

On the Spirituality of Spatial Emptiness: The Example of St. Peter's in Cologne

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The recent renovation of St. Peter's, one of the oldest parish churches in Cologne, was undertaken owing to an increasing danger of collapse. After three years of difficulties of construction and negotiation the church was finally re-opened in a stable condition in September 2000. First established in the sixth century in the form of a small chapel built on the ruins of Roman thermal baths, it grew from church to church: Carolingian, Romanesque, Gothic, and early Renaissance. The Second World War destroyed it to such an extent that only a few remnants of its walls were left standing. As the city of Cologne was being reconstructed, these remains were spatially rearranged and renovated. This process of continual revitalization has lasted almost two thousand years. The current Jesuit church in Cologne is characterized by simplicity and emptiness. It is a space cleared of pews and all other furnishings, distinguished by two rebuilt organs, and above all an altar by Eduardo Chillida. What pastoral and artistic concept of space lies behind this?

Dimensions of the Space

Space, like time, belongs to the most basic human condition. It is accessible and open to the whole world, or else it is closed like a solid block of stone. When considering space, we have to differentiate between the casing and the encased. From an architectural perspective a space is initially empty, notwithstanding consideration of its possible function. Design, construction, building materials—including textures, and above all light—create the space and define its character. Yet beyond this, the space must be furnished and enlivened by an individual alone, or by those who desire to reside in it. Space has, in addition to an emotional dimension, above all a spiritual, conceptual dimension. It is a space of consciousness, or a space of representation, or it is an artistic space.

The *space of consciousness* arises in its contours from the desires and perceptions that are connected with the space. Admittedly, it exists only as a space in the mind; it is a fiction in the consciousness, but identical to the subject that senses it. This space of consciousness is initially built on what the individual experiences with the senses: seeing, hearing, touching, thinking . . . It is a model based on desire, the product of the momentary impressions, thoughts, intuitions, and memories that establish it as space. For this reason it is the location of a settling down, of inner-experiences, as the Kiel phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz called it.¹ Emotions, ideas, and intuitions qualify this space, as do emotional and spiritual experiences. This space of consciousness is the inner world of the subject, a space of personal feelings, and, as an atmospheric space, a supra-subjective phenomenon.

The *space of representations* is primarily a space of knowledge. It is filled with mythological, religious, and historical images and symbols. It represents the symbolic cosmos of the world of meanings, and it represents no empirical existence but instead only an imagined reality. On this level possible facilities and functions are negotiated. The aim is to represent the individuals who reside in this conceived space, or visit it, and to delineate and calculate the effects that the space has on them.

Thoughts on an *artistic space* were conceived by Martin Heidegger in his text *Art and Space*.² He distinguished artistic space from geometric space. All individuals need a space in which to find

themselves and in which to dwell. Space generally has its foundation in its open expanse, but the individual has to determine this space creatively. Such creation is the freedom of the space. Here individuals order their experiences, and here they can dwell as themselves. The artistic space is therefore in the first instance a place in which things can be present, but between these things, in the space, an emptiness remains.

Dimensions of the Sacred

This basic view leads us to another concept, sacred space. A sacred place is a holy place. It differs from familiar space. The German philosopher Josef Pieper defined it as something expressly removed from ordinary use. An individual needs spaces that will open up possibility. Sacred space allows us to step out of acoustic and optical noise and to enter a space where silence and real hearing are possible.

Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, takes us one step further when he understands the medieval Gothic church as a dwelling. The church is primarily an enclosure by means of which an internal space is closed off from the outside. In the enclosed space something sublime, celebratory, and unearthly stirs, something about to explode limits and lead out into the immeasurable. Another step is taken by Hermann Schmitz, who specifies sacredness as a looking at an exaggeration of experience, an unfathomable excitation that can manifest itself in a church, yet the experience needs to be more understandable. The endeavor is to obtain concentration and formability out of what is often overwhelming.³

In this connection Schmitz speaks of “atmospheres,” which he understands as feelings cast indeterminately into the vastness, feelings experienced as gripping forces. For this reason during the past two hundred years sacred space has increasingly been understood as an aesthetic category. Participation in a space has come to be considered as an experience of an “atmosphere” of a space. People today continue to think of emotions connected to specific memories as sacred. Such a connection is problematic, however. The word sacred is not objective but a vague description of a special atmosphere of space. The atmosphere provides support to a community during celebration, it brings people to themselves, it helps them feel fulfilled, and it encourages them to be at home with themselves. It comes down to two points: the atmosphere of the space, and the atmosphere that is stirred within the individual.

In the new space of St. Peter’s emptiness is a defining factor, produced by the absence of seating, the grayish filtered glazing; a reduced view of the organ limits its appearance in the space. This ensemble of reduced forms structures the space and the experience of the altar with its presence and absence of reduced forms, its tension between full and empty. Space creates a resonance, an echo within the visitor.

The Power of the Empty Space

From the perspective of the history of architecture, St. Peter’s is a late Gothic basilical church with recessed galleries. The perception of the space is influenced by a gallery that ends at the last bay of each side aisle. A nave space is implied. As mentioned earlier, the church stands on the foundations of Roman thermal baths, creating a complex building history and a very fragile base. Exact geometric conceptions are negligible, and no right angle is seen there. In the interior experience of space the longitudinal and transverse axes play a part. The material used, subtle in its overall appearance, is integral to the experience of the space. Opened up by large windows,

the space is at rest in itself and in the light (fig. 1; *the illustrations are found on the accompanying CD*).

The defining factor of this space is the cross altar by Eduardo Chillida.⁴ Chillida has chiseled the stone, light granite from Rhode Island, in a way that reflects and emphasizes light, but precludes any shine or reflection. Light and shadow are caught within it, and present it as both an autonomous and an integrated object in the space. Separated from each other, its three segments allow the changing cast of light and shadow from the church windows to enter into its interior. It is linked and located within the light Gothic space. Seen from the nave, the different heights of the arms of the crosses reach from various directions into and away from one another, with the view concentrated on the cross form at its center. Outer and inner spaces are created, and it is the outer and inner spaces that evolve. For Chillida the most important aspect is the inner space, evident from the apse. The sculpture exists in five elements to include three forms of masses and two forms of emptiness. The mass is equally important to creating a sense of emptiness, because a tension exists between mass and formlessness. Such tension helps viewers turn to themselves, find their own sense of interior space.

The altar sculpture is placed in the perceived center of its inner space at the crossing point of the longitudinal and transverse axes of the church. The center of the altar and the center of the church coincide, and the visitor is immersed in an exciting rapture. The altar in this church can be experienced as a cross altar based on its inner form as well as its positioning on the cross of the space. The connection of the altar to space is indicated by Chillida in the following words:

I wanted to create a work that enters into dialogue with the light. In this church space there are indeed different types of light: a physical light and a spiritual light connected to this space. On the longitudinal axis of the nave stands . . . the main altar of the church As a result of this a specific relationship is created that paves the way for spiritual light in this church space. Creating this dimension was one of the original ideas in the making of this work. Thus the sculpture is functionally related to the space.⁵

Eduardo Chillida sees his art as a creation of spaces. "My entire work is a journey of discovery in space," he once said to me. The imagination of space is the goal of his thinking. The construction of the interior space makes an impression as visitors identify the actual inner space of the altar, and this is turned further into an inward reflection. The altar prompts identification with inner space. This experience is totally dependent on an empty space so that individuals can come to their own interior spaces. This interior space is for them simultaneously also an empty space. All sculptural activity circles around that open middle, which acts as a spiritual center, and activates more than the optical powers of viewers. What is reflected is the limitedness of the surrounding space, and individuals experience the freedom of letting themselves be who they are regardless of what personal belongings accompany them.

According to Eduardo Chillida, space has expressive qualities. As he said, "It sets the matter that encompasses it in motion, determines its proportions, chants and orders its rhythms. It must find its analogies, its echo in us, it must possess a type of spiritual dimension."⁶ This artistic philosophy of space in St. Peter's is the basis for building a bridge to the people of our day.

From a pastoral viewpoint the concept of emptiness is necessary for experiencing a church as

sacred space. Emptiness is needed as a dimension in order to meet the inner needs of people, to help care for modern souls, and to help people come back to themselves. In its pastoral principles the largely empty church space of St. Peter's stems from two existential impulses: doubts and questions. To begin with, every church space—full or empty—is an image. It is based on the architectural form of the space itself, its furnishings, and the lighting conditions. If the space is filled with pews in post-Reformation style the space is concealed. Pews cover the floor and rob the columns of their bases; walls appear to float, or diffuse the gaze in grids and crossing lines. These things, and more, rob the space of its clarity and its character. For visitors to find themselves in such space takes a lot of effort because they are bombarded by impressions. Nevertheless, they struggle to find themselves in the sacred space.

Church spaces are today to a great extent filled with many optical, and therefore distracting, eye-catchers: statues, pictures, and furniture such as seats, lecterns, and flower vases. Like the overall interior space, the altar space is also often overloaded with many accessories so that what is central, the altar as sculpture and the cross as symbol, do not dominate. As a result the eye finds no rest; it cannot surrender itself to the light; it is not guided by the architecture according to the time of day.

The French architect Le Corbusier expressed what a sacred space is about:

The key is the light.
And the light clarifies the forms.
And these forms have power to excite
Through the play of the proportions,
Through the play of relationships,
The unexpected, the astounding.
But also through the spiritual and intellectual play
To be its basis:
Its true birth, its ability to endure, structure . . .⁷

Even the sacred images limit the realization of the space, and contribute to shutting out the space and throwing viewers into doubt. In many cases pictures capture the idea of a biblical scene, or the image of a saint, in a specifically selected, designed form. Most visitors to churches lack the knowledge needed to understand them. Images distract viewers, or indirectly challenge them, not allowing for an openness to the space; visitors are hardly given a chance to be touched by them, but are rather shut off from the deeper spiritual dimension. The role of a church space is, however, to elicit the emotion of its visitors, to absorb and shape it. In images, fixed messages of belief can therefore to a great extent—because unmediated—only interfere. The fixed stories of the images block visitors who cannot understand aesthetics and iconography, and they are distracted. No venue exists to impel the inner space of the visitor further.

A largely emptied church should, as a sacred space, engage visitors by its openness, and invite a response, without their having to renounce their Christian, Catholic, or Evangelical character in doing so. The individuals who enter a church want to come to rest. Their moods are supposed to emerge as they are immersed in an atmosphere of space. Visitors seek first themselves, then their God, and then perhaps a message. The awakening of their own experience is the pre-condition for any effort to move beyond themselves, and to go there visitors must move

questioningly. They have to come up with their own experiences, questions, and inner stirrings; they must struggle within and beyond themselves. They have to be encouraged to come into the space with their certainties and doubts. Overall, they have to go in with their questions.

The Mystique of Questioning

Hardly any artist has so shaped the spirituality of the congregation of St. Peter's as the American James Lee Byars (1932–1997) in his exhibition *The White Mass* (1995).

Around the centerpoint of the church he installed *The Ring* (1990; marble, 20 x 150cm); at four points along the arches of the span pillars, between the points where they intersect and end, and halfway between the church supports and the outer circumference of the ring, he placed four stelae (1987; marble, 162 x 27 x 27 cm).

On one side of each of the stelae, at about eye level, a two-letter titular reference was chiseled. Each stood there with its eye-like inscription facing east: Q.R. - I.P. - O.Q. - Q.D.:

Q.R. - The Figure of the Question is in the Room,
I.P. - The Figure of the Interrogative Philosophy,
O.Q. - The Figure of the One Question,
Q.D. - The Figure of the Question of Death.

In this arrangement the empty center was encircled by the Ring, which was set within the room's two squares, one defined by the four stelae, the other by the four center pillars. In this way the installation was connected within the room both formally and ideally, and derived its unity and shared foundation from the center.

When no liturgy was being conducted cordons marked off this square, which visitors were not allowed to enter. During the liturgy, practically the whole center nave, from the installation to the apse at the east end, formed a single large altar space. The dynamic void of the Ring was its center.

Byars's room installation was lit up by a blazingly bright light bulb. This hung over the four blindingly white marble stelae, posed around a ring of the same material, in the middle of the space of the nave. This represented philosophical and religious thoughts. Byars understands the tradition of belief as a complex of questions that open up into specific pre-formed answers: in images, stories, rituals, and dogmas.

With his installation, *The White Mass*, Byars exhibited a work in the direct context of a concrete documentation of faith. Here religious forms of theory and practice were placed within the dialectic of question and answer. Three of the stelae represented three formal questions: the question's presence, the question as an interrogative method, the question as focusing on the so-called last question; these three formal questions were confronted by the fourth stela that posed a question of content, and this was the question of death. The ring separated the questions that surrounded it as if the questions themselves would otherwise fight against each other. In its perfection it acted as a display of the consummate. The questions reached beyond any answer; they forced the ring, as it were, to raise itself beyond itself, and to imaginatively form and formulate itself anew. In this dialectic religion, as a form of belief, as principle and subjective act, could first be cancelled out. A reformatory principle took shape in the

installation, where all received traditional answers were overcome in favor of gaining a new one.

Through the overlaying of artistic form and liturgical use, the sense of the installation was also transformed, specifically in the question and answer. The intercessor for spirit and grace, and all the achieved evidence of faith within the ceremony, are continuously surrounded by doubt. God can only be experienced as a question because the word of God, and the experience of the numinous, can be described as question. Those who do not engage in both faith and doubt are closed to what the word of God means.

The question as question: it alone can fill the emptiness of the church described above, as well as that of inner space. The question is itself sufficient. This is possible in reflected sacred spaces. James Lee Byars was an artist, and sought to avoid any appropriation by cultural groups in society. Therefore he often appended a question mark to his statements in order to fill them in with enduring life, and to shift them into the field of art and poetry. For religious individuals the problem arises of whether the question as question may perhaps be the most sublime form of mysticism and of belief. On a feast such as Pentecost, for example, should every answer perhaps lie not in the content of the biblical story but in psychological encouragement—in the spirit of the Greek word *parrhesia*, for example, meaning dauntlessness, confidence, openness, freedom . . . —as question?

The questions posed by the stelae reanimated the thought of a methodic and concrete interrogative philosophy, and in the question of death they called into question the direction of all interrogation. They awakened questions about life and existence, God and the world, the sense and the senselessness of human existence. Though at its core Christian belief denies the sole validity of the visible, and claims that what supports life and the word is transcendent reality, this is precisely the sort of norm that is called into question by the installation. The White Mass shatters the certainty of the often far too frivolously postulated matter-of-factness of the transcendental; it knocks it out of the hands of the encircling worshipers, forcing them to make an effort to gather it once again. This was, after all, the reason for mounting this installation inside the church. The act of questioning activated an answer from the questioning and pious energies of the faithful, from the pathos of their devotion. This was a time which in its shapelessness and triteness was both painful and mystical, and which was accompanied by desire as well as anguish. In this way belief was challenged by the artistic form and incorporated in the urgency of interrogation, in the tedious dialectic of position and negation, of establishing and calling into question, of venture and doubt. The question is thus the actual *movens*, the driving force of creative activity, the restless, never satisfied creativity that can only be experienced as long as one is *in motion*; art and faith, as they once again attempt to give form to formlessness without losing their tension.⁸

The Sacredness of Experience

Sacred space is today understood by many searching individuals not so much as a place of answers but as an energy-charged space for seeking and questioning. Sacred space should provide individuals with the strength to awaken their belief within themselves, to doubt and to question, to be skeptical and to listen. In this way inner certainties can be renewed and new ones established independent of association. Considering the old theological differentiations between *fides quae* and *fides qua*, it is the distinction between the content of faith in the Credo and the form as a vivid creative praxis.

For such an orientation sacred space—a space cleared, free, and empty—is an important precondition. This does not mean the deconstruction of a church into something profane. Quite the contrary! A stark space requires bold abstract forms in order that the character of sacredness and dignity may exist. It requires above all freedom from superfluous furnishings, which at best represent a denominational setting for the comfort of its staff. The modern sacred space must be freed from its seeming unambiguousness in order to retrieve it in its traditional openness and complex multi-layered meaning. This means no iconoclasm. From a Catholic perspective, for example, this means carefully selecting the places for the altar, the cross, the Madonna, and possibly the church's patron saints. The rest of the space must be kept clear architecturally for the space to be a sacred space, and to maintain its openness.

The sacred atmosphere of a space is not static. It also has a dynamic dimension. The liturgical calendar implies transformation and openness toward images, but only as posed questions. In St. Peter's, exhibitions of contemporary art (as well as contemporary music) are regularly presented in the space in order to fill and move it with new aesthetic forms and content. This confronts viewers and listeners with the times in which they live, and challenges their creative seeing, because seeing is the soul of art as well as being at the core of faith, as creative attention is for the music.

These aesthetic efforts allow the architecture of a church to once again become a multi-dimensional image, not to mention an existential stage. It should not provide individuals with answers but instead inspire paths to a personal belief. In this sense such sacred spaces open up paths and traces of the inconceivable presence of God in this world.

ENDNOTES

1. Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, vol. 3, *Der Raum*, part 4, *Das Göttliche und der Raum*. 2d ed. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1995), 283.
2. St. Gallen: Erker-Verlag, 1969.
3. *System der Philosophie*, 284.
4. See Friedhelm Mennekes, *Eduardo Chillida: Kreuz und Raum* (Munich: Chorus, 2000).
5. *Ibid.*, 76.
6. *Ibid.*, 86.
7. Le Corbusier, *In Ronchamp* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1957), 27.
8. James Lee Byars: *The White Mass*, ed. Friedhelm Mennekes, with essays by Barbara Catoir, Heinrich Heil, Thomas McEvilley, Friedhelm Mennekes, and an interview with James Lee Byars by Wolf Günter Thiel. German and English (Cologne: Walther König, 2004).

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