Sacred Ground, Divided Histories: Conflicts Over Religious Sites and Their Impact on Cultural Memory

Prasanthee Rajendram, 2233979

Supervised by: Prof. Bettina E. Schmidt

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Abstract

This study analyses the impact of the destruction of contested sacred spaces on the cultural memory and identity of the communities involved. Contested sacred spaces involve one or more religions claiming ownership of the site. Conflicts that arise from these disputes can affect the cultural memory of the groups involved. The shared communal and cultural practices shape the narratives passed down through the generations. When sacred spaces are contested and destroyed, there is disruption and sometimes distortion of the information passed down due to political and religious agendas. This dissertation investigates the concepts of "Sacred Spaces" and "Cultural Memory". Next is an analysis of three disputed sites: Ayodhya, Temple Mount and Bamiyan. Each case study examines the historical background of the sites that have led to their present contested state. It highlights current conflicts and evaluates the impact of contestation on the cultural memory and identity of the societies concerned by studying the dual sacrality and identity politics involved. There is a need for continuous effort to safeguard sacred spaces to ensure cultural traditions and narratives are preserved, and a few ongoing ventures are highlighted in the final chapter.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Sacred spaces are essential in forming cultural memory and identity, representing a community's collective history, beliefs, and values. These sites, whether temples, cathedrals, mosques, or natural features, serve as repositories of collective memory, safeguarding religious narratives and customs across generations. Sacred spaces are tangible representations of the spiritual, the divine, and the transcendent. These spaces help link believers with the divine, anchoring spiritual ideas and practices in concrete locales. Through rituals, pilgrimages, and communal gatherings, sacred places strengthen a sense of belonging and continuity, connecting individuals to their cultural and spiritual history.

Sacred locations are often susceptible to conflict when various groups regard the same spot as vital to their faith or history. Disputes around ownership, access, and interpretation frequently arise from conflicting claims, political power struggles, religious erasure, and nationalist ideologies. These go beyond mere disputes over land or structures to encompass the authority to define history, faith, and identity. An illustrative case is the Ayodhya controversy, where religious and political tensions regarding the Babri Mosque-Ram Janmabhoomi site have incited enduring disagreements, exemplifying the convergence of faith, identity, and authority in contested sacred spaces.

On December 6, 1992, more than 300,000 Hindus assembled in Ayodhya, India, with the objective of razing the Babri Masjid and erecting a temple at what they regarded as the birthplace of Lord Rama. Notwithstanding a Supreme Court judgement forbidding modifications to the site, nationalist factions garnered substantial backing for the initiative. Despite the deployment of 15,000 paramilitary personnel to safeguard the mosque, 40,000 Hindu volunteers circumvented the security barriers and demolished the edifice within six hours. That evening, violence erupted as volunteers assaulted the local Muslim area, resulting in 10 fatalities and the destruction of roughly one hundred homes. The following day, the military intervened to re-establish order. The demolition incited widespread communal uprisings across the nation, leading to 1,200 fatalities, more than 5,000 injuries, and the devastation of 50,000 residences and 100,000 businesses. In response, the central government banned the nationalist groups involved, dismissed state governments, and arrested key leaders, though they were later released. The violence extended beyond India, resulting in retaliatory assaults on Hindu temples in Pakistan and global demonstrations. In February 1993, communal tensions reemerged, particularly in Bombay, where Hindu

militants employed temple rites to incite more violence during Muslim Friday prayers. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

The inauguration of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple on January 22, 2024, at Ayodhya signifies a pivotal moment in the affirmation of Hindu identity in India. The temple, constructed on the location of the demolished Babri Masjid, represents the apex of a protracted effort seeking acknowledgement of Lord Rama's birthplace. For Hindu nationalists, the temple's consecration symbolises the restoration of historical and religious justice, bolstering a unified Hindu identity and cultural pride. Nonetheless, the ceremony exacerbates communal divisions, since it represents the victory of a political-religious claim that has sidelined Muslim perspectives of the site. The temple's opening is a significant religious milestone and a potent declaration of Hindu revitalisation within India's socio-political context. (Gupta, 2024)

The Ayodhya event illustrates that disputes over sacred locations have enduring impacts on the cultural memory of the affected populations. These conflicts frequently determine how groups recall their history, strengthen community identities, and affect future intergroup relations. The destruction or desecration of sacred locations inflicts cultural trauma upon the affected group. The destruction of a sacred site is not merely material devastation but a disruption of historical and spiritual continuity. The Taliban's obliteration of the Buddhas in Bamiyan was regarded worldwide as an assault on Afghanistan's diversified history and Buddhist legacy. The tragedy solidified a shared remembrance of loss among Buddhists globally and Afghan cultural historians, representing the obliteration of a formerly thriving religious culture. The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is the location of the First and Second Temples of Judaism. Muslims also venerate it as the site of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. The shared sacredness has resulted in centuries of hostility between Jews and Muslims.

This dissertation seeks to examine the impact of the destruction of contested sacred spaces on the cultural memory of the affected communities. The paper discusses the fundamental concepts of "sacred spaces" and "cultural memory," examines the three aforementioned case studies of contested locations and analyses their influence on cultural memory.

Chapter 2 examines sacred spaces, their diverse classifications, and their overarching importance, referencing the contributions of prominent scholars such as Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, Emile Durkheim, Jonathan Z. Smith, Ursula Rao, and Ron Hassner. The chapter commences by delineating sacred areas and analysing the many conceptualisations proposed by different theorists. The next section classifies sacred areas into several categories, including manmade and natural sacred spaces. The concluding section examines the wider implications of sacred spaces within religious, social, and political frameworks.

Chapter 3 examines essential theoretical frameworks in memory studies, emphasising individual, collective, and cultural memory, referencing the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Jan Assmann, Astrid Erll, and so on. The chapter also examines the interplay between history and memory in constructing cultural narratives. Finally, it examines the role of memory in the establishment of religious and cultural identity. Religious traditions depend on sacred memory, transmitted through rituals, scriptures, and oral traditions, to uphold belief systems.

Chapter 4 comprises three case studies: the Temple Mount, Ayodhya, and the Bamiyan Buddhas, which were chosen because they share dual sacrality and have been destroyed and transformed by opposing religious parties. Their conflicts trigger national and global consequences and have been used to shape cultural narratives and manipulate identity politics. The initial portion outlines the historical context of the sites that have led to their current contentious condition. The subsequent section examines the dual sacrality of the sites and the influence of identity politics on the cultural memory of the impacted populations. This dissertation culminates in Chapter 5, offering final reflections on the worldwide response to disputes at contested locations and emphasising ongoing initiatives for shared sacred spaces.

Chapter 2: Sacred Sites

Religious individuals perceive space as divided into sacred and profane areas, unlike secular individuals who see space as homogeneous. The distinction between the sacred and the profane is a foundational paradigm in the study of religion. However, to understand its implications fully, multiple perspectives and contextual factors must be carefully considered. In Section 2.1, the term "sacred" is discussed from the viewpoints of Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto, who saw the sacred as transcendent, and from the perspective of Émile Durkheim, Jonathan Smith and Ursula Rao, who viewed it as a social construct subject to external influences. Section 2.2 discusses the different types of sacred spaces, and section 2.3 examines their significance.

2.1 Sacred Spaces

The notion of the sacred is intrinsically related to sacred spaces, which act as concrete representations of the sacred in the real world. The sacred denotes that which is distinguished, esteemed, and infused with spiritual importance, whereas sacred places offer an actual setting in which individuals and communities experience and interact with the sacred. Whether through religious ceremonies, stories, or personal encounters, sacred sites assist in localising the sacred by providing a focal point for worship, meditation, and relationship to the divine. In this way, sacred spaces act as bridges between the transcendent and the everyday, anchoring spiritual meaning within human experience.

"Sacred" denotes something regarded as holy, divine, or distinguished from the ordinary or "profane". Often connected with religious or spiritual relevance, it reflects a sense of respect, awe, and reverence. Modern academics' descriptions of the sacred and the profane have their roots in Latin words the Romans used. While "profanum" referred to what was outside the temple precinct, "sacrum" alluded to what belonged to the gods and was connected with cult rites and temple ceremonies. These names initially possessed a spatial implication, with "sacer" (sacred) regions being differentiated and segregated from "profanus" (profane) areas. (Colpe, 2005)

The concept of the "sacred" is key to understanding religious and sociological perspectives on human spirituality and collective life. Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto represent religious viewpoints, emphasising the sacred as a transcendental reality. In the book, '*The Sacred*

and the Profane', Mircea Eliade explores the idea of the sacred and explains that "*The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from natural realities.*" (Eliade, 1957, p. 10). He builds on Rudolf Otto's idea in "*Das Heilige*" that a religious person's experience of a "Living God" can make them feel both awe and fear in the face of such grandeur and power. Rudolf Otto's concept of the "numinous" is a central idea in his work 'The Idea of the Holy' (1923), where he explores the nature of religious experience. The numinous is a unique, non-rational, and ineffable experience at the heart of religion. Otto's concept is built on the idea that the divine is encountered in a way that transcends ordinary human experience, eliciting a deep emotional response that is both fascinating and terrifying. (Otto, 1923)

The numinous is characterised by a feeling of being in the presence of something wholly other, mysterious, and powerful. Otto breaks down this experience into two primary components: *Mysterium Tremendum* and *Mysterium Fascinans*. *Mysterium Tremendum* refers to the overwhelming sense of awe, fear, and even dread that arises in the presence of the numinous. It is the recognition of the terrifying and majestic aspects of the divine, evoking a feeling of humility and insignificance in the face of something vastly more significant than oneself. (Otto, 1923)

In contrast, the *Mysterium Fascinans* aspect of the numinous is the compelling attraction to the divine despite its terrifying nature. A sense of wonder, amazement, and love compels an individual towards the sacred, instilling an intense desire to engage with the divine. Otto's concept of the numinous highlights that religious experience is not merely an intellectual or moral understanding of the divine but an encounter with something that transcends ordinary human experience. (Otto, 1923)

The numinous is both awe-inspiring and irresistible, embodying the paradoxical nature of the divine as both fearsome and alluring. This concept has significantly influenced the study of religion, emphasising the importance of understanding the emotional and experiential dimensions of the sacred. (Otto, 1923)

Eliade believes that a person senses the power of the numinous when it appears as something other than the mundane or everyday things we encounter.

> "*Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany*" (Eliade, 1957, p. 11)

Eliade explains how any object can remain in its true nature and simultaneously manifest as something sacred to those who believe. He gives the example of a stone that appears as it is to everyone, meaning non-believers, but is revered as a sacred stone to those who believe that it has manifested divinity. As such, all objects in the universe can exhibit sacrality for those with a religious experience. Mircea believes that the sacred is a reality that prehistoric man would want to be close to because it represents power and protection. He mentions that "*Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy*." (Eliade, 1957, p. 12)

The sacred is associated with the "real" according to Eliade. The sacred reveals a fundamentally distinct reality from the mundane, profane world. Hierophanies, or manifestations of the divine, are the means by which this sacred reality is experienced. These events penetrate the mundane world and establish a connection to a transcendent order. These sacred experiences give life structure and meaning, anchoring it in an eternal and unchanging source. In this regard, the sacred symbolises the ultimate reality for those who encounter it: a lasting, important and immutable (Eliade, 1957, pp. 20-67)

Conversely, the "unreal" is linked to the profane. The profane world is characterised by the ordinary, the mundane, and the transient. It lacks the depth and significance of the sacred and is perceived as less real by those who have experienced it. The profane reality is seen as chaotic and insignificant compared to the order and meaning provided by the sacred. For individuals living within a sacred worldview, the profane is often experienced as a mere shadow of the actual reality, accessible through sacred experiences and practices. (Eliade, 1957, pp. 20-67)

The transformative force of sacred experiences is underscored by Eliade's distinction between the real and the unreal. When the sacred is encountered, how individuals perceive reality is fundamentally altered. They regard the sacred as the bedrock of actual reality, while the profane world is reduced to a lesser, less significant status. This dichotomy affects the manner in which religious individuals perceive the world, their actions, and their understanding of existence. (Eliade, 1957, pp. 20-67)

The sacred is connected with genuine reality, purpose, and order, whereas the profane is considered to be missing these traits and perceived as less authentic. This distinction impacts the worldview and lived experience of individuals who engage with the sacred. Eliade examines the divergent perceptions and experiences of space among religious individuals compared to secular or non-religious folks. His notions of non-homogeneous space and the "fixed point" or axis mundi are important for comprehending this distinction.

Eliade's statement, "*For the religious man, space is not homogeneous,*" (Eliade, 1957, p. 20) implies that religious individuals do not perceive space as neutral or uniform. Instead, they perceive it as being divided into sacred and profane regions. Sacred spaces are qualitatively distinct from the ordinary, profane spaces that surround them and are imbued with significance. Sacred spaces are frequently identified by religious rituals, symbols, and events that render them unique and significant. (Eliade, 1957, pp. 20-67)

The concept of a "fixed point" or axis mundi is crucial to understanding how religious individuals orient themselves within this non-homogeneous space. The axis mundi is seen as the centre of the world, a point where the heavens, earth, and the underworld intersect. It is a celestial pillar connecting different realms of existence and provides a stable, central reference point for orientation in both the corporeal and ethereal senses. It is a place where the sacred is most intensely experienced.

The axis mundi serves as a bridge connecting the divine with the earthly. It is a place where communication between the gods and humans is possible, often represented by sacred structures or holy sites. The axis mundi provides a fixed reference point that brings order to the world's chaos for the religious person. It is the starting point from which they can physically and spiritually orient themselves. The existence of this central point gives meaning and structure to the surrounding space, making the entire cosmos intelligible and navigable. (Eliade, 1957, pp. 20-67)

In contrast, the perspectives of Émile Durkheim, Jonathan Z. Smith and Ursala Rao situate the sacred within the social fabric, arguing that it arises from collective human activity. Émile Durkheim's sociological theory on the sacred and profane in "The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life" revolves around the idea that these categories are central to the structure and function of all religions. Durkheim posits that the sacred and the profane are the most basic and universal classifications of all things in human thought. The sacred represents things set apart and forbidden, inspiring awe, fear, and reverence. The profane encompasses the ordinary, mundane aspects of life. He believes that sacred things are not

inherently different from profane things; rather, their sacred status is conferred upon them by society. This designation is a result of collective agreement and societal needs. (Durkheim, 1995)

Durkheim argues that the sacred symbolises the collective conscience, the set of shared beliefs, values, and norms that bind a society together. Through rituals and religious practices, society expresses and reinforces its collective conscience. Rituals play a crucial role in distinguishing the sacred from the profane. They are structured activities that unite individuals, reinforcing social bonds and the collective conscience. Rituals can be positive, such as celebratory or negative, meaning prohibitive, and both serve to maintain the sacred-profane distinction. (Colpe, 2005) (Durkheim, 1995)

Durkheim discovered that the totem, a symbol that typically represents a clan and is an animal or plant, embodies the sacred in his research on totemic religions, particularly among Australian Aboriginals. The totem is an embodiment of the group's identity and the sacred power that society holds in high regard. The representations of fundamental societal values and ideals are embodied by sacred objects and symbols. They are tangible symbols of the society's moral authority and collective beliefs. Religion serves critical social functions by means of the sacred-profane dichotomy. Social cohesion is fostered by the unification of individuals through shared beliefs and practices. It also offers structure and significance, assisting individuals in comprehending their position in the world and directing their conduct. (Colpe, 2005) (Durkheim, 1995)

The sacred is maintained through taboos and prohibitions, which delineate what is forbidden and help prevent the sacred from becoming profane. Violations of these taboos can result in severe social consequences, emphasising the power and importance of maintaining the sacred-profane distinction. The sacred is not static; it evolves as society changes. New objects, ideas, and practices can become sacred, while others may lose their sacred status. (Colpe, 2005)

While Smith contends that holy sites are not intrinsically holy but rather defined as such by human actions and ritual practices, Durkheim sees sacred spaces as socially constructed and emphasises their part in fostering collective identity and social cohesion through shared beliefs and practices.

Jonathan Z. Smith posits that rituals and religious practices distinguish a sacred place from other spaces. It is defined by the activities and meanings attributed to it by a religious community. He suggests that sacred space acts as a focusing lens.

> "*Indeed, this is necessarily so if we take seriously the notion of a temple, a sacred place, as a focusing lens. The ordinary (which remains, to the observer's eye, wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes sacred, simply by being there. It becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way. This is a most important point, one that is only recently gaining acceptance among historians of religion...*"
> (Smith, 1980, p. 115)

When we consider a temple or a holy site as a "focussing lens," it suggests that what is otherwise ordinary becomes significant and sacred because our attention is directed towards it in a particular way. Smith underlines that sacredness is not necessarily inherent in a place or object but is attributed to them by human perspective and focus.

This perspective challenges the traditional view that sacred places are intrinsically holy. Instead, it argues that a place's sacredness arises from how people perceive and engage with it. The "focussing lens" metaphor implies that focusing on an object or place transforms it into something sacred. This concept is gaining recognition among historians of religion, who are beginning to understand that sacredness can be constructed through human experience and perception rather than being an inherent quality of the place or object itself. (Smith, 1980)

Ursula Rao takes a contemporary anthropological approach, examining sacred spaces as dynamic and contested sites influenced by social, political, and economic factors. Rao argues that creating sacred spaces is not merely a spiritual or theological act but also a social and political one. Competing groups or individuals often conflict over how sacred spaces should be defined, used, and understood. Sacred spaces are more than physical locations; they are crucial in defining religious identity and community boundaries. By establishing sacred landscapes (e.g., temples, churches, pilgrimage sites), religious groups create a sense of belonging for believers while simultaneously distinguishing them from outsiders or non-believers. This process helps reinforce the social cohesion and collective identity of the religious group. (Rao, 2018)

Rituals performed within sacred spaces are essential in maintaining and reinforcing their sacredness. Religious rituals, such as prayers, ceremonies, and rites of passage, imbue spaces with meaning and ensure their continued relevance to the community. The sacred does not exist in isolation; it is embedded in the community's social fabric. Through rituals and collective practices, sacred spaces serve as a binding force, connecting the divine to everyday human life. Sacred spaces are not just spiritual entities but are strongly tied to

social, political, and cultural processes. They are created, contested, and maintained by human communities through rituals and social organisation, unifying believers and distinguishing them from outsiders. (Rao, 2018)

Rao highlights how sacred spaces are contested sites of power, especially during political transitions. When a new ruling power takes control of a region, it often seeks to establish its authority by appropriating sacred spaces. This can take several forms, such as eliminating sacred sites to erase the legacy of previous rulers and assert new dominance or Transforming existing sites to fit the new ruler's identity and narrative, thus embedding their rule into the spiritual landscape. Such actions reflect the broader theme of sacred spaces as political legitimacy and continuity markers, where authority is inscribed into the very fabric of religious and cultural practices. (Rao, 2018)

Sacred spaces are not only religious in function but also contested spaces of identity, belonging, and power struggles, reflecting larger socio-political tensions in pluralistic societies. This is seen in Ayodhya, Jerusalem, and Bamiyan, where religious tensions arising from one group's activities are perceived as encroaching upon the other's sacred spaces, which can escalate to large-scale conflicts. (Rao, 2018)

2.2 Types of Sacred Spaces

Sacred spaces can be broadly categorised into constructed and natural sacred spaces. Constructed sacred spaces are human-made sites such as temples, churches, mosques, and shrines deliberately built to serve as focal points for religious worship and community gathering. These spaces are often designed according to specific religious doctrines, architectural styles, and symbolic elements that reflect the beliefs and values of the faith. Constructed sacred spaces provide a tangible expression of the sacred, allowing for rituals, ceremonies, and communal practices that reinforce religious identity and cultural memory.

However, specific locations hold more importance to believers due to certain key events that occurred there. These are key sacred sites with deep meaning and connection to one or more specific religious communities and tend to have certain discerning features; they are ancient, massive architectural marvels that exhibit the artistry of the civilisation that created them. (Hassner, 2009, pp. 1-16)

Swayambhunath, a significant Buddhist pilgrimage site in Kathmandu, Nepal, is one of many notable constructed sacred spaces. The stupa is believed to have self-emerged from the

primordial waters, and the deity Swayambhu is worshipped here as a self-manifested Buddha. The entire hill on which the stupa stands is considered sacred, with the belief that the divine presence emerged naturally here.

The Jwalamukhi Temple in Himachal Pradesh, India, is one of the 51 Shakti Peethas and a significant pilgrimage destination where devotees come to witness the eternal flames. The temple is dedicated to the Goddess Jwalamukhi, who is worshipped as a natural flame that emerges from cracks in the rock. The flames are considered self-manifested and believed to be the goddess herself.

The Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf and the Iman Husayn Shrine in Karbala are both significant pilgrimage sites for Shi'a Muslims in Iraq. This is due to the presence of the remains of spiritual leaders. (Hassner, 2009, pp. 17-36)

On the other hand, natural sacred spaces are areas in the natural world that are regarded as sacrosanct because of their connection to historical events, spiritual significance, or divine presence. Some of these are revered for their inherent spiritual power or their connection to myths and legends, such as mountains, rivers, forests, and caverns. Numerous indigenous and ancient traditions, including those of Native American and Hindu cultures, regard these natural sites as manifestations of the divine, frequently incorporating them into their cosmological comprehension of the universe. In contrast to constructed spaces, natural sacred sites are frequently perceived as discovered rather than created, underscoring their organic connection to the spiritual realm.

One significant example is Mount Kailash in Tibet. It is considered sacred in several religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Bon, an indigenous religious tradition of Tibet. In Hinduism, it is believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva. Pilgrims believe that circumambulating the mountain on foot is a holy ritual that brings spiritual merit. The mountain is revered for its natural form and is seen as a manifestation of divine presence rather than because of a man-made structure or specific human action.

Sacred places of non-structured religions or folk, traditional, pagan religions may not have a built structure to identify their space but instead may encompass a natural formation, such as Uluru or Ayers Rock in Australia, sacred to the Anangu people; Black Hills or He Sapa, USA, sacred to the Lakota Sioux; and Stonehenge, England, considered sacred by modern Pagans and Druids, especially during the solstices.

Both natural and constructed sacred spaces function as anchors of faith, offering spaces for meditation, reflection, and worship. While natural sacred spaces underscore the belief in the sacredness of the earth itself, constructed spaces depict human endeavours to manifest the sacred within built environments, illustrating how various cultures interact with and interpret their spiritual landscapes. (Hassner, 2009, pp. 17-36)

2.3 Significance of Sacred Spaces

In contrast to ordinary territory, sacred spaces are intrinsically indivisible due to their three fundamental attributes. Initially, they are monolithic and incorporated, forming a unified entity that cannot be divided without compromising its spiritual integrity. Secondly, they are characterised by unyielding boundaries that distinguish the divine from the secular. Third, they are irreplaceable due to their spiritual singularity, which renders them incapable of being replaced. In general, divine encounters, miracles, or historical revelations are associated with particular locations. Sacred spaces are incapable of being divided, compensated for, or relocated, rendering disputes particularly difficult to resolve. Their indivisibility is not predicated on physical attributes, but rather on religious convictions and spiritual significance, making it nearly impossible to compromise and frequently resulting in conflict. (Hassner, 2009, pp. 37-50)

Mircea Eliade's concept of the Axis Mundi highlights the central role of sacred sites as cosmic connectors between heaven and earth. These places are physical locations and spiritual anchors that maintain the link between the divine and the material world. Destroying or dividing them is not merely an act of physical alteration but a symbolic severance of this spiritual connection. Many shrines are deliberately designed as concentric circles radiating from a central point, reinforcing their unity and wholeness. Any attempt to divide a sacred site horizontally disrupts its spiritual coherence, while a vertical division destroys its function as a conduit between realms. Since sacred sites embody cosmic order, any fragmentation destabilises their religious significance. To believers, such an act threatens the very foundation of their spiritual existence, making these spaces deeply contested and often at the heart of religious and political conflict. (Hassner, 2009, pp. 37-50)

These spaces are regarded as consecrated territory, serving as a transition between the mundane and spiritual realms. In numerous indigenous and traditional cultures, there is minimal to no distinction between the land, humans, and their community. Individual identity is deeply connected to the land and the land is inextricably linked to the mythologies, origin stories, and fundamental identity of the people. Consequently, any attack on sacred land or sites is perceived as an attack on the integrity of the people and their society. Traditional communities may experience an "irrecoverable rupture" of the unity between people and the landscape due to physical separation from their sacred lands due to relocation. This separation has the potential to result in the social group's decline and extinction, which could be catastrophic. (Thorley & Gunn, 2008)

The three case studies in this report are examples of communities trying to hold on to a sacred space that they believe is an important aspect of their cultural and religious identity. Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Ayodhya in India, and the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan are prominent examples of contested sacred spaces with great religious significance for multiple communities. Each site functions as an axis mundi, or a centre of the world, where the sacred and the profane intersect, serving as focal points for religious identity and devotion. They inspire a deep sense of awe and reverence while simultaneously evoking fear and conflict due to their contested status and historical significance. These sites demonstrate how sacred spaces are made and remade through continued rituals, practices, and contested claims, reinforcing their status as divine epicentres for their respective religious communities.

Sacred spaces are qualitatively different and imbued with religious significance. The rituals and collective worship of a community transform the space into a repository of tradition, belief, and meaning, storing collective memory for generations to indulge in and contribute to, in addition to the inherent sacredness of a place. Not only does their persistent presence provide individuals with a sense of inclusion, but it also plays a critical role in the preservation of the cultural memory of religious communities. Regrettably, they also serve as battlegrounds for identity, authority, and heritage. As we transition to the following chapter, we will investigate how sacred spaces serve as receptacles of cultural memory, transmitting the narratives, histories, and symbols that preserve religious identity across generations and influence how communities recollect, interpret, and transmit their sacred traditions.

Chapter 3 Cultural Memory

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary domain that investigates the processes of memory formation, preservation, and dissemination at both individual and communal levels. It examines how individuals and cultures remember and understand historical events, utilising insights from psychology, sociology, history, and cultural studies.

> *"Memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level."* (Assmann J. , 2008, p. 109)

Jan Assmann posits that memory is the mental faculty connecting past experiences to identity, shaping personal and collective senses of self over time. Memory can be segmented into personal, social and cultural memory. Personal memory refers to individual memory within the brain and mind, recognised before the 1920s as the personal recollection of experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Developed by Maurice Halbwachs, social memory emphasises that memory is shaped by social interactions and reinforced through shared experiences within a group. Introduced by Aby Warburg, the concept of cultural memory emphasises how cultures hold onto their identity and connect to the past using cultural objects like art, literature, and rituals, thereby preserving and transmitting collective memory. (Assmann J. , 2008)

Collective memory and cultural memory studies are two critical branches of this field. Collective memory is the shared recollection of a group, which is influenced by communal experiences, cultural narratives, and social dynamics. It is essential in the moulding of historical memory and the development of group identity over time. Cultural memory studies concentrate on preserving and transmitting these collective memories across generations through cultural practices, artefacts, and institutions. An individual's collective and cultural contexts frequently influence and reshape their personal recollections, which is why these branches are closely linked to individual memory.

Anthropologist Jan Vansina delineated three 'Time Frames' about the manner in which groups recall their heritage. The 'Recent Past' frame pertains to collective memories transmitted through contemporary social interactions, which may be verbally conveyed across three generations. Memory in this context is immediate and individual, frequently transmitted through firsthand accounts. It intersects with history and collective memory, encompassing firsthand accounts that can be documented. The 'Floating Gap' frame refers to the interval exceeding three generations during which oral history becomes fragmented

and memories are limited. This is the transitional phase where memories are no longer directly recalled by living individuals but have not yet become part of deep cultural tradition. It marks a gap between remembered history and oral tradition; memories here are often at risk of fading unless institutionalised. (Assmann J. , 2008)

The events in the 'Remote Past' frame have lost all direct human recall and have been turned into myths, folklore, or religious narratives where historical events combine with symbolic narratives. This phase correlates with cultural memory, where stories are incorporated into rituals, religious beliefs, or communal identity and it is well documented and preserved through organisations, art forms and celebrations. Vansina's three-time frames are valuable in memory studies because they help explain how societies preserve, transform, and lose memories over time. Collective and Cultural memories and Historical preservation aim to capture the three-time frames and ensure that future generations are aware of their heritage. (Assmann J. , 2008)

This chapter discusses how individual and collective memories are formed and reinforced by the social and cultural connections made and the impact of history on cultural and collective memory.   It will also discuss the bearing of memory on identity creation and the influence of the loss of heritage spaces. The first section, 3.1, will cover some of the theoretical perspectives in memory studies concerning individual, collective and cultural memory. The following section, 3.2, will discuss the involvement of history in memory studies.   In section 3.3, the role of memory in the cultural and religious identity of communities will be examined, followed by a conclusion in section 3.4.

The terms "Communicative memory", "Collective memory", and Cultural memory" are used widely in this section. The term "communicative memory" was introduced to differentiate between Halbwachs' "collective memory" and the term "cultural memory". While cultural memory refers to a shared identity through traditions and cultural objects, Halbwachs focused on social memory and excluded cultural aspects. To preserve his distinction, collective memory is now divided into "communicative", which refers to everyday social interactions and "cultural", which denotes traditions and symbolic forms, acknowledging both as distinct ways of remembering. (Assmann J. , 2008). However, in this essay, Halbwachs literature still uses the term "collective memory" to refer to social interactions.

3.1 Memory Studies Theories

In the early 20th century, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and art historian Aby Warburg independently formulated theories of "collective" or "social memory." Both scholars believed that collective memory should not be conceptualised in biological terms but instead approached from a cultural viewpoint. They theorised that a person's individuality was developed by the community they belonged to rather than a trait passed down through genetics. They argued that the particular behaviour and attributes a person exhibits because he belongs to a specific community were due to the social interaction and customs of the group instead of through biological contributions. (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995)

In "The Collective Memory", Halbwachs lays the foundation for his theory on Collective memory by comparing Individual and Collective forms of memory. He explains how our memories are influenced by the impressions of others who have shared a similar experience. Personal memories, exemplified by Halbwach's reminiscence of residing in Reims, France, are vivid and cohesive, anchored in real experiences, ideas, and emotions. Conversely, collective memory, exemplified by his recollection of Joan of Arc anointing Charles VII at Reims, is acquired through historical accounts and social interactions. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 50-87)

Whilst Individual memories are deemed unique and discrete, he argues that even these are shaped by societal factors. The environment and different social groups we engage with impact our perceptions and thoughts. He introduced the concept of social frameworks (*cadres sociaux*) to structure the memories recalled and interpret them through family, religion, social class, educational institutions, cultural norms, and other affiliated groups. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 22-49). (Erll, 2008)

Individual memories can fade or become distorted over time, influenced by changes in relationships, the influence of others' recollections, or the disbanding of groups. For instance, a teacher might forget specific students due to the routine nature of their experiences, while students remember the same class vividly. Similarly, memories tied to a group can diminish when that group disbands, just as forgetting a language can sever ties to a culture. Nonetheless, the potential for entirely individual recollections exists, such as a lone encounter with nature, grounded in "sensory intuition," which refers to direct sensory experiences unaffected by collective influence. Although group memory prevails, a residual,

distinctly individual facet of memory may persist, resisting collective influence and underscoring the intricacy of our recollection processes.

Halbwachs employs the analogy of a heavy object suspended by delicate, interwoven wires to demonstrate how these memories, seemingly situated in the void of individual consciousness, are fundamentally supported by a framework of social connections. The challenge in retrieving certain memories is due to the distance or rarity of interaction with the social groups that influenced them. Consequently, even our most intimate and ostensibly distinctive memories are not wholly our own but are grounded in the collective memories of the social environments to which we belong, with their perceived distinctiveness being a natural illusion produced by the intricacy of these influences. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 22-49).

In traditional societies, memory was linked to the sacred. Their identity was maintained through the collective memory embedded in rituals, practices, and spaces that the group shared. In modern societies, history strips away this sacredness, turning memory into something to be analysed and critiqued rather than revered. Nora points out the secularisation of memory in modern society. As society's narratives become chronicled, the sacred aspect of memory is gradually lost. (Nora, 1989)

Nora explains that *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory) emerge precisely because *milieux de mémoire* (real environments of memory) have disappeared. As society's stories become more documented, memory must be intentionally preserved. These sites of memory are physical and symbolic, functioning as places where memory is preserved even as lived experiences and cultural memories have eroded as communities shrink or move away from their ancestral lands, prompting the emergence of *lieux de mémoire* as intentional efforts to preserve historical and cultural memory. (Nora, 1989)

The sites of memory arise from two key developments: the reflexive turn of history upon itself and the decline of spontaneous, lived memory. As societies modernise and abandon traditional rituals and communal memories, they increasingly rely on artificial means—such as museums, cemeteries, and commemorations—to preserve their past. The *lieux de mémoire* emerged because, without active preservation, memories would fade in the face of historical progress. These sites are defensive markers against the erasure of collective

memory, often fiercely defended by minority groups striving to maintain their identity. (Nora, 1989)

According to Nora, what we now refer to as memory is actually a type of history that has been painstakingly documented and kept by outside sources like data banks, museums, and archives rather than genuine, spontaneous recollection. There was a time when lived customs, silent cues, and deeply rooted behaviours passed down through the generations contained accurate memories. However, with a society fixated on conserving every remnant of the past, modern memory has changed to become more archival, intentional, and personal. Fear of losing the past and anxiety about the future are the driving forces behind this change, which has resulted in an unparalleled volume of data, documents, and testimonies. Modern memory is now shaped by external "prosthetic" devices rather than being a natural, collective experience. The proliferation of archives reflects society's need to preserve every possible memory, even trivial ones, as though they might be called upon for proof in the future. This extensive production of archives creates a paradox. While the materialisation of memory has expanded, memory itself has become fragmented and detached from lived experience, existing now as a secondary or artificial form of remembering. (Nora, 1989)

When history is selectively remembered, repressed, or altered, it can harm communal memory and cause identity distortions. When political regimes or dominant groups control historical narratives, they have the power to reshape communal memory in ways that marginalise or erase minority communities' experiences. This politicisation of memory influences how groups create their identities in the present as well as how the past is remembered.

However, because cultural memory maintains customs, rituals, and symbols that go beyond the current political or social environment, it checks this historical manipulation. Cultural memory is a lasting source of meaning that is rooted in customs and tangible culture that have been passed down through the years, in contrast to collective memory, which is frequently influenced by modern social structures. Cultural memory can help groups preserve their sense of identity and continuity even when historical erasure or repression occurs by resisting or reinterpreting the harmful distortions of history.

The collective store of information, stories, and experiences that a community maintains throughout time, forming its identity and values, is referred to as cultural memory. Religious locations and their memory carriers, such as myths, rituals, historiography, and symbols that are passed down through the generations, are intimately associated with cultural memory. These hallowed locations act as hubs for transmitting and preserving cultural memory, strengthening group identity and spiritual continuity in ways beyond straightforward storytelling. Cultural memory is significant because it serves as the foundation of collective identity and offers a sense of continuity and belonging in a constantly changing world. (Erll, 2008)

> "*Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorised, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another*." (Assmann J. , 2008, p. 110)

Cultural memory exists outside individual minds, stored in emblematic objects and practices. These "objectified" forms are established and can be passed down across generations. Institutions such as monuments, libraries, and museums play a key role in preserving and transmitting this cultural memory over time. Personal memory interacts with objects like artefacts, symbols, and places, which trigger recollections through material contact. (Assmann J. , 2008)

In '*Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook'*, Erll (2008) presents a similar understanding of cultural memory as a dynamic exchange between the past and present within socio-cultural contexts. This perspective considers both individual and national memories, recognising the influence of major global events and various forms of stored memory. These forms include recall, oral tradition, visual stimuli, artistic expressions, and other non-narrative methods of transmission (Erll, 2008).

Culture, according to anthropological and semiotic theories, is a three-dimensional framework consisting of social (people, relations, institutions), material (artefacts, media), and mental (ways of thinking) aspects. This framework underpins "cultural memory," which includes social memory (studied in social sciences), material or medial memory (focused on literary and media studies), and mental or cognitive memory (explored in psychology and neuroscience). Although the above dimensions are distinct for analytical purposes, they all contribute to the formation of cultural memories. For instance, the history of mentalities investigates the relationship between material and mental aspects, whereas memorials

reflect social and material dimensions. In the same vein, conversational remembering investigates the correlation between cognitive and social phenomena. (Erll, 2008)

3.2 Collective & Cultural Memory and History

Memory and history are closely linked. Collective memory is multifaceted. It is indicative of the diversity of shared memories within groups, which are essential to the identity of the people and may not be incorporated into the overarching historical narrative. In contrast, history is a more structured, objective account of the past, typically focusing on selected events recorded in textbooks and official records. The historian's perspective, which often prioritises events based on their significance, aims to create a coherent and objective narrative that transcends the specific experiences of smaller groups. This creates a key distinction: while collective memory retains what is meaningful to a group, formal history often omits the everyday experiences and emotions that shape people's lives. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 50-87)

Maurice Halbwachs argues that individual memories are intertwined with broader historical events, emphasising that personal recollections cannot be separated from the historical periods in which they occur. Although significant events like the Franco-Prussian War did not directly shape his childhood, he acknowledges that the social and psychological atmosphere of the time influenced his experiences. He highlights the importance of historical context in enriching personal memory, demonstrating how external forces shape individual perceptions. Halbwachs illustrates this idea by referencing how cultural artefacts such as paintings and books from that era helped him reconstruct and understand the social setting of his childhood. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 50-87)

Halbwachs makes the case that tradition is essential and that history emerges when societal memory wanes. Historians take over to record events as societies change throughout time and lose their direct ties to the past. These historical documents could, however, be devoid of the background information and subtleties of those who were there. Local customs and tales, for example, may be honoured and cherished by the people of a village. However, when they fade over the course of many generations, they are reduced to far-off, written historical narratives. In historical narratives, lived experiences no longer have the same direct emotional link, indicating a lack of continuity. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 50-87) (Nora, 1989)

Pierre Nora shares this opinion, arguing that history is a critical, intellectual, and secular reconstruction of past events. Memory, on the other hand, is lived, collective, unconscious, and connected to customs, rituals, and a common history. Nora claims that contemporary society has shifted from living memory, which was formerly ingrained in daily life (known as milieux de mémoire), to a fixation with conserving history through deliberate memorialisation (lieux de mémoire), such as monuments, museums, and archives. (Nora, 1989)

Furthermore, historians rely on written records when memory preservation becomes necessary. While memoirs or historical documents can offer insights into the past, they often fail to fully capture the events' lived experience and emotional depth. Halbwachs points out the shifts in generational perspective, noting that history tends to categorise time into distinct periods, while collective memory is more fluid. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 50-87)

The conventional dichotomy between history and memory, originating from Halbwachs and subsequently popularised by Pierre Nora, juxtaposes history as abstract and inert against memory as vivid and significant. This binary is frequently emotionally charged, contrasting organic memory with artificial history, or community-generated memories with government narratives. This divide is seen as useless for comprehending cultural representations of the past. Conversely, perceiving history as one of several modalities of recollection is more advantageous. The past is not static but is perpetually reinterpreted, with recollections of the same events manifesting in many forms, including myth, political history, trauma, or familial narratives. Consequently, historiography is a distinct method of interacting with the past, alongside other cultural memories, each possessing its own legitimacy and purpose. (Erll, 2008)

Rothberg's concept of Multidirectional memory provides a framework for understanding how memories of different historical events intersect and influence each other within societies. Multidirectional memory emphasises that cultural memory is not static or confined to a single narrative. Instead, memories of different groups and events interact dynamically, shaping one another. In this view, memories are not in competition but coexist and cross-influence within the broader cultural memory. For instance, the public remembrance of slavery can inform and deepen the understanding of the Holocaust, encouraging solidarity rather than competition among memory communities. (Rothberg, 2009)

The article "*Places of Power and Memory in Mesoamerica's Past and Present*" explores the relationship between power and memory, highlighting how power dynamics influence the interpretation of a place's past and future. Power, understood as domination in a Weberian sense, affects how groups organise and recall memory. Places and landscapes function as mnemonic devices, storing cultural and collective memories. For instance, in Mesoamerica, the mythical city of Tollan was replicated across different sites, becoming a symbol of shared memory. (Graña-Behrens, 2016)

Memory is distinct from history, which is seen as an independent truth, but memory can be used strategically to shape social identity, reconstruct the past, and organise the present. It is negotiated among groups and constrained by factors such as authority and consensus about the past. Forgetting, as the counterpart to memory, is an essential tool for collective amnesia, often used in nation-building to eliminate divisive memories. Both memory and forgetting are critical in how societies shape their identity and navigate their future. (Graña-Behrens, 2016)

3.3 Cultural & Collective Memory and the loss of heritage spaces and impact on identity

The concepts of "cultural" or "collective" memory are rooted in a metaphor that extends individual cognitive processes of remembering to the collective level. This metaphor allows scholars to speak of a "nation's memory" or a "religious community's memory." Jeffrey K. Olick highlights two distinct views of culture: one as subjective meanings within individual minds and the other as public symbols embedded in society. (Erll, 2008) If a sacred site is destroyed or contested, its loss affects people in both ways. Subjectively, believers experience emotional and cognitive distress because the site is tied to personal faith. Publicly, its destruction erases a shared cultural symbol, affecting national, religious, or ethnic identity.

The impact on collective and cultural memory can be profound when such spaces are lost, whether through destruction, displacement, or neglect. Losing a heritage space disrupts the tangible connection to the past, eroding the physical anchors that sustain community identity and memory. Without these spaces, the performance of cultural memory becomes fragmented, and the collective memory that binds individuals to a shared history weakens.

This can result in a sense of dislocation and identity crisis as communities struggle to reconstruct or preserve their memory without heritage spaces' continuity.

Halbwachs suggests that collective memory is inherently tied to specific physical spaces, which serve as enduring frameworks for recalling past events. He emphasises that space is not just a collection of physical forms but is socially constructed, influenced by the activities and relationships associated with it. Memories are evoked by significant locations, such as childhood residences or landmarks, due to their association with social contexts and experiences. Space is a stable repository for collective memory, as it persists over time, in contrast to transient impressions. The enduring nature of physical space enables the preservation and recollection of memories despite the evolution of social groups or activities. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 128-158)

Halbwachs highlights how deeply embedded and unyielding a group's relationship with its physical surroundings is. The group becomes reluctant to adjust to changes in their environment as a result of their thoughts and behaviours being influenced over time by the familiar images of their surroundings. He contends that although tangible things, such as buildings, may be transportable, the close ties that are forged between them and the group's identity are difficult to break. Since these buildings are connected to the group's collective memory and sense of identity, any attempts to alter or destroy them are met with resentment. The tangible environment thus becomes a symbol of local tradition. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 128-158)

Halbwachs stresses that physical objects and spaces are essential for preserving religious memory, with sacred sites such as churches or convents closely related to a group's collective memory. These spaces are filled with religious symbols like altars and statues that anchor the memory of ceremonies, prayers, and rituals. Separating sacred and profane spaces further strengthens believers' connection to their faith, as entering a sacred space like a church renews religious experiences and memories. Spatial arrangements within these religious locations reinforce specific religious thoughts and practices, helping maintain continuity across generations. Even uncertain or disputed holy sites, such as those sought by the Crusaders, retain their religious significance simply through belief in their existence. The Crusaders' efforts to reclaim Jerusalem and other holy sites demonstrate how certain places are imbued with religious significance and how these places help believers connect

with their faith's history. Even when the exact locations of biblical events are uncertain or disputed, the mere belief that such places exist is enough to maintain their religious importance. This belief allows the faithful to anchor their memories and religious experiences to these sacred sites. The permanence of sacred spaces provides stability and ensures that religious traditions and memories endure despite changes in the broader world. (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 128-158)

A dam construction project in southeast Turkey destroyed the landscape and cultural heritage of hundreds of thousands of people in Cattepe. Over many generations, the Kurdish people in the area developed a close bond with the river and terrain, strengthening their collective identity and cultural memory. This tradition was upended by the forced migration, which prevented them from making new memories and put them at risk of losing their identity forever. Cultural legacy can be erased by this damage and the absence of community participation in decision-making, which can cause psychological distress. (Apaydin, 2020)

Ani, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on the Turkish-Armenian border, exemplifies the intricate connection between anguish, cultural memory, and legacy. With thousands of years of history, Ani is most famous for the mediaeval Armenian Kingdom era, which was followed by Seljuk, Ottoman, and Turkish conquests. The village was greatly affected by the early 20th-century Armenian ethnic cleansing, which left descendants in the diaspora with a sense of connection to the location even if they never lived there. Armenian tourists who visit Ani emphasise the site's emotional significance for their shared identity, demonstrating how trauma prevents the development of new memories and traditions. On the other hand, the Turkish population that moved there has aggressively embraced the environment, tearing down ancient Armenian buildings to construct a new village next to Ani. Using the past to construct a new heritage reflects the continuity of cultural memory and its link to material culture, blending destruction with reconstruction to meet the needs of the current community. The site exemplifies how cultural memory is shaped by both historical trauma and everyday engagement with heritage spaces. (Apaydin, 2020)

3.4 Conclusion

A cultural memory scientific study conducted by researchers from the Centre for Social Learning and Cognitive Evolution, School of Biology, University of St Andrews, UK, studied

humans and animals' transmission of knowledge.   The Study examines two forms of memory: "genetic memory," where survival traits are inherited through DNA over generations, and "cultural memory," which involves storing knowledge in books, artefacts, and media. While genetic memory aids survival, cultural memory allows societies to preserve and build upon knowledge across generations, playing a key role in human progress and success. (Rendell, 2013)

The Study posits that cultural memory enables populations to adapt to changing environments by preserving successful past strategies. This accumulated knowledge serves as a resource in times of crisis. An example is how older women in the Solomon Islands preserved knowledge of edible wild plants, which helped their community survive after devastating cyclones. The accuracy of information transfer between individuals directly affects the longevity of cultural memory. Research shows an exponential relationship between transmission accuracy (fidelity) and the preservation of cultural knowledge, meaning that even slight accuracy improvements can significantly extend cultural traditions' lifespan. Humans have language and teaching, which allow for extremely high-fidelity information transmission. This capability enables humans to maintain long-lasting traditions and accumulate vast cultural knowledge. (Rendell, 2013)

Cultural memory is about how the mind remembers the past through stories and practices of a society and not about historical knowledge, which tends to be a factual reconstruction. Cultural memory is linked to immovable stations in the past and involves selective remembering and forgetting, which aids in developing a group's identity. (Assmann J. , 2008) The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is sacred to both Judaism and Islam, and its contested status highlights how sacred spaces serve as focal points of collective memory and identity. Any perceived threat to the site fuels religious and political tensions, as both communities see their historical and spiritual legacies at stake.

Similarly, the Ayodhya conflict in India demonstrates how memory shapes religious and national identity. The destruction and reconstruction of religious monuments reflect broader struggles over history and legitimacy, showing how collective memory influences contemporary religious and political realities.
The 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban exemplifies how erasing sacred landmarks disrupts cultural and religious memory. More than an act of iconoclasm,

it was an attempt to erase a historical narrative conflicting with the Taliban's ideology. However, memory endures through global cultural consciousness, digital reconstructions, and preservation efforts.

These cases show that religious and cultural identity is deeply tied to sacred spaces and the memories that sustain them. The loss or contestation of such sites disrupts historical continuity, provoking grief, resistance, and even violence. However, memory remains resilient, preserved through rituals, oral traditions, and historical narratives, ensuring these sites retain symbolic significance even in their absence. Thus, memory serves both as a foundation for identity and a means of resisting historical erasure. The following section will explore the three case studies in greater detail.

Chapter 4: Contested Sites

Sacred sites often emerge as centres of contention due to their importance for religious and political entities. Believers regard these locations as venues for sacred dialogue, bestowers of blessings, and the enhancement of faith, while various religious factions vie for dominance to marginalise competing traditions and affirm their own authenticity. Political entities perceive sacred sites as instruments for exerting influence over religious communities, movements, and leadership frameworks. In contrast to other disputed assets, sacred sites resist simple division or allocation, as doing so would infringe upon fundamental religious tenets. They might engage in violence to establish dominance, as their convictions necessitate total sovereignty over revered domains. (Hassner, 2009, pp. 1-16)

In this chapter, three sacred sites will be analysed as case studies on the impact of contested sites on cultural memory and identity. The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Ramjanmabhoomi in Ayodhya, and the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan exemplify the complex interplay of dual sacrality and identity politics. In each instance, the dual sacrality of these sites has transformed them into arenas where religious significance and identity politics intersect, resulting in significant cultural and societal implications. The three sites were selected because they are contested, their destruction and repurpose heightened religious tensions within the communities affected. Their current status is a potential trigger for further violence despite efforts at compromise and resolution.

The analysis of the three case studies engages with concepts introduced in chapters 2 and 3. Mircea Eliade conceptualised sacred spaces as an "*axis mundi*", as mentioned in chapter 2. Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire,* as discussed in Chapter 3, reveals how holy spaces can be instrumentalised to reinforce or challenge national and religious narratives. For example, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas highlights how acts of iconoclasm can reshape cultural memory by eliminating symbols of coexistence.

Ursula Rao underscores the performative and political aspects of sacred spaces in Chapter 2, contending that they serve as platforms for the negotiation of memory, identity, and power. In the same vein, Émile Durkheim's comprehension of religion as a social phenomenon emphasises the significance of sacred spaces in the development of collective solidarity. The repercussions of the destruction or reconstruction of such spaces are felt throughout

the social fabric, resulting in either the unification of communities in mourning and resistance or the escalation of divisions and animosities.

The Temple Mount, Ayodhya, and the Bamiyan Buddhas are sacred spaces illuminating the complex relationships between power, identity, and memory. These sites' preservation, annihilation, or transformation influences communities' narratives regarding their identity and position in the world. As Eliade implies, these spaces are not merely physical; they are the symbolic epicentres around which civilisations are orientated, making their fate a significant matter for cultural memory and identity.

In Section 1 of this chapter, the historical background of the three case studies are detailed. Section 2 consists of an analysis of the case studies. Section 2.1 discusses the dual sacrality of the sites and its impact on cultural identity. Section 2.2 examines the case studies concerning the impact of identity politics on cultural memory.

4.1 Background of the Selected Case Studies
4.1.1 Ayodhya – Ramjanmabhoomi / Babri Masjid

Over the course of centuries, the sacred landscape of Ayodhya has undergone significant transformations and has been influenced by religious, political, and cultural forces. By the 15th and 16th centuries, Ayodhya's religious geography underwent an important shift from a pluralistic pilgrimage centre that reflected a variety of Hindu traditions, including Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and local deities, to a predominantly Ramaite site, as revealed by the work of Indologist Hans Bakker. This "Ramatization" process reinterpreted previous traditions by connecting the geography of Ayodhya with mythical narratives of Lord Rama's divine dominion in the "Tretayuga" era, an epoch in Hindu cosmology. Archaeological evidence further emphasises the antiquity of Ayodhya, with the earliest strata dating back to the 7th century BCE. Its significance was not limited to Vaishnavism; it also served as a critical hub for Buddhism during the Mauryan period, as evidenced by structures such as the Mani Parvat stupa, which were subsequently reinterpreted within Ramaite traditions. (Shaw, 2000)

Ayodhya's importance as a Hindu sacred site is deeply rooted in its ancient history. Featured prominently in texts such as the Ramayana and the Puranas, it is depicted as the illustrious capital of the solar dynasty and the kingdom of Rama. This ideal king exemplified dharma (righteousness). This portrayal established Ayodhya as a symbolic centre for Hindu

ideals of governance, social harmony, and divine intervention in human affairs. During the medieval era, Ayodhya flourished as a significant pilgrimage destination, with temples dedicated to Rama further cementing its sacred status.

Islamic influence in South Asia began minimally in the 8th century with Arab victories in Sind but grew rapidly from the 10th century as Turkic Muslim troops attacked northeastern India, eventually establishing the Delhi Sultanate around the 12th century. By the 13th century, much of North India was under Islamic dominion. (Talbot, 1995)

During this period, Hindu society elevated the Ramayana as a cultural icon of resistance, with Rama symbolising Indian identity and Ravana representing the alien "Other." Temples and representations of Rama grew, reinforcing Hindu identity. The name "Hindu," originally a Persian geographical designation, acquired ethnic and religious significance after the 12th century, signifying a developing Indic identity. Prior to British colonial rule (pre-1947), during the period of Muslim political supremacy, Hindu nationalists assert that extensive temple desecration occurred, alleging the destruction of 60,000 Hindu temples, with 3,000 subsequently replaced by mosques, including the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, purportedly constructed on the site of a temple denoting Lord Rama's birthplace. (Talbot, 1995)

The rulers of Ayodhya strategically linked its sacred geography to the mythical grandeur of Lord Rama during the Gupta period, which spanned the 4th to 5th centuries, thereby solidifying its status as a pilgrimage centre. Nevertheless, the site's identity has consistently been a subject of controversy, as a variety of cultural, political, and sectarian factors have shaped it. The association with the Rama cult experienced growth in the 11th and 12th centuries; however, it was disrupted by the rise of Islam and the 1192 invasion by Muhammad Ghuri. Ayodhya experienced a resurgence as a Ramaite pilgrimage centre in the 18th century, which was characterised by sectarian tensions between the Vaishnavite and Shaivite factions. The construction of the Babri Mosque in 1527 on a site that Hindus believe to be the birthplace of Lord Rama added an additional layer of controversy, thereby integrating Ayodhya into India's contemporary religious and political conflicts (Shaw, 2000) The present dispute around the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site originates from at least the 19th century, as British colonial records indicate intermittent disputes between Hindus and Muslims concerning access. In 1885, a Hindu leader initiated a legal action to get authorisation for the construction of a temple at the location. However, the court denied the

request, citing concerns regarding public order. In December 1949, idols of Lord Rama were clandestinely positioned within the mosque, heightening community discord. The government designated the property as disputed, secured its gates, and limited access to both parties. Legal disputes arose in the 1950s and 1960s when Hindu and Muslim factions asserted ownership, although the cases remained unsettled for decades. (Mehta, 2015)

The 1980s signified a pivotal moment with the emergence of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's (VHP) initiative to restore the land for a Rama temple. This movement acquired substantial momentum, driven by Hindu nationalist views. In 1986, a judicial mandate to open the mosque gates for Hindu prayer incited demonstrations among Muslims, who perceived the ruling as politically driven. In 1989, the VHP conducted a symbolic ceremony for laying the foundation stone near the mosque, amplifying the demand for a Rama temple and elevating the controversy into a national issue. (Mehta, 2015)

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as a crucial entity in the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, utilising the issue to unify Hindu electoral support. Under the leadership of L.K. Advani, the BJP embraced the temple's construction as a central political objective. Advani's Rath Yatra, a national chariot procession, sought to galvanise support but resulted in communal divisiveness and violent rioting in many locations. His arrest in Bihar momentarily stalled the campaign but exacerbated tensions. In December 1992, ongoing legal conflicts regarding the site's ownership resulted in a large-scale mobilisation by the VHP, with the backing of the BJP. Numerous volunteers assembled in Ayodhya, advocating for a Rama temple and dismantling the Babri Masjid. This dynamic and multifaceted history depicts Ayodhya not as a static holy place but as a sacred location perpetually influenced by shifting religious and political narratives. (Davis, 2009)

4.1.2 Temple Mount – Har Habayit / Haram al-Sharif

The First and Second Temples of Judaism were situated in a mountainous area of Jerusalem, identified in Jewish tradition as Mount Moriah. On this biblical site, Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac. Over time, this location became known as the Temple Mount (Har Habayit). The First Temple, constructed by King Solomon in 957 BCE, served as the focal point of Israelite devotion and contained the Ark of the Covenant. In 586 BCE, Babylonian armies led by Nebuchadnezzar II obliterated it, resulting in the exile of the Jewish

populace and a transition to portable religious rituals such as prayer and Torah study. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel instilled hope for restoration, characterising the exile as divine retribution and repentance as the means to redemption. (AICE, 1998) (Loewenberg, 2013)

Following the temple's demolition, Jews maintained their association with the Temple Mount through prayers, customs, and sporadic visits despite imperial prohibitions and displacement. Jewish prayers around the world consistently invoke Jerusalem and the aspiration for the temple's reconstruction, with certain Jews contravening limitations to worship at the location. Throughout the Fatimid and Crusader epochs, Jews faced killings, expulsions, and restricted access to the Mount, yet they maintained unwavering loyalty. Rabbinic discussions on the permissibility of accessing the site, stemming from apprehensions about ritual impurity, ultimately resulted in prohibitions becoming the prevailing position by the mediaeval era. (Loewenberg, 2013)

In the 16th century, Sultan Suleiman designated the Western Wall as a place of prayer for Jews, while access to the Mount remained restricted. Rabbinic authorities continued to enforce prohibitions, emphasising concerns over sacred areas. By the 19th century, following the Crimean War, Jews gained limited access to the Mount under British influence, but rabbinic leaders maintained their prohibitions, and many Jews adhered to these rulings. (Loewenberg, 2013)

Following the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel acquired possession of the Old City, encompassing the Temple Mount. Initially, Jewish prayer was authorised; however, political sensitivities subsequently imposed limits, permitting Jewish visits and forbidding prayer. Currently, access is stringently controlled and overseen by Israeli security personnel and Muslim waqf caretakers. Notwithstanding legal assurances of worship rights, Jewish praying on the Mount is nevertheless forbidden, highlighting the site's dual religious and political importance. (Loewenberg, 2013)

The tensions between both groups have led to one of the most violent confrontations in the city's recent history. On October 8, 1990, the unrest was sparked by the "Temple Mount Faithful", a Jewish nationalist group, announcing plans to march near the site during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, intending to lay a cornerstone for a Third Temple. This plan

alarmed Palestinian leaders, who urged Muslims to defend the sanctity of the site. Thousands of Palestinians gathered on the Temple Mount, while Jewish worshippers assembled below at the Western Wall. Despite revoking the group's permit to march, Israeli police did not effectively communicate this to the Muslim leaders. Around 10:40 a.m., clashes erupted when Palestinian youths, possibly reacting to rumours of the group's imminent arrival or provoked by tear gas, began throwing stones at police and Jewish worshippers. The situation escalated as police responded with tear gas, rubber bullets, and, according to some reports, live ammunition. The incident underscored the volatility of the Temple Mount as a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (Diehl, 1990) (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

4.1.3 Case Study 3: Bamiyan Buddhas

The strategic location of Afghanistan has shaped its rich cultural legacy. Trade for lapis lazuli connected Mesopotamia and Egypt as early as the 5th BCE. Bamiyan linked the Indus Valley, and Mesopotamian urbanised populations during the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages. Provinces like Bactria and Herat prospered under the Persian Empire, and then Hellenistic culture blossomed from Alexander the Great's colonies and the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms. The key Silk Road hub in Afghanistan helped spread trade and Buddhism, which thrived there for almost a century. Herat became a centre of Islamic art and architecture throughout the Timurid dynasty. (Stein, 2015)

Bamiyan, which was documented in the Chinese Tang dynasty chronicles as early as the fourth century, was a thriving cultural and artistic hub from the 6th to the 8th centuries. It incorporated Buddhist influences from India, Gupta sculptural styles, and elements from Sassanian Persia, Byzantium, and Tokharan Central Asia. The Buddhist cave temples, completed before 800 AD, fell into decline with the ninth-century Islamic invasions, which marked the beginning of centuries of destruction. Faces of Buddhist images were mutilated, and further damage occurred during Genghis Khan's attack in the 13th century and Aurangzeb's campaign in the 17th century. (Higuchi & Barnes, 1995)

The exact timeline of Buddhism's decline in Bamiyan is unclear. Archaeological evidence suggests that toward the end of the first millennium CE, Buddhist monastic communities began migrating away from the Hindu Kush region, and the local population gradually embraced Islam. During the Buddhist period, the Bamiyan Buddhas were monumental

pilgrimage sites, as described by the Chinese monk Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsiang) during his visit around 630 CE, shortly after the statues were completed. Wall paintings in the area indicate ongoing artistic activity into the 10th century, after which the monks responsible for maintaining the pilgrimage site left the region. As Buddhism ceased to be practised in the valley, the Buddhas were deconsecrated by removing their faces and metal coverings, rendering them no longer "living" idols from both Buddhist and Islamic perspectives. By the late first millennium CE, their identity as Buddhist figures faded from collective memory. A Persian geographic account from around 982 CE identified the statues only by their colours—red (Surkh) and white/grey (Khing) idols. Later Islamic sources referred to the statues as wonders (Arabic: 'Ajaib), marvelling at their extraordinary design without recognising their religious origin. (Klimburg-Salter, 2020)

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Buddhas had become part of local Islamic stories. Legends connected with Hazrat-i Ali, the first Imam for Shia Muslims, reinterpreted the figures in the legendary narrative of Islam's advent in the Bamiyan area. Oral histories started to mark the smaller monument as Shahmama's wife and the larger one as Salsal, a legendary warrior. These stories told the epic defeat of Salsal by Hazrat-i Ali, who, under divine direction, converted Salsal and his adherents to Islam, therefore turning the sculptures into emblems of Bamiyan's Islamic legacy. Bamiyan became known throughout the Mughal era as a site of beauty and historical value. First Mughal ruler Babur explored the area but made no mention of the Buddhas. Jahangir Mirza, his brother, postponed his travels to visit Bamiyan to see the Buddhas. Indicating their changing local biography, a 17th-century Mughal document called the Ain-i-Akbari depicted the statues as a male, a female, and their child. (Klimburg-Salter, 2020)

Early in the 20th century, French-Afghan archaeological campaigns unearthed the Buddhist roots of the sculptures. While local oral traditions kept attributing Islamic mythology to the figures, scholarly writings stressed their cultural and historical background. Recorded in Afghan folktales, these stories turned Bamiyan into a holy terrain anchored on the enormous images of Salsal and Shahmama. The most well-known myth about Salsal is one of a brave warrior who finally adopted Islam following a magical meeting with Hazrat-i Ali. (Klimburg-Salter, 2020)

Despite the rediscovery of the statues' Buddhist origins through French-Afghan archaeological efforts, popular Islamic legends such as those of Salsal and Shahmama continued to thrive, intertwining Islamic and Buddhist histories. This blended cultural narrative emphasised Afghanistan's Islamic identity while recognising its Buddhist heritage. Ria Hackin and Ahmad Ali Khozad documented these widely shared legends in a collection of Afghan folktales, preserving their integration into local traditions. (Klimburg-Salter, 2020)

Though Buddhism is no longer prevalent in the area, the Buddhas stayed prominent and globally recognised by the 20th century as monuments of Afghanistan's varied past. They were vulnerable, nevertheless, given the political unrest of the late 20th century, including Soviet occupation, civil war, and the emergence of the Taliban. Leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar, declared their demolition in February 2001 and denounced them as un-Islamic idols. With UNESCO and other international agencies calling for their preservation, the announcement drew worldwide censure. Rejecting offers to move the sculptures to museums, the Taliban destroyed them using explosives on March 11, 2001. Defying international pressure, the destruction was intentionally filmed and extensively disseminated. Further cultural damage followed from the looting of the Kabul Museum and damage to other Buddhist relics. The global media was dominated by images of the devastation, and the now-empty niches where the Buddhas once stood served as a stark reminder of the loss. (Boggs, 2016) (Falser, 2009)

4.2 Analysis of the case studies

The three case studies represent some of human history's most iconic and contested sacred sites. Each location embodies dual sacrality, serving as spiritual epicentres for distinct religious traditions while simultaneously becoming battlegrounds for political ideologies and cultural identity formation. The Temple Mount, sacred to Jews and Muslims, symbolises overlapping claims of divine connection and national sovereignty. Ayodhya, revered as the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama and the site of the demolished Babri Masjid, has been a focal point for Hindu-Muslim tensions and the assertion of religious nationalism. The Bamiyan Buddhas, monumental relics of Afghanistan's Buddhist heritage, stood as symbols of pluralism and shared cultural memory before their destruction by the Taliban. This act underscored the erasure of diverse identities in the name of ideological dominance.

This comparative analysis examines the intersections of religion, politics, and cultural identity through these three sacred spaces. Exploring how their sacrality has been co-opted for political agendas highlights how sacred sites become tools for constructing, asserting, or contesting cultural narratives. This study seeks to uncover the impact of these contested sites on communal identity and social cohesion. Whether through their physical destruction, reconstruction, or continued contestation, the Temple Mount, Ayodhya, and Bamiyan exemplify how sacred spaces are not only repositories of faith but also arenas of power, where history and identity are continually rewritten.

4.2.1 Dual Sacrality of the Sacred Places

This comparative analysis investigates the intersections of religion, politics, and cultural identity through these three sacred spaces. The examination of how their sacrality has been appropriated for political purposes underscores how sacred sites are transformed into instruments for the construction, assertion, or contestation of cultural narratives. This study aims to determine the influence of these contested sites on social cohesion and communal identity. The Temple Mount, Ayodhya, and Bamiyan are exemplary symbols of how sacred spaces are not only repositories of faith but also arenas of power, where history and identity are perpetually rewritten, whether through their physical devastation, reconstruction, or ongoing contestation. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

The first case study, the dual sacrality of Temple Mount, involves a sacred space revered by two religions and lies at the core of their foundation stories. Control of worship rights at the site holds profound religious, political, and national significance for both Jews and Muslims, as it represents not just religious devotion but also spiritual continuity, communal identity, and historical legitimacy.

In Judaism, the site encompassing the Holy of Holies, bearing the Arc of the Covenant, is seen as the centre of the cosmos, the foundation of God's creation, and the rock where Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac. It served as the sacrificial site, the link between the human and divine, and the destination for annual Jewish pilgrimages during Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

In the Jewish Temple, the Foundation Stone or Even Shetiyyah was located beneath the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred part of the temple. Only the High Priest could enter

this space on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.   The Even Shetiyyah is believed to be the point from which God created the world, making it the "Axis Mundi", as described by Eliade. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

The Prophet Muhammad's miraculous night journey and ascension to heaven, as recounted in the Qur'an (Sura 17), are both associated with the same site, al-Haram al-Sharif. It was here that the daily prayer sequence was disclosed to him. In subsequent traditions, the site is associated with the Prophet's tethering of his steed, Buraq, to the Western Wall, a location that is sacred to Jews as the final remnant of the Second Temple that the Romans demolished. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

In the case of the Temple Mount, it is consistent with the beliefs of both Jews and Muslims that the site is intrinsically sacrosanct. Smith's viewpoint emphasises the active shaping and reaffirmation of its sacrality through religious and political actions, such as Jewish nationalist organisations advocating for temple reconstruction and Muslim worship reinforcing its status as the third holiest Islamic site. A significant number of Jews regard the capacity to worship at the location as a religious right and a demonstration of Jewish sovereignty over a site that is fundamental to their faith and history. Even though Jewish law has traditionally restricted entrance to the Mount due to its sacredness, nationalist and religious movements have been advocating for Jewish prayer rights, interpreting the restrictions as a denial of religious freedom and Israeli sovereignty.

The control of worship in that location is associated with the broader Palestinian national identity and the sovereignty of Jerusalem for Muslims. Many Muslims regard any change in the status quo, such as the expansion of Jewish prayer rights, as an existential threat to Islamic control over the site, as they are concerned that it could result in the eventual construction of a Third Temple. Consequently, the ownership of worship rights is not merely a matter of access to a religious site; it is a representation of the competing national and religious claims to Jerusalem itself, which has become a recurring focal point of Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

The second site in Ayodhya holds significance for both Hindus and Muslims. It holds particular significance for Hindus, as it is regarded as the birthplace of Rama, hence constituting an eternal sacred area that aligns with Eliade's concept of a preordained axis mundi. The Rama-Katha, one of two principal Indian epics, depicts Rama as the progenitor

of the Hindu nation and an exemplary monarch, whose reign (Rama Rajya) functions as a standard for government and an idealised vision. Ayodhya's significance surpasses historical recollection, serving as a continuous emblem of the divine. As a pilgrimage place, Ayodhya serves as an axis mundi, symbolising the connection between the celestial and terrestrial realms, existence and mortality, as well as the living and their forebears. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

Central to this sacred narrative is the Ramjanmabhoomi Temple, marking Rama's birthplace. Hindus believe this temple existed even after Rama moved his capital to Saketa and Ayodhya went into disrepair. They assert that the temple was destroyed in the 16th century by a nobleman under the first Mughal Emperor Babur, who built the Babri Masjid on its site. This act is viewed by Hindus as a desecration, sparking a long-standing struggle to reclaim and protect the divine heritage of Ayodhya. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

The Babri Mosque has profound historical and spiritual importance for Muslims in Ayodhya, functioning as a significant site of prayer and a representation of their religious and cultural legacy in the area. For decades, the mosque served as a vital venue for collective prayer, cultivating a sense of togetherness and belonging among local Muslims. Its demolition in 1992 affected the community's sense of security and collective identity by resulting in the loss of sacred space and increased feelings of vulnerability and marginalisation.

Control of worship rights at Ayodhya is deeply significant for both Hindus and Muslims, as it represents not just religious devotion but also historical grievances, identity, and political sovereignty. It symbolises the fulfilment of religious and cultural aspirations and is often seen as an assertion of Hindu identity and national heritage. The loss of the mosque and the subsequent legal battles over the site were viewed as an erosion of Muslim religious rights and historical claims. The 2019 Supreme Court ruling, which granted the land to Hindus while offering Muslims an alternative site for a mosque, was accepted legally but remains a source of communal and historical grievance.

Worshipping at the original Babri Masjid site would have symbolised preserving their religious heritage and the right to practice their faith without political or communal interference. The inability to do so is often felt as a loss, not just of a mosque, but of a religious identity tied to the land.

Ultimately, for followers of either faith, the ability—or inability—to worship at Ayodhya represents more than a physical act of prayer; it embodies the broader religious, historical, and communal narratives that define their spiritual and cultural existence.

The third case study at Bamiyan holds dual sacrality as a site of Buddhist heritage and a revered element of Afghanistan's Islamic cultural landscape. The Bamiyan Buddhas could be interpreted as an axis mundi within the Buddhist worldview. The towering Buddhas stood as embodiments of the path to enlightenment, linking the earthly realm to transcendent spiritual ideals. Their size and placement within the natural landscape evoked a sense of divine connection. Bamiyan's location on the Silk Road made it a literal and metaphorical crossroads for commerce, culture, and religion. For Buddhists, it was a sacred landmark guiding pilgrims on their spiritual journeys. Worship access to Bamiyan means reconnecting with a sacred past, honouring their faith through pilgrimage, and reclaiming a lost spiritual space. The empty niches where the Buddhas once stood symbolise cultural erasure and the impermanence of all things.

With the advent of Islam in the region, the site's role as a Buddhist axis mundi diminished. However, it remained significant, recontextualised within local legends and narratives such as the legends of Hazrat-i Ali, blending the site's Buddhist origins with Islamic cultural memory. This dual sacrality reflects the layered religious heritage of Bamiyan, where its historical and spiritual identities converge, creating a complex cultural tapestry that resonates with both its Buddhist past and its enduring place in Afghan Islamic traditions.

For Muslims in Afghanistan, the religious significance of Bamiyan is complex. While the region does not hold the same centrality in Islam as sites like Mecca or Jerusalem, Islamic rule has shaped its history for over a millennium. They framed the destruction of the Buddhas by the Taliban as an act of religious purification based on the view that Islamic teachings prohibit idolatry. However, many Muslims, both within and outside Afghanistan, opposed this destruction, seeing the Buddhas as an integral part of their country's rich, multicultural history rather than a threat to Islamic belief. Today, some Afghan Muslims see Bamiyan as a place of historical memory rather than active worship.

In contrast, others view efforts to reconstruct the statues as an important step in acknowledging and respecting Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas exemplifies the clash between these views. The destruction was framed as an assertion of Islamic identity and a rejection of external influences. It reinforced a

cultural memory where Afghanistan was defined strictly as an Islamic nation, denying its pre-Islamic history.

Having explored the historical significance of contested sacred sites, examining how they compare across different cultural and religious contexts is essential. By analysing similarities and differences in contested sites worldwide, we can better understand the factors that drive disputes and the role of sacred spaces in identity formation.

The three sites show that the contestation or destruction of sacred spaces, often considered axis mundi, impacts the cultural memory and identity of the communities that hold them sacred. The axis mundi often becomes a cornerstone of cultural and religious identity. Sites like the Temple Mount, Ayodhya, and the Bamiyan Buddhas exemplify this disruption. Furthermore, the indivisibility of these sites in terms of their spiritual link with their believers makes them unique and, therefore, a contested site when worship rights are questioned.

Sacred spaces serve as living repositories of cultural memory, preserving historical events, collective religious experiences, and continuity with the past. Gathering at these locations reinforces shared beliefs, ensuring that religious identity is passed across generations.

Cultural identity is intricately connected to these sacred spaces and the axis mundi they represent, as they provide a tangible link to a community's history and values. Sacred spaces are often sites where collective memories are preserved and transmitted through rituals, prayers, and stories. They symbolise continuity, grounding a community's identity in its past while offering a vision for its future.

When these spaces are contested or destroyed, it disrupts the cultural memory, leaving communities feeling displaced or rootless. The loss of worship at sacred sites, such as the restricted access to the Temple Mount for both Jews and Muslims at various times, creates a spiritual and cultural void, further emphasising their centrality to collective identity.

In essence, sacrality, the axis mundi, and cultural identity are pillars of cultural memory, reinforcing a community's connection to its spiritual and historical roots. The preservation or loss of these sacred spaces significantly impacts how communities perceive themselves and their place in the world, underlining the important relationship between the sacred and a people's collective consciousness.

4.2.2 State Power: Identity Politics

Historical state power has been instrumental in shaping the sacred status and the ongoing disputes surrounding these sites. The three conflicts linked to the sites are not merely a local dispute but a reflection of how identity politics shaped and were shaped by historical narratives. It illustrates the complex interplay between religion and politics in a society where sacred sites symbolise spiritual faith and cultural and political authority. This historical background sets the stage for understanding how these contested sites became a focal point for political mobilisation in modern times, transforming an ancient site into a contemporary battleground of identity and power.

The Temple Mount symbolises Jewish spiritual resilience and historical connection, persisting as a focal point of faith and longing through centuries of upheaval and adaptation. The Western Wall, constructed by Herod the Great around 20 BCE as part of the Second Temple expansion, profoundly symbolises Jewish history and spirituality. Originally a supporting wall of the Temple platform, it became a central site of Jewish devotion and mourning after its destruction in 70 CE, representing the Jewish people's resilience and enduring connection to Jerusalem despite exile. (Loewenberg, 2013)

The Wall is the last tangible link to the temple, holding sanctity for Jews worldwide. It is a site for traditional prayers, especially during holidays and crises, where worshippers insert written prayers into their crevices to connect with God. Following Israel's 1967 victory in the Six-Day War, the Western Wall Plaza was established. It enables large gatherings for worship and national events and symbolises Jewish identity and perseverance.

Restricted access to the Temple Mount fuels perceptions of loss and denial of cultural heritage. The site underscores the connection between Judaism and Jerusalem, often used to symbolise the Jewish people's historical right to the land. For religious Zionists, reclaiming sovereignty over the Temple Mount is seen as integral to Jewish national identity.

The Jewish collective memory has persisted and adapted itself over 3,000 years, focussing on exile and return, with a longing for Jerusalem and the land of Israel as a consistent thread throughout history. Several mechanisms have enabled the preservation of this memory. Through sacred texts like the Bible and Talmud, textual preservation anchors shared memory by encoding history, rituals, and values. Religious rituals, such as Passover and

Yom Kippur, commemorate historical events, while oral tradition ensures memory transmission even when physical texts are inaccessible. Additionally, tight-knit community structures and an emphasis on education played crucial roles in sustaining shared narratives. (Dudai, 2022)

In the Diaspora, the memory of Israel became an abstract hope, sustaining Jewish identity across geographic dispersion. The establishment of modern Israel in 1948 stands as a testament to the persistence of Jewish memory, with modern Zionism representing a revival of ancient collective aspirations. This connection between ancient Israel and the modern state reflects a reactivation of historical memory rooted in texts, rituals, and historical consciousness. Despite challenges like assimilation, persecution, and the pressures of modernity, the core elements of Jewish memory, particularly the centrality of Jerusalem and the idea of return, have persisted. (Dudai, 2022)

The Islamic community views the Al-Haram al-Sharif as a cornerstone of Islamic identity and history in the region. Challenges to Muslim control or access are perceived as existential threats to their cultural and religious heritage in Jerusalem. The defence of Al-Aqsa is a rallying point for Palestinian and broader Islamic identity, symbolising resistance against perceived occupation and the preservation of Islamic heritage.

Amongst Muslims, the significance of Har Ha-Bayit differs depending on their political or religious inclination. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood emphasises its transnational religious significance; Hamas views it as a national symbol tied to Palestinian identity, whereas many ordinary Muslim pilgrims see it primarily as a sacred site for worship. Jerusalem has long been a contested city, and Palestinians have historically claimed it as their capital, starting with their declaration of statehood in 1948. The PLO's founding meeting took place on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem in 1964, symbolising the city's importance to Palestinian identity. The Israeli government have maintained the status quo due to political and security concerns. However, right-wing leaders from both sides have used the Temple Mount issue to appeal to nationalist and religious constituencies. (Friedland & Hecht, 1998)

Ayodhya's importance lies in its ability to act as a cultural and emotional unifier for Hindus, transcending regional, linguistic, and caste barriers. As the birthplace of Rama, it embodies ideals of morality, governance, and devotion. As a site of contestation and reclamation, it

has become a powerful symbol of resilience and identity, reinforcing Hindu society's collective memory and aspirations across millennia.

The Hindu nationalist campaign to reclaim Ayodhya was built on three core claims: that the Babri Masjid marked Lord Rama's exact birthplace, that a grand temple dedicated to him existed there before being destroyed by Babur in 1526, and that the mosque symbolised Muslim domination over Hindu sacred spaces. Secular historians contested these claims, but the movement emphasised faith over evidence, framing the issue as a centuries-long conflict between Hindus and Muslims. The campaign portrayed Hindus as victims of historical injustice, using religious devotion and cultural pride to mobilise mass support. (Davis, 2009)

The movement relied on innovative strategies, including media campaigns with symbolic imagery and religious ceremonies uniting Hindus nationwide. Popular media, such as the televised *Ramayana* series (1987), amplified devotion to Rama and aligned with the campaign's goals. The 1990 Rath Yatra, led by BJP leader L.K. Advani, was a pivotal moment, blending religious symbolism with political mobilisation but sparking communal violence and political instability. (Davis, 2009)

Beyond the immediate consequences, the campaign redefined Hindu identity as a political force, aligning religious symbolism with the Hindutva agenda. As Rama's mythological birthplace, Ayodhya became a focal point for efforts to redefine India as a Hindu nation, challenging its secular and multireligious ethos. (Davis, 2009)

India's capitalist-driven development has heightened identity-based politics and deepened social divisions. Marginalised groups, such as Muslims, tribal communities, and lower castes excluded from economic progress, have increasingly asserted their identities. In contrast, privileged groups, primarily upper-caste Hindus, have aggressively defended their status. This socio-political landscape has amplified the use of caste and religion as tools for political mobilisation, intensifying societal confrontations. (Augustine, 2009)

Democratisation empowered marginalised groups to demand rights and recognition, which provoked aggressive responses from the middle and upper classes, escalating identity-based tensions. Over time, caste grievances evolved into communal narratives, with upper-

caste discontent aligning with Hindu nationalist mobilisations. Political parties exploited these dynamics: the Congress Party courted minorities, while the BJP consolidated Hindu votes by leveraging Hindu nationalism to counter minority-centric policies and caste-based fragmentation. (Augustine, 2009)

The Ayodhya site became a potent symbol of Hindu cultural and religious heritage, representing the reclamation of Hindu pride and identity after perceived suppression under Muslim and colonial rule. For Hindus, constructing a Rama temple symbolises a cultural and political assertion of dominance. Conversely, for Muslims, the destruction of the Babri Masjid signified the erasure of their cultural and religious legacy, exacerbating fears of marginalisation and alienation. This event heightened communal tensions, disrupted interfaith harmony, and deepened the divisions in India's social fabric. (Augustine, 2009)

The term "Hindu" was not an ancient religious identity but was constructed during Muslim and British rule in India. Initially a geographic term referring to non-Muslim South Asians, it was solidified during the British Raj, where the British created categories for governance that later formed the basis for Hindu identity in modern India. Indian nationalism became intertwined with Hindu identity, blending religious history with nationalist aspirations. Over time, Indian national identity evolved into a secularised religious discourse that is still evident today (Friedland & Hecht, 1998). The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent construction of the Ram Mandir in 2024 have been framed by many Hindus as a long-overdue reclamation of their sacred land, symbolises the fulfilment of religious and cultural aspirations, and is often seen as an assertion of Hindu identity and national heritage.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and its role in Hindu identity politics highlights how sacred sites become focal points for religious and nationalistic movements. Similarly, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan reflects the intersection of religious ideology and political power, where non-Islamic icons were targeted as symbols of cultural and historical erasure. Both cases reveal how sacred sites can become battlegrounds for competing identity, heritage, and religious dominance narratives.

The Bamiyan Buddhas, constructed between the 6th and 7th centuries CE, were once a focal point of Buddhist worship and pilgrimage, embodying the spiritual and artistic zenith of the region. Over time, however, the Buddhas transcended their religious origins to become emblematic of Afghanistan's multicultural history, representing a bridge between its Buddhist

past and its Islamic present. The Buddhas reflect the diverse cultural and religious exchanges along the Silk Road, where Afghanistan was a critical crossroads of civilisations. Their existence symbolises an era when the region was a melting pot of ideas, art, and spirituality. For many Afghans, the Buddhas signify the depth and complexity of their cultural heritage, encompassing a history that extends beyond any single religious or political narrative. The deliberate a of the Buddhas by the Taliban in 2001 dealt a significant blow to Afghan cultural memory. Their obliteration was not only an act of iconoclasm but also an assault on the country's identity, aiming to erase a tangible link to its pluralistic and pre-Islamic past. For many Afghans, the loss of the Buddhas symbolised the erasure of a part of themselves, a cultural amnesia imposed by extremist ideology.

Although geographically small, Afghanistan boasts a diverse and dramatic landscape with high mountains, fertile valleys, and deserts. This problematic terrain has isolated communities, with many people living in their valleys, unaware of others nearby. However, due to its strategic position between four major civilisations, Afghanistan has seen an influx of conquerors, intellectuals, missionaries, traders, and exiles over centuries. These diverse influences have shaped Afghan culture into a unique blend. (Dupree, 2002)

Defining an Afghan identity is challenging due to this complex ethnic mosaic. Afghan culture is shaped by shared beliefs, values, and customs expressed in arts, music, literature, and architecture. Despite a high illiteracy rate, Afghans maintain a strong cultural awareness through oral traditions and respect for social etiquette. Cultural diversity enriches Afghanistan, with influences from neighbouring regions. Although various ethnic and religious groups such as Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Sikh, Hindu, and Jew exist, there is a unifying sense of being Afghan. This national identity is most evident when external threats arise, as Afghans unite despite internal conflicts. Afghan history reflects cycles of division and unity, yet the sense of national pride and belonging endures. (Dupree, 2002)

Afghan cultural patterns, deeply rooted over millennia, faced challenges with the nation-state's emergence in 1880 and the imposition of borders by foreign powers. The ruling Mohammadzai monarchy pushed for modernisation inspired by Western ideas, introducing secular schools, new architecture, and urbanisation in Kabul, which disconnected the city from Afghanistan's rural areas. This modernisation clashed with traditional Afghan values, leading to resistance, such as the 1929 expulsion of King Amanullah. Efforts to build national unity included introducing national holidays, radio broadcasting, and popularising

music and media. However, Western and Soviet influences shaped urban life significantly, while rural areas remained largely traditional. Kabul's cultural institutions, like the National Museum and Theatre, leaned toward foreign works, neglecting Afghan heritage. Provincial restoration projects for historic sites aimed to preserve tradition, but modernisation in urban housing and architecture often replaced traditional crafts with uniform Soviet-style buildings, eroding cultural identity. (Dupree, 2002)

This Western-oriented modernisation created a rural-urban divide, as city policymakers overlooked the importance of balancing tradition with innovation, weakening Afghan cultural identity and alienating rural communities. In the 1970s, tensions arose in Afghanistan as foreign-educated Afghans brought new expectations that clashed with conservative values. A coup led to a Soviet invasion, sparking chaos and exile for millions, followed by the rise of the ultra-conservative Taliban. The Soviets tried to impose their ideology, while the Taliban enforced strict puritanical rules, suppressing cultural expressions like art, music, and heritage preservation. The ongoing conflict, economic hardship, and lawlessness led to widespread looting of archaeological sites and the National Museum. Taliban hardliners, influenced by foreign forces, began to erase Afghanistan's heritage, culminating in the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001, devastating Afghans who felt connected to these symbols of their history. The destruction symbolised a loss of cultural identity, deepening feelings of betrayal and despair amidst the prolonged suffering from war and instability. (Dupree, 2002)

In all three cases, sacred sites became entangled with nationalist movements that sought to assert a particular identity—Hindu, Jewish, Palestinian, or Afghan—through the control or destruction of these sites. While initially religious, these sites evolved into potent symbols for nationalistic causes, with political and religious identities intertwined. They became battlegrounds for competing national narratives, where the struggle for control over these spaces was about more than religious devotion—it was about who has the right to define the nation's identity and history.

Identity politics plays a significant role in shaping, contesting, and often reshaping cultural memory and identity. At its core, identity politics revolves around asserting and recognising group identities, whether based on religion, ethnicity, gender, or nationality, in the political and social arena. These identities often draw heavily on shared cultural memories, which include historical events, sacred sites, and symbolic narratives that bind communities

together. However, when identity politics becomes a tool for exclusion or dominance, it can distort or suppress certain aspects of cultural memory, privileging one narrative while marginalising others. For example, competing claims over sacred spaces like the Temple Mount or Ayodhya often reflect broader struggles over cultural identity and historical legitimacy, with each community invoking its memories to justify its position.

Cultural identity, closely linked to collective memory, can be enriched or undermined by identity politics. On the one hand, efforts to reclaim erased or neglected histories can empower marginalised communities, restoring pride and coherence to their sense of self. On the other hand, when identity politics focuses on dividing "us" from "them," it can foster selective remembrance or deliberate amnesia, erasing pluralistic histories to construct homogenised or exclusionary identities. For instance, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban was not just an act of iconoclasm but a political statement aimed at erasing the memory of Afghanistan's Buddhist past, severing its multicultural heritage to assert a narrow, ideological identity. Ultimately, identity politics acutely influences how cultural memory is preserved, contested, or weaponised.

Chapter 5 Final Thoughts

Sacred sites anchor collective memory, requiring preservation and visitation. The loss of identity due to colonialism and de-territorialisation highlights the need to reclaim these spaces. Despite religious shifts, a spiritual connection to the land remains vital. The destruction of the Notre-Dame and Nantes cathedrals highlighted the cultural and historical significance of France's religious monuments, even in a secular society. Though rooted in Catholicism, these cathedrals represent France's national identity and political heritage, making their destruction feel like a national wound. Notre-Dame's restoration efforts underscored the role of sacred sites in preserving collective memory and ignited debate over *Laïcité*, France's strict secularism policy. The discussion extended to the relevance of sacred architecture in a diverse, modern society, emphasising the need for designs that respect historical symbolism while adapting to contemporary contexts. (Kleinhempel & Nicolaides, 2024)

This dissertation focussed on contested sacred sites destroyed due to religious conflicts and their impact on the cultural memory and identity of the people involved. A few final thoughts on the sacred spaces mentioned in the report regarding the global response to the events. The conflicts at Ramjanmabhoomi, Temple Mount, and the Bamiyan Buddhas had varying impact scales, spanning local, regional, and global contexts. The Ramjanmabhoomi conflict, centred in Ayodhya in India, had a primarily local and national impact. The dispute over the Babri Masjid and the alleged birthplace of Lord Rama was a key point in the rise of Hindu nationalism within India, affecting the political and religious climate of the country. The destruction of the mosque led to widespread communal violence across India, highlighting how a local religious site can become a flashpoint for national identity politics and inter-religious conflict.

In contrast, the Temple Mount is a site of regional significance, situated at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its contested status has made it a key symbol of both Israeli and Palestinian national identities. The religious and political tensions surrounding the site impact the broader Middle East, particularly in terms of Muslim-Jewish relations and the ongoing struggle for control over Jerusalem. The Temple Mount is a key point in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. It remains a sensitive and volatile site for regional politics, with its symbolism representing both territorial claims and religious legitimacy for both Israelis and Palestinians.

On the other hand, the Bamiyan Buddhas, located in Afghanistan, had a global impact after their destruction by the Taliban in 2001. The Buddhas represented Afghanistan's cultural heritage and a shared historical and artistic legacy for the world. Their destruction sparked an international outcry, with global actors such as cultural organisations, governments, and advocacy groups calling for their preservation and condemning the act as cultural vandalism. The global impact of this event highlighted the importance of sacred heritage not just to local communities but to humanity at large, with calls for international intervention in the protection of cultural sites.

The role of international actors and preservation efforts is evident in these cases, especially when comparing the responses to the Bamiyan Buddhas' destruction to the internal, more politically localised legal battles over Ayodhya. While the international community mobilised around the destruction of the Buddhas, with efforts to document, preserve, and even propose rebuilding the statues, the Ayodhya dispute remained contained mainly within India's borders. The legal process surrounding the Ramjanmabhoomi site was driven by domestic political forces, with parties such as the BJP utilising Hindu nationalist rhetoric to advocate for constructing a Rama temple. At the same time, the conflict was primarily viewed through an Indian political lens. In the case of the Temple Mount, though international diplomatic pressure occasionally influences its status, the day-to-day management and political battles surrounding the site have remained largely under the control of Israeli and Palestinian authorities.

From ancient times to the present, the destruction of cultural heritage has often accompanied warfare and societal upheaval. In antiquity, wars led to the intentional targeting of cultural artefacts alongside massacres and enslavement. Since the 1990s, the destruction of cultural heritage has increasingly characterised civil wars and conflicts involving terrorist groups, particularly in weak or failed states. Often tied to identity, nationality, and group membership, these acts aim to erase shared history and collective memory. Modern communication technologies amplify the global visibility of such destruction, making it a tool for propaganda. This distinguishes contemporary conflicts from earlier forms of cultural targeting. (Parzinger, 2022)

Chapter 2 mentions natural sacred spaces such as mountains, rivers, forests and caves. Many indigenous communities revere these spaces, and their loss due to encroachment or deforestation is a worrying trend. This area of study was not included in this report.

However, two endeavours that aim to capture the significance of these sites are as follows. The sacred sites of indigenous, Dharmic and Pagan religions serve as important cultural and religious connections to the cultural memory of the communities involved. The "Sacred Land Film Project" (https://sacredland.org/) by the Earth Island Institute is a documentary initiative that focuses on indigenous and sacred lands worldwide, highlighting their cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance (Sacred Land, n.d). It raises awareness about threats to these sites, such as environmental destruction, resource extraction, and cultural erosion, while advocating for their protection and indigenous rights. Another initiative is the "Sacred Sites Report" by the Gaia Foundation (Thorley & Gunn, 2008). The study explores the significance of sacred natural sites worldwide, emphasising their role in biodiversity conservation, indigenous cultural heritage, and ecological sustainability. It highlights the threats these sites face from development, resource extraction, and climate change while advocating for their protection through legal recognition and community-led conservation efforts.

Two projects, one local and the other global aim to address the issue of contested sacred spaces in a more modern and open approach by promoting the idea of shared religious sites. The Sharing Sacred Spaces" project (https://www.sharingsacredspaces.org/), based in Connecticut, USA, is a local initiative that fosters community-building through the use of architecture and space, creating a welcoming and non-threatening environment for people of different faiths (Sharing Sacred Spaces, n.d). The organisation encourages deeper emotional connections and a sense of belonging by recognising that every space carries belief systems, values, and communal stories. The term "sacred" signifies both presence and exclusivity, highlighting the transformative experience of engaging with different traditions. Since 9/11, the organisation has facilitated interfaith dialogue, sustainable community-building, and civic engagement. Expanding into schools and workplaces, it aims to combat bias and polarisation through immersive education. Its vision is a world where religious differences promote peace, trust, and mutual understanding.

The other endeavour is the "Shared Sacred Sites" project (https://www.sharedsacredsites.net/) helmed by academics, which examines how multiple religious communities share sacred spaces, symbols, and rituals, highlighting the potential for cooperation despite historical or political tensions (Shared Sacred Sites, n.d). The project documents long-standing traditions of religious mixing and emerging interactions by

studying diverse sacred spaces across the Mediterranean, South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Through ethnographic and historical research, it challenges simplistic narratives of inevitable religious conflict, instead showcasing how social, political, and cultural factors shape coexistence. Utilising tools like mapping, storytelling, and multimedia archives, the project fosters scholarly collaboration and public engagement, promoting a nuanced understanding of interfaith dynamics and the conditions that enable or disrupt shared religious spaces.

These positive initiatives are a counterbalance to the conflicts over contested sacred spaces. A plurality of sacred landscapes reflects diverse religious and cultural identities. Reducing conflicts over contested sacred sites is crucial for fostering mutual respect, cultural preservation, and social harmony. Efforts to peacefully address these conflicts can promote interfaith dialogue, protect cultural heritage, and support the rights of marginalised groups, particularly indigenous communities. By prioritising respect for sacred spaces, we safeguard religious and cultural identities and contribute to a more just and inclusive global society.

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