"MAKING SACRED:"
THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MATTER AND SPIRIT
IN ARCHITECTURE AND THE CITY

The historic relationship of religious sensibility to artistic sensibility is both self evident and complex. But this relationship has become problematic in a post-modern world on the one hand no longer confident in the social and intellectual adequacy of secular materialism, in which on the other hand both religious and artistic sensibilities have become themselves to a remarkable and unprecedented degree secularized and / or individualized. To the extent that this relationship has become problematic generally, it seems especially so with respect to religious sensibility as it relates to architecture and urban design because of the essentially cooperative nature of these latter activities.

This essay seeks in a brief and general but systematic way to describe---both phenomenologically and from a standpoint of faith---several characteristics of the sacred, and of social settings in which a shared sense of the sacred is strong; and continues with further considerations about how the experience of the sacred influences and is expressed both in human culture generally, and the making of architectural and urban form and space in particular.

These considerations entail not only a characterization of "sacred places" and "sacred objects," but also of how places and objects come to be sacred; and these characterizations I have proposed under the rubric of *sacrament.* Moreover, although I consider the sacred and its relationship to architecture and cities to be of wide and general secular significance (and here pretty much limit myself to this topic), to speak of this subject in terms of "sacrament" has obvious and important implications for how believing Jews and Christians in particular might wish to continue rethinking our own assumptions not only toward "sacred architecture," but also toward contemporary cities and suburbs.

The Character of the Sacred

Anyone reflecting in these New Age days upon matters sacred would be incautious to presume a common understanding of the term "sacred." This is especially true with respect to a sense of the sacred in architectural and urban form and space. The sacred therefore, as I intend it here (synonymous with "the holy"), is not simply *a* religious category. Rather, it is arguably *the* religious category, the *sine qua non* of religion, the experience of which in everyday life tends to the recasting of everyday life in a religious mode. In this understanding I follow Rudolf Otto, whose seminal work *The Idea of the Holy* (first published in German in 1917 as *Das Heilige*) remains a touchstone for virtually all subsequent phenomenological study of religion.

"The holy," contends Otto, describes a phenomenon both rational and non-rational, capable of and demanding some degree of rational description but at the same time not fully describable or comprehensible by discursive reason. Regardless of the degree of rationality and conceptualization characteristic of the world's major religious traditions, it was Otto's carefully detailed thesis that common to all religions, and at the origin of all institutionalized religion and cultic practice, is a non-rational religious feeling: what Otto called the experience of "the numinous."

For Otto, the numinous is not identical with the sacred, but rather in its fullness constitutes the non-rational element of the sacred. He distinguishes the sacred, and the moral aspects rationally attached to it, from the partial, pre-moral, and / or amoral experience of the numinous. The psychological core of this experience, which Otto called "creature consciousness," is a feeling of dependence and contingency, "the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to what is supreme above all creatures." In turn, the numinous itself is experienced by the individual as an overwhelming, awesome, and strangely fascinating power---in Otto's famous characterization, a "*mysterium tremendum*."

Otto cites numerous examples of encounters with the numinous as described in sacred and secular writings of both the east and west. Paradigms of these in a theistic mode may be found in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad Gita*; in chapters 38-42 of the Book of Job; or the first person account found in chapter 6 of the Book of Isaiah. But even in monist mystical traditions such as Zen Buddhism and Taoism---in which ideas about origin and destiny, cosmology and salvation, self and not-self are conveyed in a paradoxical non-narrative narrative---the central religious experience is the overwhelming realization of and / or encounter with that numinous "something" which is "no-thing." Notwithstanding therefore the significant philosophical differences apparent in humanity's religions, Otto contends that all religion originates in just such overpowering experiences of the numinous as he cites.

Not everyone seems privileged to encounter the numinous in its full measure. Nevertheless, many (perhaps most) human beings feel at least some partial sense of the numinous in experiences of awe or dread, of the uncanny, the mysterious, the miraculous, and / or the demonic. But Otto understood that "God's will" is perennially disputed territory; and in Otto's view, experiences such as these may or may not constitute encounters with the sacred. Paradoxically, the judgment of their status and authority is itself a function of reason, a consequence of reflecting upon and analyzing the effects and implications of particular experiences of the numinous.

Religious (and moral) authority of the sort possessed by and accorded to Moses and Isaiah, Jesus and St. Paul, their counterparts in Islam and the religions of the east, and the subsequent specific religious traditions in and for which each has become authoritative---such authority follows from charismatic religious genius that must itself be understood as both non-rational and rational. That is to say: such figures have themselves not only had some extraordinary experience or experiences of the numinous, subsequent to which they take on and / or are given roles such as Law giver, Prophet, Son, and Apostle. They are also able to speak of it convincingly, to tell of their encounters in such a way as to enable those whose feeling for and of the numinous is genuine but partial to make religious and moral sense of their own experience.

This imperative to make the non-rational and unintelligible *mysterium tremendum* to some degree rational and intelligible---an imperative understood as coming from the numinous itself ("Woe to me," wrote St. Paul, "if I do not preach the gospel")---is what causes Otto to insist that "the sacred" is not simply the non-rational category of "the numinous," but is to some degree rational as well. That is to say, the sacred is not only something that we feel, but also something of which we both can and must speak intelligently.

The Sacred and its Effects

Human beings use various words to speak of and otherwise attempt to characterize the sacred: infinity, eternity, light, knowledge, truth, goodness, beauty, wisdom, power, glory, love, justice, spirit, no-thing-ness, void, father, mother, son, creator, lord, and judge---among others. It is from both the experience of the numinous and the imperative to speak of it that human beings attribute to the sacred this great variety of rational and metaphorical characteristics; and likewise why we pursue the on-going intellectual and existential tasks of attempting to sort out and make sense of these various and not always consistent attributes we ascribe to the sacred, and reflecting upon their implications for human thought and conduct.

In considering how a sense of the sacred influences and is expressed in both human culture generally, and the making of architectural and urban form and space in particular, I have referred to the idea of "sacrament." The term sacrament itself, of course, is historically a Christian category central to and most prominent in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran communions, though its origins as an idea are clearly grounded in antecedent Jewish and pagan sensibilities. My use of the term in this context is intended to embrace both the general understanding of sacrament shared by these aforementioned religious communities, as well as the specific "sacraments" that in their self understanding they have received and administer. Beyond this, however (and perhaps more importantly, given my more general concerns here), it is also meant to be phenomenologically descriptive of a

sensibility found in other religious traditions that do not necessarily designate that sensibility as "sacramental."

A sacrament then, as a widespread catechetical wisdom would have it, is an action or object in which the sacred is present. But what religious believers may or may not often think about is that both space and the objects that both define and occupy it are always at least potentially sacramental; and may be characterized as "sacred" in either a present or an anticipatory sense. These two senses are not identical, but neither are they unrelated. Both entail some human sensibility about the sacred; but sacred presence is best understood as an address to human beings *from* the sacred, whereas sacred anticipation is best characterized as an address from human beings *to* the sacred.

Considered under the aspect of sacred presence---as *epiphanies*, such as the experiences of the legendary Job and the historical Isaiah mentioned earlier; or as experienced in specific places and things, as in Jacob's ladder dream (Genesis 28) and his subsequent designation of the place where it occurred as Bethel, the "house of God;" or Moses' encounter (Exodus 3) with "I AM" in the burning bush on Mt. Horeb, the "holy mountain;" or the respective designations of a drinking cup and an instrument of torture as "holy grail" and "holy cross" by virtue of their association with Jesus at the last supper and the crucifixion; or as encountered in those holy men and women popularly understood to be "saints"---considered, as I say, in terms of sacred *presence*, spaces and objects and persons are made sacred not by choice of human beings, but rather by the choice of the sacred to reveal itself in and through them. In this sense, human beings lack completely the power to make spaces and objects (let alone themselves) sacred.

Considered under the aspect of sacred *anticipation* however, spaces and material objects may be deemed sacred when they are offered up by human beings to the sacred in the hope of their sanctification---that is, when they are made as a *sacrifice* (literally, a gesture of "making holy"). The impulse to sacrifice is a fundamental human response to the sacred; and its motivating emotion, the very sign of human happiness, is gratitude. Gilbert Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy* that a proper form of thanks for the largesse of creation is some form of humility and restraint, that we should thank God for beer and burgundy by not habitually drinking them to excess. Referring to Oscar Wilde's famous *bon mot* that sunsets are not valued because we cannot pay for sunsets, Chesterton suggested that indeed we can pay for sunsets: we can pay for sunsets by not being Oscar Wilde. For our immediate considerations however, more important than the sacrifice represented in self-restraint is the sacrifice represented in the lavishness and care bestowed by human beings upon the works of our minds and hands that we offer to the sacred. It seems entirely

proper therefore to speak of making "sacred spaces" and "sacred objects" in this anticipatory sense, *but only in this sense*; and it seems unintelligible that anyone would aspire or purport to do so in the absence of an at least implicit sacramental sensibility, however sophisticated or not its conception.

I think it is possible therefore, both historically and phenomenologically, to speak of the human encounter with the sacred as having a "structure" of sacred presence and sacred anticipation, of sacred call and human response. Sacred presence is simultaneously experienced as sacred call; and part of the human response to that call is to seek and anticipate the presence of the sacred.[1] Historically, the most obvious human response to the sacred has been to worship it; and human worship typically entails ritual actions in which the presence of the sacred is invoked. But the experience of the sacred as call and response is not limited to religious ritual. Cultural historian Philip Rieff argues that human culture itself is, in its origins if not its essence, the human response to the sacred. To this I would add (anticipating what is to follow) that cities are the foremost physical form of culture; and that some sort of spatial and formal hierarchy---if only as crude as the simple dichotomy between "sacred" and "profane" precincts---is the distinguishing mark of cities in which artifacts are created for and in response to the sacred.

Rieff argues that every human culture is marked by the specific behaviors that it encourages and the specific behaviors that it prohibits. Books and vows, prayers and parading, law and architecture, music and the sciences, dancing and piety toward parents, theater and athletic competition: each and all of such marks of culture originate as an address to the sacred---which also issues forth a variety of prohibitions, of "shalt nots," of *things that are not to be done*.

Sacred "shalt nots" may include such "rational" prohibitions as idolatries, profanations, murders, thefts,

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[1] In those Christian communions in and to which the category of sacrament is central, specific sacramental gestures are offered not only in the hope that the sacred will make itself present in that which is offered, but in the confidence (strictly speaking, the *faith*) that this will occur---enough confidence to prompt the proclamation that the sacred makes itself and is indeed present in the sacrament *on every occasion* that the sacramental elements are correctly offered. Historically, this has resulted in accusations that such communions are purveyors of magic: that they claim to have a power over the sacred that---according to their critics, and even by my own criteria---human beings by definition cannot have. But the sacramentalist claim is neither that sacred presence is *limited* to the community's sacraments, nor that the community has magical powers to which the sacred is subject. Rather, the claim is simply that the sacred is present in various specific sacraments because it (Christ / God) has *promised* to be. This is precisely the significance of doctrines such as the Roman Catholic notion of *ex opere operato* (that the efficacy of a properly offered sacrament is independent of the moral character of the priest offering it, an understanding shared at least implicitly by the other Christian sacramental communions as well), which have been articulated as a confirmation of St. Paul's recognition that Christians both are, and receive and convey sacred presence in, "earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not us."

betrayals, incests, rapes, abortions, and adulteries. But it will also include apparently irrational prohibitions, emblematic of that universal attitude that Chesterton once referred to as "the Doctrine of Conditional Joy," an idea he found represented most prominently in fairy tales, and paradigmatically in the story of Cinderella: "You may go to the ball, but you must be home by midnight." Both in fairy tales, and for those with a sense of the sacred, human happiness requires a primary and fundamental obedience. But this obedience does not preclude (and in fact sometimes both requires and inspires) other rebellions. Rather, the obedience circumscribes the rebellion, in much the same way as the non-rational circumscribes the rational. Thus for Chesterton (an English patriot), the Irish rebel justly opposes English tyranny, which is

> something he [the rebel] understands only too well; but the true citizen of fairyland obeys something he does not understand at all. In the fairy tale an incomprehensible happiness rests upon an incomprehensible condition. A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeit. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone.

This insistence on a sense of prohibition as a constituent element of sacred sensibility may strike moderns and post-moderns as odd, but only a moment's attention to examples from both literature and everyday speech will confirm it. "If God is dead, everything is permitted," was the conjecture of Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov; and in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "everything" included parricide. But we often express the same idea in a phrase even more mundane: of a social situation in which anything and everything seems possible we do indeed commonly say "there is nothing sacred." A sense of the sacred therefore necessarily seems to include a sense of prohibition as a pre-condition of that fundamental pleasure of agreement that culture affords. It is within the constraints of sacred prohibitions, tight or loose, that every creative freedom in a culture arises, as well as the very possibility of remission and forgiveness for their transgression. The psychoanalytic terms for this personal and cultural dynamic of prohibition and creativity are "repression" and "sublimation;" and Freud well understood what many of his heirs perhaps do not, that there can be no culture without repression. The social effect of culture, Rieff observes, is that individuals learn through a variety of ritual roles and actions to express fixed wants; and the limitation of possibilities is the first pre-requisite of human happiness.

The Sacred in Architecture and the City

What are the marks of a sacramental sensibility in architecture and the city? To dwell even briefly with sacrifice, prohibitions, and obedience as marks of a sense of the sacred is to underscore the fact that these are not exactly prominent themes of contemporary "therapeutic" society. Indeed, late twentieth century art and architecture seem to aptly display the tenor of our era in works that commonly thematize self

assertion over self sacrifice; revolt and entitlement over gratitude; the temporary over the durable; transgression over prohibition; autonomy and the pursuit of power over obedience to legitimate authority; and the deliberate blurring of distinctions over the desire to understand and order things in clear and right relationships to one another. Such themes at any rate are what I understand to be the intent, import, and / or consequence of the written, drawn, and built projects, more or less carefully conceived, of post-modern architects such as Philip Johnson, Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi, James Wines, Stanley Tigerman, Daniel Libeskind, and others. And to the extent that these themes indeed flourish in works of contemporary art and architecture, such works may be regarded as either a deliberate denial of the sacred, or (perhaps) an artistic lamentation of the absence of a shared sense of the sacred in the contemporary world. If I am correct about the marks and effects of the sacred upon human social life however, the one thing these works are not is an *address* to the sacred.

Again then, what are the marks of a sacramental sensibility in architecture and the city? If we are speaking solely in terms of sacred presence, I would reiterate that the sacred appears on its own terms, wherever it chooses; and this could even be in the meanest parking lot or the most vulgar shopping mall. I cite these two examples in particular because I have heard on several occasions sermons and lectures where just this claim has been made; but where the point has seemed to extend beyond the hopeful and astonishing conclusion that the sacred will go to great lengths to find us, to the even more astonishing conclusion that *therefore* parking lots and shopping malls are intrinsically sacred places. My own suspicion is that if there did indeed occur a genuine epiphany at the local mall or parking lot, the urge would be strong to erect some sort of building or monument to mark the place and commemorate the event, in the hope that it might happen again.

If however we speak in terms of sacred anticipation, of architecture built in response and offered to the sacred, let me suggest several characteristics commonly evident in architecture so designed and built:

1) A sense of verticality, anthropologically grounded in our two-legged nature as *homo erectus*, in which height (e.g. towers, domes, and naves) and / or depth (e.g. tombs, grottos, and crypts) are accorded sacred significance.

2) Concern for light (and shadow), as emblematic of the immateriality of the sacred.

3) Care for and delight in craftsmanship, durability, and material particularity---all properly indicative of both the intrinsic, created, immanent goodness of material things and their sacramental, redeemed, transcendent potential.

4) The conscious employment of mathematic or geometric systems as ordering devices emblematic of the structure of the natural order and its rootedness in the sacred.

5) The aspiration to achieve a compositional and artistic unity, whether simple or complex.

6) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of hierarchy: of sacred things (even if they are "plain" and "ordinary" things, sanctified) being in either their grandeur or their humility exceptional. One might summarize all this by saying that sacred architecture seems usually intended to be more or less *monumental*.

Most if not all of these characteristics are common to humanity's great architectural and urban achievements; and from Stonehenge to the pyramids of Egypt, from the temples of Angkor-Thom to the temples of the Yucatan peninsula, from the buildings on the Acropolis to Europe's Gothic cathedrals, from the sacred precincts of Kyoto to the Forbidden City of Beijing, from the domes of St. Basil's in Moscow to the domes of Renaissance Italy, the origins and histories of architecture are largely the origins and histories of sacred architecture. Starting in the west however, and for several centuries now, architects have been able to divorce these particular concerns for verticality, light, craftsmanship, mathematic rationality, unity, and hierarchy from religious architecture *per se*; and have come to view them simply as proper concerns of architecture.

Nevertheless, so long as there existed a sense of building and spatial hierarchies at the scale of the city (and as long as "city" continued to connote a genuine communal enterprise), there remained a *de facto* sense of the sacred about even non-religious works of architecture. Because the architectural care once lavished most conspicuously upon temples and churches came to be applied also to courts and palaces, schools and libraries, hospitals and gymnasia, it is all the more important not to overlook the sacred aspects of these secular institutions. As I noted earlier, justice, knowledge, and healing power are all characteristics commonly attributed to the sacred; and it therefore may represent a more advanced and nuanced rather than a diminished sacred sensibility for communities to commission and architects to devote their talents to the creation not only of temples of worship, but also to what architects themselves often refer to---perhaps not merely pretentiously---as "temples of justice," "temples of learning," and "temples of healing."

Nevertheless, cities and suburbs of today seem altogether different in intent. As often as it is necessary to reiterate that there are some basic material preconditions for anyone's understanding of the good life for human beings; and however tempting it may be to understand commercial high rises---the most noteworthy and monumental works of twentieth century architecture---as "temples of commerce," western culture has it on venerable authority that one cannot serve both God and Money. But it should be evident even to those who deny that particular Authority that there are few signs around us that

contemporary architecture is conceived as an address to sacred order. This makes the rare appearance of genuinely sacred architecture all the more precious, and perhaps explains the astonished delight of design professionals and lay people alike at works such as Antonio Gaudi's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Jozef Plecnik's churches and urban design work in Slovenia, Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, and E. Fay Jones's remarkable series of Texarkana chapels.

Still, most of the evidence found in late twentieth century life and architecture points the other way. Opulently appointed commercial buildings and enormous retail complexes dominate the urban and suburban landscape. Churches, schools, libraries, and other historically "sacred" civic buildings are built meanly, in out of the way places, too frequently careless of the logic of construction and building materials. There is little sign of sacrifice in contemporary building, of lavishness expended unaccompanied by hard calculations of its potential return in dollars or prestige. And, as I alluded earlier, contemporary architectural discourse displays a seemingly endless fascination with transgression and the blurring of distinctions, dominated by men and (increasingly) women quite content to understand architecture first and foremost as a symbol of power and self aggrandizement. The sterility and deserved failure of Marxism as a political philosophy has not diminished the power and truth of Marx's classic description of the effects of modern economic organization and its individualist ethos, not least upon architecture and the city:

> [U]ninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish [this] epoch....All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...

"Modern space" is characteristically non-hierarchical, abstract, rational, universal and undifferentiated; i.e., shapeless, not purpose-specific, and not characterized by the specific formal and figural qualities found in traditional spaces such as public squares, streets, and rooms. In reaction to this twentieth century triumph of modernist spatial ideas in the built environment, a few influential academic architects have been expressing since about the mid-1970s a renewed interest in the notion of "sacred space."

Among those inclined to refer in their work to architectural history and precedent, this interest has been conceived in terms derived largely from the work of religious historian Mircea Eliade, terms which these architects have most often used metaphorically to describe little more than shaped and differentiated spaces designated as "sacred" *by the architect*. (Perhaps this phenomenon is just another expression of the therapeutic and emotivist age that Philip Rieff and others say ours has become: There is nothing sacred, except for that which *individuals* choose to so designate.) Still other architects---some commonly

associated with critical theory and deconstructivism, notably Peter Eisenman---have for several years been promoting a kind of architectural irrationalism in the interest of evoking in persons experiencing their architecture a sense of the grotesque, the strange, the uncanny; an invocation, as it were, of the numinous if not the sacred.

Such invocations have an undeniable poignancy, undermined as they routinely are by the reductionism and disenchantedness of the invokers. A *feeling* for the sacred is deemed highly desirable ("spirituality" is the operative word here); but the sacred itself in the end is invariably understood and "explained" (away) by materialist monists as a function of organic chemistry and psychology to the exclusion of metaphysics. This is not to say that our historic understanding of the sacred is something we come to apart from our own biological nature. Chesterton once remarked that every young man patronizing a brothel is knowingly or not looking for God. But as Philip Rieff observed, Freud (and others) have taught us to play the music backwards, to look down whenever we speak the word "love"---a spiritual and intellectual conceit incommensurate with any notion of a sacred order that both makes claims upon human beings and (not so incidentally) inspires great cooperative enterprises such as beautiful architecture and beautiful cities.

A certain skepticism and suspicion therefore seems warranted, alas, regarding claims to sacred significance occasionally found in apologies for post-modern architecture. For if one retains even the slightest trace of the understanding of the sacred historically common to human beings, the sacred must be regarded as a phenomenon *sui generis*, neither manipulable nor reducible to aesthetic, biological, psychological, sociological, or other categories. Historically and anthropologically, there seems to be a basic structure of sacred-human encounter, one of call and response, presence and anticipation. In sacred order, among people with a sacramental sensibility, human life and work and architecture and cities are offered to the sacred in the hope that the sacred will in turn make itself present in that which is offered. Perhaps the foremost implication of this is that one does not (as the post-moderns would) employ the sacred as a motif or "text." Rather, it is the sacred that employs---making demands, prompting discipline and sacrifice, its power coming not only from the fact that the sacred is our origin and destiny, but that the sacred "takes place" here and now, ever giving back better to human beings that which we offer to it.

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