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Student Name: Maria Meier		
Student University Email: 2309714@student.uwtsd.ac.uk		
Module code: HPCA7014	Student ID number:	Educational support needs: Yes/NoX
Module title: Sacred Geography	2309714	
Assignment title: To examine: <i>Is sacred space a human construct or a natural phenomenon? Discuss this question through a research project with reference to the work of at least three theorists.</i>		
Assignment due date 6 January 2025		
This assignment is for the module of the degree 1 st ☐ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☒ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐		
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**Holy Dirt and the Chimayo Valley:
How Changing Times and Cultures Shape the Idea Sacredness
Word Count: 5380**

Introduction

This essay examines the question of whether sacred space is a human construct or a human phenomenon. To explore the issue, the essay focuses on a site known as the Santuario de Chimayo (or Chimayo Shrine) located in the north-central part of the state of New Mexico in the US. For over two centuries, this church has drawn pilgrims seeking to collect dirt believed to possess healing properties. Oral history cites a former hot spring at the same location that, before Spanish colonization, was considered by the local indigenous population to have similar healing powers.

The word "chimayo" derives from the area's indigenous name, *Tsi Mayoh*, meaning 'land of the good, flaked stone'.¹ This region in north-central New Mexico sits surrounded by the state's four highest mountain peaks which sit at cardinal points, thus adding to the natural allure and the belief in the area's spiritual powers. Initially, this study intended to focus solely on the Santuario, a Roman Catholic church anchoring the surrounding community, focusing on the persistence of the belief in the sacredness of the dirt that visitors, both faithful and curious continue to travel to the church to collect from a small hole in its floor, possibly encouraged by the testimonials and photos lining the walls that attest to its miraculous properties. However, further research revealed that the church's story is inextricably linked to the broader history of the surrounding area referred to as the Chimayo Valley, including the belief system of the indigenous peoples that predate the arrival of Europeans. Consequently, this paper expands its scope to consider sacred space in the context of the entire region.

New Mexico is described as a land of three cultures—Indigenous, Spanish, and Anglo, each period bringing distinct perspectives, cultures and relationships with their surroundings. This paper will use these three cultures and their historic periods to examine the evolving notion of sacredness in the Chimayo region. Within each era, the paper will provide an overview of the relevant historical context; which, if any, of the primary theories of sacred space apply to the situation; and finally, what is the significance of using the theory's framework, or discarding to develop a more in-depth understanding of how the generations of inhabitants of the Chimayo Valley have interacted with their surrounding landscape and applied their understanding of the sacredness of the land they inhabit. By examining this unique intersection of natural history, human reverence and living cultures that inhabited the area, the paper aims to illuminate how sacred space is both shaped by and embedded in the landscape.

The Place

The Chimayó Valley, was shaped by ancient volcanic activity.² This history is reflected in numerous local natural landmarks, from dormant volcanic peaks that rise to over 13,000 feet (approximately 3,900 meters) to valleys carved by ancient lava flows. In the Chimayo region, the interplay of geography resulted in fertile valleys nourished by river systems, hills, mesas and hot springs. This natural confluence of resources created a region uniquely suited to human settlement, attracting waves of inhabitants over millennia. While many of the area's hot springs have disappeared, others remain, further underscoring the region's volcanic origins.

¹ Don J. Unser. *Chimayo Valley Traditions*. Querencias Series. 1st ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014, p. 5.

² Unser, p. 7.

In the pre-colonial era, the Tewa (Pueblo) people revered the area for its hot springs, believed to have curative powers, and its alignment with one of the region's four sacred peaks central to Tewa cosmology. During the Spanish colonial period, a Catholic priest reportedly experienced a vision identifying the dirt of the now-dry hot springs as holy and healing. The construction of El Santuario de Chimayo followed, and today, the church remains a focal point for Holy Week pilgrims, some traveling up to 90 miles on foot. In the modern era, federal designation of adjacent land as open space has preserved the area's environmental integrity while mandating public accessibility, raising questions about the interplay between secular mandates and sacred designations. Concurrently, the term "sacred" has been secularized and commodified, branding the area as a tourist destination. Unlike ancient European sacred sites, Chimayo's cultural significance persists within a living community, prompting inquiries into whether conflicting notions of sacredness can coexist or if essential aspects are diminished.

Place names will reflect those found in cited references or official government sources. Any translations from Spanish to English will be provided by the author, while translations from indigenous languages will be cited accordingly.

The Indigenous Period - Cultural and Cosmological Connections to the Land

Humans have inhabited the American Southwest, including present-day New Mexico, for at least 20,000 years. Though the exact timeline is debated and remains controversial, there is evidence of even earlier occupation. Around 1100 CE, permanent settlements began to emerge in what is now the Chimayo Valley, likely due to sustained droughts that prompted migrations. The valley's fertile land and water sources would have made it an attractive site for agriculturally based communities.

"Tewa" refers to groups of previously nomadic peoples who settled in the areas of modern New Mexico, southern Colorado, and northwestern Arizona. They share a common language or linguistic roots, as well as certain cultural traits and cosmological beliefs. Today, there are nineteen Pueblos that are recognized formally by the US government.³ Encircling the Chimayo Valley are four tribes or Indigenous nations: the Pueblos of Taos, Nambé, Ohkay Owingeh (formally known as San Juan) and Picurís. These modern Tewa communities retain the term "pueblo," which was introduced by early Spanish explorers to describe their complex, multi-level housing structures. In Spanish, "pueblo" can refer to both a community and a group of people.

Without written records, it is challenging to generalize about North American Indigenous cultures, but there is enough evidence to draw broad principles regarding their interaction with the land.⁴ For most Indigenous cultures, 'nothing separated humans from their environment.'⁵ For the Tewa people of this region, cosmology was deeply intertwined with their natural surroundings. The Tewa delineated their territory to create a "beautiful order," or cosmology, which shaped their sacred stories and worldview.⁶ Natural features such as mountain peaks, lakes, and river that were aligned with the four cardinal points were considered sacred as they served as home to deities who were the source of creation stories. Some mountain peaks were so revered that only specific tribal members could access them, and even then, only at certain times of the year.⁷ This deep connection to the landscape imbued the Chimayo

³ Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. "New Mexico's 19 Pueblos | Indian Pueblo Cultural Center," May 8, 2023. <https://indianpueblo.org/new-mexicos-19-pueblos>.

⁴ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions*. New York [u.a.]: New York University Press, 2012a, p. 43.

⁵ Joy H. Greenberg and Gregory Greenberg. "Native American Narratives as Ecoethical Discourse in Land-use Consultations." *Wicazo Sa Review* 28, no. 2 (2013): 30–59, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/10.5749/wicazosareview.28.2.0030>, p. 34.

⁶ Unser, p.14

⁷ Unser, p. 8

Valley with an enduring sense of sacredness. Indeed, for Indigenous peoples of the Americas, "all land is sacred, and some even more so."

The term 'cosmo-organisms' has been coined to describe entities central to Indigenous creation myths.⁸ For the Pueblo people of New Mexico, these cosmo-organisms include sacred mountains that mark migration sites and symbolize spiritual relationships with life forms involved in ceremonial practices. Among these, the distant mountain Tsi-Mayoh and its three companion peaks hold special symbolic significance.

Oral history and early 20th-century anthropological research document the Tewa people's profound relationship with their landscape. Tradition dictated midsummer pilgrimages to sacred shrines throughout the region and the maintenance of trails leading to steep mountain paths. These shrines were often natural formations such as caves, rock formations, or pools of water, rather than permanent structures. Geographic features aligned with the cardinal points were believed to imbue a location with heightened sacredness. Overlooking the Santuario is Tsi Mayoh Hill, described as an "earth navel" or the sacred center of the Tewa world.⁹ The hill and its surrounding landscape held profound cosmological significance for the Tewa people. In 1916, an anthropologist recorded stories of a Tewa Pueblo called *Tsimajo 'onwi*, located near a spring that later became the site of the Chimayo shrine. According to the elder interviewed, local legend told of twin deities who defeated a giant living in a nearby hill called "Tsi-Mayoh", causing fire to erupt and drying the spring. What was left behind was sacred mud with healing properties.¹⁰

It is easy to see how the theory established by Eliade on sacred space being marked by a sense of transcendence or connection to the divine applies to the Tewa's relationship to the land that existed before colonization. One can argue that philosophy continues today though constrained by the context of the larger society in which these communities exist. Specifically, as he speaks to the concept of an 'axis mundi', a central point around which the world is organized.¹¹ This corresponds directly to the Tewa cosmological concept of 'earth navels' or sites that connect their world to the divine. This association reinforces the hill's role as a sacred space, imbuing the surrounding landscape with cosmological and spiritual significance.

Further, Eliade also relies heavily on the role of myth or creation story to frame his theory. His 'time of origins', derived from his study of aboriginal peoples can also clearly apply to the Tewa cosmology that believes in a time of creation and divine intervention. The eruption of fire, the drying of the spring, and the emergence of healing mud mark the space as not just physically unique but divinely directed. These events redefined the space as sacred, making it a site of ongoing interaction with the divine entities of their world.

However, it would be an incomplete assessment to simply overlay Eliade's theory. Because, all societies, even if they leave no written records are complex. Though Durkheim primarily addresses the human constructs, both societal and physical, which lead to a notion of sacredness, he also explores how sacred spaces, rituals, and symbols arise from collective social practices. He also introduces the concept of *collective effervescence*, which describes the shared emotional energy experienced during communal religious rituals.¹² While it can only be conjectured that this would be an accurate description of the Tewa

⁸ Greenberg, p. 42.

⁹ Brett Hendrickson, "The Interweaving of Pilgrimage and Tourism at the Santuario De Chimayó." *U.S.Catholic Historian* 34, no. 3 (2016): 127–145 <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/26156328>, p. 138.

¹⁰ Unser, p. 16.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade and Willard R. (Willard Ropes) Trask. *The Sacred and the Profane : The Nature of Religion* Harcourt Brace, 1959, p. 38.

¹² Emile Durkheim and Karen E. (Karen Elise) Fields. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life : Pbk* Free Press, 1995, p.322.

world of this period, it may be extrapolated based on the current understanding of Native American spirituality that this is a fitting categorization.¹³

The significance of Tewa cosmology, which defined the sacredness of the land, extends far beyond the period when the Tewa were the sole inhabitants of this region. Despite the absence of written records, their creation stories carry a profound transcendence that remains relevant today. Most importantly, the Tewa belief system, their interaction with the landscape, and their imbuing of specific geographic areas with divine meaning established a framework that influenced how subsequent cultures perceived the area.

Eliade might argue that this divine presence or transcendence was inherent to the land; Durkheim, on the other hand, might provide a sociological explanation, suggesting that successive cultures borrow and adapt these sacred traditions. Likely, it is a combination of factors. What is clear is that the existing notions of sacredness were pivotal during the Spanish colonial era, allowing the area now known as Chimayo to be reshaped while retaining its essential spiritual significance.

Spanish Colonisation and Christianization

The Spanish interaction with Indigenous cultures in the region that became New Mexico was definitively divided into two phases. The first arrival of Spanish explorers around 1598 was a continuation of the Spanish crown's approach that began with the destruction of the Aztec Empire culminating with the conquering of Tenochtitlan, modern-day Mexico City in 1521. The interactions were brutal resulting in the direct or indirect death of significant portions of indigenous communities and cultures. Those who survived were enslaved to sustain Spanish commercialization of the resources that the New World provided. So, too, was the case in the empire's northernmost regions around the Chimayo Valley. The Catholic Church, which was a vehicle for subjugating the indigenous, reorganized remaining Tewa communities around churches demanding conversion and renamed them according to corresponding saint's days. Some of the pueblos maintain the Spanish names today such as Santa Ana, San Ildefonso, and San Felipe Pueblos while some have, in recent years, reclaimed their original Tewa name.

In 1680 a violent uprising by the Tewa warriors drove Spanish settlers out of the northern half New Mexico. They retreated to larger settlements under the Spanish army's protection for twelve years until they were able to return and re-establish towns and communities. After this time, while still under colonial subjugation, the local government structure moved to incorporate the Tewa communities into the societal structure even allocating parcels of land that were solely under the domain of the Pueblos.¹⁴ It may have been a mere practicality that in these isolated communities, keeping peace with any other surrounding peoples, especially those who knew how to cultivate the land was essential to survival.

With regards to religious and spiritual beliefs, the Roman Catholic Church remained a central part of local governance. However, there is research that indicates as early as the mid-1550s, that Spanish priests were creating hybrid religious texts that incorporated Indigenous traditions, to aid in their evangelization efforts.¹⁵ It may be the case that the Catholic Church's evangelization in the Americas was more nuanced than commonly perceived. In this light, it becomes easier to understand how a sacred Tewa site in northern New Mexico was incorporated into the region's evolving belief system.

Surviving records are scant but there are references from the late 1700s to early 1800s document settlers traveling to Chimayo to access the healing mud, which remained central to the community.

¹³ Campion, p.42.

¹⁴ Charles R Cutter. "The Administration of Law in Colonial New Mexico." *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 1 (1998): 99–115. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3124735>, p. 112

¹⁵ Garry Sparks. "The Use of Mayan Scripture in the Americas' First Christian Theology, *Numen*, No. 4, Vol. 61 (2014): 396-429. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24644794>, p. 397.

During this period, a devastating smallpox outbreak swept through the region, further solidifying the site's sanctity. Desperate for relief amid the absence of medical knowledge, people sought healing from the sacred mud.¹⁶ While no definitive records exist, it is plausible that the Catholic Church, recognizing the community's suffering, chose not to dissuade them from seeking relief at the site.

In 1813, Father Bernard Abeyta, the local priest for the area, reported experiencing a miraculous event on the property. While performing penance, he was guided by a bright light to an ornate wooden crucifix protruding from the ground. Each time the crucifix was moved to the parish church a few miles away, it inexplicably "returned" to the original site. Interpreting this as divine will, Abeyta built a church on the property in 1816 that he named the "Santuario de Chimayo". The structure included a small side room with a hole in the floor so people could continue to access the healing earth upon which the church sat.

It is unclear when the spring dried up and the mud became dry dirt or whether this was a natural phenomenon in an area that experiences drought or intentional manipulation by those constructing the church. It is a significant shift for marking a new era for Chimayo in which an indigenous tradition and belief was appropriated into the dominant culture and remade to become the central point of the community and region and create a unique and enduring site of reverence that continues to this day.

As a proponent of sacred space as a human construct, Durkheim's theory would lend itself to this situation and time, when the hierarchical Roman Catholic Church transformed how societies and pre-existing cultures defined sacredness and interacted with the space around them.

Durkheim offered that the sacred is not an inherent property of a place, object, or practice but is instead socially constructed, emerging from collective beliefs, rituals, and the meanings that communities assign to specific elements of their environment. Here might be one of the first recorded examples of how sacredness is not a static concept but evolves and reshapes itself. At Chimayo, whether it was formally acknowledged or not, saw Indigenous traditions blending with Spanish beliefs and evolving community practices.

It was not by accident that this happened. As Durkheim would argue, sacred spaces arise from the collective needs of a society, functioning to maintain social cohesion. For the Tewa people, the land and its sacred sites were integral to their cosmology and identity, embodying their connection to the environment and spiritual world. With the arrival of the Spanish colonists, the Catholic Church played a pivotal role in redefining sacredness to align with colonial objectives, using religion as a tool to subjugate and reorganize Indigenous and Spanish communities alike into a hybrid.

Once the approach to governing indigenous communities had evolved following the violence of the Pueblo Revolt, the new order sought to instill a sense of order, if not equality, that allowed for the society's survival. Here, too, Durkheim is applicable as he emphasized the unifying role of sacred spaces in bringing communities together. This ongoing process illustrates the adaptability and resilience of sacred spaces, which reflect the evolving needs and power dynamics of the societies that define them.

Though, here, too, this paper will argue, that one theory alone may not be enough to more fully define or explain the dynamics of the era. Returning to Eliade's idea of sacred space as an "axis mundi" can be applied to the apparition of the cross of Father Abeyta protruding from the ground illustrates the axis mundi within the Christian culture. Whether the story was fabricated or really happened, it served to represent a tangible mundane connection to the divine.

Becoming American

Westward expansion by the United States eventually ran up against the remnants of the Spanish empire in North America which was now controlled by Mexico following its independence from Spain. Following a war and subsequent treaty in 1848, Mexico ceded to the US what became the territories and

¹⁶ Unser, p. 27.

later the states of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona to the United States. For New Mexico, the change had significant political and cultural changes.

With a constitutional foundation of separation of church and state, the influence of the Catholic Church disappeared except informally at the local level. Culturally, white settlers from the East brought a Protestant ethic to the new towns they built. The arrival of the railroad brought additional commerce and trade though northern communities remained isolated. The American government's policy towards the indigenous population was based on the eradication of communities and culture. By the late nineteenth century, word of the state's natural beauty was making its way eastward. An 1891 letter to the editor of the state's earliest English-language newspaper, addressed the pilgrimages to Chimayo and urged the expansion of a railroad line to increase access to the location. If not earlier, this marks a point of transition into the modern era for a remote sacred site to become a tourist destination.¹⁷

As the territory of New Mexico transitioned into the State of New Mexico, the federal government bought up large swaths of land. The designation of these areas as "public lands" had the effect of displacing existing residents. Further, while the stated intention was to create space for public recreation, these areas were opened to mining and timber interests.¹⁸

The pilgrimages to Chimayo continued as a local cultural practice with little notice until the events of World War II brought new attention to the area. Sometime in the 1850's, residents of the Chimayo community built a second church near the Santuario. This one was dedicated to Santo Niño de Atocha, a Spanish saint with unclear origins. The legend of the saint say he wanders the area at nights delivering miracles to those in need. In return, people place offerings of shoes before the statue to replace those he wears out in his holy wanderings. In 1942 after a fierce battle in the Philippine Islands, American troops surrendered to the Japanese army. The prisoners of war were marched on what became known as the Bataan Death March where thousands died. A number of the American troops were from New Mexico and Hispanic, deeply entrenched in the beliefs of Chimayo and the legend of Santo Nino. Those who survived made a pilgrimage to the two churches on Good Friday of 1946, beginning a tradition that continues today. A pilgrimage of over a ninety-mile route, it now attracts tens of thousands as well as media attention from around the world.¹⁹

The civil rights movement in the United States, which emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s within Black and African American population, quickly expanded to include other minority groups, including Hispanics and Native Americans. While each group's demands for equality were unique, economic opportunity, self-governance, and access to traditional lands were central to the struggles of communities in American Southwest. For Native American groups, control of traditional lands became and continues to be a central issue. Simultaneously, the rise of the environmental movement brought national attention to the ecological and social impacts of development, prompting calls for the U.S. government to address the needs of affected communities.

Over the past two decades, the focus on the reclamation and protection of traditional lands for Native American communities has only grown. Federal, state, and local governments have grappled with competing priorities, such as timber, mineral, gas and oil extraction, which often target open spaces that hold deep cultural and spiritual significance for Indigenous groups.

A landmark moment in this struggle occurred in the early 1970s when the Taos Pueblo of northern New Mexico became the first Indigenous nation in U.S. history to have land returned to it by the

¹⁷ Jeremy R Ricketts. "Land of (Re) Enchantment: Tourism and Sacred Space at Roswell and Chimayó, New Mexico." *Journal of the Southwest* 53, no. 2 (2011): 239–261, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/41710086>, p. 245.

¹⁸ Paul Frymer, "A Rush and a Push and the Land is Ours": Territorial Expansion, Land Policy, and U.S. State Formation." *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 1 (2014): 119–144, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/43281105>, p. 122.

¹⁹ Ricketts, p. 247.

federal government. After a 67-year battle, the Pueblo regained control of their Blue Lakes region, a site integral to their creation story, and which had been seized just before statehood and exploited for logging and mining.

In 2003, Democratic members of Congress, introduced the Native American Sacred Lands Act, (Gov Track) which sought to formalize federally recognized Indigenous communities' rights to access and steward lands individual tribes considered sacred. The bill's formal definition of sacred land said it was to be 'sacred by virtue of its traditional cultural or religious significance or ceremonial use,' and that the land be used with 'ceremonies...from that particular location.'²⁰

The bill failed to gain sufficient support but it, perhaps unintentionally, served to illustrate a cultural and political trend in the US. The term "sacred land," has become the purview alone of Native Americans. While land protection and access to traditional areas may well be a valid and necessary endeavor, the parlance could have the unintended result of unintentionally excluding other communities or limiting their ability to advocate for the protection of sites important to them.

It may not be possible to create a connection with any degree of certainty, but the rise in formal definitions of sacred land also corresponds with an increase in a branch of New Age beliefs, in the United States. A decline in Christianity has seen an increase in personal and amalgamated belief systems in recent decades, and in the US, this includes assuming a generalized belief in 'Native American spirituality.'²¹

While the area of Chimayo is not facing threats, the larger region continues to illustrate a balancing act of interests on the part of the government, and either directly or indirectly considering what role one or more groups' notion of sacredness can or should play when considering the interests of the whole.

As societies become more complex, their needs from their natural and constructed surroundings increase as do the diversity of these needs. It is, therefore, fitting to look to Bender's theory of contested landscape to offer a way to think about how this region may change or struggle to maintain its sacred traditions. Bender emphasizes the dynamic, negotiated, and often conflicting relationships people have with landscapes that are considered sacred.

Her approach is more expansive to include consideration of cultural geography, anthropology, and archaeology. This wider approach sets her apart from Eliade's theory. Instead, she looks at how landscapes are socially constructed, contested, and imbued with meaning through ongoing interactions and power dynamics. Though one might struggle to understand how an Indigenous cosmology might be considered within her arguments as well as the prevailing notion by many of the inherent sacredness of the Santuario, if these beliefs are considered within the larger societal contexts where they reside, Bender's theory is viable.

If the trend of increased tourism and thus, secularization of the location increases, the Church together with the surrounding communities will have to grapple with all the implications of non-believers utilizing "sacred" space.

Bender's theory helps illuminate how the sacredness of spaces like the Santuario de Chimayo may need to be renegotiated constantly, either intentionally or in response to a need or external event. Bender would argue that the meaning of the site does not exist because sacredness is a fixed concept, but because it is actively redefined through interactions between different stakeholders—Indigenous peoples, colonists, the modern state, pilgrims, and tourists. Its ability to adapt and allow itself to be remade may be why it still holds special significance.

In 1922, British author, D.H. Lawrence, visited New Mexico, describing the experience as 'true transcendence'. He went on to call his trip the "greatest experience of the outside world" he had ever

²⁰ GovTrack.us. "Search GovTrack.us," n.d. <https://www.govtrack.us/search?q=Sacred>.

²¹ Campion, p. 192

had.²² Lawrence's response to the vast, open landscapes of a region famously known as "the Land of Enchantment" aligns with Mircea Eliade's theory of the sacred, though Lawrence himself makes no explicit reference to supernatural powers. Instead, his words evoke a sense of awe and connection to something greater than the self that seeks to explain an experience however indescribable, is one that many can relate to.

Lawrence's visit occurred when New Mexico, along with Arizona, was still among the youngest states in the Union. Despite its deep and ancient history, the region was often framed in popular narratives as an unexplored and "new" frontier. Its natural splendor began to draw artists and writers captivated by the opportunity to explore and represent its unique landscapes. This artistic engagement can be seen as part of a broader evolution in the relationship between settlers and their environment.

From indigenous peoples, who regarded the land as a sacred and inseparable part of their identity, to the Spanish colonists, who blended sacred traditions with their own to create new spiritual frameworks, perceptions of the land's sacredness have continually shifted. In the modern era, this sacredness has often been externalized, becoming part of a broader cultural narrative that frames it as a place one can access but not necessarily inhabit.

Today's era, marked by increasing skepticism toward organized religion in much of Western thought, might seem to lack a shared sense of sacredness. Yet the enduring power of myth and story to shape regional identity remains evident. For instance, in 1970, the U.S. Department of the Interior designated the Santuario de Chimayo a National Historic Landmark, recontextualizing it from a strictly spiritual site to one with historical and cultural significance. This shift brought the site into the secular realm, yet it retains its spiritual resonance.

In recent years, the Catholic Diocese overseeing the Santuario has built amenities such as a visitors' center, gift shop, and cafeteria to accommodate increasing numbers of pilgrims and tourists. Despite these efforts to attract tourists, the church distributes a card at its entrance urging visitors to "Live your life as a pilgrim, not a tourist." A leaflet also provided at the church's entrance offers instructions for using the "holy dirt" collected at the site, advising the faithful to say prayers and 'rub the dirt on the part of the body in need of healing'²³ thus invoking a thousand-year-old practice completely unconnected to Christianity. Perhaps, this may be one of the best ways to illustrate an enduring human desire to find meaning and sacredness in the physical.

The Role of Culture

While not central to the discussion of this paper, the notion of culture is a critical part of what shapes beliefs and thus cannot be separated from the notion of sacredness. On addressing the difficulty of defining culture, Eggleton states that 'nature produces culture which changes nature.'²⁴ Chimayo and its multiple cultures and interactions, and definitions of the sacred illustrate this point. Eggleton will go on to argue that culture is not static but dynamic. Here, too, we have seen examples that even in situations where one culture defines itself as the prevailing force, as did the Spanish colonists, the resulting culture was not a pure imposition but inevitably a blend of that which was already existing when the new was introduced.

In examining culture, Levy-Bruhl's discussion of 'mystical participation' among what he describes as primitive peoples also has applications here, though it is not reserved for the Tewa alone. Levy-Bruhl's description of a society that is deeply interconnected with the environment, the spiritual realm, and their community could easily be applied to the faithful of multiple generations who put their beliefs in the other-worldly properties of a handful of dirt.

²² Ricketts, p. 239.

²³ www.holychimayo.us

²⁴ Terence Eagleton, Terence & Eagleton, Terry (2000). *The Idea of Culture*. Wiley-Blackwell, p. 7

Here the point is that as important as the foundational theories of sacred land and space are for understanding societal interactions with their landscape, examining and understanding the culture and cultural influences that shape those reactions are equally important. The two cannot be separated.

Conclusion

Returning to the original question, this paper concludes by arguing that the notion of sacred space is inherently a human construct, as it emerges from culturally specific definitions of the sacred itself. Sacredness serves as a lens through which humans identify, define, and interact with particular spaces within their landscapes. As previously noted, while all land might be considered sacred in certain contexts, the degree of sacredness is culturally determined. This determination often relies on elements of transcendence but is equally shaped by pragmatic, mundane factors that facilitate human engagement with a space.

The Chimayo Valley exemplifies this interplay. Would this area or its famed hot springs have been deemed sacred if not for the favorable conditions that first attracted human settlement, such as a reliable water source and fertile land in an otherwise arid region? Did the Tewa derive their creation stories based on the surroundings in which they found themselves or did the stories predate their arrival to this area? These questions, while rhetorical, underscore the intricate relationships between cultural narratives, environmental features, and the construction of sacred space.

Additionally, this examination suggests the need to reconsider traditional theoretical frameworks, such as those of Eliade and Durkheim, which have historically informed our understanding of sacred space. These frameworks often rely on binary distinctions—sacred versus profane—that may not fully capture the fluid and dynamic nature of sacredness in certain indigenous or contemporary contexts. For instance, Durkheim's perspective emphasizes the creation of sacredness to differentiate spaces, yet examples like Chimayo highlight a more nuanced process that blends environmental, cultural, and spiritual factors. It may be that the unique history of New Mexico, that has resulted in a blend that defies strict categorization of sacred theories, or it may simply be another example that though important, sacredness is too nebulous a concept to neatly define, perhaps even more so than culture.

As societies become increasingly secularized and influenced by New Age practices, a more flexible understanding of sacredness is emerging. This evolving perspective often draws from diverse traditions, including those to which practitioners have no direct cultural or historical ties. Hendrickson's concept of "sacred curious" individuals, who engage with sacred spaces from a position of interest rather than devotion, further illustrates this shift. Chimayo's rising popularity as a pilgrimage site reflects this broader trend, where sacredness is reimagined and recontextualized in contemporary terms.²⁵

Ultimately, this essay suggests that the complexity of modern interests in sacred space requires the term itself to be considered a construct and a reflection of the societal culture of its time. Doing so does not reduce the sacredness of the believer but provides a context for the intricacies the believer may have to negotiate in a world where virtually all space is shared. It also offers that there is a need for a next step in sacred land theory that is more integrative and adaptive to understanding the ever-evolving interplay of culture, environment, and human experience.

From the earliest human existence through the eras of new people migrating to the area, myth has been a critical component of how Chimayo, like many other places defines itself and defines his notion of sacredness, because in each iteration, 'the sacred genesis of a place is naturalized as fact. The strength of Chimayo's role as a sacred land may be that its story or myths 'provide multiple communities with meaning.' ²⁶Perhaps, this is the true transcendence of which Eliade wrote. To this end, it is fitting to conclude with a quote cited in an article by Keller entitled 'Indigenous Studies and the Sacred' by Grant

²⁵ Hendrickson, Brett. "The Interweaving of Pilgrimage and Tourism at the Santuario De Chimayó." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 34, no. 3 (2016): 127–145, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/26156328>, p. 140.

²⁶ Rickets, p. 250.

Bulltail, a traditional storyteller and member of the Apsáalooke or Crow tribe in Montana. In a succinct summary of the array of issues examined in this paper, he states:

'I don't want to call it a sacred site, because your idea of something sacred and my idea of something sacred are a little bit different.'²⁷

Maria Meier 2309714

²⁷ Mary L. Keller, "Indigenous Studies and "the Sacred"." *American Indian Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2014a): 82–109. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/amerindiquar.38.1.0082>, p. 82.

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