

The Ecology of Sacred Space:



Synopsis: This unit plan will serve as an analysis of historical religious structures and how they spatially construct spiritual meaning. The architectural creation and preservation of religious spaces and how they interact with the public or non-sacred sphere of society will be assessed through the prism of Turkish religious sites. This unit pays special attention to the Christian and Muslim similarities and differences throughout history and society. Students should attain an advanced appreciation and recognition of mutual respect and dialogue between religions, and an anthropological assessment of how sacred spaces affect human culture.

Potential Subjects: World Religions, Catholic Theology, World History

Levels: 11th, 12th, Introductory College Level

Supplemental Readings: Victor Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage*
Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de Passage*

Unit Plan:

A. Opening Discussion: Students should begin with a brainstorming exercise (1-2 days)

- a. The Importance of Space
 - i. Possible questions:
 1. Where are your important spaces?
 2. What does space accomplish? What does it do for you?
 3. What different kind of spaces are there?
 4. How does space affect inner disposition? (how do you feel?)
 5. Why is “living space” important for you, for humans?
 - b. **Target Goal:**
 - i. Students should come away from this class with a sense of their own use of space in their life and why it is important for them, but also how it differs from others.

B. Lesson 1: Architectural Space (2-3 days)

- a. Hagia Sophia
 - i. Students should read historical summary of the building or watch short documentary outlining its long and varied history
 - ii. How does the vastness of open space affect the inner spiritual disposition of the believer?
 1. Exhibits the power, majesty, and complexity of the divine
 2. Internal disposition of humility, awe, wonder
 3. Architectural achievement for that time would have marveled practitioners
 4. This works well for both Muslims and Christians
 - iii. How does the history of the Hagia Sophia affect its usefulness as sacred space today?
- b. Suleiman’s Mosque
 - i. Mimar Sinan
 1. Sinan’s unique role in building mosques in Turkey and his architectural genius in creating a vast open expanse that impresses and likewise opens up for the believer a similar spiritual space within.
- c. Adopting Architectural Similarities
 - i. Jewish Temple: Court of the Gentiles
 - ii. Christian Basilica Church: Narthex (for non-catechumens)
 - iii. Mosque: Outer Court for ritual washing/purification/ablutions
- d. **Target Goal:** Students should be able to compare and contrast the similarities and differences in the construction of specific religious sites and how they are built to affect the spiritual realm and inner spiritual disposition.

C. Lesson 2: Preserving Sacred Space (2-3 days)

- a. Basilica of Saint John
 - i. Mostly in decay; what does this do to the sacredness and effectiveness of the site?
 - ii. What becomes of sacred spaces once they are not longer occupied and used by believers for their original purpose?

1. Consider: The converting of abandoned churches in the United States to bars, concert venues, breweries, clubs, etc.
 2. Consider: The converting of churches in Europe and Turkey into museums or historical sites
- b. Hagia Sophia
 - i. How is the Hagia Sophia as a museum different than as a church or a mosque? How is it similar?
 - ii. What does such a secular museum allow to flourish and what is left unappreciated or unacknowledged?
 - c. Goreme Valley Churches/Monastic Communities
 - i. Initial desecration and defacing of art and icons
 - ii. How should such artwork best be preserved?
 - d. Sharing Sacred Space
 - i. Dome of the Rock and the Temple Mount
 - e. **Target Goal:** Students should be able to reflect on the challenges of respecting and preserving sacred spaces as religions and societies change.

D. Lesson 3: Sacred Space in the Public Forum (2-3 days)

- a. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's reforms in Turkey related to religion and public expression
 - i. Historical and current debate about headscarves
 - ii. Current president's building of state sponsored mosques
 1. Role of prestige and control, power and authority
- b. United States Christianity in the Public Forum
 - i. *Readings:* John Courtney Murray vs. Stanley Hauerwas
 1. What role or balance should Christianity play in affecting cultural currents through government?
- c. Creating Sacred Space
 - i. House of Mary
 1. Regardless of authenticity, it has power to attract and inspire believers by creating and sustaining spiritual space
 - ii. Gezi Protests
 1. Need for Green Space in the city
 2. Once congregated, the communal need to create space for worship (installation of mosques during the protests)
- d. **Target Goal:** Students should be able to identify and analyze the varying problems and differentiated solutions to expressing religion in the public sphere.

E. Lesson 4: Orientation of Sacred Space (2-3 days)

- a. Baptismal Font
 - i. West—East (Resurrection, Second Coming, New Life, New Birth)
- b. Orientation of Churches
 - i. West—East
- c. Orientation of Mosques
 - i. *Mithrab*—Mecca
 1. Unification of Muslims (Community-*Umma*)
- d. Liminality: Victor Turner
 - i. Anatolian desert (Cappadocia) as a liminal zone for St. Paul and Christian monastic communities

- e. **Target Goal:** Students should be able to explain the importance of orientation and location in the life of both Christian and Muslim believers.