

**INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES
ON THE SACRED**

KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

JERUSALEM

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You may wonder why we are talking about Jerusalem at a conference like this; it is such a political matter. We are going to hear a lot more about Jerusalem this year (1996) because in May it is going to appear on the agenda of the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians; they left this very difficult issue to the end because everybody is aware that at this point the peace process could flounder completely. Jerusalem is so sacred to both the Jews and the Palestinian Muslims that neither side will make concessions about it. The Israelis say that it must be the eternal and invisible capital of the state of Israel. The Palestinians claim that East Jerusalem must be the capital of their state too. It is the third holiest site in the Islamic world and they will not relinquish it.

It's not, however, just a question of rights and sovereignty. It would be very nice if we could simply get the issues sorted out on a purely pragmatic, rational basis, but Jerusalem is a bone of contention because it has achieved mythical status. It has become central to the imaginative landscape of Jews, Muslims and Christians, so it arouses strong passions. Myth touches deep emotions and reaches down to a profound level of being. It has power: people turn to myth when they want to assuage pain. Even Freud and Jung turned instinctively to classical myth when they wanted to chart their interior and scientific journeys. So it's hard for people to be objective about Jerusalem, and that is a bad omen for peace.

The divine always reveals itself in symbols, and one of the most ubiquitous symbols has been sacred places. Thus Jerusalem has become a symbol of the divine. A city like Jerusalem isn't holy simply because important events happened there. Jesus certainly died and rose again there; that's true. But for Jews and Muslims, the formative events of their religion happened elsewhere, in the Sinai Peninsula and in the Arabian Hijaz in Mecca, on Mt Sinai rather than Mt Zion. And yet at a rather late stage Jews made Jerusalem a holy city for themselves, and Muslims did the same. When they arrived in Jerusalem, Muslims felt that they had come into contact with the primordial religion of the prophets who preceded Mohammed; it was a moment of immense importance to them.

In a holy place you are not just commemorating an important past event, as you do when you visit an historical site. What you are doing is

communing with God. At a holy place people believe the divine has manifested itself, and therefore it is a place where you can make contact with the divine. Mountains, for instance, are a powerful symbol of transcendence, towering above us. On top of the mountain, midway between heaven and earth, men and women can meet their gods, and their gods come down to meet them. From an early date, Mt Zion in Jerusalem was revered in this way.

Now to the theme of exile. The sense of separation that lies at the source of so much human pain is also very important in the cult of any holy place. All cultures have myths about a golden age at the dawn of time when men and women lived in harmony with one another and with nature and the animals, and with God, too. In all cultures there is a yearning to return to this paradise. We still have it in our own secular culture; it appears in the utopianism of politicians, philosophers and advertisers, who imagine a fuller, more tranquil existence. Psychologists connect this universal longing to our memories of the time we spent in our mother's womb or at her breast - a time when we felt submerged in another, at one with ourselves and the rest of the world. Solomon built his temple in Jerusalem as a replica of the Garden of Eden, so that people could go up there and feel through the liturgy that they were beginning to make this return to the source of being. It was a symbolic return to that primordial harmony and sense of wholeness and completeness for which humanity yearns.

Later, this would be the experience of Christians and Muslims when they entered Jerusalem. Muslims see it as profoundly identified and fused in some way with Mecca, the holiest place in the world. Not because they're trying to spread the holiness around, but because in Muslim theology there is great devotion to the ideal of *tawhid* (making one); everything must return to its archetype. All holy places therefore yearn for Mecca and are somehow one with Mecca - the primordial sacred place where, they believe, the Garden of Eden was; where Adam had been blessed by God at the beginning of time.

The Dome of the Rock on the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem was the first important Muslim building ever constructed. Until it was built in 691, because of their very strong asceticism Muslims made do with a rather ramshackle wooden building, but then they built this magnificent octagonal shrine with its round dome, which came to symbolise the Muslim ascent to God. Soaring up to heaven, the outside and inside of the dome fit perfectly together - an image of that perfection achieved when the outer and inner worlds come together. You start your spiritual journey from the Rock,

which represents the earth in Muslim cosmology. You then proceed to the Octagon, which represents the first step away from the earth towards the perfect circle - symbolised by the Dome - which is a universal image of eternity. Later, Muslims developed the idea that Mohammed made his mystical ascent to heaven from that Rock; this myth became the paradigm for the Muslim spiritual quest.

So, too, for the Jews. Medieval Jewish mystics spoke of the *sefirot*, emanations of the Godhead towards humanity which were also the stages of consciousness by which men and women ascend to the divine. These *sefirot* recall the ancient spirituality of the Temple, where the rabbis imagined ten degrees of sacredness, starting with the Holy of Holies in the heart of the Temple and radiating out in ten stages until this holiness encompassed the whole of Jerusalem. Thus, long after the Temple was destroyed, the building continued to shape the Jewish sense of the divine and the Jewish self.

It is never safe to imagine that we have outgrown these myths, because on at least two occasions in the history of Jerusalem, people who thought that they had gone beyond this 'primitive' way of thinking have suddenly been shocked into a new enthusiasm for sacred space by the recovery of some famous relic of the past.

The first time this happened was when Christians dug up what they thought was the tomb of Jesus in 327. Until then, they had been very snooty about the cult of sacred space. They thought of Christianity as a more modern, spiritual religion that could bypass ancient symbols. It was only Jews and pagans who hung onto temples and sought God in a particular place or in dusty caves, as Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, put it. Indeed, Christians were deeply influenced by the Platonic ideal, which sought to rise above the earthly, get beyond the physical. You were not even supposed to pay much attention to the humanity of Jesus. When the Emperor Constantine's sister Constantia was stupid enough to write to Eusebius and ask him for a picture of Jesus, he gave her a very sharp answer and told her she was not supposed to be clinging to Jesus's flesh but to go straight to the divine Logos.

And holy places were not considered kosher at all. But that changed. Makarios, Bishop of Jerusalem, had great ambitions for his diocese. He wanted to become the metropolitan Bishop of Palestine, and he asked Constantine's permission to unearth the tomb of Christ, which was at that time under a pagan temple beside one of the main forums in Jerusalem. It was a risky venture because Constantine was wary of offending pagans. Most of the inhabitants of the city of Aelia, as it was known then, were pagans

who would not take kindly to have their temple knocked down. And if nothing were found, this would reveal a rather worrying lacuna at the heart of imperial Christianity. After two years they did dig down, and found an ancient rock tomb and a sort of pillar, which they thought had been the hillock of Calvary, or Golgotha, where Jesus had died.

The shock of this discovery instantly transformed Jerusalem into a holy place, so that even Eusebius, who had the job of interpreting these events, had recourse to the ancient mythology of sacred places that he'd always professed so heartily to despise. In a sense it was an extraordinary expression of what was happening to the Christians themselves at that time. They had just emerged from a period of obscurity and persecution and they'd risen again - just as the tomb, Eusebius said, had risen again to new life from the ground. Christians could look at that tomb and feel that they were making physical contact with the origins of their faith. Up until that time Christians were persecuted and felt they had no stake in this world, and so developed a theology that looked forward to the end of days. Now they began to see that they had a place in this world, and Jerusalem became a major centre for pilgrimage. Christians started coming from as far away as France, Spain and Germany, walking three thousand miles east to come to the tomb of Christ.

The other time when people have been shocked into a new appreciation of sacred space was in 1967, when the Israelis came back into contact with the western wall of the Temple Mount, which had been a holy place for some hundreds of years and from which they had been separated while Jerusalem was in the hands of Jordan. Zionism was a secular movement, designed to liberate Jews from a religion which they thought had kept them down and dependent. But when they came to the wall in 1967, young paratroopers clung to the stones and wept. Suddenly hardened atheists like Moshe Dayan started talking about the holiness of Jerusalem. And ever since that time sacred space has been central to Zionist philosophy and Israeli policies (sometimes in bizarre and dangerous ways, I think). Even in our modern scientific world you can be overtaken by this transcendent feeling for a particular place. The paratroopers who came to the wall on that famous day said they could recognise the wall: it was like themselves, a survivor. Like the Christians before them, the Jews had just emerged from a long period of persecution and were enjoying a new political stake in the world. All these things came together when they saw the wall. Myths can still creep up on us and catch us unawares.

It is important to see, however, that you don't just go into a sacred place for a lovely heady experience. As always in religion, you have to incarnate it in your normal, mundane lives outside the temple and the shrine. Also absolutely crucial to sacred space is a sense of social justice. When people created a city in the ancient world, what they wanted above all was security. The world was a dangerous place, so building walls and fortifications was a religious duty. You could only build paradise on earth if you were safe from your enemies. But it was no good building walls against an external enemy if, by iniquitous social policy, you were creating enemies within. So people of the stature of Hammurabi, the great Mesopotamian lawmaker, said that his job is to be a shepherd of his people, to ensure that the poor are not oppressed by the strong and that people are treated decently within the holy city. When this was ignored, as it was in Ugarit (Lebanon) in the 14th century BCE, then the whole polity was endangered; it placed too great a burden on the peasantry and it collapsed. Similarly in the Hebrew psalms, the king who is crowned in the temple on Mt Zion is called the shepherd of his people. Jerusalem must be a refuge for the poor. Later in Jewish history people who felt they were the true sons and daughters of Jerusalem used to call themselves the *Evionim*, the poor, because that's what Jerusalem should be. The prophets of Israel used to say that it was no good worshipping god with decorous liturgy in the temple. God was sick to death of all this strumming on harps and people tramping over the temple courts, and he was nauseated by the stench of all these sacrificial animals. None of this was of any value unless Israelites were going to care for the poor, to look after the orphan and the oppressed. The great priestly code of the 6th century BCE, which is enthralled by the idea of Jerusalem and sacred space, insists that Israelites must, as a sacred duty, welcome the stranger in their midst and love their neighbours as themselves. Christians, I have to say, were not very good about incorporating the ideal of social justice into their sense of Jerusalem as a sacred space. This was probably because the enthusiasm stole up upon them unawares, as we have seen. But for Muslims it was essential: when the great *madrasaks* around the Haram al-Sharif were built by the Mamluks in the 14th and 15 centuries, they always gave money, food and support to the poor. There was always charitable philanthropic work associated these colleges and Sufi convents, so that alongside the Islamicisation of Jerusalem went a program for the care of the underprivileged. The history of Jerusalem shows that those regimes which adopted equitable policies survive, while those which oppress others tend to go the way of Ugarit.

Another thing that is very important we can see in the very name of Ugarit. The word Rushalimum first appears in an Egyptian text in the 18th century BCE; it means 'the god Shalem has founded'. Holy places had to be revealed as holy by the gods. The name indicates that Shalem appeared there or somehow made it clear that this was his city. He was a Syrian god. So every time monotheists talk about Jerusalem, they should remember that other people venerated it before they did. Because of each religion's commitment to benevolence, social concern and love, it is essential that each monotheistic power treats its predecessors decently and respects their sacred rights. King David, who conquered the city from the Jebusites in about 1000 BCE, was a just and merciful ruler, even though he was not averse to massacring Philistines or Edomites in their hundreds. The Bible tells us that Joshua's Israelite armies attempted to massacre the Canaanite population of the holy land. Nothing like this happened in Jerusalem. It seems that the new Davidic establishment simply moved into the citadel and left the Jebusite population in the city intact. We can tell from Biblical records that the Jebusite administration remained intact. The Jebusite King Arauneh seems to have been allowed to keep his estate outside the city walls. Later, Jebusites and Israelites would worship together on Mt Zion, and the Jebusite cult would be fused with the rites of the God of Israel in Jerusalem. This year the Israelis are celebrating the 3,000 year anniversary of David's conquest of the city. The Palestinians are complaining that this is a mere propaganda exercise to emphasise the Jewish character of the city, but in fact David's behaviour may be more sympathetic to their cause than either side realises.

The Byzantine Christians were not as exemplary as David. When they became devoted to Jerusalem in the early fourth century, they banned Jews from permanent residency in the holy city. They left the Temple Mount in ruins as a sign of Judaism's defeat and used the site as a city rubbish dump. Christians used to climb up the Mount of Olives and look down on the ruined temple beneath, contemplating the prophesy Jesus had uttered there: that the holy city would be destroyed because it had rejected him. The miserable state of the Jewish shrine proved the truth of Jesus's prophecy and the truth of the Christian religion. Instead of treating their predecessors well, the Byzantine Christians gloated over their fate. Even the holy monks of the Judean desert were murderously anti-Semitic. They would readily take part in riots against Jews if they ever managed to slip through Christian defences and enter the holy city.

The Muslims' behaviour in Jerusalem was initially excellent. When the Caliph Umar conquered the city in 638, there was no massacre. When he was taken to the Temple Mount he was utterly appalled at the state of this important place, and the Christians' impiety there. When he visited the Holy Sepulchre Church, again he showed concern about the sacred rights of his predecessors. The time for Muslim prayer came around while he was standing beside Jesus's tomb, and the Patriarch invited the Caliph to pray there. Umar courteously refused and went to pray in the street outside: if he had prayed in the Church, he explained, the Muslims would have confiscated the site to build a mosque to commemorate the first Islamic prayer in Jerusalem. Umar also invited the Jews back to Jerusalem: seventy Jewish families from Tiberias came to settle alongside the Muslims beside the Temple Mount, now called the Haram al-Sharif, the Most Noble Sanctuary. Christians remained a majority and retained possession of the Western Hill around the Holy Sepulchre Church in the better, healthier part of town. The Jews hailed the Muslim conquest and the rededication of the Temple Mount with joy: some even saw Umar as the precursor of the Messiah because of his piety to their holy place. As soon as he had seen the desolate Mount, Umar had personally taken part in its rededication, taking the rocks and garbage, hurling them into the Valley of Gehenna below and washing the place with rose water. It was Umar who built the simple wooden mosque at the southern end of the Temple platform, on the site of the present Mosque of al-Aqsa; later, in 691, the Umayyad Caliphs built the Dome of the Rock, which still dominates the Jerusalem skyline.

The Crusaders from Western Europe must come at the bottom of anybody's list of Jerusalem conquerors. In 1099 they massacred the entire Jewish and Muslim population of the city: the blood, said an eye-witness triumphantly, came up to the bridles of the horses, and for months afterwards corpses were lying in the streets and in the valleys around Jerusalem. Five months later, Fulcher of Chartres visited the city and was appalled to learn that it still stank of putrefaction: there were so many bodies the Christians could not clear them all up. They banned Jews and Muslims from the city. Yet when Salah ad-Din conquered the city from the Crusaders for Islam, he did so without any bloodshed at all. Yet again, the Jews were invited back to settle in the holy city. It is a sad and instructive irony for us today that on two occasions an Islamic conquest of Jerusalem was good news for the Jewish people.

We know from history that Jerusalem always becomes more precious to a people after they have lost it. That is human nature. It only became

central to Jewish spirituality after the exile to Babylon in the 6th century BCE. Exile does not simply mean a change of address. It is a spiritual dislocation, an experience of loss and annihilation. So when the Jews were permitted to return to Jerusalem in 539 BCE and rebuild their temple, the place was sacred to them in an entirely new way. The same thing happened again when the Muslims conquered the city from the Crusaders in 1187. So traumatised were they by their experiences of the Crusading West that there was a new passion in their devotion to the holy city, plus a new worry and defensiveness. The Crusaders still retained a thin state along the coast in the Holy Land, and the Muslims were always worried that they would return and terrorise the inhabitants of Jerusalem again. They began a building campaign to make the city into a Muslim holy place. The wonderful big *madrassahs*, Islamic colleges all around the Haram al-Sharif, demonstrate a new defensiveness, a desire to protect this holy place from Christian profanation and to provide a bulwark of buildings against a threatening world.

At such a time, there is often a new exclusiveness. When the Jews returned from Babylon, they would have nothing to do with the Israelites who had stayed behind in Judea and had not gone into exile with them. These Israelites were not allowed to help with rebuilding of the Temple and were not considered members of the 'true Israel'. This schism has lasted until the present day. The descendants of these rejected Israelites are the Samaritans, who still practice their own form of Judaism on Mt Gerizim, to the north of Jerusalem.

Today there is a similar defensiveness and exclusiveness in Jerusalem. Both the Israelis and Palestinians have now suffered years of exile and national annihilation. The Jewish people were nearly exterminated in Europe by Hitler, and the Palestinians were wiped off the map in 1948 and lost their homeland. The Israelis are now in charge of Jerusalem, and the Palestinians feel the city slipping daily from their grasp; they see it as a symbol of their own beleaguered identity. Both seek the healing, the sense of completeness that a holy place can give after these painful experiences and separations. Or, as the Hebrew psalmist says, *shalom*, a word usually translated as 'peace', but which actually refers to just that sense of wholeness and completion that is part of the spirituality of a holy place.

There is great concern today about the Israelis' building activity in the Occupied Territories and in East Jerusalem. Like the Crusaders, they have built a defensive ring around the part of Jerusalem which they took from

the Arabs in 1867, and have appropriated Palestinian land to build apartments for Jews in East Jerusalem. Their purpose is to make sure they will never have to give this portion of the holy city back to the Palestinian people.

But building has long been used in Jerusalem as an aggressive weapon by an incoming power. The emperor Hadrian visited the city in 130. It was still in ruins, sacked by the Romans so thoroughly sixty years earlier after the great Jewish revolt that it was little more than a heap of rubble and an army camp. Hadrian decided to build a nice, modern city for the people of Palestine. He would dedicate it to the Capitoline gods of Rome and it would take his own name (Publius Aelius Hadrianus): henceforth it would be called Aelia Capitolina. As you can imagine this was bad news for the Jews; they were incensed and outraged to learn that Hadrian was going to build a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount. They rebelled, holding the Roman armies at bay for two years under the leadership of Bar Kochba. When the revolt was finally put down, the Roman 'bulldozers' came in and Hadrian built his nice new city. It looked as though Jewish Jerusalem had been buried forever under the might of Rome. Later the Jews had to endure the sight of the Christians - an apostate Jewish sect in their eyes - creating their own world in this holy place. They built the Holy Sepulchre Church around the tomb of Jesus, and left the Temple Mount in ruins. The Crusaders also rebuilt Muslim Jerusalem to make it a Western city, transforming the Haram al-Sharif into a Christian place and desecrating the Muslim shrines there. The Dome of the Rock became a church called the Temple of the Lord, because the Crusaders thought that it had been built on the site of Solomon's temple; the Mosque of al-Aqsa became the headquarters of the Knights Templar, who built lavatories and a military arsenal there. Then the Christians, in turn, were distressed to see the Mamluks building the great Madrasahs as part of their Islamising of the city. So time and again these aggressive building projects cause immense distress; often they are backed with power and money from overseas. But it is never safe to assume that this rebuilding is final.

What is to be the future of Jerusalem? I am no political strategist. What I have attempted in *A History of Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (HarperCollins) is to discover what Jews, Christians and Muslims have meant when they have claimed that the city is holy to them. Holiness is not a question of grabbing and possessing: that is always an abuse of religion. Jerusalem is not just a prize to be won: the ideology of holiness insists that there is also an imperative to social justice. Thus the Hasmonians

conquered from the Seleucids in the 2nd century BCE and made it into a Jewish city once more. They rededicated the Temple, which had been profaned by the Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes, and instituted the festival of Hanukah (Dedication). But the Hasmonian kings became such cruel rulers that some Jews asked Rome to depose them; it would be better, they said, for the Jewish people to be ruled by foreign powers. Likewise, King Solomon probably caused the disintegration of his kingdom after his death by dealing unjustly with the northern kingdom of Israel, which felt exploited and broke away from the southern kingdom of Judea. The Byzantine Christians oppressed the Jews, as we have seen, as well as all the Christians they dubbed heretics. When the Muslims invaded in 637, the Jews welcomed the incoming army and gave them practical help; they felt no loyalty to the Christian regime.

The religion of holy places often breeds a hatred that is difficult to stop. The enthusiasm for Jerusalem of the Crusaders was expressed in murderous, violent rage towards the Muslims and Jews, yet they thought their Crusade was an act of the love of God. This hatred turned inward, and Crusader society was torn apart by internal dissent. When Salah ad-Din was at the border preparing to invade, the Crusaders in Jerusalem were on the brink of civil war. This dissension contributed to the catastrophe of the Battle of Hittin, when the Crusading army was utterly defeated by Salah ad-Din and Jerusalem lost to the Christian world.

In the Middle East today, a religion of hate is developing on both sides. There are Jewish extremists who have attempted to blow up the Muslim shrines on the Haram al-Sharif, hoping that this would enable the Messiah to come soon. The Islamic group Hammas has adopted murderous policies of bombing, and declares that when the Palestinians recover the city, no Jew will be allowed to remain there. The secular PLO, however, still advocates a policy of coexistence. Either Zion will become as dangerous as Belfast or as violent as Hebron, one of the most dangerous places in the Occupied Territories at present. Every time I visit Jerusalem, I am aware of an increase in tension. The alternative is that Zion becomes a city of peace, a city of social justice where, as Isaiah predicted, the lion and the lamb - Israeli and Palestinian - lie down together. There are hopeful signs. Last year the PLO representative Faisal Husseini made a speech outside the walls of Jerusalem, saying that he looked forward to the day when Israelis and Palestinians could both talk about 'our' Jerusalem. In response, 700 leading Israelis signed a statement saying that Jerusalem was a mosaic of diversity: its history meant that it could not be the exclusive property of any one

people. There must be sharing and coexistence there. We can only hope: it would be a wonderful example of co-operation and of the healing power of religion if such a thing could come to pass. But there are many dangers ahead and no certainty of a peaceful outcome.