THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR:
EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS AND VALUES
FOR RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS IN SINGAPORE

by

LILY KONG

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR:
EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS AND VALUES
FOR RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS IN SINGAPORE

INTRODUCTION

The study of human environmental experiences has engaged a range of disciplinary attention, with work deriving chiefly from environmental psychologists and geographers. However, most research has focused on the sensory aspects of environmental experience, while the intangible, immeasurable experiences of environments have been somewhat neglected. Certainly, the meanings and values that are invested in places, which form part of the interaction between humans and environments, have not been sufficiently researched. My intention in this paper is to address one aspect of this silence, namely the ways in which humans experience their religious environments, and more particularly, the symbolic meanings and values that individuals invest in their religious buildings. I will use Singapore as a case study to explore these issues because Singapore's colourful multi-religious setting provides abundant interesting material for comparative analysis.

SINGAPORE: THE RELIGIOUS SETTING

Like the ethnic and linguistic composition, the religious composition in Singapore is extremely varied. The major world religions are all represented here, as seen in the data collected in a 1988 survey on religion in Singapore. The following distribution was recorded: 28.3% of the population were Buddhists; 13.4% were Taoists; 18.7% were Christians, of which 7.6% were Catholics and 11.1% were "Other Christians"; 16.0% were Muslims; 4.9% were Hindus; 1.1% had other religions; and 17.6% had no religion (Kuo and Quah, 1988:2).

In this paper, I will explore the contemporary meanings and values that individuals of these major religious groups invest in their respective religious buildings. The material for this discussion was collected primarily from two sources. The first is a questionnaire survey that involved 500 respondents from Clementi, a public housing estate and surrounding private estates such as the West Coast area and the Sunset Way vicinity (Figure 1). The survey was conducted between May and June of 1989. The second adopts a qualitative approach whereby a much smaller group of 23 adherents from various religious groups (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and syncretic "Chinese religion") are interviewed in-depth either during single lengthy sessions or multiple shorter ones. The use of quantitative methods allowed for the collection of broad-based extensive data that established patterns of behaviour vis-a-vis religious places. On the other hand, qualitative methods allowed for the collection of personal, detailed, in-depth information, and this was particularly necessary and appropriate given that the phenomenon (of meanings and values) is intensely personal and certainly not measurable.

On the basis of empirical evidence, I will argue that these places do not have a singular meaning for everyone, or even a singular meaning for each individual. Instead, there are multiple layers of meanings that are invested, which will be dealt with at three levels below. The first will explore the religious and sacred meanings invested in religious buildings; the second will focus on the personal "secular" ties that develop with these places; and the third will deal with the social meanings. In these various "layers" of meanings can be detected topophilic ties (Tuan, 1974a) and senses of place (Tuan, 1974b; Eyles, 1985) which have developed between humans and their religious buildings.

RELIGIOUS PLACES AND SACRED EXPERIENCES

Churches, temples and mosques are sacred centres for adherents because of their experiences with these places. Here, I will address four aspects of these experiences. The first will explore people's conceptions of the "sacred" and "sacred place".[1] The second will analyse people's "religious experience". The third will highlight the importance of the physical setting in the experience of the sacred. Finally, the codes of behaviour people observe in religious places will be discussed -- often such behaviour provides the most pervasive evidence that people view religious places as sacred.

What constitutes a "sacred place"? Tuan (1978), in one of the few papers to deal explicitly with this concept, suggested a sacred place is both apart and distinct; it represents order and wholeness; it radiates power, manifested as both order and violence. In contemporary times, Tuan felt, a church, notwithstanding its remaining religious functions, is no longer much of a sacred place because it no longer radiates power. Indeed, he argued, the nation-state, neighbourhood and suburb have more claim to sacredness than the religious place. Tuan derived these notions from historical and biblical evidence as well as an etymological analysis of the term "sacred", but did not attempt an empirical understanding of real people who use and experience religious places. My evidence, in part, challenges Tuan's contentions, both on the nature of sacredness and the "decline" in sanctity of religious places.

---

[1] I emphasise the fact that I will be dealing with people's conceptions of sacred place. I am not concerned with theological arguments here, although I recognise the divide between Catholic and Protestant doctrine as to whether the sacred can be localised in space. Catholics insist on the divine presence in the Eucharist, and treat relics, and relatedly places, as special objects of devotion. The latter refuse to acknowledge "such an impious mixing of spirit and matter" (Davis, 1981, cited in Muir and Weissman, 1989:94).

Sacredness for my interviewees means experiencing a god's presence and includes the notion of <u>preciousness</u>. A sacred place is therefore the dwelling place of god(s) and a place in which one experiences god's presence. It is precious and not to be destroyed. It is blessed and has a certain ambience of which <u>serenity</u> is a chief component. It also fulfils a specific function as a place of prayer. In other words, for all the interviewees, a sacred place is indeed, as Tuan suggested, a place apart. Yet, to them, some of this apartness and hence sacredness emanates from being a place of prayer, which Tuan dismissed. Conversely, Tuan's idea of order and wholeness does not emerge in my interviewees' definitions of sacredness at all. Neither does power (manifested as order and violence) appear, although some interviewees recognised that sacred places had "a higher energy level", which could be interpreted as "power", though of a different character to Tuan's. Further, the idea that a modern church is no longer sacred must certainly be rejected. Churches, and clearly, temples and mosques, are still sacred in the eyes of adherents, with "sacredness" defined in their own terms based on their experiences, and not in terms dictated by history or etymology.

When dealing with interviewees' conceptions of sacred places, a distinction can be drawn between Chinese and Hindu temples on the one hand, and churches and mosques on the other, in terms of notions of sanctification or the process of "sacredization" (Sahoo, 1982). In the former instance, it is possible to distinguish between sacredness that is intrinsic to the place, as opposed to that which is extrinsic. Intrinsic sacredness means the place is in and of itself spiritual. Tuan (1974a:146) illustrated such sacredness in a general way with reference to nature:

> Generally speaking, sacred places are the locations of hierophany. A grove, a spring, a rock, or a mountain acquires sacred character wherever it is identified with some form of divine manifestation or with an event of overpowering significance.

However, natural forms cannot claim a monopoly of intrinsic sacredness because it can also be true of built forms. For example, Chandran, a devout elderly Hindu interviewee, spoke of how a person may be told by a god (through a dream, for instance) that a temple is to be built on a particular piece of land, or that the god wants to reside there. The land and its temple are then sacred. This, in fact, is believed to be the case for the Kaliamman temple at Old Toh Tuck Road, which was originally located at Lorong Ah Soo. Its founder had apparently been told in a dream by the deity of the new site and as a result, the temple had been moved as a result to the new location.

On the other hand, sacredness can also be extrinsic in the sense that it is not an inherent characteristic of the place. Instead, religious practices cause the place to become sacred. For example, as a Hindu priest pointed out, a temple can be infused with divinity through the ceremony of <u>kumbhabhishekam</u> (or consecration ceremony). Such ceremonies occur on four occasions: when new images are installed in a new temple; when an existing temple has to be relocated; when renovations are carried out in an existing temple; and every twelve years in the life of a temple. These ceremonies follow a set pattern as laid down in age-old scriptures known as <u>Agama Shastra</u>. They contain rules, among other things, for the construction of a temple, the making of images, and consecration. Periodic consecration ceremonies are required because people pollute the sanctity of temples through acts of commission and omission. Performing these ceremonies thus re-infuses the temple and its images with sanctity. In this way, places which did not have an intrinsic sacredness will be imbued with the sacred through human ascription. While I have illustrated the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction with respect to Hindu temples, these notions were similarly expressed by Chinese religionists (with the exception of Buddhists).

This conceptualisation of sacredness as either intrinsic or extrinsic to a place negates Jackson and Henrie's (1983) argument that sacred places do not exist naturally but are assigned sanctity by people, but parallels Eliade's (1957) categorisation of religious places as hierophanic or constructed. If Jackson and Henrie's (1983) argument is followed through, then all sanctity is assigned, and all sacredness is extrinsic. Yet, as Eliade (1957:11) argued, there are places which are sacred by virtue of a hierophany, that is, places where "something sacred shows itself to us". This corresponds to places which I have identified as intrinsically sacred. On the other hand, he also recognised that "man may also construct a sacred space by effecting certain rituals." This is the second category of places I have identified for which sacrality is extrinsic.

Churches and mosques are spoken of in a different way. Although they are described as sacred, such sanctity is never spoken of as intrinsic. Instead, interviewees suggest that their churches are sacred because they have been consecrated; they recognise sacredness to be extrinsically given. The very recognition that their religious buildings are sacred is significant because it contrasts with the theological view within some Christian denominations, for example, that the church is in the congregation and that the buildings are not sacred but functional. It illustrates how lay interpretations can differ from official doctrinal positions.

I turn now to the second major aspect of my discussion -- the way in which religious places evoke certain feelings which constitute a "divine" or "sacred" experience. In fact, the place in which one undergoes such an experience is often rendered a sacred place. James (1902:27), in his much-cited work The Varieties of Religious Experience, described religious sentiment as "a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse in alternation". These may include fear, a feeling of dependence, a feeling of the infinite and so on. Equivalent notions are Otto's (1917) "numinous" and Tuan's (1978) "ambiguity and paradox", all of which recognise the variety of feelings evoked and their seemingly

contradictory nature. All this is borne out in my empirical material. Interviewees expressed at least four different components of their sacred experience: <u>serenity</u>, <u>protection</u>, <u>overwhelmingness</u> and <u>fear</u>. For example, Cheng, a 22-year old Methodist described his feelings in this way:

> I felt it was holy. You can't put your hand on it, but it was a sense of serenity -- very calm, very peaceful kind of feeling.

This sense could be environmental in that the place could be quiet and tranquil and "cut off from the outside world", as a Catholic interviewee Joan put it:

> Beyond its arched doors of solid timber, you feel cut off from the hurly-burly outside -- the shouts of schoolchildren, the revving of buses, the blaring of car horns ... Everything is like left behind in another world.

On the other hand, it could be a sense of being at peace with oneself even if the environment was far from calm and serene. This is true of the Hindu temple where there is "noise and colour" and "activity (is) going on all the time". As a result, "it's not a calm and a serene place", and yet, as Prema put it,

> ... the feeling I get when I walk in is one of suddenly feeling very calm

> ... you can stand there and you can find your own sea of tranquility.

Part of the divine experience is also a feeling of being protected while at the same time, there is a sense of fear, as well as being "overwhelmed". In other words, there is the feeling that here is "a being greater than myself, or greater than mankind". This is reminiscent of Otto's (1917) idea that there is something "wholly other" which emanates an overwhelming superiority of power. These emotions were described in the same terms by interviewees of all the different religious groups, suggesting that beneath theological and doctrinal differences, people's experiences of the sacred are essentially similar.

While writers like James, Otto, and Tuan have dealt with the concept of "religious experience" and the feelings involved as one undergoes this experience, they have not examined the important roles played by the physical environment in evoking or enhancing these feelings. In fact, my empirical material suggests three ways in which the physical environment is important: the structure and architecture of the buildings are significant; the presence of physical forms such as statues and engravings evoke and/or enhance the divine experience; and colours, orientations, shapes, morphology and the like also have contributory roles to play.

The structure and architecture of religious buildings influence the ambience of the setting and can play a large role in contributing to or detracting from the divine experience. This was expressed most strongly by a Christian interviewee Wen Mei:

> ... anything that's less than established in a recognised form seem(s) to be less ...
> sacred.

Hence, a church without the characteristic steeple, dark, weathered benches, huge pipe organs, stained glass and so forth did not feel particularly sacred. In turn, a church with all its characteristic forms felt more sacred than an auditorium being used for worship, for example. Anne, a Methodist interviewee whose church had been demolished and who now worships on Sundays in a school hall, expressed her reservations:

> I don't feel like it's a church. I feel as if I'm entering school... (and) it bothers me
> -- a lot ... because I find that the atmosphere is not there at all.

Within the religious building, the physical setting is also seen to be important in contributing to the divine experience. As Reverend Lim, a Methodist pastor put it:

> The setting -- the interplay of light and dark, the silence, the cold, the high
> ceilings, the pews, the decor (that is, the cross and so forth) -- is such that it

encourages introspection.

To him, it "supports the imagination" and draws one into a "meditative mood". This view is echoed by Hindus, Muslims, Catholics and Chinese religionists alike, though couched in different terms.

In addition, the space within religious buildings contributes to the feeling of the numinous, a sense of awe and of something overwhelming. For Kartini, a Muslim, the expanse of space both horizontally and vertically is overpowering; it totally engulfs the person. Kumar, a Hindu, gets the same "sense of the overwhelming", that there is an "out-of-this-world" power. For others, the feeling of abundant space contributes to a sense of peace and serenity. For example, Mrs Nair is a Hindu who often prays at a Sikh temple. To her, the Sikh temple is a big empty hall, except for the holy book in the centre and the space evokes in her a sense of calm and peace. To Eng Teng, a Buddhist, the big, open, empty and expansive space in the Buddhist Centre he frequents, provides little distraction in line with Buddhist thinking, and forces him to look inwards and search for answers to problems within himself.

This important role of the general physical setting within churches, temples or mosques supports strongly Walter's (1988:75-77) argument in his book Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment that religious places "energize and shape religious meaning" and "help to make religious experience intelligible". Walter's arguments were couched in terms strangely similar to the Methodist pastor Reverend Lim's words quoted above. Just as Reverend Lim spoke of support for the imagination and meditative moods, Walter (1988:75-6) wrote of sacred places thus:

> Any sacred place is a specific environment of phenomena that are expected to support the imagination, nourish religious experience, and convey religious truth. It organizes sight and sound, introduces light to present clarity and order, or makes things dark to suggest unseen presences and hidden power. Mosques as

well as churches have surfaces that dematerialize the walls or use other techniques to draw the believer into a meditative mood or even an altered state of consciousness. The hypnotic quality of glittering mosaics on Byzantine walls, the dialectic of light and shadow in Romanesque churches, the mystic luminosity and magic colors of great windows in Gothic buildings are all variations on a single topistic intention -- to inspire an ecstasy of place change. This impulse leads the soul toward heaven, but it also changes the place, turning the building into a mystic interior that represents the heavenly Jerusalem.

Apart from the buildings themselves, a second way in which interviewees spoke of the physical environment as an important contributor to the sense of the sacred is the presence of physical forms such as altars, crosses, statues, engravings, paintings, lanterns and so forth. The roles they play vary for different individuals. For Mr Tan, a 66 year old traditional Chinese religionist, statues are very important because the gods have been invited to dwell in them. In other words, the statues have become the gods. On the other hand, for Soo Ling, a young Chinese religionist who was searching for a rationality in her "inherited" religion, these statues at best provided a "sense of a religious place". For yet others, there was often a rational-emotional divide in their view of these tangible forms. On the one hand, as Prema, a highly articulate Hindu interviewee suggested, rationally they were inanimate objects. Yet on the other hand, they also come to life for her:

> ... they have the most wonderful eyes. And whenever I'm there, and I go there and I look at their eyes, or I look at Siva's eyes, the one in the middle, I look at his eyes ... I almost feel like there's a connection you know. I sit there and I look at his eyes, and I don't need ... and everything else is just blocked out because something's been made. ... I mean, obviously, if you ask me intellectually, you know, it's an inanimate object; somebody drew the eyes. But to me, it means something. I'm looking at him; he's looking back. We're communicating like that.

Even if not all other interviewees felt such communication, they were in general agreement that such tangible forms were important because

> ... seeing is believing. You have to see something to feel it.

While these tangible forms are important in contributing to the sacred experience, some warned against an excess of icons because they then become distractions. This is true in particular of Christians where both the Catholic and Methodist ministers said these physical forms are helpful reminders of one's faith but they should not in themselves become the focus of worship. In other words, they cautioned against idolatry.

Finally, at a third level, the built environment also contributes to the sacred experience through the symbolism of colours, orientation, shape, morphology and so forth. This aspect of religious symbolism has attracted many writers over the years. For example, Gordon (1971:216) illustrated the symbolism of orientation in his paper on "sacred directions", while Lip (1978, 1981) discussed the importance of colours, feng shui, orientation and axiality in Chinese temples (see also Michell, 1977; Koh, 1984/85; Kohl, 1984; and Sivapalan, 1985/1986 for further examples). Others explored the functions of religious symbols in religious experience (Dillistone, 1966; and Tillich, 1966) and conceptualised different types of religious symbols (Hutt, 1985:11-14). Despite the tremendous academic interest in religious symbols and despite the wealth of religious symbolism encoded into religious buildings, my empirical data suggests that the symbols are only recognised by a small number of interviewees and understood by few. Those who are able to decode these meanings have specialised knowledge of the religion, such as priests and ministers. The laity, on the other hand, do not recognise these symbols. For example, Reverend Vuyk spoke of the symbolism underlying the shapes of churches, citing examples in Singapore. These include churches built in the shape of a cross symbolising the death of Jesus Christ on the cross (Church of the Holy Cross); churches built in the shape of a tent symbolising the tent of meeting in the Old Testament (Church of the Blessed Sacrament); or churches in the shape of a boat or ship symbolising the parable of Jesus and his disciples in a boat on stormy waters with Jesus ultimately calming the waters for his flock. Yet, as Reverend

Vuyk himself put it, the symbolic meaning of the shape of a church is often "the vision" of the architect, "not understood so much by the people". In contrast, the laity remain silent about such symbolism. When asked for their interpretation of some symbols, many acknowledge that the buildings are probably heavily encoded with symbolic meaning but admit that they have no specialised knowledge of their meanings. Clearly, it is important to understand the symbolic meanings invested by producers of religious buildings but it is equally important to appreciate that the laity will not necessarily interpret them in the same way.

The distinction between priest and laity was also true for Hindus and their temples. Only the Hindu priest I interviewed described the symbolic meanings of temples: how they are constructed in the image of a human body lying down, with the head on the west and the feet towards the east. As he explained it, the Tantras teaches devotees to practise kundalini yoga, that is, yoga which awakens the divine energy within the human being which then rises through seven centres of consciousness (situated at different parts of the body) until it reaches the seventh centre which is located in the brain. To help devotees visualise this process, the temple was constructed so that different sections corresponded to the centres of consciousness of the body (Figures 2 & 3 and Table 1).[2] Furthermore, he went on to explain that the east-west orientation of most Hindu temples in Singapore was symbolic -- the temple was aligned with the laws that govern the movements of the sun. The first rays of the rising sun would then reach the principal deity of the temple who would then transmit it in the form of divine grace to the devotees. These contributed to the symbolic significance of the Hindu temple as a place of god(s) and as a place where the god(s) can reach out to his/her devotees, but it is a symbolism not well recognised by the adherents interviewed.

---

[2] Eliade (1957:172) dealt with this correspondence between body and temple (or house) and beyond that, the world, and indeed the universe. He called it the body-house/temple-cosmos homology.

One other argument needs to be spelt out regarding the role of physical settings in the experience of the sacred. In general, I have shown that the physical environment is important to adherents' feelings of the sacred and numinous. However, Chua (1988:37-38) argued that there is a nascent development in which some churches seem to avoid the conventional symbols and forms of a church intentionally. These tend to be the newer and more charismatic churches in which the theological emphasis is not on the building but the individual -- each person is saved by faith alone. The church as building is "essentially dispensable" (Chua, 1988:38). Chua cited the example of the charismatic Church of Our Saviour to illustrate this theological position. When refurbishing an unused cinema for their own use, the charismatic group submitted a building brief to the architect which requested that the building "must not look like a church" in an "orthodox" sense (Chua, 1988:38). The result was a post-modern building in which the exterior is characterised by a "riot of colours ... sometimes 'crashingly' juxtaposed, sometimes harmoniously blended" (Chua, 1988:37). It has no characteristic steeple, no stained glass windows. This may lead to the conclusion that the physical setting is not important in evoking and enhancing sacred experiences. Yet, as Chua himself pointed out, once one enters the building, there is no mistaking that it is a church. This is in large part due to the rows of "stiff brown wooden church pews" (Chua, 1988:37), creating the sense of a place of worship. At the same time, even though the symbolism may be different, there is no doubt the physical environment has been created to encourage certain modes of sacred experience, in this instance, religious joy. For example, the main prayer hall is constructed to portray a sense of liveliness and vibrance, and has creation as its basic theme. This complements the congregation's style of charismatic worship, with fast tempo hymn singing, spontaneous and rhythmic clapping, stretching out of hands, swaying and dancing in joy. The physical environment is as important here in evoking and enhancing this sense of religious joy as in the more solemn settings of orthodox churches which evoke a sense of awe and overwhelmingness.

Finally, I turn now to an analysis of people's behaviour in religious places because by far the most pervasive evidence that religious places are experienced as sacred places is the behaviour of people. There are both written and unwritten codes of behaviour which people observe when they are in churches, temples and mosques. On the one hand, certain forms of behaviour are frowned upon and indeed, considered "desecrating behaviour". On the other hand, there are accepted forms of behaviour and ways of maintaining the sanctity of the buildings which interviewees consciously or unconsciously practise.

In the case of desecration, some forms of behaviour cannot be condoned in a place of worship. Dancing, for example, is taboo. Turning a church into a dance hall is tantamount to desecration for Magdalene, a Catholic Sunday School teacher: "How can we think of dancing in churches? It's ... frivolous ... pleasure-seeking. Church is solemn and sacred." Prema, a Hindu, speaking of her experiences in New York puts it less directly but nonetheless clearly:

> ... it amazes me that there is a disco in New York that is on the site of an old church. And nothing has changed. Nothing. I mean, all they did literally was, I think, they took out the figures and they desanctified it. And I cannot understand how someone can go in there, when all they did was say they "desanctified" it. I walk in there; I can't dance there because to me, it looks like a church!

Another form of desanctification for some interviewees is turning a church into a house of prostitution: to Karen, a Catholic, that would be "an extreme kind of profanation". Similarly, Joan, another Catholic, would not "dream of holding a party" in a religious building because that would be a "terrible defilement". For Mrs Nair, a Hindu, even opening up a religious place to tourism would be "almost like ... desanctifying this place". To her,

> a temple or mosque or church is for religious (activities). You open it to all and sundry and you get insensitive people walking in with their shoes and talking and laughing and gawking. Where's the respect for God? For sacredness?

Even in places where religious services are not held regularly any more, the sort of behaviour and activities which go on are still regarded as important by some to maintain the sanctity of the religious buildings. For example, one suggestion that the Armenian Church in Singapore be opened up for "passive recreational uses" and "intimate performances of music and drama" was met with objections from the Board of Trustees of the church. In framing his objections, one member of the Board argued: "although religious services are not held at the church on a regular basis, it remains a sacred and holy place" (Straits Times, 1 November 1981). In his view therefore, acceptable codes of behaviour should still apply.

While all the above appear to be unwritten but generally accepted rules of behaviour, there are yet other forms of behaviour which are considered desecration and which are written into the religious books. For example, Christians cite biblical sanction against using church premises for commercial purposes, which some interpret as including tourism and the related tourist trade. For example, Anne, a young devoted Methodist and Pauline, an equally devoted Catholic, both cite the parable in which Jesus disapproved of any buying and selling in the Temple. When asked what she thought of tourist souvenir trade in the premises of religious buildings and when shown a picture of such trade in a Chinese temple, Anne responded thus:

> I don't think it should be done. I really don't think it should be done ... because it's a religious place of worship, you know, it's not a profit-making business. Religion is something that's supposed to be close to your heart; if you actually set up a business .... something's wrong ... the focus is terribly wrong and I don't think it should be, you know. It's like the ... you know, when the Lord went to Jerusalem Temple and he overturned all the tables and the people in Jerusalem were selling doves and all that and they were turning that place of worship into a profit making business and I think that's terribly wrong because the people are no longer going there to focus, to worship the Lord but buying and selling and that is definitely not what religion is.

There are a body of rules governing entry to Hindu temples and mosques. For example, it would be desecrating behaviour if one did not take off one's shoes before entering the temple.

Devotees should also wash their feet before entry, though in the past, it used to be necessary to wash oneself totally first. Pregnant women in their eighth and ninth months of pregnancy would be desecrating the temple if they went in. Those women who went to temple or mosque during the month after pregnancy and when menstruating were also considered to be violating the sacredness of the place. This is one clear instance in which prescribed behaviour is prejudicial to women, which a more "liberated" woman might find difficult to accept. Prema for example, has obvious difficulty:

> If you're a woman and you're menstruating, you're not suppposed to go to the temple. But that I have never been able to reconcile, because as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing wrong with that. And I don't think God made women not to go to worship.

There are, on the other hand, certain acceptable codes of behaviour which are generally shared among the various religious groups. For example, walking into a religious place should spell the end of incessant talking and chatting. "Joking, laughing and romping around" are not acceptable, and secular pop music is seen to be incongruous. By observing these standards of behaviour, the sanctity of religious places can be maintained. To conclude, these forms of acceptable behaviour display people's reverence for a religious place and their actions preserve its sanctity. Without the codes which are tacitly and/or formally agreed upon and which are enforced by the adherents of each religion, religious places would not be sacred places. Hence, our actions and behaviour are important ways in which we give substance to the meaning of "sacred place".

"SECULAR" TIES AND "SACRED" PLACES

> The catalyst that converts any physical location -- any environment if you will -- into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings (Gussow, 1971:27).

16

The preceding section has dealt with one set of meanings -- the ways in which churches, temples and mosques are constituted as sacred places in a religious sense. In this section, I will focus on how they are also "sacred" in another sense -- because of the special and intense "secular" ties attached to them. These are ties with tremendous personal or shared meanings for people, and are akin to the attachments that can develop with other places, such as one's home or neighbourhood. In this sense, they are not necessarily unique, and in fact, concepts used in other "secular" contexts can be used to frame the following discussion. Churches, temples and mosques become "places" in the sense various humanistic geographers and architects have used the term. For example, they are foci "where we experience the meaningful events of our existence" (Norberg-Schulz, 1971:19); and they "involve a concentration of our intentions, our attitudes, purposes and experience" (Relph, 1976:43). Put another way, these are places with which people have developed topophilic ties or a sense of place (Tuan, 1974a & b).

Secular ties take a variety of forms. Specifically, and most importantly, they include personal relationships and experiences tied to the religious place -- so much so that the place becomes an integral part of these relationships and experiences. It is, as Ittelson <u>et al</u>. (1976:204) explained, experiencing the environment as "emotional territory", and is evident when a person tends to describe his/her environment in terms of how he/she feels. For example, the church could have been a place where intense pain and sorrow was experienced, and which seemed to offer solace and refuge. Thus, many of the interviewees spoke of how they would go to the chapel or church whenever they were troubled. Joan, a Roman Catholic, put it this way:

> My mum was not well, and I remember bursting into tears one day when a colleague asked me about my mum. So I turned and ran straight to the chapel, without actually thinking about it. It calmed me: the place, and the atmosphere, and gave me a certain strength to face the world again. So in a way, that was a turning point for me and the chapel. The same with Novena Church. Mum was in the operating theatre in the hospital down the road, and I went on to Novena to pray. And there, I cried, and recovered. And felt a strength. So the church became for me the place that comforted me when I was distressed. It's become

17

an important place in my life.

Another way in which secular ties with a religious place render it in some sense sacred is through the connection with some person(s) of great personal importance, such as a favourite relative. The religious place then takes on special meaning and significance, as in the case of Prema, a Hindu. The temple she refers to is the one her grandmother used to go to:

> ... my grandmother, the one who died before I was born: she had cancer of the throat, and they only detected it very late. They found out, and in her last year or so, she had to go for chemotherapy and the priest there would open up the temple early for her, so she could go in. And I had never been into that temple before last year, but I walked in there, and I don't know if it was because I knew grandma used to come here, and she really liked the temple, I mean, it was her favourite temple, or whatever, but I just felt real strong ... you know, I was very happy there; I liked it. I had a really good feeling about it. If they tore that down, it'd be like tearing a part of me down.

In this instance, Prema, her grandmother and the temple have all somehow become closely intertwined. Her feelings and memories of her grandmother cannot be divorced from the temple her grandmother used to visit, and tearing down the building was like tearing up Prema's memories and indeed, destroying part of her own identity. Such is the intensity of emotions and the extent to which self and environment have merged that the environment becomes self, and self, environment. In other words, the environment has become an integral component of self-identity (Ittelson et al., 1976:202-203).

Religious places also become sacred because they may embody the past and all it stands for in a personal way. Particularly for those seeking their "ethnic" roots, this whole connection with the past becomes particularly important. Prema, having lived out of Singapore for the best part of her formative years, was seeking her roots; certain religious places were important and indeed sacred to her because they were familiar parts of her childhood and had not changed during the time she was away. They were places which she could connect with her past.

Similarly, religious places also become very highly valued when the individual has been closely involved in the creation of the place. Through the process of investing real time and effort, the place becomes a part of the person and a part of something sacred and precious. Mustapha, a devout Muslim who devotes much of his time to mosque activities, epitomises this sense in which the religious place becomes sacrosanct through his involvement in the construction of the neighbourhood mosque. He felt himself to be part of the mosque. The strength of his attachment becomes apparent when the mosque is threatened with hypothetical demolition: to him, it would be tantamount to destroying his creation.

Aside from these personal experiences and relationships with religious places which render them sacred, others also feel the pull of religious places because of the familiarity and strength of old ties as a result of time spent there. All the interviewees felt time to be a crucial factor in the development of place attachments. For those who have been to the same church, temple or mosque for a substantial period of time, the place is cherished for its familiarity: "seeing the same gods, the same sorts of things ... the same smells, the same sights, sounds ..." By the same token, others felt this layer of meaning did not exist for them, simply because they have not had long periods of contact with their religious places. Instead, they feel such attachments for their homes and schools where they have spent far more of their time. These places then become "sacred" to them, but this "sacredness" does not derive from any religious meaning.

In short, religious places, like other places, become "sacred" to people because they are where personal relationships and experiences are anchored. As Walter (1988:21) put it,

> ... a place is a location of experience. It evokes and organizes memories, images, feelings, sentiments, meanings, and the work of imagination. The feelings of a place ... come from collective experience and they do not happen anywhere else.

They belong to the place.

RELIGIOUS PLACES AS SOCIAL CENTRES

A third layer of meaning I wish to discuss is the social meaning invested in churches, temples and mosques. For some, the religious place is also a place for meeting other people and mixing socially. Drawing on the questionnaire material, "Other Christians" were the biggest group (41.1%) who cited "meeting other people" as one of their common activities in churches (Table 2). Catholics followed next with 27.9%, with the Hindus (23.9%) and Muslims (21.4%) close behind. The group for whom this is not significant is the Chinese religionists; only 5.7% claim that they are engaged at this social level in the temple. Of these, all are Buddhists rather than the other syncretic groups.

Another indication of the different degrees of social interaction within the various groups can be seen in the amount of time devotees spend at their respective places of worship. The majority of Muslims (34.7%) usually spend between one to two hours (Table 3), which would include the time spent at Friday prayers, for example, and some time after prayers just talking to other people. The same is true for Catholics, for whom Sunday mass on the average lasts between 45 to 60 minutes. Most (44.8%) however spend between one to two hours, again reflecting the way in which people spend some time talking to friends before leaving the church premises. "Other Christians" seem to spend the most time in church: an equal proportion (32.9%) spend between one and two hours, and two and three hours; and 20.5% spend more than three hours (12.3% actually spend more than five). These are people who sit on para-church committees, are involved in church organisations and who therefore spend time at these activities. In the process, they interact socially with other members. Hindu worship is often highly individual with people saying their own prayers, a process which does not often take very long. This is reflected in the 32.6% who usually spend less than half an hour at the temple.

20

However, there are those who also spend much more time in the temple than private prayer sessions warrant. For example, 32.6% spend between one and two hours; and 15.3% spend more than three hours at the temple. As one respondent put it, her weekly temple visit is also a time for her to catch up with her relatives and friends, something she does not have time for during the rest of the week. Finally, reflecting the brief nature of individual worship and the lack of social interaction with other devotees, a large majority of Chinese religionists (51.3%) spend less than half an hour at the temple. Another 28.9% spend between half to an hour. Only 7.5% spend more than an hour, and most of these are Buddhists rather than syncretic and traditional Chinese religionists.

To understand these trends, I began to explore in the in-depth interviews some of the reasons and attitudes underlying such patterns. In the case of traditional Chinese religionists, there are not many opportunities for devotees to gather socially because worship is on an individual rather than communal basis. Thus, people come and go when they want: there are no fixed times (although there may be certain important days in the religious calendar when devotees may go to the temple). Because of such general flexibility, devotees do not meet the same people week after week. The routines of the religion do not encourage social interaction. Furthermore, another factor is the attitudes adopted by devotees. The traditional Chinese religionist's disinterest in other devotees is well characterised in Mr Tan's case, for example. He sees no reason why the temple should be the place to bring people together because religion is a personal relationship between him and his gods. As he puts it, "I request; they respond. What do other people have to do with it?" On the other hand, while agreeing that temples do little to bring people together, a much younger and far less devoted Chinese religionist Soo Ling, expresses regret that it should be so. Her opinion is shaped by her knowledge of Christian Bible study and fellowship groups where social interaction and companionship are probably as much part of the group as the religious devotions are. Perhaps the fellowship and community which is

so much a part of Christian groups is one of the reasons why some Chinese religionists convert to Christianity. On the other hand, Buddhists seem to differ from the traditional Chinese religionists in the extent of their social interaction. This seems to be part of the movement towards a style of Buddhism more akin to Protestant Christianity, including an emphasis on fellowship.[3] At the same time, Buddhist groups also organise activities which encourage interaction. For example, the Nichiren Shoshu Association participates in a range of social and community activities (such as the mass grand finale display for a few National Day celebrations), which does much to bring members together socially.

Aside from Buddhist centres, churches, mosques and Hindu temples also appear to have taken on meaning and value as social centres. For example, Joseph, a Catholic, finds in Christian teaching exhortation to communicate with other people:

> ... you can't live alone. No man is an island. You need the community. All men are brothers.... (God) wants you to love -- that's why the world is full of people.

In fact, he sees embodied in the cross a symbol of both a "God-man" relationship and a "man-man" relationship. When coming together on Sundays to worship, he believes Christians should also interact and get to know one another. In this, the church helps by organising activities which bring people together. The church as a place is important too, particularly the parish halls attached to churches, for these are settings where people meet others and hold their activities. For those who thus participate and communicate, the social component is so strong they feel as if the church is a family, with many of their friends belonging to the same church community. Indeed their social circle revolves round the church. As Tong (1989:28-29) suggested, the

---

[3] Clammer (1988:26-28) refered to a recent trend towards "protestant Buddhism" -- "simplified, refined, more linguistically accessible" -- in which there are fixed times for services, meditation, chanting and personal counselling with abbots, much like Christian services. There are also hymnbooks, lectures, forums and classes, after the manner of similar Christian activities.

church is "a place where they have a "sense of belonging". It is a place to meet for fellowship, and to encourage each other. The church is liken (sic) to a family. Christians call each other "brothers and sisters", and Christ is seen as the head of the family."   This is true of both Catholics and "Other Christians"; in fact, in the former instance, the Catholic parish becomes not only a spatial entity but a social community as well.

These sentiments are echoed to a large extent by Zakir, a Muslim. Like Joseph, he feels a fundamental part of Islam and of going to the mosque is getting to know more people, and interacting and talking with others. In his view, some of this is made possible because mosques are not only places of worship. In fact, they are also settings for religious classes, classes to prepare pilgrims for the haj, marriage counselling, poetry reading, tuition classes, computer courses and so forth, and through these and other activities, opportunities arise for greater social interaction. In the view of some Muslims, this is as it should be. For example, Haji Suratman Markasan, leader of Asas 50 (a literary event, "The Literary Movement of the '50s"), expressed the view that the mosque should be an "activity centre" beyond just being a place of worship (Straits Times, 1 August 1989). Historical precedents are often cited to support such views. The original functions of mosques in many parts of the Islamic world, especially in the Ottoman Empire, were varied. Besides being centres of religious activities, they were also political and administrative centres, where important official pronouncements were made (for example, edicts about taxes, appointment of important officers, results of battles, orders, assignment of duties and so forth). Mosques were also courts of justice, places where cases were heard and justice administered. During wars, they also acted as rallying points in the campaign for conquest; military headquarters for keeping prisoners and treatment of injured warriors. Furthermore, mosques functioned as meeting areas and reception halls to receive representatives or delegates from other parts of the Muslim world. They were even stopping places for travellers (Melati, 1978/79:26-30; Crim, 1981:495).

While Hindu temples do not appear to have as many organised activities as mosques, there are beginning steps in the form of Indian dance classes and kindergarten classes. However, in a less direct sense, devotees go to the temple as much to pray as to socialise, particularly on festival days. Indeed, Chandran argues in favour of the Hindu temple playing the role of a community centre. In reply to a question about whether he thought the temple ought to remain strictly religious-based in its activities, he says:

> No, I don't. Because I think for the Hindu temple, and from what I've seen of it in its purest most natural form, which is in Sri Lanka, that's not what it started out as, and that's not what it is intended to be. It is part of the community. It is as much a community centre as anything else. ... So it's not important that it be ... for me, that it be solely confined to religious activity. In fact, I think it's better if it's not, because that's like saying, you take religion out, and you make it one part of your life where you put it in one place, and that place is only connected with religion. That is tantamount to saying that you can pick religion up and put it in one place and you can walk away from it, and then it's not there any more.

The role of religious places as "community" and "social" centres for devotees brings a political question into focus. Mr Lee Kuan Yew (9 October 1984), then Prime Minister, emphasised the dangers of racial and religious segregation because mosques were drawing Muslims away from the more multi-racial neighbourhood community centres. Although he spoke specifically in the context of Muslims, the possibility of the same occurring with at least some of the other groups is as high. Confronted with this potential problem, some interviewees were quick to defend the activities at their respective religious places. For example, a Buddhist nun suggested that when people go to the Buddhist Centre, it would be to learn about Buddhism -- and the teachings of Buddhism are in opposition to segregation, hatred or bigotry of any kind. Hence, there could be little danger deriving from Buddhists being exclusionary. Magdalene, a Catholic, also suggested that if people spent a lot of time in church, rather than creating problems of segregation, it would teach them the Christian way of charity and love for others.

That could hardly be detrimental to society, she argued. On the other hand, others recognised the danger of segregation more readily and suggested there should perhaps be some control of the activities going on in religious places. This reflects the recent doubts as to whether it is appropriate for computer and other vocational courses to be conducted in mosques (Straits Times, 12 September 1989 and 15 September 1989). MUIS (Islamic Religious Council) while not overtly telling mosques what to do, has taken the stand that the priority is to run religious classes for Muslims in the neighbourhood. Everything else must take second place. In fact, MUIS intends to have a bigger say in the running of mosques built under its mosque-building programme in the 1990s. Specifically, it will help determine the types of activities to be conducted and how the mosque funds can be best spent to meet the needs of the community.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I began this paper outlining my primary intention to address what I saw to be a lacuna in the literature on human environmental experiences. In particular, I sought to document and analyse the ways in which humans experience their religious environments using Singapore as an interesting empirical example in the light of the population's multi-religious mix. What I have done is to illustrate how Singaporeans invest a variety of meanings in their religious buildings and experience a range of emotions at these places. They are sacred centres where concentrations of religious activities take place. They are places where one's god(s) may be found and where one may undergo a sacred experience. These sacred experiences include a gamut of emotions from serenity and protection to fear and the sense of being overwhelmed, some of which correspond to Otto's "numinous" and James' (1902) discussion of the varieties of religious experience. They are also centres of intense personal attachments and experiences, closely associated with special people and special times in one's life. Through these ties, people

develop <u>affective, topophilic bonds</u> with their religious places. Put in another way, these places are experienced as "emotional territory" (Ittelson <u>et al</u>., 1976:204) and "existential space" (Matore, 1966). Indeed, these secular bonds are often of such strength and significance that they gather "sacred" meaning as well, though of a non-religious kind. With the exception of traditional syncretic Chinese religionists, adherents agree that their religious places are also <u>social centres</u> where they can gather and meet friends and relatives. They are places where social bonds are forged and developed.

Given these discussions of the importance of religious buildings to people, it is pertinent to draw attention to the way in which other agents have perceived and treated these same buildings. In particular, the state has always approached urban renewal in a spirit of "rational pragmatism" in which emotions and social and spiritual values play little, if any, part. This has led to the demolition and relocation of individual buildings and neighbourhoods (including religious buildings) in order to make the most "efficient" use of available space. These policies and actions have sometimes met with the wrath of religious groups and at other times, grudging compliance. These actions and reactions provide the arena for comparative studies, focusing on how different groups have reacted to state policies and actions, in the light of the meanings and values that are invested in places.

REFERENCES

Chua, B.H. (1988) "A Born Again Building", <u>Mimar: Architecture in Development</u>, 29, 33-39

Clammer, J. (1988) "Singapore's Buddhists chant a modern mantra", <u>Far Eastern Economic Review</u>, 29 December, 26-27

Crim, K. (ed.) (1981) <u>Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions</u>, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon

Dillistone, F.W. (1966) "The function of symbols in religious experience", in F.W. Dillistone (ed.) <u>Myth and Symbol</u>, London: S.P.C.K., 1-14

Eliade, M. (1957) <u>The Sacred and the Profane</u>, Translated by W.R. Trask, San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959 edition

Eyles, J. (1985) <u>Senses of Place</u>, Warrington: Silverbrook Press

Gordon, B.L. (1971) "Sacred directions, orientation, and the top of the map", <u>History of Religions</u>, 10, 211-27

Gussow, A. (1971) <u>A Sense of Place</u>, San Francisco: New Library

Hutt, R.E. (1985) <u>Symbolism in Religion, with special reference to orthodox worship and its relevance for the Free Church Tradition</u>, Unpublished M.A. thesis, Department of Theology, Durham University

Ittelson, W.H., Franck, K.A. and O'Hanlon, T.J. (1976) "The nature of environmental experience", in Wapner, S. <u>et al</u>. (eds.) <u>Experiencing the Environment</u>, New York: Plenum Press, 187-206

Jackson, R.H. and Henrie, R. (1983) "Perception of sacred space", <u>Journal of Cultural Geography</u>, 3, 2, 94-107

James, W. (1902) <u>The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature</u>, New York: University Books, 1963 edition

Koh, J.C.H. (1984/85) <u>Sacred Space: Chinese Temples in Singapore</u>, Unpublished Academic Exercise, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore

Kohl, D.G. (1984) <u>Chinese Architecture in the Straits Settlements and Western Malaya: Temples, Kongsis and Houses</u>, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books

Lee, K.Y. (9 October 1984) Transcript of discussion with five foreign correspondents recorded at Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, in <u>Singapore Government Press Release: October 1984</u>, Singapore: Information Division, Ministry of Culture

Lip, E. (1978) "Symbols, colours and decorations of Chinese temples in Malaysia and Singapore", Majallah Akitek, 3, 39-42

Lip, E. (1981) Chinese Temples and Deities, Singapore: Times Books International

Melati, S. (1978/79) Mosques in Singapore, Unpublished Academic Exercise, School of Architecture, University of Singapore

Michell, G. (1977) The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms, London: Elek

Muir, E. and Weissman, F.E. (1989) "Social and symbolic places in Renaissance Venice and Florence", in J.A. Agnew and J.S. Duncan (eds.) The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations, Boston, London: Unwin Hyman, 81-104

Norberg-Schulz, C. (1980) Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture, London: Academy Editions

Otto, R. (1917) The Idea of the Holy, Translated by J.W. Harvey, 2nd edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1950 edition

Sivapalan, S.S. (1985/86) Devalaya: The Hindu Temple in Singapore, Unpublished Academic Exercise, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore

The Straits Times, various issues

Tillich, P. (1966) "The religious symbol", in F.W. Dillistone (ed.) Myth and Symbol, London: S.P.C.K., 15-34

Tong, C.K. (1989) Religious Conversion and Revivalism: A Study of Christianity in Singapore, Singapore: Ministry of Community Development

Tuan, Y.F. (1974a) Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall

Tuan, Y.F. (1974b) "Space and place: humanistic perspective", Progress in Geography, 6, 212-52

Tuan, Y.F. (1976) "Humanistic geography", Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 66, 2, 266-75

Tuan, Y.F. (1978) "Sacred space: explorations of an idea", in K.W. Butzer (ed.) Dimensions of Human Geography: Essays on Some Familiar and Neglected Themes, Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Geography, Research Paper 186, 84-99

Walter, E.V. (1988) <u>Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment</u>, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press