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# The semiosis of sacred space

**Abstract.** The structure of any religion is based on signs and meanings, i.e. intentions and recognitions, as well the production/consumption of messages showing collective identity and memory. Through the semiosis process, space is perceived as a representation or a manifestation of something else (like the spatial recognition of a hierophany). Believers perceive the heterogeneity and the sacralization of space, distinguishing it from the “pro-fane”. This distinction produces meanings and transforms space into a spiritual and cultural heritage. This article argues the sacralization of space and its physical (geographical) and psychological (“mythopoeitic”) factors. Following a theoretical perspective, the aims are a) to address the influence of geography over the sacred; b) to reveal the role of the resemantization and sacralization for the spatial organization of places; and c) to emphasize the genesis and dynamics of sacred space and its recreation in a collective psychology.

**Keywords:** resemantization; sacralization; semiosis; signs; space.

## 1. Introduction

Any sign or symbol has the function *sine qua non* of representing something, i.e. “to be instead of” or “to be in the place of”. This is the replacement function or the semantic transitivity *aliquid pro aliquo*, i.e. something is in the place of something else. This is why the definition of sign emphasizes, on the one hand, the disclosure of anything latent by its representation, or on the other hand, the fulfilment of the semiosis process, i.e. the recognition or grasp of something that functions as a sign. The semiosis is a process of “to realize” through a sign (which acts as a mediator). The sign must have a *designatum* (what the sign refers to), an interpretation (the effect on someone, the “becoming aware of” the thing in question as a sign) and an interpreter (someone), according to Charles Morris (1938: 34).

The sacred space is seen and understood through a semiosis process; it is perceived as a symbolic product in a permanent resemantization. The sacred space is invented and recognized as such, producing intended meanings, which are structured in a desirable collective identity and memory.

In the field of religion, the semiosis process is exponential, because a) this field is necessarily riddled with signs and symbols, b) the faith and religious experiences depend on the sign-function for the recognition of something which is represented by the representative (the sign or symbol), and c) signs and symbols appear as something already given, as an *analogon* of the reality narrated by religion, as if, according to Paul Ricœur, signs and symbols precede the interpretation and donate their meaning as if they give rise to thought, because they call for an interpretation (Ricoeur 1969; port. transl: 29; 1960: 23).

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim pointed out that a religion is a solidarity system of beliefs and practices related to sacred (and separated or interdicted) things, i.e. a set of beliefs and practices uniting everyone who adheres to the religion as a unique moral community. Religion is an explanation of the complete and ultimate meaning of life. Religion is also a cultural production, transmission and consumption of signs and meanings. According to Daniel Dennett, religions are culturally transmitted through language and symbolism, not through genes (Dennett 2006: 36). Through religion, we obtain answers about how to live accordingly with and with a basis on some ideas regarding the transcendent. Therefore, the concept of “religious experience” means any experience about something sacred to a collective tradition, culture or society. A religious experience is part of a particular religious context and it includes feelings and attitudes, believers, beliefs and practices. Our world is a religious world: our world is a coded world, i.e. a world of beliefs and expressions of religious experiences, which are necessarily ubiquitous.

Any sign or symbol requires understanding and interpretation, because there is no understanding or interpretation without signs or symbols. To interpret the symbol is to unveil the disguise of the symbol (Ricœur 1960: 23). To understand is an art and a technique of meaning-apprehension, which implies the interpretation and the representation of signs and symbols defined in a meaning structure (Ricoeur 1969; port. transl: 14).

When the space becomes a sign or a symbol of something else (e.g. the transcendent), it acquires a new and different meaning and is seen as a sacred space. There must be significant elements in the space to check the semiosis process of sacred places, i.e. a semantic transitivity through elements (verbal or iconic and natural or conventional) which are not worth anything for themselves (they have worth for what they represent, indicate or connote, because they always mean more than they show) and trigger the clear perception of the space as a demarcated territory with connotative deep meanings about the sacred. The space is re-signified and it belongs to a complex structure of signification that manages a system of believers' expectations.

The sacred space, better than any other space, is symbolic, because it

is a cultural construction. The space functions itself as a “sacred object” (it is a sign settled by sacralization) and it also functions as an external and defining element of symbolism and ritual (it engages and defines everything inside). As Gaston Bachelard claimed, the space comforts, because it allows a memory for protection: «We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images» (Bachelard 1958; engl. transl: 6). Consequently, «memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost» (Bachelard 1958; engl. transl: 6).

The sacred space is a space of proximity: it is familiar: it retains or stores individual and collective memories. The semiosis of sacred places is only appropriate in the precondition of memories raised by space, which can be reified in the present time, because the sacred attributes meanings to the space, projects a symbolic order and organizes, re-means and distinguishes the geography.

The semiosis of sacred places requires the understanding of cultural processes (e.g. the space of religion) as a communication process and a system of meaning, according to Umberto Eco (1976: 27), because the distinction between systems of meaning and communication processes requires mediations. Culture is the human intervention on the natural, which is modified to be inserted into a social relationship (Eco 1968: 3). Culture is only experienced when it is converted into signs and inserted into a comprehensible system. If religious experience is a variety of cultural expressions, i.e. a variety based on a system of signs expressing beliefs and values through worship and symbolic rites, it also fits into semiotic studies, respecting the definition of Ferdinand de Saussure, according to which semiotics is a science which studies the life of signs within the social life (Saussure 1916: 33).

Therefore, this article follows a semiotic approach on the geography of religion. The objective is to understand the conception and the perception of sacred places, i.e. the influence of space over the perception. This approach starts from the question: what is the role of the sacred in the organization and distinction of space? The aim is to understand the factors that lead believers to understand, and to mean certain sacred and separate spaces from the space left.

This approach is justified by the issue concerning the heterogeneity of space for religion. This issue raises a questioning and a critical analysis about the meaning, the sacralization and the cultural identity/memory. The semiosis of religious space has to do with either the presence of the space's physical characteristics or the semantic transitivity of signs and symbols in

the space. The presence of physical elements and the transitivity of signs not only identify the space as such, distinguishing it from the profane space, as they guide the semiosis of believers (interpreters of sacred spaces) on what is “sacred”, which has great significance and interpretation and contributes to shape a collective thought and a cultural identity/memory.

All spaces and places are a form of language. Regardless of the sacredness, spaces and places mean something or say something about the culture, history and customs in which they belong. However, sacred spaces and places consist in a form of religious language and are more embedded in a semiotic system of meanings and culture. The sacred space has a different and higher dimension than the profane space. The sacred space is meaningful. It is the result of a cultural conception. Such a higher dimension is consistent, effective, fertile, endless, plentiful, sensible (irrational, i.e. ineffable), necessary and transcendental. The space is sacred only because it is seen as such by believers. Being a sacred space means being a codified “object” with certain and intended meanings, i.e. given ideological or mythical meanings produced specially to be consumed as such, creating a desirable collective identity and memory. We exert mental processes over empirical objects (like profane space) resulting in a way of constructivism of reality (i.e. sacred space). Space’s memory only exists if a remarkable substance or element already exists, i.e. if there are previously some identity values or elements between people and space.

However, before being sacred, the space is seen as ordinary or profane, having a common and human dimension, which is inconsistent, ineffective, sterile, finite, mundane, intelligible (rational), contingent and immanent. The reason for this space’s transformation or transubstantiation is the change of perception and recognition of the signs (i.e. the semiosis process) produced by new meanings given to space (the resemantization process). The resemantization process is a sort of transfer of meaning or change of sense, i.e. the meaning of things is transferred or changed to produce new meanings or to produce an incorporation of the sacred into the profane. The resemantization process is presupposed in the cultural and social uses of profane elements to construct a sacred collective identity/memory. Therefore, the concept of resemantization is important to understand how the semiosis of sacred space functions and how the collective identity/memory is constructed.

In religion, the sacred space is a holy territory, but it is also an object of representation and worship, i.e. it is also a sign or symbol not immediately understood as something conventional, an *aliquid* which presupposes referentially as a label for an *aliquo*, an object. The semiosis of sacred places is appropriate in this transitivity situation *aliquid pro aliquo*, because it is an element *in praesentia* that refers to another element *in absentia* in the message or sign.

## 2. From the semiosis of space to the invention of the sacred place

What is the role played by the sacred in the organization and distinction of space? The answer to this question undertakes religion and geography. These two different disciplines are connected: both have the space as a common element: space is the territory for religious practice (as a cultural phenomenon) and it is also the object of study of geography, according to Zeny Rosendahl (1995: 45). The space or the sacred place creates and radiates symbolism and identity, because the meaning of space is perceived and because space is lived as a demarcated territory of religiosity and a convergence centre or irradiation point of the sacred.

Religion is a cultural, symbolic and dynamic phenomenon: it is manifested in different ways and it motivates experiences and social behaviours with certain meanings. A religious person expresses himself through symbolic ways related to the space (Sousa 2011: 253), i.e. believers behave and act according to the local culture in which they participate: they do as they see to do and how they are told to do, as if the rite fits the myth (e.g. the way how Jews express their feelings mourning and wailing at the Western Wall in Jerusalem).

The sacred conception of space increases cultural marks and strengthens the ties of identity with the environment, as well as the believer's commitment to the cult. The sacred place is the place of the symbol: it is the place of religion in the space and also the place that joins people around the sacred: religion print marks on the landscape through culture (Rosendahl 2008: 6). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the re-significations of space made by religious practices and believers' perceptions.

According to Zeny Rosendahl, religious convergence centres are necessarily inserted in a wide space under the influence of a certain faith (Rosendahl 1995: 46). These centres are promptly located and mobilize frequent pilgrimages (e.g. the annual pilgrimage to Mecca) as the Latin etymology of *peragrar*, "to walk", "to go away", i.e. *peregre*, *per agros*, "to go outside the city, in the field", designating *peregrinus* and *pereratio*, "the one who travel to a distant and abroad country remaining there for a period". The word "pilgrimage" acquires the meaning of walk to holy places for religious purposes, which connotes the term with a spatial sense: i) to go to a place of worship (i.e. a sacred space); ii) to walk away; iii) the exodus from the usual space or the absence from the land where one lives, and iv) the passage from the profane space to the sacred space (Eliade 1959: 183). Therefore, a sacred time and a sacred space are conditions *sine qua non* for the pilgrimage.

Life is a walk for those who believe and want to dwell in the house of the Lord. To this end, one has to undergo a transformation process

(a personal resemantization) through a long and painful journey. The pilgrimage is a practice motivated by the conviction that, on earth, there is no permanent home (Hebrews 13: 14) and that one is on the way to the future and eternal home. Pilgrims are released from everyday life and run “virtuously poor”. For this reason, pilgrims took the legal status of *miserabilis persona* in the Middle Ages. This status guarantees them protection during the walk to fulfil vows. The point of arrival was and still is a sanctuary, where the comfort and plenty of divine message await them. A sanctuary conveys a meaning of strength and security.

But what are the factors for the occupation and expansion of religious space? The historical evolution of sanctuaries in Europe, *in totum*, has followed the trends of worship and veneration of sacred goods (relics, images or graves) in *latria*, *hyperdulia* and *dulia*, especially during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. A pattern or type prescribes the places designated “sanctuary” which must, on the one hand, provide infrastructure and support facilities and, on the other hand, comply with the assumption of formation and maintenance of the spiritual or the “myth” (from the Greek *mythos*, “word”), i.e. a collective thinking, a primary or traditional historical narrative (associated with the ritual). In every society (either archaic and traditional or complex and modern) the myth provides action-models and social behaviours giving meaning and value to life. Despite the changes over time, myths still reflect a primordial condition (Eliade 1963: 15). Many sanctuaries followed a given model for the sacred occupation of the space (an organization similar to the Italian sacred hills, with evocative chapels, staircases, terraces, entrances and main temples).

With regard to the material component (i.e. the infrastructure and support facilities) sanctuaries must today have: i) a strategic location, usually isolated, high and inaccessible, to be distinguished from the profane space, in which one experiences the religious mainly as mystical, cosmic and sacred; ii) an imposing sacred temple for the practice of worship and dedicated to the local venerated entity, whose name is also the name of the village, mountain or hill, serving as a sacred place for the worship; iii) an airy central yard or terrace filled with bucolic vegetation; iv) a natural framework, exploring the natural elements (clean air, fresh water, dense forest, etc.); v) profane leisure activities; vi) accessibility (roads, lifts or cable cars, etc.), and vii) tourist facilities (accommodation and restaurants, souvenirs and gift shops, etc.).

As for the spiritual component (i.e. the formation and maintenance of the spiritual or the “myth”) sanctuaries must today have: i) a set of legends or “popular stories” to justify their existence, usually resulting from an epiphany or hierophany which founded the cult and the sacred space (which was “chosen” by the deity to manifest itself) or a “cultural construction”, but associating the worship of a holy image (a sign of

sacred power) with remote and unknown origin; ii) holy images and relics on display, as if they legitimize or give meaning either to the sacred space or to the worship; iii) the conception and maintenance of beliefs, spiritual moods to admit with confidence and faith a given truth or religious reality, and iv) an association of believers legally constituted with the main aim of increasing the public worship and maintaining the “myth”.

A sanctuary is an *aliquid* (a sensitive mark on the landscape) which makes present the *aliquo* (the intelligible sacred) in the space. The conception of a sanctuary requires: a) a specificity compared to other kinds of religious temples; b) a pledge or suggestive location of the sacred plan of life; c) a historical or mythical origin of the spiritual elements, and d) a centre of spiritual convergence. There are sanctuaries of permanent pilgrimage or seasonality: dedicated to *latria*, *hyperdulia* or *dulia*; with relics, images or appearances; rural or urban; local, regional, inter-regional, national or international attractiveness.

Places of worship on the top of mountains and hills are frequent territories and symbols of popular devotion. Their magnificent height fascinates, because they are “closer” to the sky. These places mean doubly: i) they have meaning for what they are, i.e. a sacred territory for worship and religious practice, according to a random choice of the hierophany (the holy choice) or a previous choice of the geographical factor (nature’s choice), and ii) they have meaning for what they represent, i.e. through symbolism and identity they shape the relationships between a) human beings and the environment; b) believers amongst themselves, sharing a kind of collective psychology (space produces spiritual purposes, like the requirement to go to Mecca, a pilgrimage to honor the sacred in a spiritual and collective place), and c) the geography (the contingent, worldly and perishable) and the religion (the necessary, fully and perennial). The space undergoes a resemantization process, it acquires new meanings either by i) or ii) above, because sacred space represents sacredness, disassociating itself from the profane space.

The sacralization and the formation of space as an intangible heritage are linked to the space’s resemantization process. In the sacralization of many sanctuaries’ spaces, the harmonious consortium between nature (the geography or, in particular, the “space factor”) and religion (the faith or, in particular, the “mythopoetic factor”) can be observed. While the “space factor” is physical and permanent, the “mythopoetic factor” is spiritual and floating in believers’ consciences.

Treating religion according to a geographical perspective allows us to underline the conditions imposed by the space on the religious phenomenon. It gives primacy to the influence of geographical conditions in determining the human perception of the sacred. However, if space influences religion, religion contributes, in its turn, to the creation of an identity based on

the relationship between space (the ecosystem) and religion (form of life and culture), because religious life was and still is inseparably linked with social life, according to Charles Taylor (2004: 51). The space is relational: it is an integral part of the sacralization process. The sacred space is a product (in the sense of a merchandise, a certain commodity offered for symbolic trade-off: an exchange that occurs as a cultural compromise between human and sacredness), a transmissible and significant artefact; it is the result of a collective cultural construction.

Cults and rituals depend both on the characteristics of space and of religious experiences. At the top of mountains and hills, the creation of sacred places is a gradual process of a sacred occupation of the space, which is related either to the random and capricious nature of the relief (e.g. rounded rocks in unusual positions, forming caves and itineraries) or to the hierophany (manifestation of the sacred) or semiosis (perception and recognition of religious meanings through certain signs) of the sacred. Space is not interpreted according to a uniform or linear way (Eliade 1959: 20). The transition process from a profane space to a sacred space is complex: it breaks the spiritual value assigned to the space.

Relief elevations are important for spiritual sustenance. When nature does not create hills, the need and human ingenuity build “artificial mountains” (e.g. the ziggurats in the plains of ancient Mesopotamia, the Nile’s pyramids, or the megaliths in the highlands of Salisbury, Stonehenge, in southern England).

The cult of mountains and hills spread like a model (e.g. Mount Calvary, Mount Sinai (Exodus 19: 16-20); Mount Carmel (1<sup>st</sup>. Kings 18: 19-46), or Mount Tabor (Matthew 17: 1-9). In many cases, the sacralization of mountains and hills results from a belief process related to salvation or protection. The sacred invocation arises due to an episode of epiphany, hierophany or hermitage. The process of “invention” of the sacred place includes the sacralization of natural space or the transformation of an inaccessible, harsh and inhospitable space (connoted to an evil symbolism) into a protecting, sacred, nice, tranquil space.

Concerning the symbolism as a variety of identity, religious space also promotes identity, because the space allows the establishment of interrelations based on material or physical organization of the community, as well as on the social and symbolic structures. According to the perspective of the French Sociological School, the space is a social and peculiar reality, claiming relation with identity: the space is a physical reality, but it is also a conceptual construction. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim defined the space as a category of understanding, because the space is a social construction made by the collective thought (Durkheim 1912; engl transl: 16-17). As a social construction of collective thought, the space allows also collective representations of life in the community.

For Durkheim, the space is inseparable from the society that inhabits and we should look for an explanation of the types of organization in the relationship between them (Silvano 2010: 14).

Sacred conceptions and representations of space presuppose the heterogeneity of the space itself. Therefore, sacralizing the space requires ordering different spaces. The meanings attributed to space cannot be the result of different properties of space itself, but the result of different sensitivities and subjective emotional conceptions or semiosis about the space. According to Tim Wallace-Murphy, the landscapes of Western Europe and around the world are populated by thousands of megalithic structures of different sizes and with varied purposes, all of them very old. There is “a vast range of megalithic structures scattered right across the globe” (Wallace-Murphy 2010: 13).

All these structures (dolmens, tapirs, circular stones, solar and megaliths temples, etc.) have a spiritual or religious purpose. The places where these structures are located persist, imbued with mystical or telluric forces (a kind of *genius loci* or “local spiritual force” recognized by the identification of the place as a sacred space), to the extent that these forces are perceived and felt as such. That is the case with Stonehenge.

This issue is related to a possible perception of holiness or sacredness. Therefore, to perceive space is a process and a consequence of a) mystical or telluric forces of the place, and b) symbolic effects of the sacred structure, space disposition and the beauty of the landscape.

If the perception and identification of holiness or sacredness of space are due to a), the causes are inherent in the place, which must have idiosyncratic mystical properties. Regarding a), it may also be the case of local structures representing something extraordinary and also be considered sacred. If the mentioned perception is due to b), the causes are inherent to the people who mystically interpret the meaning of something profane (the space) in an overly symbolic way, attributing supernatural properties of the space (properties that the space does not possess nor can supposedly possess). In situation b), Stonehenge may simply have symbolic structures, even if we don't understand their meaning. The symbolic effects of a space or a space's sacred structure may result from the knowledge of its association with ancient religious practices.

Changing the state of awareness and perception about a given place's holiness or sacredness or about its structure is not just a purely biological process, but it also entails an intellectual process and the awareness itself. In Wallace-Murphy's words: “man himself is an integral part of the evolutionary process: a process which is not just biological in nature, but also encompasses the evolution of both intellect and consciousness” (Wallace-Murphy 2010: 6).

By the rule, space is socially organized by the community, taking into

account the respective symbolic configuration given by the representation. In *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* and *La Mémoire Collective* (1925), Maurice Halbwachs recognized the importance of social memory and the ways in which this is socially constructed within the framework or context of belonging to a social group (Halbwachs 1925: 38, 81). Space is also a collective memory relation (Halbwachs, cited in Connerton 1989: 36). According to Maurice Halbwachs, we acquire, identify and evoke our social memories through class, religion or family membership relationships (Halbwachs 1950). Based on Maurice Halbwachs's perspective, religion is a domain of social life conducive to the mythical formation and reproduction of the well-known collective memory, to the extent that their rites allow us to recreate and celebrate a common past (Halbwachs 1925: 187). This function is what Maurice Halbwachs called "morphology of religion" (Halbwachs 1938: 24).

In the species' adaptation process to respective ecosystems, the space settles the group characteristics (Silvano 2010: 14). Regarding the religious experience, this adaptation process is complex and forced by the sacralization of space and the construction of symbolism and identity, which is more evident in spaces and times of religious festivals, where people participate in both space and time of social construction of identity/memory and meaning-production. Consequently, there are two relevant factors for this adaptation process: one, a physical or geographical factor, the other, a psychological or "mythopoeitic" factor. The former is about the relief's characteristics, because places of worship on the top of mountains and hills are common symbols of popular devotion, whose height fascinates; the latter is about beliefs and rituals which create identity and symbolism in places of worship, because they shape and maintain the spiritual element of the territory. Both factors are treated as follows.

### 2.1. *The physical or geographical factor*

From a strict point of view, the space is unquestionably a kind of a universal condition of being: it is an existential and material field which includes human condition and common objects or things. It is not so much important to discuss this concrete and unequivocal dimension of space as to analyse it in an ample point of view, in which space is questionably idealized in a spiritual and connotative way as an artefact. Like all artefacts, space is perceived as a transmissible symbolic construction; a cultural intervention with meaning. *In nuce*, space is part of a common and collective life structure.

The space is usually conceived as a) a homogeneous quantity (i.e. leaving aside the bodies occupying the space, any part of the space is identical to

the other parts of the same size); b) continuous (all parts of the space are in touch); c) unlimited (it is always possible to imagine a space beyond the limits of the universe), and d) necessarily existent (a non-existent space is inconceivable, because space is one of the coordinates of all that exists). Although permanent and immobile, the space is seen as subjectively connoted with certain sacred values. According to a subjectivist theory or ample point of view, the space is devoid of objective values, because it is an *a priori* form of external sensibility. The space defines our sensitivity. It is only possible to perceive other people and external phenomena juxtaposing them to each other. The time, in its turn, is the law of internal sensitivity. These forms have nothing in common with reality, because they depend on the constitution of our spirit. However, these forms do not exist in us before any perception, because it is through the perception of the reality that we acquire the idea of space. Therefore, the notion of space has also objective grounds, since it is the product of a life's experience.

According to Kant, space is a necessary representation *a priori*, forming the very foundation of all external intuitions. It is not possible to have a representation without space (Kant 1781; engl transl: 24). Space is the condition for the phenomena (i.e. space supports all external phenomena) and not a determination that depends on them. In this perspective, the notion of space is the result of a need of the spirit, which may only represent things placed next to each other.

The physical factor is, in this sense, one of the most crucial in order to understand the forms of existence of social beings. With the space, people develop primary relationships only made possible by stimulation of beliefs and feelings of identity, closeness and belonging, on the one hand, and the accomplishment of modifications or adaptations in the environment, on the other hand.

In the sacralization of space, there is a key moment: a source or a founder situation of religious phenomena, which is evoked and still motivates and preserves a collective memory. This key moment is focused on beliefs and meanings. The creation of sacred places (i.e. the religious symbolism of space) is due to this founder moment or, in Mircea Eliade's words, *in illo tempore* (1963: 15). The time makes the space and it also allows the hierophany and the foundation of sacred places.

## 2.2. *The psychological or "mythopoietic" factor*

The "mythopoietic" factor is, *in primis*, the combination of myth and faith. This combination explains the space occupation and the religious expansion in the space. Searching the intellection of reality, investigating the truth or demanding the explanation of the phenomena develops the

mentality, the consciousness and the mythical thought. Human beings create forms of existence and ways to understand reality through myths and not, paradoxically, through reasoning.

The religious semiosis of space is the perception of signs representing or manifesting the sacred. The space loses its peculiar physical characteristics and it is resemantized (i.e. it is transformed into sacred space). Mircea Eliade stated in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) that a purely a-religious human being is a very rare phenomenon, even in the most deconsecrated of modern societies, because human beings have, even unconsciously, a camouflaged mythology and numerous rituals, i.e. a building awareness of myths (a “myth-poetic”), because we are made simultaneously by rational and conscious activities and by irrational or emotional experiences. Myths are caused by semiosis, ambiguities and interpretations of reality: myths appear to support the faith about something or someone.

Human beings are adapted to the environment through a symbolic system. They transform their natural and biological condition in the world into a cultural and symbolic condition (Cassirer 1944: 26). This new condition is given by the mediation or the symbolically mediated relation, because language is the expression, the manifestation or the symbolic representation of thoughts, feelings and religious experiences. Cassirer defined human beings as “symbolic animals”. Human beings are symbol-making as well as tool-making animals. Cassirer wrote in *An Essay on Man* (1944), that human beings understood their world and shaped their lives by assigning meanings to everything (objects, facts, beings and persons) and by connecting things together in symbolic patterns, as well as by creating elaborate forms of symbolic action and narrative. Therefore, studying how symbols are created and structured or how they function to give meanings to all domains of human life, enables us to understand the world and the meaning of life.

For this reason, the myth is just one artefact or cultural response of the human being to his biological needs. According to Roland Barthes (1957; engl transl: 111), the myth is a speech, an ideological, social or political message; it is a secondary semiological system built on an existing semiotic system: the language. The myth is a language, a way of expression or a symbolic interpretation of the sacred space.

The transition from myth to *logos* is a significant moment in the history of Western humanity. It is so significant not only because of differences between mythical thought and rational thought, but also due to an evolutionary relationship for humanity, which is represented by the transition itself.

While the myth was based on its symbolic and intangible character of collective and spiritual reference, the *logos* needs an objective, factual correspondence, because it is based in a mental activity that allows, like

the myth, to organize society. Would there be tolerable human existence without myths? If it would not be tolerable, it would certainly be harder, because myths play a palliative role regarding the concerns, fears and anxieties of collective mentality.

At the present moment, according to George Steiner, we are as hungry for myths or full explanations as ever: we look forward to a guaranteed prophecy (2003: 16). George Steiner mentions the role of myths, a role identified and recognized by Claude Lévi-Strauss: myths are simply the surviving instruments of man, i.e. the thinking and social species. It is through the myths that man understands the world (Steiner 2003: 39-40). Therefore, man is a “mithpoietic primate” for Lévi-Strauss, according to George Steiner, i.e. man is a subject capable of manufacturing myths, because he needs them to organize his social life and overcome the contradictions of life (Steiner 2003: 40). Only man can build, model and provide emotional adherence to the myth-logic, the mythical and the logical, i.e. the logical inside the myth (Steiner 2003: 40). Myths are essentially and necessarily made up of meanings. Otherwise, myths could not fulfil the narrative function.

Myths are narratives constructed for the convenience and maintenance of certain unproved and unprovable beliefs. Myth resembles a distortion or illusion (deception) of reality, where the true value does not matter. The privileged field for myths is religion and any other way to produce cultural psychology or collective thinking, i.e. collective identity/memory through a mythopoietic sacralisation of human life.

### 3. Conclusions

Sacred spaces increase feelings of belonging, wellbeing and community based on the cult (as an intangible heritage) and the territory (as a tangible heritage). These feelings are increased by sacred space because the meanings intentionally attributed to and consequently recognized by space are properly produced to create a collective identity and memory. These mentioned feelings lie in the perception of a cultural vitality (Cohen 1995), because all signs are used to always produce certain and intended meanings.

Therefore, signs and symbols are active elements of culture, because they give rise to thought, in accordance with Ricœur, i.e. «the symbol, in effect, only gives rise to thought if it first gives rise to speech» (Ricœur 1976: 55). To give rise to speech and to thought, signs and symbols must be significant and always mean something. They are not self-sufficient; they do not stand for themselves, but for what they indicate or say (i.e. represent) and they always say less than they could. Signs and symbols say without saying, they always conceal more than they show, because they

function like *aliquid pro aliquo*, i.e. they have a semantic transitivity and they function accordingly.

All meanings are cultural and, for this reason, they are created and conveyed by signs and symbols. Using signs and symbols is to come close to the meaning's essence. The meaning is communicated through a variety of expressions and intentions to signify. Signs and symbols are elements of the universe like the sky, the water, the moon, etc., or things like trees, stones, etc. (Ricœur 1960: 21). Following Ricœur's words, the bond between myth and ritual attests in another way to this non-linguistic dimension of the sacred, because it functions as a logic of correspondences, which characterizes the sacred universe and indicates the specificity of *homo religiosus's* vision of the world and space. Ricœur pointed out that such ties occur at the level of the very elements of the natural world, like the sky, earth, air and water (Ricœur 1976: 61).

If the sacred space is a sign, it is because the space was created symbolically, not physically (which would be an impossibility). The idea of community is also constructed symbolically by people as a source and a repository of cultural meanings and as referent for collective identity/memory.

No form of life (e.g. religion) should dismiss the symbolic function, which is at the base of every meaningful form of life. Cultural forms of life, like religion, depend on the beliefs, because to believe is to see what is invisible or hidden and it is ineffable: it is an invisible located beyond the limits of rational understanding. In this perspective, signs and symbols represent or function as mediator between human beings and the "Supreme Being", the universe or God, according to Ricœur. Therefore, in the last resource, every symbol is a hierophany (Ricœur 1960: 331) i.e. a manifestation of people's relationship with the sacred.

The mediation of signs draws attention to language as a place where human experience is expressed, because human experiences (either the most intimate and tiny to the most collective and great) are translated through the language, so that "we have experience to bring to language" (Ricœur 1976: 21). The human being is a being mediated by the signs and only reaches his own understanding and the understanding of other people by understanding the signs. In his *Interpretation Theory*, Ricœur mentioned the symbol opacity due to the fact that symbols are rooted in many areas of our experience. He asked: «And would we have religious symbols if man had not given himself over to very complex, yet specific forms of behavior designed to invoke, implore, or repulse the supernatural forces, which dwell in the depths of human existence, transcending and dominating it?» (Ricœur 1976: 57).

According to Ricœur, within the sacred universe, there are not living creatures here and there, but life is everywhere as a sacrality, which per-

meates everything and which is seen in the movement of the stars, the return to life of vegetation each year and the alternation of birth and death (Ricœur 1976: 61). In Ricœur's view, it is in this sense that symbols are bound within the sacred universe: «the symbols only come to language to the extent that the elements of the world themselves become transparent» (Ricœur 1976: 61).

For that reason, places of worship on the top of mountains and hills are more salient (i.e. transparent) in geography than other spaces or sacred places. Relief elevations are natural demarcations, but these demarcations are also reinforced by cultural factors. As a way of seeing and understanding the reality, culture differentiates spaces, times, objects, experiences and meanings: *in nuce*, every element of the world.

The location of temples at the top of mountains and hills may be explained by a human need for superiority, achievement and asceticism. The sacralization of space implies semantic transitivity, i.e. the resemantization or rupture of level, moving from one stage of secularization to another stage of sacralization. The effective change is a change of meaning: it is not a physical change. Support infrastructures for worship and rites or religious practices are built in the physical space. It is a process of "invention" of sacred places that begins with the meaning of the space, which is culturally constructed, in so far as they are signs and, therefore, mean something. The world is pan-semiotized: everything or every element of the world means something, and the meanings give perspective, perception and understanding of the world.

The semantic transitivity is a resemantization due to the sacralization process of space, which shows how space is the product of a cultural construction and social representation. This process consists essentially in making the mountains' nooks familiar (giving them a name, e.g. names of saints to identify the places and to associate them to the homonymous deity) and erecting symbolic marks of worship (crosses, oratories or chapels) forming convenient cultural meanings. This symbolic context of the sacred makes the space a target area of positive connotations, in order to be a subject of memory and spiritual appropriation instead of the previous negative connotations. Human needs for meaning and memory to create identity/memory and intangible heritage are pleased this way.

The sacred space is relevant to the heritage symbolization. The historicity and symbolization of space come from monuments, places of worship and ritual practices. As Carlos Fortuna claimed, places of worship work at different levels, such as personality relocation spaces or transformation of the identity of believers (1998: 68). Places of worship function like this because they are invented and recognized as sacred spaces, producing certain cultural and intended meanings structured in a desirable collective identity and memory. They are also symbols (a codified "object") and, con-

sequently, convey a given ideology or mythical message produced specially to be consumed as such.

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