

Loci Sacri: Understanding Sacred Places. T.Coomans, H. De Dijn, J. De Maeyer, R. Heynicks, and B. Verschaffel (eds.) Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9789058678423

As a historian of Africa and as a teacher of world history, I am very intrigued by the subject of sacred spaces as a way to examine the lived worlds of different faith traditions. To some degree, *Loci Sacri: Undersanding Sacred Spaces* was something of a challenge for me to review. This edited collection features works primarily by specialists in areas I personally have no formal expertise in: architecture, medieval European history, philosophy, religious studies, and theology. Thus, this review will discuss aspects of these varied chapters that could be of service to world historians in the classroom. One striking feature of the collection is its primary focus on Europe and North America. For example, David Bell's opening essay briefly mentions the medieval Hindu philosopher Shankara, but relies mainly on theologians such as Saint Anselm and Aquinas in a mediation of what is understood to define what makes a space sacred. Some of the essays examine the notion of sacred spaces in terms of conceptualization rather than actual use. These selections admittedly gave me little to incorporate into my own teaching.

However, a number of chapters emphasize the reuse of former sacred spaces that offer material for world historians, particularly in terms of the rise of secularization in European and North American contexts. Thomas Coomans points out that the reuse of former religious sites is hardly a modern phenomenon, as he notes how the collapse of the Roman empire and the religious wars of early modern Europe led to new roles for abandoned religious sites. Secular uses of former churches and other religious institutions during the French Revolution and the Communist era demonstrated the willingness of radical regimes to efface or declare victory over tradition. The author contends that reusing sacred spaces would be much preferable to destroying them, particularly if they can serve a function in celebrating and documenting culture. For this reviewer, such sentiments seem a bit utopian. I live in Scranton, a city filled with dilapidated abandoned churches, a testimony to the decline of the ethnic parish system and waning fortunes of Catholicism in the northeastern United States. Québécois scholars Luc Noppen and Lucie Morriset examine debates about the use of former churches in their Canadian province. The *revolution tranquille* of the 1960s and the sudden collapse of Catholic practice in Quebec – oddly not even mentioned in their essay – led the Catholic Church to vacate large numbers of properties, particularly those built between the 1930s and the 1950s. Despite the increasingly secular outlook of Québécois politicians, the provincial government has chosen to protect numerous closed churches as part of the Québécois heritage. I wish the authors would have tied in the rise of secularization as a historical and sociological phenomenon with their analysis over how closed churches might, and have, been put to secular uses.

Lindsay Jones' essay on the Zapotec pyramid of Monte Albán in Mexico provides some good material for world historians teaching survey courses. The discovery and excavation of this site in the mid-20th century and UNESCO's decision to make it a world heritage site in 1987 led to new discussions of how it remained a sacred space. By presenting the site as part of Mexico's religious heritage, the thoroughly secular Mexican state incorporated Monte Albán into its defense of Mexican indigenous culture against its rival, the Catholic Church. On a practical level, alternative spiritualities that purported to be linked to Native American traditions were a

way of bringing in tourists. Debates between national and local elites about the tourist role of the site also highlighted differences in current understandings of what constitutes heritage. Jones observes that there is little to indicate that indigenous people actually viewed the site as sacred from its abandonment by roughly 850 CE. Just as Christians and Muslims could ignore Roman and Greek temple ruins, so could Native Americans leave abandoned previous sacred spaces. Especially for those of us who find students have preconceptions of the otherness of Mesoamerican civilizations, it would be a good reminder to them that people could forget and ignore older traditions in pre-Colombian Mexico as much as Europeans could leave old churches and temples in ruins elsewhere.

While Jones' essay is probably the single contribution best suited to the needs of world historians, there are other gems embedded into other chapters. Terry Kinder's essay on burials includes a brief reference to the Battle of Hastings. In the early Norman period, the site was said to be haunted by the appearance of blood every spring, and William the Conqueror had Battle Abbey built upon it. The battle of Foneteny-en-Puisaye in Burgundy in 841 between two grandsons of Charlemagne became farmland for a thousand years before Napoleon III's regime decided to place a monument there as part of the king's effort to recast French nationalism.

As a whole, this book is best suited for scholars and graduate students whose research is directly engaged with sacred spaces, rather than as a resource for teaching. One wishes there had been more discussion of non-Western sacred spaces in a comparative perspective.

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