A Qur'anic Perspective and Analysis of the Concept of Sacred Space in Islam[1]

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Using the Qur'an as a mould, two broad definitions of sacred space are explored and contextualised within the Islamic tradition. The entire process of sacralisation of space is reflected in the history of the Ka'bah, as recorded in the Qur'an. Sacred space is found to be a product of cultural labour and not something inherent. Through a process of ritual practice, space is sacralised either on a permanent or temporary basis. Issues pertaining to the politics and contestation of space can be studied and understood in the light of these findings.

Introduction

Mircea Eliade, the renowned scholar of religions who pioneered the study of sacred space, once stated that the history of religions "describe the modalities of the sacred and the situation of man in a world charged with religious values" (Eliade 1959, 18). Suffice to say, understanding the concept of the sacred is central to the study of any religion. In this paper I will use the two broad lines of definition of the sacred that have been advanced in the study of religion as a point of departure for an analysis of the concept of sacred space in Islam. I will then argue in favour of one of these definitions, locating my arguments within the framework of the Qur'an. As such, I will also outline the importance of the Qur'an in the Islamic tradition and briefly explain the hermeneutical model adopted for the purpose of this study.

This approach consciously favours an insider bias in addressing the topic and therefore warrants some justification. Geertz points out that cultural analysis is undoubtedly interpretative since it deals with the flow of social discourse (1993, 20). However, such analyses often prove to be problematic in the study of religion. By analysing Muslim society, for example, the scholar inadvertently draws conclusions about the Islamic faith, which, while accurately reflecting

societal practice, may be contradictory to the principles upon which the religion is based. This study strives to be faithful to fundamental tenets and not necessarily to social practice.

With globalisation ever so persistently etching away at the boundaries that separate us, we are increasingly being confronted by a plethora of cultures and beliefs. Issues of religious identity and the contestation of sacred space therefore continue to come to the fore. While not necessarily addressing these issues directly, this study hopes to contribute to this on-going debate in a positive manner. References will therefore occasionally be made to these issues.

Sacred Space as Sacred Centre

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the production of sacred space is the ensuing distinction that is inevitably made between the sacred and the profane. These boundaries of demarcation introduce the dimension of opposition; not only between the sacred and the profane, but also between foreign and familiar, hostile and secure. Our sacred world, or cosmos, is thus in opposition to the wild, dangerous and chaotic forces of the profane world surrounding us (Eliade 1959, 29).

Eliade has convincingly shown that for religious man, space is not homogenous. In a homogenous world space is a formless expanse devoid of any significance. Religious man experiences breaks or interruptions in this homogeneity due to a qualitative difference in certain spaces caused by the manifestation of the sacred (1959, 20). Whether one holds that space is consecrated by means of ritual (or any other socio-cultural practice), or whether one contends that sacred space irrupts and makes itself known, merely to be discovered by us, the final result is the same: not only is there a break in the homogeneity of space, there is a revelation of an absolute fixed point, or centre, as well.

Indeed the manifestation of the sacred, as is Eliade's contention, ontologically founds the world. Eliade explains that in a homogenous world there can be no possible point of reference and hence no orientation. He thus contends that, for religious man, the revelation of a sacred space possesses existential value because nothing can begin and nothing can be done without a previous orientation (1959, 22). Therefore, by appropriating any place as a sacred centre, religious man simultaneously creates an environment of security and defines himself as a spiritual being.

Sacred space is entirely different from that which surrounds it. Eliade emphatically argues that "within the sacred precincts the profane world is transcended [...]. Here, in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven" (1959, 26).

Bearing this very powerful significance of the sacred centre in mind, an exposition of the two major definitions of the sacred will now be undertaken.

These are commonly referred to as substantial and situational analyses. Common substantial definitions of the sacred include Otto's "holy," Van der Leeuw's "power," and Eliade's "real." Situational definitions, in contrast to these traditional portrayals, have linked the concept of the sacred to human practices and social projects (Chidester 1995, 211). Both definitions have varying implications and therefore different consequences. This warrants a brief analysis.

Substantial versus Situational Definitions of the Sacred

Mircea Eliade contends that the first possible definition of the sacred is that it is the opposite of the profane. He goes on to argue that man becomes aware of the sacred as a result of it manifesting itself, or showing itself as something wholly different from the profane. Eliade proposes the term "hierophany" to describe this act of the manifestation of the sacred, regarding it as fitting because it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e. that something sacred shows itself to us. For him, the history of religions – from the most primitive to the most highly developed – is constituted by a great number of hierophanies. These hierophanies range from the most elementary – for example the manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object like a stone or a tree – to the supreme hierophany (which, for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ). Eliade describes this act of manifestation as something mysterious and of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world but that is manifested in objects that are an integral part of our natural "profane" world (1959, 11). The sacred tree or the sacred stone, he thus explains, are worshipped precisely because they are hierophanies, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree, but the sacred itself (1959, 12). Van der Leeuw expresses a similar sentiment by asserting that the sacred's "powerfulness creates for it a place of its own" (Chidester 1995, 214).

Eliade points out that the place is never "chosen" by man; it is merely discovered by him (1958, 369). Although every sacred space implies a hierophany, there is often some sign or the other which serves to indicate its sacredness. Eliade relates the example of a marabout that planted his stick in the ground and found that it had taken root; he regarded this as a sign indicating the sanctity of the place and settled there. When no sign manifests itself, it is provoked; for example, by evoking the help of animals who "show" what place is fit to receive the sanctuary or the village, etc. (Eliade 1959, 27). Eliade asserts that since religious man cannot live except in an atmosphere impregnated with the sacred, we should expect to find a large number of techniques for consecrating space (1959, 28).

Situational analyses adopt a far more distanced and critical view of the concept of the sacred. This analytical framework may generally be regarded as an observational or outsider perspective and its roots go as far back as Durkheim. The sacred is seen as an empty signifier that is – as Lévi-Strauss proposed – a

value which is susceptible to the reception of any meaning whatsoever through the human cultural labour of interpretation and ritualization. The sacred, from this perspective, is a notional supplement to the ongoing cultural work of sacralising space, time, persons, and social relations. The sacred is a by-product of sacralisation (Chidester 1995, 211).

Sacred Space in Islam According to the Qur'an: Substantial or Situational

The Sacred Mosque in Mecca is without a doubt the most revered place on earth for Muslims and immediately synonymous with sacred space. It serves as a model for the analysis of the concept of sacred space not only because of its unanimous status, but also because it is so frequently mentioned in the Qur'an. It is by no means an exaggeration to contend that its entire history is recorded in the Qur'an. The question hypothesised for this study is therefore as follows: Does the Qur'an favour a substantial or a situational definition of sacred space? Using the Sacred Mosque as an example, a critical reading of the Qur'anic representation of its history will be attempted to answer this Question. It is however imperative to firstly outline the importance of the Qur'an in the Islamic tradition.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the speech of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammed[2] in the Arabic language, and subsequently transmitted to us by a group of people of such a large number that it would be impossible for them to collude upon a fabrication. It is believed to be free of any distortion and protected by God to remain as such for all time (Khallaf 1996, 26). Muslims regard the Qur'an as the ultimate source of guidance and the final word of truth. Historical narratives related in the Qur'an are accepted as factual rather than mythical. This is of direct relevance to this study.

The hermeneutical model adopted for this study aims to be as faithful as possible to the Qur'an itself. Two key features central to any interpretation will therefore be stressed. These are "Occasions of Revelation" and language-usage. "Occasions of Revelation" refers to the historical context within which any specific verse was revealed and places the Reader or Interlocutor within the framework of the original context. This helps in understanding the verses in light of the realities of the period of revelation.[3] The verses also need to be understood in light of language-usage at the time of revelation and not according to language-usage of later eras.

The Qur'an remains its own best interpreter. Issues raised in certain chapters are often addressed in later chapters. By grasping hold of any one of its many thematic threads the Interlocutor is able to proceed through the text and finally emerge with an understanding that is cohesive, lucid, and well ordered.[4] For the purpose of this analysis of sacred space the natural place to begin is in Mecca.

Appropriation of Space for the Purpose of Worship

The Qur'an states: "Verily, the first house (of worship i.e. the Ka'bah) appointed for Humankind was at Mecca, full of blessing, and a guidance for all of creation" (Q. 3:96).[5] The literal meaning of this verse suggests that the Ka'bah was the first house of worship built on earth. This view has been advocated by some of the classical scholars even though the Qur'an[6] quite explicitly states that the Ka'bah was built by Abraham.[7] They qualify their claims by arguing that he had merely rebuilt it, and that it had originally been built in the time of Adam. Ibn 'Ashur[8] rejects this claim on the basis of its weak authenticity (1984, vol. 4, 13). He argues that reference is being made to the first house of worship for people of the scripture i.e. Muslims, Christians and Jews. Since there is unanimous agreement that Abraham is the father of all three of these religions, and considering the fact that he had built the Ka'bah, ibn 'Ashur understands the verse as referring to the Ka'bah as the primary house of worship within these three monotheistic faiths. He stresses that from the perspective of worship there is no preference of one place over another. Preference, he argues, is established due to antiquity.

His interpretation is lent support by considering the context of revelation. This verse was revealed in response to a quarrel between Muslims and Jews; both maintained that their specific worship sites were the more important. Jews argued for the superiority of the Temple of Jerusalem and Muslims argued in favour of the Ka'bah. Revelation responded by pointing out that the Ka'bah was built earlier and is therefore of a higher status as a place of worship (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 4, 6).

Thus, closer inspection of the verse indicates a shift in focus from a strong spatial emphasis to a more functional one concentrating on worship. This view is strengthened in light of (Q. 5:97) which states: "God has made the Ka'bah, the Sacred House, an asylum of security and pilgrimage for Humankind..." Two interpretations are offered for the word *ja'ala*; both being considered as applicable. Zuhayli[9] contends that it could mean, "made" i.e. create, or secondly, "ordain" i.e. as a religious responsibility (1991, vol. 7, 70). The first meaning refers to God making the precincts of the House an asylum of security, and the second meaning refers to the institution of the pilgrimage as a religious duty. Both meanings are applicable simultaneously. Once again, the functional characteristic of the Sacred House is emphasised. The pilgrimage, after all, is a ritual of worship. In addition to this, Ibn 'Ashur stresses that the Ka'bah itself is a symbol of Monotheism (1984, vol. 6, 54).

The Purpose of the Ka'bah

Although the verses quoted thus far have stressed the functional characteristic of space, they are by no means decisive. A substantial emphasis is present as well. The Qur'an (Q. 3:96) describes Mecca as "full of blessing" and (Q. 5:97) de-

scribes it as "an asylum of security." Eliade's concept of hierophany comes immediately to mind when pondering (Q. 22:26) in which God the Almighty says: "And (remember) when We showed Abraham the site of the (Sacred) House..." In this instance God appoints the space to His Prophet. It is not just simply an instance of the sacred manifesting itself. However, unlike Eliade, we are not able to conclude that this manifestation results in the conversion of profane space to something sacrosanct.

Once again, a functional characteristic is emphasised in the very same verse. After having shown Abraham the site of the House, God continues by exhorting: "Associate not anything (in worship) with Me, and purify My house for those who circumambulate it, and those who stand up for prayer, and those who bow and make prostration" (Q. 22:26). Ibn 'Ashur explains that the function of this house is the establishment of the rituals of Islamic worship i.e. circumambulation, and the other forms mentioned in the verse. He further argues that since the House is a symbol of pure Monotheism, "purify" refers to cleansing the House of any idolatrous practices (1984, vol. 17, 241).

In another verse Abraham himself alludes to the function of the Sacred House when imploring God's mercy for his family after having left them there: "O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in an uncultivable valley by Your Sacred House; in order, O our Lord, that they may establish the Prayer..." (Q. 14:37). Ibn 'Ashur stresses that Abraham had left his offspring in this place specifically for the purpose of establishing the prayer (1984, vol. 13, 241).

The verse confirms that the area itself was not really special and describes it as uncultivable. Taking cognisance of these harsh conditions, Abraham continues his supplication saying: "...so fill some hearts among men with love towards them, and (O God) provide them with fruits so that they may give thanks" (Q. 14:37). One is immediately struck by the contrast between the establishment of prayer and the expectation of security and sustenance. Abraham's sincerity and conviction in establishing a centre of worship exclusively for God is rewarded by the conversion of a barren desert into a centre of security with plentiful sustenance[10] (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 13, 264-66). This proves the opposite of Eliade's contention to be true. By the sacralisation of the profane through the establishment of worship, the "sacred" is manifested as a reward for sincerity and as a sign of acceptance.

Space as a Conduit for Worship

Although Qur'an (Q. 22:26) proves that the appointment and location of the Sacred House was God-Ordained, it still does not lend complete support to a substantial definition of sacred space. Just as God had appointed the site of the Sacred House, so too, does He make it clear that the site itself is only secondary

and by no means essential. It is a conduit through which worship is observed.

God the Almighty states: "The fools among the people will say, "What has turned them (Muslims) from their *Qiblah* [prayer direction] to which they used to face in prayer." Say (O Muhammed) "to God belongs both east and west. He guides whom He wills to a straight way"" (Q. 2:142). The occasion of revelation places this verse in the context of Medina, during the Prophet's stay there. While the verses discussed thus far had concentrated on the history of the Scared House and its construction by Abraham, the Qur'an's focus now shifts to a contemporary context (i.e. That of the community of Believers in Medina). For a period of sixteen months after the Prophet's migration to Medina the Muslim community, under his direction, used to pray facing in the direction of Jerusalem. Now, by Divine directive, the community of Believers change orientation and face the Ka'bah in Mecca.[11] As a result, they are mocked by the disbelievers who question the motives for this change (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 2, 6).

The Divine response is firm and decisive: "...to God belongs both east and west" (Q. 2:142). This is a clear rejection of any fixed spatial orientation attributed to Mecca (or any place else) on the grounds of some inherent sanctity. All of space and all orientations are God's domain, with no innate preference of one place over another. The Qur'an (Q. 2:115) again declares: "And to God belong the east and the west, so wherever you turn yourselves or your faces there is the face of God. Surely! God is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knowing." Zuhayli emphatically argues that neither the rock of Jerusalem nor the Ka'bah possess any specific benefit to set them aside from all other places. The only true orientation is towards God, The Omnipresent (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 2, 6).

This very same view is expressed with a finality that leaves no doubt and effectively closes all debate in (Q. 2:177): God the Almighty declares "It is not piety that you turn your faces towards east and [or] west [in prayers]; but piety is [the quality of] the one who believes in God, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book (i.e. this Qur'an), the Prophets and gives his wealth, in spite of love for it, to the kinsfolk, to the orphans, and to the poor, and to the wayfarer, and to those who beg, and to set slaves free, performs the Prayer, and gives the Alms-tax, and who fulfil their covenant when they make it, and who are patient in extreme poverty and ailment and in times of difficulty. Such are the people of the truth and they are God-conscious." The verse opens with what is effectively a rejection of any substantial definition of sacred space.

Ibn 'Ashur argues that the rejection of defining piety in terms of spatial orientation in this verse is very significant. Space and spatial orientation are only means *(wasa'il)* and not objectives *(maqasid)* of the act of worship. As such, they should not occupy the utmost concern of the believer. Worshippers are exempted from facing in the direction of the Kab'ah if they are unable to establish it correctly. In such instances they would face in what they think is the

most probable direction. Allowances have also been made for the performance of supererogatory prayers while on a riding-mount (Ibn 'Ashur 1984, vol. 12, 128). Modern-day Jurists even allow the performance of the obligatory prayers in aircrafts during long-haul flights.

Although the verse addresses the fundamentals of Islamic Belief, it makes a very strong statement concerning the analysis of sacred space in the process. Space cannot simply be viewed as sacred because the individual has some sense of it being different from the profane, or in Eliade's terms, because of the manifestation of a hierophany. In this verse (Q. 2:177), a situational definition of sacred space is stressed. Sacralisation is produced through the cultural labour of ritual. The resultant product is a sacred centre that serves a functional purpose. It is a gateway opening into the realm of the transcendent thereby facilitating divine communion.

In spite of this powerful Utopian orientation – which implies that every place on earth is as close to God as any other – the significance of the Sacred House cannot be banalised or overlooked. It serves as the most potent signifier of Islamic identity; a fact clearly stressed in the Qur'an.

Islamic Identity

In a verse addressing the Prophet God the Almighty states: "Verily We have seen the turning of your face towards the heaven. Surely We shall turn you to a *Qiblah* (prayer direction) that will please you, so turn your face in the direction of the Sacred House. And wheresoever you people are, turn your faces [in prayer] in that direction. Certainly, the people who were given the Scriptures (i.e. Jews and Christians) know well that, that (i.e. change in direction) is the truth from their Lord. And God is not unaware of what they do. And even if you were to bring the people of the Scripture all the proofs, they would not follow your *Qiblah*, nor are you going to follow their *Qiblah*. And they will not follow each other's *Qiblah*. Verily, if you follow their desires after that which you have received of knowledge (from God), then indeed you will be one of the wrong-doers" (Q. 2:144-5).

These verses were revealed in the context of the multi-religious society of Medina. Even though the Prophet had declared the independence of Islam from Christianity and Judaism in no uncertain terms, he and his community of faithful still continued to face in the direction of Jerusalem for the prayers. The Jews therefore accused him of imitating their *Qiblah* (prayer direction) but of contradicting their beliefs. Apart from this accusation, the Prophet had yearned to face in the direction of the Ka'bah because it stood as a symbol of the perfect monotheism of Abraham (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 2, 20). In these verses his wish is finally fulfilled when God orders the Muslim Community to face in the direction of the Sacred House.

Ibn 'Ashur points out that the change in direction signalled the complete independence of Islam from Christianity and Judaism (1984, vol. 2, 28). The verses exploit the symbolism of the *Qiblah* to emphasise the distinct identities of the various faith communities. Just as they fail to agree upon a common orientation in prayer to a god equally recognised by them all, so too, will they never agree upon the differences that separate them. The verse subtly implies that conceding to a common *Qiblah* is tantamount to conceding to a contested aspect of belief. It therefore equates following "their desires" after having knowledge of the truth with an act of grave transgression.

In the verses that follow, the Qur'an once again stresses good deeds over spatial orientation while at the same time hinting at the distinct identities of the various faiths: "For every [faith community] there is a direction to which they face (in their prayers). So hasten towards all that is good. Wheresoever you may be, God will bring you together (on the day of Resurrection). Truly, God is able to do all things" (Q. 2:148).

The Muslim community is then addressed specifically and bestowed with its own unique seal of identity: "And from wheresoever you start forth [for prayers], turn your face in the direction of the Sacred House (in Mecca), that is indeed the truth from your Lord. And God is not unaware of what you do" (Q. 2:149).

Exclusivity of Space

While in Medina, the nascent Muslim community asserted its unique identity by aligning in the direction of the Ka'bah even though it still remained under the control of the Idolaters. There was bound to be drastic changes when Islam would finally march victoriously into Mecca. The appropriation of the Sacred House by Muslims brought to the fore issues of exclusivity and contestation. The Sacred House could no longer symbolise both Idolatry and Monotheism. This is clearly alluded to in (Q. 9:17): "It is not for the Idolaters to maintain the Mosques of God while they continue to attest to disbelief. The works of such are in vain and in fire shall they abide."

Zuhayli explains that maintenance of a mosque does not simply encompass a physical dimension, it has spiritual significance as well. Mosques are specifically built for the purpose of worship and prayer and he points out that this is regarded as maintenance as well. The Arabic word for the Lesser-Pilgrimage is *'Umrah* and it shares the same tripartite root form as *'Imarah*, which means maintenance (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 10, 134). This example lucidly captures the sense in which the word "maintain" is to be understood in (Q. 9:17).

The verse was revealed after the Battle of Badr, which took place several years before the conquest of Mecca. Although the plural form *masajid* (mosques) is used, the reference is clearly to the Sacred House in Mecca that was at that time still in the hands of the Idolaters (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 10, 136). In the next

verse the requirements for the maintenance of any mosque is clearly spelt out: "The mosques of God shall only be maintained by those who believe in God and the Last Day, perform the prayer and give the alms tax, and fear none but God. It is they who are expected to be on true guidance" (Q. 9:18). In this verse the maintenance of mosques exclusively by the Muslim community is clearly and decisively established. The mosque, as such, is a source of identity as much as it is a place of worship.

This injunction is finally established after the conquest of Mecca, in one of the last verses revealed in the Qur'an: "O you who believe! Verily the Idolaters are impure. So let them not come near the Sacred Mosque after this year, and if you fear poverty, God will enrich you if He wills, out of His bounty. Surely, God is All-Knowing, All-Wise" (Q. 9:28). Although the literal meaning of the verse suggests a prohibition from entering, or even coming close to the Sacred Mosque itself, closer investigation reveals a different picture. This verse was revealed during the pilgrimage in the ninth year A.H. (after migration to Mecca). It served to give notice to the Idolaters that they were to be excluded from participating in the Pilgrimage from hereon after (Zuhayli 1991, vol. 10, 166). Mecca had prospered as a centre of commerce, due to the influx of the surrounding tribes for the purpose of the Pilgrimage. The exclusion of the Idolaters was bound to impact negatively upon trade. This is why the verse addresses the issue of poverty as well.

Ibn 'Ashur explains that the description "impure" is in reference to spiritual impurity and not physical impurity. The Idolaters still persisted in associating objects of worship with God, hence denying monotheism. This "impurity" warranted their exclusion from participation, considering that the Pilgrimage is a ritual that seeks to inculcate and uphold monotheism. Their participation would be tantamount to desecration. Ibn 'Ashur stresses that exclusion did not stipulate vacation and removal of Idolaters from the pilgrimage sites. It was made clear that from the following year the Pilgrimage would be an exclusive right of Muslims only (Ibn 'Ashur 1984, vol. 10, 161). Exclusion is therefore applicable to contradictory forms of worship and not necessarily to physical presence. Zuhayli points out that this is a position adopted by Hanafi[12] jurists as well (1991, vol. 10, 167).

Also of significance is what historically came to be known as the year of delegations. Towards the end of the ninth year A.H. the Prophet received delegations from the surrounding territories. Amongst them was a delegation of Christians from Najran. They were hosted in the Prophet's mosque and even performed their prayers in it, facing in an easterly direction as was their custom. Using analogy,[13] the classical jurist Ibn al-Qayyim cites this incident as evidence for the permissibility of Christians and Jews to pray in a mosque. He does however stipulate that this should not be the norm and, as such, not encouraged on a regular basis. He regards such incidents as circumstantial (1987, vol. 3, 638).

Because Christianity and Judaism are both monotheistic faiths, their rites of prayer do not conflict ideologically with those of Islam. This incident took place at about the same time that (Q. 9:28) was revealed, in which idolatrous worship was prohibited in the Sacred House and – by analogy – in all places of Islamic Worship.

Verse 28 of the 9th chapter is literally the last word on the history of the Sacred House in the Qur'an, which had begun with the construction of the Ka'bah by Abraham. In the Qur'anic narrative the history and function of the Sacred House are inextricably intertwined. Closer analysis has shown that the functional characteristic of the Ka'bah far outweighs its spatial significance. The history of the Ka'bah is therefore the history of a faith of uncompromising monotheism. Its sanctity cannot be viewed in terms of some inherently perceived quality, but rather in light of this monotheistic symbolism. Therefore, contrary to Eliade's theory, the Ka'bah cannot be appropriated sacred significance because it "shows" something other than the profane, or something "holy." This analysis has shown that the Sacred House was assigned a specific significance from the very outset. It can therefore be concluded that the Qur'an favours a situational definition of sacred space and not a substantial one. This has direct implications upon the entire Islamic tradition. Bearing in mind the centrality of the Qur'an, not only is it justifiable to regard this as a model for Muslim practice, it is in fact imperative to do so. A strategy for the production of sacred space can be extracted on the basis of this analysis.

The Creation of Sacred Space in Islam

An analysis of the history of the Sacred House in the Qur'an has revealed an important relationship between space and function.[14] What is apparent is that although the Islamic tradition does not reflect as passionate an approach to sacred space as Eliade's vision of its irruption and discovery, one cannot deny the existence of a spatial dimension. No matter how sacred space may be defined, the significance of the sacred centre as an opening towards, or a link with the transcendent remains equally valid. Its relevance to Islam is therefore just as applicable.

It is important to note that the Prophet Muhammed expressed the view that all of the earth was a place of prayer (Zuhayli 1988, vol.1, 788). This statement is very relevant to the examination of the concept of sacred space in Islam. While it implies a utopian vision in Jonathan Z. Smith's sense, i.e. that every place on earth is as close to God as any other, it does not necessarily mean that the entire surface of the earth is sacrosanct (Smith 1978, 101). Since prayer is a ritualistic practice that has a spatial dimension, it can be concluded that places of prayer are sacred. It therefore has locative implications as well, where space is identified with fixed, stable centres of power (Smith 1978, 101).

Another consideration worth mentioning is that the sacred centre and the act of prayer both share the same significance: they are seen as a link with the transcendent. As such, the act of prayer itself has to be a means of consecrating space. Therefore, when considering the creation of sacred space from an Islamic perspective, one is constrained to regard any space utilised for the purpose of ritual as sacred.

Strategies for the creation of sacred space

As has been argued above, the creation of sacred space in Islam is achieved through the practice of rituals of worship. These rituals basically encompass formal prayers, rites of pilgrimage, alms giving, and the observance of fasting. Of these rituals it is only the prayer and the pilgrimage rites that require a distinct spatial orientation. The space required for the fulfilment of these obligations may be divided into two categories: that which is required on a permanent basis, and that which is required temporarily.

The creation of permanent sacred space

Apart from the obligatory congregational prayer on Fridays, Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day, preferably in congregation. This is a practice that was established at the dawn of Islam and is one of its five pillars. The Prophet exhorted the attendance of prayers in congregation and regarded them as far more superior to the individually performed prayers (Zuhayli 1988, vol. 2, 147). As such, any viable Muslim community regards the building of a Mosque as its primary duty.

The Mosque not only acts as the receptacle of the faith community, but also as its spiritual centre. Once established and erected, it is unanimously accepted as holy ground by the faith community and its precincts are regarded as inviolable. The act of prayer itself, as a locative strategy for the consecration of space, entails two dimensions: First, the specific movements and postures that entail the act of prayer, and second, the devotional invocations that are recited along with the movements. The movements may be equated with the appropriation of the space being utilised for the prayer and the invocations with divine communion. The centrality of the worship-act in the creation of sacred space is highlighted by the atmosphere that prevails within the Mosque before and during prayers. Free movement and conversation is commonplace, but as soon as the prayer begins the atmosphere is transformed to one of sanctity and respect.

The third Caliph of Islam, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, recognised the significance of the prayer as a means of appropriating and sanctifying space. For this reason he courteously refused to perform the Midday Prayer in a Christian shrine when Jerusalem was conquered by Muslim forces. He explained to the patriarch that had extended him the offer that had he done so, later Muslims would have confiscated it and converted it into an Islamic place of worship. He even wrote

a charter to protect Christian shrines and to ensure that they remain in Christian hands (Armstrong 1996, 229).

The Pilgrimage, in addition to the prayer, is another obligation that manifests itself within a very defined spatial orientation. Every Muslim who has the physical and economic capacity is obligated to perform the Greater Pilgrimage *(Haj)*, at least once in a lifetime. One may embark on the Lesser Pilgrimage *('Umrah)* as well if one is able, but this is considered as purely devotional rather then obligatory. The pilgrimage itself consists of certain rites that are carried out in specifically appointed places in Mecca. The two-dimensional locative strategy for the creation of sacred space by means of prayer is just as applicable to the pilgrimage rites as they too, consist of movements accompanied by invocations. Although the *Haj* only occurs annually, the *'Umrah* may be performed throughout the year. Thus for all intents and purposes, all of these pilgrimage sites are seen as sacred places as they are continuously utilised for acts of ritual worship on a permanent basis.

The creation of temporary sacred space

The two-dimensional locative strategy for the creation of sacred space is manifested much more lucidly when considering the consecration of space on a temporary basis. Generally any place, provided that it is physically clean, may be used for the purpose of formal prayer. As such space can be consecrated on a temporary basis for as long as the duration of the prayer ritual. Because it is not always possible to attend the daily obligatory prayers in congregation at the mosque, many people perform this duty wherever convenient; this is usually in the home. Although it is not uncommon for people to set aside a specific room for the performance of the prayers, one would normally set down the prayer mat in any suitable place in the house. For the duration of the prayer, this space is sacrosanct and the worshipper is not disturbed in any possible way.

Another example of temporary consecration is the *'Id* prayer. This occurs on the occasion of the two festive holidays in Islam, known as the days of *'Id*. A special congregational prayer is held in the morning, shortly after sunrise. Because it occurs only twice a year, the entire community, men, women, and children are strongly encouraged to attend. The Mosque is usually too small to accommodate everyone and therefore any large open space of ground is utilised (Zuhayli 1988, vol. 2, 362).

A final example of temporary sacred space creation is the Prayer for Rain ceremony (Zuhayli 1988, vol. 2, 412). In times of drought, members of the afflicted community gather in an open place on the outskirts of the town or city and perform a specified prayer, in congregation, imploring for rain. What is normally seen as space that is quite profane is now sacrosanct, for a short period of time at least, lasting the duration of the ritual.

Although the ritual of worship is the only locative strategy that is involved

in the creation of sacred space in the Islamic tradition, it has been shown to have many different manifestations. What emerges is that in Islam, it is not necessarily the character of the place on which one stands that is fundamental, but rather the act of worship itself. Closeness to God is not determined by any place, or spatial orientation. This is alluded to in (Q. 50:16) where God states: "And indeed We have created man, and We know what his ownself whispers to him. And We are nearer to him than his jugular vein."

Conclusion

Religious man has always defined himself in terms of an external, transcendent locus. It is therefore only natural that his faith should find expression within a spatial dimension. The sacred centre – a veritable gateway to the transcendent – has been conceptualised and defined in many ways in the various religious traditions. Some traditions have stressed the substantial nature of sacred space, and yet others have contended that it is produced through cultural labour. Using the history of the Ka'bah narrated in the Qur'an as a model, I have contended that sacred space in Islam is created through the performance of rituals of worship. Space in itself is neutral and serves as a conduit for ritual practice. As such, the sanctity of space has to be understood in terms of its functional attributes. This utilitarian characteristic of space does not banalise its importance. Sacred places serve as strong centres of Islamic identity, of which the Sacred House in Mecca is by far the most important.

The appropriation of space and the conferance of significance necessarily involves exclusion. In Islam, this exclusion is based on ideological principles or tenets of belief. Any compromise of monotheism expressed on an Islamic worship-site is regarded as an act of desecration and is strictly prohibited. Tayob has touched on the significance of the Mosque as a centre of political authority as well in his work on sacred space in the *Sirah* (Prophetic biography) (1993).

This study has not explored the politics of sacred space or issues of contestation in significant detail. It has attempted to lay the groundwork for future studies in which such issues can be raised. Focus has almost exclusively been concentrated on the Qur'an because of its normative status in the Islamic tradition. It is hoped that both insiders and outsiders to the Islamic tradition will find this study relevant in exploring further avenues of research in this field.

Notes

[1] I am deeply indebted to Professor David Chidester for his thorough and at times very entertaining introduction to the study of sacred space. I am also grateful to Professor Abdulkader Tayob for the opportunity to publish this article. Finally, I must acknowledge the assistance of my friend and former colleague at the UCT

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2 Muslims express veneration for the prophet of Islam by amending the expression "upon whom be peace" after the mention of his name. This article is directed to a much wider audience so it is expedient to simply mention this convention and not implement it throughout.

3 Most of the classical exegetes expound on the occasions of revelation in their commentaries, including the commentaries used in this study.

4 The interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an is a well established hermeneutic tool utilised from a very early period.

5 T. al-Hilali (tr.) & M. Khan (tr.), *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*, (Riyadh, Dar-us-Salam, 1995). All Qur'anic translations are based on those of al-Hilali and Khan, with slight modifications by myself. Qur'anic references in the article are indicated as follows, for example (Q. 2:127), where the first number indicates the chapter and the numbers following the colon are verse numbers.

6 (Q. 2:127): "And (remember) when Abraham and (his son) Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House (the Ka'ba), (saying) "Our Lord! Accept (this service) from us. Verily! You are the All-Hearer, the All-Knower."

7 Muslims also show veneration for all other prophets using the expression "may God be pleased with him" as an amendment to the name.

8 Ibn 'Ashur's Exegetical work has been chosen because of his emphasis upon *Maqasid* (Principles or Objectives) of Islam.

9 Zuhayli's exegetical work has been chosen because it is encyclopaedic, encompassing the major corpus of classical exegesis. He also tries to balance between discursive and transmitted views.

10 (Q. 28:57): "...Have We not established for them a secure sanctuary (Mecca) to which are brought fruits of all kinds – a provision from Ourselves, but most of them know not."

11 (Q. 2:144): "...so turn your face in the direction of the Scared House. And you People are, turn your faces (in prayer) in that direction..."

12 One of the four major schools of Jurisprudence in Islam.

13 This is a principle of Source Methodology in Jurisprudence referred to as *Qiyas*.

14 For a interesting analysis of the function of the Friday sermon in the creation of sacred space see (Tayob 1999, 102-114).

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