

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT. The assemblage of objects that constitute the publicly visible religious landscape of the United States—houses of worship and a variety of church-related enterprises—deviates so markedly from its counterparts in other lands that we can regard its uniqueness as a significant argument for American exceptionalism. The diagnostic features in question include the extraordinary number and variety of churches and denominations, their special physical attributes, the near-random microgeography of churches in urban areas, and, most especially, their nomenclature and the widely distributed signage promoting godliness and religiosity. Such landscape phenomena suggest connections with much-deeper issues concerning the origin and evolution of American society and culture. *Keywords:* American exceptionalism, architecture, churches, landscape, names, religion, signs.

Uniqueness, like sincerity, can be one of the more trivial of virtues. Indeed, every place or event, every person or social entity, any physical object can claim at least a modicum of uniqueness. But what qualifies the American religious landscape for critical scrutiny is the remarkable character and extent of its uniqueness, a constellation of attributes that sets it far apart from the visibly sacred elsewhere in the world. One may argue further that this complex of peculiarities hints at grander issues concerning the origin and evolution of the overarching American cultural system in which they are embedded. However, such ambitious considerations fall beyond the scope of this exploratory essay. Neither do we have here the space or the proper venue for a full-bore assault on the great and controversial general issue of American exceptionalism. But in any extended brief on behalf of such a proposition—and the most persuasive to date may well be Seymour Martin Lipset's—an exceptionally potent argument could be based on the religious evidence, as Lipset has noted (1996, 60–67, 154–157).

To deal with first things first, why should we concern ourselves with the place of the sacred in the visible, tangible, manmade landscape? Simply because, quite apart from its considerable role in the less immediately visible economic, social, and political life of the nation, religion is a major, if seldom dominant, component of that immensely opulent repository of cultural data we call the American landscape.¹ Such intimate involvement in the dynamic fabric of lived-in space is especially rich and complex in urban areas, but the statement holds for the entirety of inhabited territory in the United States and abroad.

AN ASIDE ON THE NONMETROPOLITAN SCENE

If the following discussion focuses almost exclusively on the American metropolitan landscape, it is for two compelling reasons. First, our metropolitan areas con-

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tain by far the greater part—at least three-quarters—of the total American population and, in all likelihood, an even ampler share of the nation's houses of worship. Second, it is within our larger cities and their suburbs that we come across the strongest expressions of American peculiarities in the religious landscape. But the title of this essay would still make sense were we to confine ourselves solely to the less populous cities, towns, villages, and open countryside.

One may grant a certain loose resemblance between the sacred elements of those American towns of modest size and their Old World counterparts. Church buildings tend to claim a relatively central site in both settings, but with a crucial difference. In the Eurasian instances, a single structure almost always dominates the scene, whereas in the United States (outside the nonmetropolitan Mormon Culture Area) we find multiple denominations and their quarters manifested at or near the center, generally, *inter alia*, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, and, depending on the region, Roman Catholic.

In the American countryside we encounter items that are rare or totally absent in other lands, most conspicuous among them a considerable host of isolated, free-standing church buildings, with or without a burial ground. Moreover, the open country contains tens of thousands of cemeteries, properties maintained by individual families or neighborhood groups thereof, sites that are seldom associated with any particular church (Zelinsky 1994). Then what is more quintessentially American than the itinerant revival meeting tents (usually, but not always, in an empty suburban lot), the isolated brush arbors or more durable wooden shelters adjacent to rural churches used for summertime worship, or the camp meeting grounds so widespread in the past and surviving in small numbers to this day? But perhaps, as I discuss more fully below, what is particularly symptomatic of the special Americanness of rural as well as urban tracts is the frequency of religious posters and billboards along the roadways, a practice unknown in foreign lands.

ANTECEDENT WORK

Anyone hoping to deal with the topic at hand faces some formidable difficulties in terms of both shortcomings of available official and organizational data and severe inadequacies in preexisting scholarly literature. The United States has never conducted a full and accurate census of religious organizations and has never even tried to ascertain the religious preferences of its citizens (Zelinsky 1961). Published surveys by private associations and denominations are incomplete and inconsistent in coverage and totally mute on the physical attributes of the structures and grounds in question.

In terms of academic research, progress has been inhibited by a pervasive mindset. As Sally Promey has noted, "Outside of departments of religious studies, the academy has long practiced a policy of containment, marginalization, and suspicion of the subject of religion" (2001, 44). Thus it is not too surprising to discover that, within the thriving field of urban geography, virtually none of the leading texts and monographs devotes even a single sentence to the topic. On the other hand, the

subdiscipline of religious geography may have begun to flourish in recent years, as has the sociology of religion, despite the general indifference to such matters in the larger world of social science, and so too the general field of landscape studies in the United States.

For whatever reasons, practitioners of both areas have almost wholly ignored the large-scale—that is, localized—visible manifestations of the sacred. Such estimable texts as those issuing from David Sopher (1967), John Gay (1971), Chris Park (1994), Gisbert Rinschede (1999), and Edwin Scott Gaustad and Philip L. Barlow (2001) adopt a macroscopic approach to religious phenomena, with scant attention to their role in the landscape. The handful of publications that do focus on sacred landscapes are concerned with the essentially rural or nonmetropolitan scene (Bjorklund 1964; Jordan 1976, 1980; Milbauer 1988; Laatsch and Calkins 1989; Andrews 1990; Cresswell 1999). Those studies that treat urban areas do so selectively, looking at a particular period (Colten 1985; Ley 1996; Diamond 1997), specific denominations (Hotchkiss 1948, 1950), selected neighborhoods (Ducey 1977; Dear and Sommer 1998, 35–44; Tillman and Emmett 1999), a single church (Scroggs 1994; Kostarelos 1995), or a single exurb (Eiesland 2000) but seldom documenting any physical facts beyond simple location. The one artifactual item that has aroused active curiosity has been Italian American and Latino yard shrines (Curtis 1980; Manzo 1983; Arreola 1988; Sciorra 1989).

I realize, of course, that there is no shortage of volumes, usually of the coffee-table genre, that address and celebrate the more aesthetically and/or historically interesting of our houses of worship, often in full color (for example, Kennedy 1975; Lane 1988; Johnson 1999). Some cover the entire country, others a single metropolis, state, or denomination; but they all have one thing in common: They systematically ignore the vast majority of churches and church-related facilities, the “ordinary” vernacular variety.² (Throughout this essay I use the term “church” generically, in order to embrace all faiths and denominations, non-Christian as well as Christian.)

Moving beyond the house of worship, one topic that has enjoyed serious attention—and one that straddles the boundary between sacred and secular—is the cemetery (see, among many publications, Jordan 1982; Meyer 1989). But we still lack any scholarly notice at all of religious bookshops (aside from Moore 1994, 253–254) and record stores, schools, retirement homes, day-care facilities, or, with one honorable exception (Sommer and Dear 1998, 77–84), hospitals, or of the quasi-religious funeral parlor (Figures 1–2).

Given the weak and fragmentary nature of antecedent research, the assertions that follow are derived largely from personal observations of the North American scene over several decades, travels in more than thirty foreign lands, and an ongoing study of Chicago and environs.

The various attributes that render our American religious scene distinctive fall into two broad categories: the quantitative (matters of degree, how much more or less of something that tends to be universal or widespread is observable in an American setting); and the qualitative, charting characteristics that depart absolutely from

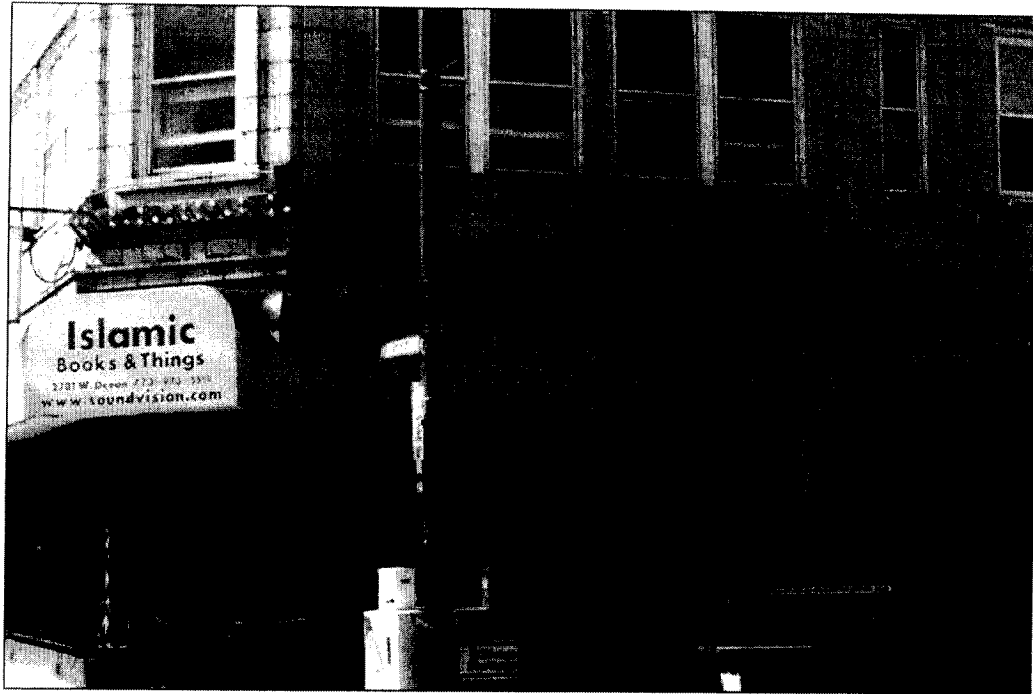


FIG. 1—Though far outnumbered by Christian bookstores and gift shops, Islamic, Jewish, and other groups also operate retail outlets for their wares. (Photograph by the author, Chicago, May 1999)

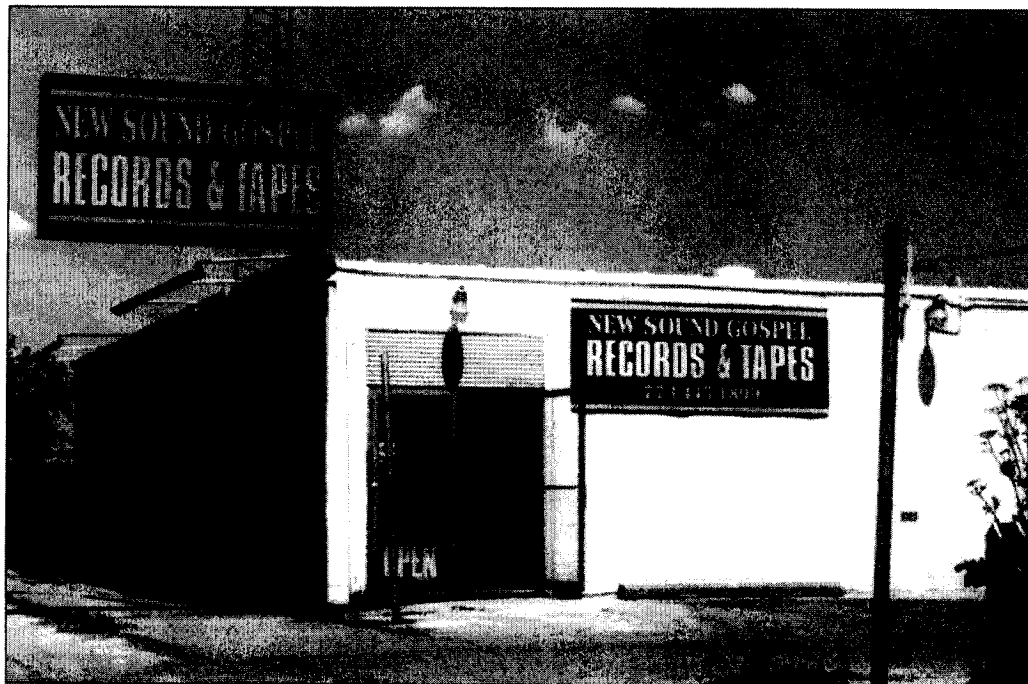


FIG. 2—An African American shop specializing in gospel music. (Photograph by the author, Chicago, May 1999)

the general and appear only within American communities. But, as we shall see, some items hover in the boundary between the two gross categories.

As the world's prime example of a modern, or postmodern, society, the United States shares with other First World nations an obvious central attribute that is clearly legible in its sacred landscape: the rapid flux of so many elements of its cultural and socioeconomic life. But, by virtue of membership in a special subset of advanced societies—those Neo-European settler nations transplanted from Old World entities—the United States also finds itself characterized by sheer newness. As a result of being occupied at such a late date by European colonists and not being effectively imprinted by a powerful state-related church, there was a failure to develop in what is now the United States any reasonable facsimile of any single home country's religious landscape. A somewhat comparable situation came to pass in Australia, New Zealand, and British Canada. On the other hand, the transposition of a traditional set of ecclesiastical items, imperfect though it may have been, did occur in Quebec, Latin America, pre-British Dutch South Africa, Siberia, and pre-American Russian Alaska.

Perhaps more to the point, virtually everywhere throughout the Neo-European realm, all or nearly all of whatever was sacred in the aboriginal scene was obliterated during and after the invasion by the newcomers. Only in bits and pieces are Native American religious landscapes being rediscovered and reinvested with meaning; after all, many Indians were moved away from home ground to reservation at least in part to separate them from places of long religious significance. But recently we have seen a certain resurgence of both scholarly and politically activist interest in sacred aboriginal sites on the part of Caucasian as well as Native American writers (for example, Michaelsen 1986).

During the few centuries since the cataclysmic Euro-African invasion, there simply has been too little time and too little stability to create anything resembling the temporally deeply layered scene, the cumulative sacralization and densification of concordant objects, that can be observed in a country like France, Ireland, India, or China. The obvious exception to such a generalization (the exception that proves the rule?) is, of course, to be seen in certain indigenous and Latino villages in the American Southwest, where venerable Roman Catholic chapels and missions and their associated burial grounds have acquired a powerful physical and symbolic presence (Blake and Smith 2000).

Thus the rarity in contemporary America of sacred hills, groves, springs, and streams, of sites linked to the lives of saintly individuals or to miraculous events (a dearth partially redressed by nationalistic items). Roadside shrines, sacred effigies, hilltop crosses, and the like do occur spottily but never approach the saturation level one sees in Italy, Bali, or Thailand. The tendency is to invest buildings with spiritual significance far more readily than other sites or spaces; hallowed halls ahead of holy hills. But if the temporal depth of the American churchscape is so shallow, the spatial churning so characteristic of the nation's life has often meant rapid social succession within the span of mere decades. We have a kind of palimpsest in many

urban neighborhoods, one in which the spectral geography of vanished, or vanishing, ethnic, racial, and denominational groups can still be deciphered beneath that of their latter-day successors. But let us proceed now to some specifics, initially those differences of degree, that help make our sacred scene uniquely American.

DIFFERENCES OF DEGREE

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the American religious landscape is the sheer number of churches and church-related facilities and their near ubiquity in eligible zones. We can only guess at the total number of houses of worship currently extant in the United States. American Church Lists, Inc. of Arlington, Texas, maintained a database of 355,232 congregations as of 1993, but it may well have missed a certain number even while more new churches have been organized in the past several years than have perished (Vaughan 1993, 39).³ A current total well in excess of 400,000 is quite credible. Such an extraordinary proliferation probably works out to a ratio between general population and churches that rivals or exceeds that of any other country.

Part of the explanation may be economic: the general affluence of churchgoers and the tax-exempt status of such enterprises. A more direct reason is the astonishing number of denominations, national, regional, and local, a total surely in the hundreds, as well as much diversity within nominally unified denominations. Is there any doubt that no other nation can begin to compete with the United States in terms of multiplicity of faiths and creeds? And such diversity leads, inevitably, to diversity and eclecticism in architectural styles and physical arrangements.

Our inability to reckon their number stems from the dynamic character of denominations and their subdivisions and from the elementary problem of strictly defining the denomination and its range. Compounding the difficulty is an abundance of congregations that are affiliated loosely, or not at all, with any larger entity. Such a complex mosaic of facilities for worship is related in quite fundamental ways to such traits of the national character as individualism and reliance on social and spatial mobility, and to the class and racial/ethnic structure of the population. In any case, the outcome is the village or small town with a half-dozen or more churches and the occasional urban neighborhood with several different or related houses of worship within shouting distance of one another. However numerous the American churches and varied their identity, and however patchy their distribution, such abundance and variety is a matter of relative ranking within an international context. Other countries can also be diversified in terms of denominational complexion and physical character of consecrated structures, if to a much less extreme degree.

Multitudinous though the church buildings may be, we do not seem to have enough of them to meet the needs of our even more numerous congregations. It is not uncommon to find two or more of them, not necessarily of the same theological persuasion and frequently immigrant in origin, sharing the same physical facilities on some sort of staggered schedule (Fuchs 1990, 311–312). Still other congregations,

by choice or necessity, have no regular abode but rent space in schools or commercial buildings—such as a movie theater on Sunday mornings—for their services (Ibata 2000; Masterson 2000). Such doubling up and portability may occur in some foreign metropolises but arguably not nearly to the same extent as in the United States.

The next of the possible American divergences from universal patterns is in the house of worship and its adjuncts. Here, as in other settler countries over the past 500 years, European colonists tried to replicate the architectural styles of the ancestral lands to the extent feasible, given usually limited means and knowledge (Gyrisco 1997).

As the United States prospered overall during the two centuries following independence and as native and immigrant denominations proliferated, the sacred landscape became ever more diversified in ways so complex as to elude convenient summary. It is quite conceivable that several vernacular regional styles may have evolved in addition to the well-known New England and Hispanic Southwestern types. What is clear is a certain standardization within some denominations, so that a Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, or perhaps Methodist edifice can often be recognized from afar. And there certainly have been strong family resemblances among structures erected by Mormons, Christian Scientists, Mennonites, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Despite the enormous range and diversity of styles, sizes, and levels of aspiration, a certain generic Americanness seems to pervade the great majority, a national reinterpretation of the West European *ur-model* (Heatwole 1989).

The more affluent or self-sacrificing congregations constructed the largest, most faithful replicas of such venerable Old World styles as Gothic, Romanesque, and Baroque. Many less ambitious congregations commissioned scaled-down, somewhat Americanized versions of the revered Gothic. It eventually retrogressed into a rather stodgy generic church type, usually in brick, with traditional gestures in overall shape, spires, belfries, and window treatment. In recent years there has been widespread adoption of a more up-to-date generic building type, one with only the vaguest allusions to premodern tradition—usually in the form of spires, crosses, stained glass, pillars, and gable roof. Indeed, this style sometimes becomes indistinguishable from the secular school, office building, or social hall. Such architectural developments may mirror certain secular or modernist trends within American religion. Toward the very nadir of spiritual ostentation, the Friends content themselves with the plainest of buildings and the stricter Amish with nothing more than a house or a barn.

In recent decades there have also been some remarkably adventurous developments in American ecclesiastical architecture. It may not be too extravagant to claim that the most exciting of advances in design among all buildings are to be found in some latter-day churches, synagogues, and mosques (The New Churches 1960; Kampf 1966, 23–45; Hayes 1983, 40).⁴ For whatever reasons, architects seem less constrained when awarded church commissions than they do in working on most commercial and public edifices. Certain it is that we saw more variety and innovation in church structures during the late twentieth century than in the relatively timid, con-

formist design of residences. Once again, there have been parallel trends in other First World countries, but not, I believe, with comparable vigor.

At a rudimentary material level, virtually all well-to-do American houses of worship are a step or two ahead of their Old World counterparts, given the fact that local building codes and the expectations of their flocks mandate electricity, telephones (and perhaps Web sites and e-mail), floodlights, water and sewer connections, heating systems, and often cooling systems. In addition to providing the customary spaces for worship and a parsonage, the up-to-date American church or temple, often functioning as the community social center (and polling place during elections), will have a suite of offices, library, day-care facilities, possibly a food and clothing bank, space for Sunday School, an elementary or secondary school, a social hall with connecting kitchen, an auditorium for lectures and cultural events, a garden and comely landscaping, possibly a gift shop, an exhibit hall, and athletic facilities, but, above all, a parking lot.⁵

The church parking lot merits special notice as a feature that helps differentiate the American scene from what generally prevails elsewhere. Most frequently found in suburban, exurban, and rural settings, it is far from rare in the inner city. The parking lot is a virtual necessity for the inner-city church whose formerly locally clustered congregation has migrated far afield, and equally so for the "associational" churches, which espouse a quite special theology or social doctrine and whose flocks may also be strewn across much of a metropolitan area. In strictly economic terms these extravagances do not make much sense. Unlike parking lots adjoining hospitals, schools, office buildings, apartment complexes, shopping malls, and factories that are heavily used, sometimes around the clock, the religious facilities are seldom fully occupied, usually being crowded only a few hours per week. Consequently, some churches find it expedient to rent out the space to nearby enterprises during certain time periods.

Almost invariably absent from the standard modern repertoire of objects constituting the American church complex is the cemetery, or churchyard, so traditional a feature in the Old World. The exceptions are usually to be found alongside churches in the cores of colonial cities and towns or next to rural or small-town structures built more than a hundred years ago. But many an urban congregation owns or manages burial grounds at an outlying site.

SOME WIDER DIVERGENCES

What tends to distinguish the American sacred scene more sharply than any of the foregoing items are its two extremes in physical expression: the megachurch and the storefront church. The former is evidently an American invention of post-World War II vintage and is limited to Protestant groups of an evangelical or pentecostal bent. It is a vigorously expanding phenomenon with a total number that approached 400 in the 1990s (Trueheart 1996). The megachurch can be defined in terms of both physical magnitude and size of congregation. One writer specifies "an average weekly attendance of 2,000 or more people, including all children, in the primary worship

service or services" (Vaughan 1993, 19), but total membership may be well in excess of 10,000. In order to accommodate such crowds the main structure is imposing, even colossal in bulk, if not necessarily architecturally distinguished, and so too the surrounding real estate that includes enormous parking lots (Goldberger 1995). An example is Calvary Church in Naperville, Illinois, an Assemblies of God "massive facility that dominates 116 acres of former farmland and accommodates nearly 3,000 worshippers each Sunday" (Numrich 1997, 43–48). An even more extravagant case—assuming eventual construction—is a huge, 13,000-member complex announced in December 2000 for erection in Chicago's Pullman neighborhood by the Salem Baptist Church (Mowatt 2000).

In its fullest embodiment, as represented by Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, which is first or second in the land in terms of attendance (Vaughan 1993, 31–32), one finds an astonishing array of social services and amenities, something rivaling the most extravagant of shopping centers in the amplitude of its resources (Trueheart 1996). Indeed, in his dissertation on a megachurch near Atlanta, Scott Thumma notes the striking parallel between the rise of megachurches and the proliferation of giant food warehouses and hypermarkets (1996, 522; also see Niebuhr 1995). Most megachurches are in suburban or exurban locations, but not all, and they appear among both Caucasian and African American communities.

Recent development on [Chicago's] South Side is exemplified by gigantic churches surrounded by vast parking lots. In their lack of religious symbolism these structures resemble convention centers or gymnasiums. With room for as many as five thousand people, and pastors who are radio evangelists, these houses of worship draw their flocks from the African American population of the entire metropolitan area. Like sports stadiums and hospitals, such churches form enclaves that have little connection to their surroundings of devastation. (Vergara 1995, 194)

I do not know whether such churchly gigantism has been exported recently to other shores, but I suspect there may be fertile soil for the megachurch in such countries as Australia and Brazil.

The storefront church is a much more widespread phenomenon, one that has emerged spontaneously in virtually every American metropolis above a certain threshold size. In lieu of any national survey, it seems safe to claim that they number in the many thousands. If they are not unknown in foreign lands, they are far less numerous and conspicuous outside the United States. Defining the storefront church is a simple matter. It is a house of worship occupying recycled premises—former retail shops, funeral parlors, factories, or warehouses (but not former churches)—usually with minimal remodeling. The definition could be stretched to include residences transformed into churches, again with little or no physical modification (Figure 3).

Although they are not entirely absent from middle-class neighborhoods, there is an emphatic negative correlation between measures of socioeconomic well-being

and the number of storefront churches in given districts. The obvious explanation for their profusion in impoverished settings, sometimes as many as four or five within a single block, is the low rent or purchase price for the properties in question, along with their recreational and spiritual appeal for a clientele with few social alternatives.⁶

The vast majority of such churches may be African American and Latino Protestant in character, but other denominations are occasionally represented, including Jewish, Islamic, Roman Catholic, and Mennonite, as well as, of course, the Christian Science Reading Room. And not all storefront churches are tiny and shabby. Some occupy, and properly maintain, relatively large, architecturally ornate former bank buildings, funeral homes, movie palaces, auto showrooms, and the like (Figure 4).

The inventory of American deviations from worldwide norms continues in the realm of transportation. The theme of mobility so pervasive in American life finds ample expression not only in frequent shifts of church location and turnover in denominational occupants undergone by a given facility but also in the existence of a fleet of buses and vans owned and operated by a significant percentage of congregations (Tillman and Emmett 1999). What renders such a resource practical or even necessary is the scattered location of many flocks, along with the physical infirmities and carelessness of many parishioners. Although the absolute number of such vehicles may be considerable, they account for only a minuscule fraction of the nation's total fleet. But quantity matters less than the simple fact of their existence and relative ubiquity. If such church-related items are present in foreign parts, they must be quite inconspicuous, for I cannot recall ever seeing any overseas. Related phenomena—again arguably only in America—are those mobile ministries to be glimpsed occasionally along city streets or major highways: vans catering to the spiritual and bodily welfare of the homeless and afflicted and those theologically bedizened tractor-trailer rigs—latter-day circuit riders, so to speak—en route to religious gatherings for truckers at large service plazas along interstate highways.

There is a further way in which the American case tends to deviate from worldwide norms, yet, once again, in quantitative degree rather than in any absolute qualitative sense: the microgeography of houses of worship within cities and towns. In times past, in virtually all European, Russian, Middle Eastern, and many American communities, a single imposing church structure—or, in some American cases, a cluster of same—claimed the most central and prestigious site. The building would be the tallest, perhaps the bulkiest, most architecturally ambitious within the settlement, its looming presence serving to ratify the preeminence of the sacred in the natural order of things. As already noted, such a pattern still prevails in thousands of Old World and Latin American places that have not undergone radical physical transformation and in many American villages where time has stood still (Ostergren 1981; Glassie 1999, 342–343).

But such a venerable mode of town design could not long prevail in a dynamic United States, a land where monetary values have become so omnipotent. By the late nineteenth century, steeply rising land prices resulted in the squeezing out, or

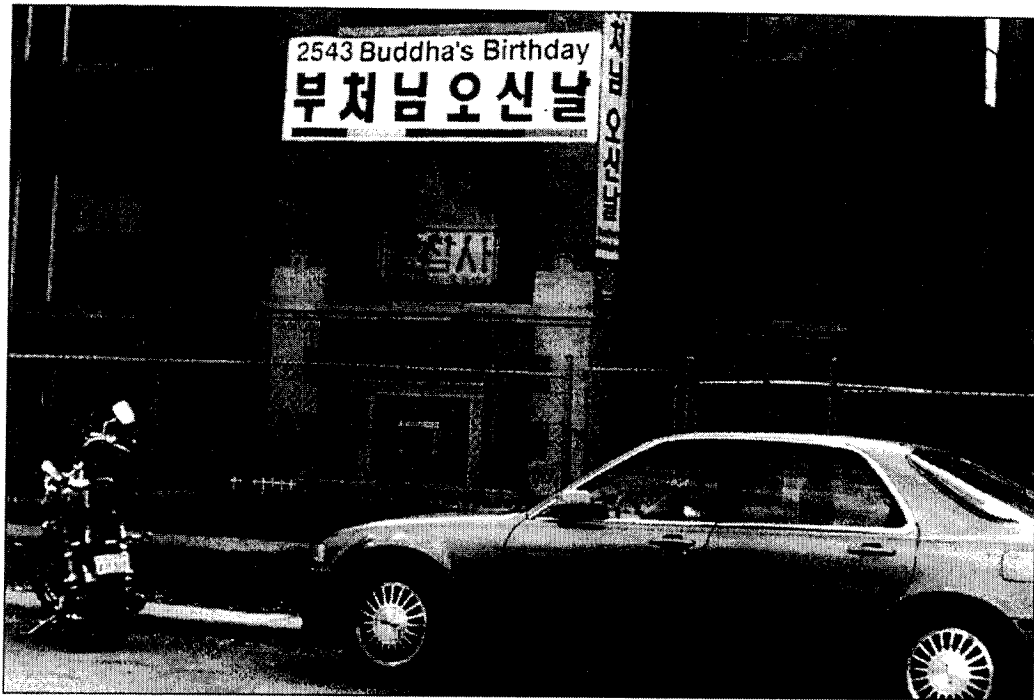


FIG. 3—The conversion of a Chicago apartment building into a Buddhist temple with no outward change beyond the signage. (Photograph by the author, spring 1999)



FIG. 4—The African American Israel Church has taken over an ornate movie palace on Chicago's South Side. The Nubian Islamic Hebrews establishment immediately next door is a much more typical sort of storefront church. (Photograph by the author, September 1989)

razing or recycling, of preexisting central houses of worship and their outward transfer to less competitive sites. Daniel Bluestone has chronicled in definitive detail the centrifugal shifts of churches in late-nineteenth-century Chicago, a process of separating the ecclesiastical from the world of business that was progressing simultaneously in other cities (1991, 62–103).

The spatial disposition of the sacred is now no longer reducible to a simple model. Greatly exacerbating the complexity of the churchscape has been, first, the remarkable explosion in number and variety of faiths and denominations previously noted, something resulting from both immigration and internal migration

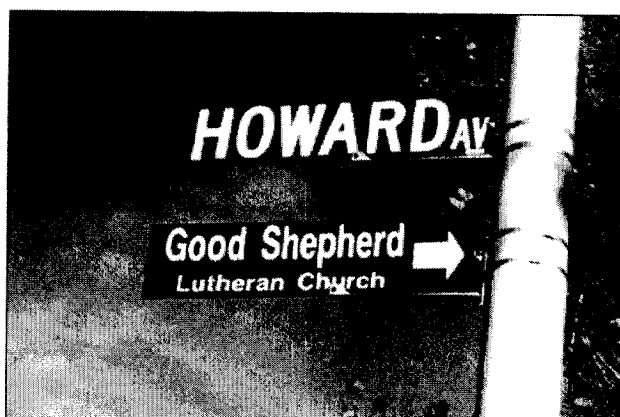


FIG. 5—Showing the way to an otherwise hard-to-find church embedded in a residential neighborhood. (Photograph by the author, Chicago, fall 1999)

and the sheer inventiveness of spiritual entrepreneurs, and, second, the loosening of spatial constraints with innovations in transportation and communication. Today's shopper in the religious marketplace is no longer tethered to the gravity model. If one wishes to be religiously observant, the choice of where to worship and how deeply and often to be involved in churchly doings can revolve around several factors in addition to propinquity: de-

nomination, or specific theological faction therein; ethnic/racial identity; social class; locus of church on the conservative/liberal spectrum; style of worship; family ties; and the size, amenities, and social, cultural, and educational facilities offered by a given church. Each of these factors, and others, may well generate its own geographical peculiarities.

Just where have all these latter-day churches located under the new dispensation? There is no straightforward answer or clear-cut geographical formula. In fact, with one major class of exceptions, something close to pure randomness most often seems to be the rule, so that the placement of religious facilities outside the urban core zone fails to conform to any economic logic. Although we can specify with some exactitude the optimum locations for service stations, banks, supermarkets, bail-bond offices, and the like, just where church elders choose to break ground is largely a matter of happenstance having little to do with business cunning or return on investment whenever acceptable sites are donated or come on the market at attractive prices.⁷ In addition, local and zoning regulations and construction codes may complicate the siting decision (Wuthnow 1994, 48).

The parcels of land in question may be in a residential neighborhood or along a commercial street or even cheek by jowl with factories, warehouses, and institu-

tional grounds or in the midst of abandoned farmland, but rarely in a shopping mall or at a commanding intersection in an outlying district. Although we must exclude from the territory offering “churchable” sites all parks and other such public lands, airports, railroad yards, military reservations, country clubs, dumps, quarries, heavy industrial districts, and governmental complexes, that still leaves in play much the larger portion of urban space, all those tracts classified as residential and commercial, along with college campuses.⁸

The building(s) may be set on a corner or within a block; no particular direction is favored. They may or may not dominate their environs physically and aesthetically. Tracking them down calls for no small measure of pluck and luck. So haphazard and unpredictable are these locations that congregations frequently post signs along major thoroughfares indicating how many blocks in which direction the spiritually famished wayfarer must drive to find churchly solace (Figure 5).

The exception to the general lack of locational logic is the category of storefront churches previously discussed. Indeed, it should be feasible to devise a mathematical formula incorporating relevant social and economic variables that could predict their number and location in candidate neighborhoods. Another idiosyncrasy of the American churchscape is the matter of architectural incongruity; that is, inserting what may be a perfectly fine specimen of ecclesiastical tradition into an inappropriate setting. Thus, in discussing Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church (1889–1891) in affluent Evanston, Illinois, Robert Brueggemann states:

Although the interior was lavishly polychromed and fitted out with sumptuous furnishings, the exterior looks like a modest medieval British parish church dropped on an Evanston corner. It is conspicuous, though, that the church, though probably similar in size to a British country church, has a completely different relation to the houses around it. Rather than dominating the center of a tightly packed village, the Evanston church occupies a corner lot in the middle of acres of houses. The houses, moreover, are much larger than those in a medieval town, rivaling the church in size. (1997, 153–154)

Thus another paradoxical aspect of the intraurban geography of American churches is that, despite their impressive numbers, these buildings seldom overpower their surroundings. The only instances in which they do are rather limited, confined, as they are, to some residential neighborhoods where, by virtue of sheer bulk or height, they outbid other buildings for attention. And, as already indicated, there is not a single large American city today (Salt Lake City has ceased to be the sole exception) where a church structure commands pride of place in the central business district.

In still another meaningful way, the siting of American churches deviates from Old World antecedents. A significant minority of houses of worship in Europe and Asia are located on inherently sacred sites, places associated with miraculous events or the lives of holy individuals. Such buildings may be deemed *domus dei* (Turner 1979). In the American case, locations are almost always arbitrary, with no aura of

the supernatural attending the particular parcel of real estate, so that the church is simply *domus ecclesiae*, the meeting place of the congregation. A handful of exceptions have become pilgrimage centers, but it is difficult to think of any situated in a city (Rinschede 1989).⁹

In a curious deviation—this time from the general humanized American landscape rather than from international practice—the American churchscape has little to tell us about nationalistic sentiment. Thus, in contrast to the pervasive flaunting of flags, our totemic eagle, and the red-white-and-blue motif to be seen on so many residences, shops, factories, vehicles, and personal costumes, it is the rare church building that flies Old Glory (Zelinsky 1988, 175–222). Although it may be obligatory for the parochial school next door, if such be present, as well as for public schools in general, it is quite unusual to find such a display on or next to the church structure proper. The same observation applies to church names: a distinct dearth of items reflecting patriotic zeal. I paid close attention to the matter during fieldwork in Cook County, Illinois in the weeks following the atrocities of 11 September 2001 but found only a barely perceptible rise in the incidence of church-related national flags. Evidently the wall separating church and state remains sturdy.

SOME VIRTUALLY ABSOLUTE DIFFERENCES

Turning away from matters locational, we can begin to make a genuinely strong case for American exceptionalism by considering the simple, if not so obvious, topic of church names. In most parts of the world, naming the house of worship is quite unnecessary or so formulaic as to require no deliberation. The structure, with or without an assemblage of associated items, is simply the church, mosque, synagogue, or temple of whatever place. No special title is called for, and certainly no signage. And in countless instances it is the only house of worship in the village or town.

But in America a church that seeks to establish and maintain its identity faces serious obstacles. In a land with hundreds of thousands of churches and no end to the multiplicity of denominations, with so many alternatives for worship in a given town or neighborhood, how to attract the interest of potential parishioners? The various denominations and congregations are quite literally scrambling for customers in the religious marketplace (Moore 1994). One obvious tactic is to contrive a distinctive, perhaps catchy, title and to flaunt it before the passerby. The result has been a luxuriant efflorescence of names—and demonstrations of verbal virtuosity (Mencken 1948, 589–591). Even relatively staid Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations have not been content with tagging themselves succinctly with a saint's name or that of the locality. They have frequently opted for wording with theological or poetic resonance. But there are the exceptions. Christian Scientists make do by denoting their edifices numerically, and all the structures maintained by the Jehovah's Witnesses are labeled Kingdom Hall.

It is among the less prestigious denominations and the unaffiliated churches, especially in African American communities, that we come upon the most colorful

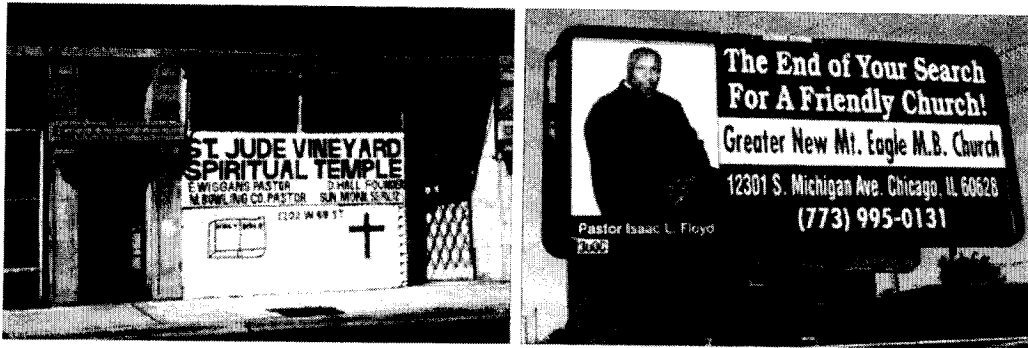


FIG. 6 (left)—A not unusual instance of the sign that overwhelms the publicly visible face of a storefront church. (Photograph by the author, Chicago, May 1999)

FIG. 7 (right)—It pays to advertise? (Photograph by the author, Chicago, June 1999)

and inspired nomenclature (Stronks 1962; Noreen 1965; Dillard 1968). The verbal bravura can be dazzling, as in two of my favorite examples: Holy Ghost Power-Packed Gospel Arena, and Baptist Church without Spot or Wrinkle.¹⁰ And, as such examples suggest, verbosity often prevails, although few congregations can match The House of God, Which Is the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and the Ground of Truth, without Controversy, Inc.

A final aspect of the sacred landscape to be considered here differs from the preceding items by its decidedly qualitative nature, by what I believe to be a set of virtually absolute differences between the American scene and the presentation of the otherworldly in all other lands. The argument centers on the sign. The profusion and nature of religious signs clamoring for the attention of Americans are truly extraordinary. In their most sedate form they appear as signboards, either affixed to the front of the church building or hanging outward, or as freestanding objects a short distance away and a meter or so in height. As often as not, these signboards function not merely to identify and inform but also to persuade the



FIG. 8 (left)—Fair warning. (Photograph by the author, Centre County, Pennsylvania, July 1987)

FIG. 9 (right)—One of a remarkable series of billboards that have recently appeared around the country, source of funding unclear. (Photograph by the author, Chicago, May 1999)



FIG. 10—Every bit of space along the two streetward-facing walls of this corner residence on Chicago's South Side is covered with shrill statements of Christian faith and missionary zeal. (Photograph by the author, May 1999)

unredeemed or to reinforce the faith of believers with their brief homilies. Such items are quite rare outside North America.

Other signs may appear on church walls, such as bits of scripture or inspirational phrases painted onto or carved into the structure, or as temporary cloth or paper posters draped on any convenient nearby surface, such as lampposts and utility lines. In the case of many storefront churches, the streetward-facing sign—one that may present not only the name of the church and its clergy and schedule of events but also biblical verses and other verbal embellishments—may account for up to half the front surface and occasionally even more (Figure 6).

Much more remarkable, and suggesting something more deep-seated than the urge to engage in puffery for the local congregation (Figure 7), is the multitude of propagandistic signs along America's highways and byways with little or no reference to specific houses of worship (Figures 8 and 9). The largest are to be found as leased space on full-size billboards. Others are smaller wooden or metal objects or placards mounted on posts, or they are simply bumper stickers or decorated vehicles, whether church vans or private automobiles. Then we have those incredible displays outside the dwellings of extreme zealots (Figure 10). Only in America. One may also come across the occasional outdoor religious mural, but they are less common than are those with a political, ethnic, or personal message (Figure 11).



FIG. 11—Noncommercial mural art in American cities is almost entirely confined to African American and Latino neighborhoods. Some of those with a religious motif, like this one in Chicago, are fine achievements. (Photograph by the author, summer 2000)

More numerous are the chalk, painted, or sprayed graffiti that adorn every sort of available wall, road cut, or pillar; for example, the ubiquitous “Jesus saves.” There may be such graffiti in other lands, but I do not recall ever catching sight of any of the more elaborate signs in any of the foreign countries I have frequented—outside the work of North American missionaries.¹¹ Virtually all the items in question seem to be Protestant (or, rarely, Jewish) in origin. I have yet to identify clearly any that are Eastern Orthodox, Islamic, or Buddhist.

Although some of the signs advertise specific churches or evangelists or the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to recruit clergy or publicize its celebrations, at a deeper level this signage is part of a grander campaign to promote godliness and biblical authority generally without advancing any narrowly defined theology (Moore 1994, 256; Doclar 1999). Such a domestic mission is clearly linked to a vigorous American missionary effort overseas. It also overlaps the great number and fervor of radio and television ministries, the inescapable Gideon Bible in hotel and motel rooms, and the blizzard of small religious tracts handed out on street corners or waiting to be picked up in bus stations and cafés.

One may argue in rebuttal that the American situation is not really exceptional. Witness all those roadside shrines in Catholic Europe and Latin America, as well as the crucifixes and holy effigies attached to so many houses and the countless Hindu and Buddhist temples and other tangible displays of devotion in India and South-

east Asia. But there is a crucial, indeed profound, difference between, on one hand, such traditional, pervasive behavior among the devout (including the wearing of religious articles by God-fearing Americans or displays of the Holy Family) and, on the other, the obstreperous signage proselytizing travelers along America's roads. There is a matter-of-factness about the former, the quiet affirmation of unarguable verities, a nonconfrontational statement of settled fact, of the natural order of things. Those American signs, in contrast, are reaching out to the unconverted and the stray lamb, striving to save souls and thwart the Devil, a feverish, never-ending missionary struggle. The signs plead, scold, and nag, and they are meant to shame or frighten into submission those of us who are in spiritual peril.

The implications of the religious signage just discussed range far beyond their overt purpose. At one level, they reveal evidence that, after nearly 500 years, the emotional turbulence of the Reformation has not yet fully subsided. More fundamentally, given their setting in a nation that professes to be a light unto the world, this self-styled God's Country, they suggest a serious nervousness within the national community. It is something not limited to fundamentalist Protestants, this anxiety about identity and purpose, a restlessness and hunger no amount of material superabundance and technological bedazzlement can assuage.

In any event, I trust that this accumulation of visual and mappable testimony confirms my central argument: that the sacred landscape of this land is unique in a nontrivial fashion. These findings concerning our peculiar ways of punctuating the American scene with outward expressions of commitment to the divine—be they matters of intensity beyond global norms or items limited to the national turf—portend weightier messages about American society and culture that we have yet to decipher.

I have merely scratched the surface of an exceedingly large subject. But these preliminary reflections may serve to reinforce the creed by which students of our humanized landscapes live and work: This dynamic, intricate text lying all about us, in both its religious and secular phases, not only is fascinating and worthy of parsing in its own right but also provides an indispensable key for unraveling the invisible knotted core of our society's collective psyche. Just what that process of unraveling might fully reveal is a topic for another time and a much longer exposition.

NOTES

1. Despite the recent resurgence and political clout of fundamentalist and born-again Christians in the public arena, overall church membership and attendance has been declining in the United States, as Robert Putnam meticulously documented for the 1960–1999 period (2000, 65–79). However, whether or not this trend continues indefinitely, religion will continue to play a large role in the social/political life of the nation and, in our physical milieu, one much too large to ignore. Incidentally, in the immediate aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, our newspapers reported a sudden upsurge in church attendance. But the same journals later noted that such activity had subsided to predisaster levels by the end of the year.

2. We must go to Canada to find one of the rare exceptions, a loving treatment of Ontario's vernacular churches (McIlwraith 1997, 144–156).

3. Rather arbitrarily, we exclude from our landscape analyses the interiors of structures. Although major airports may maintain chapels for the transient worshiper, as do hospitals and the occasional business enterprise, such facilities are not churches in any genuine sense of the concept; that is, gathering places for members of an organized, continuing congregation. Moreover, they are located indoors and are not exposed to the public gaze. All such items should, of course, be included in any truly comprehensive study of the religious life of the nation.

4. In the case of State College, Pennsylvania, my longtime domicile, the most impressive architectural achievement, in my opinion and that of others—leaving aside the looming presence of our quasi-sacred Beaver Stadium—is represented by Grace Lutheran Church, on the outer fringe of the central business district. And my candidate for the closest runner-up is the Roman Catholic Our Lady of Victory Church, which is ensconced in a pleasant residential neighborhood.

5. The most elaborate situations are those of the larger Roman Catholic complexes, veritable villages unto themselves, often including convents in addition to the items noted above. They can occupy an entire city block and even portions of others. An adjacent funeral home is often to be seen. But the ultimate in institutional self-sufficiency are the Catholic pilgrimage establishments in rural settings discussed by Rinschede (1989).

6. The only other type of enterprise that even begins to rival the storefront church numerically in such neighborhoods is the liquor store.

7. The manuals on the siting and construction of churches by church-related authors are filled with practical details but offer a minimum of theoretical enlightenment (Faulkner 1946; Jones 1976).

8. We can assume, however, that some of the more affluent congregations do carry out fairly sophisticated analyses of the socioeconomic and other characteristics of candidate sites when building new, or relocating older, facilities, with or without the services of professional firms.

9. In the case of Chicago, the one plausible exception is the National Shrine of Saint Jude, a site drawing substantial numbers of pilgrims from far and wide (Orsi 1990). It is amusing to note that, in a guidebook entitled *Pilgrimages USA*, the author is hard put to recommend anything remotely holy in Chicago beyond its Art Institute and skyline (Higgins 1985, 90–95); in another such publication all three of the sites noted for Illinois lie far beyond its largest metropolis (Joseph 1992).

10. Some of the names, such as Purchased Church of God, or Move of God, can be downright perplexing.

11. The only foreign example I can come up with is one in Sydney, appropriately enough in a country that in so many respects is the “Other America.” “Christmas in Australia brings out the billboards pleading to put Christ back into Christmas” (Ryan 2000).

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