

Exploring Holiness and Worship in Places Near and Far

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Abstract

This article examines worship and holiness across Türkiye, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Drawing on site visits to ancient temples, Byzantine churches, and Ottoman mosques, it explores how worship sites, their orientation, and their architecture shape religious experience, concluding that holiness resides less in buildings than in community, nature, and the presence of God.

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Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone or in the deep, deep woods and I'd look up into the sky—up—up—up—into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just feel a prayer.

—L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

As a young girl, I always resonated with Anne of Green Gables. My own formative years were spent skipping through towering trees, on an island where holiness felt like a constant hug of glittering water and majestic mountains. Now my own children have grown up on the same island, where I hope they too are feeling a similar sense of holiness. Recently we spent a year in the United Kingdom on internship for seminary, and from there I took a class in Türkiye, where we explored how, where, and what we worship, what feels holy, and how our learnings impact our thoughts about worship (and life) today. This reflection is coming to you from all of these places.

I often feel close to God when I'm in nature. My youngest child, Kaia, was baptized in the salt water of the Puget Sound. The experience of crabs crawling over our toes and the salty spray on our lips added embodied elements to that sacrament. Jesus too was baptized in flowing water. He often retreated into nature to pray, and spoke to large groups out-of-doors.

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In Türkiye, we learned that Roman temples had been built upon previous worship sites to Earth goddesses (for example, in Ephesus the Temple of Artemis was built upon a site that previously was for worshipping the mother goddess Cybele; Hierapolis at Pamukkale was also an ancient site for the worship of Cybele, and later became a site of worship primarily of Apollo in the second century BCE). Christian churches were then built near or on top of these temples. At a temple of Artemis in Sardis (figure 1), I saw a distant peak framed perfectly between the two central columns of the temple, and wondered if and how the lay of the land impacted the orientation of the temple.



Figure 1. Temple of Artemis, Sardis, Türkiye.

In many ancient Christian churches, both in Türkiye (Hagia Sophia, Hagia Irene, and Chora, for example) and in the United Kingdom (St. Paul's Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral, for example), the altar is intentionally oriented in the easternmost part of the church and we are instructed to turn and face that direction to say the creed. I grew up in a number of different denominations, and this was totally new to me—the orientation of the churches had never been discussed! In the ancient baptismal pools in Türkiye, the person would enter the pool on the west side and emerge on the east (figure 2).



Figure 2. The baptismal pool in the Basilica of St. John in Ephesus, Türkiye.



Figure 3. The Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Türkiye.

The buildings of worship in Türkiye have had global religious and cultural impact. The Hagia Sophia (figure 3) is one of the best-known churches in the world. The current structure was finished in 537, and was the first structure ever built to have a full dome over a square room. This architectural style was so impressive, it was emulated by Ottoman mosques a thousand years later. For example, the Blue Mosque or Sultanahmet (figure 4), which was built in 1609, has a similar style.



Figure 4. The Blue Mosque or Sultanahmet, Istanbul, Türkiye.



Figure 5. The Hagia Irene in Istanbul, Türkiye is not far from the Hagia Sophia. It predates the Hagia Sophia by a couple of centuries.

The interior of the Hagia Irene (figures 5 and 6) is a stark contrast to the Hagia Sophia, and is an example of iconoclasm—the intentional stripping of religious icons or images from a religious space. As we reflected on how we felt in both spaces, our professor asked the question: What feels holy to you?



Figure 6. Interior of the Hagia Irene.

In the United Kingdom, I spent many an evening worshipping in a nine-hundred-year-old church in Nottingham. There, the parts that *feel* holy to me are the moments when the setting sun streams in from the west and lights up the altar in the east during evensong; when I connect with friends who are also attending the service; when Kaia lays her head on my lap and I tussle her hair; when I hear the Scripture in a new way; when

the choir hits those harmonies that send goosebumps all over; when we sing and pray together in community; when we receive the sacraments. Aside from the sunlight on the altar, very little of this is actually associated with the building itself—*it is the life within the church* that feels holy to me. The same could be said for churches in the United States. But it's not just church—many places in nature and interactions throughout the day feel holy. My supervisor asked me recently, What is holiness, or what makes something holy? I don't know that there's one correct answer to this question, but my initial thought was *anyplace where God is*, which to me is everything, everywhere, all the time—omnipresence—and so, in a way, the question is not so much *what feels holy*, but rather *how do we live with holiness* that is all around and within us?

This brings the question back around to how we live in general—what, who, and how do we worship, with our time, energy, and attention? In the Old Testament, taking time for worship (or at the very least, rest) was baked into creation: on the seventh day God rested, and hallowed it (Genesis 2:3). It's in the Ten Commandments: “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8 NRSVue). Worship during New Testament times, in Türkiye and the Roman Empire was more complicated. New Testament professor Brigitte Kahl tells us that “Gentiles (i.e. uncircumcised) were supposed to take part in civic and imperial worship, celebrations, meals, sacrifices.”¹ There was a *hierarchy of holiness*, with god(s) at the top, followed closely by emperors, while the giant marauding Gauls (Galatians) were underfoot at the bottom—separate-from, other-than, and very much *not* holy. This is in part why the verse from Galatians 3:28 is so radical. It dismantled the hierarchy to say you do not need proper documentation, that you do not need to speak a certain language, or look a certain way, or have a certain income—that everyone, everywhere, is beloved: “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28 NRSVue).

What does a place of worship look like, where radical love and inclusion are embodied experiences? Professor Kahl asks: “Do we have the courage to imagine such a new civilization not based on victory but cooperation? . . . It is a table where the poor belong and all children are fed, because they are all perceived as children of God.”² As I packed up a year of internship in the United Kingdom, and prepared to return home to the United States, and as my heart holds the immense challenges we face as a community and nation, I come ready to serve at that table with you.

NOTES

¹ Brigitte Kahl, “Reading Galatians and Empire at the Great Altar of Pergamon,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 49, nos. 3–4: 31.

² Kahl, “Reading Galatians and Empire,” 40.