoming light, so that each heavenly beam was a divine lancet filled with the promise of solace and grace. Such inspiring light effected the transition of a secular structure into a sacred sphere; figuratively it created heaven on earth (Walter 1988; McDannell and Lang 1990).

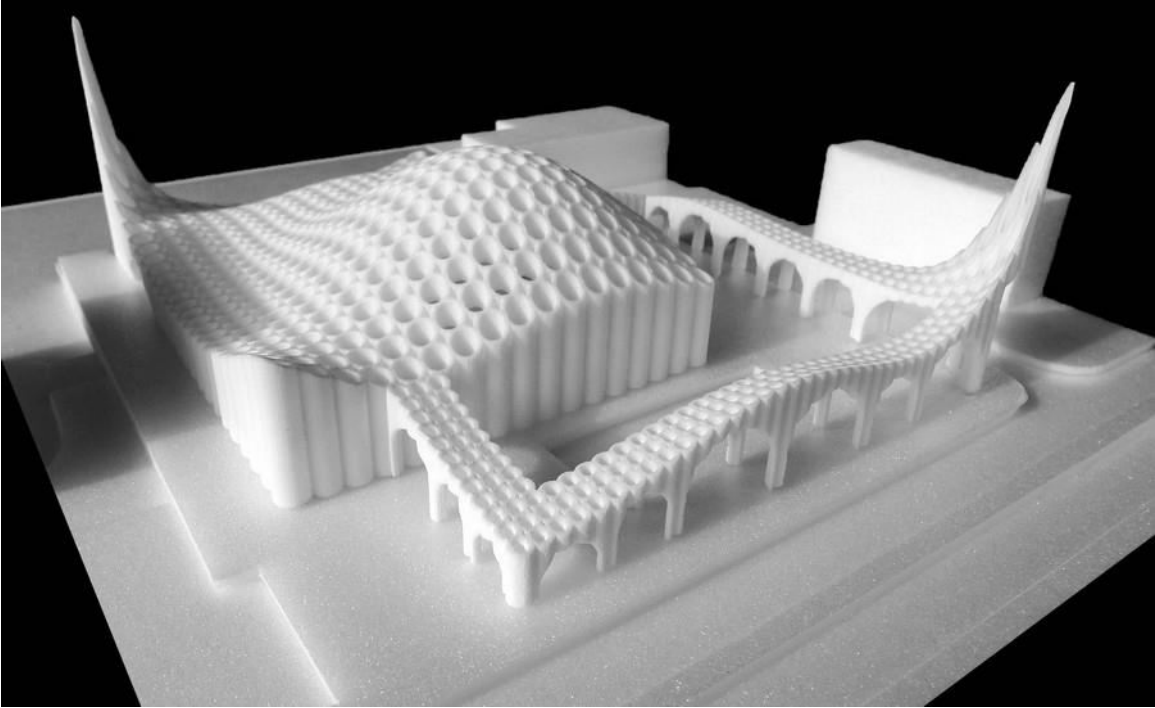


Figure: 6 A Central Mosque of Pristina

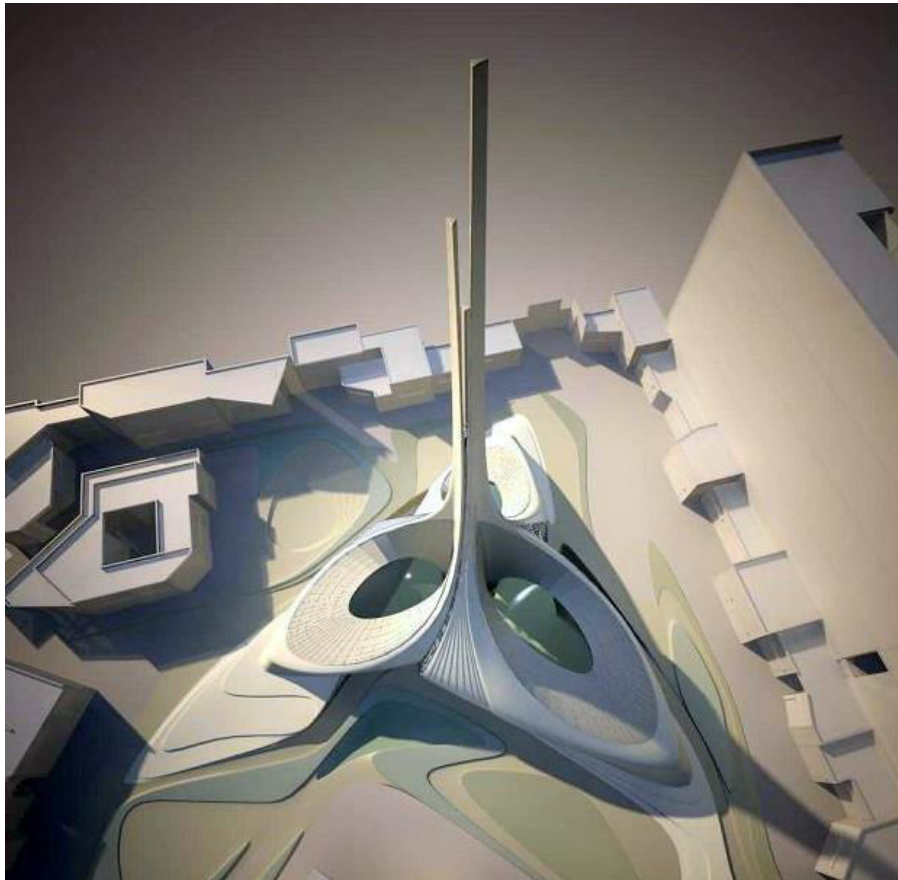


Figure: 6(B) Courtesy of Zaha Hadid



Figure: 6 C Moschee (minaret) din Isfahan (Iran)

Light, in symbol and substance, is fundamental to Islam and the essence of Islamic architecture. In the twelfth century, a special school of *israq*, or illumination, based on the symbolism of light, was founded by the Persian Sufi Suhrawardi (Nasr1987). Light is identified with the joy of the soul, with the functioning of the intellect, and as an ordering and sacralizing principle. Light defines space and infuses it with the Word; Word as light reverberates and sanctifies. A mosque's minaret is called *al-manarah*, the place of light. Islamic architectural masterpieces such as the Taj Mahal and the great mosques of Cordoba or Isfahan are, meaningfully, crystallizations of light that emit geometric clarity and intellectual lucidity (Figure 3).



Figure: 7 Tajmahal

Light can be conceived as yellow and gold or white and silver, the most prominent sacred colors. Yellow is the main ceremonial color of Buddhism, and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are often replicated in gold (Figure 4). White, as a combination of all spectral colors, is pure light and is a popular color for Buddhist stupas, monasteries, and other sacred structures. In Islam, the white turban is a badge of the faithful, many grave markers are white, and pilgrims to Mecca are required to wear white garments, symbols of humility, unity, and purity (Fickeler 1962). Purity in Christian culture is symbolized in white vestments, wedding garments, or, especially, baptismal gowns, as original sin is removed.

Attribute of Beings and Places

Light is an attribute of sacred personages, frequently portrayed with a nimbus, or a mandorla—an almond-shaped halo that surrounds the body, or, like the Buddha, with an *ushnisha*—a flame of invisible light that represents enlightenment (Cooper 1978; Walker 1988). Christians claim that Jesus Christ is the Light of the World and depict him in art with a halo. The Koran states that "Allah is the light of the heavens and of the earth." Islam is the light of Allah, who illuminates the world; it is divine knowledge. One of Allah's ninety-nine names is *al-Nur* (The Light), a name of "Essence" also used in concert with *al-Qaddus* (The Holy) and *al-Haqq* (The Truth) (Danner 1988).

In Hinduism, *Surya* is mentioned in the Vedas as creator of the universe. In contemporary Hinduism, he is linked to other gods with celestial associations. *Ar-juna*, the god of sunrise, is *Surya*'s charioteer, who drives him triumphantly through the heavens (Jansen 1993). Even Hinduism's sacred cow has solar associations. The Sanskrit word for cow is *go*, which also means ray of dawn or ray of spiritual

illumination. The cow goddess Aditi began as a divinity of infinite light; later, in the Surya cult, she was imagined to be the sun itself, whose nourishing light was her milk (Lodrick 1981).

Sacred places are also cast as centers of light. For more than 600 years the Heavenly City of Beijing served as the Celestial Capital and cosmo - magical center of the Middle Kingdom (Samuels and Samuels 1989). Although much changed in modern times, heroic rhetoric of "red sun rising" in reference to China's capital reflects its inherent cosmogonic quality (deBeaufort 1978).

Varanasi (Banares), on the sacred Ganges River, is also known as Kashi, or the City of Light. It is the embodiment of Shiva. Here, the Unga of Shiva, phallic symbol of creation, rose from the dark netherworld as a fiery axis mundi to pierce the highest heavens. Kashi is not simply the place of that event, it is the event itself (Eck 1981). Kashi, embodying the world, is the center of everything and incorporates all. Kashi is light, and through its brilliance, truth and vision are revealed. The transcendent light of Kashi is the Sada Shiva—Eternal Shiva—or Brahman, the One Ultimate Reality sought fervently by the totality of existence (Eck 1983).



Figure: 8 Ganga Aarti Varanasi



Figure: 9 Saptha Rushi Aarathi at Kasi Viswanath Mandir Varanasi

Hierophany and Home

A hierophany is a manifestation of the sacred. Everything is said to be capable of revealing its divinity, through hierophany, to the seeker of the sacred (Eliade 1987). A hierophany stands apart from the milieu; it is qualitatively different. As cosmic immutability and its divine manifestations have waned with scientific rationalism and technological progress, sense of place has also frayed, fueling the need to find orientation and meaning in the chaos of an "explained" positivist universe (Bunkse 1990).

Sacred persons, in particular, hope to escape the endless relativity of the profane world and bask in the certitude of the sacred as "preeminently the real" (Eliade 1987, 28). This has been a major influence on convents, monasteries, ashrams, and other places devoted to full-time seeking of the light. If the sacred does not reveal itself, it is provoked to do so. In the absence of hierophanous manifestation, sanctity is constructed, not as a human work but as a reproduction of the gods (Eliade 1987).

Fire is a critical modality in evoking the sacred. Whether shining in Paradise or burning in Hell, fire is the one phenomenon with decided attributes of both good and evil. Fire is one of the four elements, a part of universal explanation (Bachelard 1964). Fire altars, such as the Vedic, take possession of territory, are used to conjure requisite deities, and ensure communion with the holy. Here, sacred place is established as home; home, according to Dovey (1985), is demarcated territory with physical and symbolic boundaries that define the dialectic between order and chaos.

When construction of a traditional Hindu home has been completed, a fire altar is set up in a central room, which is perceived as the domestic hearth or womb. Sacred cow dung is burned, and offerings of ghee and rice ritualize insemination. The entire process constitutes a kind of creative act, a

ritual return to origins (Khambatta 1989). Fire altars serve to center and orient their devotees in the spatiotemporal landscape of the sacred and the profane, defining sacred place as home and home as sacred place.

Icons are essential to the Orthodox Church and home, reminding believers of a supreme presence. Light is indivisible from those icons, even from those that possess no single light source. According to the Bible, God's Kingdom is permeated by divine light, and no shadows are cast. Among the artistic virtues of working in the medium of gold leaf is that light appears to radiate from the icon itself (Hart 1991). When the icon is placed within a room, often in a corner, it is sacramental, and a lamp burns before it. Russians refer to this as "the glowing corner" (Cross 1988).

Oil lamps and candles can delineate the light of intimacy and refuge (Bachelard 1969). They keep vigil on sacred horizons, as beacons signaling presence of the holy and transcendence of the mundane. Such luminants symbolize eternal light and infinite truth, ordering attributes of spiritual home in the relative chaos of secular experience.

Darkness and Light

A sacred place is an ordinary place made extraordinary through ritual (Lane 1988). In sacred places, material phenomena are dematerialized and worldly substance becomes diaphanous as spirituality pervades and religious experience is nourished. In the process, outer darkness vanishes in the wake of inner light.

Plato, in the Republic, stressed the spiritually cleansing effect of passing from darkness to light. For Plato, discovery of the true source of being was made possible by departing the shadowy cave of human affairs and entering into the archetypal light, a realm of luminous knowledge, truth, and goodness. According to Hannah Arendt (1958), the transference of focus from private to public in antiquity is paralleled by the medieval tension between the darkness of daily life and the illuminated splendor of the sacred realm.

Light and dark are integral to numerous creation myths. Creation entails setting into motion related energies and constitutes a sacred order or hierarchy. Perhaps, as with the Zuni, an upward journey between antipodes of dark and light reveals the world. Or perhaps the trip is downward. An ancient Gnostic text attributes creation to the loss of divinity. By contrast, the shining of divine light into darkness constitutes a descent, with darkness temporarily absorbing sparks from that light (Maclagan 1977)-

The interplay of light and darkness within religious structures is intrinsic to an evocation of the holy. The dialectic of light and shadow in the Romanesque and the mystic luminosity and kaleidoscopic colors of the Gothic are intended to inspire ecstatic experience of place (Walter 1988). But some believers, especially those in sorrow or remorse, wish to pray or mourn in dim privacy, because darkness can also provide a sense of the holy. Revelations from the soul might best be expressed in the hidden world of darkness.

That darkness often signifies danger and evil, that light represents safety and goodness, is apparent enough in literature—children's and adults' alike (Brooker-Gross 1981; Porteous 1987). Darkness also implies death. As the common saying implies, when we sleep we are "dead to the world." Light manifests cosmic creation and is associated with consciousness, enlightenment, glory, splendor, and joy. Darkness envelops at the Fall, and light is regained upon access to Paradise. Yet, for many things, darkness is essential. It is the shade of privacy and inner contemplation. Embryonic life initiates in darkness, and the numinous is perpetuated through its mystery and awe (Tuan 1978).

From a spatiopsiritual perspective, to reach the light is to attain the center of existence. But sacred space is no single fact or attribute; it is multivalent. For the Greeks, winds from the east or southeast were called Eurus, the name linked with brightness; the west wind was Zephyrus, meaning the dark. To the Romans, the east was Oriens, meaning to rise, whereas the west was Occidens, meaning to fall (Krupp 1991). At sunset the great west rose window at Rheims, which portrays the death of the Virgin, becomes a consuming ball of fire evoking the end of time (Cowen 1979). In the Pure Land school of Buddhism, however, the cosmic Buddha Amitaba, "having unlimited light," dwells in an orange-red paradise in the western realm of the setting sun.

In Taoist tradition, the intermingling of light and dark is the tangible expression of balancing the harmonizing, universal elements of yin and yang. Christ can be related to the Tao because He is the Light in a world of darkness. An expansion of light and dark is a metaphor for the process of redemption or growth of Christ-consciousness (Wessels 1990).

Spiritual Journeys

In Christian temporality, the End terminates a journey from the Beginning, a spiritual sojourn between dark and light, lost and found, away and home. Master masons aligned medieval cathedrals from sunrise westward, away from a gnomon. On the day of the saint to whom the cathedral was dedicated, sunrise behind the east altar charted the long axis of the nave (Mann 1993). This illuminated, sacred path emerged as a linear hierophany, a metaphor for life passage and spiritual journey culminating within the church structure and ultimately illuminating the inner sanctum of God.

Reflecting fundamentally medieval visions, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* presents a Christian mythology that has had lasting influence. Dante and Virgil depart the darkness of Earthly Hell's enmity and despair. Their journey to the radiance of God's throne, in the highest celestial sphere above the mountain of Purgatory, culminates in joyous fulfillment in a brilliant complement of human love and love for God.

Medieval Sufism held that the soul, deriving from the luminous land of Yemen, is later imprisoned in a dark well in the far west. Subsequent to this occidental exile in darkness, the soul is increasingly illuminated on its sacred journey eastward to its spiritual home in Yemen (Schimmel 1991).

Pilgrimage is a sacred journey with earthly and spiritual pathways. Ideally, it involves a comforting or enlightening transformation of the self (Bhardwaj 1987). In earlier times, the search for sacred center often entailed an arduous and even dangerous journey. Culmination at the sacred site saw the bonding of similarly inclined strangers, who had liberated themselves from both perils of travel and trials of everyday life (Tuan 1986). Even in the modern era, an important element of pilgrimage is leaving behind the mundane or familiar, as pilgrims approach the divine to embrace an alien cosmos (Tuan 1984).

In his study of Mount Sinai, Joseph Hobbs (1995) notes that, historically, one of the most powerful driving forces of pilgrimage was the desire to experience places where holy people had been and where miraculous events had occurred. He documents numerous examples of radiance-endowed spiritual metamorphosis deriving from these ventures. The most frequently visited site on Mount Sinai remains that of the burning bush.

In Europe, pilgrimage peaks during the long, warm days of summer, and candle lighting is a common occurrence. The shrine-lined route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain is known as the Milky Way (Nolan and Nolan 1989). Around the world, sacred mountains from Fuji to Kilimanjaro are scaled to reach the summit at sunrise. And the phenomenon of light is expressed in a myriad of ways at Mecca and at sacred sites in the Holy Land.

In Hindu India the ultimate pilgrimage is to Varanasi. There, at the Mani-karnika cremation ground, a sacred fire has been tended by the untouchable Doms for a seeming eternity. Cremation rites are called "the last sacrifice" and structurally are associated with fire sacrifices in India. Through immolation as an offering to the fire god Agni, the dead acquire the form and signs of Shiva, his crescent moon and his trident. To believers, death is a time of illumination, vision, and insight. In luminosity, the transition is not from life to death but from life to life (Eck 1981,1983).

Conclusion

Through these few examples, it is clear that light is expressed and understood in religions and belief systems in innumerable ways. Existing only in relation to darkness, it is prominent in hierophanous manifestation or provocation. As a centering force, it denotes home and thereby separates sacred from profane and provides a locus for spiritual journeys. The phenomenon of light clarifies sacred space and is vital to the experience of the holy.

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Appendix photo



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