

**Holy Ground: reinventing ritual space in modern Western culture**  
**Paul Post & Arie L. Molendijk**

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*A research programme*

In 2006 we started a research programme on ritual space in (post)modern Western culture, titled 'Holy Ground: reinventing ritual space in modern Western culture', in which scholars from Tilburg University and the University of Groningen participate. The programme is funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research in the context of a wider programme, which stimulates research into 'The Future of the Religious Past'.

In general the programme 'Holy Ground' focuses on the changing relationship between space and ritual in contemporary Western society. Ritual spaces in contemporary Western culture are subject to a dynamic in which the traditional forms of ritual are increasingly marginalised. Examples are such diverse developments as the rearrangement or destruction of traditional confessional spaces (churches), the rise of increasingly multi-religious urban ritual spaces, the remarkable vitality of places of pilgrimage and war cemeteries, and the growing popularity of *lieux de mémoire* in general with their accompanying forms of 'topolatry' and 'geopiety'. These developments cover a wide area, from the private sphere of home altars to the public domain containing a multitude of often new forms of localised rituality. The programme wants to describe and analyse the dynamics of modern ritual spaces, both in a synthesizing way, as by two case studies. The case studies focus on two important innovations in the field of ritual space within the (semi-)public domain:

(a) The independent development of small scale (constructed) spaces for contemplation. All Western countries have, by now, developed an extensive and varied network of so-called 'rooms of silence' (*stiltecentra*). Although their precise origin has never been investigated, this type of ritual space seems to have developed from the traditional (devotional) chapel. On the basis of especially ecumenical and multi- or 'supra'-religious projects of great international influence that took place in the 1960s and 1970s (such as the Rothko chapel opened in 1971 in Houston, Texas), a network of hundreds of 'rooms of silence' developed from the 1980s/1990s.

(b) The rise of various forms of memorial shrines. Worldwide, there has been a strong rise in 'landscapes of tragedy and memory' where disasters and (traffic) accidents are commemorated, either individually or collectively, temporarily or permanently, on a small or large scale. Recently, there has been a rise in monuments and places where diverse groups of victims develop (commemorative) rituals.

*Aim and questions*

The programme focuses on the interaction between space and ritual. In the case of rooms of silence, new spaces are created institutionally (though usually not by traditional church-religious institutions); memorial shrines are often created at the initiative of the group or individual concerned. In both cases particular ritual repertoires associated with the space in question are developed, which also strongly converge. Proceeding from the central focus on ritual in its spatial dimension, this programme analyses forms of new ritual space and ritual repertoire in mutual connection, and will interpret them in relation to processes of changing (religious) dynamic, such as individualisation, 'emotionalisation', deinstitutionalisation, and (de/re-)sacralisation. This aim will be translated into a number of general research questions, of which the most important are: (1) What are the current developments with respect to ritual space,

both materially and as regards use? (2) What are the cultural-social domains with which (new) ritual spaces are connected (compare health care institutions, campuses, cemeteries, the (semi-)public domain)? (3) What is the relationship between personal religious expression and corporate worship? (4) What is the relationship between the private and public, individual and collective, temporary and permanent dimensions? (5) What connections exist with the transformation processes of rituality and religiosity and social developments? (6) Does 'sacrality' play a role in these new forms of ritual space and how does this impact on the relationship between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'?

#### *Perspectives*

The design of the research as a whole is multidisciplinary by nature and has a strong international perspective. Because the programme aims above all to be a contribution to research into various forms of ritual and religious dynamic, a comparative element will be essential. The development of new ritual spaces is often subject to international influences, both in relation to the space itself and to its ritual design. Examples are the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, the 9/11 Memorial Park in New York, the enduringly strong tradition of War Grave memorials, the meditation space in the building of the German Bundestag, and the Holocaust Memorial, both in Berlin.

Another important part of the programme is a critical study of the role of ritual space within the modern study of culture. For instance, the historiographic and theoretical position will be explored for central concepts such as cult space/ritual space, 'holy place', the triad of ritual-sacrality-religion and the present attention for 'located religion' in cultural and social sciences in general and religious and ritual studies in particular.

#### *Contact*

Paul Post, professor Liturgical and Ritual Studies, Tilburg University (Departement Religious Studies and Theology) [p.g.j.post@uvt.nl](mailto:p.g.j.post@uvt.nl)

Arie Molendijk, professor of the History of Christianity, University of Groningen (Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies) [a.l.molendijk@theol.rug.nl](mailto:a.l.molendijk@theol.rug.nl)

Suggestions for illustrations:

- Holocaust memorial, Berlin