

space
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Even if we ignored reports of the celebrated “spatial turn” in cultural theory and glanced only at the Baroque intricacy of the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s enormous entry on “space,” we might conclude that the English word—and its Latin and French antecedents—has had a wide range of uses in diverse contexts. To refine our understanding of “space” for those who study religious practice and material culture, it might help to begin by setting aside some disciplinary-specific terminology and challenging some vernacular uses. In other words, let’s start by indicating what “space” is *not*. Most important, for our purposes “space” is not a preexisting static container isolated from other spaces. Space is not an absence waiting for a presence. It’s not undifferentiated vacuity, a void to be filled. It’s not static or outside of the flow of time. It’s not self-contained or beyond the flow of causes. But then what is space? Referring to this photograph of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel at Washington’s Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (Figure 1) to illustrate the broader points, we can propose a list of defining features: “space,” I suggest, is *differentiated*, *kinetic*, *interrelated*, *generated*, and *generative*.

If we use this image of a woman praying in a chapel to anchor our discussion, we’re reminded, first, that religion-as-practiced has little to do with the most abstract notions of space. Lay devotees rarely employ generic notions, as with philosophical conceptions of space as an a priori category of thought or mathematical ideas of space as a set of points in an imagined field. For religious practice, space is usually *differentiated*. Religious space is a particular space. I didn’t think to ask this Catholic woman of Mexican descent I encountered in 2007 how she’d describe the chapel, but in my years of fieldwork at shrines I’ve found that devotees, lay and clerical, rarely

FIG 1

A Latina devotee kneels in prayer in 2007 at the shrine's Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel, which includes a mosaic designed by Mary Reardon (1912–2002) and manufactured by Ravenna Mosaic Company. Photograph by the author and used with the permission of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.



invoke the abstract singular noun. Speakers refer to “this space” or, turning to the plural, “spaces,” but those sites are specific locales. This Latina migrant and the other pilgrims I’ve studied are not unique. Some peoples, including the southern Sami of Scandinavia, have no term for abstract space (Rydving 2004) but only labels for particular spaces—from the vertical strip on either side of a tent’s opening (*bejsjerne*) to the world of the departed (*aajmoe*). Some languages—including Latin, Arabic, and Sanskrit—allow talk about abstract space, but they also distinguish generic spatiality from specific locales. In Latin, it’s the distinction between *spatium* and *locum*, and for the kneeling Marian devotee, who is a Spanish-speaker, it’s the difference between *el espacio* (space) and *un lugar* (a place). To make a similar point, some geographers have used the term “place” to classify a “type of space that is defined by . . . the lived experiences of people” (Hubbard, Kitchin, and Valentine 2004: 5), and it’s possible to talk about the Mexican chapel in those terms, as a devotional “place.” Similarly, we also could call the shrine—as well as the surrounding neighborhood, Brookland, and the city, Washington—“places.”

Rather than employ two terms to acknowledge the difference inscribed in this distinction, however, we might instead classify diverse “spaces” on a continuum between differentiated and undifferentiated, where “differentiated” means imaginatively figured and/or sensually encountered locales that are deemed more or less “special,” “singular,” or “set apart” (Knott 2005: 61; Taves 2009: 28–35). The distinctions here are not between more or less “real” — or “authentic” — locales, since the never-experienced contours of a desired terminus (Christ’s heaven or Amida’s Pure Land) or a distant territory (Jerusalem or Mecca) might orient daily life and elicit affective response more than tangible sites nearby. The poles on the continuum function as imagined extremes. At the one end are sites most fully marked by multisensorial encounters and colored by affective attachments, such as the chapel in Washington with its mosaic of the Virgin of Guadalupe or the shelf in the devotee’s living room where a similar image is enshrined. At the continuum’s other pole are unnamed generic locales farthest from the devotee’s sensorial range and beyond the community’s cognitive map.

Using this continuum model offers several advantages for the scholar of religious material culture. Understanding differentiated “religious” space as one kind of “special” space and positing a scale of singularity acknowledges religion’s interaction with biological and cultural factors affecting human life and expands the potential locales studied to include those—like the movie theater and the sports stadium—that might be regarded as “secular.” While still allowing for distinctions, this approach reminds us that there are no purely profane or solely sacred spaces. That’s because, as I argue below, religious space is always interrelated with “nature” and with “culture,” and so-called “secular” forces always impact religion to some degree.

To classify a site on this spatial continuum it’s necessary to clarify what we mean by “special” and “religious.” A space might be designated as special because it is “ideal”—such as the perfection of Mary’s celestial realm—or because it seems “anomalous”—as with the Mexican site of the Virgin’s apparition (Taves 2009: 35–46). There are no “universal” standards for isolating reified binaries called “religion” and “secularity,” but we can stipulate for our purposes that religions are “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (Tweed 2006: 54). In other words, religions are about dwelling and crossing, about finding a place and moving across space. Devotees enact the kinetics of dwelling and crossing as

they use tropes, narratives, rituals, and artifacts to appeal to suprahuman forces and map the ultimate horizon of human life. So some differentiated spaces might be deemed “religious”—by devotees and/or by those who study them—to the extent they meet two criteria: at that site humans have appealed to suprahuman forces (like the Virgin of Guadalupe) and imagined an ultimate horizon (like Mary’s celestial realm, heaven).

The differentiated space of the religious is also *kinetic*. Spaces are processes, not things. Propelled along by natural-cultural flows, they change over time. Some linguistic usage juxtaposes space and time. The Latin *spatium* and the English *space* refer to both extension and duration, a temporal and spatial “interval.” So does the Japanese word *ma*, which has implications for the arts, since it refers not only to the space between walls in architecture but also the aesthetically appropriate intervals of “no action” in performance (Pilgrim 1986). This interlocking of the temporal and the spatial also characterizes the material culture of religious practice, including the Mexican chapel. In other words, that worship space has a history. The chapel was dedicated in 1967, just after legislators passed the 1965 federal immigration law but before anyone could notice that statute’s dramatic demographic effects, and it now has much more resonance—and, shrine officials report, many more visitors—than it did during the late 1960s. In that sense, the space has changed, as more migrants from Latin America seek out the patroness of the Americas. The chapel’s design also self-consciously propels devotees back to the moment in 1531 when the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego on a hill outside Mexico City. That miraculous encounter is memorialized in the mosaic’s image of a kneeling Juan Diego, who raises his arms as he gazes up at the glowing Virgin of Guadalupe, and that event is architecturally re-created in the chapel’s curved contours, which have a transtemporal function: “the undulation of the walls gives the visitor the felling of being ‘present’ during the apparition” (Basilica 2007: 75).

This kinetic chapel, which has both extension and duration, connects to other sites and events; and spaces are also *interrelated*. For this Latina and many other visitors, the chapel is linked with domestic spaces and childhood memories, since they grew up with images of the Virgin of Guadalupe in their home. The chapel also opens out to other times and wider spaces. As one of forty-five chapels and ten oratories in that domed Washington shrine, which clerical promoters have marketed as a “national” site that “complements” the US Capitol Building and claims civic space, the chapel

connects Marian devotion and American identity (Tweed 2011). Like the shrine's nineteen other ethnic chapels consecrated by 2010, the Virgin of Guadalupe chapel allows US Latino migrants to feel they have a place in the Catholic Church and American society. Yet the central image above the altar is, after all, Mexico's national patroness, and the polychromatic tiles on the right wall allude to the Virgin's shrine in Mexico City. So it is a Mexican national space. As the figures represented on the mosaic indicate, however, it's also a transnational space. The mosaic catalogs a who's who of Catholic saints in the Americas, including Rose of Lima, Ann Seton, and Katherine Tekawitha, and juxtaposes tiled renderings of lay devotees from, for example, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Canada. So the translocative and transtemporal chapel propels visitors in time and space, back to earlier miraculous interventions and exemplary actions and up and down sacred sites in the Western Hemisphere.

Space is interrelated in another way. To suggest that the dynamics of religious practice can be understood as a "confluence" is to use aquatic metaphors to emphasize the mutual inter-causality of the biological and the cultural—and, in turn, to acknowledge that converging cultural "streams"—political, social, and economic—impact religions as they emerge from the swirl of transfluvial currents. So political processes, social relations, and economic forces mark religious spaces, and, therefore, they are sites where power is negotiated as meaning is made. Further, whether we consider a sacred mountain, a tattooed icon, or a devotional chapel there are no purely "natural" or exclusively "cultural" spaces. The chapel's marble walls and tile mosaics include "natural" materials, for example, but the political antagonisms of early-twentieth century Mexican church–state relations and the social dislocation of late-twentieth century transnational migration also have encoded devotions. The shrine's clerical leaders regularly protested Mexico's restrictions on Catholicism during the 1920s and 1930s, and, as I've hinted, more recently the chapel's central image has attracted post-1960s Latin American migrants because that familiar symbol recalls the homeland and signals ethnic identity.

The kinetic and interrelated spaces of religious practice are produced from the swirl of transfluvial currents and, in turn, exert causal influence as they mix with other currents along the way. Never inert preexisting containers, devotional spaces are both *generated* and *generative*. They make and are made. Generated spaces, which come into being through embodied perception, figurative imagination, and ritual practice, include many

intermediate locales—from the street to the empire—but piety situates practitioners in four primary chronotopes or space-times: the body, the home, the homeland, and the cosmos. Yet as the image of the kneeling devotee reminds us, the confluence of organic-cultural flows—and spatial orientation—always begins with bodies, biologically constrained and culturally coded selves. The “sensory cultures” (Promey and Brisman 2010: 198) that scholars of material religion study are co-produced by embodied selves interacting with sensorial environments encountered through sound, touch, smell, and sight. This multisensorial “interaction” begins with the brain and two modes of spatial cognition: autocentric (self-centered) and allocentric (object-centered) reference frames. Autocentric framing involves the parietal neocortex and uses the three body-axes to orient humans in the immediate environment. So this woman kneeling in prayer might say the Virgin is “above” and the tiled image of the Mexico City shrine is on the wall to her “right.” And gazing at that representation of the Mexican shrine might prompt her to shift to allocentric framing, which employs fixed (not relative) points and helps navigate space beyond the body and its immediate environment. Drawing on the hippocampus and adjacent cortical and subcortical structures as well as culturally transmitted symbols (the Virgin of Guadalupe) and learned linguistic labels (Spanish terms for directions), this praying devotee might also note that Mary’s Mexican shrine—and her own homeland—is “south” (*sur*). So spatial orientation involves neurons firing and cultures coding, just as special spaces, like the Washington chapel where this devotee kneels to orient herself, are always both “natural” and “cultural” sites, always more than the stuff—in this case, marble and tile—that forms and decorates them. This prayer site takes on meaning—and negotiates social power—through the use of symbol, narrative, and ritual. It becomes this particular chapel only through the shared symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the familiar story about the historic apparition, and the contemporary migrant’s kneeling supplication.

At the same time, the space also is generative. Spaces do things. We might say playfully: spaces are people too. Some scholars have suggested that images perform actions—weep, cajole, and comfort—and, in a similar way, spaces are structures that exert agency. We might re-imagine them as characters—not just settings—in our scholarly narratives. What do those quasi-characters do? Well, it depends on the scale, form, and ornamentation of the space. For example, the shrine’s Upper Church, measuring 399 feet along the nave and 159 feet in height from the floor to central dome, evokes different

sensations and produces different associations than the small enclosure dedicated to the Mexican patroness on the nave aisle. Crossing from the narthex to the nave, the viewer's eye is drawn down the long central aisle, past the refracted light of Great Dome's thirty-six stained glass windows, and toward the enormous red and gold mosaic, *Christ in Majesty*, which covers 3,610 square feet and dominates the north apse (Basilica 2007: 90). The furrowed brow and piercing gaze of the stern, even frightening, divine judge at the nave's terminus creates a very different mood than the intimate chapel's smaller image of the humble Virgin, an accessible intercessor suspended in perpetual prayer whose downward glance averts her eyes from the supplicant's vision. And whether we attend to the intimate chapel or the imposing nave, it becomes clear that space—and special spaces of many kinds and multiple scales—are important for the pious, who make the spaces that, in turn, make them.

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