

Sacred residue

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When I first visited the Fatih Mosque, housed in a former Jesuit church in the centre of Amsterdam, its spokesperson, Mehmet Yamali, took me to the prayer space located in what used to be the church's nave. Standing in the middle of that impressive space, marked by an extraordinary mix of Christian and Islamic elements, Mehmet said that he experienced it as a very special place due to its "spiritual charge". He felt that it held an "essence" – also witnessed in the great mosques of Istanbul – because it had been built "with love and faith" by the Catholic community in the 1920s.

Mehmet's words point to a more widely shared sense that something remains after churches and other religious sites have been abandoned and then given a new purpose. This sacred residue may take the form of a particular atmosphere that is felt to linger in the converted building, but it may also consist of objects or images that have been preserved and serve as remainders and reminders of the site's previous uses.¹ Sacred residue can be described as that quality of a religious site, or of specific things within that site, that – in the perception or feeling of beholders – persists after the site has lost its original religious function. As a result, it leaves a mark on the site's new uses, be this as a mosque or cinema in what was once a church, or a church in a former mosque. Sacred residue, in my view, does not inhere in an object or a site in and of itself. Rather, it is generated in the encounter between people and things, as the former perceive, sense and interpret symbolically meaningful things (be they buildings, artefacts or images), based on their memories, knowledge and imagination.²

In Amsterdam, Berlin and London, the cities featured in the exhibition *The Urban Sacred*, many religious places are characterized by a historical layeredness in that they have been shaped and reshaped by past uses. A remarkable illustration is the Baitul Aziz Mosque in London, where archaeological excavations in 2014 revealed the remains of coffins and other artefacts from a Roman settlement. An important phenomenon in recent years has been the conversion – or re-purposing – of Christian churches and other religious sites, either for secular uses (such as cultural centres or housing) or

religious ones (such as “migrant churches” or mosques). This process of conversion is often regarded as the simple replacement of one by the other. [p. 40] Yet, as the notion of sacred residue suggests, the earlier uses of a building often continue to have an effect, albeit one that tends to be difficult to grasp. Such uses live on in the memories and feelings of people, but are also enclosed in material forms that index the previous identity of a building. Examples from Amsterdam include the now disused organ situated above the stage in the Maranatha Ministries Pentecostal Church (formerly Calvinist Reformed), the holy water receptacles in the Chassé Dance Studios (formerly a Catholic church), and the ichthys fishes depicted on the ceiling of the Fatih Mosque. A question, often overlooked in debates about secularisation, is raised by these manifold traces of an earlier sacred that no longer nurtures – and is no longer nurtured by – its associated religious community: What happens to church buildings and other material expressions of Christianity once they have been left behind?³

The lingering and puzzling presence of sacred residue also affects the ways in which Christian communities relate to their church buildings. Members of these communities often point out that people and their faith, rather than mere buildings, are key to their religion.⁴ Nonetheless, both Catholics and Protestants tend to ascribe an aura of sacredness to their church buildings, even those that they no longer use. Catholic churches are commonly taken to be sacred “houses of God” for as long as they are in liturgical use, but once abandoned, they are deconsecrated. Yet, as I have been told by Dutch Catholic officials and ordinary parishioners, many Catholics still perceive and remember these deconsecrated churches as holy places: “All of the incense has been absorbed by the walls”, as one local church official from Amsterdam put it. Protestant churches are generally not regarded as sacred in the first place. Even so, they accumulate sacred associations as a result of their liturgical use, thus setting them apart as places of worship. In this way, as a policy document of the Dutch Protestant Church points out, Protestant churches too become sacralised.⁵

For these reasons, both Protestants and Catholics treat the conversion of their church buildings with care. The re-use of their churches should not violate the sacredness associated with these buildings or the objects and images within them. In the same vein, many people, including non-churchgoers, are critical when churches are re-purposed as supermarkets or night clubs, precisely because they still consider them to be sacred.⁶ It

appears that once particular places or objects have been construed as sacred, it is hard to dissociate them from this aura.

Sacred residue can occasionally become a bone of contention. A striking example from our research is the recent conversion of the Catholic Chassé church into dance studios. When the site was bought, the new owner was contractually bound to “unchurch” the building as much as possible by erasing its Christian symbols. Stained glass windows had to be removed and crosses on the walls filled with putty. The crosses on the holy water receptacles were modified so that they were no longer recognizable. A mosaic that had once been located next to the altar, and then adorned a corner of one of the centre’s eight dance studios, was a cause for debate for several months. The new owner wanted to preserve it. He found the mosaic beautiful and valuable, and he imagined it might inspire the kids who would take dance classes there. For the staff of the Chassé dance studios, the mosaic was one of the very things that gave their new centre something “extra”, setting it apart as a former church.

Yet, representatives of the former parish of the Chassé Church wanted the mosaic to be removed or hidden, as part of the wider requirement of “unchurching” the building. [p. 41] The parish leadership, supported by the diocese, sought to differentiate the new use of the building as much as possible from its former use as a church. As an official of the diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam explained to me, for them it was important to “make a difference between a church that is no longer a church and a church that continues as a church.” Arguably, what the church leadership wanted to prevent was the uncontrolled appropriation of the sacred residue that continued to be found in the building. Now that its appropriate context – the operative church – was gone, the mosaic was “no longer in the right place”, as the secretary of the parish put it to me. The disagreement was finally resolved when the new owners covered the mosaic with plaster, thereby neutralizing this apparently powerful sacred residue – at least for the time being.

The mosaic in the Chassé dance studios is just one instance of the sacred residue that is perceived to leave its trace in disused religious sites. It is elusive and hard to pin down, but the photographers of *The Urban Sacred* offer lenses through which its felt presence can be captured and contemplated.

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Notes

¹ In his study on the re-use of church buildings in the Netherlands, Justin Kroesen similarly observes that, in the perception of many, these church buildings continue to be marked by a “sacred sediment” (*sacraal sediment*). See his “Sacraal sediment: Gemengde gevoelens bij herbestemde kerkgebouwen”, in J. Kroesen, Y. Kuiper and P. Nanninga (eds.) *Religie en cultuur in hedendaags Nederland: Observaties en interpretaties*. Assen: Van Gorcum (2010). Pp: 5-13.

² Compare Yael Navaro-Yashin, “Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1 (2009): 1–18.

³ Daan Beekers and Birgit Meyer, “Nieuwe vormen van het heilige,” *Nederlands Dagblad*, October 28, 2015.

⁴ Oskar Verkaaik, “Religious Architecture: Anthropological Perspectives,” in *Religious Architecture: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Oskar Verkaaik. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press (2013), p. 8.

⁵ Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, *Een protestantse visie op het kerkgebouw. Met een praktisch-theologisch oogmerk* (2009), p. 13.

⁶ Compare Kroesen, “Sacraal sediment”, pp. 11-2.