

THE PLACELESS CHAPEL

MEMORY, MEANING AND DESTRUCTION IN SACRED SPACE

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An ethnographic narrative from Israel, with its sacred sites marked by war and destruction, explores the dynamics of absence and presence, of imagination and reality of religious dwelling places.

This idea of a chapel of placelessness underlies an ethnographic field diary written in the summer 2015 in Israel. Sacred spaces offer their presence built on absence, on layers of cultural memory. The focal point of my diary is the town and the sacred sites of Nazareth, built on the incarnation of the word, and, more concretely, on Mary's house. It is an everyday dwelling place in local narratives, and a centre point of worldwide pilgrimage. Yet, at the same time, the House of Mary is itself imagined as a travelling chapel, absent, but ubiquitously present in innumerable Loreto churches.

Keywords: *religious ethnography, place, sacred space, cultural memory, void*

Etnografska pripoved iz Izraela in njegovih svetih krajev, ki sta jih zaznamovali uničenje in vojna, razgrinja dinamiko o odsotnosti in navzočnosti, o imaginaciji in resničnosti svetih bivanjskih krajev.

Zamisli o kapeli brez kraja je podlaga etnografski terenski dnevnik, pisan poleti 2015 v Izraelu. Sveti kraji so ponavzočeni z odsotnostjo, na plasteh kulturnega spomina. Žarišče dnevnika je sveti kraj Nazaret, zgrajen na utelešenju sveta ali, določneje, na Marijini hiši. V lokalnih pripovedih je to vsakdanje bivališče in središni kraj svetovnega romanja, vendar je Marijina hišica hkrati zamišljena kot potujoča kapela, odsotna, vendar vsepovsodno navzoča v brezštevilnih loretskih cerkvah.

Ključne besede: *etnografija religije, kraj, sveti prostor, kulturni spomin, praznina*

I

You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, The place, O Lord, which You have made for Your dwelling, The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established. (Exodus 15:17)

Building a place for God's dwelling: This desire has grasped people's imagination since biblical times, and it might already have motivated the people of Israel on their journey out of Egypt to what they anticipated as "home". Against this background, my paper comes with an invitation to imagine the building of a religious dwelling place, a chapel, of our time. With this, I mean a sacred space made from solid stone, wood and metal, and luminous glass, built on the grounds of past realities and reaching out to imagined future worlds. This imagined chapel is a space composed of images and narratives, of beauty and meaning. Moreover, designing a sacred building leads us to reflect on the qualities of religious practice and performance that would be experienced within this space, on being still, amazed, maybe sad, maybe joyful; of looking, listening, singing maybe, praying, moving about alone, or in a congregation, in liturgy.

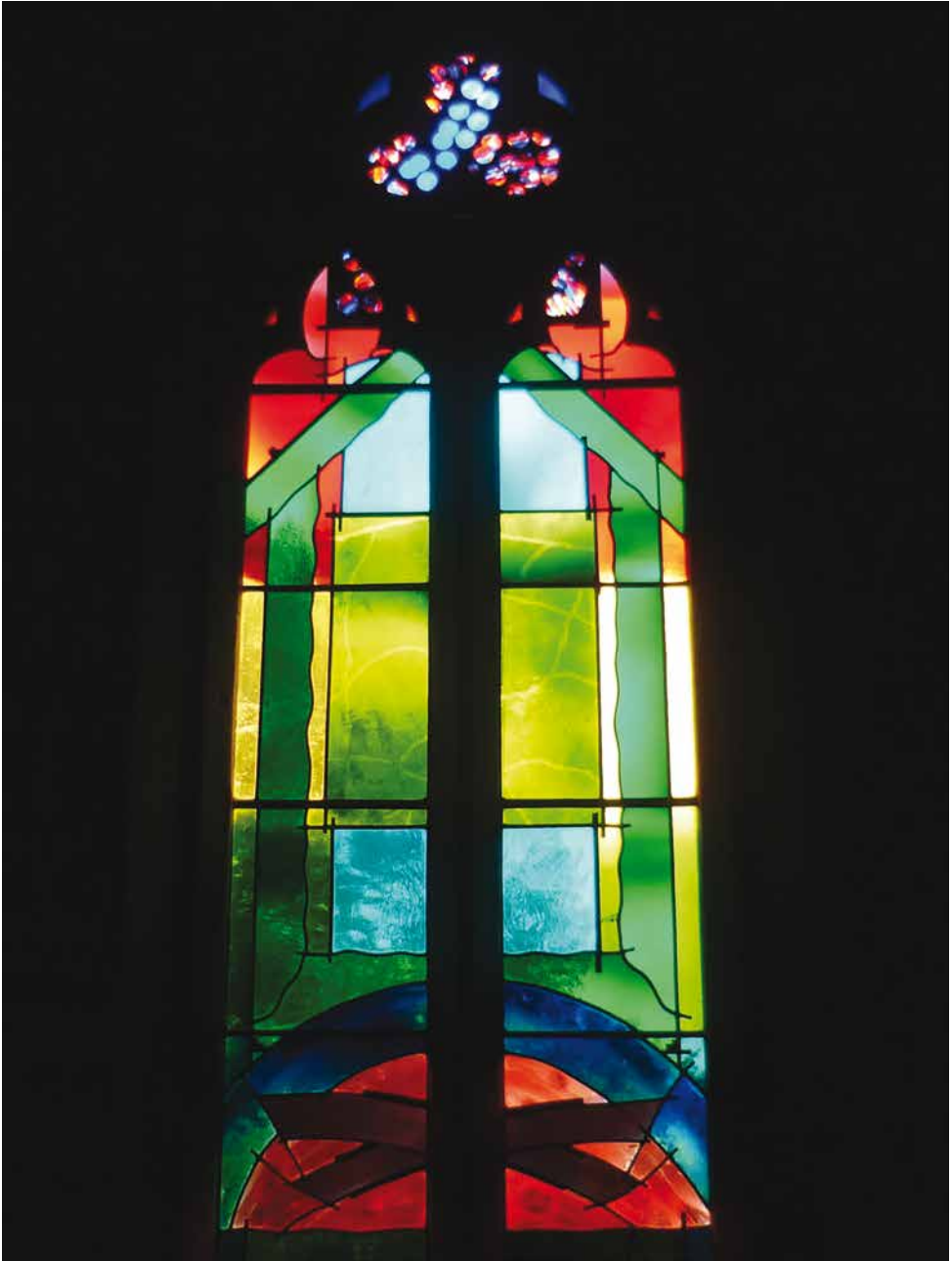
At this starting point, a crucial question arises: Where can we build our chapel? How could we locate it – even if it is only in our imagination? In our times, Arjun Appadurai sees the imaginative deployed especially by the displaced, by migrants, people on the move, who dwell in “diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror, and diasporas of despair. But in every case,” as Appadurai writes, “these diasporas bring the force of the imagination, as both memory and desire into the lives of many ordinary people” (Appadurai 1998: 6). However, this would mean that there is no actual place for this chapel, no firm mountain of God’s inheritance to build on. The idea of building a church in a classic Christian sense, established by “Your hands”, appears to be as misguided as the question of its location. It might be founded on memories and desire, but in principle it could only be built on absence, on placelessness.

However, whereas the refugees of our time would find their habitations, their roots and lasting refuges being denied, Western migrants of a fleeting modernity, and especially when it comes to religiosity, widely deny to be bound to traditional faith, to its customs and places of worship. So, one might say, would not placelessness, rather than locating a building place for a Christian church, not only meet the realities of an unrooted age of mass migration, but also comply with the tendencies of contemporary spirituality? Should not we rather view our chapel as a virtual castle-in-the-air, in the sense of New Age and spiritualism, as a creative sanctuary for a narcissistic, self-empowered human subject? Moreover, has not the development of Christian religious faith shown itself as “the story of the hero (or subject)” to himself, like a “coming-of-age novel”, as sociologist Hans-Georg Soeffner puts it (Soeffner 2012: 220)? Must not a contemporary place of worship reflect, or even re-enact the paradox struggle of the modern subject, that in its neediness, its fragmented and limited being has to strive for, but can never reach up to, the full potentiality of his and her own, godly self?

For Soeffner all religion does go back to the subject, in the sense that religiosity is based on a liminal experience that cannot be expressed in words. It is the experience of an individual that finds itself alone, thrown into the world and imagining “a comforting ‘no-place’ a utopia” (ibid.: 216). In this way, religious expression starts off with the figures of both the “heretic and the artist” (ibid.: 217). Yet, in a fundamentally paradox way, both act within society and play their roles in the way that they communicate a unique otherworldly experience into a collective knowledge of the unsayable, to be shared by a community and translated into words and images that gain content and meaning beyond the individual. There is no private religion (except in the sense that it collectivises the belief in an omnipotent private subject as such).

However, if we explore this chain of thinking a bit further, we find ourselves led back to a communality where the omnipotent subject might not want to be. Religious collectivity inevitably entangles us in questions of norm and power.

Nevertheless, let us take this inevitability back to the – seemingly anachronistic – question of how a chapel of our time can come to reality and gain its specific place.



“Place”, stained glass window by Mark Angus, from the scheme “The spiritual journey”, Parish Church Spinkhill near Sheffield, UK. Photo: Mark Angus.

The problem remains even resilient: If our chapel building should reach beyond subjective self-empowerment, and beyond an academic experiment in art or anthropology, where is its god, who authorises us? Where is the priest to give his blessing, to lead the rituals? What is the consecration of our church, what is its faith, its mythology? Will, and this brings us right into Catholicism, our chapel have a tabernacle, a mystical centre?¹ These questions reveal that not only is our chapel without a place, but also it lacks any sense, it seems lost in our times if it can't be bound to symbolic systems of (possibly Catholic) church power that we would rather see left far behind us.

Still, having myself grown up in a Baroque pilgrimage place in Catholic Bavaria, I populate my imaginative chapel with painted figures in full flesh, with bones in reliquary shrines, and fill it with scenes and stories, scent, and music. These images of sacred space come from my own experience, yet they are not my personal invention. They are engrained in cultural memory and can be brought to appearance by a master-builder, an artist - or, just for the purpose of this paper, an ethnographer.

Therefore, in order to explore the questions of the materialisation of sacred space a bit further, I would like to trace an ethnographic journey to Israel, which, in the summer of 2015, I recorded in a field diary.² In Israel, where not only the three classic book religions are rooted, but also for thousands of years peoples passed through, cultures emerged, fought and mixed, religion materialises as condensed culture and cultural memory in a paradigmatic way.

Here the stories of the bible can, through carved stones, buildings, and remnants of all sorts be located right within in the everyday topographies of ancient landscapes and towns like Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and many others. In the old harbour town of Acre, Akko, the landlord of an Arabian hostel pointed to a 5000 year old history – a legacy that, in a maze of small lanes, steps and passage ways, of walls, houses, balconies built onto each other – can still be felt, although most buildings don't date back earlier than the 18th Century. Especially in the texture of the old town, like in a built and lived in palimpsest, the sediments of cultural memory gain a very concrete presence within the weave of everyday life. Mosques, churches, synagogues are constantly pointed out to be built on the foundations of other sacred buildings, they appear as crossing points of Eastern and European past and present, whilst opening up silent spaces within a contemporaneous bustle of trade and tourism, of work and leisure. This resonates in the sounds of the city, shouting, chatting,

¹ Clifford Geertz in his ground-breaking essay on "Religion As a Cultural System" starts off stating that religion can only ever be practised, as well as researched, through the manifestations of a specific religious culture. From this follows: "Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other" (Geertz 1973: 90).

² The following thick descriptions and quotes are taken from my field diary, dating from 31 August to 9 September 2015.



The old town of Akko, Israel, 2015. Photo: K. Eisch-Angus.

and tooting; all overlaid with the sounds of religion, church bells, and especially the Muezzin calls. Five times a day they proclaim their power of ordering, but are at the same time counteracted by everyday life. I observe how a group of young men take the melody up that waves down from the minaret, and then drown it with their MP3 players; or, in the silent yard of Acre's Great Mosque, how some women follow the call for prayer to the side entry, whilst others keep on chattering. In this way, the secular and the sacred create one space as a heterogeneous weave, in which rules and norms can be known and broken, difference is recognised and transcended.³ In this way, religious space sums up the idea of life as a liminal passage towards a different other, from the univocal to the polyphonic.

Yet this space is scarred with violence. It is marked by political posters and CCTV cameras in the Arabian old town of Acre. Guidebooks and text boards convey local history through successions of dominion and power, sieges and battles, and destroyed, mostly sacred buildings. "Because of the wars", for an Arabian tourist guide this seemed sufficient to explain erstwhile events, and the now absent churches and mosques on one and the same place, thus both moderating and normalising violence within the fabric of life and cultural memory.

³ My chapel, I note in my diary, should have sounds, maybe bells, and a women's and a men's side as I remember it from the days of my childhood. However, who would then be the people of the everyday that respond to the call of the bells, and follow the normative order of gendered space, and who, most importantly, would counterbalance it in their everyday practice?

However, during the time of my stay in Israel the bulldozing of the 5th Century Catholic monastery and pilgrimage site of St. Elian in Syria went through the press and followed me in my dreams.⁴ At the time, the 2014 bombings of Gaza were only one-year back, haunting images that could not be reconciled by recalling the serial destructions of biblical Gaza. In an unprecedented way, the wars in the Middle East confront us with fundamentalist ideology of one truth and one orbit of power that devastates in the name of religion the religious spaces a many-voiced culture. Still, in travelling through Israel, I could recognise the legacy of both the cultural pluralism, and the violence in my own cultural roots.

Here I am referred back to the crusaders and the terrors of European religious wars that also speak in the symbolism of Baroque churches. Or, I find myself reminded of the deserted track of the Iron Curtain right through Europe, where churches and cemeteries were targetedly destroyed as the sacred centres of (often multi-ethnic or multi-language) communities. I also think of Bogdan Bogdanović's laments of the Yugoslav "urbizide" (quoted in Lachmann 2007: 107; see also Assmann 2009), where religious everyday syncretisms, the "algorithm of tolerance and harmony" were shot to rubble (Bogdanović 1994: 119).

When destruction is total, targeting sacred space and architecture together with life and humanity, an everyday understanding of togetherness can not easily be re-integrated into the weave of memory. For this reason, our placeless chapel must find a way to recognise the ruptures of power and violence within the ambivalence of the imagined religious space that it intends to create.

II

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (John 1:14)

I would now like to take you to Nazareth, where a variety of religious truths and worldviews come together. The Bible knows that Nazareth is the place where Jesus grew up, and, more importantly, where Mary lived and met the angel of the Annunciation. Nazareth shows itself as a lively small town with a population of mixed languages and faiths, predominantly Christian Arabs. The central Basilica of the Annunciation is a large 1960s building, the words *And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us* in Latin written right over its plain white facade. A text board informs about predecessor churches lying underneath. Walking through the spacious cloistered yard, where groups of believers gather to enter the church, I can overhear comments and stories: A young preacher instructs a group of possibly African pilgrims to open their Bibles. "Here is where it happened", he says, and reads the story of Mary meeting her cousin Elizabeth. For him, the main messages are about time

⁴ The monastery was destroyed on 21 August 2015, an act that was condemned by the UNESCO Director-General as "cultural cleansing underway at the hands of ISIL/Daesh" (UNESCO 2015).

and history, and power – that Jesus was born in the lineage of David, and, he proclaims with a long, chanting end tone that “his kingdom will never end.” Quite differently, an Austrian priest refers to the house of Mary around which the Basilica is built and asks his pilgrims’ group to imagine little Jesus jumping down the stone steps to his mum. Here the mythical event of Nazareth appears as both political and personal when he says “Here is where the most important event of mankind happened, which is Mary’s saying ‘Yes’. We are infinitely grateful for this word.”

A third, native tourist guide roots the same Biblical myth in local memory and in a female narrative tradition and links it to a personal genealogy of his grandmother. How impolite would it have been if the angel had appeared unannounced in a woman’s house, therefore he would first have approached her at the well where local women and passing through strangers met.

With the help of my tourist guidebook I follow this track, first to a concreted excavation hole, that is now filled with rubbish and that I identify with the help of a business sign “Mary’s Well Taxi” nearby at the roadside, way out at the edge of town. A bit further behind I enter the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, that is distinctly dedicated to the angel Gabriel and opens as a colourful and highly ornamental space filled with painted angels and stories from Jesus’ life, and saints like St. George, with horses and dragons. A friendly elderly man greets incoming visitors, asks where they come from and chats to them in various languages, whilst humming and chanting along, but also guarding an atmosphere of reverence and silence. From the main church room a dark rock passageway leads down into a narrow grotto around a spring, filled with flowers, votive offerings showing baby faces, and, on an easel, a small painting of the Biblical scene with the angel of the Annunciation and Mary, with a tiny Jesus baby glowing in her belly. At the side of the passageway, visitors can take and taste the water: “The water is another”, says a German pilgrim standing next to me in the cave and looking down to the burbling spring, “but the well is the same.” Here, in this place built in rock, stone and colour, over an ancient spring, a mythical truth becomes a tangible reality, the presence of the angel can be felt and communally shared, similar to the way in which Clifford Geertz observes religious acts to “create an aura of utter actuality” (Geertz 1973: 112).

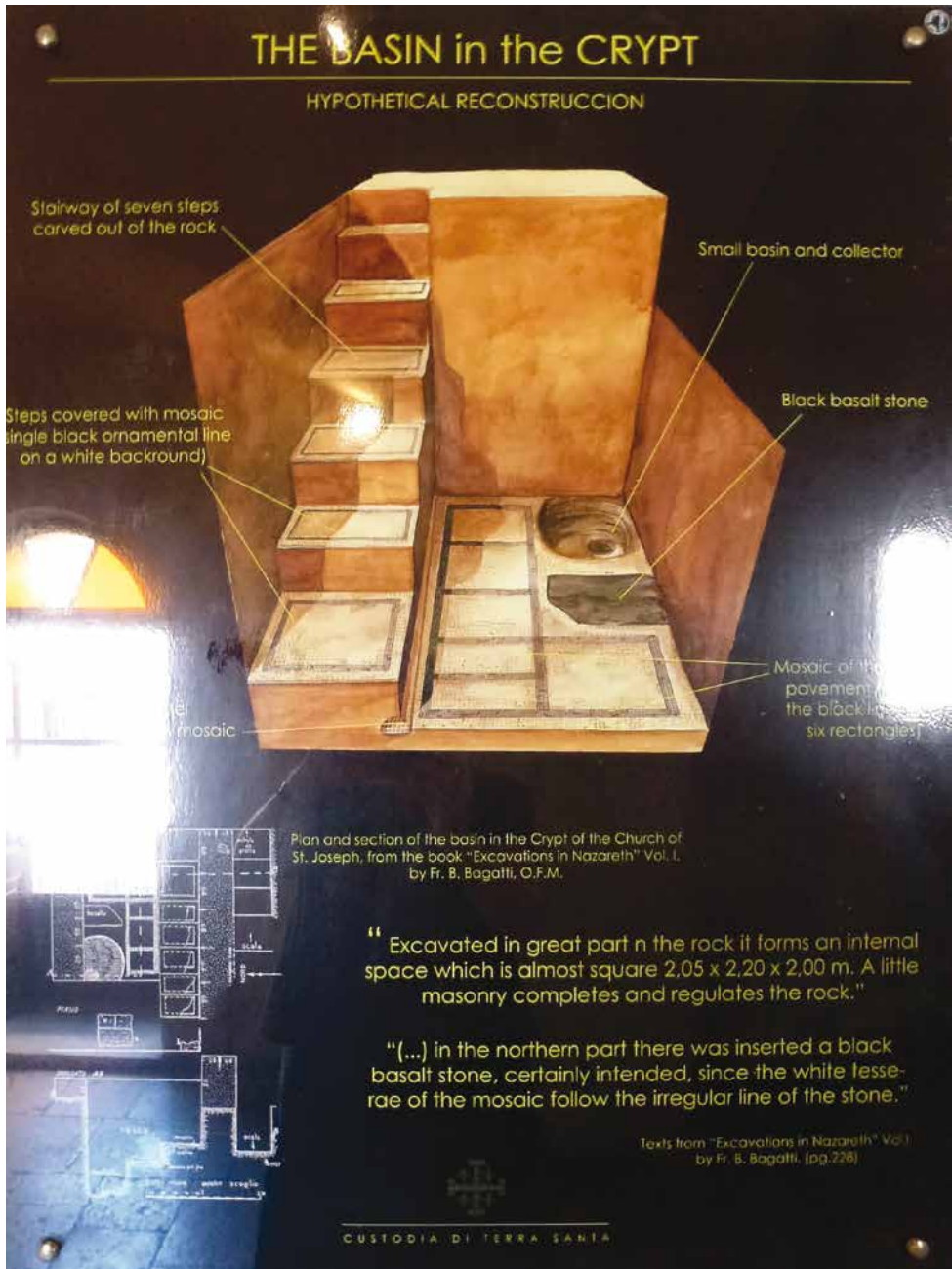
In this place, embedded in the multiple truths of places and narratives, scientific questions of historical truth could hardly arise, as they were put to me by an Irish visitor near the Church of St. Joseph, right next to the great Basilica.⁵ “I don’t go along with this”,

⁵ Importantly, Clifford Geertz argues that in the way that an everyday common sense perspective, and religious moods and cosmic worldviews fall in place as an experience of the “really real”, this does not detach the individual from a sense for the factual and empirical. “Rather than detachment, its watchword is commitment; rather than analysis, encounter. And it differs from art in that instead of effecting a disengagement from the whole question of factuality, deliberately manufacturing an air of semblance and illusion, it deepens the concern with fact and seeks to create an aura of utter actuality” (Geertz 1973: 112).

the annunciation cannot have happened here as the town of Nazareth even did not exist at that time. On a similarly sceptical and scientific note, the grottos in the basement of the Victorian St. Joseph's Church are presented as archaeological sites. Text boards and excavation plans explain how food might have been stored and consumed within these stone caves. From this rationalist perspective, as Soeffner points out, reason and myth, culture and religion become opponents to each other (Soeffner 2012: 221). Obviously, St. Joseph's church does not intend to host the sacred memory of the Holy Family, which only features in a kitschy Nazarene painting, as a matter of art history, and is, maybe, referred to with the fluorescent green neon lights that illuminate the lowest grotto like a scenic museum's display.

Rationalism seems also to dominate the Annunciation Basilica, which, with its upper and lower church, follows the idea of layered sacred space built around an ancient stone chamber. However, according to Archaeological text boards, this is only "said to be" the house of Mary. Searching for this centre of Christian heritage, I enter the Basilica into a vast, dark space with naked concrete walls, illuminated by glowing modern dalle de verre windows. From a banister around a large circular cut-out, I look down towards an altar space, cast in the lime-light of a roof opening that repeats the cut-out circle as the architectural and liturgical epicentre of the Basilica. In the basement, I finally find the grotto behind the altar space, fenced off by an iron grit, with a small stone-carved staircase in the background that I recognise from the story of the Austrian priest. However, with its plain construction centred around an empty space to be filled by communal worship, the Basilica follows the rationalist clearing of liturgy and church architecture in accordance with the Second Vatican Council - the "accountants' council", as the German sociologist and psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer (1981) blames it for having abandoned the performative celebration of the mysteries, the emotionality and ambiguity of life, and its sensual embodiment in church art, as well as in ritual and liturgy. In favour of a, in Lorenzer's words, "disciplinary exercise" between priest and community (Lorenzer 2006: 76), I experience the mythical heart of Nazareth as largely discounted to a backdrop. The House of Mary has become an objectivated, museum-like representation, and with this has replaced the re-enactment of mythical truth (Uspenskij 1992) that could link the individual experience of the numinous to a heterogeneous collective memory and hope.

Only for a moment, this void of Nazareth reminds of the pilgrimage centres of the great religions, the empty religious centres of the Holy Kaaba in Mecca, or the empty grave in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem which, like a black box, hold religious mystery and imagination. Not far away is also the Lost Temple in Jerusalem that bases Judaism on the experience of absence, of placelessness and homelessness. But, differently to these sacred centres, the contemporary void of Nazareth can hardly capture mystery and imagination. At the same time, this void and the rationalist setting of the church make it improbable that this place ever could spark violence.



Archaeological information board in the crypt of St. Joseph. Nazareth, 2015. Photo: K. Eisch-Angus.



View towards “Mary’s house” in the Church of the Annunciation. Nazareth, 2015. Photo: K. Eisch-Angus.

So what follows from all of this for our placeless chapel? I believe that now our task would be to consider and acknowledge the void of the modern subject as well as the actual and spiritual homelessness of contemporary people, then to embrace it, and fill it with ambivalent meaning. Here, Nazareth offers yet another mythical and performative concept in the Loreto cult. The upper church of the Basilica and the surrounding cloister walls are covered with images of Mary, donated by pilgrimage places from all over the world. Whilst this might quite rightly remind of Catholic imperialism, it refers especially to the narrative of the angels that in the 13th Century were said to have carried Mary's house to the Italian pilgrimage place of Loreto, from where it was relocated in the 16th and 17th Century in numerous Loreto chapels in Central Europe as a physical embodiment of the mythical multiplicity of life and sacred space. In this concept, and its manifold realisation Mary's house is present, but also absent, and simultaneously present all over. I don't know if the placeless chapel will ever be built, but I believe that in this idea it could find a place.



Transfer of the House of Mary, oil on wood, anonymous painter, Brügge, 16th Century. Photo: Oliver Edelbruch (public domain, Wikimedia Commons).

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KAPELA BREZ KRAJA
SPOMIN, POMEN IN UNIČENJE V SVETEM PROSTORU

Eksperimentalni esej, ki se nanaša na biblijski kraj, kakor ga je za bivališče ustvaril Gospod (Eksodus 15:17), vabi k zamisli o zgraditvi sodobnega svetega kraja, kapele, in premisleku o nasledkih te zamisli. Te merijo na liturgične funkcije svete zgradbe kakor tudi mogočega prostora za njeno dejansko uresničitev. V svetem prostoru so zgoščeni spomini in sanje o prihodnosti; oboje Arjun Appadurai pripisuje močem imaginacije pregnancev in selivcev sodobnega časa. S tega vidika je zamišljena kapela lahko le brez kraja. Enak sklep sledi iz sodobnih teženj po božanskem sebstvu posameznika in duhovnosti, ki želi zanikati verske vezi krajev in praks. Ker vera ne more biti povsem individualna, hkrati vidimo projekt zamišljene kapele tesno povezan z materializacijo kulturnega spomina, s posebnostmi vernosti in simbolizma ter grajenimi izrazi verske avtoritete in družbene moči.

Avtorica sledi tem vprašanjem na podlagi terenskih zapisov na potovanju po Izraelu poleti 2015. V starodavni Akri opazuje heterogeno usakdanje valovanje različnih verskih izražanj, večplastnih preostankov svetih zgradb ter sledi nasilja in uničenja. V drugem delu članka preprašuje raznotera razumevanja Marijine hiše in njenih bivališč, zgrajenih v kamnu v verskih krajih mesta Nazaret in njegovih – mitičnih, racionalističnih ali arheoloških – resničnosti. Antropologova izkušnja praznine v baziliki Marijinega oznanjenja po drugem vatikanskem koncilu, zanikanje skrivnosti in verske imaginacije, a tudi njena nedotakljivost za nasilje, vodi k primerjavi praznin tudi v drugih verskih romarskih središčih. Hkrati pa mnoštvo Marijinih upodobitev v katoliških romarskih krajih po vsem svetu spominja na baročni kult v Loretu, po katerem je bila Marijina bišica prenesena in znova postavljena v loretskih kapelah vsepovsod po svetu. Besedilo se sklene z dialektično mislijo o odsotnosti in navzočnosti kot modelu za nadaljnje premisleke o sodobnih svetih prostorih.

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