**The Value of Sacred Places**

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This paper explores the neglected topic of the value of different religions’ sacred places. Such places have great value for different religions’ adherents, but that cannot account for their public political value, given that duties to respect such places fall on all citizens whatever their faith, as well as the phenomenon of secular sacred places. The paper considers and rejects three views of the value of sacred places: that they are protected by cultural rights, that damaging them would hurt the feelings of religious believers and that they are the collective property of religious groups. It then goes on to consider the right to religious liberty, which it’s argued (drawing on recent scholarship on religious accommodation) is best defended through the value of integrity or honouring one’s religious commitments. Though integrity is too individualistic a concept to explain the value of sacred places directly it’s argued that, in the way in which they demonstrate sacredness here on earth, sacred places do help enable integrity by showing what one’s commitments are invested in. This view of sacred places value is able to account for the value of non-religious sacred places, as well as duties to respect them all.

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**The Value of Sacred Places**

**1. Introduction**

Sacred places, sites of special meaning and significance, are diverse. They include temples, monuments, mountains, rivers, landscapes and shrines. Thus some are human-made; while others are not, such as Bear Lodge/Devil’s Tower in the United States or Uluru/Ayer’s Rock in Australia. Some sacred places are exceptional human accomplishments such as Stonehenge in England or the Buddhas of Bamyan in Afghanistan before they were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. Many sacred places are sites where miraculous or supernatural events were said to have occurred, such as Mecca or Lourdes, or simply places of enormous significance in the history of a religious community such as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Most sacred places are religiously orientated, but not all. The Vietnam war memorial in Washington DC is a secular sacred place, for example. The compendious *Encyclopaedia of Sacred Places* includes in its list of sacred places some of the Nazi concentration camps as today they memorialise the exceptional evil and suffering which took place there.[[1]](#footnote-1) Perhaps the First World War cemeteries in France and elsewhere in Europe are sacred too? Sacred places do enjoy some protection in international treaties and conventions such as the 1972 UNESCO Cultural and National Heritage Convention.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nonetheless, some of them sacred places, especially those sacred for indigenous peoples, are subject to pressures from commercial activities such as logging or public purposes such as building dams. Here the conflict involves economic interests, on the one hand, and indigenous beliefs, intermingled with environmental values, on the other. Even where no conflict is involved sacred places, however, it’s believed that a sacred place should enjoy special protection and security. There is some good in preserving them.

That good is not merely pragmatic or prudential; it stems from the value of sacred places in some way, but what is that value? That question is important for nonreligious citizens who may be required to bear some of the cost of preserving a sacred place, if it’s subsidized by the state, for example, or enjoys some exemption from ordinary laws and regulations. Even where no special costs or exemptions apply to sacred places, visitors to sacred sites often treat them with a special measure of respect. Given those third party interests, we cannot invoke the religious beliefs of groups for whom a place is sacred. Those beliefs will be rejected by outsiders who nonetheless must meet certain costs and bear some burdens.?[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus in the dispute between the US climbing community and the Native American peoples over Bear Lodge/Devil’s Tower, for example, why should the former cede their interests in climbing to the latter’s belief that mountain is sacred? Climbers reject the basis on which the latter maintain that climbing is an act of desecration and grievous disrespect. After all, an avid climber might claim that her activity is, in its own way, transcendent. Sacred places take beliefs beyond the inner realm of conscience; they are sites where beliefs are concretized in the public world that’s shared with others.

Sacred places do enjoy some protection in international treaties and conventions such as the 1972 UNESCO Cultural and National Heritage Convention.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, this hardly settles the question of their value, since the question is why those places should enjoy treaty protection in the first place. Thus the 1972 UNESCO Convention refers to sacred places’ “outstanding value from the ethnographical or anthropological point of view”[[5]](#footnote-5) without stating what sort of value that is. In any case, for a religious group to be told their place’s special value is ethnographic is somewhat alienating. For them, it is religiously valuable, a claim which in turn will not satisfy the non-religious.

My aim in what follows is to make some progress towards delineating a public political account of the nature and source of the value of sacred places. By a public political account I mean one that can be reasonably addressed to all citizens, whatever their faith or lack thereof, who may be required to support sacred places, financially or otherwise, and certainly have duties to respect them. This question has received very little attention from political theorists who have focused instead on religious belief and ritual.[[6]](#footnote-6) It’s worth noting that sacred places may have other kinds of value besides that which I delineate below. They may have aesthetic or environmental value, or their value may be bound up in some way with the value of a nation’s identity – as the Temple Mount is for Israeli Jews, for example.[[7]](#footnote-7) But I do not consider those sources of value here.

The plan of the remainder of the paper is as follows. Section 2 searches for a definition of sacred places and distinguishes a narrow conception of e*specially* sacred places from the familiar world of churches, temples, synagogues and so on (what I call the “wide view”). Our interest is principally in the narrow view and any cogent view of the reasons to preserve sacred places’ will need to address those normatively relevant features. Section 3 canvasses three possible sets of reasons to preserve sacred places: that they’re part of the group right to culture; that preserving them avoids harm to religious feelings; and that people enjoy collective property rights over the places sacred for them. The section goes on to point out some problems with each of these answers. In Section 4, I argue that if we want to defend sacred places, we do better to look at the moral basis of religious liberty. Section 4 in particular argues that recent philosophical work on the value of individual integrity (as a basis for religious liberty) provides the strongest basis for the public political value of sacred spaces. Section 5, offers a reconceptualisation of integrity where the value of sacred places consists in their being necessary settings or contexts for integrity. I suggest further that analogous reasoning applies in the case of secular sacred places as well as sites in the wide view of sacred places. Section 6 briefly concludes with some further questions.

**2. Defining Sacred Places**

What are sacred places? As I’ve hinted, if only *religiously* significant places merited the title sacred, non-religious citizens might legitimately complain the state is promoting certain contentious commitments, whilst precluding others. That I take it is the reasoning behind the anti-establishment clause of the U S First Amendment. Some writers are very inclusive. One recent essay suggests that New York’s Central Park is an American sacred space on the grounds that it was consciously designed as a refuge from the commercial activity which surrounds it.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, not all non-fungible, non-marketable goods are sacred ones, and it’s not plausible Central Park is a sacred place. Our view of them should not be too broad.

The genealogy of the sacred in anthropological and sociological studies probably begins with Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, originally published in 1912, with its division of the world into the sacred and profane.[[9]](#footnote-9) Durkheim, however, made no reference to the idea of the non-religiously sacred. Mircea Eliade, writing in the 1950s, saw the sacred as a kind of portal through which supernatural forces (are believed to) flow into the profane world. The sacred, says Eliade, is, saturated with being, and has existential value.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is where the really real unveils itself to everyday reality and hence is where the world comes into existence.[[11]](#footnote-11) Religious practices and ceremonies carried out in sacred places put believers in touch with a higher order of cosmological significance, and provides a point of reference for ordering and making sense of the ordinary world. The sacred can apply to objects too. Eliade mentions an aboriginal Australian tribe who, when their sacred totem pole is broken, lose all direction; they lie down and wait to die. Though his language is somewhat elusive, Eliade conceives of the sacred as more present, more real, and more “there” than the profane world; sacred places are where the sacred ruptures the profane to reveal itself as a kind of cosmic presence.

We don’t have to share the cosmology of peoples committed to sacred places in order to understand the latter’s functional role. Borrowing from Eliade, we can conceptualise the sacred as providing a basic grounding in moral space. A sacred space or object is not merely a source of values we have reason to appreciate; it orientates those values, and gives them significance. As Jobani and Perez argue, sacred places are “thick sites”, loaded with diverse, significant, and irreplaceable meanings.[[12]](#footnote-12) Sacred places serve to communicate that the transcendent realm which is the object of our convictions, addresses us, here on earth. For example, Australia aboriginal peoples traditionally believe that their primordial ancestor beings left their marks in the world in the form of Uluru and the nearby Kata Tjuta/Olgas. They are where the mythic is most manifest, and contain a special energy which can be actualised by ritualistic activity. Hence these two rock formations anchor aboriginal commitments by making the transcendent tangibly present to flesh and blood human beings. On this view, then, sacred places have an incomparable significance for adherents; giving their beliefs their bearings and a concrete yet also transcendent context.

Sacred places are spatial locations where the everyday is interrupted by something of a categorically higher-order, such as the site of a miracle, for example, or the place where a major religious figure was born or died. The sacred confronts believers with its "thereness"[[13]](#footnote-13) (Eliade) and demands that they take an attitude towards it: awe, or reverence, and always respect. It is noteworthy that the sacred places typically call forth such attitudes among even non-believers; they will usually give special respect to the sacred, by not entering forbidden space, dressing appropriately, and not engaging in uncouth or unseemly behaviour.

Secular sacred places such as war memorials do not invoke a transcendent realm, but they do communicate values to which a people are publicly committed and thus orientate their national history. The Holocaust memorial in Berlin, for example, preserves the collective memory of Nazi atrocities for Germans, demanding that the darkest period in that nation’s history not be forgotten, and providing a context for its nowadays liberal commitments to freedom, rights and democracy.

As this last example shows, sacred places (secular and religious) are importantly public in the sense that they are sacred for religious believers or citizens as such i.e. as a collective who share a moral orientation, not a set of singular individuals. It is significant for *them*, as fellow believers, that a miracle or healing or whatever occurred on that location; sacred places are not like artworks on a wall which communicate their meaning to each viewer privately. Most sacred places are locations for collective practice or ritual where each participant is aware of others also performing them, who are aware of them, and so on. Experiencing their higher-order significance, especially through the performance of ritual, functionally speaking serves intra-group solidarity, and helps constitute the group as a group, whose commitments the place also represents.

I’ve so far discussed places of special significance in themselves which we can distinguish from the numerous churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, shrines and so on where believers practise their sacred obligations. Beyond the narrow meaning of sacred places prevalent in the literature, there is also a wider usage denoting these myriad locations around the world. After all, we speak of churches being consecrated, a special ceremony which imbues them with religious significance they wouldn’t otherwise have. To be converted back to ordinary buildings they must be deconsecrated. The religious symbolism and adornments which characterise them render them a fitting context for collective religious practice. On this wide view, ordinary churches and the like are sacred as apt settings for believers to engage in religious practice and ritual. They are not sacred as such (as on the narrow view); they are special - detranscendentally sacred one might say - for us as citizens. My main interest in what follows is the narrow interpretation of sacred places, but I’ll say a little more about the wide view at the end of Section 5.

**3. Preserving Sacred Places: Three False Starts**

On what basis, then, ought sacred places be preserved by non-believers? As I said, that basis should be a public one: it is not sufficient that sacred places are important for a religion’s adherents since that importance will not impress those of other faiths or none. One possible public political approach is a group’s right to their own religious culture.[[14]](#footnote-14) Though largely used in the literature on minority ethnic and national cultures, perhaps this approach could be extended to the ‘culture’ of religious groups too? After all, religions too provide contexts for identity, meaning and moral orientation for their members, and sacred places of the kinds I’ve mentioned help nourish those values. Cultures change and evolve, of course, and the strongest version of the cultural argument claims that those processes of change should be under the control of members of the culture themselves. The distinction is between processes of change under their control, and change - or worse, existential threat to the very identity of the particular culture - that comes from without.

One issue for this extension of the cultural rights argument, however, is that unlike cultural practices and traditions which members of a minority see that value as inhering in their culture, sacred places are regarded by religious adherents as valuable for the religion just because they are valuable in themselves. In some contexts, a minority culture can experience a sacred place as valuable in itself and (therefore) valuable for the group: this will apply to many indigenous communities’ relationship to their territory, or specific features of it such as Bear Lodge in Wyoming in the United States or Uluru in Australia’s Northern Territories, valuable for Native American and Aboriginal peoples. But for non-indigenous religions the two sources of value part company: sacred places such as Mecca or the Dome of the Rock are regarded as holy in themselves; cultural practices have grown up around them. So the cultural rights argument seems phenomenologically inaccurate: it doesn’t focus the source of value where it is matters for the group. Further, it’s not clear that the cultural rights argument can be so easily extended to non-indigenous religions. The argument is essentially one for self-government rights, but this really only works for groups that are territorially concentrated in a given area and whose cultural practices are quite distinct from the majority nation’s and which encompass a specific form of life.[[15]](#footnote-15) Claims to self-government or group autonomy are claims which apply to territorially concentrated peoples, not groups which are dispersed across different states, as applies to Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews. After all, Mecca is important for a Muslim in London, and the Temple Mount for a Jew in New York. But it makes no sense to grant these individuals a say in the governance of sites located elsewhere as a cultural right. Moreover, our British Muslim or American Jew, even if they take their respective religion very seriously, will live a hybrid way of life, very common in culturally and religiously diverse societies, much of which is very similar to their non-Muslim or non-Jewish compatriots. For that reason too, it makes little sense to give them cultural rights to group autonomy: they do not seek to be autonomous or separate from the larger society in the way that indigenous peoples are. It is therefore, far from clear whether the cultural rights argument can be extended in this way.

An alternative foundation for the protection of sacred places is the conventional expectations which have grown up around them, and given those expectations, the fact that damaging sacred places or forcing a religion to relinquish control of a site sacred to them, would assault the sentiments and feelings of its members.[[16]](#footnote-16) It would subject them to a specific form of offence, indeed moral injury, to which their dedication to their sacred places makes them vulnerable. To avoid those wrongs, sacred places therefore merit protection. It is, however, an unacceptably broad principle of justice that any group be protected from even deep offence at the actions of others. Religiously diverse societies will inevitably contain a certain amount of friction calling for all groups to be relatively robust. An artwork or piece of literature might substantially offend the feelings of a religion’s members, but the value of freedom of expression will often outweigh that offence. Sometimes there is positive good from offending or injuring a group’s beliefs, as when campaigners inveigh against FGM conducted on young girls in parts of Africa and Asia. Whether acts which offend feelings are all things considered justifiable or not is a complex question, but investigating it will inevitably draw us into a debate about real interests and the meaning of respect for religion in a specific context, both of these being moral bases on which feelings arising from social expectations and conventions rest. At best, therefore, feelings of hurt and offence, is a kind of portal, inviting us to investigate whether damage or relinquishing control of a sacred places would actually set back the interests of the group in question in a substantial way, thereby making it pro tanto unjustifiable. Merely consulting the sentiments and feelings which are vulnerable to how a religious group’s sacred place is treated will, on its own, be relatively uninformative. We need to know whether those feelings have any moral foundation.

Third, sacred places might be defended as part of the collective property of the religion for which they’re sacred, something to which they have a moral – and therefore should have a legal – rights claim. At the very least, some moral claim to own a sacred site would support shared arrangements for the use and management of the site between the religion which regards it as sacred and official authorities in the state where it’s located. There are different sorts of potential bases for that property claim. As far as territorial expanses are concerned, the principle could be one of first occupancy. If a group settles on a piece of land, it’s not implausible to hold that it becomes theirs, this property claim continuing down the generations. The first occupancy argument needs to make a number of assumptions, for instance that the group occupies the territory on a (more or less) continuous basis, that their acquisition and occupancy of it doesn’t violate others’ moral rights and that the territory continues to play a significant role in the life of the group. As with the cultural rights argument, the first occupancy version of the property argument plausibly applies to some indigenous groups’ sacred places. But it doesn’t succeed with sacred places whose origins are unknown or obscure, or in cases where first occupancy is disputed between two (or more) contending parties such as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Moreover, the first occupancy argument has limited scope because most sacred places do not consist of tracts of territory. They are human-made structures, or specific sites where significant events are believed to have occurred, or features of the landscape such as inhospitable sacred mountains (e.g. Athos, Fuji) or rivers (e.g. the Ganges) which it’s not realistic for anyone to occupy. However, the notion of collective property might also be justified by other property arguments familiar from liberalism. The labor mixing argument has its origins in the work of the English philosopher, John Locke. It says that members of a group expended effort on constructing or improving sacred place, which they thereby come to own it as a matter of moral desert, or perhaps because they added value to it e.g. areas of natural beauty which have been husbanded and preserved. These arguments need to be adapted to account for their collective dimension: that the religion sustained by all its followers created the social context in which a few of those adherents actually labored to create the site.[[17]](#footnote-17) However, neither the labor mixing nor the tangible improvement arguments will apply to sacred places where no group has labored which is quite a number of them: inhospitable geographical landmarks (e.g. Athos, Fuji, Uluru, Bear Lodge) and sites of supernatural occurrences (e.g. Lourdes) so these arguments too, if successful, have limited scope. Finally, even with sacred places to which the collective property argument does apply, sacred territory in the case of first occupancy, or human-made structures in the case of labor mixing, it’s worth noting that the right really only expresses the group’s responsibility to be custodians of the site: to preserve and protect it, as well as the liberty to use it in religiously appropriate ways. They lack the property rights to sell, gift or bequeath their site to others; rights to alter it in substantial ways; as well as rights to use or employ sacred places exactly as they wish, for example by permitting commercial activity there. Given all this, the relevance of property rights discourse to sacred places may be rather limited.

**4. From Religious Liberty to Individual Integrity**

The most obvious way to defend the value of sacred places, and hence the reason to preserve them, is through the idea of religious liberty itself, and specifically the right to it. Rights are (inter alia) public expressions of citizens’ entitlements and hence the right to religious liberty not only has the right kind of public political form to defend sacred places, it is the sort of instrument which advocates for them will naturally reach for. But religious liberty plainly cannot be the whole of the answer. We need to give some definition to the right, in this particular context given that, like all rights, it is on the face of it broad and general, and to do so that we need an argument which connects sacred places to the kind of religious practice that is protected by the right. The form of the argument will be that religious liberty characteristically protects some valuable human interest, an interest which can be extended to sacred places too.

One way of addressing the former question is to think normatively about what’s at stake when we assert a right to religious liberty, what is the value of that which it protects? We know that the category of ‘religion’, or any particular religion, will not do the job. In recent work on religious accommodation and exemptions there is an emerging consensus on the concept of integrity as the appropriate basis to defend believers’ rights to manifest their religious commitments.[[18]](#footnote-18) Integrity can mean a number of things.[[19]](#footnote-19) It can point to the fact that there are bottom line principles – moral ones, and perhaps also religious – which a person will not betray, whatever inducements or incentives there are to do so. It can suggest an ideal of wholeness or coherence so that a person’s commitments do not point in incompatible directions.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the accommodation literature, however, a third view of integrity has generally been adopted, one which sees it as involving a person living up to those values and beliefs to which her conscience commits her. The person of integrity manifests in practice those commitments which are important for her identity; she honours her convictions in her life. Thus Paul Bou-Habib defines integrity as the value of living in accordance with one’s felt duties while Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure maintain that a person’s moral integrity ‘depends on the degree of correspondence between, on the one hand, what the person perceives to be his duties and preponderant axiological commitment, and, on the other, his actions’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Some authors emphasize the notion of commitment rather than duty per se. Thus, according to John Corvino, ‘personal integrity comes from trying to harmonise your choices, actions and expressions with your moral [including religious] convictions’ and Kevin Vallier has employed a conception of integrity as fidelity to the projects and principles that are constitutive of one’s identity to argue for religious exemptions.[[22]](#footnote-22) Patrick Lenta has defended the ideal of integrity at some length, maintaining that integrity is valuable because autonomy, self-respect and identity all depend upon it.[[23]](#footnote-23)

There are two important components to this. First, integrity hinges on the value of agency; a person is required or obliged to perform certain actions, or refrain from others; it matters to the individual believer that she engages her will in prayer, worship, practice and ritual. Second, there is the content of those commitments as defined by religious norms: to pray this way, wear this attire, avoid those foods, invoke these traditions in worship, and so on. The value of integrity reposes precisely in forms of practice which a person is free to adopt within limits, but not to define as she chooses. So integrity regards individuals as active, autonomous beings, respectful of themselves, who simultaneously through their practice, appreciate and reflect on the religious and other commitments which make sense of their life. The value of integrity consists in living up to those commitments one endorses. One key advantage of integrity, conceptualised this way, is that it does not hinge on accepting the truth or even value of any religious doctrine, and hence it is capable of enjoying the support of non-believers. Integrity applies to the committed vegan, the secular pacifist and even, in one case from the UK, an employee committed to mitigatinggreenhouse gas emissions.

In her recent book, Cécile Laborde too endorses this congruence view of integrity.[[24]](#footnote-24) She introduces the notion of Integrity Protecting Commitments (hereafter IPCs) which describe those commitments which, if manifested in practice, mean that a person is living as she thinks she ought to live. What Laborde calls *Obligation* IPCs arise from the duties which characterise religious observance, but also cultural and communal practices which are experienced as obligatory religious by believers. *Identity* IPCs, by contrast, reflect a more interpretative view of religion as a lived identity and set of practices. They focus on the meaning and value of religious and allied cultural commitments. While the latter do not have quite the ethical salience of the former they are important nonetheless. The basis of the right to religious liberty, then, is that it protects IPCs.

Though there is not the space to defend this view of integrity at any length, I hope it has some intuitive appeal as the normative basis of the right to freedom of religion. Granted that, there remains the second part of the argument which connects integrity to sacred places. This is a more difficult argument to make as integrity involves human practices, not places or objects in themselves. The argument from integrity therefore needs to make an indirect claim. It needs to claim that there is some special value in some IPCs being undertaken in sacred places; that the latter provide some peculiarly apt context, absent which IPCs would not realise that value. This claim seems plausible. There is some special value in Jews praying at the Western wall, for example, or Muslims going on the *Hajj* to Mecca, or in Hindus ritually bathing in the Ganges at Varanasi. All of these involve the stronger notion of Obligation IPCs in Laborde’s terms. As a matter of fact, however, Courts have not always been impressed with this reasoning. In the 1988 case, *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association*, the US Supreme Court ruled that permitting logging and the construction of a road on land regarded by native American tribes as sacred would not violate their constitutional right to free exercise of religion since it did not compel any behaviour which violated their beliefs.[[25]](#footnote-25) In fact, in numerous cases involving indigenous peoples in North America, Courts have remained unconvinced that the location where IPCs are met is of cardinal importance.

The *Lyng* case seems to point to a gap as we attempt a bridge between integrity and sacred places. Enabling religious adherents to enjoy integrity by living by their core commitments favours exemptions from uniform laws and other forms of accommodation which remove obstacles to their doing so. The harm which the integrity argument seeks to avoid is that of betraying or simply not living up to one’s religious requirements and commitments as one understands them. But sacred places do not easily fit that format. They are not themselves religious practices but special locations where these practices take place. If sacred places are damaged or destroyed there is not an obstacle which lies in the way of integrity; rather a condition of its possibility had been removed. Sacred practices are without their necessary context (Of course, much everyday religious practice such as private prayer or dietary restrictions need have nothing to do with sacred places; all we need to assume here is that sometimes it does). The notion of ‘context’ and ‘condition of possibility’ are a bit mysterious, however, and if we are to employ the concept of integrity to explain why sacred places merit protection then more needs to be said. In particular, I think, three sets of questions will need to be addressed. First, as I’ve emphasized, sacred places seem intrinsically valuable in and of themselves. The phenomenology of sacred places suggests that it is the place in itself which grounds special duties of reverence and respect, even for outsiders (by talking quietly for example or wearing appropriate attire). So, given that integrity’s value is that of *persons* living up to their commitments, we need some explanation of the characteristic thought that *places* enjoy that value. The second question arises from the fact that there are quite a number of sacred places which do not actually involve any IPCs. Gideon Sapir and Daniel Statman give the example of the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka, believed by some Hindus to be spanned by a mysterious bridge, built by Rama’s monkeys, known as the Ram Setthu.[[26]](#footnote-26) In Israel, the Holy of Holies within the Temple Mount is off limits for even the most devout Jews. There is also the category of secular sacred places such as war memorials or the Holocaust memorials at Yad Vashem or in Berlin where no IPCs, not even of Laborde’s weaker identity-related kind, are involved. It’s not clear, then, what integrity has to do with such places. Third, we need to account for the way that sacred places are important for a group qua group; they are valuable for the group as such. In Section 2 we noted the *collective* dimension of the rituals and practices that take place at many sacred sites. This is in contrast to individual integrity where, though religious commitments are shared by the group, it is important for an individual that she manifests them. The public dimension of religious practice is emblematic of the way in which sacred places are valuable for the people whose special places they are. The rituals associated with a place are a way of honouring that value; they communicate the place’s importance in the life of the religious group. Think of Muslims Hajj to Mecca, for example. If we are to adapt the integrity argument to explain our interest in sacred places too, we need to account for this public dimension.

**5. Contexts for Integrity**

We can distinguish between manifesting one’s ideals (religious or otherwise) and having them protected.[[27]](#footnote-27) The integrity argument introduced in the last Section explains the value of manifesting one’s ideals; because by manifesting them we thereby honour them and the way a person lives becomes the expression of what she actually believes, her commitments. Because manifesting one’s ideals is valuable they thereby merit protection: that is what grounds the right to religious liberty which grants each person a protected space to honour the commitments which matter to her. When we think about integrity and sacred places similar reasoning applies. By explaining the value of sacred places, from the perspective of integrity, we account for the normative basis of the protection they’re owed. Sacred places are usually (not always) associated with particular manifestations of religious practice, but they are always (on the narrow construal) considered valuable in and of themselves. It is again on that basis that religious adherents, and often third parties, have duties to help preserve and protect them. But can integrity be adapted in this way?

The value of integrity is the value of honouring one’s moral and religious commitments, and it is important to note at the outset that those commitments come from without. They are not like the quotidian plans and projects we choose and pursue as individuals. True, pursuing the latter calls for some of the same virtues of self-discipline and dedication, but part of the value of our self-chosen projects is precisely that we have decided to adopt them as one way of carving out our own lives. Religious commitments exert a grip on our practical deliberations above and beyond the fact that we have chosen them, if indeed we have. We experience ourselves as part of a living tradition whose origins predate our own lives and which will continue past them. It’s worth noting in this context the temporal regularity of so much religious ritual and tradition which is performed in regular patterns and which marks a religion’s holy days such as Christmas, Passover and Eid, both of them anchoring its adherents in the flow of time. In observing these traditions and requirements we honour those values that inhere in a horizon of significance above and beyond us. Expressing our religious commitments, if we have them, answers our interest in meaning by demonstrating the significance of our lives in a larger framework which encompasses and explains them. It addresses our need for value by showing us what is precious and noble, what our commitments aim at. The religious horizon also answers our need for orientation in moral space by showing us what is right and true, providing what Charles Taylor calls ‘strong evaluations’[[28]](#footnote-28). The fact that people’s religious commitments, in contrast to their everyday plans and projects, invoke a larger field of significance – one they seek to honour at the bar of their integrity – is the key to explaining the value of sacred places. Put simply, sacred places help mark out that field in a way that is visible here on earth.

In Section 2 I noted that sacred places enjoy a categorically higher-order significance by expressing the transcendent realm, here on earth among finite, vulnerable beings. Sacred places - on the narrow construal where they are precious in themselves - are firmly located in the earthly domain yet at the same time point beyond it to a higher realm; hence their irreplaceability if they are severely damaged or destroyed; we cannot rebuild what was not ultimately made by us. As Ron Hassner puts it, “[t]he phenomenon of sacred space. concretises religion, giving it a worldly material facet”.[[29]](#footnote-29) On the one hand, sites of miracles or God’s appearance; the births, deaths and ascensions of Gods, prophets and saints; sacred mountains, rivers and natural monoliths, and so on, are all sparks of a supra-human reality, the “really real” as Eliade says. On the other, they are stubbornly lodged in this world: hence we can encounter, respect, appreciate, revere and engage with them as spatially located objects. It seems noteworthy that, in their various and diverse ways, pretty much all religions have their sacred places. My claim is that the value of sacred places for some religious adherents is that they demonstrate what their IPCs are invested in; they show that the divine is tangible and real. Sacred places are not simply platforms for the performance of IPCs (though they generally are), they express what those practices are invested in, that integrity involves communication with a divine realm. They give sense to those IPCs by representing their ultimate source (think of Muslims facing Mecca as they pray), showing in their materiality how the divine realm is reachable for flesh and blood individuals; they stand for the joining of the two realms. Sacred places bring the transcendent realm down to earthy reality, making it accessible by mortal beings, not remote and alien. At the same time they point upwards to a higher reality not our human making; thereby enabling our religious commitments to be invested in something larger, answering our needs for meaning, value and orientation.

Integrity’s value, as I explained earlier, lies just in the way that we direct our agency towards a larger horizon of significance which comes from without. We achieve integrity by honouring our commitments, but those commitments are never merely self-regarding; they invoke, if they are religious in nature, a larger plane of value. My claim is that sacred places help enable integrity by marking out that plane here on earth, revealing the divine order. They show religious people something of what their commitments are invested in. This does not of course mean that their value necessarily overrides every other human need or interest, but it does explain why they enjoy public value in the first place.

I do not claim that sacred places necessarily serve this function for all religious believers; but they do so for significant numbers. For example, for many but not all Catholics, sites of Marian apparition put them in touch with the presence of the miraculous conception, and with it God’s authorship of the world, and his sending Jesus to save our sins. For Catholics who make pilgrimages to these sites, they visually express their convictions, and the prayer and worship conducted there connects them with what they hold most (religiously) dear. For them at least, such sites orientate their integrity.

Sacred places represent an external context where conviction’s objects are materially tangible, calling on believers to revere and respect them. If that view is correct it addresses the first desideratum I mentioned at the end of the last Section; it explains the sense in which believers regard sacred places as valuable in themselves. The fact that some religious sacred places have no particular practices attached to them is no obstacle to their role as demonstrable expressions of the divine on earth because sacred places enjoy second-order value with respect to IPCs; communicating to believers that the divine realm is one in which they can participate as finite agents. Explaining how sacred places need not involve sacred practices was the second desideratum. The third was accounting for the collective dimension of sacred places. In the majority of cases where a sacred place does involve specific rituals or practices conducted in that place, these will often be collective in the sense described above: at least some others’ engagement in them will be a necessary condition of enjoying the good oneself. Thus the sketch above suggests how the notion of integrity, once we take into account the larger field it invokes, can overcome the issues which arise when we take an over-individualistic view of individual integrity. Moreover, just as in the case of individual integrity, a non-religious person can understand the value of a religious person honouring her commitments in practice, so in the case of a sacred place non-religious individuals (or those of a different religion to the one whose place it is) can appreciate that place’s expressive value, bridging the transcendent and worldly.

One complication, however, is the case of indigenous peoples for whom it is often said that land itself is sacred in its totality; invested as it is with the cosmic presence of a supreme being, or beings. The truth of this claim clearly merits detailed ethnographic study; it may be more true of some indigenous peoples than others. If correct, this expansive view may appear to challenge the argument above insofar as it appeals to the contrast between sacred places which expresses the unity of the transcendent and worldly, and profane places which remains firmly in the latter category. Yet there seems no reason why the integrity argument need make that appeal; why can’t a group’s traditional territory in its totality express the sacred for them? The challenge here is not axiological, but normative: it may seem objectionably inflationary to employ the territory is sacred as such view in pursuit of group claim for its special protection from other interests. But then we need to assess the strength of those interests and engage in trade-offs which, however difficult, are quite common in debates about justice. After all, we are quite familiar with political arrangements, as in Australia, where indigenous groups have been leased federal land with substantial devolved rights of self-government with respect to them.

Perhaps a more troubling conceptual challenge for this view are secular commemorative sites such as Vietnam memorial in Washington DC, Holocaust memorial in Berlin, or the Cenotaph in London. None of these, plainly, bridges a worldly and transcendent realm. Nonetheless, the significance of secular sacred places is singular and particularised. They embody the collective identity of the people and are chosen to honour events of momentous importance in that people’s history. Such places afford opportunities for contemplative reflection which is a secular analogue of religious ritual and practice. Sometimes, as in Armistice day at the Cenotaph, secular commemorative places are marked by special ceremonies, but not always. Either way, secular places encourage visitors to engage with the values they’re designed to commemorate, such as humanitarianism, for example, or sacrifice in pursuit of a just cause. Thus such places take us out of the everyday quotidian world and towards something more elevated and more noble. At the same time, they are grounded here on earth. Secular places of great significance, therefore, enjoy *something* of the expressive function of religious ones, albeit in a more attenuated, worldly sense. They speak for a country’s people, announcing the events and values on which they take a stand. They enable a common national or civic life of the people whose places they are, analogous to the way religious sacred places symbolise the commitments of a religious group.

I’ve so far been discussing the narrow view of sacred places – places which are sacred in themselves - but we must also ask whether the integrity argument can be directed at the wide view where the relevant places are not sacred as such, but locations for the performance of devotional activity. On the wide view, sacred places *represent* or emblemise preciousness; sacredness is not part of their very constitution as on the narrow view - hence churches etc need first to be consecrated. Yet churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and the like, in all their variety and multitude, also anchor integrity in the less exalted but nonetheless critical sense that they provide – or should provide - a safe home for religious adherents to pursue IPCs surrounded by like-minded others. A religious building’s integrity as a domain makes it an external context for integrity. Its undamaged state; its security from outside threats; the symbols, pictures, furniture and so on which decorate its interior; and its sheer continued presence whatever turbulence occurs in the outside world all serve to make it a protected space for regular and communal religious observation. The value of sacred places that meet the wide but not narrow criteria lies in their practically realising such IPCs. A religious group which, though legally free to pray and worship together, had no guaranteed special places in which they could do so would experience their collective religious life as hollowed out and unattached. It would be absent the spatial anchoring that everyday sacred places gave them. If we value individual integrity, on this view, then we must accord value and significance to the places where believers join one another in community in pursuit of public IPCs. Outsiders to a faith do not value such places as insiders do but can still appreciate how they help enable the latter’s integrity and the meaning, recognition, and solidarity which only flower as they do because the physical infrastructure for communal practice is secure. Moreover, in churches, temples and the like, believers are able to engage with and experience their religious values, and if we regard human being as value-responsive creatures, then we have reasons to respect those places in which appropriate response to, and concrete engagement with, such values most naturally occurs.

I end this Section by turning to the issue of the respect which third parties seem obliged to demonstrate at sacred places, especially on the narrow view, and to some extent on the wide one. As I mentioned, this is expressed in injunctions to wear proper attire, not to speak loudly or utter profanities, not to behave in an obnoxious or unseemly way, not to smoke, beg, trade in goods, and so on. Here again the issue is how to account for such directives without appealing to religious values which are sectarian and contestable, not least by those required to be respectful. What these directives signal, I believe, is respect for the social context of sacred places which I’ve argued helps ground believers’ integrity. Appropriate behaviour communicates that certain places are owed respect as such, and thus cements the common knowledge that these are special locations. Moreover, respect from third parties, not only reflects, but also helps constitute the significance of sacred places, thereby helping enable them play their role I’ve outlined.[[30]](#footnote-30) By contrast, disrespectful behaviour would cause believers to regard their sacred places tainted or degraded; and thus on the route to becoming profane and ordinary instead. Public norms of respectful behavior thereby help secure the social boundaries of sacred places; maintaining them as a social category distinct from the everyday profane world.

**6. Conclusion**

I have argued that on the narrow view sacred spaces render believers’ integrity meaningful, intelligible and significant by visibly demonstrating that their religion is of this world, it is not wholly transcendent. That is an internal argument about the enabling conditions of integrity. On the wide view, sacred places provide a protected venue for fellow adherents to pursue their religious commitments together and engage with their value. Here sacred places play an external role. This account of the value of sacred places nonetheless leaves several important questions unresolved. Though it explains why sacred places are valuable in a way that has public purchase for citizens as a whole (whatever their faith or lack thereof), it does not inform us who should bear the cost of maintaining them, or protecting them from possible outside interference. It does not offer a view on whether human-made and some natural sacred places may be augmented, modified or improved. Nor does it address the issue of contested sacred places where their use and ownership may be fairly divided between two or more contending groups.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, all these questions presuppose some normative view of the value of sacred places, and thus the account I’ve offered above is a necessary preliminary to addressing them.

1. Norman Brockman, *Encyclopaedia of Sacred Places 2 Vols* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Petkoff, “Finding a Grammar of Consent for “Soft Law” Guidelines on Sacred Places” in Silvio Ferrari & Andrea Berzo (eds.), *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage: Legal and Religious Perspectives on the Sacred Places of the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 2003); Andrea Berzo, “Towards a Definition of Sacred Places” in Silvio Ferrari & Andrea Berzo (eds.), *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage: Legal and Religious Perspectives on the Sacred Places of the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peter Jones, “Bearing the Consequences of Belief”, 2(1) *Journal of Political Philosophy* (1994), 224-243. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Petkoff, “Finding a Grammar of Consent for “Soft Law” Guidelines on Sacred Places” in Silvio Ferrari & Andrea Berzo (eds.), *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage: Legal and Religious Perspectives on the Sacred Places of the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 2003); Andrea Berzo, “Towards a Definition of Sacred Places” in Silvio Ferrari & Andrea Berzo (eds.), *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage: Legal and Religious Perspectives on the Sacred Places of the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in Berzo, *supra* note 3, at 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Though see Yuval Jobani & Nahshon Perez, “Governing the Sacred: A Critical Typology of Models of Political Toleration in Contested Sacred Sites”, 7(2) *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* (2018), 250-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Owen Goldin, “Tamir, Rawls and the Temple Mount”, 22(3) *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2005), 289-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Patricia Mohr, “God in Gotham: The Design of Sacred Space in New York’s Central Park”, in Louis P. Nelson (ed.), *American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

9 Emile Durkeim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1957), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*., at 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Yuval Jobani & Nahshon Perez, *Women of the Wall: Navigating Religion in Sacred Sites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-4; Berzo, *supra* note 3, at 5-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Eliade, *supra* note 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gideon Sapir & Daniel Statman, “The Protection of Holy Places”, 10(1) *Law & Ethics of Human Rights* (2016), 135, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As Sapir & Statman point out, it’s also not clear the argument can be applied to cultural and religious majorities (*Ibid*., at 148). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*., at 150-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. James O. Young, “Cultures and Cultural Property”, 24(2) *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2007), 111-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Paul Bou-Habib, “A Theory of Religious Accommodation”, 23(1) *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2006), 109-26l; John Corvino et al, *Debating Religious Liberty and Discrimination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Patrick Lenta, “Freedom of Conscience and the Value of Integrity”, 29(2) *Ratio Juris* (2016), 246-263; Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism’s Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Nick Martin, “Exemption Proliferation”, in Jonathan Seglow & Andrew Shorten (eds.), *Religion and Political Theory* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019); Jonathan Seglow, “Religious Accommodation: Agency, Integrity and Self-Respect”, in Cécile Laborde & Aurelia Bardon (eds.), *Religion in Liberal Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Charles Taylor & Jocelyn Maclure, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Kevin Vallier, “The Moral Basis of Religious Exemptions”, 35(1) *Law and Philosophy* (2016), 1-28. For a critique of the integrity approach, see Giulio Fornaroli, “Do We Need Integrity in a Theory of Justice? A Critique of the ‘Argument from Integrity in Favour of Accommodation’”, 36(4) *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2018), 659-674. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cheshire Calhoun, “Standing for Something”, 92(5) *Journal of Philosophy* (1995), 235-260. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Lenta, *supra* note 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Bou-Habib, *supra* note 16; Taylor & Maclure, *supra* note 16, at 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Corvino et al, *supra* note 16, at 125; Vallier, *supra* note 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lenta, *supra* note 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Laborde, *supra* note 16, 215-216. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*., at 52-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Sapir & Statman, *supra* note 12, at 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Charles Taylor*, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ron Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Colin Bird, “Does Religion Deserve Our Respect?”, 30(3) *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2013), 262, 277-279. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Berzo, *supra* note 3, at 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)