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Jon Mathieu

The Sacralization of Mountains in Europe during the Modern Age

In the debate about sacred mountains, authors often voice the opinion that sacredness is endangered by, or even lost under the influence of, modern economic and social development. But how legitimate is it to generalize this assumption or assessment? The present article shows that, in the case of Europe, history has proceeded in the opposite direction: here, one can observe clear indications of a sacralization process during the modern era, while in earlier periods mountains had much less religious significance. This paper first demonstrates that there are signs of an increase in the sense of the sacredness of mountains in Europe, in both religious and non-religious domains since the 16th century; it then places this development in the context of the particular Christian tradition and its redefinition during the modern age of economic and intellectual modernization. The evidence is taken mainly from the Alpine area.

Keywords: *Sacred mountains; Christianity; perception, appreciation of nature; modernization; Alps; Europe.*

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Introduction

On 5 February 1988 the Swiss Canton of Valais published a commune's application for a building permit to increase the height of one of its mountains to over 4000 m (Pfrunder 1992). In the 19th century the height of the Fletschhorn, the mountain in question, was estimated to be 4001 m. In accordance with later, more accurate measurements, this figure was reduced to 3993 m. The president of the local commune therefore came up with the idea of recovering the "lost" meters by building a dry stone wall on the peak (Pfrunder 1992).

However, the publication of the application met with astonishing reactions. Thanks to press agencies, the news spread halfway round the world; hundreds of newspapers, from the *Chicago Tribune* to the Russian *Izvestia*, published reports of the building application to raise the height of a Swiss mountain. Soon there was a plethora of comments. Some letter writers were delighted at the idea, noting, for example, that they had not climbed the Fletschhorn only because it was not a "magical" 4000-m mountain. Many, however, opposed the idea and were disgusted that humans were planning to interfere with the boundary between heaven and earth. The idea obviously hurt religious feelings. In many cases, commentators used religious language. A doctor from Germany quoted the Bible (Luke 18, 14): "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Another letter writer intimated briefly: "They should not interfere with God's handiwork" (Pfrunder 1992).

What would these reactions have been like if the heightening of the mountain had not been planned in 2000 but at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era, ie around 1500 AD? In order to explore this question from a historian's point of view, we must first clarify the use of the term "sacred." There is no universal definition of this term, but many scholars agree that some aspects of it can be generalized, and that it is useful to leave other aspects open for more context-specific use. First, the idea of *sacredness* is distinct from the concept of *profaneness* and implies corresponding commandments or taboos regarding transgression. Second, it has to do with hierarchy: it embodies power and creates social attention. The relationship between sacredness and an institutionalized *religion* or a church is, on the other hand, a relatively open matter. The same applies to the form of its expression in terms of representations, rituals, significance, and feelings. These variable, context-specific aspects make it clear that "sacredness" has new configurations in each period. Nevertheless the ideas of demarcation, taboo, power, and public attention give us a yardstick for measuring historical change with respect to this topic (Eliade 1987; Bernbaum 1997).

Religious landscapes

An initial indication of how different landscape elements in the European mountains were perceived in the distant past can come from toponymy (the study of place names). In fact, the distribution of sacred names demonstrates a clear polarity: in areas of settlement, there were and are numerous religious names; when it comes to names of mountain peaks there are almost none. Saint-Véran, St Gallen, St Moritz, St Veit an der Glan—throughout the entire Alpine area, we can find settlements whose names relate to a Christian saint. In some regions they are numerous. In the French department of Savoy, no fewer than 66 communities, ie 22% of all communities, have the name of a saint. Far less numerous, but nevertheless appearing regularly, are saints' names for passes (Great St Bernhard, Little St Bernhard, St Gotthard, San Marco, San Jorio, etc). By contrast, it is an exception for an Alpine mountain peak to be named after a saint. In a list of over 1300 peaks, there are only a handful of saints' names. The peak region was toponymically almost totally profane,

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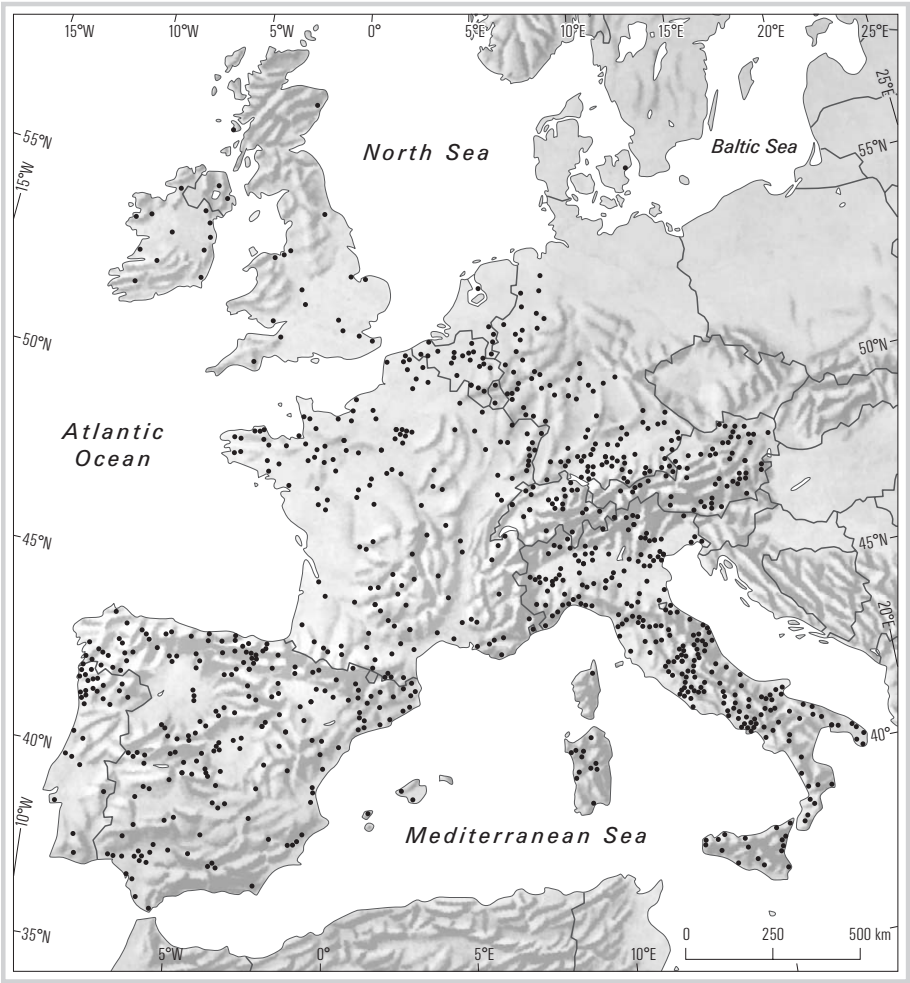


FIGURE 1 Major pilgrimage centers in Western Europe still visited in the 1980s. Each dot (n=830) on the map represents a major shrine (Nolan and Nolan 1989). As Nolan and Nolan conducted their research before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, shrines in East Germany and other countries now in "Western Europe" are not included. (Map by Andreas Brodbeck, based on Nolan and Nolan 1989)

and was hardly used by human beings until the 19th century. Numerous tracts of land in the high mountains only received names as a result of topographical measurements and mountain climbing (Schorta 1988).

Another type of access to the historical development of the religious landscape is analysis of pilgrimages. The places that regularly attracted numerous pilgrims reflect the distribution of sacredness in an area, ie the sacred power fields of the period. According to ancient Christian tradition, pilgrims did not simply go to a place for its own sake; they went to be near a certain saint who was buried there or whose reliquaries were kept there. The person-related character of pilgrimage was also expressed in the mobility of holy objects: quite early on in Europe, it was possible, and also normal, to transfer reliquaries from one place to another. The sacredness of certain regions and landscape elements therefore appears to be a derived phenomenon rather than a central one (Nolan and Nolan 1989).

The most important pilgrimage sites in the medieval period were Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela (Spain). None of these places was at a particular altitude or associated with the dimension of topographical height. Already during this period new pilgrimage places were constantly created. The rate of creation reached its high point in the 17th and early 18th centuries. By the 20th century it was at a level similar to that in the late Middle Ages. In the 1980s the major places of pilgrimage in Western Europe were spread fairly evenly across the Catholic countries (Figure 1). The Alps and Europe's other mountain areas do not appear on the map as particularly well-endowed sacred areas. On the contrary, the map shows that Christian pilgrimage has, among other things, an urban character. Cities such as Rome, Naples, and Paris stand out clearly in the continental overview.

The trends and distributions on a regional scale are of interest, too. During the early modern period, an above-average number of smaller pilgrimage sites appeared in Southern Germany and Austria. Some of these had a relationship to topographical features, for example the *Four Mountains Pilgrimage* in southern Austria, which begins and ends at midnight. Pilgrims

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FIGURE 2 Christian cross on the Jegihorn in the Valais, Switzerland, late 20th century: a common feature in the European Alps. (Photo courtesy of bergfoto.ch)



must climb 4 nearby mountains with altitudes ranging from 970 to 1170 m within 24 hours and participate in the masses and devotions in the church buildings there. The *Sacri Monti* (artificially constructed holy mountains) at the southern foot of the Alps are also clearly related to topography. They developed in some regions near the border with Protestant countries during the decades around 1600. The idea of bringing "Jerusalem" to Europe and imitating it architecturally had already appeared before 1500 and gained greater significance after the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The thematic center of the Sacri Monti is formed by the life and the Passion of Christ on the mountain of Golgotha, or by remarkable scenes from the life of Mary, or the life of a saint. Here, as in other regions, it was often conspicuous but seldom very high mountains that received pilgrimage churches (Zanzi and Zanzi 2002).

According to comparative cultural studies, the spatial practices of many religions were, and still are, determined by 2 contrary conceptions: "If the tendency to institute sacred places is universal, so also is the tendency to deny the localization of divinity" (Eliade 1987, p 528). In European Christian tradition the 2 conceptions materialized in different ways after the Reformation of the 16th century. In Protestant areas, the omnipresence of God was a central concept that set somewhat narrow boundaries on sacred topography. In the areas that remained Catholic, the attribution of sacredness to a physical-tangible landscape grew much more stronger after the Tridentine Reform. Over time, a rich inventory of religious symbols ranging from large church buildings to small chapels, wayside shrines, crucifixes, and pious mementos developed. One Alpine valley in the Canton of Valais, Switzerland, with a few thousand inhabitants, had at least 70 churches and chapels built between 1650 and 1800. Small religious constructions in particular covered increasingly large areas of mountain landscape. When the papal nuncio paid a visit to the Valais in 1675, he prohibited masses from taking place on Alpine meadows under an open sky, as had previously been the custom. This was one reason why Alpine chapels were constructed, which meant that the sacred landscape would attain the highest level of land use (Anderegg 1983).

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FIGURE 3 Artificial sacred mountain erected during the French Revolution, from which the Supreme Being (the Deist God) revealed the laws of Nature to men. (Reproduced courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France)



In comparison, the peaks whose profane names have already been mentioned and which had seldom, or never, been trodden on, remained free of religious associations for quite some time. Christian crosses were set on mountain tops only during the 18th century. The first crosses to be well documented so far were those placed, with considerable effort, on prominent Austrian mountains round about the turn of the century: in 1799 on the Kleinglockner, in 1800 the Grossglockner, in 1822 the Ankogel, and in 1823 the Erzberg. This was just the beginning. Succeeding generations of Catholic and, much later, Protestant mountaineers then set religious symbols on mountaintops throughout the Alpine area. By the 20th century there were so many that they were no longer remarkable (Figure 2). In earlier times placing these crosses was a religious act of some significance. The celebration on the Erzberg in 1823 was described by a witness in the following words: "The bright morning sky arched over the vast temple into which the Alpine region had changed at that moment. A temple built by the hands of God Almighty, the Alps were its columns and the sky its roof!" Significant for this new nature-based religiosity is the fact that many of the early crosses on mountaintops were equipped with a lightning conductor—a symbol of the secular,

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Die
PHYSICA SACRA,
Oder
Geheiligte
Natur-Wissenschafft
Derer
In Heil. Schrifft vorkommenden
Natürlichen Sachen,
Deutlich erklärt und bewährt
Von
JOH. JACOB SCHEUCHZER,
Med. D. Prof. in Lyceo Tigurino, Academiæ Imper. Naturæ Curiosor. LEOPOLDINO-CAROLINÆ Adjuncto, & Socc. Regg. Anglicæ & Prussicæ Membro.
Anbey
Zur Erläuterung und Zierde des Wercks
In
Künstlichen Kupfer-Tafeln
Ausgegeben und verlegt
Durch
Johann Andreas Pfeffel,
Kayserlichen Hof-Kupferstecher in Augspurg.
Erste Abtheilung
Von
TAB. I — CLXXIV.
Samt Vorbericht und Verzeichnis der Auctorum, &c.
Augspurg und Ulm,
Gedruckt bey Christian Ulrich Wagner, 1731.

FIGURE 4 Title page of *Physica Sacra* by Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1st Volume, 1731); the subtitle translates as: "or Sacred Science of the Natural Phenomena Mentioned in the Holy Bible."

innovation-oriented tendencies of the Enlightenment period (Scharfe 1999; quote above: p 305).

Sacredness beyond religion

A syncretic combination of various elements also characterized the "sacred mountains" that were erected all over France in the squares and churches of the new Republic at the height of the Revolution in 1793 and 1794. These were constructed from piles of earth and other suitable materials. During the philosophical discussions of previous decades, nature had interestingly gained an almost mystical character, as the essence of perfection with which society had to reconcile. It was the embodiment of the freedom, equality, and brotherhood appearing on the flags of the French Revolution. The artificial mountains were used for the public, cultic representation of nature (Figure 3). Here, a Supreme Being revealed to man the laws of Nature, just as the biblical God had once given Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, or the gods of Greek antiquity had lived on Mount Olympus. During celebrations of the Revolution, the artificial mountains were often climbed by a woman dressed in white. Standing at the summit, she was hailed as the new goddess of freedom and reason (Harten and Harten 1989).

This nature and mountain cult in revolutionary France was merely a particularly radical, political expression of a Europe-wide phenomenon. "By the later eighteenth century the appreciation of nature, and particularly wild nature, had been converted into a sort of religious act," writes an English historian. The intellectual elite now not only saw nature as a thing of beauty but also as morally uplifting. The mountains represented both qualities to a significant extent; they were a symbol of the sublimity of God (Thomas 1983). This sacralization beyond institutionalized religion was to a certain extent rooted in past developments, and it could take various forms. In the following paragraphs, a few examples from science, literature, and mountaineering will be cited.

Everything points to the first impulse coming from science. One of the pioneers of research on the Alps was the Swiss doctor and naturalist Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1672–1733). His multifarious and tireless activities made him known in European academic circles. He corresponded with Newton, Leibniz, and numerous other personalities, and developed Alpine research almost into an industry. He described his annual mountain trips in several books written in both German and Latin. Scheuchzer's science was totally marked by a recognition of God. This is demonstrated most clearly in his final work, *Physica Sacra*, in which he tried to document the correspondence between biblical and scientific truth (see Figure 4). For the author this was legitimized by the words of the Bible, according to which the invisible Almighty can be recognized by His creation and His work in nature. This opinion put Scheuchzer in opposition to official religion; his religiosity paid attention to the outside world and, not least, to mountains, which was still an unorthodox idea in those days (Müsch 2000).

During the subsequent intellectual generations, the field widened to include literary texts and their sometimes cultic reception. In 1761 *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (*The New Heloise*) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau appeared. This was a romantic novel in the form of letters which became the most successful bestseller in Europe during the late 18th century. Rousseau caught the emotions of the time so well that he started a kind of literary

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pilgrimage. Traveling with the book in their hands, educated people visited the sites of the fictional happenings in the Lake Geneva area and its adjacent mountains, paid tribute to the author, and admired the landscape. Attracted by their idols and the new aura acquired by the region, other poets arrived, whose sphere of residence and work also turned into a form of sanctuary after their demise, and became integrated into the pilgrimage. The primacy of the text had a religious slant. Just as biblical tradition had put "the word" in the forefront, literature contributed magic and significance to Alpine reality (Reichler 1998).

Actually, some travelers saw the romance of the mountains as an almost religious text. A French marquis looking back at his Swiss journey of 1811 described how the imposing high mountains exerted an impression on the human spirit: "One does not observe nature anymore, one questions it; everything becomes mystery and allegory; everything appears as a revelation, and one gains impressions similar to the deep emotions evoked by reading holy books!" (Reichler 1998, p 37). Irrespective of the individuals and their subjective perceptions, during the 18th and 19th centuries a vocabulary took root that came from the border area of esthetic and religious experience, or made explicit use of religious images. People spoke of a feeling of "delightful horror," the idea of "the sublime" was central, mountains were designated as the "cathedrals of the world." In return, these literary and linguistic innovations had an influence on religion in a narrower sense. In the 1850s a mountain priest and keen reader of Goethe, Schiller, Jean Paul, and Rousseau looked back on his life. He described how he experienced a closeness to the almighty and all-gracious God on the high passes he had to cross while carrying out his professional duties. On the pulpit of a remote church he had inscribed "The mountains are also His" (Guichonnet 1980; Carisch 1993).

Mountaineering began shortly after the development of modern mountain literature. For the Alpine area, 86 first ascents are documented during the years 1751–1800; from 1801 to 1850 there were 210, and from 1851 to 1900 this number increased to 1010 (Mathieu and Boscani Leoni 2005). Early alpinism still came under the spell of scientific and literary culture. The language of reports of mountain climbing drew doubly on religious expressions: on the one hand, successful climbers had the exemplary gods of antiquity before their eyes; on the other hand, they spoke of the "altar" and "temple" of nature and of a closeness to the Christian "Creator of the World." Even after alpinism included a purely sporting variety and turned the Alps into the *Playground of Europe*, as Leslie Stephen's famous book title referred to it in 1871, the sacred did not entirely disappear. More than ever it settled now on the topmost peaks of the highest mountains. The precise altitude, as determined by modern meter measurements and the decimal system, therefore received an ultimate value. This was the moment when 4000 m became the magical measurement in the Alps (Scharfe 1999).

Conclusions

The discourse about mountains in Europe stretches back into the Middle Ages and antiquity; however, since the 18th century, it has greatly increased in extent. This sudden, large surge in attention is usually attributed to the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment is usually classed as a secular if not an anti-religious movement. In more recent times, however, historians' ideas about the Enlightenment have changed. It now appears to have been a very complicated period which was creative even from a religious point of view. Two things can be observed in the age of Enlightenment: processes of secularization and of sacralization. And it seems plausible to assume that the religious and non-religious domains of society could not develop independently from one another (Outram 1995). In this short overview, we have outlined several tendencies that point to the sacralization of the mountains in modern times from different aspects.

In the religious domain: Mountain peaks had no holy names in European tradition, and the mountain areas were no different from other areas with respect to pilgrimage sites. From the 16th century onwards, there was an expansion of sacred landscapes. Ever more and ever higher tracts of land had religious buildings and symbols built on them. The placement of crosses on the tops of mountains that began in the 18th century can be seen as a continuation of this expansion.

Beyond the religious domain: In early modern times, a movement in the scientific and literary milieu initiated a trend that attributed an almost sacred character to external nature, and particularly to mountains. In the second half of the 18th century, this nature-based, diffusely religious worldview gained ground and had an effect on the Church, too. The crucifixes with lightning conductors on the tops of Austrian mountains and the holy mountains in the secularized churches of the French Republic are both strong symbols of the reconfiguration of the sacred.

In the recent past, European mountains have been continually gaining new meaning and it is difficult to decide what weight to assign to the sacred in relation to other meanings stemming from a critique of civilization, republicanism, nationalism, tourism, or ecology (Mathieu and Boscani Leoni 2005). However, there is a definite time sequence. In the 15th to 17th centuries, the mountains were considerably less sacred than in the 18th to 20th centuries. The tendency

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towards sacralization occurred at a time when the continent was experiencing modernization in the form of industrialization and nation-state building. This contradicts the current but untenable assumption that old "simple" societies are always particularly religious, while all modern "complex" societies must have a secular character.

Compared with mountain areas on other continents, the Alps and other European mountains appear to have fewer sacred symbols. At least overviews rarely mention examples from Europe (Grötzbach 2004). If the thesis that sacralization is tied up with modernization is correct, we would have to look for the reason for this in antiquity, and particularly in ancient Christian tradition. Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1997) has convincingly demonstrated that when it comes to mountains, both strands of tradition contain an ambivalent message. The Christian Bible certainly mentioned several mountains on which central religious events were played out, for example Mount Sinai or Golgotha. However, it also pointed to a future reversal of high and low, for example, in Josiah 40, 4: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The uneven shall be made level, and the rough places a plain."

It is important that Christian tradition was strongly rooted in the society of believers. In Christ, all believers were seen as brothers and sisters, irrespective of place. We must leave it to others to search for the reasons for this ambivalent and personality-related culture. They could be connected with the strange rise of Christianity from a persecuted sect to the Roman state religion. Modern history, however, teaches us that holy texts and mountain landscapes also have something in common: every new generation discovers a new message in them (Brunet et al 2005).

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