

## War on Sacred Grounds

*Ron E. Hassner*

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Holy places have frequently been the focus of religious and political conflict. Ron E. Hassner analyzes the causes, the course, and the outcomes of such conflicts. His prologue, "A Terrifying and Fascinating Mystery," is an account of his visit to Jerusalem's Old City, which the three revealed faiths share. The reader is made acquainted with the city's human and linguistic diversity, the narrow alleys, the smells of the bazaar, the monumental buildings, the security checks, and the risks and hardships that visitors may face.

The first of the book's nine chapters is an introduction. The remaining eight are divided into two parts: part 1 is "Understanding Conflicts over Sacred Spaces," while part 2 deals with "Managing Conflicts over Sacred Spaces." Each part consists of four chapters. Photographs are mostly placed between the chapters. The book ends with acknowledgments, followed by notes with references and clarifications, and an index of terms, people, and places.

In chapter 1, "On Sacred Grounds," Hassner defines the term *sacred place* and discusses the various types of such spaces—and the religious and political causes for conflict over them. He also describes his own approach and other approaches to the study of holy places. He concludes that no single approach is sufficient and, therefore, adopts a combined perspective.

Chapter 2, "What Is Sacred Space?," begins with a list of holy places and describes the groups to which they are sacred (believers, ethnic groups, tribes); what or who they represent (gods, personalities, events); how priests have influenced political and economic developments, religious shrines, which have become the focus of bloody conflict; the role that shrines play in the lives of believers; the transition of sites to shrines and then to temples; and how a holy place is institutionalized and transformed into a focus of centrality and vulnerability.

Chapter 3, "The Indivisibility Problem," deals with competing claims over shrines that cannot be divided. Hassner refers to Solomon's Judgment concerning the two mothers as the model for something that is indivisible: a divided baby is of no value to anyone. He defines indivisibility and discusses specific instances such as temples in India and churches in Je-

rusalem. He demonstrates that any attempt to divide such a site or change its status is perceived as sacrilege and an attempt to abolish its value as a symbol of the universe. He also describes different ritual styles and unique ceremonies that are performed at various shrines.

In chapter 4, "Conflict over Sacred Spaces," the author shows that conflict is inevitable whenever there is competition over a shrine. The competition may be between religions (for example, between Jews and Muslims over the Temple Mount and the Tombs of the Patriarchs in Hebron) or between different sects of one religion (such as the Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, and others in Jerusalem). Hassner gives examples of how temples have been converted to use by other religions (for example, the Hagia Sophia Church/Mosque in Istanbul), temples that were built over the ruins of a previous shrine (the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, mosques over destroyed temples in India), and shrines built as fortresses in remote regions as shelters from a hostile environment. He describes violent conflicts, which brought about political and military intervention in an effort to resolve the conflict and its aftermath.

Chapter 5, "Mismanaging Conflicts over Sacred Spaces," is devoted to an analysis of failure to resolve such conflicts. The examples are taken mostly from cases in India and Israel, but also from elsewhere. Among the failed solutions are restrictions such as preventing one group from entering the shrine, closing it for prayer, time division, barriers between groups, and more. The author quotes the various arguments used by the parties to the conflict and provides insights for understanding it.

Chapter 6, "The Foundations and Limits of Religious Authority," is concerned with showing how the emergence of new holy places helped solve conflicts. His first example is Rome, which replaced Jerusalem for Christians when the latter became unsafe for pilgrims after the Muslim conquest. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, too, was built as an alternative site when a political rival took control of Mecca. The author discusses the parameters for the establishment of a new holy place, its importance to believers and its vulnerabilities, and provides evidence from the Bible. He discusses the kind of leader who can establish a new religious center (he or she must be charismatic and well versed in the law). He mentions several biblical and historical figures who created holy places (David, Solomon, Jeroboam, Johanan ben Zakai), and explains the original cause of the conflict between Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem (and why Christians are not a party to the conflict). At the end of the chapter, he explains that the ability

of religious leaders to found a new holy place, depends on the character of the society of believers and its political elite.

Chapter 7, "Successful Conflict Management: Jerusalem, 1967," is dedicated entirely to the resolution of conflicts over holy places between Jews and Palestinians—especially the most holy and sensitive of all, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, called the Noble Sanctuary by the Muslims. In this chapter, we learn of the history of the site and why it became holy, of the violent confrontations between the parties, and of the changes that took place after 1967. The author tells of the discussions between military commanders and Jewish and Muslim clerics and describes how each side tried to prove that it was master of the site. Eventually Israel's Supreme Court also intervened; rabbis were consulted, but they could not agree among themselves; the Intifada broke out, and today Israelis as a rule do not ascend the mount without prior approval and protection.

Chapter 8, "Successful Conflict Management: Mecca, 1979," describes the events surrounding the takeover of the Ka'bah, the holiest site for Muslims, by a group of rebels in 1979. According to Muslim law, the sanctuary is a place where warfare is forbidden, but the Saudi clerical elite, the ulama, found a legal solution, which permitted the use of firearms on the site in order to put down the rebellion. The close relations between the religious elite and the ruling dynasty engendered a successful solution. The author describes the city of Mecca and its importance for Muslims as a pilgrimage site, and the attempts made by various Muslim groups since the birth of Islam to take control of it.

Chapter 9, "Lessons from Conflicts over Sacred Spaces," summarizes the previous chapters. The author concludes that leaders must seek the advice of experts on religion and shows that solutions were not successful whenever clerics were not involved in the discussion. In this chapter, Hassner also discusses secular territorial conflicts, in which leaders raise issues concerning holy places within the territory. He notes that territorial conflicts become more difficult to resolve over time and describes a number of possible solutions. He ends with a call for more studies that would shed light on conflicts and their resolution.

The author gives an objective picture of conflicts over sacred territories in which clerics and their adherents, political leaders and their followers, and believers took part. He also presents the arguments used by the parties. The greater part of the book is devoted to two holy sites, Jerusalem, a city that is holy to the three monotheistic faiths; and Mecca, the holiest place of Islam. The book contains a wealth of information about historic-

ally and spiritually significant shrines all over the world. The author goes into considerable detail in describing the course of conflicts among different religious groups; he asks pointed questions and gives appropriate answers. Anyone with an interest in holy places, especially Jews and Muslims, will find the book useful and interesting.

Dr. Ben Ami Naama  
Department of Arabic, Faculty of the Humanities  
Bar-Ilan University 52900 Ramat-Gan, Israel  
naamaba@012.net.il