

Comparing Sacred Mountains: Notes on Approach and Method

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Abstract

Mount Kailash in Asia, the Black Hills in North America or Uluru in Australia: around the globe, there are numerous mountains that have been accorded sacredness in the past and present. Religious veneration is carried out with prayer, meditation and pilgrimage. One can use these mountains as probes to look under the surface of societies. A contrasting foil to this is Christianity, which for a long time showed little interest in nature. Thus, in the age of colonialism, a variety of tensions arose. Decolonization and the “ecological turn” changed religious interpretations and gave new meaning to talk about sacred mountains. At the level of global or quasi-global studies, the topic has so far been aimed primarily at a broad readership. Moreover, it is located in a diffuse interdisciplinary field between history, geography, anthropology, and religious studies. Therefore, the methodological discussion has fallen short. These notes would like to outline aspects thereof.

Keywords: sacred mountains, comparative perspective, interdisciplinary research, global history.

1. Introduction

What is a sacred mountain, and how can one compare sacred mountains across the planet? In this chapter, I would like to discuss some methodological aspects of these questions. I do so against the background of a recently completed global history of sacred mountains since 1500 (Mathieu, 2023). In

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working on this book, it has struck me that scholarly, methodological discussions have been lacking for this issue. As far as I can see, serious approaches to such a discussion exist only for certain area studies, for example Tibetan Buddhism (Blondeau & Steinkellner, 1996; Huber, 1999). At the level of global or quasi-global comparisons, one finds almost nothing of the sort. Among other things, this has to do with the fact that publications on sacred mountains are often addressed to a broad readership. The popular format impedes lengthy explanations. Moreover, the topic is located in a diffuse interdisciplinary field between history, geography, anthropology and religious studies. The interest in it, however, not infrequently comes from the alpinist side, from mountain enthusiasts who are interested in the cultural and spiritual enhancement of their “playground”.

First, this chapter looks at a selection of comparative studies on sacred mountains. The next sections are devoted to various conceptual and political aspects of the topic. Finally, I suggest some paths on how to move forward in future research. Needless to say that this short text can not mention all the important mountain regions of the world.

2. A Bibliographical Survey

Special overviews of mountains and mountain ranges on all known continents existed in Europe as early as the 17th century (Mathieu, 2017). Comparative studies of *sacred* mountains, on the other hand, did not emerge until the 19th century, in the wake of rapidly expanding colonialism and imperialism. The first consistent study of this kind that I am aware of was by an Austrian geologist and folklorist, the founder of the Anthropological Society in Vienna, Ferdinand von Andrian. He published a 400-page book on the *Höhencultus*, the height or summit cults in Eurasia (Andrian, 1891). It could be called the beginning of a Western tradition. In the Chinese empire, with its elaborate system of sacred mountains, an extensive literature on individual mountains and their spiritual relations had existed for centuries. However, it seems to have reached beyond the borders of the Middle Kingdom only in special cases. The perspective remained self-centered (Sheng, 2013).

In Table 1, I have compiled a sample of Western publications on sacred mountains with a large-scale focus. The list is by no means exhaustive, but it allows some insights into the different perspectives from which the topic is approached or treated.

Table 1 – Sacred mountains compared: a chrono-bibliographical sample

1891	F. v. Andrian, <i>Der Höhencultus asiatischer und europäischer Völker. Eine ethnologische Studie</i> [The height cultus of Asian and European peoples. An ethnological study].
1903	J. Grand-Carteret, <i>La montagne à travers les âges: rôle joué par elle – façon dont elle été vue</i> [The Mountains through the ages: Role played by it – How it was seen].
1934	J. Blache, <i>L'Homme et la montagne</i> [Man and mountains].
1936	R. Peattie, <i>Mountain geography. A critique and field study</i> .
1936	K. Ziak, <i>Der Mensch und die Berge. Eine Weltgeschichte des Alpinismus</i> [Man and the mountains. A world history of Alpinism].
1973	Samivel [P. Gayet-Tancrède], <i>Hommes, cimes et dieux. Les grandes mythologies de l'altitude et la légende dorée des montagnes à travers le monde</i> [Men, peaks and gods. The great mythologies of altitude and the golden legend of mountains throughout the world]. (new editions 1983, 2005).
1990	E. Bernbaum, <i>Sacred mountains of the world</i> (reprint 1997, revised edition 2022).
1990	K. Gratzl (Ed.), <i>Die heiligsten Berge der Welt: Olymp, Parnass, Athos, Ararat, Sinai, Kailasa, Nyantschen Thanglha, Burhan Haldun, Fuji, Miwa</i> . [The holiest mountains in the world: Olympus, Parnassus, Athos, Ararat, Sinai, Kailasa, Nyantschen Thanglha, Burhan Haldun, Fuji, Miwa].
2004	E. Grötzbach, <i>Heilige Berge und Bergheiligtümer im Hochgebirge – ein Vergleich zwischen verschiedenen Religionen</i> [Sacred mountains and mountain shrines in the high altitudes – A comparison between different religions].
2006	A. Barbero & S. Piano (Eds.), <i>Religioni e sacri monti: atti del convegno internazionale 2004</i> [Religions and sacred mountains: Proceedings of the international conference 2004].
2010	J. Ries (Ed.), <i>Montagnes sacrées</i> [Sacred mountains].
2010	M. Boilève, <i>Montagnes sacrées</i> [Sacred mountains].
2013	P. Chavot, <i>Voyages spirituels aux sommets du monde</i> [Spiritual journeys to the summits of the world].
2013	R. Messner & R-P. Martin, <i>Meine heiligen Berge</i> [My sacred mountains] (new edition 2020).
2023	J. Mathieu, <i>Mount Sacred. Eine kurze Globalgeschichte der heiligen Berge seit 1500</i> [Mount Sacred. A brief global history of holy mountains since 1500].

Together with the burgeoning alpinism and the emerging geosciences, a sporadic general interest in sacred mountains awoke in the late 19th century. This was joined, as in Andrian (1891) and Samivel (1973), by the gathering of legends in the Romantic tradition. The pioneering works of the new, specialized mountain geography (Blache, 1934; Peattie, 1936) touched on the subject only in brief reviews of the history of mountain perception. The two-volume survey by a journalist (Grand-Carteret, 1903) was often quoted and had probably the greatest impact on later authors.

In the last 30 years, the interest in sacred mountains around the globe has increased markedly, certainly also because of everyday globalization thanks to the internet and cheap flights. Publications now place more emphasis on aesthetic illustration, and cultural journalism remains an important driver (Boilève, 2010; Chavot, 2013). In the case of the famous global mountaineer Reinhold Messner, this tendency combined with practical alpinist experiences (Messner & Martin, 2013). Genuinely religious components emerged more clearly in this phase than earlier. Christian dignitaries who were committed to interreligious dialogue wrote prefaces to publications or acted as their editors (Gratzl, 1990; Ries, 2010). At the same time, the influence of Asian religions increased (Bernbaum, 1990). The scientific profile also became much clearer in the context of very different projects – from the perspective of geography (Grötzbach, 2004), anthropology and religious studies (Barbero & Amilcar, 2006; Bernbaum, 1990) or history (Mathieu, 2023).

All in all, this literature increased the level of knowledge about sacred mountains quite considerably. Today, it is much easier than in the past to gather information on specific examples and overarching questions. It remains difficult, however, to determine the origin of individual pieces of information and to place them in their historical context; journalistic works are not obliged to provide rigorous source information. In addition, a fundamentally affirmative attitude toward sacred mountains dominates. These are regarded as positive from the outset, and their classification as “sacred” does not usually have to overcome any major hurdles: When in doubt, the thumbs go up. Certain exceptions are made in the case of Christianity. Messner & Martin state that there are no real sacred mountains in this religion (2013, p. 33), and Grötzbach classifies Christianity as a “nature-remote” religion, in

contrast to “nature-close” religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and others (2004, p. 458).

Basically affirmative is Edwin Bernbaum, an American religious scholar, mountaineer, and environmentalist. Nevertheless – or also because of this – his work *Sacred Mountains of the World* seems to me to be the most appropriate for the discussion of methodological aspects. The work was published in California in 1990 and reprinted there in 1997; in 2022 it will be published in a revised second edition by Oxford University Press.¹ The author’s rich knowledge of and decades of involvement with the subject make it special. Bernbaum has also designed a “Sacred Mountains Program” for U.S. national parks and has repeatedly advocated collective mountain-related issues (Bernbaum, 2006).

3. Religion and Ecology

Bernbaum’s work can be placed within the interdisciplinary field of “religion and ecology” that has been forming in research for the past several decades, largely prompted by the United States (Kinsley, 1995; Bauman et al., 2011; Jenkins et al., 2017). The new area of research is itself an expression of a trend known as the “greening of religion”, which stems from the “ecological turn” beginning in the years around 1970. In the course of this change, many religions embraced ecological concerns and in turn formed a force in the advancement of this direction. As for Christianity, the trend is often illustrated with two high-profile texts: the essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* by Lynn White as a critical starter (1967) and the environmental encyclical *Laudato si’* by Pope Francis as a positive ecclesial response (2015).

Lynn criticized Christianity, especially in its Western form, as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen”. It had not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it was God’s will that humans should exploit nature for their own ends (White, 1967, p. 1205). Pope Francis accommodated critics like White to some extent in his environmental encyclical. Instead of dualism, there is now talk of the togetherness of all crea-

¹ The 2022 edition was not yet available to me when I wrote this essay, but I could read it after the review process. Where the new edition differs noticeably from the first, I report it in a note.

tures; an “integral ecology” deserves promotion. However, nature must not be deified, and the “obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person” goes too far. Compared to previous church teaching, the cosmic hierarchy had become flatter, but otherwise remained untouched: God the Lord, then the human race, and finally the rest of creation, to which one should relate “as brothers and sisters” (Francis, 2015, pp. 10, 66, 68).

For Bernbaum, all religions have always been green, and they have remained so despite modern setbacks. In a summary of his book, written for the promotion of mountains at the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development, he puts it this way: “Mountains have entered the inner core of society since the dawn of human awareness. All the major and many minor religions render mountains spiritually significant. And despite the spread of modern skepticism, these emotional, religious or spiritual forces prevail throughout much of the world. For development agencies to ignore them is not only to court failure and exasperation but is also to risk the loss of a vital part of our world heritage and to reduce a critical pillar of our cultural diversity” (Bernbaum 1992, p. 10). Thus, in addition to religious and spiritual forces, the author also considers general “emotional” forces, which he often illustrates with secular mountaineering experiences.

From a historical perspective, two points in particular seem problematic to me: (A) the self-evident assumption of strong religiosity in the early period, weakened by skepticism in more recent times; and (B) the homogenizing statement that mountains have spiritual significance in *all* major religions. There are important empirical and conceptual objections to such generalizations.

(A) Sacred mountains in a long downward trend? We know very little about the early historical period, “the dawn of human awareness” of Bernbaum. Sources are sparse and often inconclusive. In a part of the ecologically inspired studies of religion, however, it became common to assume with Mircea Eliade (1961) a *homo religiosus* who inhabits archaic societies in history and in the present and who regards the whole of nature as a source of cosmic sacrality. This archaeo-religious perspective has been heavily criticized in recent decades because it hardly stands up to scholarly standards (especially vehement: Dubuisson, 2005). With reference to mountains, evidence proves that religious devotion increased in quite a few cases from the Middle

Ages until the 20th century. In Asia, retreats of individual spiritual pioneers often developed into large pilgrimages to sacred mountains. Never before have these been so popular as in recent centuries. Even in Christian Europe, which historically had little inclination toward nature cults, a certain tendency of mountain sacralization emerged in modern times (Mathieu, 2006; Mathieu, 2023).

(B) All major religions “montanophile”? The concept of religion derives from Latin and has a Western genealogy. It is debatable to what extent it can be used for spiritual traditions of other areas and continents where confessional coherence was less important than in Europe (Kollmar-Paulenz, 2012). This heterogeneity is a general problem in comparative religious research. Thus, in addition to substantive and structural-functional definitions of religion, another form of definition has emerged in recent decades that speaks only of “family resemblances” of the religious. Here, the boundaries with profane phenomena remain relatively open and are mainly determined by the actors themselves, whereas the classical definitions are top-down approaches (Byrne, 2015; Taylor, 2010). Bernbaum’s statement that a “critical pillar of our cultural diversity” is lost by ignoring sacred mountains can be seen as contradictory. Conceiving of religious traditions in such a generalizing way reduces a potential part of diversity as well.

4. Narration, Performance, and Context

In explaining the sacred, Bernbaum draws heavily on individual, emotional aspects. He quotes the German Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto, author of the famous essay *Das Heilige* (The idea of the Holy) from 1917, who focused on the religious feeling of the “wholly other” – “an inscrutable mystery that attracts and repels us with intense feeling of wonder and awe”. This fascination or fear can appear both as divine or demonic. “Whether it reveals a vision of heaven or hell, the encounter with the sacred moves us to the depths of our being to disclose a realm of existence beyond the power of words to describe.” (Bernbaum, 1990, p. XV).

Otto is considered a pioneer of religious studies because in the early 20th century – not least with his interest in non-Christian religions – he freed him-

self from certain dogmatic precepts of traditional theology. Precisely for this reason, however, he is not a very reliable guide to history. In the Christian Church, the concept of the sacred has been a topic of discussion since its beginnings in late antiquity and has sometimes been hotly contested, especially during the Reformations in the 16th century. The Council of Trent took a position on this in many ways. Cardinal Cervini, a papal envoy to the council, convened a small group of theologians in early 1547 to examine Reformation writings. Luther had claimed in 1520 that there were only two sacraments, and he seemed to downplay their effectiveness and role in the practice of the faith. Cervini's commission extracted from the suspect writings 35 points that seemed to contradict Catholic teaching. For about four centuries, theology had paid much attention to the sacraments, so there was plenty of reading material. The points were subsequently discussed in the General Assembly and finally summarized in 13 articles. On March 3, 1547, the assembly unanimously approved them (O'Malley, 2013, pp. 118–121).

Unlike with Otto, the sacred was thus determined here in a learned, administrative church procedure, and it almost never referred to natural elements. Of course, the general population was also involved in the production of the sacred. This is best illustrated by the local saints propagated “from below” that appeared in Catholic areas in the early modern period, but increasingly struggled to assert themselves within the Vatican hierarchy (Burke, 1984; Zwysig, 2018). This social dynamic of power and hierarchy receives little attention in Bernbaum's work, although it was one of the central premises in many places – also in areas where the official religion referred to mountains, as in Tibetan Buddhism. One example is the cult of Pure Crystal Mountain in southeastern Tibet, on the border with Assam, where the highlands drop steeply into the southern rain forest. The main pilgrimage ritual of the Crystal Mountain, known as the “great ravine circuit of Tsari,” developed in the 18th century, parallel to the solidification of the theocratic state in central Tibet. It was a dramatic and dangerous mass procession that took place every twelve years, in the years of the monkey, until 1956.

The danger came from the necessary descent into the jungles of the south and from tribal groups that ruled there and were often hostile to the Buddhist pilgrims. The 1944 procession even resulted in an actual massacre. The pilgrims flocked from all over Tibet and usually numbered about 20,000. In

order to carry out the event despite adverse conditions, officials from Lhasa used to pay a so-called “barbarian tribute” to tribal leaders before the start of the circumambulation. With the gift ritual, performed with much ceremonial effort and affirmed by an oath, the Buddhist elite hoped to provide safe conduct for their people. But even without encroachments, the procession of a good 150 kilometers, which took about two weeks, was exceedingly demanding. Moreover, only those who completed the circumambulation with devotion, in the spirit of the Buddha, could hope for sin redemption and religious merit. The authorities in Lhasa invested massively in this sacred mountain district and its mass procession. The connection was symbolically underlined by the fact that clothes of the Dalai Lama were worn prominently through the gorge circuit (Huber, 1999b, pp. 128–174).

There is a long-standing debate in the relevant disciplines about how much weight to give to narrative (mythology), performance (ritual), and the broader social and political context when exploring religion. A general rule for weighting is unlikely to be sensible because different elements are of particular interest depending on the circumstances. Bernbaum, however, generally tends toward mythology in his work. For example, in the section on Mount Kailash in Tibet, considered by many today to be the holiest mountain in the world, mythological explanations take up more than half of the text. One learns much about Hindu and Buddhist views of Mount Kailash, but not very much about the political framework within the ruling People’s Republic of China (Bernbaum, 1990, pp. 8–15). From a strictly historical perspective, the heavy emphasis on mythology is particularly problematic because it often takes on a timeless character by necessity. We know little about who exactly preferred which form of legend at which point in time.

5. Colonial Settings and Indigenous Agency

An important aspect of the aforementioned “ecological turn” concerned the new positioning of indigenous people in colonial situations. Just before the turn, decolonization had fully set in. It also permeated sub-national entities. Of general importance was the change in the leading world power, the USA. In the course of the fundamental social criticism of the 1960s, the “Red Pow-

er” movement emerged. This changed the power imbalance between the religions. While Christianity was put on the defensive and under pressure to adapt, Native American spirituality was now insistently propagated. In 1970 and 1971, activists of the American Indian Movement occupied the presidential monument on Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills. Unlike in the past, they asked no one for permission. On the mountaintop, they performed more than just Native American rituals. One leader shouted down the Christian Ten Commandments to the audience, adding in allusion to the many contract violations: “Thou shalt honor thy treaties.” (Larner 2002, p. 285; Washburn, 1996).

Prompted by the criticism, U.S. Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978, guaranteeing the free exercise of religion for the Native American population. For Euro-Americans, this right had long been secured in the First Amendment, while the religion of Native Americans had previously been considered non-existent or devilish. The Code of Indian Offenses of 1883 had restricted their ceremonies. The Freedom Act, enacted a hundred years later, thus marked a reversal of the trend. But because place-based forms of spirituality were often related to land rights, the issue came under the competitive American judiciary. It was now courts that decided, in costly litigation, whether a religious practice on a mountain or elsewhere was “truly religious” and what that meant for land use. It turned out that the congressional decision often could not be enforced (Rannow, 1982; Parlow, 1989).

Bernbaum wrote his *Sacred Mountains of the World* in California of the 1980s. He was a protagonist of the ecological movement, but could not conceive it as a historic turning point in the perception of nature. In any case, the political-cultural conjunctures and conflicts in his own country barely appear in the chapter on North America (Bernbaum, 1990, pp. 142-167).² In a general way, colonialism and imperialism functioned as a machine for the worldwide production of nationalism in small and large formats. Since sacred mountains often served as focal points of identity, these “patriotic” movements were, and are, of great importance to our topic. The anti-colonialist symbolism of a mountain is very strong, for example, in the case of Paektusan, the “Holy Mountain of Revolution” on the border between North

2 The 2022 edition addresses conflicts in somewhat greater detail than the 1990 original.

Korea and China (Mathieu, 2020). In addition, the colonial framework produced new interpretations, as can be seen with Kilimanjaro on the northern border of Tanzania.

A few years after the British took over the Tanganyika Territory from the Germans at the end of the First World War, the colonial official Charles Dundas published a comprehensive book about this highest mountain in Africa. Already in the first lines he gave free rein to his enthusiasm. Whoever lives in the shadow of one of the most magnificent massifs of this earth feels a spiritual attraction similar to the magnetic effect of large bodies on small ones. His enthusiasm was that of a scientifically interested European mountaineer. He himself did not quite make it to the summit, but he paid tribute to those who had tried and succeeded. And he devoted himself to the exploration of the entire mountain area, which was inhabited by the Chagga people up to a sea level of about 2000 meters. To this local population he assigned an attitude that corresponded to his own feelings. Kilimanjaro was for them “the embodiment of all that is beautiful, eternal and strengthening” (Dundas, 1924, p. 38).

Did this *embodiment* have a religious dimension? Dundas gives few clues. The Chagga called their god *Ruwa*, which also meant sun. Whether the god was identical with the sun, or the sun was the dwelling place of the god, did not trouble them (in any case, it was not a mountain). According to Dundas, the natives were very reluctant to provide information about their religious practices. To find out more, he had hired a local helper. The mountain appeared in common sayings and some narratives. It also served as a landmark that provided ritual direction on certain occasions. Thus, the dead were buried with their faces toward the summit. But there were no special religious events for the mountain (Dundas, 1924).

Two generations later, Bernbaum in California picked the baton of Dundas. In his book, he now explicitly stated that Kilimanjaro was, or at least had been, a sacred mountain. Africa’s most famous mountain thus corresponded to his initial thesis of the general sacredness of mountains. But Bernbaum could not provide more evidence for this than Dundas. With the latter’s reference to the ritual direction toward the summit, he surprised a student who had been educated in the Chagga area in Christian schools and was studying at Berkeley in the 1980s. The American explained in detail to the African that

there had been a deeper meaning to it. Apparently, at the end, the latter believed that the “seemingly unimportant things in contemporary Chagga life” that he had never thought about stemmed from ancient religious practices around the sacred mountain (Bernbaum, 1990, p. 137).

6. New Actors: International Organizations

Other studies, however, failed to confirm Bernbaum’s thesis of the sacredness of Kilimanjaro (Stahl, 1964; Iliffe, 1979). When UNESCO added Kilimanjaro National Park to the World Heritage List in 1987, no mention was made of this property either. Local religious beliefs were generally respected by the organization and used as a criterion. Kilimanjaro, however, was only recognized by the organization on the basis of environmental characteristics: “superlative natural phenomena”, and “exceptional natural beauty” (UNESCO, 1987).

UNESCO, the United Nations cultural organization headquartered in Paris, began registering and protecting cultural and natural sites of “outstanding universal value” in 1975. States participating in the convention can submit applications to this effect, which then go through a review by experts and are ultimately accepted or rejected. By including the designation “sacred” in the positive resolutions, it receives an official endorsement by the world community. China is an interesting case in point. In 1987, at the same time as the Great Wall, the imperial sacred mountain Tai Shan was added to the World Heritage List. To date, more than twenty Chinese mountains and mountain landscapes have been added to the list and declared universally outstanding – far more than by any other country in the world. Since 2008, the entire imperial system of the Five Mountains, of which Tai Shan forms the head, has also figured on the candidate list. The proposal was submitted by the Ministry of Construction of the People’s Republic (UNESCO, 2021).

In contrast, there is uncertainty about the UNESCO candidacy of Tibet’s sacred Kailash, which captivates people around the globe. In 2015, an international environmental and development center in Kathmandu launched the *Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative* with the goal of submitting a transnational Nepal-India-Chinese application, promoting

biodiversity and other ecological issues. Bernbaum, reputed for his work and general mountain activities, led the preliminary negotiations. But problems soon arose. Borders in the Himalayas are disputed, and it seems unlikely that the People's Republic of China would make a special effort to promote a mountain on its territory that has also become a national symbol of Tibet (UNESCO, 2016; Bernbaum, 2020).

As indicated above, a strategic connection between Western ecologists and indigenous societies emerged in the late 20th century. In the eyes of many critics of modern industrial society, other cultures showed that it was possible to deal with the environment in considerate and sustainable ways. Since the sacredness of natural elements formed a potential protective factor, and indigenous people were considered responsible for the sacred, there was a potential of alliance. A number of projects explored how sacred mountains and other sacred natural sites could be used for environmental protection. In the 1990s, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature took an initiative at the global level. It set up a task force on "Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas". After several international conferences, the group took stock at a 2008 event (Verschuuren et al., 2010).

Eight "custodians" of sacred natural sites from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Australia/Oceania were invited to the event (whereas the organizers and funders were from Europe and North America). In closing, the organizers argued that sacred natural sites should be recognized as the first network of protected areas in history, much older than the national parks that started emerging in the late 19th century. According to them, such time-honored sites made an important contribution to the preservation of biodiversity. Tourism could benefit from them economically, but also pose a cultural and ecological threat. The major religions were described as "mainstream religions". They seemed less suitable for conservation aims than indigenous religions (Verschuuren et al., 2010, pp. 280–291).

The preface of the conference publication reproduced a long poem written for the occasion by a Siberian shamaness about her sacred mountain Alkhanai, beginning with an admonition to its visitors ("What are you tourists doing, so-called pilgrims?"). At the end, the custodians had space for their own views. It can be understood as a global-indigenous doctrinal statement. What is striking about it is the broad extension of sacredness: "We also note that

for many of us our whole territories are sacred and this includes our homes, communities, farms, footpaths, markets and meeting places; and that these territories include layers of sacredness often with different purposes, including those that are material and functional to humans.” (Verschuuren et al., 2010, pp. XXI, 293).

Just as conservationists began to form a picture of indigenous peoples, so those began to form a picture of ecology and its claims. Well studied is this “reverse environmentalism” among Tibetan Buddhists in China. Since the late 20th century, a network of non-governmental organizations spread in the highlands. The age of projects began. At the sacred mountain Khawakarbo, for example, the number of visitors had increased massively, which affected the local incense cypress. These trees provided a habitat for small animals, helped improve the climate, and reduced soil erosion. Thanks to a project, the use of cypresses was reduced to ten percent. Central to this was the teaching of two monks who questioned the karmic merit of pilgrims when they burned “the very best ornaments” of the mountain as offerings (Yeh, 2014, pp. 200–201).

However, some of the Tibetan activists perceived the Western environmentalists as arrogant, not only because they had the money and thus ultimately made the decisions, but also for religious reasons. Presuming that they had the power to protect the environment was, in their eyes, a presumptuous, self-righteous belief; its condition depended more on the inner state of mind on the Buddha’s path than on external actions. And the concept of biodiversity, which places a higher value on rare species, was unfair; all sentient beings in the world deserved equal care and mindfulness (Yeh, 2014, pp. 202, 213–214).

7. Role Attribution: Gender, Mobility

It can also be instructive to examine the social distribution of roles in religious mountain worship. As for gender roles, we find that male primacy was often ritually emphasized in this context, in Asia as well as on other continents. These rules point to their deep roots in patriarchal societies and may prove to be a handicap for the future of such forms of mountain worship.

However, it may also be an opportunity for women (and other genders or non-genders) to rediscover and claim symbolic places for themselves. Historical and contemporary examples suggest that this change could be quite different.

Well documented and studied is the much-visited Mount Fuji in Japan, known as a national mountain. It has been venerated by mountain ascetics of various doctrines since the Middle Ages. From the late 15th century onwards, pilgrimage to the mountain increased strongly. Parallel to the sharpening exclusion of women, criticism of this tendency began, first from genuinely religious currents. The ascetic Jikigyo Miroku, who starved himself to death on the mountain in 1733 and became a celebrity, held: "A woman cannot be sinful if she does nothing wrong." Later, actors of this current moved on to symbolic actions. In 1832, a woman secretly reached the forbidden summit of Mount Fuji. The increasing relaxation of the ban on women was also due to economic competition between the operators of the various access routes, who lived off the pilgrimage and struggled to promote it. In 1860, the ban was temporarily suspended, and in 1872 the volcano was opened to both sexes. Special circumstances connected with the Meiji Revolution contributed to this. Another factor was that the deities of Fuji were more important to the lower classes than to the ruling classes (Miyazaki, 2005).

The situation is quite different on the Holy Mount Athos, where the Christian Orthodox monks still adhere to the exclusion of women from their peninsula. What is sacred on Athos is above all the monastic presence and not the real mountain, which has only a metaphorical meaning. But it is precisely this that may have contributed to the tenacious defense of the female exclusion. It is said to apply even to the animal world. Especially since Greece's accession to the European Community, controversy has arisen on several occasions. In 2003, the European Parliament called for the mountain's opening in a non-binding resolution. Greece should lift the threat of several months' imprisonment for transgressions. The Parliament stated that "such a ban is a violation of the principle of and the international conventions on gender equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender and the provisions relating to free movement of persons provided by the Greek Constitution and Community law" (European Parliament, 2003).

The monks on Athos also pursue a special strategy in another role assignment: The mountain is only open to pilgrims, not tourists. Regardless of their origin, orientation and motivation, all male visitors officially transform into “pilgrims”. Mandatory registration allows the flow of visitors to be controlled; there is a cap and rules regarding length of stay (Speake 2018, pp. 233–237). The distinction between pilgrimage and tourism is thus also drawn by the leading protagonists themselves. One encounters such sweeping categorizations in many places and in very different forms. When Chinese literati visited the sacred mountains of the early modern empire, they programmatically distinguished themselves from the pilgrims of the lower classes, whom they readily labeled as superstitious (Bingenheimer, 2017, p. 23). As tourism to Uluru/Ayers Rock in Australia skyrocketed from the 1960s onwards, a segment of white Australians did not want to be considered tourists: For them, the “red heart of Australia” represented a spiritual-national trial. Tourists were of a different, inferior quality in their eyes, namely ignorant and materialistic foreigners (Whittaker, 1994; Barnes, 2011).

In recent decades, both specialized tourism studies and pilgrimage studies have experienced an upsurge internationally. Many of these scholars emphasize the overlaps between the two broadly defined forms of mobility. The term *pilgrim* consolidated in Europe during the 17th century and is usually associated with religious institutions (Albera & Eade, 2017, pp. 5–9). The term *tourist* emerged in the 19th century as the modern transportation revolution took hold. Today, however, researchers also speak of religious tourism and of secular pilgrimages or tourist sight sacralization (MacCanell, 1999). The emphasis is on frameworks and behavior that link the two fields. One may, of course, wonder whether this use of language is not overly broad and metaphorical. But I do not think that one can find a general answer to this. To make a proper decision, we should pay attention above all to the statements of the actors themselves.

8. Conclusions

Comparative research on sacred mountains began as early as the 19th century and has increased considerably in recent decades. However, much of the global or quasi-global literature is aimed at a broad audience, leaving little room for methodological discussion. Moreover, the subject is located in an interdisciplinary field between history, geography, anthropology, and religious studies. One should also have some knowledge of the traditions of the various disciplines in order to truly understand their reasoning. Here, the sacred mountains were treated from a historical perspective. To discuss methodological issues, I have chosen Bernbaum's insightful work *Sacred Mountains of the World*, a classic from 1990 due for its second edition in 2022. Bernbaum comes from a background in religious studies and mountaineering. Seen from a historical perspective, he gives comparatively great weight to the mythological side of the subject, paying little attention to the ritual realm and especially to the broader political-cultural context. Since the author assumes a general sacredness of mountains, he is not demanding in the empirical proofs for this classification.

Future research would also do well to include topics that do not appear in his work. I am thinking, for example, of questions of gender roles in religious mountain worship or of the activities of new international actors such as UNESCO, which transfers a local sacredness to a global, administrative level.³ Ideology criticism remains important. Religious phenomena like to dress themselves in eternally identical garments; a claimed long duration lends them stability and security. In reality, change cannot be overlooked. Thus, the concept of the sacred has been a topic of discussion in the Christian church since its beginnings and was especially hotly disputed during the Reformations in the 16th century. There was a learned, administrative church procedure for deciding such questions. Quite differently, in the 20th century, a subjective idea of the sacred gained the upper hand, which centered on contradictory emotions that were at once eerie and gratifying. Simultaneously, the idea of a *homo religiosus* populating archaic societies in history and the present also spread. With reference to the mountains, however, it can be

3 In Bernbaum's 2022 edition, UNESCO appears more frequently than in the 1990 original. In several instances he was a prominent player of the endorsement.

demonstrated that religious devotion often gained in breadth and social relevance from the Middle Ages until the 20th century and did not decline.

Important for this field are the debates about colonialism and about ecology, which are conducted not least by anthropology. In both fields, a fundamental change has occurred since the 1960s and 1970s. It created the basis for a strategic link between Western ecologists and indigenous societies. In the eyes of many critics of modern industrial society, other cultures showed that it was possible to deal with the environment in considerate and sustainable ways. Environmentalists were now exploring how sacred mountains, for example, could be used for protection. In the 1990s, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature took a global initiative. At their final conference in 2008, a Siberian shamaness presented a long poem about her sacred mountain Alkhanai, and the invited custodians of sacred natural sites from different continents stated their own global-indigenous doctrine. Striking is the wide extension of sacredness to the whole territories of these delegates. It would be tempting to scrutinize the background of such a large view in detail.

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