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Space, Modernity, and Emptiness: Some American Examples

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ONE of the ways in which Christian groups responded to the challenges of modernity was by positioning themselves differently in space. In the interest of better understanding that process, let us think for a moment about the social system, the social *space* to be precise, within which groups exist. As one starting point for that, it is useful to acknowledge that social groups define themselves in relation to others. Specifically, groups define themselves by saying *what they are not* as much as by saying what they are. If we are to believe the German social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, a leading advocate of the notion of social system, difference is prior to identity. That is to say—and this is the core of Luhmann's "difference" theory—one distinguishes a table from other objects before one indicates what it is (Luhmann adds, paradoxically, that distinction presupposes itself). His grand theory has shortcomings, but his point is that social groups create and maintain collective identity by defining themselves in relation to other groups, and especially by saying *what they are not*. They push off from other groups in defining themselves. We could extend that approach by stating that groups sometimes behave as if they lack a clear collective self-understanding; that is, they lack a fully formed core identity that they can marshall in a positive fashion against a field of other groups. They accordingly define themselves in relation to other groups, define themselves *via negativa*, by differentiating—in some cases to a great degree—from other groups. Identity is built through such negative definition. The twentieth-century American theorist of social conflict Lewis Coser described that mode of thinking in *The Functions of Social Conflict*, an extended mediation on the social conflict theories of Georg Simmel, and sociologist of religion Martin Reisebrodt has observed more recently how Christianity invents itself principally by distinguishing itself from other religious practices and beliefs. The process is evident among Christian groups in modernity as it was in early modern Europe. When we focus on how it has manifested spatially, we see the modern in American church history as a broad spectrum of occurrences demonstrating complexity, multivalence, competition, and differentiation.[99]

[99]Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, trans. Peter Gilgen (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 87, 90;

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The United States historically is a rich environment for the formation of group identities *via negativa*. In a religiously plural society, the opportunities for deepening collective self-understanding are high because of the broad possibility of encounter with other groups. There are more groups to encounter and push off from. Those encounters, moreover, are spatially framed. A central tenet in the thinking of scholars working in human geography is that social groups define themselves through their occupation of space. The more competition there is for space, the more contact there will be between groups. Scarcity of space means competition for space, which means more engagement and debate among social groups that occupy that space.

In nineteenth century America, contact and competition between social groups increased markedly. Religious groups, like ethnic and racial groups, and economic classes, contended more determinedly for space. The closing of the frontier in the late nineteenth century profoundly affected the American imagination of space, and especially challenged the notion that "empty space" was freely available to groups that chose to distance themselves from the growing commotion of urbanization and industrialization (as did Mormons in the mid-nineteenth century). At the same time, immigration greatly increased, adding millions of religiously diverse new Americans to city spacescapes and prompting the drawing of sharper and clearer boundaries between groups. The city increasingly came to represent what was modern about America, all of the problems as well as the promise on modernity, and the notion of empty space became less compelling a myth—but it did not disappear completely. We can glimpse something of the modern in the negotiation of space by three religious communities at the turn of the nineteenth century: (1) the Catholic effort made in urban settings to differentiate spatially; (2) the removal to the suburbs of Protestant communities that pushed off from others by crossing city lines; and (3) the rejection of traditional spatial categories by fundamentalists who sought both to reform the world and to escape from it. In these examples modernism appears within a three-dimensional spectrum as the cultivation of difference, the flight from difference, and a resistance to recognizing difference.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Catholic communities in American cities were hyper-aware of differences between themselves and other denominations (and, to some extent, aware of differences among Catholic congregations themselves—Irish, Italian, Polish, and other ethnicities and, additionally, differences of class or, most simply,

Martin Reisebrodt, "'Religion': Just Another Modern Western Construction," Religion and Culture Web Forum, The Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion, University of Chicago Divinity School (December 2003), http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/122003/riesebrodtessay.pdf.

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neighborhood). Nineteenth-century American Catholic history is thick with incidences of Catholics proclaiming the ways in which they were not like Protestants, or other non-Catholic groups. A vigorous campaign of defining themselves through differentiation characterized much Catholic rhetoric of the nineteenth century (and some of the twentieth century as well). At the same time, Catholics vigorously "represented" themselves in all manner of public stagings of religious community—such as the *festa* in Italian Harlem. Such events contributed to fashioning a public face for Catholicism, but encounter with other groups and ongoing efforts to define through differentiation continued. In the bounded urban spaces where congregations dramatically encountered one another, the constant process of building and maintaining the components of collective identity by pushing off from other groups fostered an atmosphere of concern about the consequences of "negative definition." Was American Catholicism, finally, just identifiable as an inventory of what was left after stating what it was not? And was such negative definition capable of sustaining a collective sense of belonging and purpose? One response to that question was to claim to be, as writers of the time termed it, "Americanist." That meant relaxing some of the program of differentiation and finding ways to join Roman Catholic traditions with American democratic ideals that were thought to be imbedded in most Protestant denominations. Another response was to retrench and carry forward the fight against opponents, identifying those opponents more clearly and by degrees fashioning a collective American Catholic persona distinct from them. The latter response, which won out with support from Rome, brought its own problems, however, including the worry that group identity was hollow; that is, American Catholicism spent so much effort in distinguishing itself from other groups that it risked appearing spiritually and ritually insubstantial itself, even "empty" as many of its critics of the time (including those on the inside) claimed. The Catholic response to that concern had several spatial referents, including the *horror vacui*, or the fear of emptiness, that characterized some Catholic Church decoration in the late nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. In a broader sense, the Catholic response reflected suspicion about emptiness within the group, about the lack of coherent collective self-understanding.[100]

The *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, looking back over a century of American architecture in 2000, observed that "*Horror vacui*—fear of emptiness—is the driving force in contemporary American taste" having developed steady momentum from the late nineteenth-century onward. Long-established in Latin American Catholic baroque churches, *horror vacui* as

[100]Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, third edition (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).

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decoration meant that the interior of the church and often parts of the exterior were filled to bursting with items emblematic of the faith of the community. Side altars, stained glass, elaborate archways and pillars, dramatic sculpture, detailed carvings, ceiling ornamentation, images of Jesus and the saints, flourishes of color and light, complex delineation of space—all such features, layered on top of each other, represented the battle against emptiness—which was, in another phrasing, a struggle to assert identity. The baroque style that came to be associated with *horror vacui* emerged in early modern Europe as the Catholic Church was asserting itself against Lutheran and Reformed critics. In America, the same process of self-defense/self-assertion took place anew as Catholic immigrants settled in cities and formed neighborhood congregations. Baroque was the language of the material culture that many embraced. It was characterized by play between feelings of emptiness and fullness, what literary critic Christine Buci-Glucksmann calls "an excavation of an absence." It is a "madness of seeing" in which plenitude and emptiness are simultaneously pitched, a drama where emotion arises from a sense that "the world is at once valued and devalued." Or, in the words of Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes: "The baroque, language of abundance, is also the language of insufficiency." In the material culture of public worship, the case is similar.[101]

Baroque Revival churches appeared in American cities with greater frequency in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when the shift in urban demographics and related spatial rethinking were well underway. Baroque Revival in general had begun to gain in popularity about the time of the Civil War, when it appeared alongside Romanesque, Neoclassic, Gothic, Greek Revival, Georgian, and Italianate styles. In the early twentieth century the influence of Latin American Catholic baroque churches likewise was important in some regions, and especially after the favorable reception of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue's eclectic colonial style buildings at the 1915–1916 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego. The style reached the peak of its implementation just around the turn of the century, and can be clearly seen, for example, in immigrant-rich New York City. The Church of St. Francis Xavier (1882), the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral (1901), St. Jean Baptiste Church (1910–1914), St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church (1900), and the Most Holy Redeemer Catholic Church (1870s), among other houses of worship (and many residential and civic buildings)

[101]Herbert Muschamp,"Public Space or Private, A Compulsion to Fill It," *New York Times*, August 27, 2000, 2.27; Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 138–141; Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Sage, 1994), 71; and The *Madness of Vision: On Baroque Aesthetics*, trans Dorothy Z. Baker (Athens, Oh.: Ohio University Press, 2012), 27. Carlos Fuentes, "The Novel as Tragedy: William Faulkner," trans. Trude Stern and Evelyn Tavarellini, *The Faulkner Journal* 11 (1995–1996), 13–31.

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impressively incorporated the baroque aesthetic. It was present in other cities as well, but in few more strikingly than in Buffalo, where Our Lady of Victory Basilica and National Shrine was completed in the mid-1920s.[102]

A particularly good example of Baroque Revival in New York at this time is the Roman Catholic Church of St. Ignatius, located at Park Avenue and 84th Street in New York City, which was dedicated in 1898. Its interior is elaborately ornamented, with varied, layered patternings of color and light, exotic European and African marbles, intricately carved pilasters and wainscoting, sumptuous iconography and statuary, and extravagant ritual appliances. Overall, it exemplifies the expression of *horror vacui*, the fear of emptiness [See Figures 1–4].

While some urban Catholic congregations in the early twentieth century, pushing off from other social groups, worshipped in churches filled to bursting with artifacts reminding them of who they were, other religious communities took a different approach to the shifting social and religious currents of modernity. One of those was the hegira to the suburbs that took place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An example of this is the religious relocations along the Philadelphia Main Line, a string of affluent towns—Ardmore, Radnor, Glenside, Bryn Mawr, and others—that sprung up along the main rail line westward out of Philadelphia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The rich who fled the city of Philadelphia to fashion exclusive suburban retreats—and especially Episcopalian enclaves—left behind a city that was a hodge-podge of many different groups increasingly vying for space. Suburban historian Margaret Marsh describes social space in Philadelphia at the end of the nineteenth century in this way: "The dispersal of the urban population to Philadelphia's outer city first became significant during the 1880s. Until that time, most Philadelphians lived in a small urban sector," which, notes Marsh "was remarkably heterogeneous; rich, poor, and modestly prosperous citizens all shared the same small urban space. Even the most fashionable residential district was still located in the heart of the city." Most of the elite families of the city continued to reside in their neighborhoods along Chestnut, Walnut, Spruce, and Pine streets through the 1880s with black Philadelphians occupying space immediately to their south and middle- and lower-income native whites along with immigrants from Ireland, Germany and elsewhere living in neighborhoods scattered

[102]New York city baroque architecture is in the *AIA Guide to New York City* by Norval White, Eliot Willensky, and Fran Leadon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 233, 202, 826–827, 447, 400, 462–463, and elsewhere. The founding of the shrine to Mary served as a strong statement to Buffalo's Protestants who in their various denominations numbered 179 out of 253 churches in the years just after the completion of the shrine. See: http://www.ourladyofvictory.org/Basilica/panoramic.html.

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Fig. 1. Baptistry, St. Ignatius Church. Photos © Laurie Lambrecht, (1999), from *St. Ignatius Loyola, A Pictorial History and Walking Guide of New York City's Church of St. Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, 1999), 15.

throughout the city. As Marsh points out: "People of moderate means were interspersed with the wealthy. Luxurious townhouses fronted the major thoroughfares while small cramped row houses jammed the back alleys and side streets." Through the 1880s, there was ongoing and intensifying competition for space among all the various groups—religious, ethnic, class,

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Fig. 2. Altar, St. Ignatius Church. Photos © Laurie Lambrecht, (1999), from *St. Ignatius Loyola, A Pictorial History and Walking Guide of New York City's Church of St. Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, 1999), 9.

occupational, and so forth—that made up the society of the city. In the 1880s, some started moving out. Episcopal groups were especially noticeable in the removal to the suburbs.[103]

[103]Margaret Marsh, "Suburbanization and the Search for Community: Residential Decentralization in Philadelphia, 1880–1900" *Pennsylvania History* 44 (1977), 102–103.

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Fig. 3. St. Ignatius Church. Photos © Laurie Lambrecht, (1999), from *St. Ignatius Loyola, A Pictorial History and Walking Guide of New York City's Church of St. Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, 1999), 31.

The period between 1870 and 1905 was, as Deborah Mathias Gough has written, a "gloomy situation" for Episcopal churches such as Christ Church, which survived shrinking budgets, neighborhood arguments, and internal differences but just barely so. Less lucky were St. Paul's and the Church of the Mediator, which closed; St. James, The Church of the Ascension, the Church of the Atonement, and Calvary Monumental, which moved; and St

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Fig. 4. Sacristy Door, St. Ignatius Church. Photos © Laurie Lambrecht, (1999), from *St. Ignatius Loyola, A Pictorial History and Walking Guide of New York City's Church of St. Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, 1999), 25.

Luke's which merged with the Church of the Epiphany. The urban Episcopal churches in Old Philadelphia, Rittenhouse Square, and West Philadelphia lost an average of thirty percent of their membership between 1900–1940. The churches along the Main Line—Redeemer, Good Shepherd, St. Asaph's, St. Martin's, and St. David's, grew by 189 percent during that same period.

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All told, the number of Episcopal communicants on the Main Line grew by a factor of 27 from 1860–1940, prompting historian Digby Baltzell to observe of the Main Line that by 1940 the "fashionable suburban churches became the center of upper class Epicopalianism." The suburban historian Robert Fishman has argued in *Bourgeois Utopias* that the origin of London suburbs was closely tied to evangelical religion and its growing concern for "the family." In America, religion also played a role as suburbs—and especially elite communities such as the Main Line towns, among others—were founded or enlarged in the later part of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.[104]

Certainly class was involved in the instance of the Main Line. But the exodus of Philadelphia Episcopalians to the suburbs was a combination of several factors. Episcopalians left an urban environment in which they had to continuously and energetically maintain boundaries by articulating what they were and were not. For Episcopalians, the process of differentiating finally came to mean explicit spatial distancing, a pushing off from other groups in the form of opening a spatial gulf between themselves and others. That performance of distancing was in part a pilgrimage to the suburbs in an attempt to recover something of the mythic "emptiness" of American space as opposed to the city that was filled with immigrants, sin, corruption, dirt, and danger. It was an effort to reclaim the American imaginary of pristine "empty space," fantasized as something prior to the closing of the frontier, the arrival of immigrant masses, and the deep tessellation of the religious landscape of the city. As suburban historian John R. Stilgoe writes, the American suburb was both attractive and puzzling in its flirtation with the "utter rawness" of emptiness. Upper class Episcopal suburbs such as those just west of Philadelphia accordingly took shape, in spatial terms, as the pursuit of emptiness, of empty space—rather than the fear of emptiness, the *horror vacui*. Their growth was one side of the same religious coin.[105]

One final example of the spatial aspect of religious and social changes occurring at this time can be glimpsed in the rise of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is often discussed as a protest against modernity. It was, as historians such as Margaret Bendroth and Thekla Joiner and sociologists Rhys Williams, Christian Smith, and Martin Reisebrodt recently have

[104]Alexander V. G. Allen, *Phillips Brooks, 1835–1893: Memories of his Life with Extracts of his Letters* (New York: Dutton and Company, 1907), 229; Deborah Mathias Gough *Christ Church, Philadelphia: The Nation's Church in a Changing City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 282; E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (New York: Free Press, 1958), 248, 261; Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

[105]John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 156.

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emphasized, an urban phenomenon in its early twentieth century origins. It took shape as a protest against the science that challenged belief in the supernatural, against cultural pluralism in the industrialized city. The collected pamphlets on a wide range of topics published in four volumes by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles in 1910–1915 as *The Fundamentals* were not systematic theology but rather a continuous series of protests, alongside copious references to the enemies of truth, the Bible, and revelation, and assertions about what a good Christian *is not*. The first half of volume 4, for example, opened with a dozen chapters each explaining what the true Christian was not: a Darwinist, Evolutionist, Socialist, Jehovah's Witness ("Millennial Dawnist"), Mormon, Eddyist, a person of the world, Spiritualist, Sabbath-breaker, and Satanist. Elsewhere fundamentalist writers and preachers condemned Romanism, secularism, Unitarianism, and a great many other groups and "isms." With its primary strength in the Baptist and Presbyterian denominations, it emerged in the urban North but quickly became associated with the South. Its lack of a standard, coherent theology ensured that it would remain a cross-denominational movement—and it likewise ensured that its critics would complain that it was an intellectually shallow campaign against other groups, the *Christian Century* in 1922 referring to the "creedless" Baptist fundamentalists. Christian fundamentalism was a protest movement against a perceived "modernity" that modeled collective identity formation as a process grounded in differentiation and lack of internal resources (for example, its so-called "creedlessness"). Reisebrodt accordingly notes that "the fundamentalist self-perception derived unavoidably from its characterization of the enemy," a view seconded by sociologist Christian Smith.[106]

Fundamentalists wished to be both in the world and out of it. In the words of Rhys Williams, fundamentalism was "'in' the emerging industrial city but not quite 'of' it."[107] That posture was reflected in the fundamentalist penchant for staging public performances of "old-time" religion in the interstices between the socially marked spaces of the city. Fundamentalism as it took shape as a program of protest against modernity did not fit the map of bounded religious spaces that organized the city. Fundamentalism fell into the cracks, or more precisely, it represented itself from within the interstices between the

[106]Martin Resiebrodt, *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 22, 62; *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth,* vol. 4 (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917); *The Christian Century* 39, March 16, 1922, p. 325; Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[107]Reisebrodt, 5; Rhys Williams, "American National Identity, The Rise of the Modern City, and the Birth of Protestant Fundamentalism" in *The Fundamentalist City? Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space*, eds. Nezar AlSayyad and Mejgan Massoumi (London: Routledge, 2011), 95.

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marked territories. Revivalism, as many American historians have observed, historically has favored liminal settings—parks or fields, city corners, the woods by the river, hastily assembled warehouse-like tabernacles, the beach, and so forth. The fundamentalists of the early twentieth century who rejected the world rejected its spatial logics, but by wanting to remain in the world, they were forced to find space to gather. When we look at their revival settings, we can see something of their complex relationship with other religious groups in society, and with American society as a whole.

One illustration of the spatial imagination of revivalists is the Billy Sunday campaign in Chicago in 1918. That revival took place in a wooden tabernacle —a temporary structure built just for the revival—on the edge of the city, at the lakefront, in relatively non-descript urban space. Streetcar lines were laid to transport people to it. Billy Sunday did not wish to have the warehouse-like tabernacle look like a church because, as he said, the churches "have fallen down on their job. . . . So far as the mass of people is concerned churches repel rather than attract. . . . there is nothing about any of it to suggest the church or any of its surroundings." As Thekla Joiner concluded in her study of turn of the century revivalism in Chicago, the tabernacle was a "zealously created liminal space." Such space expressed a feeling of emptiness in a way that differed from the examples of urban Catholic baroque churches or the migrations of Protestants seeking the empty spaces of the suburbs. In its implicit refusal to either stay and fight (as at St. Ignatius) or to escape (to the Main Line), the fundamentalist urban revival site spoke even more clearly about the worldview of its leaders and presumably many of its participants. The profound spatial emptiness of the geography of such a fundamentalist revival gathering—liminality read here as "nowhere," as a *tabula rasa*—*s*ignals a deep sense of personal and collective emptiness. The highly polemical preaching and publishing of fundamentalists appears in such a context as an exceptionally determined effort to define group belonging out of emptiness by identifying opponents. Most importantly, fundamentalism appears here as something of a contradiction. Fundamentalists appear to have pursued vigorously the marking of doctrinal/theological territory at the same time that they sidestepped issues of difference in claiming space for urban revivals. That fact is another caution against simplifying the character of religion in modernity.[108]

[108]Thekla Joiner, *Sin in the City: Chicago and Revivalism 1880–1920* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 188. Fundamentalists' move to the suburbs in the latter part of the twentieth century is described by Darren Dochuk in "'Praying for a Wicked City': Congregation, Community, and the Suburbanization of Fundamentalism" *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13 (2003), 167–203.

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