

Aspects to the religio-geographical concepts “sacred” and “sacred space”

Keményfi, Róbert

Studies on the spatial dimension of religious phenomena apply, according to the aim of the study, those basic spatial units that are adopted both in the field of social sciences (eg.: polity, politology, history, ethnography, social geography) and in the field of natural sciences (natural geography, biology/ecology). However, it should be emphasized that despite the fact that the notions are the same, their content differs according to the disciplines (even according to the different branches of the given discipline). That is why efforts are made now and then in the international literature to clarify the function and nature of the various spatial units (landscape, place) in different situations. For example, the word “landscape” is the same in ethnography, history and geography, yet these disciplines have different approaches to the meaning of the expression. As a matter of fact, the history of the ethnographical landscape-research shows that even inside ethnography different definitions and types were developed for the concept of the landscape depending on the branch of ethnography that carried out the research. According to this principle, research in the field of ethnography of religion have created their own conception of landscape, which, on the one hand is identical with, and on the other hand, different from the interpretation of landscape adopted in geography of religion.

The expression “landscape” comes from the Dutch painters of the 15th and 16th century, and was spread in geography via the English language. Considering that with the evolution of this science the concept had to meet more and more demands, the content of meaning of “landscape” has become the central issue of the researchers’ discussions. Landscape is the most frequently used concept in natural geography, since this branch treats landscape as a basic unit of research, where the landscape-factors (eg.: soil, climate, relief) form a complex system.¹ However, as a result of the nature transforming effect of the society, natural landscapes unaf-

¹ Hettner, A. 1927

ected by human influence are very hard to find. That is why the concept *cultural landscape* was adopted in scholarly literature as a “supplementation” in content to natural landscape, to reflect the results of the interrelationship between nature and society. In cultural landscape the various natural geographical and social/cultural elements form a complex, spatial system. This term is also open towards ethnography, since its original meaning has broadened: as cultural expressions are changing constantly, the concept of cultural landscape has to be interpreted dynamically as well.

Approaching the concept of cultural landscape with this aspectual shift leads one to realize that the expression could provide malleable frameworks to study the infinite spatial variations of social phenomena. According to this aspect the meaning of cultural landscape can establish the passage from geography to the investigation of the spatial issues in ethnography, as the broadening meaning of the concept makes it possible to use the term referring not only to the landscape formed as a result of the interrelation of natural and social phenomena, but also explicitly (or specially) to the complex spatial system of the constantly changing cultural phenomena of the social environment. I believe that such an approach provides the possibility to broaden the traditional cultural landscape units (eg.: Mediterranean or lowland). Even individual settlements can be considered cultural landscapes, where the spatial interconnectedness of the different cultural elements is analyzed. Therefore, cultural landscape is the environment that was created by man.² According to this phrasing even the social environment can be regarded as an independent (in other words, not dependent on the original natural environment) cultural landscape. So, if we regard the expression “landscape” applied to man-shaped landscape to be a collective/grouping concept, then the nature of the cultural landscape can be further clarified according to the aim of the research concerning the given social phenomenon. Consequently, the concept of sacral or sacred landscape, which can be interpreted as a subtype of cultural landscape, has appeared in ethnography of religion and geography of religion.³ Owing to several comprehensive studies of Georg Schreiber, the expression gradually adapted to international and Hungarian folklore studies and ethnography of religion.⁴

² Wirth, E. 1979: 94-97.; Gunzelmann, T. 1987:32-33.

³ However, it should be noted that the ambivalence of sacral power is reflected in the Latin expression „sacrum” as this word has a double – “sacred” and “not sacred” – meaning. Nevertheless, it is common in the two opposite senses that both meanings differ from “profane”. In other words, public speaking almost only uses it in the first, “sacred” sense with the “sacral” attribute, which can refer to helping and harming powers. – Sopher, E.S. 1967. 49.

⁴ For the conceptual clarification of landscape-research in Hungary, see Bartha, E. 1992.

The question is though, that in what system of relations could the geographical landscape apply the attribute "sacred"? Or, in other words, how, and in what senses did the concept of "sacred", which had originally come to use in social sciences and theology, integrated into the exact, (theoretically/originally) quantitative science of geography? Even geography of religion has recognized by now that the spatial functioning of religious places and spaces cannot be understood, their relations cannot be interpreted while disregarding their surplus in content. As a result, the more subtle description of the sense of "sacred" appeared in geography of religion. Although ethnography and geography have much in common in interpreting the expression "sacred", because of the nature of these disciplines, there is still a shift of emphasis in using the term.

To the concept of "sacred"

Present day ethnography uses the concept "sacred" most naturally. Veikko Anttonen has devoted a whole volume to the Finnish word "pyhä" – sacr(aliz)ed – and he presents the surplus in meaning that can be summarized by this word through the phenomena of Finnish culture.⁵ The relationship between "pyhä" and the religious "sacred" is very complicated. The two terms only partially overlaps in certain parts of their meanings and are not precisely corresponding categories. However, the comparison of the two expressions clearly delineates the spatially important meaning of the sacral attribute in ethnography.

The etymological root of the word "pyhä" basically used as an adjective means: "to separate". The word "pyhä", the closest interpretation of which is "taken out of the environment", is used to denote such special natural places (eg.: rivers, ponds, hills) which separate the (wild) territories of different peoples. The question is: why should we call these spatial phenomena "sacred"? According to Veikko Anttonen, the following criteria should be satisfied for the usage of the expression:

- the place is an uninhabited, wild territory
- this should be the first name of the territory
- the place has a special function for the owner population
- the place is special, uncommon from a topographical point of view.

The above-mentioned criteria refer to such a conscious activity, through which the residents attempt to conciliate the given place with mythical places in order to reinforce their local identity.⁶

⁵ Anttonen, V. 1996.

⁶ Gribben, A. 1990: 277-291.

The word “pyhä” has a religious reference only to the extent it can be related to “sociality” and “territoriality”.

“Pyhä”: Social relevance: Crossing borders can be done only after proper, socially prescribed ceremonies.

Spatial relevance: Spatial borders are of magic, religious nature. “Pyhä” refers to the presence of subjective factors besides religion, which can make certain spatial elements or points of time sacral. In other words, a way of thinking different from religion can also make a place or object “sacred”.⁷

The sacral in a religious sense (sacr[aliz]ed) simultaneously refers to the process and the result of the process. Although sacral phenomena are recognized by other creeds as well, only followers of the religion concerned are capable of decoding the exact meaning of the sacred. The general content of the sacred (sacral) can be summed up in three points:

- consciousness in operation
- recognizing sacred things
- dissimilitude in quality different from the profane environment.

The expression sacred means not only a state, as I have mentioned, but also a process. On the one hand it means the process of consecration in a religious sense, but on the other hand it also refers to the social behaviour of man. Such a dynamic interpretation of “sacred” (“the continuous production of sacredness”) opens a way from the religious sense of the expression to the social conception of “sacred” (similarly to the notion of ethnicity: from ethnic state to ethnic dynamics⁸). Human behaviour is exposed to public attention, so “sacred” is not exclusively a religious functionality, but also a social set of relations (regulated, can be studied, and observable). This way sacred is not only a category of religious life, but also that of social life. So sacred should be interpreted as a symbolic border-constituting power/ effect. It starts operating in such social situations where categories, which are considered as value (eg.: marriage, justice, personal freedom, etc.), of a person or the community become fragile and endangered. Consequently, sacred is a category protecting against phenomena considered negative in the society, and referring also to the attack against these phenomena.⁹

Since asking questions in a geographical sense refers only to a special dimension, the spatial dimension of human activity, it does not need the multi-level

⁷ Anttonen, V. 1999: 9-11.

⁸ Barth, F. 1994. 11-32.; Keményfi, R. 2000. 255-266.

⁹ Anttonen 2000. 271-282.

interpretation of "sacred" like ethnography, in fact, questions in the classic geographical sense – measurability, "tangibility", real existence in space – are unfamiliar with spirituality. So the traditional school of geography cannot deal with the personal manifestation and spiritual phenomena of religiosity. Researches on absolute space are only capable of analyzing the spatial processes of the institutionalized (i.e.: "real") structure of religious systems¹⁰: "Post-Enlightment geography, with its emphasis on the observable, countable, and measurable properties of phenomena, has no place for spirituality. ... The pendulum seems to have swung too far the other way, and so-called 'modern geography' is founded on a set of assumptions about people and what motivates them that gives no credit to the supernatural, the apparently international, or the normative influence of the belief systems. There are some signs of attempts to redress the balance. If these even partially successful, we might expect to see spiritually back on the geographical agenda again in the future."¹¹

That is why classic geography basically evades the exact geographical definition of "sacred", since its true meaning refers beyond the level of everyday (geographical) experiences. This stern forbearance from interpreting "sacred" has been "softened-up" by ecological anthropology's branch studying religious spatial structures and the environmental embeddedness of practicing religion, which gradually involved personal spaces in its scope of research.¹² Nevertheless, spatial science continues to be careful in defining "sacral", because "to broach the theme of holiness or the sanctity of place in geography always verges on the trite or the impertinent... (and threatens) to intrude on a domain preempted by theology."¹³ It is important for geographers as well to feel the role and significance of the devotion and the miracle in experiencing the "sacred". Despite of the fact that the sacred place is a spatial unit of real expanse (i.e.: measurable by geography) on Earth, sacred places cannot be replaced or transferred, because the place concerned received sacredness on that very spot.¹⁴ Consequently geography of religion also has to accept that "sacred" is a double-meaning notion: both the absolute and the relative (mental) contents are present together in the concept. However, if a more "geographical" definition is needed, different from the theological, ethnographical, psychological ones, one may claim that "sacred" means the manifestation (mys-

¹⁰ Sopher, D.E. 1967. 1.

¹¹ Park, C. C. 1994.26-27.

¹² Sopher, D. E. 1967. 49.

¹³ Cited after Erich Isaac, who studies the spatiality of religiousness: Park, C. C. 1994. 250.

¹⁴ Park, C. C. 1994. 250.

tery) of the transcendent world beyond and apart from the intelligible geographical environment. But this surplus in content does influence the space-organizing potency, the space-structural place of the given area, in other words, without this spiritual essence even geography cannot understand and analyze religious spatial processes, as it cannot give an even approximately precise view of the spatial operation of the analyzed sacred place. Depending on the conception of space, the attribute refers either rather to state (absolute space: "consecrated") or rather to process (relative space: "being consecrated"): "It is by no accident where sacral buildings and other objects are located in the settlement-structure, since even the building itself possesses meaning and conveys information (given state – K. R.). These pieces of information are enhanced by the continuous repetition and continuous presence in the system of daily activities, and one cannot put aside their psychological effects ("production" process on the mental level – K. R.)."¹⁵

To the concept of sacred space

Religion and space are closely intertwining concepts. Seeing that space is the object of research in geography, the concept of sacred space has appeared naturally in geography of religion. Ethnography also takes an interest in the spatiality of religiousness, and, similar to geography, the absolute and relative conceptions of space are also present in ethnographic researches. Yet the designated end delineates the differences in accentuation between the two sciences.

THE RELATIVE SPACE

On the one hand cognitive studies in geography attempt to represent the individual's experiences concerning (sacred) space. On the other hand "sacred" refers to the process, to being consecrated in representing mental spatiality, namely it raises the question about the kind of space-experience the given sacred space appears in the believer's mind.

In turn, ethnography aims to thoroughly analyze the individual's and the community's attachment to sacred places through religion. That is why the terminology on connectedness to sacred places is so subtle in ethnography. The main organizing nodes: 1. attachment to natural landscapes, 2. attachment to cities, 3. attachment to architecture (religious buildings and homes). Based on these frame-nodes, we can analyze the relationship of religion and emotion to space and the

¹⁵ Bartha, E. 1992. 75.

development of attachment itself. We could sum it up by declaring that ethnography asks about attachment to sacred places as one thread of religious identity.¹⁶

THE ABSOLUTE SPACE

When presenting geographical "sacred" I mentioned that in the other (absolute) context of the interpretation of space the attribute "sacred" refers to that place/space in which the sacred appears. These are the permanent sacral places, in which sacred is regularly and constantly present. In this case geography of religion primarily deals with the space-influencing role of the sacred place. What effect does the sacred place have on the economy and population of the given area? As an example it focuses on the spatial net of tourism, traffic, and commerce related to shrines and pilgrim places.

The absolutist interpretation of the sacral space: in the narrowest perspective it means the really present objects playing roles in the manifestation of sacredness (church, bell, crucifixes, sculptures, chapels, dwelling houses, cemetery). In this approach investigations of space are aimed at the religion-organizing potency of the objects, and practically designate the revealing of a thread of religious identity linked to objective space (eg.: course of movement, activity spaces).¹⁷

The concept of the double natured (absolute and relative) sacral landscape cannot be defined on the basis of space-conception. Georg Schreiber created the expression "sacral landscape" to describe the area of influence of a shrine or a sacral center. Later the meaning of the concept broadened and now ethnography of religion regards those objects of human environment (objectivity) to be sacral landscape, which have some religious contents for the believers (subjectivity). This environment induces the religious individual / community to practice his or their religion, or simply reminds him/ them to their religion.¹⁸ I believe that we should return to the meaning of "pyhä" in order to describe the Janus-faced sacral landscape more subtly.

According to the above-mentioned ideas, the expression primarily referred to the partition (accentuation) of not the built, but the natural landscape elements (river, creek, hill, forest) from the profane environment. In other words, the "pyhä" is a concept primarily (but not exclusively) related to landscape (and also to space). So the term is applicable in describing the ecological approach:

– It can refer to the (in this case: mainly) border-constituting potency of real landscape elements existing in the objective environment, and

¹⁶ Mazumdar S. – Mazumdar, S. 1993. 231-242.

¹⁷ Bartha, E. 1992. 39-74.

¹⁸ Bartha, E. 1992. 31-32.

– It can refer to that content of the conscience, which “sets off” the given element from space.

On the basis of this, the functioning of a given part of landscape can be analyzed with traditional geographical or/and with (cultural) ecological methods, and with methods aiming the mental space. While “pyhä” has only a limited religious reference (see above), the meaning of this adjective can be transferred to the research of explicitly religious spaces. In this case the link between the religious “sacred” and “pyhä” is spatiality.

As a summary, it can be stated that the more and more subtle use of “sacred” in the geography of religion was made possible because of the recent aspectual shift in geography. Traditional geographical approach, which primarily focused on the exact, objective space, was complemented and partly replaced by the research of the space-perception capability of the subjective consciousness, namely that of individual, relative spaces. A new trend of research, which brought a turn in quality, has appeared in social geography: the conception of space as cultural factor, instead of “container”. Ethnography as a discipline concentrating on “small-region phenomena”¹⁹ could (in fact, it does) have a place in this qualitative approach. It is by no accident that Hungarian geography of religion regards itself through recognizing the religious results of the also geographically rooted cultural ecology in Hungary.²⁰ Consequently, the approach focusing on individuality, which was integrated into geography after ethnography, does not use the expression “sacred” as a “simple” descriptive attribute (as it is the case in traditional geography), but in a way that it refers de facto to the individual characteristics of the given place, to its irreproducible (depending on the actual situation) content. By now the sacral (sacred) landscape described above has become such a complex spatial category, in which the built objects adjusting to the natural environment and serving religiousness (the place) are simultaneously “present” with the believer’s attachment to the place through religiousness, namely with the inner individual quality of the landscape.

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¹⁹ Kraas-Schneider, F. 1992. 78.

²⁰ Hunyadi 1998. 325-347.

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