

Body and Sacred Place in
Medieval Europe,
1100–1389



Dawn Marie Hayes

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BODY AND SACRED PLACE IN
MEDIEVAL EUROPE, 1100–1389

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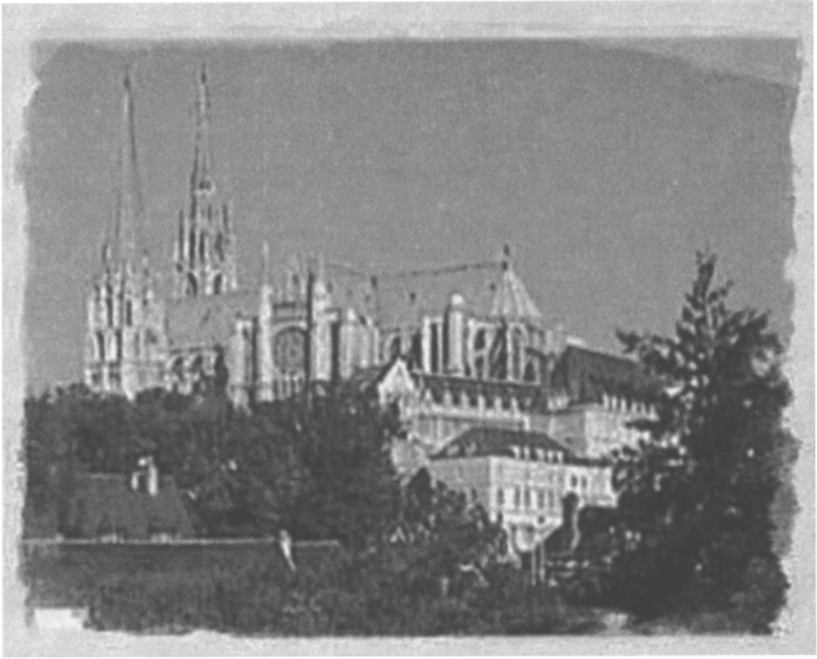
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Francis G.Gentry

For my husband, Joseph Sr., and our children
Joseph Jr., Anastasia, Madeleine and Alessandra,
with my love and devotion

and in loving memory of my maternal grandfather
Nicholas Alfred Pepe
(February 5, 1920–November 18, 1997)
for the rare bond we shared



Chartres Cathedral. (*Photo: James Raymond Blaettler, S.J.*)

LES PLUS GRANDS PRODUITS DE L'ARCHITECTURE sont moins des oeuvres individuelles que des oeuvres sociales; plutôt l'enfantement des peuples en travail que le jet des hommes de génie; le dépôt que laisse une nation; les entassements que font les siècles; le résidu des évaporations successives de la société humaine....

Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*

AND THEY HEARD ME WHISPER TO MYSELF, "That dirt which is on a man's hands is nothing." Now I said aloud, "What comes out of a man, however, can defile him." ...Of course, they were terrified of evil from without! They were terrified even of the dust of the road and the mud of the fields. For as they saw it...it took no more than one mote of non-observance to unbalance the scales within.

Norman Mailer, *The Gospel According to the Son*

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Introduction

THIS STUDY EXPLORES DYNAMIC EXCHANGES BETWEEN HUMAN BODIES and sacred places in the central Middle Ages.¹ It argues that Christian bodies and church buildings were inextricably joined to the extent that rarely could one exist without the other. Although this bond was forged by and reflected in the ideology of learned perceptions of sacred space, nevertheless it was present in the actual practice of these places as well. [Part I](#) of the study explores the way these exchanges are revealed in documents of theory. [Chapter One](#), “Learned Conceptions of Sacred Place: Building and Body as Two Facades of Christian Worship in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” posits that clergy cultivated two facades of Christian sacred place—church and body—and compares the rite of consecration to the sacrament of baptism to lay bare this connection. This analysis is followed by “History Incarnate: Human Bodies and Ideal Sacred Place in *The Miracles of Our Lady of Chartres*,” which grounds the miracle collection in its historical context, suggesting that it was intended to generate funds for rebuilding the church destroyed by the great fire of 1194. At Chartres Cathedral the intimacy between medieval churches and bodies was made explicit as its main relic, the holy tunic that had touched the bodies of Jesus and Mary, was the source of the church’s mediating authority. As a vehicle for pious propaganda the *Miracles* offers a glimpse at one community’s conception of ideal sacred place as bishop and canons showcased their cathedral. Chartres contained residual sanctity from the holiest bodies in Christian history that enabled it to restore the damaged and dead bodies of the faithful.

[Part II](#) takes another approach to the relationship and has been influenced by Umberto Eco’s suggestion that to understand a system of belief it is often necessary to study its margins. I am persuaded by Eco’s argument that at its periphery the flexibility of a system is revealed.² “Earthly Uses of Heavenly Spaces: Non-Liturgical Activities in Sacred Place” explores the mundane use of sacred places and reveals their ambiguity as bodies challenged the idealized perceptions discussed in [Part I](#). The non-liturgical use of sacred spaces at times betrays an intellectual divide between clergy and laity, but it also reveals a world that was less concerned, I think, with compartmentalizing space and restricting activity than in the centuries that

followed. [Chapter Four](#), “Body as Champion of Church Authority and Sacred Place: The Murder of Thomas Becket,” turns to the outright desecration of church space. It examines the accounts of the murder of the twelfth-century archbishop slain in his cathedral and argues that long after his spirit departed Thomas’ corpse continued to champion ecclesiastical authority and the church space that his assassins had sacrilegiously violated.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

One of the most fascinating aspects of medieval culture is the competition between sacred and profane jurisdictions, which reveals attitudes that are very different from modern ones. Today the most popular way of understanding the relationship between *sacred* and *profane* in the western world is to dichotomize it. Modern popular opinion in the West accepts the division of the world into polarized sacred and profane spheres. Consider, for example, a relatively recent article in *The New York Times* that discusses the discovery of secret graves in Guatemala; the author writes:

As [the scientists’] investigations proceed, it becomes clear that military executioners regarded no place as sacred. In the isolated central highland town of San Andrés Sajcabajá, for instance, the scientists have begun excavating the interior of a 16th-century church. On May 22 they unearthed four bodies from two graves that also contained bullet casings, military food tins, pornographic playing cards and camouflage burlap bags.... By 1980, residents recall, fighting in the area [had been] so intense that priests and nuns were forced to flee, and the Guatemalan Army moved into the roofless sanctuary, turning it into a barracks and interrogation center.³

The writer, anticipating the reaction of his audience, is clearly shocked to learn that this sixteenth-century church had been used for mundane and profane activities. The expectation is that the executioners would have respected the sanctuary (a world with an entirely different reality) and would not have stored ammunition, eaten meals, played card games, and slept overnight on this holy ground. The use of the church for torture and makeshift graves is even more unsettling to modern readers.

This dichotomous approach to sacred space has roots in Emile Durkheim’s sociology, which holds that one of the elementary forms of religious life is the division of the world into separate spheres of sacred and profane.⁴ Durkheim responded to William Robertson Smith’s earlier work on Semitic religion that had maintained the ambiguity of the sacred.⁵ Durkheim’s view is perhaps most comfortable to a society such as our own that neatly compartmentalizes knowledge; this, in fact, may be why many people still turn to this model to make sense of their experiences. Indeed, the

anthropologist Mary Douglas has remarked that differentiation is a hallmark of historical progress so that undifferentiated: primitive:: differentiated: modern; technological advances result in differentiation in every sphere of human existence.⁶

For those who study the pre-modern societies of the European Middle Ages Durkheim's model is not as useful. To the average medieval person the physical world was at one and the same time sacred and profane—sacred as God's creation, profane as a place of human exile. Even God himself joined the two spheres according to the doctrine of the Incarnation; the Church maintained that Christ was simultaneously fully human and fully divine. Durkheim's assertion that "religious and profane life cannot coexist in the same space" does not hold for Christianity since to a Christian both spheres coexisted in the world.⁷ Durkheim maintained that "if religious life is to develop, a sacred place must be prepared for it, one from which profane life is excluded...[the] institution of temples and sanctuaries arise from this."⁸ This study aims to sensitize modern readers to the fact that, contrary to many modern perceptions of churches, in the Middle Ages mundane and profane life was not fully excluded from Christian sacred places.

Mircea Eliade has noted a special characteristic of Christianity that may help explain the contradiction between the theoretical and practical uses of medieval sacred spaces. He observes that unlike many religions that encourage their members to look beyond historical time and events, Christianity teaches its believers that God can be encountered in the world. The potentiality inherent in Christian historical time may provide a theoretical foundation for the accommodation of non-devotional activity in medieval sacred places and may explain why it was not fully set apart from the world. In addition, people's belief in the church as an earthly reflection of the city of God may have rendered non-devotional activities more acceptable as the church building began to resemble a true city and reflect the cares and concerns of urban life.

The ambiguous relationship between sacred and profane in the Christian tradition has been discussed by Harold W. Turner, who has argued that the New Testament signaled an important change in the history of the conception of sacred place by introducing the body as a competing focus. No longer was sacred place circumscribed within the space of the temple. By the central Middle Ages sacred place was established and functioned through a dialogue between buildings and bodies, the two distinct but intimately related facades of Christian sacred place.

Little has been written on the relationship between churches and bodies in the Middle Ages, including the tension of non-liturgical activity in sacred places. Late last century and early in this century some work was done on this subject for medieval England by Sidney Oldall Addy and William Andrews.⁹ These works are narrative and do not address larger questions of meaning and significance of such uses. More recently J.G. Davies has done

work in this area.¹⁰ Davies' emphasis is on offering these non-liturgical uses of sacred space as examples by which modern worshippers should abide; he does not address the larger question of what these uses reveal about medieval society. Medieval France has hardly been touched. In the seventeenth century Jean Baptiste Thiers, a canon of Chartres, published a book on the diverse uses of church porches.¹¹ More recently an article has been published on the use of Chartres Cathedral for lodging medieval pilgrims.¹² But again, they do not consider these activities in a broad historical context.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL PARAMETERS

This study focuses on northwestern Europe (mainly France and England) in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries and uses documents from the cathedral of Notre-Dame of Chartres for grounding. Despite the trials of the church's history, Chartres still remains one of the best-documented medieval cathedrals, and its sources provide a fascinating view of the conversations between churches and bodies in the central Middle Ages.

SOURCES

Since this book seeks to establish the mutually supportive exchanges between body and sacred place as well as to reveal the tension between the medieval theory and practice of sacred place, I have chosen to consult both "documents of theory" and "documents of practice."¹³ [Part I](#) draws on a number of sources, the most important of which are the liturgy of consecration contained in the Roman Pontifical of the Twelfth Century, Ivo of Chartres' *Sermon 4*, and *The Miracles of Our Lady of Chartres*. These documents reveal ideal sacred place, the way the authors of these works hoped churches would be created and function.

The evidence for [Part II](#) of this work has been culled from various sources, most of which would fall under the category "documents of practice." Any study of non-liturgical and profane uses of sacred places will draw on a wide variety of documents and forces the researcher to cast his or her net far and wide. I have done so and have just skimmed the surface. I offer [chapter three](#) as a seed for a more ambitious and well-needed study. The material for [chapter four](#), which focuses on perhaps the most famous profanation of the church sanctuary in the Middle Ages, is taken primarily from the eyewitness accounts of Thomas Becket's murder.

This study begins by looking at why—and how—sacred places were made in the twelfth century, and how in their ambiguity they reflected each and every Christian body of the time.

Part I

Incorporating Conceptions of Medieval Sacred Places

Chapter One

Learned Conceptions of Sacred Place

Building and Body as Two Facades of Christian Worship in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

A FUNDAMENTAL TENSION EXISTED IN THE FORMULATION OF A MEDIEVAL conception of sacred place due to the inherent contradictions within Biblical authority. The Old Testament tradition enshrined the physical space of the temple as the holy locus for worship ["But I...will enter your house, I will bow down toward your holy temple in awe of you." (Psalm 5: 7)], while the New Testament was filled with language ["Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ...God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." (I Corinthians 3:16–17)] that personalized *and* particularized the individual Christian's body as a temple.¹ The baptized Christian body even consumed the mystical body of Christ in the Eucharist in the bodily act of eating.

Learned medieval Christians, therefore, nurtured two distinct views of sacred place. They had to. Focusing on churches while neglecting the role of the temple of the soul in worship would have been a rejection of New Testament tradition. On the other hand, cultivating the importance of the human body in worship while ignoring the tradition of buildings would have rendered impossible a catholic Christian church. If they were going to cultivate a universal church, medieval Christians had to maintain hierarchy and structure in their religion. A way medieval Christians harmonized the two facades of sacred place was to think of the baptism of bodies and the consecration of churches as two sides of the same ritual. Both separated, cleansed, and strengthened places of worship. The only real difference was the material they affected: baptism was a sacrament of flesh, consecration a rite of stone.

This chapter addresses the two facades of Christian worship, then moves to medieval comparisons of baptism and consecration. It finishes with a discussion of the levels of sacredness within and without the church fabric.