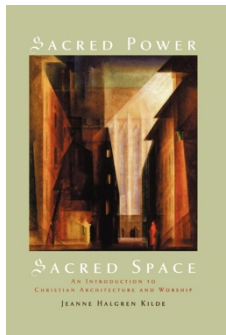


[Review] *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship*, by Jeanne Halgren Kilde



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Jeanne Halgren Kilde's *Sacred Power, Sacred Space* not only illuminates the intersection of power and space in Christianity, but it also reveals how historical movements and worship practices are revealed in a sacred space. As I read the book and considered the worship spaces I know, I began to think beyond questions of usefulness or tradition to other questions: Who appears important or has access to power in this space? What story does this space tell about our beliefs? What practices does this space encourage or hinder? (And why are modern churches building pallet walls and buying purple lights?)

According to Kilde, "church buildings are dynamic agents in the construction, development, and persistence of Christianity itself" (3). A religious space is not just a setting for worship; rather, spaces contribute "to the very meaning of ritual practices and to the shape and content of religious systems themselves" (3). Her analysis of sacred space focuses on three categories of power within that space: divine or supernatural power, social or hierarchical power, and personal or individual power. The book is organized into eight chapters that chronologically address historical changes in Christian architecture through selected church buildings and the stories they tell about shifts in power.

Kilde's primary purpose—to provide a method for sorting through the dynamism of religious space—



occasionally feels buried in the historical scope and sweep of the book. Further revision or perhaps a different organizational scheme may have helped the thesis rise more clearly to the surface. Nonetheless, I find Kilde’s analysis of power as articulated in space compelling and memorable. Therefore, rather than giving an orderly chapter-by-chapter summary, I am highlighting the power relationships revealed in *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*.

Intersections of the divine and the personal

The concept of sacred space begins with the idea of divine power and presence. Kilde cites Mircea Eliade: “places are deemed sacred precisely because a divine or supernatural power dwells in them” (Kilde 5). In pursuit of holy places, Constantine built churches at sites tied to Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. The relics of human saints and martyrs, considered to be infused with divine power, sacralized space and, as an Orthodox religious studies professor once told me, made “a meeting for you with God.” Special furniture and locations were designed for the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, inviting individuals into divine participation, reenactment, and identification with Christ.

In the Hagia Sophia of Byzantine Constantinople, enormous vertical space and a central dome ringed with light evoked a sense of the divine. In the great Gothic churches of the middle ages, pointed arches allowed even larger windows, and, as Kilde explains, “Bejeweled light itself signified divine expression” (69). Earlier Constantinian buildings were made sacred through the procession of lay Christians and clergy into the space; the power was rooted in the gathered community. In contrast, Gothic churches were built to tell a story even without any clergy present. In this period, churches became holy places where God dwelled, “metonymies of heaven” (69), and “the power of the space preceded human occupation” (89). Thus, Kilde argues that Gothic churches provided individuals new access to spiritual power. Perhaps this is one reason why so many who have visited Notre Dame in Paris were grieved to see it burning on April 15, 2019. Whether people are members of such a church or not, there they have a place and are invited into a personal spiritual experience.

Demarcations of the social and hierarchical

In her discussion of social power, Kilde describes sacred space as not only *recognized*—in the substantive view of Eliade—but also *created*—as explained in the work of Jonathan Z. Smith. Sacred space is, among other things, a social construction, and in the process of sacralizing space, groups of people are also designated more or less sacred and ascribed more or less power.

Some of the earliest evidence of an emerging clergy–laity divide is found in the ancient city of Dura-Europos (in what is present-day Syria), where a specially appointed assembly room held an elevated dais for clergy.

Kilde writes that the change from worship in the *triclinium* or dining room of a family's residence to the adapted *domus ecclesiae* may mark "women's declining power within the Christian community as meetings moved from domestic space in which women held some authority to a formal and hierarchal setting that separated them from positions of power" (31).

Hierarchy is demarcated in sacred space. It is often delineated by physical association with places considered to be imbued with the divine presence, or at least as representative of divine authority.

Clergy sat in the apse of Byzantine basilicas, their power underscored by their proximity to the Eucharistic altar. In the middle ages, churches took on the cruciform shape and laypeople sat in the nave, monastics sat in the choir, and clergy sat in the sanctuary (chancel). The distance, both figurative and literal, between clergy and laity was vast, and laypeople often could not even see the parts of the worship space and service considered most holy. For just a moment, they might catch a glimpse of the elevated host. Kilde calls Gothic cathedrals places of "concealing and revealing the Divine."

While the great churches of the middle ages emphasized the transcendent otherness of God and distance between ordained and lay people, monasteries provided a different spiritual opportunity. Many people think of monasteries as places of retreat; however, "the paradox of monasticism lies in its bringing community and the individual into not just creative tension, but into creative dependence upon one another within confined quarters" (Kilde 63). It is social power (or possibility) within a discipline of individual submission, rather different from the social forces at work in the Renaissance and Reformation.

As Kilde claims, "cultural and social change frequently play a greater role in spurring architectural changes than do evolving liturgical requirements" (92). The Renaissance brought a return to classical Greek and Roman design, as well as forms that emphasized rationality and symmetrical beauty. Catholic architecture after the Council of Trent moved away from mystery and toward theater. "Watching became a new type of Christian participation" (99). Jesuit churches were full of light—not mysterious Gothic light, but the light of illumination and understanding. Visual art depicted biblical characters in the contemporary clothing of the wealthy. Worshipers were invited to be in awe of man. Music became more elaborate, and church practices were celebrations of human creativity. All of this artistic expression was expensive, increasing the demand for money from papal indulgences, helping trigger the Reformation.

In Kilde's history of Christian architecture, the Protestant Reformation is pivotal. Power shifted in all three categories. Divine power was now more decidedly identified with the Word of God. The social power of clergy

was exhibited in their ability to preach the Word well. And personal power took on new meaning as individuals were invited to read the Word in their own languages. These changes in belief triggered significant alterations in worship space. The pulpit became an important liturgical center, at first elevated in Lutheran churches, sometimes placed front and center, at least equal to the communion altar. In Reformed churches, the altar was a removable table, not even a permanent feature. Galleries were built to bring more people closer to the pulpit and the table. The Word was emphasized, but the Image was devalued, and Protestants engaged in destruction and iconoclasm as an expression of their new faith.

Negotiations of power and form

As *Sacred Power, Sacred Space* moves toward its conclusion, Kilde presents two additional analytical frameworks. One is the continuum between formalism and non- or antiformalism, prefaced with a discussion of the tension between high and low church movements in post-Reformation England. The second is the continuum between historicism and modernism, with a return to neo-Gothic traditionalist buildings on one hand and innovation in space, light, and authentic materials on the other.

The evangelical movement, starting with the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley in the 18th century, marked a turn toward the nonformal, with open-air preaching in natural amphitheatres. Kilde notes that these spaces were often not used to full acoustical advantage: preachers stood halfway up the hill, mimicking the position of the elevated pulpit.

Salvation began to be understood as contingent upon individual response to a clearly preached gospel. Not only did congregations need to see and hear the preacher, but they should also be able to see other congregants wrestle with their consciences before God. As Kilde describes Finney's Broadway Tabernacle: congregants "could also see one another—they could hear those who rose to testify and they could watch those who descended to the 'anxious bench' during what we would now call the altar call" (155).

No one did antiformalism quite like the 19th-century camp meeting revivalists. "Revivals and camp meetings made visible the centrality of the social or communal component of evangelical worship" (Kilde 154). Though evangelical worship was about individual experience, it was also about the whole church witnessing and testifying to that personal experience of salvation.

Following the trajectory set by the Renaissance and Reformation, congregations began to have a stronger communal identity and voice. Buildings were designed with the "audience" in mind, and members gained influence over liturgical choices. The battlefield of the later "worship wars" was set.

Audiences and power

Kilde brings research from her earlier book, *When Church Became Theatre*,¹ into the final chapters of *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*. If church is theater, the congregation is an audience. For some readers, the idea of an audience may evoke images of Willow Creek or Saddleback, but Kilde reminds us that congregations have been seated as comfortable audiences for many years, sometimes even hidden inside formal neo-Gothic exteriors.

Who has the power in an auditorium church? In prominent churches of the 19th and 20th centuries, the auditorium design signaled growing congregational power, according to Kilde. Does it signal congregational power in a 21st-century megachurch? In such churches there is antiformalism and deemphasized clerical authority. Pastors wear Hawaiian shirts, sit on bar stools, and address the congregation casually. Yet images of these charismatic speakers are projected on gigantic screens, and the worship team—the priests of the modern church—play from a prominent stage backlit in cool purple. The congregation wields the power of the consumer, as church leadership responds, carving out space for faithfulness within the constraints of market sustainability.

As Kilde argues, changes in sacred space tend to have more to do with changes in the church's social context than with reflection on liturgical priorities. In the modern evangelical church, individual power and clerical (or "staff") power exist in tension with the influence of an underexamined pragmatic materialist age. And in the midst of the slick efficiency and "flow," worshipers in many modern churches are being invited back into darkly cavernous rooms lit with an array of color to privately (albeit in a crowd) catch a glimpse of God revealed and concealed by spiritual authorities who orchestrate the divine mysteries. Perhaps the megachurch is more Gothic than we realize.

Conclusions

In her analysis of sacred space through time, Kilde argues that there is no single pattern of change. Instead, throughout history we see a constant negotiation between formalism and antiformalism, and "contemporary Christianity continues to wrestle with its relationship to the past" (197).

In the concluding chapter, Kilde reminds readers that her objective is to reveal the function of power—divine, social, and personal—within Christian space (199). Kilde acknowledges the limits of her "brief survey" from the

¹ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in 19th-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

outset and promises mainly to expose “patterns and meanings that are inherent in Christianity, but which have often been neglected precisely because they are so deeply embedded in architecture and space” (11). It is for these patterns and meanings that I recommend worship scholars take a look at this book.

As a student of missiology, I wish there were a few more examples from the global church, particularly the global south and east. Eastern Orthodoxy is addressed but left behind in the Byzantine chapter. The bulk of the book deals with Western Christianity. Those of us who study the global church may wish to continue Kilde’s work, examining the power structures reinforced by buildings—both imposed/borrowed and indigenous/innovated—in other cultures.

As someone raised in the evangelical holiness tradition, with its bent toward simplicity, and as a student of simple house churches, I found it helpful to consider all the various meanings that can be embodied in a building for worship. The question is not simply whether a dedicated building is helpful or not, but rather, what does the physical reality of the meeting place communicate about power or facilitate in regard to power? Reflecting on the shift from earlier centuries to the post-Enlightenment period, I wonder if the church loses something spiritually formative when the building points more toward human achievement or aptitude than divine presence and power. No matter what shape sacred space takes, it rarely, if ever, fails to communicate something about sacred power.