

## Introduction

In this Element, we analyze sacred space: what it is, how people make it and use it, and the limits of sacralization. The discussion that follows is arranged as a sequence of nine related points. We discuss our reasoning and give examples in each section.

Perhaps counterintuitively, our grounding argument is that no universal statement about sacred space is sustainable. In stating this, we do not claim originality, as Jonathan Z. Smith made the case cogently decades ago. He wrote, “there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational ones. Sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement” (Smith, 1987: 104). We follow Smith’s reasoning and expand the concept of emplacement to include bodies, senses, and the virtual world. We also draw on his description in that same work of ritual as “a mode of paying attention,” analyzing sacred space as something such attention produces (Smith, 1987: 103).

We define the sacred as the connection between humanity and “extrahuman” figures – the ghosts, reanimated ancestors, nature spirits, gods, and souls that people attempt to interact with in some form in every society. Sacred space is made different from regular (or “profane”) space in its articulation with loss and memory (for example, in memorials to the dead), reverence (in worship), fear (in taboo restrictions), and fortune (in expressions of *mana*, spiritual power, blessing and luck). In setting this frame for our exploration, we might seem to be building a universal argument, but in the following pages we will keep the focus on the partiality of understandings of sacred space: your sacred space might not be mine, and vice versa. Moreover, scholars should keep the category of regular/profane open and active. Some spaces are plainly *not* sacred for most people, but the reasons for their non-sacredness are not always evident, and repay consideration.

New Religious Movements (NRMs) are ideal social contexts for the creation of new sacred space. Because NRMs often stand at a critical angle to mainstream religious groups, sanctifying physical points of reference can help ground NRMs’ fresh claims and innovative practices.

Consider the example of Spiritualism. In this movement, mediums attempt to connect listeners with spirits of their loved ones. It emerged historically from American Christianity as inflected by Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, and the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910). In the following pages, we will give examples of the various ways Spiritualist mediums make places sacred, including their own bodies. Here, we note that as the movement became institutionalized in regional and national organizations, particular places have become identified with effective spirit mediumship. Spiritualists in Australia

treat the Arthur Findlay College in Stansted Mountfitchet, England, as a sacred site. The college, located on the same grounds as the United Kingdom's Spiritualists' National Union, is considered the most prestigious training ground for Spiritualist mediums in the world. It holds classes year-round on spirit mediumship and psychic work, training opportunities for which Australian mediums are eager to travel across the globe. It is a site where metaphysical theory is put into practice (see, e.g., Kalvig, 2017: 94–6 on a memorable table-tipping séance there). For many Spiritualists in the United States, the hallowed ground is Lily Dale, a village in upstate New York which is home to the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. To own a home in Lily Dale, you must be a member of the local Spiritualist governing body (the Assembly). Thousands of people visit the village in summer for its workshops and for private sessions with mediums (Wicker, 2003). One could look more closely at particular sites within these locations – for example, the tombstone of famed medium Emma Hardinge Britten at the Arthur Findlay College, or the Inspiration Stump at Lily Dale, where mediums give readings in a forest clearing. Our point is simply that by establishing sites like the Arthur Findlay College and the village of Lily Dale, Anglophone Spiritualists have declared that they offer something different: new grounds for engaging with the spirit world here and now.

In this Element, we turn to NRMs for many examples of sacred space-making. We acknowledge that mainstream religious institutions also work energetically at defining sacred space, sometimes in their own novel ways. Thus, in focusing on “the newness of sacred space,” we emphasize that the newness is in the practice and not only in the movement or institution.

Please note, we use the terms “space” and “place” interchangeably, although we realize that some readers would prefer to reserve “space” for physical area in general and “place” for specific locations made meaningful by human action and interpretation.

## 1 Sacred for Whom?

In February 2023, Matt Tomlinson conducted an interview in Canberra, Australia, with two spirit mediums, a married couple named Norman and Lynette Ivory. Matt had known them for more than seven years, and understood a bit about their philosophy of life and visions of the spirit world. He had taken a course on mediumship, which they taught when they were the leaders of the Canberra Spiritualist Association.

On this day, Norman surprised Matt with his recollection of seeing an archangel. The main topic of the interview was spirit healing. Late in the discussion, talk had turned to the subject of angels, and Lynette said that angels

have different responsibilities: “You’ve got angels of love, angels of healing, angels of war . . . every emotion you can think of, there’s an angelic force involved.” Norman lamented that Spiritualists do not understand as much about angels as they used to. He then added that he and Lynette “have experience with angels,” and proceeded to describe the time they went to “a little park by the side of the railway.” He was not sure where it had been. Lynette suggested Bundanoon, a town around 150 kilometers from Sydney. “Bundanoon sounds right,” Norman agreed. “We sat in this little park right next to the railway, not too far from the railway station in Bundanoon, and an archangel came. An archangel is quite big. This is not a small being. This is quite a tall being. This angel would have been twenty feet high at least.”

He mentioned that “A host of angels will have an archangel in charge,” and returned to his critique of Spiritualists’ diminished understanding of angels today. Matt steered the interview back to the park: “Can I ask what happened then in that park in Bundanoon? Was there a message, or was there – ”

“Well, he came and he talked through me,” Norman replied, patiently. “He talked to us both, talked about what we were doing, where we were going in Spiritualism. He also – did he talk about the family?”

“I’ve got no idea, darling,” Lynette said. “I don’t remember.”

“I can’t remember,” Norman mused, and added, “That’s something that [his spirit guide] Sun Tsen would usually talk to me about. It was basically philosophical and based . . . [on] what was going on as far as Spiritualism was concerned in our lives. Because we were then running the Hills Spiritualist Centre, and obviously that was a fairly successful church.”

Norman often sees spiritual beings. In the first of his three books, *The Rabbit on the Roof*, he tells of many vivid encounters: meeting hundreds of dancing fairies; seeing the bird-headed angel of death in a friend’s room at the hospital; meeting a kind but cautious elf while walking in the woods; and banishing a “piglike imp” that had been afflicting a household, for example (Ivory, 2016: 217, 222, 238, 180–2). Yet the archangel story still surprised Matt. Note how the event was memorable, but the place less so, and the message even less. An archangel, in Norman’s description, is not just another spirit being. It is an especially large one, pulsing with extraordinary energy. Nevertheless, after one appeared to Norman and spoke through him, the words faded from memory, and he needed prompting from Lynette to remember that it was in Bundanoon. An extraordinary messenger had delivered a routine message in what might seem an unremarkable place.

If one actively seeks spiritual visions, one might be expected to head to the usual places: majestic shrines, ancient houses, deep forests, the edge of the sea. Even the militant atheist Richard Dawkins (2004: 137) admits to being



**Figure 1** Bundanoon seen from its train station platform, August 2, 2024.  
 Photo by Matt Tomlinson.

moved by the profound depth of the Grand Canyon, although he grumpily deflects his emotions onto his reader and retreats into the passive voice: “Why, when you go to the Grand Canyon and you see the strata of geological time laid out before you, why . . . is there a feeling that brings you close to tears?” A park next to a rail line in a small town, by comparison, might not be high on many people’s lists of spiritually magnetic places. Matt did find Norman’s story intriguing, however, and paid a visit to Bundanoon in August 2024 (see Figure 1).

Putting aside the element of surprise, it is worthwhile to ask how other scholars might respond to Norman’s story. Some readers might hark back to Mircea Eliade’s classic work (1961) on ritual and characterize Norman’s experience as a hierophany, a moment when the sacred appears to humans and establishes the connection which centers humanity in the world and enables communication with the divine. Others, agreeing with Jonathan Z. Smith (1987) on Eliade’s analytic limitations, might say that Norman had actively made the park sacred with his vision, “paying attention” in a ritualized way wherein his interests transformed a seemingly ordinary space. He sacralized the park by seeing it anew. In doing so, he prompted Matt to go there to pay attention to it with heightened interest.

As Smith writes, the sacred is “above all, a category of emplacement” (1987: 104). A casual visitor might not encounter the sacred in Bundanoon, but Norman did, and Lynette did through Norman’s experience. Matt went there and enjoyed it, but did not see anything out of the ordinary. Their experiences understandably diverge from Aboriginal visions of it as a place inhabited by kin for tens of thousands of years.

Even as no space is inherently sacred, some places obviously earn a reputation for spiritual efficacy: Mecca. Lourdes. The Ganges River. Indeed, some sites become such powerful icons of sacredness that the idea of newly or differently sacralized places can sit uneasily alongside them. The British journalist Hannen Swaffer, a committed Spiritualist, groused that even after mediums presented incontrovertible proof of life after death, audiences stubbornly rejected it: “You do not accept evidence of the hereafter like that, even if you accept it when you read the New Testament, concerning the writing of which you know nothing whatever. It must take place in Jerusalem to convince you, not Kingston Vale” (Swaffer, 1962: 5). Many people expect the sacred in Jerusalem in a way they do not in Kingston Vale – or Bundanoon – and although stating this fact baldly may seem to belabor the obvious, we suggest drawing back to ask why and how, culturally speaking, this is the case.

Can an entire country be sacred? Here, we are not referring to places like Israel or Vatican City, but to places that most visitors would not consider sacred, but many locals do. In an earlier research project, Matt conducted fieldwork at Christian theological colleges in Sāmoa and American Sāmoa. The independent nation of Sāmoa is possibly the most Christian country in the world, demographically speaking. In 2013, an estimated 98.8 percent of its population belonged to a Christian church (Grim, Johnson, Skirbekk, and Zurlo, 2014: 38). A legal scholar declares that Sāmoa is not technically a Christian state, but is a *de facto* one because Christianity thoroughly shapes national self-understandings and works its way into key texts such as the national motto (“Sāmoa is founded on God”), the Constitution (whose preamble states that “sovereignty over the Universe belongs to the Omnipresent God alone”), and the national anthem (which includes the line, “God is our foundation, our freedom”; Ahdar, 2013). The theologian Ama’amalele Tofaeono writes of pre-Christian Sāmoa as literally Edenic, a place where humans interacted with all of living creation in a holistically interconnected and fundamentally sacred way. But he adds that the arrival of Christian missionaries ruined things, changing Sāmoa from an inherently sacred place in tune with God’s will into one alienated from the natural order (Tofaeono, 2000).

In short, many Sāmoans see the nation as godly, even if they do not agree on how to evaluate the work of European missionaries (see also Efi, 2014).

Now consider another perspective, that of an Englishman named Donald Hemingway, who became obsessed in the early 1950s about God's mission for him. Hemingway heard God speak often and at length, although he wrote that he was "not a person given to imagination or hallucination" (Hemingway, 1993: 72). God's message to Hemingway became direct and urgent one day at Richmond, in Surrey:

It was on Saturday morning, 7th April 1951, after nine months of prayer and waiting upon the Lord that my prayers were to be answered. Leaving home at the usual time of 7.30 am I was halfway down the Upper Richmond Road, cycling fast and yet waiting upon the Lord when, like a bolt out of the blue, the one word SAMOA was given to me. I heard it distinctly. I said, "Lord what is it, what does it mean, is it a person's name or is it a place?" Then I remembered that the night before I had been to a farewell service of a friend of the family who was leaving as a missionary for Africa. I wondered if this could be a place she had mentioned. All the rest of the way to the store this one word SAMOA was ringing in my ears and kind of hitting me on the head like a hammer. It seemed impossible to work that morning. . . . I was very [per CMS 12.62, 18th ed.] thankful when 1 o'clock came and my lunch hour. Rushing from the shop with "Samoa" still ringing in my ears, I made my way down the High Street into W. H. Smith's large bookshop, one of London's noted booksellers. It was full of people and I had to push my way in. Eventually I was able to pick up an atlas. Turning to the map of Africa I began to look all over to see if I would see a place . . . called Samoa. Not finding what I wanted I suddenly heard a voice say, "Why don't you turn to the index." I thought how stupid of me not to have done this at the beginning. Turning to the index I read "Samoan Islands, Pacific Ocean." I then said, "Thank you Lord, I believe this must be the place where you want me to go." As soon as I said those words, the ringing and the hammering of the word "Samoa" in my ears and heart ceased and a wonderful peace and joy stole over my whole being. This was the first time in my life that I understood there was such a place in existence called Samoa. For the rest of that day I seemed to walk on air. (Hemingway, 1993: 12)

Later, on September 15, 1952, on the isle of Guernsey, he was praying when he received a vision of a thatched-roof home standing between palm trees, and "the Lord audibly spoke and said, 'I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance'" (Hemingway, 1993: 16, quoting Psalms 2:8).

On one level, this is a moving story of faith and the search for sacred space. Hemingway is hit hard by what he takes to be God's words, determined to understand the significance of that mysterious word "Samoa," and feeling like he is walking "on air" when he understands where his new mission is to take place. On another level, it is the story of someone who stumbles off the path trying to find what is right in front of him. Carrying out what he believed to be his divine mission, Hemingway arrived in Tutuila, American Sāmoa, on

November 7, 1956, ready for those heathen. In his book, he carries on with his narrative as we might expect, full of fervor and determination to outmaneuver his opponents. But despite learning the basics of Sāmoan mission history and acknowledging that everyone goes to church, he never quite comes out and admits that in looking for the heathen, the Christian missionary had arrived at the most Christian place on earth.

As it happened, the same year he arrived, a census was taken in American Sāmoa and the proportion of the population recorded as Christian was at least 95 percent; it was probably higher, because the category “Other” (998 persons, out of a total population of 20,154) almost certainly included Christians not counted in the main denominations. Yet for someone like Donald Hemingway, the people in Sāmoa could never be Christian enough, because they were not enough like him. They went to church regularly, but not religiously, because real religion for Hemingway was a distinct brand of Pentecostalism. His theology and anthropology were like an overfocused beam of light that, passing the point of fineness, becomes blurry again.

Although Hemingway’s story does have its humorous aspects, we retell it not to make fun of him, but rather to point out that he agreed fully with many Sāmoans on the divine significance of Sāmoa. He just saw it from a completely different angle – one that, to others’ eyes, might seem to distort the situation into unrecognizability.

To put the matter as a question: *Is Sāmoa a sacred place?* Everyone agrees: Yes, it is. National discourse proclaims Sāmoa’s divine foundation. The theologian Ama’amalele Tofaeono portrays pre-Christian Sāmoa as united with God’s purpose. The missionary Donald Hemingway also felt Sāmoa had been chosen by God, although his understanding of his mission might jar Sāmoan sensibilities. We can widen this range of perspectives, too, as there are non-Christian sacred sites in Sāmoa such as the Baha’i temple, set on lush grounds high on the mountain over which the Cross Island Road runs (see Figure 2).

We are not claiming that any place is sacred just because someone says it is. It might be sacred for one person but not another, or sacred for many people for different reasons. This assertion might sound obvious to the point of banality. But it is always worth making, if only to remind ourselves that sacredness is a value, and that as a value it is always open to reevaluation.

The variable evaluation of sacredness is exemplified in an earlier research project by Yujie Zhu, who conducted fieldwork in Yunnan province in Southwest China, where various forms of religious folk culture have historically fused and intertwined. One significant indigenous folk religion of the region, Dongba, originates from the Tibetan Bon tradition (Mu, 1995; Li, 1997; Yang, 2008; Xu, 2023). Following the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Dongba and many folk