WEEK 4
Profanation: The Undoing of Sacred Space

A. Desecration
B. Deconsecration (whole or partial)

Desecration: intentional – often violent – removal or destruction of sacred objects and sacred architecture.
Deconsecration: the removal of any formal recognition of a space as sacred

DESECRATIONS

I. Desecration is most often committed by rival religious groups.
Examples: the Roman sack of the Temple of Jerusalem (70 AD); the nationwide post-Reformation iconoclasm pursued during Interregnum (Puritan) government in England (1649–1660); the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban (2001); ISIS’s desecration 28 historical religious buildings (mosques, churches, monasteries and cultural heritage sites) in Syria, Iraq, Libya (2014–2015).

II. Desecration can also be secular & state-sponsored.
Examples: the desecration of Notre Dame de Paris (and other churches) during the French Revolution; the desecrations committed in the USSR (1917–1997) and China (to this day). Marxist-Leninism considers religion to be a hindrance to human development following Marx’s dictum: “religion is the opium of the people/the masses”.

III. Desecration in the name of art, science and culture.
Examples: Lord Elgin and his marbles (1820s), Heinrich Schliemann’s exploits in Myceneae and elsewhere (1880s), Howard Carter in Tutankhamun’s grave chamber (1920s).

Much of the activity that fits under point III can be classified as “furta sacra” (holy theft), i.e. a practice that arose in the Middle Ages in connection with the translation of relics. Furta sacra was understood as:
1. the theft of something holy; and
2. as an in itself holy act. (Only the right person or persons is able to remove the sacred object, so if you are able to take it, it is because you have the right to do so.)

IV. Secular destruction (“desecration”) or removal of secular objects and architectures.
Examples: damnatio memoriae (of Roman ex-emperors); toppling of statues of Lenin, Stalin, Saddam Hussein, etc.; statues of Confederate generals in the US.
Motivations for desecration:

a. annihilation of one religion by another
b. a ritual taking-possession of a religious site
   — for practical reasons (reuse of auspicious site, reuse of building material, profit from people being used to consider it a religious place, etc.)
   — for symbolic reasons (to translate some of the power of the previous cult to one’s own or to remove some of the power/charge of the older cult’s objects)
c. to mark a military or political conquest (revenge, show of power, introduction of a new world order, imperialism, colonialism…)
d. desire for justice (toppling statues representing figures that have come to stand for injustice)
e. for the promotion and furthering of science, art, culture
f. for the sake of cultural heritage (designations) – particular places become associated with particular times/eras and these places can be cleansed of “confusing” elements from other eras.
g. the desire to save something (Lord Elgin?)
h. desire to benefit spiritually from making something holy one’s own (translation of relics)
i. greed…

So, causes of desecration can be **negative, positive** or reasonably **neutral**.

The **effects** of desecration can similarly be either

a. deeply traumatizing; or
b. experienced as cathartic, allowing for necessary healing to take place;
c. incomplete – something of sanctity always remaining;
d. paradoxical – causing the opposite of what it intended, bringing about an increase in veneration and attention to a particular place or object. Examples: people gathering at tumbled waycrosses in England after the Reformation; people travelling to see the no-longer-there Bamiyan Buddhas.

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**DECONSECRATIONS**

What happens to sacred architecture in a secular world?

There is an **erasure of the boundary** between the sacred and the non-sacred, a smoothing out of qualitatively different spaces, making all space qualitatively equal.

Secular societies make sacred architecture conform to their principles, subsuming it within the “sacred space of consumption.” It can happen in one of two ways:

1. The sacred space being deconsecrated & turned into a secular building. There is not necessarily as much material destruction involved in this way of undoing sacred space as there is in desecration, but it usually involves a complete change both of function and of what Walter Benjamin called the “aura” of the space. While desecration is more harmful to individual sacred sites, deconsecration is more harmful to **concept of holiness** itself than is the desecration (which, if anything, as we’ve seen, can actually enhance the notion of “the sacred”).

2. The sacred space remains consecrated and in use as sacred architecture (for now), but adopts many of the same ethico-aesthetic principles that non-ecclesiastical buildings follow, such as:
a. They are built out of industrially manufactured materials such as concrete, steel and tempered glass.
b. They are built using straight lines and flat surfaces.
c. They don’t have a clear frontage or a portal.
d. They are increasingly kept locked.
e. They are flooded with light, either natural or artificial.
f. There is a focus on newness, on constant restorations and reorderings.
g. Screens have been brought into churches.
h. Reordering often results in changes in orientation, it is popular just now not to face east but rather north or south, most often north, causing a disconnect both with the architect and with theology.
i. They fail to connect, *through the architecture*, to either the topography or history of the site.
j. There is more and more text around the church room (on the screens, on banners, notices, etc.).
k. They follow the dicta of contemporary commodity architecture not only where aesthetics are concerned, but also where the perception of “use” and “value” is concerned. It is not perceived as having any inherent or intrinsic value (as a mediator of poetry, of romance, of emotion, of faith, of transcendence, of mystery), because value tacitly means *dollar* value. It must therefore be treated as an instrument and money-maker, as square footage that must pay its way and thereby prove its utilitarian value. It seems to often be this attitude that most threatens the existence of sacred architecture. The corporate ethos can be expressed in charging admission, in installing ever larger gift shops.
l. There is also a domestication of sacred space – cushions, carpets, flowers, tea urns and coffee-making equipment, toilets, heaters… domestication acts against the holiness of the space.

The relationship between money and holiness is a fraught one. Funding bodies, such as the National Lottery Fund in the UK, often offer money on the condition that certain kinds of “improvements” are made. The church should:

1. be more “accessible” (for non-religious purposes)
2. be more community-friendly (i.e. more secular)
3. be more “fit for purpose” (more toilets and coffee pts)
4. be more “multi-use” or “multi-purpose” (more room for conferences and festivals, etc.).
5. have its “potential unlocked” (host as wide a range of merchandizing and monetized activities as possible).

These are all code words, all of which invariably translate into more glass, more lights, and more commercial activity. And none of which can be said to increase the sense of holiness of the space, to help us enter “into the mystic” – to reference the title of this lecture series.

Mecca: possibly the most extreme example of what happens when secular forces influence a sacred site.
Connection to landscape and connection to the past broken. Many of the holy hills around Mecca leveled and historical locations associated with many of the founding personalities of early Islamic history demolished, as a result of the continued expansion of the mosque and its auxiliary service facilities (as part of the 98% of Saudi Arabia’s historical and religious site that have been destroyed, according to the UK-based Islamic Heritage Research Foundation.

Some causes:
The official rhetoric regarding what is going on there has it, on the one hand, that the improvements aim at the better accommodation of the millions of pilgrims that annually make the hajj. This explanation sounds pragmatic and accommodating.
On the other hand, the cause for the demolitions is also proclaimed to be to prevent “excessive veneration” of early Islamic heritage.
The real reason for the destruction is probably neither religious nor political, but economic. The oil economy with its attendant enormous influx of capitalist investment has created a hyper-monitized, hyper-commercialized society, which has very little to do with real religion, but which is nevertheless presented as if it sits at the very heart of it.

Some consequences:
Capitalism /globalism /consumerism /commodification /monetization, i.e. the system or systems that have made possible and resulted in what has happened – and is happening – in Mecca e.g., can become so enmeshed in religion, that they appear as one and the same. This is what Giorgio Agamben means when he says that fundamentalist capitalism has literally swallowed the world whole. For many this makes this type of profanation particularly difficult to spot, and even if one does spot it, it is difficult to protest, as any criticism levelled is likely to run into accusations of being anti-Muslim /anti-Christian / anti-religion, even when the impetus is the very opposite.