



The Presence of Absence: Sacred Design Now

Samer Akkach

To cite this article: Samer Akkach (2010) The Presence of Absence: Sacred Design Now, Design Philosophy Papers, 8:1, 49-55

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871310X13968744282836>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 24



View related articles [↗](#)

The Presence of Absence

Sacred Design Now

Samer Akkach

Samer Akkach is Director of Centre for Asian and Middle Eastern Architecture and Associate Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Adelaide.

He is working on the religious, socio-urban and intellectual histories of Damascus in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, focusing on the life and works of 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi.

His recent books include *The Correspondence of 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (1641–1731)* (Brill 2009), *'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Oneworld 2007), *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (SUNY 2005).

Greek philosophers proposed a simple idea: that the governing principle of any domain lies always beyond it. This meant that the governing principle of the visible reality lies beyond its physical confines, which in turn meant that the order of the senses is one thing, while the order of the mind is quite another. This simple, yet powerful, philosophical idea proved to be very popular, so popular, indeed, that it has since dominated not only western thinking but also the thinking of other civilizations that inherited Greek philosophy and system of knowledge. According to this idea, reality is divided into the realm of the *sensible* and the realm of the *intelligible*, with the latter being accorded more significance on the basis of permanence and immutability. The principle that governs the intelligible reality lies, in the same manner, beyond its intelligibility: it is the incomprehensible First Principle, the Immovable Mover, that governs the entire universe.

The “sacred,” as we understand it, derives its meanings, workings, and efficacy from these philosophical assumptions and reasoning, and since the First Principle was identified with a deity in the two major religious traditions which

inherited and operated within the Greek systems of thought, the Judaeo-Christian and the Islamic, the sacred came to belong in the realm of religion and to be anchored in metaphysics. A range of derivatives and related words, such as sacrament, sacrifice, sacrosanct, sacrilege, sacrum, describes its usages and conceptual spectrum, pointing to actions and beliefs concerned primarily with the reverence, service, and sustainment of a transcendental reality – its dictates and manifestations.¹ In this sense, the sacred is the “presence of absence,” the presence through other reality of what in itself cannot be present.²

The efficacy of the sacred, thus understood, depended on the ontological relationship that binds sensible existents to their higher intelligible realities. This ontological bond formed the essence of the symbolic power of the sacred, through which symbolic significance was seen not as an added on or constructed conceptual garnish, but rather as an inherent quality integral to the very fabric of the material object itself, and inextricably united with it in a manner analogous to the way in which natural law inhere within physical phenomena or as mathematical principles reside in the very nature of numerical or geometrical phenomena.³

Through this ontological connection material objects are seen to have the capacity of embodying symbolic significance belonging to a higher order of reality, and through such embodiment to be able to deliver qualities of that higher order. Accordingly, sacred objects and actions were thus cable of delivering aspects of the *sacred* itself and of generating the sense of sacredness in those who are experiencing it. This aspect is still operative today and can be seen in religious rituals.⁴

Despite the polarity of the mundane and transcendental, and the significance accorded to the latter, the sacred, in premodern times, was not perceived, experienced, and sustained in contrast or exclusion to the worldly, the secular, or the profane. At least, this was the case in the Islamic tradition, wherein there were, and still are, no words for the secular and the profane as contrasting adjectives whereby the sacred can be profiled, defined, and comprehended. The world was not sharply polarised into the sacred and the profane as has increasingly become in modern times.

With the collapse of traditional theology, anthropology, and cosmology at the end of the pre-modern times, a new intellectual regime emerged in Europe, which is commonly known as the “Enlightenment.” During the Enlightenment, a “disenchantment of world” took place, a process whereby the realm of the sacred was redefined and its efficacy was severely undermined. This occurred through a number of key shifts in the ways reality was perceived, experienced, and interpreted. Descartes introduced one of these shifts when he considered that the self-conscious mind can, through internal mental process, alone establish truths and reach certainty. Traditionally, this was a divine prerogative. The other

key shift resulted from the rethinking and eventual abandonment of Aristotelian-Ptolemaic philosophy, cosmology, and physics. With this, the concept of “power,” which was previously identified with the Immovable Mover, the incomprehensible source of life and existence that lies outside the confines of the physical world, became immanent in the physical world and was ultimately identified with nature and the sensible.⁵ In other words, the source of power that runs and organises the world was no longer transcendental; it has become natural.

With these major intellectual shifts, the power of symbolism, the inner force of the sacred, was diminished: the cosmic hierarchy was flattened and the ontological relationship upon which the symbol once depended to deliver qualities of the transcendental without mediation, irrespective of the individual understanding, was transformed into a theoretical agency whereby truths and efficacy depended on the human self-conscious understanding of it.

Up until the Enlightenment, “design” in general (though it did not yet go by that name), and architectural design in particular, had access to the sacred through many means, such as religious narratives, myths, dreams, and collective memories, but most importantly, through geometry and numbers. Geometry and numbers were the expression of the sacred *par excellence*, as they were at once the traces and tools of sacred design.⁶ Numbers and geometry were available as mundane tools in everyday life, yet they were also potently loaded with symbolic significance that made them particularly powerful as objects of philosophical and spiritual reflections. The immediacy of their symbolic significance meant that the act of designing could never be just about *firmitas*, *commoditas*, and *venustas*, but first and foremost about an interaction with the cosmological tools and criteria of designing. In this sense, design was, in one form or another, an engagement with the transcendental dimensions of being.⁷

Within the scientific project of the Enlightenment numbers and geometry were reduced to units of measurement and became the necessary tools of scientific experimentation. And as human rationality and the scientific truth became at once the source and measure of dealing with reality, the act of designing became a measurable rational exercise. During the Enlightenment, design was reduced into an activity determined primarily by questions of function, efficiency, and aesthetics, and this trend laid the foundations of the modern ways of understanding of design, both as practice and in education.⁸

Modernity has its roots in the Enlightenment’s intellectual project, and was established upon a fundamental premise: that reason and faith are incompatible, and, consequently, that scientific reasoning and religious thinking are irreconcilable. As the world went scientific, social scientists, like Max Weber for example, who equated modernity with secularity, predicted that as scientific

understanding becomes more highly valued than religious belief, the disenchantment of the world would prevail in modern societies, and that the more a society embraces modern ways of life the more secular this society becomes. Sacred modernity has thus become fundamentally an oxymoron that can only make sense in the realm of fiction.

To reconcile the inherent contraction between the sacred and modernity, religious studies scholars, like Rudolf Otto, established a sharp divide between the *rational* and the *irrational* or *nonrational*, whereby they further alienated the sacred from the credible realm of modern science by relegating it to the nonrational, the ineffable, the mysterious. This in turn stripped the sacred from any remaining conceptual rigour and reduced it to “the *feeling* which remains when the *concept* fails.”⁹ Thus the sacred became primarily an issue of psychology rather than ontology, as it was for thousands of years. The sacred and its concomitant opposites, the profane and the secular, became contrasting forces to be understood and negotiated within one’s own personal space, and not something of cosmological order and communal magnitude as it used to be. While this fits neatly within modernity’s emphasis on individuality, it is questionable whether “personal sacred” is anything more than a contradiction, especially given the growing recognition of the sacred as that which creates community – a community of believers forms around/is formed by that which is held sacred.

Talking about sacred design today leads us to confront the confinement and limitations modernity has imposed upon the sacred. If we are to maintain the restriction of the sacred to personal space, then sacred design will continue to revolve within the sphere of personal interpretations and understandings as it has increasingly become over the last hundred years. If we are to restore to the sacred an aspect of its inherent power, however, a major shift in understanding needs to take place so that the significance of the sacred can re-emerge in a communal or societal space that extends way beyond individuality and personal concerns. This is neither simple nor easy, of course. For even with a pressing global crisis, such as climate change and global warming, and its palpable destructive impact on the planet, there has been no global unity to re-invest the planet with an inviolable sense of “sacredness” profound enough to inspire nations, societies, and individuals to believe and to design their futures with such belief and constructed “sacredness” in mind.

Today, there are many reasons why the sacred needs to be re-empowered through a renewed understanding of its nature and fresh intellectual investment in its significance. One of these reasons is the vigorous resurgence of the religious against all the robust predictions of the prophets of modernity. True, aspects of Western society and ways of living might have become more secular, however, many other societies around the world have become more religious. Religious

expressions in the public sphere have risen, rather than decreased as predicted, even in the West, reaching points of serious conflicts in many Western countries. This new sense of religiosity spreading widely, especially in non-Western societies, is not a revival of pre-modern understandings, as many portray it to be, but rather a whole new sentiment that is able to forge a new partnership with modern science and its prevailing rationality. Today's fundamentalists, for example, work very skilfully and proficiently with modern rationalism, sciences, and technologies, yet they are able to maintain a strict sense of religiosity and a viable religious space in ways many would consider contrary to the fundamental premise of modernity.

Sacred modernity, once an oxymoron, is now a reality. Perhaps the sacred and the religious, despite the arduous efforts of secular modernists, have never really disappeared, nor could ever disappear, for these seem to be an "ineliminable subjective stratum" tied to, and inherent in, the spiritual dimensions of humanity. So rethinking the sacred now presents us with the challenge of confronting the religious, the home ground of the sacred, in new ways. Several questions may define the search for these new ways. Can the sacred be divorced from, or thought of outside, the religious without losing its efficacy and inviolability and being transformed into something else? Is it possible to re-invest the inviolable necessity of the symbolic function, the essence of sacred, in a whole new spectrum of things and actions? How can the unpredictable, mysterious side of the sacred be reconciled with modern scientific rationality? Does today's re-emerging religiosity necessarily require a schizophrenic subjectivity in order to accommodate the demands of both the sacred and the secular? Is there a horizon of thinking today that can give meaning to a contradictory expression, such as "sacred secularity"? And how can we think of the sacred in a post-modern and post-secular society?

Within the current regime of rationality, Marcel Gauchet asserts that a complete departure from religion is possible, and that personal experience, as an "ineliminable subjective stratum underlying the religious phenomenon," can indeed be freed from fixed dogmatic content.¹⁰ In this liberated context, the sacred can be invoked and engaged in two intellectual spheres: psychology and morality. In the realm of psychology the sacred can still manifest as an aesthetic feeling, or as Otto puts it, "the *feeling* which remains when the *concept* fails." Now the concept has failed, all that remained is the unreducible, ineliminable feeling. This refers to the intrinsic feeling that is anchored in the imaginative, not the intellective, faculty, as Gauchet explains: "Our capacity for emotion at the sight of things arises from a basic mode of inscription in being, which connects us with what used to be the meaning of the sacred for thousands of years. Here we are no longer dealing with our manner of thinking the profound nature of things, but of the way we receive their appearance, of the imaginary organisation of our grasp of the

world – of our imaginative rather than our intellectual faculty.”¹¹ Here the sacred can be reinvoked in connection with our emotions within the realm of aesthetic appreciation of art, as well as the realm of spirituality and free spiritual expressions outside the dictates of dogmatic religion. Yet the question remains as to what *moral parameters*, if any, guide our aesthetic experiences and underlie the “imaginary organisation of our grasp of the world”? Who sets such parameters, and for what end? Or should the aesthetic experience be sought for pure pleasure?

In the realm of morality, the sacred can manifest in the form of inviolable moral code for human actions. But whereas in the realm of psychology invoking the sacred draws on an intrinsic human nature, feelings and emotions, morality, considered free of inviolable religious laws, cannot rely on the intrinsic and the imaginative but has to move into the deliberate and the intellectual, wherein the inviolability will have to be constructed collectively. Here the efficacy of the sacred would hinge on the level of human conviction, belief in, and adherence to, the constructed sacredness. Yet a sense of sacredness can never be constructed; it can only emerge in a community formed by a shared belief in the inviolable values of certain things. But in a world wherein the absolute otherness of a transcendental being no longer enforces and guards the inviolability of things, the question remains as to whether human-centred social orders and moral codes can ever provide the immaterial power and inner bond required for the re-emergence of the sacred. “When the gods abandon the world,” Gauchet explains, “when they stop coming to notify us of their otherness to it, the world itself begins to appear other, to disclose an imaginary depth that becomes the object of a special quest, constraining its purpose and referring only to itself.”¹² In this horizontal self-referential context, wherein proliferates “obsessive investigations of the fracturing of everyday life, of internal transcendence of appearances, of the world being expressed as other to itself,”¹³ the inviolable otherness of the sacred will have to be evoked from deep within us rather than from without.

Notes

1. See Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1990).
2. Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. Trans. by Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 203.
3. See Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: an Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany: SUNY, 2005), 10–13; and Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa* (Ithaca: SEAP, 1985), 1–4.
4. See Paul Tillich, “The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,” in Sidney Hook (ed.), *Religious Experience and*

- Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 3–11; and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (ed.), *Mircea Eliade: Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Art* (New York: Crossroad, 1986).
5. See Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 18–44.
 6. See Robert Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry: Philosophy and Practice* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).
 7. See Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture*.
 8. See Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1983).
 9. See Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. By J. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1926, 4th ed.), vii.
 10. Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, 200.
 11. *Ibid.*, 203.
 12. *Ibid.*, 203.
 13. *Ibid.*, 203.