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SACRED SPACE[1]

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Abstract: This exploratory chapter proposes that the term sacred space is a misnomer in the Islamic context, since the binary concept of sacred and profane does not exist in premodern and earlier Islamic culture. Instead, the chapter argues, one should talk of opened space: space that is opened by rewardable, ritualised actions. This opened space draws the ritual actant into momentary engagement with the divine other world for the potential accrual of rewards. Lastly, the chapter discusses ritualised actions meant exclusively for the pilgrimage in Mecca but performed elsewhere, too, because of their presumed efficacity in opening space in this potentially rewarding way.

Is it possible to detach one term of a binary concept so that its meaning is independent of the other term? This is the question Shahab Ahmed asks in the course of his withering assessment of the utility of the sacred/profane concept for the study of Islam, and to which he responds with a clear and persuasive: No, it is not.[2] This is a problem, because although approximately equivalent terms can be found in premodern and earlier Islamic culture for the sacred half of the concept, the profane half has no obvious equivalent.[3] This means two things:

First, the applicability of the concept for the study of Islam is, at best, suspect, regardless of the concept's importance to the modern constitution of the Eurocentric category of religion.[4] As academics, should we ignore this and carry on in spite of it? Given the growing demand to decolonise the university, doing so might seem dismissive and complacent.

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1 . In memory of Heggach, who was always disappearing into thin air.
2 . Ahmed 2016, 209.
3 . Akkach 2003, 48; Wiederhold 2001-06, 281-3; Ahmed 2016, 208-9. For a list of possible Arabic words for "sacred," see Talmon-Heller 2020, 12-13. Tellingly, perhaps, no equivalent list is offered there for "profane."
4 . Ahmed 2016, 206-7.

Second, because the concept is indivisible, this chapter's title is also suspect. Instead of this title, I cautiously suggest '"opened space." My reasoning, necessarily explorative and thus provisional, follows below. At the outset, though, I state one thing: this concept of opened space is not defined in relation to its opposite, closed space. Rather, just as one speaks of a gift that awaits opening as an unopened, not closed gift, so one may speak of unopened space. As I shall explain, this space is opened by ritual bodies, seeking its rewards.

In a long encyclopedia entry about geography in the Qur'an, Neuwirth argues 1) the Qur'an re-coded the inimical and often empty-of-meaning space inherited from the pre-Islamic period as scripturally informed, meaningful space, because it now belonged to salvation history; and 2) as a result of this re-coding, worldly space became a medium for otherworldly, divine bounty. Now no space was beyond God's precincts, which is to say no space was *profanus*, to employ the Latin term.[5] Using (allegedly) pre-Islamic poetry as her source for the pre-Qur'anic, pre-Islamic space, Neuwirth says the following, for example, of the re-coded space. (Re-coded is her term, as are all the adjectives and terms in the foregoing summary, except *profanus* and otherworldy.)

> As against the heroic attitude of man towards space as displayed in [pre-Islamic] poetry, the early quranic revelations present earthly space as particularly inspiring of confidence. They present it as a locus of pleasure and enjoyment, as a venue for the reception of divine bounty and as a site of ethically charged social interaction. […] Be it the image of the firm land or the image of the sea, humankind is taught to rejoice in a divinely adorned cosmos. […] Haphazard fate and all-consuming time have ceded their power to a just divine agent. Space has regained a meaningful historical dimension.[6]

5 . Neuwirth 2001-06, 299-312.
6 . Ibid., 302-8.

In this quote and the encyclopedia entry as a whole, Neuwirth effectively renders the sacred/profane binary redundant in the Islamic context. Is she correct? Certainly, while she might be alone in scholarship in presenting an argument that effectively achieves this redundancy, she is not alone in conjecturing the redundancy. Before her, for example, Clinton Bennett had said that "in Islam, ideally, everything that exists is 'sacred,' nothing and nowhere, 'profane'."[7] At about the same time as her, Denis Gril had said: "From a certain point of view, everything being governed by cosmic or revealed divine Law, nothing escapes the category of the sacred";[8] and Samer Akkach had said, in a related vein: "Medieval Arabic sources do not speak of 'sacred' sites, landscapes, and cities as distinct from other types that are 'profane' [...]."[9]

A sound hadith supports all four scholars. It alleges the Prophet said: "The earth has been made a mosque (*masjid*) and means of purification for me, so wherever a man of my community is when the time for prayer comes, let him pray."[10] Additionally, if a key marker of a mosque is its qibla orientation, or alignment with the Ka'ba in Mecca, then my own research into early and medieval Islamic urbanism also supports these scholars. This research shows that it was not uncommon for entire settlements to have or desire to have a qibla orientation.[11] In such locations, the sacred/profane binary again seems redundant.

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7 . Bennett 1994, 112
8 . Gril 2006, 38
9 . Akkach 2005, 165.
10 . Al-Bukhari 1994, 100 (k. al-tayammum, b. 1, #335); cf. trans. Sunnah.com, https://tinyurl.com/hcm54k5x (accessed 12 April 2021).
11 . O'Meara 2020, 30-38.

To render the binary redundant in the Islamic context does not, however, simultaneously render the Quranically re-coded, salvific space as all equal, and thus undifferentiated and homogenous. For space, regardless of context, is always differentiated according to the boundaries that make room for it (following Heidegger's notion that "spaces receive their being from locations").[12] In the Islamic context, the one differentiation that does not, however, happen is that between sacred and profane, because as I am arguing, no such distinction exists. A very few types of location exist that would seem from hadiths to have a minimally salvific spatial dimension, because ritual prayer (*salat*) is prohibited there.[13] Among them is the toilet, said to be especially haunted by the jinn and thus potentially dangerous, necessitating the utterance of protective, pious formulae (sing. *du'a'*) when entering and exiting.[14] But these locations are not beyond God's precincts and so profane; rather, the space they bound is not "a venue for the reception of divine bounty," to use Neuwirth's words. To use my words, the space they bound cannot be opened.

12 . Heidegger 1971, 154.

13 . E.g. "Allah's Messenger prohibited prayer from being performed in seven places: The garbage dump, the slaughtering area, the graveyard, the commonly used road, the bathroom, in the area that camels rest at, and above the Ka'bah." Ibn Majah 1952, 246 (k. al-masajid wa al-jama'at, b. al-mawadi' allati tukrahu fiha al-salat, #746); trans. Sunnah.com, https://tinyurl.com/y7a8evs3 (accessed 12 April 2021).

14 . Ibn Majah 1952, i, 109-10 (k. al-tahara wa sunaniha, b. ma yaqul al-rajul idha dakhala al-khala', #298-301); trans. Sunnah.com, https://tinyurl.com/24hjk9xk (accessed 12 April 2021).

Recalling Neuwirth's argument that the Qur'an re-coded all space as scripturally informed, meaningful space, let us take as an example of spatial inequality in the Islamic context, the *ḥaram,* or precincts of Mecca, heretofore not unreasonably deemed in scholarship the most sacred of all Islamic space.[15] The boundaries of the precincts do indeed identify a transition zone, a separation between the precincts' exterior and interior, but this transition is not between typologically different spaces: meaningless and meaningful, profane and sacred.[16] The boundaries, rather, indicate the commencement of a space that is, inter alia, more meaningful than the space outside them (supposing one is entering, not departing Mecca, in which case the reverse obtains).[17] Certain rituals must be observed to open and accrue the rewards of this space, but in terms of its salvific, meaningful quality it is not different to the space surrounding it. It is just more meaningful, more salvific. The difference is one of degree, not kind.

What are these rewards and the rituals required to accrue them? Regarding the former, although a number of Islamic terms exist for the word reward, its meaning is the recompense given by God for obedient behaviour (*ta'a*). Rewards are accruable in this and the postmortem life, and mostly received in the world to come.[18] Regarding rituals, these vary according to the intentions of the person entering the precincts. For the pilgrim, it would involve, inter alia, the circumambulation of the Kaaba, the *tawaf al-qudum*, or circumambulation of arrival. For the immigrant construction worker returning after a period abroad, none of the pilgrimage rituals would be required and he could head straight to his billet. Nevertheless, ritual prayer, for example, would open to him the precinct's space for the potential accrual of rewards; and were this prayer performed in the city's main mosque, the so-called Sacred Mosque (*al-Masjid al-Haram*), the potential rewards would be especially great, in accordance with the following and related hadiths:

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15 . See e.g. von Grunebaum 1962, 31-4.

16 . For a thoroughgoing *fiqh*-based treatment of who may and may not enter the precincts, see Maghen 2007, *passim*.

17 . For what else these boundaries indicate, at least in terms of the regulations to be observed once traversed, see Munt 2014, 33-6.

18 . See e.g. Raven 2001-06, 451-2.

> The Messenger of Allah said: "A man's prayer in his house is equal (in reward) to one prayer; his prayer in the mosque of the tribes is equal to twenty-five prayers; his prayer in the mosque in which Friday prayer is offered is equal to five-hundred prayers; his prayer in Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem] is equal to fifty thousand prayers; his prayer in my mosque [in Medina] is equal to fifty thousand prayers; and his prayer in the Sacred Mosque is equal to one hundred thousand prayers.[19]

What I am arguing is that any rewardable action momentarily opens space for the accrual of rewards, or rather their potential accrual (God not being subject to human will), regardless of whether the action is the *tawaf al-qudum*, ritual prayer at the appointed hour, walking to the mosque at the same hour, greeting the mosque (*tahiyat al-masjid*) on arrival there, greeting a fellow Muslim with the formulae of peace (*taslim*), and so on. These ritualised actions open space for momentary engagement with the Eternal, rather than bypassing time, because as Christian Lange has argued, this world (*al-dunya*) and the world beyond (*al-akhira*), earth and eternity, are spatially tied in Islam – intertwined. With reference to the Qur'anic verse stating God is closer to a human than their jugular vein (50:16) and a hadith alleging Paradise is "closer to you than the strap of your sandal, and so is the Fire," Lange commences his argument with the insight that the "otherworld […] cuts through earthly reality in the way in which the strap of the sandal penetrates the cavity between the toes of the foot."[20] This insight he then develops, substantiates and variously illustrates in the course of his impressive book, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Tradition*.

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19 . Ibn Majah 1952, i, 453 (k. iqama al-salat wa al-sunna fihi, b. ma ja' fi al-salat fi al-Masjid al-Haram, #1413); trans. Sunnah.com, https://tinyurl.com/utn4d66 (accessed 12 April 2021). Although this hadith is considered weak, there are several others like it. See e.g. Kister 1969, 186-9. I chose this version because it highlights the fact that ritual prayer is rewarded, whether performed at home or the Sacred Mosque. From the space that the prayer opens, comes the prayer's reward or rewards.

20 . Lange 2015, 3. For the hadith, see e.g. al-Bukhari 1994, vii, 239 (k. al-riqaq, bab al-janna aqrabu ila ahadikum, #6488); trans. Sunnah.com, https://tinyurl.com/4h5rxj6h (accessed 12 April 2021).

The location where a rewardable action occurs has no bearing on the actual opening of the space that the action occasions. Nevertheless, places do have a bearing on the rewards that can be accrued via this opened space, because some locations in the Islamic world are more salvifically meritorious than others. This fact is exemplified in the above-cited hadith about the variable number of rewards for ritual prayer, and it is echoed in the words of the Andalusian mystic Ibn ʻArabi (d. 638/1240) regarding the effect on the heart of places in general and Mecca in specific:

> Places (*amkina*) have an influence on sensitive hearts. If the heart finds itself in any location (*ayy mawdiʻ*), the spiritual presence (*wujud*) [it experiences there] is the most general, but the spiritual presence [it experiences] in Mecca is more radiant and complete.[21]

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), a jurist notorious for his rejection of religious innovation (*bidʻa*), especially mystical innovation, concedes the same fact with the words:

> The more meritorious (*afdal*) a place or time, the better (rewarded) are good works and the stronger (more severely punished) is sinning therein (*kanat al-taʻa fihi afdal wa-l-maʻasi ashadd*).[22]

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21 . Ibn ʻArabi 1972-92, ii, 120.

22 . Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Mustadrak ʻala Majmuʻ fatawa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad b. Taymiyya*, ed. Muhammad b. Qasim (1998) iii, 107, as cited in translation in Talmon-Heller 2020, 116. Cf. Katz 2007, 162. The ranking of places that is implicit to Ibn Taymiyya's words finds a counterpart in how medieval Islamic local histories often classify places in term of their merits or virtues (*fada'il*). Regarding this classification, Akkach has argued for its utility in overcoming the absence of the sacred/profane concept in the Islamic context, because the "notion of the virtuous accounts for both the sacred and the profane, in that all sites and places have virtues. The intensity and significance of the virtuous, however, varies from one place to another. The variations are hierarchically ordered and are charted through a unique form of conceptual mapping of holiness that is traced by Muslims on the territories they inhabit." Akkach 2005, 165-6. This is an idea that needs pursuing in the context of another academic topos, sacred place.

In view of the variable merit of places, it is unsurprising to learn that actions juridically restricted to the most meritorious place, Mecca, are also performed in other places, as if the space of these other places could equally become, when opened, a conduit for near numberless rewards.These actions comprise the *manasik*, or the rites specific to the greater or lesser pilgrimage (*hajj*, *'umra*).

The most ubiquitous of these rites when performed outside Mecca is the *tawaf*: the sevenfold circumambulation of the Kaaba. Despite the '*ulama* proscribing this rite's occurrence elsewhere, from at least the medieval period the same '*ulama* have despaired at precisely that: its occurrence elsewhere. An example is Ibn Taymiyya's disciple, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), who fulminates not only against the practice at tombs, but also against two other Mecca-specific rites there: *istilam*, which at Mecca involves greeting the Ka'ba's Black Stone and, crowds permitting, kissing it, but which at tombs involves touching the tomb's corners; and shaving or cutting the hair of the head (*halq*, *taqsir*). Ibn Qayyim says:

. For a measure of this rite's ubiquity beyond Mecca, see most recently O'Meara 2022.

> Should you see the fanatics of those who take (tombs) as places of frequenting, they dismount from their saddles and mounts when they behold them from afar. They place their faces upon the tomb, kiss the ground, bare their heads and their voices become raised in a clamour. […] After that they turn to circumambulating around the grave in imitation of the Bayt al-Haram (that is, the Kaʿba) which God had made holy and guidance unto the inhabitants of the world. Then they begin to kiss (it) and touch it (*istilam*). Did you not see the Black Stone and what those visiting the Bayt al-Haram do with it? […] Then they conclude the rites (*manasik*) of the pilgrimage to the grave with shortening and shaving their hair there.[23]

23 . Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ighathat al-lahfan min masayid al-Shaytan*, ed. Muhammad al-Fiqi (1986), i, 220, as cited in translation in Meri 1999, 278. *Pace* Meri, who states, with reference to Ibn Qayyim's words, "there is insufficient evidence to conclude that many Muslims were guilty of the deviations condemned by Ibn Qayyim" (ibid., 279), there is in fact plentiful evidence of Mecca-specific rites being performed elsewhere. See e.g. below, the previous note, and inter alios: Kister 1990, 31-3; Straughn 2014, 169; and Iványi 2016, 65-98.

Much less ubiquitous among the rites juridically restricted to Mecca but performed elsewhere is the wearing of the pilgrimage garb, the *ihram*; the recital of the *talbiya*, the formula of servitude that pilgrims to Mecca commence chanting at the precincts' outermost boundaries and which announces to God their presence in God's territory and places them at God's disposal; and the *hajj*-specific *wuquf*, or the vigil of standing before God at Mount ʻArafat.[24] Regarding the former, historical records show it was sometimes donned by visitors to a small number of Sufi mausolea across the Islamic world; these buildings or the tombs they contained were taken as substitutes for the Kaʻba during the visit, with other of the pilgrimage rites also being performed.[25] The *ihram* was likewise donned at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.[26] Regarding the *talbiya*, it is still performed today, at least at some Shiʻite shrines and mausolea.[27] Historical records show that it was not restricted to Shiʻism.[28] Regarding the *wuquf*, it, too, is still performed today; for example at the shrine of Sidi Shashkal (lifetime unknown) near Safi, Morocco, where there is annually staged a "pilgrimage of the poor" (*hajj al-masakin*) that coincides with the *wuquf* at Mount ʻArafat. This substitute *hajj*, which is not unique, involves circumambulation of the shrine, standing before God at a nearby rock called ʻArafat, and – before it dried – drinking from a well named after the well at the Kaʻba, Zamzam.[29] In the past, *wuquf* was particularly associated with Jerusalem, but it also happened at other major settlements, for example Basra and Kufa.[30]

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24 . On the *ihram*, see Wensinck (1954-2009), 1053; on the *talbiya*, see Toufic Fahd (1954-2009), 160-1; and on the *wuquf*, see Lory (1954-2009), 220-1.
25 . Bashir 2005, 87-8; Subtelny 2007, 194; Post 2020, 44.
26 . Talmon-Heller 2020, 170.
27 . See e.g. Szanto 2019, 180.
28 . Basset and Lévi-Provençal 1922, 419–420; Duri 1989, 117; Friedman 2013, 222.
29 . Al-Ajarma 2020, 307. On similar "pilgrimages of the poor," see ibid., 293-8; and Elrasam 2019.
30 . Goitein 1966, 137; Kister 1990, 31-3; Fierro 1992, 227, 227 n. 142; Talmon-Heller 2020, 170; Post 2020, 44.

In this chapter, I have cautiously and provisionally argued that sacred space is a misnomer in the Islamic context and instead one should talk of opened space. The steps of the argument can be summarised as follows: there is no equivalent to the sacred/profane binary in premodern and earlier Islamic culture; the binary cannot be split, so one cannot talk of sacred space without simultaneously implying the existence of its opposite, profane space; Neuwirth's argument concerning the Qur'an's re-coding of pre-Islamic space as scripturally informed, meaningful space excludes the existence of profane space; opened space is not in opposition to profane space, but unopened space; in Islam, this world and the other world are spatially intertwined, the latter partly immanent in the former; this divine immanence can be engaged via rewardable, ritualised actions that momentarily open worldly space for the potential accrual of otherwordly rewards.

In making this argument, the chapter has also touched upon the related academic topos of sacred place. Although this topos necessitates a chapter of its own, the present chapter has not denied that the Islamic world is full of places that are held to be more meritorious than others. To the contrary, the chapter has asserted that Mecca is the most meritorious of such places. Even so, let me conclude this chapter with a story that downplays the importance of place, as related by Ibn Taymiyya. Although the story does not deny the merit of certain places over others, like the chapter it emphasises that the key to receiving the rewards of the space these places bound is ritualised action, obedience.[31] "Come to the holy (*muqaddasa* – literally, "sanctified") land!" wrote the Prophet's companion Abu al-Darda' to another of the Prophet's companions, Salman al-Farisi, when inviting him to Syria (*al-Sham*). Salman replied: "Land does not sanctify anyone; a man is sanctified only by his actions (*'amaluhu*)."[32]

31 . Shortly after finishing this chapter, I came across a Qur'an-focused article that echoes certain key aspects of it. See Farouk-Alli 2002, *passim*.

32 . Ibn Taymiyya 1997, 29 (45); trans. Katz 2007, 162. Cf. Talmon-Heller 2020, 14.

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