



# Deciphering the religious orientation of a sacred space: Disparate impressions of worship settings by congregants and external observers

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 11 September 2017

Received in revised form

18 December 2017

Accepted 28 December 2017

Available online 2 January 2018

### Keywords:

Environmental preferences

Religious settings

Intrinsic/extrinsic orientation

Quest orientation

Religious fundamentalism

## ABSTRACT

Although existing research has assessed the factors associated with judgments of novel sacred spaces, comparatively little work has investigated how these environmental properties relate to the beliefs, emotions, and satisfaction of the congregants who worship there. In this study, individuals from 23 churches evaluated their worship space, and an online sample provided their impressions of these settings and the type of people they believe worship there. A series of linear mixed-effects models revealed that (a) worship spaces that offer exploration were associated with greater satisfaction, feelings of restoration, and more positive emotions among congregants, particularly for those high in quest orientation, (b) external raters' explicit judgments of a congregation's religious orientation from observations of their worship space were highly inaccurate, but (c) an external rater's similarity to the congregation's actual religious attitudes, even when it was unknown to the perceiver, predicted greater liking of that congregation's worship space.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the tendency for psychologists to study spirituality and religion as a set of internal, cognitive attitudes or beliefs (Graham & Haidt, 2010), the external, physical environment plays a key role in religious life across a wide variety of faiths and traditions. Religious life, as it plays out in faith-based communities, is physically embedded within specific spaces, such as churches, temples, and mosques, which are the physical environments in which people communally worship. Critically, more than providing just a location to worship, the design, shape, and features of religious settings ultimately structure the way in which worship is actually conducted. The physical space itself affords particular ways of engaging in religious ritual, provides shared points of reference for the community, and communicates important symbols, narratives, and models to those who meet within it (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004; 2009). The present research assesses the hypothesis that variability in terms of the design of these sacred spaces may guide the cognitive and emotional experiences of those worshipping within it, as well as the impressions individuals form about the type

of spirituality practiced there.

What exactly characterizes religious space? Several environmental factors have been studied in terms of their association with impressions of sacredness. The scale or magnitude of a physical structure has been shown to be capable of eliciting transcendent emotions associated with spirituality. Joye and Verpooten (2013) proposed that the size of monumental religious architecture, such as medieval cathedrals or the Giza Pyramids, accomplish a pair of goals. First, the massive amount of energy required to construct a non-utilitarian physical setting of such size represents a strategy of “costly signaling,” communicating to perceivers the social importance and status of this type of physical space (Trigger, 1990). Second, the magnitude of monumental structures can exploit a human sensitivity for what Joye and Verpooten (2013) refer to as “bigness” (p. 54). Encountering massive physical structures proves capable of eliciting feelings of awe, an experience comparable to those produced by massive, natural environments, such as mountains or oceans (Shiota, Thrash, Danvers, & Dombrowski, 2014; Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012). Thus, physical structures that dwarf the usual stimuli one encounters can trigger emotions associated with spirituality, thereby communicating to observers its sacredness.

The importance of a setting's scale is consistent with research

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demonstrating an implicit relationship between conceptions of power and the spatial property of verticality (Giessner & Schubert, 2007; Moeller, Robinson, & Zabelina, 2008; Schubert, 2005). That is, stimuli located higher in space tends to show stronger associations with concepts related to social status, dominance, and power. Meier, Hauser, Robinson, Friesen, and Schjeldahl (2007) demonstrated that this pattern extends to how people conceive of God, finding that perceivers are quicker to respond to and more likely to recall God-related concepts when they are presented higher in visual space. Interestingly, they also found that their participants tended to infer that target individuals believed in God when images of these targets were shown higher in visual space, suggesting that this God-verticality association also extends to how people form impressions about others.

More recently, Costa and Bonetti (2016) demonstrated this verticality-sacredness association in perceivers' evaluations of geometric objects. Using a forced-choice format, these researchers presented participants with a series of paired three-dimensional shapes and asked them to choose which object they found more sacred. Consistently, vertical, tall shapes were rated as more sacred than horizontal, lower shapes. Interestingly, the same pattern was also observed for judgments of attractiveness and dominance, suggesting a strong association between these attributes and sacredness. This finding is consistent with results of Herzog, Gray, Dunville, Hicks, and Gilson (2013), who found that preferences for settings specifically designed to be worship spaces were predicted by the perceived tranquility, visual richness, and care/up-keep of the building. Thus, environmental attractiveness is also linked with sacredness. Finally, Costa and Bonetti (2016) also found, in a subsequent assessment of landscapes among the same participants, that secluded, less accessible space was also rated higher in sacredness. Spaces possessing some degree of mystery (Herzog & Smith, 1988; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Stamps, 2004) therefore also appear to be associated with sanctity.

Although this research reveals several environmental factors associated with impressions of sacred space, there nevertheless exists a great deal of individual variability in how such settings are viewed. It is perhaps unsurprising that explicitly religious environmental stimuli can have quite different effects on those who either do or do not identify as religious (Bilewicz & Klebaniuk, 2013; Levi & Kocher, 2013; Ruback, Pandey, & Kohli, 2008). Ruback et al. (2008), for example, noted clear differences in the impressions of a sacred space between pilgrims and those at the same setting for non-religious reasons. In a similar way, the extent to which a natural setting can elicit feelings of transcendence has been shown to be contingent on the perceiver's orientation to feel personally connected with nature (Davis & Gatersleben, 2013). Importantly, differences exist even among religious perceivers. Research by Colzato and colleagues (Colzato, van Beest et al., 2010; Colzato, Hommel, van den Wildenberg, & Hsieh, 2010; Colzato, van den Wildenberg, & Hommel, 2008) has shown that the content of one's faith system can guide the way in which an individual attends to visual stimuli. For example, Colzato, van Beest et al. (2010) found that Catholics and Jews, members of religions prioritizing social community, show greater attention to the global features of visual images compared to Calvinists, members of a religion that prioritizes individuality. Thus, one's religious belief system can guide perceptual processes.

In a similar vein, Meagher (2016a) evaluated how preferences for worship spaces relate to the religious orientation of perceivers. In this study, participants were shown a series of images of worship spaces and asked to evaluate those they would feel most comfortable worshipping in. Adopting Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) theorizing on environmental preferences, settings rated high in both "making sense" (i.e., one's ability to understand and

comprehend an environment) and "involvement" (i.e., one's ability to explore an environment; it's visual complexity) were positively associated with the participants' preferences. However, the strength of these relationships interacted with the perceivers' own religious motivations. For example, individuals high in *intrinsic* orientation, who are characterized by strong adherence to a faith and the view that religion is an end unto itself (Allport & Ross, 1967), tended to more strongly prefer spaces higher in making sense, whereas those high in *quest* orientation, who are characterized by religious doubts, openness to development, and comfort with ambiguity (Batson, 1976), showed a reduced liking of such spaces.

Taken together, this research has focused on how individuals evaluate novel religious environments, in terms of spatial variables such as magnitude, attractiveness, and visual complexity. However, in focusing on initial impressions, this work has not explored the ways in which these religious environments relate to the actual people who choose to use these environments on a regular basis. Interestingly, personality researchers have found that observers show surprisingly high accuracy in their judgments of occupant traits (e.g., conscientiousness, openness) when viewing only the individual's territory, such as an office or bedroom (Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2008; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002; Sadalla, Vershure, & Burroughs, 1987; Wells & Thelen, 2002). Gosling et al. (2002) proposed that a perceiver's ability to detect the personality traits of occupants is the result of the occupant's own behavior within the space. Specifically, individuals create *identity claims*, adorning the physical environment with objects, symbols, and decorations that reflect their values and interests, such as photographs, posters, or colors. Moreover, individuals also leave behind *behavioral residue*, evidence of previous activities that communicate common actions engaged in by the occupant (e.g., empty bottles of soda, running shoes near the door). Taken together, these environmental cues provide useful information for inferring the attributes of the owner. However, this existing research literature has focused exclusively on impressions of individual space, rather than communal space, and it has not yet tested perceivers' capacity to detect explicitly religious attributes from environmental cues.

### 1.1. Aims of the present research

The current research seeks to expand on the existing literature by investigating two key questions about the individuals who worship in these settings. First, what factors predict satisfaction with the physical environment in which one already worships? Specifically, this study investigates whether Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) key constructs of *making sense* and *involvement* are predictive of liking among congregants, as well as investigating whether the interactions found previously between these spatial variables and intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest religious orientation among novel perceivers (Meagher, 2016a) show a distinctive pattern among those who already use the space for worship. Importantly, in addition to general satisfaction, by measuring congregants this study can also assess whether the individual's relationship with the worship space impacts other outcome variables critical to religious experience; specifically, the frequency of experiencing transcendent emotions, such as awe, as well as feelings of cognitive/emotional restoration while in the setting (S. Kaplan, 1995; S. Kaplan & Berman, 2010).

Second, the current research also seeks to assess the extent to which a sacred setting reflects the religious attributes of the congregation that worships there. That is, does a space used by a congregation high in intrinsic orientation, for example, provide visual cues to an observer that would allow him or her to recognize

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