Auschwitz and the Meta-Topography of the Sacred[1]

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For conceptualizing (something as) sacred space, much is a matter of definitions, preconceptions, prejudices, and folk theories. For example, the attribute ‘sacred’ is often held to be identical with the religious or uniquely tied to the religious sphere. In other words: Sacred space is religious space. Albeit common, this preconception is misleading. Consider the inverse: Is all religious space automatically sacred space? Many examples come to mind where this does not seem to be the case. Some Protestant temples or meeting places, for example, do not aim at being a sacred space; they are not consecrated, and the space as such is not considered inherently sacred. Believers might be offended because the idea of sacred space is, in their view, a hallmark of their significant other, namely the Catholics. It all boils down to a matter of definition: If and where religion is conceived of as sacred matter – and the holy and the sacred are inherently tied to the religious[2] –, then distinguishing the sacred from the religious makes no sense. To my eyes, however, this narrow preconception misses the potential of meaningful differentiations. Some colleagues have already spoken of the “secular sacred”.[3] In order to distinguish between the sacred and the religious, one would need to define both terms. This

[1] For comments on earlier drafts, I wish to thank Alexander van der Haven and Christhard Hoffmann in Bergen and Doris Bachmann-Medick, Jens Kugele, and Katharina Stornig in Giessen.

[2] For a partial genealogy, see Michael Stausberg, The Sacred, the Holy, the Numinous – and Religion: On the Emergence and Early History of a Terminological Constellation, in: Religion 47 (2017), 557–590.

[3] See e.g. Gordon Lynch, The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2012); Kim Knott, The Secular Sacred: In between or both/and?, in: Abby Day, Giselle Vincett, and Christopher R. Cotter (eds.), Social Identities Between the Sacred and the Secular, Farnham: Ashgate (2013), 145–160; Tuomas Äystö, The Sacred Orders of Finnish Political Discourse on the Revision of the Blasphemy Law, in: Numen 64 (2017), 294–321.

would be an impossible task if one aimed at consensual or exhaustive definitions.[4] In this essay, I will adopt a different strategy. I will discuss one of twentieth century's most iconic and significant places – a site typically not considered primarily as a religious place – to see how the category of the sacred could be put to work analytically.[5] In what I call "discursive meta-topography", I will project some common conceptualizations of the sacred onto a specific place. As we move along, the category of the religious will make its appearance; contrary to that of the sacred, I am not considering the religious as a generic category here, but as an attribute related to religious institutions or traditions, namely Judaism and Catholicism.

In this article, I will revisit Auschwitz, universally considered among the most infamous places of human history,[6] by drawing on a repertoire of theoretical tropes tied to the concept of the sacred. Rather than starting with a chronological outline of Auschwitz, different facets of its history will be highlighted in the course of the article. Auschwitz is many things: "a site of mass atrocity, a museum, a cemetery, a tourist 'must-see', and a place where complex negotiations of identity and morality take place".[7] Auschwitz is a prominent site of memory,[8] and as such it does not exist outside of media representations, as it were; Auschwitz is embedded in various discourses and media of representation to which it is subjected. The historical Auschwitz of the Holocaust is gone, a matter of the past, of memory, yet it is ever present, and, as we will see, it factors in different creations of history. Visits to Auschwitz are part of a broader tourist infrastructure and carefully staged by the museum that seeks to convey a certain narrative. This

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[4] For a definition of religion, see Michael Stausberg and Mark Q. Gardiner, Definition, in: Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2016), 9–32.

[5] A source of inspiration (even though my agenda is different) is Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, Semantics and the Sacred, in: Religion 47 (2017), 616–640.

[6] I have learned much from Sybille Steinbacher, Auschwitz: A History, London: Penguin (2005) and Christoph Auffarth, Auschwitz: Der Gott, der schwieg, und vorlaute Sinndeuter. Eine Europäische Religionsgeschichte fokussiert auf einen Erinnerungsort, in: Adrian Hermann and Jürgen Mohn (eds.), Orte der europäischen Religionsgeschichte, Würzburg: Ergon (2015), 463–501.

[7] Joanne Pettitt, Introduction: New Perspectives on Auschwitz, in: Holocaust Studies (2019), 1–11, here 6.

[8] Peter Reichel, Auschwitz, in: Etienne François and Hagen Schulze (eds.), Deutsche Erinnerungsorte I, Munich: C.H. Beck (2002), 600–621.

narrative has changed since the museum was founded in 1947.[9] There are some recurrent points of reference in these ongoing processes of imaginary re-presentation of this "metropolis of death"[10] (to privilege one of the many metaphors). To begin with, there are photographs from different parts of the complex spatial structure. In this article, I will use this photograph as a point of departure and reference – for speaking of Auschwitz is also dealing with this image:

Wenn möglich, bitte hier Abbildung einfügen

Figure 1: KZ Auschwitz (Source: Bundesarchiv, B 285 Bild-04413/Stanislaw Mucha/CC-BY-SA 3.0, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/KZ_Auschwitz#/media/Datei:Bundesarchiv_B_285_Bild-04413,_KZ_Auschwitz,_Einfahrt.jpg).

Who has not seen this picture? And who would not immediately recall what it represents? It shows a left-over part of an extermination camp, which again was part of a spatial configuration of other camps, and factories with various auxiliary structures; beyond this specific complex site, it evokes an even larger complex: genocide, in particular the Holocaust/Shoah, an abyss of human history. In this sense, the picture is a metonymy.

1. The Sacred as Ineffability

The metonymic picture carries the viewer's mind to 'Auschwitz', named after the German name of the nearby town with the Polish name 'Oświęcim'. Auschwitz was part of an evolving network of thousands of concentration camps set up by Nazi Germany in Germany itself and the German-occupied territories, where prisoners were held, mistreated, and starved as forced laborers and prisoners. At the same time, Auschwitz was one of some ten extermination camps, where human beings were killed on a massive scale immediately upon arrival. In the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau alone over a million people were murdered, some 90 per cent of them were Jews. Industrially executed mass killings of that scale had not been seen before in human history.

[9] See (e.g.) Pettitt (see note 7).

[10] Otto Dov Kulka, Landschaften der Metropole des Todes: Auschwitz und die Grenzen der Erinnerung und der Vorstellungskraft, Munich: DVA (2013).

Therefore, Auschwitz is not only a place, and a space, but also a historical rupture. The German historian Christian Meier has called it a mythical place.[11] Auschwitz stands for a moment in time after which history does not look the same. It represents a most special and unique event, a break(down), a new dispensation. It is not the *illud tempus* of mythical time that seeks for repetition, but a threatening past that is to be sealed off from future reoccurrence.

This leads me to the first entry point of the notion of the sacred: its ineffable quality. The Holocaust is a crime beyond all imagination. Something that one cannot make sense of. Reason capitulates, and there is no adequate representation. The event and Auschwitz as its indexical sign leave us stupefied and speechless, just as the sacred or the numinous, according to some of its theoreticians among whom Rudolf Otto is the best-known protagonist.[12] It lies outside of our rational grasp and defies our discursive language. Otto famously requests the reader who has not had “a moment of deeply-felt religious experience” to “read no farther”.[13] Elie Wiesel made a similar claim of limited communicability: “Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know”.[14] Gillian Rose dubbed this reference to the ineffable, this mystification of something we do not dare to understand, “Holocaust piety”.[15]

Peter Reichel has called Auschwitz “der wortlose Ort”, the wordless place.[16] The extraordinariness of the crimes executed in Auschwitz resonates with the extraordinary quality of the sacred, as that which cannot be measured by ordinary means. The event, to evoke metaphors coined by Otto, appears as a *mysterium* – being “beyond conception and understanding” –, in particular in the mode of the *tremendum*, the terrifying, crude and barbaric,

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[11] Christian Meier, Vierzig Jahre nach Auschwitz: Deutsche Geschichtserinnerung heute, Munich: C.H. Beck (1990).

[12] Rudolf Otto, Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen, Wrocław: Trewendt & Granier (1917).

[13] Id., The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational, New York: Oxford University Press (1952), 8.

[14] Daniel P. Reynolds, Postcards from Auschwitz: Holocaust Tourism and the Meaning of Remembrance, New York: New York University Press (2018), 58.

[15] Gillian Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996), 43. Rose rejects this discourse and promotes what she terms “Holocaust ethnography”, see also Kate Schick and id., A Good Enough Justice, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2012), 74.

[16] Reichel (see note 8), 618.

awful and revulsive.[17] It remains a mystery, which is abysmally scary, dreadful and demonic, horrifying, but also intriguingly fascinating as horror. "These two qualities, the daunting and the fascinating, now combine in a strange harmony of contrasts"[18] at Auschwitz. The scene that we imagine looming large through the picture above, does not exhaust itself. It is the crime that is the source of the sensation of the ineffable, but the crime is not to be untied from the crime-scene where it was executed; the crime is inscribed in the location, in Auschwitz, which is the epitome of the *numinous*. Auschwitz is the extreme case of the inconceivable.

Why did Auschwitz gain this exalted, singular status in our memory-scape, to the extent that the denial that these crimes could happen in Auschwitz amounts to the denial of the Holocaust?[19] What makes it different from Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek, and Belzec – to name the other Nazi extermination camps that were on the territory of post-war Poland? To begin with, no other camp saw the killing of so many people, but even in other camps the numbers are enormous. In Treblinka, for example, some 800,000 to 850,000 were murdered. There are some further reasons for the mnemonic prominence of Auschwitz. Moreover, given that Auschwitz was an integrated series of camps with different functions – Auschwitz II (Birkenau) being the extermination camp –, it had the highest numbers of survivors. There were more than 10,000 survivors. By contrast, there were fewer than 100 survivors of Treblinka. While it is estimated that 500,000 people were killed in Belzec, less than 10 people survived. Hence, there were more voices from Auschwitz who could witness and remind the world of their suffering and the crimes that were perpetrated. Another reason for this is that Treblinka, Majdanak and Belzec were dismantled already in 1943, after most Jews of Poland had been killed. In Belzec and Majdanak there had been uprisings in August and October 1943, which resulted in the final killing of all inmates. Hence, there are only few traces left from the killing infrastructure in these camps, even though at Majdanek, taken by surprise at the rapid Red Army advance, the SS had failed to destroy the gas-chambers and prisoners' barracks. As a result, already in August 1944 pictures from the extermination were published in US magazines. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, by contrast, the systematic killing of Jews began in 1942, and the camp started its operation as a center of mass extermination only in 1943.

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[17] Otto (see note 13), 13.

[18] Ibid., 30.

[19] See Geneviève Zubrzycki, "Oświęcim"/"Auschwitz": Archeology of a Mnemonic Battleground, in: Erica T. Lehrer and Michael Meng (eds.), Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (2015), 16–45, here 17.

The SS started with the dissolution of Auschwitz as late as late summer to autumn 1944. Himmler ordered the termination of extermination activities across the Reich in November 1944; at around the same time, the Russians established a memorial museum at Majdanek. By the middle of January 1945, the Lager-SS tried to remove all written evidence of the mass murder at Auschwitz. Killing equipment was transported away or destroyed, and buildings were burned. Yet, when the Red Army finally arrived on January 27 – coincidentally on a Sabbath! – they found at least 600 corpses, and some 7,000 prisoners were still alive.

With the help of a resistance group, prisoners from the Sonderkommando – inmates who were forced to aid the SS with the disposal of gas chamber victims – managed to smuggle some pictures out of the camp, among them one showing women undressing in open air before entering the gas chamber and another one showing Sonderkommando prisoners standing by a pile of burning corpses scattered on the ground.[20] After the liberation of the camp, the Soviet authorities asked the Polish photographer Stanislaw Mucha (1895–1976) to take pictures of the camp. He made 100 pictures, 38 of which he put into an album that he gave to the Auschwitz museum. Among them is the one from the gatehouse to Auschwitz-Birkenau (above).

We can see that it was taken on a grey, cold winter day. The colors and climate efficiently communicate the grim oppressiveness of the scenario, which our prior knowledge effectively feeds into our gaze. This gatehouse was built in 1943, when the extermination activities were intensified.

2. The Sacred as Establishing and Crossing Boundaries

Mucha's picture has been copied numerous times, and almost all pictures I found on the internet copied his central perspective, with the rail tracks steering the view to the passageway.[21]

The railway tracks make the space of extermination transcend beyond the site. The tracks connect the inside with the outside world. The railway connection of Auschwitz had been a main reason for selecting this place as a location for the concentration and later extermination camp in the first place. The railway connection is another reason why Auschwitz occupies a specific mnemonic place. While Majdanek and Sobibor were mainly used to murder Jews from

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[20] Miriam Yegane Arani, Holocaust: Die Fotografien des "Sonderkommando Auschwitz", in: Gerhard Paul (ed.), Das Jahrhundert der Bilder: 1900 bis 1949, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (2009), 658–665.

[21] For an analysis of the picture that has inspired the following, see Christoph Hamann, Torhaus Auschwitz-Birkenau: Ein Bild *macht* Geschichte, in: Paul (see note 20), 682–689.

the ghettos of nearby cities, Auschwitz had a European radius. Even Jews from such remote a place as my place of residence (Bergen/Norway) were brought there. In this way, Auschwitz is a relevant point of reference and place of memory for Jews from all over Europe.

Mucha's photograph shows a boundary as marked by the gatehouse. The gatehouse occupies almost the entire horizontal axis, with some barbed wire poles on the far right, as if to emphasize the impenetrability of the boundary. Even the tracks that lead out of the picture are no longer visible beyond the gate, conveying the message that there is no way out. At the same time, they create the impression of a teleological directionality[22] – the finality of a process. The gatehouse with the elevated watchtower marks the boundary between the inside and the outside. The clouded sky affords the viewer no glance into the open; it affords no hope.

There is a line of theorizing the sacred that claims the sacred is a binary phenomenon, that it cannot be understood apart from its fundamental opposition to its dialectical other, the profane. The sacred is what the profane is not, even though the sacred can be profaned and the profane can be sacralized. Consider this famous statement from Émile Durkheim: "There is […] a pronounced opposition between sacred and profane things. They repel and contradict one another so forcefully that the mind refuses to think of them at the same time. They expel one another from consciousness".[23]

I suggest that we can read this into Much's photograph – and that this offers an interpretation of the intriguing quality of the picture. What we can see in it is the boundary between the humane and the inhumane, between civilization and barbary, between life and death, between compassion and cruelty, between everyday ordinary life and the extraordinary, between clothing and nakedness, the coiffed and the bald, the cooked and the raw. The camp is a "space of exception", "a zone of indistinction".[24] Note the residues of dishes in the foreground: Human civilization is discarded upon entering this space. Apart from the broken dishes, no traces of human life are visible. Neither victims nor perpetrators can be seen, but their past presence is all over the pace. The incommensurability of the crimes defies anthropomorphic representation. The still scene seems soundless and silent: "Grabesstille", deathly silence. There is a complete

[22] Ibid., 684.

[23] Émile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, New York: Free Press (1995), 240.

[24] Giorgio Agamben, Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la vita nuda, Turin: Einaudi (2005 [1995]), 189, 191. See also Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, Topographies/Topologies of the Camp: Auschwitz as a Spatial Threshold, in: Political Geography 30 (2011), 3–12.

incompatibility between the two spheres. Recall the last two sentences in the Durkheim citation. The picture indexes this repelling contradiction.

3. The Ambiguous Sacred

This brings me to another signature trope commonly tied to the sacred: its ambiguity.[25] Durkheim praises Robertson Smith for this insight.[26] Durkheim speaks of two kinds of religious forces: benevolent vs. evil ones; while the former inspire respect, the latter cause feelings with "a component of horror".[27] For him, religious life "gravitates around two opposite poles"; the one does not come without the other, so that there "actually is a certain horror in religious respect, especially when it is very intense".[28] A little later, he shifts emphasis from the religious to the sacred. We recall that the sacred finds itself in a foundational opposition to the profane, but within the realm of the sacred, Durkheim claims, there are two main varieties – for example lucky and unlucky, impure and pure –, and the ambiguity of the sacred refers to the possibility of transforming the one into the other.[29] It is certainly not appropriate to speak of Auschwitz as a beneficial or auspicious place, but as a sacred space the significance of Auschwitz may lie in the possibility of a transformation: In this sense, it is not only a place of memory of a horrific

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[25] Agamben (see note 24), 83 dismisses this idea as a scientific mythologeme ("un mitologema scientifico"). I am not sure whether I can follow Agamben's arguments, but from a meta-theoretical point of view all other facets of the sacred that this article draws on could also be called "mythologemes" in the sense that they have a precise modern genealogy.

[26] This section of his book relies on the essay on sacrifice by Hubert and Mauss from 1899, who likewise speak of "religious forces". Hubert and Mauss speak of the "ambiguity" of the "mechanism of sacrifice" and "the religious forces themselves": Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function. Foreword by E.E. Evans Pritchard, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press (1964), 60. NB: Hubert and Mauss do not speak of the ambiguity of the sacred here, but in the introduction they mention "the ambiguous character of sacred things, which Robertson Smith so admirably pointed out" (3). For the later reception of the idea by Caillois, see Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, The Ambiguity of the Sacred: Revisiting Roger Caillois's L'Homme et le sacré, in: Journal for the Academic Study of Religion 30 (2017).

[27] Durkheim (see note 23), 412.

[28] Ibid., 413.

[29] Ibid., 415.

past, but also one of hope for a better future (for example by means of education); the railway tracks shown on Mucha's image lead into the camp, but they can also indicate a path towards liberation. We will encounter such a transformational move in a Catholic attempt at sanctification below.

4. The Contagious Sacred

Here is another point related to the sacred: The spatial difference and polar ontological transformation can be conceived in terms of contagion. Durkheim referred to "the extraordinary contagiousness" of sacredness.[30] Whatever touches the profane becomes profane, and profanity means indifference. We can think of this in spatial terms. As if by spatial contagion, whoever enters the power-sphere of the camp leaves the orbit of humanity. All standards of human morality irrevocably lose their validity and reliability and are carried into the maelstrom; inside the camp the state of exception is the normal. The potency of the camp as a mechanism of extermination immeasurably surpasses the scale of the ordinary, to adopt another set of metaphors taken from sacred space discourse.

The Nazis pursued the project of the Germanization of Auschwitz, which was to be developed into a sort of model-town. It was here, as Steinbacher points out, that two big ideas of the Nazi ideology converged in spatial terms: the extermination policy and the conquest of Lebensraum. Since the beginning of the war, which was initiated not far from the town, Auschwitz was incorporated into the German Reich. Unlike Belzec, Sobibor, Majdanak, and Treblinka, Auschwitz was not located in the Generalgouvernement. And the camp was very close to a town – one that historically was positioned right at the dividing line between Germanic and Slavonic population groups (see also below).

The sacred-profane distinction is often tied to discourses and ideologies of purity and pollution as another common strategy of drawing distinctions and boundaries.[31] In the Nazi-ideology, the labor of extermination of the disabled, among whom the technique of gasification was first tried out, then of the Jews and the Sinti and Roma was conceived of as a way of "purifying" the "Volkskörper", the body of the German people, and the land on which this people would be living. Accordingly, the inmates were treated as impure and the vocabulary of threatening impurity abounds: People are lice, sub- and non-human. That the poisonous act of killing, the

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[30] Ibid., 322.

[31] The *locus classicus* is Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, London: Routledge (1966).

squeezing out of the air of life from the bodies, was performed in a space where people were brought seemingly to take a shower, was in this view not only a deception, but 'enspaced' the dehumanizing ideology of impurity, which could be atoned for by washing but required elimination by death and annihilation in the gas-chambers and the crematoria. This process, however, was hidden and concealed from the general public and was set apart, acted out off-limits.

In an essay on the economy from 1906, Durkheim noted that things do not have a value in themselves. Likewise, the sacredness of the human person, which he advocated as a cornerstone of modern society, is not inherent in the human being: "It is society that has 'consecrated it' – and this 'aureole' that surrounds and protects humans against 'sacrilegious trespass' is not a natural given".[32] Society, then, which Durkheim conceives as an agent, could not only constitute the sacredness of the human personhood but also deconsecrate and profane the human being. This, in fact, was a fear that Durkheim's long-term collaborator Marcel Mauss uttered in 1938. The idea of the sacred character of the human nature, he wrote, had come under attack, even in the country where this principle had first been established.[33] Apparently, he did not have France in mind here, but Germany, as he refers to Kant and Fichte in this context. Mauss dreaded that the idea of the sacred character of the human person would disappear within a generation. It did indeed disappear, shortly after his comment was written, in the camps in Auschwitz.[34]

Let us take another look at Mucha's photograph. The inside-outside boundaries that I commented on are handled in a subtle manner by the photographer, as the picture itself does not at first sight reveal whether we, as the viewers, are located inside or outside. The illusion that we could find ourselves at both points makes the photograph a scary experience to me. But from our background information we know that we are within the camp. The tracks do not converge before entering the camp, but they diverge within it. We know that we are standing at the edge of the ramp, where, behind our back, the selection of the prisoners would decide on their fate immediately upon arrival. This ramp, however, was in use only since May 1944. The

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[32] Émile Durkheim, Sociology and Philosophy. Translated by D.F. Pocock. With an Introduction by J.G. Peristiany, London: Cohen & West (1965), 58f.

[33] Marcel Mauss, Une catégorie de l'esprit humain: La notion de personne celle de "moi", in: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland 68 (1938), 263–281.

[34] See Stausberg (see note 2), 571.

practice of selection, on the other hand, was employed regularly from July 1942 onwards, and marked the beginning of systematic extermination.

The construction of the IG Farben plant and the settlement of workers from the German Reich in Auschwitz were part of the project of Germanization of the town. In Auschwitz-Birkenau around 20 per cent of a prisoner transport were sent to labor deployment under the harshest conditions, which in fact was a death in instalments going on over a period of some months. This brings me to the fifth reason for the distinctiveness of Auschwitz, namely the close ties we find here between extermination and industrialization. Not only because the extermination was executed in industrial style – the camp is commonly referred to as a "Todesfabrik" ("death factory") – but also because the SS entered a strategic partnership with big industry, first and foremost the pharmaceutical and chemical conglomerate IG Farben, which built one of the biggest and most expansive factories of the German Reich in Auschwitz.[35] Access to unpaid forced labor was one of the factors why the plant was constructed at this location, besides access to natural resources and the rail network. IG Farben was far from the only company to settle in Auschwitz, however, resulting in the establishment of some 30 sub-camps external to the concentration camp. Auschwitz vastly extended its spatial range, with the SS acquiring whole villages, forests, ponds, and farmland.

"Labour deployment was just as much aimed at realizing the racial dogma of physical extermination as were mass shootings and murder in the gas chambers – but in a form that was profitable to the economy of the German Reich", writes Sybille Steinbacher.[36] Even the bodily remains of the exterminated were made profitable:

Zitat, folgender Absatz im Petitsatz

[G]old from teeth was melted down and handed to the Reichsbank in ingots. Human hair was spun into thread and turned into felt for the war industry, and presumably it was also used in the manufacture of mattresses and ropes […] Ash was used not only as fertilizer, but also as a filling material in the building of roads and paths and insulation for camp buildings. The SS sold human bone-meal to a fertilizer company.[37]

Rather than ritually enshrining the bodily remains in cemeteries, the profane, subhuman and subservient status of the killed was thereby once again affirmed post mortem.

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[35] The industrial settlement continued after the war, when the Nazi industrial plants became one of the biggest factories of Communist Poland.

[36] Steinbacher (see note 6), 61.

[37] Ibid., 102.

5. Jewish Oświęcim: From Replicated Jerusalem to Tourism Centre

At this point, we should take a little detour to look at the town of Auschwitz or Oświęcim and its political and religious history.[38] The history of Oświęcim is documented since the late twelfth century. The name is derived from the Polish word *wity*, meaning 'saint'. Its etymology ties the town to the history of Christianization of this region. Over the centuries, the town was incorporated into the Holy Roman Empire under Bohemian rule. In 1772, it became an Austrian possession (as part of Galicia), entered the German Federation, and in 1866, it supported the Habsburgs until the downfall of that monarchy in 1918. Accordingly, the official languages were German, Czech, again German, and finally Polish, so that the town adopted its Polish name again in 1866, while it benefitted from the Habsburg connections.

During that latter period, the Jewish community thrived. Jewish presence was first recorded in the mid fifteenth century. Unlike in surrounding areas, there was no law forbidding Jews to live and trade there. Neither pogroms nor mass executions were unleashed, and the Jews did not have to live in a ghetto. After 1866 they achieved a status of equality as citizens. The town became an intellectual center of orthodox Judaism, but also a hub of Zionist associations. Jews proudly spoke about their town as "Oświęcim Jerusalem".[39] This is a good example of the mechanism of replication of sacred space. Names, designs, or other signs are transposed spatially, thus creating an interlinked network of sacred space. For example, menorah lampstands created connection between homes and synagogues, and they invoke the presence of the temple.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Jews were economically successful to the extent that they outperformed the Christians. The mayor of the town, however, had to be a Christian. In 1900 Oświęcim became a railway junction, which half a century later came to make the location attractive as a location for a concentration camp and for industrial development. At the same time, the town was a destination of migrants seeking employment, known as 'Sachsengänger', a slang work for migrant workers. Eventually, a Sachsengänger camp was erected. It comprised 22 brick houses with hipped roofs and 90 wooden barracks designed for 12,000 job seekers. After World War I, this camp was used by Polish refugees who fled those parts of Silesia that the Versailles treaty had given to Czechoslovakia. The former Sachsengänger camp formed the nucleus of the concentration camp, also known as Auschwitz I, or the parent camp. The

[38] The following is mainly based on Steinbacher (see note 6).

[39] Ibid., 8.

economic misery during the years leading up to World War II put strains on the Jewish-Catholic relationships, and some restrictions were imposed on the Jewish population. For example, they were banned from entering the town park. Yet, the Jewish population grew – and continued to grow after the town was annexed by the Germans, as it became a collecting point for Jews who were deported from other parts of occupied Poland where Germanization was started in 1940. The Jewish community continued to live in Oświęcim even after the concentration camp was set up.

It was only after the SS had struck the deal with IG Farben, as a result of which the town of Auschwitz would be Germanized and redesigned, that the Jewish population was deported. In April 1941, during the week of Passover, the Auschwitz Jews were forced to march to the station and from there transported to large-scale collection points around 30 kilometers away, and then onwards to Upper Silesia. In the end, the Jews of "Oświęcim Jerusalem" were not murdered in Auschwitz.

Today, very few Jews live in the town of Oświęcim, which never again came close to hoping to become a Jerusalem. At the same time, Auschwitz has turned into a major point of reference for Jewish identities and a 'tourist' destination for Jews from many countries, most prominently from Israel and the United States. The most visible event has been the "March of the Living", an educational program that since 1988 brings mostly Jewish students from different countries to Poland, where they visit various sites related to the Shoah. Given the specialness of the destination and the special character of the trip, these travelers are often called "pilgrims".[40] The main event takes place on Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah) in the Jewish calendar, when thousands march from Auschwitz I to Auschwitz II (Birkenau), the

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[40] The literature tends to distinguish between three types of tourists: those on a pilgrimage, those on educational trips, and casual tourists (Sarah Hodgkinson, The Concentration Camp as a Site of 'Dark Tourism', in: Témoigner: Entre histoire et mémoire 116 [2013], 22–32); a casual/profane tourist, an ideological tourist, a pilgrim (Natalie C. Polzer, Durkheim's Sign Made Flesh: The "Authentic Symbol" in Contemporary Holocaust Pilgrimage, in: The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie 39 [2014], 697–718). Space does not permit me to discuss the travels of atonements organized by West German organizations (Aktion Sühnezeichen and Sozialistische Jugend Deutschlands) that are referred to as pilgrimages and "redemptive" by Jonathan Huener, Antifascist Pilgrimage and Rehabilitation at Auschwitz: The Political Tourism of Aktion Sühnezeichen and Sozialistische Jugend, in: German Studies Review 24 (2001), 513–532.

extermination camp. This stages a double performative inversion: The empty space of the dead is re-populated by the living, and the death marches, on which the last remaining prisoners were put before the liberation of the camp by the Red Army, is substituted by the March of the Living (inside to outside vs. outside to inside). Some participants drape their bodies into flags of the state of Israel. After the visit to the sites in Poland, participants travel onwards to Israel where they observe Yom Hazikaron (Israel's Remembrance Day) and Yom Haatzmaut (Israel's Independence Day). This liturgical order[41] conveys the message that Auschwitz puts the living on a march to the state of Israel. Top Israeli politicians have visited Auschwitz in recent years. This resonates with changes in the position and presence of the Holocaust in Israeli political life. Only since the 1980s and more so since the 1990s has the claim that the Holocaust has a central position in Jewish life emerged as a key ingredient of political discourse. In addition to the "pilgrimages" to the extermination camps this is shown by celebrations, speeches, publications, museums, school textbooks, and related forms of "Holocaustia".[42]

The promise to prevent another Holocaust from happening is a major factor of legitimation of the state of Israel. This also holds for the Israel Defense Forces that are not only supposed to protect the state of Israel but also to be a force for potential Holocaust prevention. In 2013, the chief of the Israel Defense Forces led the March of the Living procession in Auschwitz and he has been cited as saying there: "The state of Israel is the security that an atrocity like this will not happen again. The IDF is the shield for the national home – the safe haven for the Jewish people".[43] In separate ceremonies, the Israeli Air Force flies its jets over Auschwitz as a kind of empty extraterritorial sacred center of the State of Israel.[44]

6. The Sacred as Excess of Meaning

[41] Roy A. Rappaport, Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999).

[42] Ian S. Lustick, The Holocaust in Israeli Political Culture: Four Constructions and Their Consequences, in: Contemporary Jewry 37 (2017), 125–170.

[43] Stuart Winer, "Army Chief in Auschwitz: IDF 'Shield' Against Second Shoah", in: The Times of Israel (April 7, 2013), https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-shield-against-second-shoah-army-chief-says-in-auschwitz/ (accessed June 1, 2020).

[44] Israeli Air Force planes also fly over Masada; like Auschwitz, Masada has an important place in Israeli identity discourses and commemorative practices.

The state of Israel is not the only actor to lay claims on Auschwitz. This brings me to another feature ascribed to the sacred: the surplus of meaning it generates, resulting in negotiations and struggles over the ownership of instances of the sacred, including sacred space.[45] The sacred is embedded in the work of discourse and interpretation. Auschwitz is a good example. Among Jewish and Christian thinkers, the very name Auschwitz indexes a broad range of attempts to rethink their notions of god and his, her, or its place in the world. Auschwitz is a shorthand for the problem of theodicy instanced by the atrocities, crimes and suffering that took place at this site. All this is a thing of the past; it can no longer be seen, but it is still there. One would wish it had never taken place, but it must not be forgotten. This necessitates the work of memory.

Memory work has made divergent claims on Auschwitz, reflecting the constellations, developments, and turns of postwar history. In Poland, because of pogroms and persistent anti-Semitic attitudes, even what was left of Jewish life after the Shoah became further marginalized. Nevertheless, based on a law "on the commemoration of martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim", Auschwitz was turned into a museum soon after the war (in 1947). In line with the law, it has become a site to commemorate national suffering and martyrdom during the war and the Nazi occupation and terror. Jonathan Huener has pointed to the Polish nationalist roots of this "martyrological idiom", which at the same time carried Christian overtones.[46] Habbo Knoch has argued that the Polish treatment of Auschwitz reveals features of Catholic material religion. For example, the barbed wire or victims' hair displayed behind glass resemble relics, and the pre-defined itineraries, starting with the entrance gate and the motto, in iron, "Arbeit macht frei", are reminiscent of the *via crucis*.[47]

While these resonances of Catholic forms of ritual space were implicit, the hegemonic narrative was a nationalist and a communist one, with the liberation of the camp by the Red Army at the

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[45] David Chidester, Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press (2005), 19. For this idea in relation to sacred space, see Jens Kugele, Kultort als sakraler Raum: Überlegungen zu Begriff, Konzept und Theorie, in: Matthias Egeler (ed.), Germanische Kultorte: Vergleichende, historische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Zugänge, Munich: Herbert Utz (2016), 11–48, here 38f.

[46] Jonathan Huener, Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration: 1945–1979, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press (2003). Note that the Hebrew word for victim *(korban)* has echoes of sacrificial language.

[47] Habbo Knoch, Die Tat als Bild: Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition (2001), 774f.

same time signifying the liberation of Poland through Communism. While the suffering of the Jews was also acknowledged, it was not privileged, and, as Geneviève Zubrzycky has observed, in the structure of the displays in the museum it came last.[48] The early official Polish Auschwitz memory was preoccupied with the first period of the camp, the concentration camp period from 1940 to 1942, when Jews only formed a minority of inmates. The majority were "members of pre-war political parties and political organizations, members of the intelligentsia, and anyone potentially involved in the Polish nationalist resistance, above all teachers, scientists, clerics and doctors".[49]

During the Cold War, apart from Poles, the majority of the visitors came from the former so-called East-bloc countries. As a hyper-significant – sacred – space, the camp was invariably part of tourist itineraries. After the fall of the Wall, Jewish and other Western tourists became the main groups of visitors, and restaurants, hotels as well as other tourist facilities sprawled in the town of Oświęcim. Visitor numbers skyrocketed. In line with this development, the focus on the representation of the past in the museum also changed. Jews, comprising the majority of victims, came to occupy a much more prominent place in the narrative as told by the exhibition. This reflects broader changes in the construction of memory of Auschwitz in Poland in the period since 1995, as is demonstrated by survey research. While there was a slight decline in the number of Poles that considered Auschwitz as "above all a site of the martyrdom of the Polish nation" (from 47 percent in 1995 to 39 percent in 2010), there was a major decline in universalist interpretations such as "a site of martyrdom of people of various nationalities" (from 26 to 2 percent); at the same time, the view that Auschwitz is "above all a site of the annihilation of Jews" saw a massive increase (from 8 percent to 47 percent).[50] In Poland, this shift is sometimes polemically referred to as "de-Polonization" and "Judaization" of the Auschwitz discourse (and the latter finds its visible confirmation in, among other things, the March of the Living).[51]

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[48] Zubrzycki (see note 19).

[49] Steinbacher (see note 6), 29.

[50] Marek Kucia, Auschwitz in the Perception of Contemporary Poles, in: Polish Sociological Review (2015), 191–206.

[51] Over sixty percent of Polish respondents in 2010 were also aware that Auschwitz served as an annihilation site for Sinti and Roma as well; that homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses were placed in the camp was acknowledged by some 30 percent of the participants in the study: Kucia (see note 50), 194.

The popularity of Auschwitz as a public site is also tied to its global canonization. In 1979, after some negotiations typical of this kind of process, Auschwitz – to be precise: the museum comprising the site – was added to the UNESCO world heritage list. This was done by appealing to criterion 6, which requires candidates "to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance".[52] While this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria, in the case of Auschwitz none of the other five criteria (such as representing "a masterpiece of human genius") seemed applicable; so an exception from normal procedure was made for Auschwitz. The universal significance seemed obvious enough; in a self-enforcing feedback-loop it was further enshrined through the inclusion of the list.[53]

This again contributes to the distinctiveness of Auschwitz, as no other Polish camp was admitted to the list, nor is any concentration camp in Germany. This could create the impression that Poland had been the country of extermination. To counteract such an identification, with Poland now being part of NATO and the EU, plus the acknowledgment of Jewish presence and claims, the Polish authorities requested to change the name of the UNESCO site from "Auschwitz concentration camp" to "Auschwitz-Birkenau: German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940–1945)". While this change, implemented in 2007, acknowledges the extension of the *lieu de memoire* from mainly Polish to mainly Jewish victimhood, it makes clear that the camp is by no means a Polish affair and emphasizes German culpability. Auschwitz is a place, or space that necessitates drawing boundaries. This tendency intensified recently when the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance from 1998 was amended. National and international protests notwithstanding, this act makes it punishable to claim that Poland had a responsibility for Nazi crimes and to refer to extermination camps as "Polish".[54]

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52 https://www.icomos.org/en/icomos-and-world-heritage/the-world-heritage-convention?start=1 (accessed June 26, 2020).

53 It is unfortunate that Kucia (see note 50) adopts these terms in the abstract of his article, which does not really substantiate their use; for a critical perspective see also Geneviève Zubrzycki, The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2006).

54 "Article 55a. 1. Whoever claims, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich […] or for other felonies that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity or war crimes, or whoever otherwise grossly diminishes the responsibility of the true

While this legislation does not mention Auschwitz, nationalist retaliations unleashed against the museum, its administrators, and guides, despite international and in particular Jewish as well as Israeli protests. The museum was accused of having become “un-Polish”. This reflects a criticism that has been growing over the years, that the site was “de-Polonized” and “de-Christianized” (even though such criticism mostly reflects changes in the more general mnemospace).

7. Catholic Sanctifications

Having considered Auschwitz as a Jewish, German, and Polish place – with some rivalries between the Polish and the Jewish identifications –, the question arises: What about Christianity or, rather, Catholicism? Representatives of the Catholic church – such as priests – were among the inmates during the early period of the camp. Catholic claims on Auschwitz intensified since the 1970s. A major driver was the Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Józef Wojtyła. (Auschwitz is located in his diocese.) In 1972, the archbishop celebrated a public mass in Auschwitz-Birkenau. During the sermon, he stated that the Church of Poland had seen “the necessity for […] a site of sacrifice, of an altar and a sanctuary – precisely in Auschwitz”.[55] As Pope John Paul II, the first pope from Poland, Wojtyła returned to his native country in 1979 – a visit that is sometimes considered one of the factors leading to the decline and eventual downfall of the Eastern bloc.[56]

The Christian sanctification of the sacred place, which effectively took the site out of the hands of the communist authorities,[57] operated on several levels. On a ritual level, primarily by celebrating a mass (together with 200 priests who were former prisoners of the concentration camp), the papal mass transformed Auschwitz into a Christian place. Note that the mass, just like the one in 1972, was celebrated on the ramp in Birkenau where the selection of the prisoners

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perpetrators of said crimes – shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to 3 years. The sentence shall be made public.” https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-polands-controversial-holocaust-legislation/ (accessed June 26, 2020).

[55] Andrew Charlesworth, Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz, in: Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 12 (1994), 579–593, here 585; Huener (see note 46).

[56] Frank Bösch, Zeitenwende 1979: Als die Welt von heute begann, Munich: C.H. Beck (2019), 78–84.

[57] See Huener (see note 46).

was made (and from where Mucha's picture was taken). A big cross was erected for the occasion. When the Pope, who avoided any explicit reference to the Jews, referred to Auschwitz as "Golgotha of our age" it became identifiable on the universal map of salvific space. On an institutional level, where memory was transformed into charisma, the camp was furthermore to be inhabited by two Catholic saints, the murders of which reflect its two modes of operation as concentration and extermination camp respectively: Pater Maksyimilian Kolbe and Sister Edyta Stein. Both choices were a matter of dispute. Kolbe's cell in the so-called Block of Death in the concentration camp, where he was killed in August 1941, had already enjoyed a certain aura; Kolbe's beatification (in 1971) and canonization (in 1982) sanctified it into a kind of shrine. In his 1972 sermon, Wojtyła had "made reference to Father Kolbe's actions favoring the conversion of Jews" (just as Auschwitz was to be converted into a Christian site).[58] Kolbe's saintly reputation was challenged if not damaged, however, when it became known that Kolbe had, before the war, been the editor of a newspaper with a markedly anti-Semitic profile. The canonization of the learned Carmelite nun Edyta Stein (Teresa Benedicta A Cruce) was controversial with Jewish communities, since Stein was killed in August 1942 in the extermination camp because she, in the official definition inscribed on her life and death by the Nazis, was a Jew, her conversion to Catholicism notwithstanding; so, her Catholic identity did not cause her murder. Assigning her the status of a Christian martyr could seem to diminish the scale of Jewish martyrdom.[59] The importance of Auschwitz for global Catholicism was confirmed by both successors of the Polish pope, Benedict XVI and Francis, who both paid official visits to Auschwitz.

In 1983, a building at Auschwitz-Birkenau that had served as the SS commandant's office was transformed into a church.[60] Conflicts with Jewish claims on Auschwitz came strongly to the surface in 1984, when a Carmelite convent was established outside the museum complex but still on the site of the former camp, on a site where prisoners used to work and in a building where the Zyklon-B was stored. Against the will of the nuns, the convent was relocated in 1993 by order of the Pope. This decision, based on an agreement between representatives of the Polish Catholic church and Jewish leaders in 1987, sparked reactions by Catholic leaders that were "often unabashedly antisemitic in content and tone".[61]

[58] Charlesworth (see note 55), 585.

[59] Auffarth (see note 6), 494.

[60] Charlesworth (see note 55), 589.

[61] Zubrzycki (see note 19), 22.

In the meantime, the controversy had acquired a new dimension. This is known as the controversy of the crosses, which raged from 1998 to 1999.[62] In 1988, the huge cross that had been used during the Mass celebrated by John Paul II in 1979 had been put up on the ground close to the convent, but before the separating wall and clearly visible from the outside. The cross had been stored in a basement and was brought there by a priest and a group of former Catholic prisoners. The cross that came to be called "the papal cross" indexed the papal presence and made the ground part of the Catholic enspacement. When rumors spread about plans to remove the cross, self-styled "Polish Catholics" began to erect hundreds of crosses in the yard of the convent that was turned into a site for extensive ritualization through prayer vigils, masses, demonstrations, and nationalist speeches. The government at first tried to avoid getting involved, but it had to in the end. A new law for "the protection of former Nazi camps" was promulgated in May 1999, a buffer zone around Auschwitz was established, and all the crosses were removed – with the exception of the "papal cross", which remained.

8. The Sacred as the Non-negotiable

Recall the above-cited world heritage criterion of "outstanding universal significance". It seems to me that Auschwitz fulfils this criterion in a manner that is again related to scholarly interpretations of the sacred. Gordon Lynch, for example, defines the sacred as "what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities that exert unquestionable moral claims".[63] I think we can translate this into spatial terms and apply it to Auschwitz. In a spatial inversion of this statement, Auschwitz appears as precisely the space where moral claims that are ordinarily taken as unquestionable and are taken as absolute – such as respect for human life, the integrity of the human body, and naked life – have been denied, neglected, and violated. In a widely cited definition Veikko Anttonen engages in a similar language game when he speaks of sacrality as "a category-boundary to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions".[64] By extending that to sacred space, we could speak of a "boundary-space". Auschwitz indexes the boundaries between civilization and barbarism, the human and the inhuman. The non-negotiable resonates in the conviction of the "never again". In a reverse mode, Auschwitz signifies a space where "things with non-

[62] Id., The Crosses of Auschwitz (see note 53) provides a detailed analysis.

[63] Gordon Lynch, On the Sacred, London and New York: Routledge (2014), 32.

[64] Veikko Anttonen, Sacred, in: Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.), Guide to the Study of Religion, London and New York: Cassell (2000), 271–282, here 281.

negotiable value" were, in a radically unprecedented way, treated as "things whose value is based on continuous transactions". For example, as we have seen above, IG Farben was supplied with forced labor and even made a profit from the inmates' corpses.
Consider another claim made by Anttonen:
Zitat, folgender Absatz im Petitsatz
[I]t is important to conceptualize the sacred as a category-boundary which becomes actual only in social situations, when the inviolability of such categories as person, gender, marriage, nation, or justice, liberty, purity, propriety, are threatened and in danger of losing their legitimating authority as moral foundations of society and social life.[65]
This relational constellation can be spatialized for our case: Auschwitz is precisely the place where "the inviolability of foundational social categories such as person, justice, liberty, purity, propriety" have lost "their legitimating authority as moral foundations of society and social life". This theoretical take on the sacred – in the sense of non-negotiable, inviolable, and absolute fundamental categories of human existence – resonates with Auschwitz, albeit in a negative, in an inverted manner: Auschwitz is a mnemonic, set apart boundary place, where the sacred appears as being radically profaned. Auschwitz is a sacred space by inversion or negation. And as a sacred space, Auschwitz must not be desecrated. At the same time, Auschwitz can appear as a sacred space that serves as a watchtower over the future non-transgression of the core values of humanity.
Auschwitz, in this sense, carries a very heavy burden. Not taking Auschwitz seriously could seem to threaten the sacred fundaments of our human world. Auschwitz is not a place one is supposed to visit for fun. This is reinforced by the status of Birkenau as an involuntary cemetery; referring to it as "the largest cemetery in the world without a single tombstone" is a recurrent trope. This calls for a certain behavior onsite as reflected in the "Visitor regulations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum". The first regulation reads as follows: "On the grounds of the Museum, visitors should behave with the appropriate solemnity and respect, and dress in a manner befitting a place of this nature".[66] This, and related prohibitions, are similarly enforced in cultic or religious buildings visited by tourists. Recall once again Gillian Rose's

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[65] Ibid., 276f.

[66] https://visit.auschwitz.org/regulamin-zwiedzania-panstwowego-muzeum-auschwitz-birkenau.html?lang=en (accessed June 24, 2020).

term “Holocaust piety” cited above. Tours are likewise conducted as “reverential acts”.[67] This necessitates refraining from common or ‘profane’ behavior that could desecrate the sacred space. A prominent example is taking selfies – an act commonly performed attourist sites. While taking selfies has also been banned at some tourist spots, such as the Trevi Fountain in Rome, this activity is often considered inappropriate in many religious places, and in many prominent religious temples or churches it has even been prohibited. There have been controversies on selfies being taken in Auschwitz with the gatehouse captured by Mucha as serving as a popular background.[68] This exhibits another resonance between Auschwitz, on the one hand, and some varieties of religious space, on the other. Behavior considered ordinary/profane can pose a danger to the extraordinary/sacred quality of space.

10. Conclusion

This article invites the reader to reflect upon the sacred not as an entity but as an analytical concept. As an example of such an operation, I have used the sacred as an analytical concept to work by projecting it onto space as represented in Stanislaw Mucha’s picture of the gatehouse at Birkenau. I have proceeded by disentangling the notion of the sacred into a series of master tropes: the sacred as the ineffable, the sacred as a binary/oppositional category, the sacred as contagion and transformative ambiguity, the sacred as a boundary-category, the sacred as excess of meaning, the sacred as the non-negotiable and inviolable. I am not concerned here how and whether these different tropes cohere into a theory of the sacred, nor whether any of these tropes are true in the sense that something like the sacred really exists. I have treated it as an obscure, multifaceted theoretical construct. But when applied to our case – Auschwitz, its history, historical significance, and its representation in Mucha’s picture –, some of the tropes

[67] Samantha Mitschke, The Sacred, the Profane, and the Space in Between: Site-specific Performance at Auschwitz, in: Holocaust Studies 22 (2016), 228–243, here 234.

[68] For an example: Jenni Frazer, “Pictures at Auschwitz is a Matter of Selfie Respect”, in: Jewish News: The Blogs (September 16, 2019) . The author expresses a common opinion when she writes: “So here goes: it is legitimate to cry at a concentration camp, even if you had no personal connection, because it is completely human to feel appalled by the horrors that took place. It is not legitimate to pose for smiling selfies as a way of validating your visit. This is not a nightclub where you get a rubber stamp on your hand – no matter your gender.” https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/pictures-at-auschwitz-is-a-matter-of-selfie-respect/ (accessed June 25, 2020)

related to the sacred yield meaningful analysis. (Whether this conceptual tactic can work for other cases has to be considered from case to case.) To make it as clear as possible: I do not wish to advance any political claim that Auschwitz should be recognized as a sacred place, but I have sought to show that selected features ascribed to the sacred by its theoreticians can make sense of Auschwitz and Mucha's picture. The metonymic specialness of Auschwitz resonates in many ways with the discursive topography of the sacred. Furthermore, I have tried to disentangle the notion of the sacred from that of the religious. Rather than identifying the religious and the sacred from the outset, we should look at their interplay and take into account religious and political claims, discursive and ritual appropriations here referred to as sanctifications.