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Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

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ISSN: 1941-1022

https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000560

The Varieties of Spiritual Ties to Place: A Latent Class Analysis

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This article examines the construct of spiritual ties to place, a particular form of place attachment entailing a bond to the sacred within a place. Specifically, we explore what types of places people feel spiritual ties to, as well as the psychological characteristics of this person–place bond. An online sample of North American participants ($N = 823$) self-identifying with the Abrahamic traditions (281 Christians, 272 Muslims, 270 Jews) provided descriptions of a place they have a spiritual connection to. After conducting content analysis across underlying subgroups, we employed latent class analysis to identify the most common ways in which spiritual ties to place manifest. A four-class solution revealed distinct profiles: spiritual ties to (a) worship places, (b) natural places, (c) private places, and (d) unfrequented places. Although equivalent with regard to general attachment, classes differed in terms of their spiritual ties, highlighting the unique explanatory power of this psychological construct. This study reveals how spiritual ties to place vary, in terms of both the kinds of locations people bond to and the unique emotional experiences that emerge from those bonds.

Keywords: spiritual ties to place, place attachment, religion, spirituality, latent class analysis

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000560.supp

Places play a central role in people's religious lives across a wide variety of faith traditions, ranging from holy cities like Mecca, to sacred worship sites like the tabernacle of ancient Judaism (Counted & Watts, 2017), to the private shrines created to sanctify areas within one's own home (Counted et al., 2023; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004, 2009a). The perception of particular places as sacred represents a historically ubiquitous feature of human societies. In Eliade's (1987) classic text, *The Sacred and the Profane*, he argues that sacred spaces imply *hierophany*, the manifestation of the divine, in that location. Cultures use such places to center their communities, functioning to help people differentiate heavenly power (located within sacred places) from the forces of the secular world. In so doing, individuals are provided with the context and cultural symbols for performing acts of deference and demeanor that reflect and communicate a self-as-spiritual identity (Goffman, 1956). Thus, at the personal level, spending time in these sacred places can allow individuals to experience their own sense of empowerment through its connection with the divine (Kilde, 2008).

Despite their commonality across faith traditions, there is little empirical psychological work seeking to understand these important spiritual places in terms of their common features, variability, and impact on people's faith and behavior. In this article, we explore some of the ways in which people experience a spiritual connection to a particular place. We begin with an overview of the concept of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) before highlighting how *spiritual ties to place*—as one's sense of and connection to the sacred in a particular place—may represent a distinct type of person–place bond (Counted et al., 2024). We then report the results of an empirical study that seeks to identify common types of spiritual ties to place, relying on participants' own descriptions of the places they feel a spiritual connection to.

Attachment to Place

A substantial literature within environmental psychology deals with the emotional bonds people form with particular physical places (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). This work has drawn heavily from Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988), a framework originally developed to describe the emotional bonds children form with caregivers. This attachment relationship is characterized by a tendency to experience distress when separated, to seek proximity during times of stress, and to view the attachment figure as a secure base from which to explore the world.

People's emotional connection to particular places also shows patterns consistent with attachment bonds. One prominent framework for synthesizing research on place attachment is Scannell and Gifford's (2010) tripartite model, which structures the understanding of place attachment in terms of three dimensions: person, place, and process. The person dimension focuses on how individual experience and interpretation influence whether one feels a personal connection to a particular place. For example, a setting's association

Amy Wachholtz served as action editor.
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This research was supported by a Networking Grant from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities to Victor Counted.
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with important memories (e.g., the home where I grew up) will dramatically influence one's sense of connection with it. The place dimension emphasizes the qualities of the setting itself. Places with a strong community or valuable resources may facilitate feelings of attachment. Homes, for example, are particularly likely to be places people attach to (Meagher et al., 2024). Finally, the process dimension entails the psychological interactions—affective, behavioral, and cognitive—that occur within the place attachment bond. Notably, these processes in many ways mirror the psychological experience of interpersonal attachment. For example, many people experience intense separation anxiety when leaving their homes or places of origin (Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015). Behaviorally, this often manifests as a strong motive to maintain close proximity to the important places in one's life (Billig, 2016; Fried, 2000). People also experience a number of psychological and emotional benefits from having access to these significant places of attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2017), including feelings of safety, enhanced emotion regulation, and self-confidence (Brown et al., 2003; Korpela et al., 2002). As further evidence of such benefits, studies have consistently found a positive association between place attachment and psychological well-being across a number of different demographic groups (Junot et al., 2018; Meagher & Cheadle, 2020; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Wiles et al., 2017).

Despite these parallels with interpersonal attachment, substantially less is known about place attachment. Most notably, there exist decades of research investigating interpersonal attachment variability, both in terms of individual differences in style (e.g., secure, anxious) and (dis-)continuity across relationship types (e.g., child–parent, romantic partners; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, 1992). In contrast, relatively little is known about place attachment types (Scannell et al., 2020), even though places can have a wide range of meanings for people. Different elements of a setting can be more resonant for some occupants than others (Meagher, 2024), and people often vary in the types of benefits they experience from being in attached places (Scannell & Gifford, 2017). In the present work, we focus on one specific type of place attachment: one's sense of connection to the sacred within a particular place.

Spiritual Ties to Place

One way in which people may experience a close emotional bond with a particular place is through their faith (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010). Specific places play a role in the religious praxis of all major faith traditions, often as sites of ritual behavior, community fellowship, or private worship and reflection (Counted & Watts, 2017; Counted et al., 2023). These types of activities, performed reliably within a given place, may facilitate feelings of attachment to the place itself (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). This process would suggest that spirituality is one of many potential means by which place attachment may form.

However, an alternative account of this dynamic could argue that a spiritual bond between a person and a place represents a unique form of attachment. In other words, not all emotional bonds to place are equivalent, and there is a tangible difference between general feelings of attachment and the formation of a spiritual bond. Counted et al. (2024) recently proposed the concept of *spiritual ties to place* to account for such a possibility, conceptualized as one's sense of and attachment to the sacred within a place. Sacred, in this context, refers to "a divine being, a divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual" (Hill et al., 2000, p. 66). Many different components of life can be viewed as sacred (e.g., marriage, vocation), that is, be reflective of a Higher Power or possess divine qualities (Pomerleau et al., 2016), and doing so leads to an increase in investment, commitment, and a need to protect (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). For example, several studies have demonstrated that viewing one's marriage as sacred uniquely predicts better relational health, above and beyond general religiousness and other positive attributes of the couple (Ellison et al., 2011; Kusner et al., 2014).

In the same way, certain places in an individual's life may also be sanctified, leading to an attachment bond that is itself spiritual in nature. Counted et al. (2024) argued that spiritual ties to place can emerge through multiple psychological dimensions. First, certain types of transcendent emotions (e.g., awe) are associated with spiritual experiences (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012). Critically, these emotions are more likely to be experienced within particular types of settings, such as monumental architecture (Joye & Dewitte, 2016) and natural environments (Arzy et al., 2005; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Thus, spiritual ties to place may be fostered by the types of environments most likely to produce emotions associated with the divine. Second, spiritual practices within a particular location may increase the extent to which the space itself feels sacred. Worship spaces, for example, are explicitly designed to afford particular types of ritualized behaviors meant to connect the individual with the divine (e.g., kneeling, praying, communing). However, even small locations within one's own home may allow for private reflection or contemplation, assuming they have supportive qualities (e.g., being quiet, secluded, beautiful). The qualities of the behaviors may then extend to the physical context in which they are performed (Savani et al., 2011). Third, cognitive processes may closely link a particular place to an individual's own spirituality. Key places in a person's life are often incorporated into that individual's self-concept (Proshansky et al., 1983). Those places supporting a "self-as-spiritual" self-schema will therefore be directly tied to their own understanding of the sacred. For example, settings associated with important memories related to one's spiritual life (e.g., where I was baptized) or one's identity as a member of a particular faith group (e.g., Jerusalem as the promised land for Jews) will likely foster a strong sense of spiritual connection.

Although these three dimensions may represent reliable pathways through which spiritual ties to place may form, we also anticipate substantial variability in the kinds of places people form spiritual bonds with and the ways spiritual ties to place manifest through the senses. On the one hand, individual differences may make people more or less likely to experience certain types of settings as sacred. For example, beliefs about the natural world vary substantially, and these attitudes can moderate people's transcendent emotional responses to them (Davis & Gatersleben, 2013). Moreover, faith traditions differ in terms of what they teach about the physical world. Judaism and Islam, for example, both contain religious teachings that explicitly identify certain geographical settings as sacred to the faith. This is in contrast to Christianity, whose New Testament teachings tend to emphasize a transpatial view of God as the king of the whole earth (Counted & Watts, 2017). Even at the level of an individual believer, recent research has shown that people's beliefs about God (e.g., anthropomorphic vs. mystical) influence their

impressions of and affective experiences within religious spaces (Meagher, 2018, 2024).

At the same time, different types of places play quite distinct roles in people's spiritual lives. A setting that affords quiet, private contemplation is different from one that affords novel and uplifting stimulation, which itself is different from one that affords the formation of close community bonds and friendship. Consequently, the experience or benefits associated with a spiritual connection to a place may vary substantially across people and places. For example, Scannell and Gifford's (2017) qualitative work identified 15 types of benefits associated with places to which people were attached. While some benefits (e.g., important/cherished memories, a sense of belonging) were commonly reported, other benefits (e.g., privacy, aesthetics) were less common. It is possible that spiritual ties to place will elicit similar types of benefits. For example, positive memories may also be commonly associated with spiritual connections to place, assuming these places are linked to particular important moments in people's spiritual lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Likewise, social belonging might also be a common benefit of spiritual ties to place when the location binds a person to certain communities or spiritual exemplars (Hayward & Elliott, 2011; Oman & Thoresen, 2003). Additionally, places experienced as sacred may be uniquely associated with certain spiritual processes, such as feelings of transcendence (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012) or a sense of closeness or access to the divine (Kilde, 2008), which would be less common for more general place attachment bonds. Thus, attributes of the place itself will guide the formation of spiritual ties, depending on how compatible it is with the spiritual needs of the individual. Importantly, these needs will not only differ from person to person, but are also likely to fluctuate within an individual over the course of their life.

The Current Research

Despite the aforementioned theorizing, there is relatively little empirical research investigating the nature of spiritual ties to place. In the present research, we take an initial step toward developing an empirical understanding of spiritual ties to place by examining how people's spiritual ties to place vary. Drawing on a cross-sectional sample of North American Christians, Muslims, and Jews who described a place to which they had a spiritual connection, we explore the qualities of the person, the place described, and the psychological processes (emotional, behavioral, cognitive) experienced in that place. Latent class analysis (LCA) is used to identify several basic ways in which spiritual ties to place are most likely to manifest. To explore potential distinctions between the identified classes, we perform a secondary set of analyses testing whether the classes differed on several auxiliary variables related to attachment (i.e., spiritual ties to place, attachment to God, place attachment). Because of its exploratory nature, this study was not preregistered. It was approved by Hope College's Human Subjects Review Board (#23-045).

Method

Participants

We recruited 906 participants residing in either the United States or Canada who agreed to participate in a study entitled "Religious Beliefs, Spirituality, and Important Places in Your Life" through the online platform *Prolific*. We used the screening filter for self-reported religious identification that participants completed when first joining *Prolific* to create distinct surveys for which Christians, Muslims, and Jews were eligible to participate, respectively. At the time of data collection, 11,972 Christians, 625 Jews, and 675 Muslims met the eligibility criteria to participate in this study. Despite using these initial filters, 31 participants indicated either being atheist or agnostic or having no religion in our questionnaire. We also removed 52 participants for providing either suspicious (i.e., bots) or insufficient (e.g., saying there was no place they had a connection to) responses to the question prompts. After dropping these cases, we had a final sample size of 823 people (281 Christians, 272 Muslims, and 270 Jews). Full demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Measures

Participants completed an online survey hosted on *Qualtrics*. They were first asked to think about a particular physical place in their life that they feel they have a spiritual connection to. They were then given two writing prompts: (a) "Describe this place in detail. Where is it? What is it like?" and (b) "What about this place makes you experience a sense of spiritual connection to it? Please provide one or two reasons." After completing their response, participants were asked to indicate how frequently they had spent time in the place they had written about over the past few years, using an 8-point ordinal scale ranging from "not at all" to "every day." Participants were also asked to select what type of place they had written about and were given the following categories to select from: Home or Private Space, Place of Worship, Natural Site, Burial Site, Historical Site, Pilgrimage Destination, Educational Institution, Cultural Venue, Monastic or Retreat Center, Battlefield or Memorial, and Other. Participants could select as many categories as they thought relevant (e.g., one's backyard garden could be selected as both *Home or Private Space* and *Natural Site*).

Finally, participants completed a series of Likert scales. These scales included (a) a nine-item Spiritual Ties to Place Scale (α = .892; Counted et al., 2024), (b) the nine-item Attachment to God Scale (α = .866; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002), and (c) the seven-item Abbreviated Place Attachment Scale (α = .908; Boley et al., 2021). Participants also reported depression and anxiety symptoms using the four-item Patient Health Questionnaire (α = .908; Kroenke et al., 2009), along with a single item of how much stress they have experienced in the past year.

Coding Procedure

Content analysis (Smith, 2000) was employed to apply quantitative coding methodology to participants' descriptions. Drawing on Counted et al.'s (2024) theorizing, we developed a codebook to identify particular psychological themes.[1] In it, we seek to code for a number of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses previously found to be associated with general place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2017) or proposed as characteristic of religious/spiritual

[1] Full codebook instructions are provided in our Supplemental Material.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	Total sample	Christian (n = 281)	Muslim (n = 272)	Jew (n = 270)	F/χ^2
Age, *M* (*SD*)	38.7 (14.4)	47.7_a (14.5)	29.2_b (10.1)	39.1_c (15.2)	131.91**
Gender, %					15.96**
Male	40.6	50.2_a	35.7_b	35.6_b	
Female	57.6	49.1_a	63.6_b	60.4_b	
Race, %					
Asian or Pacific Islander	20.9	6.4_a	54.0_b	2.6_a	261.12**
Black or African American	12.5	18.1_a	15.8_a	3.3_b	30.70**
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	3.4	5.0_a	1.5_b	$3.7_{a,b}$	5.92*
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.3	1.8_a	1.1_a	1.1_a	0.62
White or Caucasian	61.7	74.4_a	16.2_b	94.4_c	369.15**
Other	6.6	0.7_a	15.1_b	4.1_c	49.24**
Region, %					58.32**
Urban	38.5	27.8_a	46.0_b	42.2_b	
Suburban	50.8	51.2_a	50.4_a	50.7_a	
Rural	10.7	21.0_a	3.7_b	7.0_b	
Education, %					27.30**
High school or less	8.4	10.3_a	10.7_a	4.1_b	
Some college/associate's	23.6	31.7_a	20.6_b	18.1_b	
Bachelor's degree	44.3	38.8_a	47.1_a	47.4_a	
Graduate/professional degree	23.7	19.2_a	$21.7_{a,b}$	30.4_b	
Religious commitment, *M* (*SD;* range: 1–4)	2.74 (1.04)	3.04_a (0.92)	3.13_a (0.84)	2.03_b (1.00)	119.87**

Note. Analysis of variance tests (F test) and chi-square tests of independence (χ^2) were used to evaluate differences across the three religious groups for continuous and categorical variables, respectively. Subscript letters denote a subset of groups whose proportions do not differ significantly at $p < .05$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

experiences (Kilde, 2008; Shiota et al., 2014; Snell & Simmonds, 2015). They included:

1. *Religious/Spiritual Praxis*: Statements discussing particular behaviors the person engages in that are related to their faith (e.g., a place of prayer and meditation).
2. *Sociality*: Statements discussing the social nature of the setting (e.g., a sense of community; being surrounded by family and friends).
3. *Memories*: Statements describing past events involving the participant (e.g., I was baptized at this church; it is where I first learned about God).
4. *Peacefulness*: Statements that communicate positive, low arousal emotion, or the ability to recover from emotional experiences (e.g., tranquility, serenity, calm, relaxation);
5. *God's Presence*: Statements that communicate a feeling of closeness to God or Higher Power (e.g., God is there; I feel close to God here).
6. *Uplifting*: Statements that communicate positive, high arousal emotions (e.g., happiness, excitement, joy, delight, fun, hope).
7. *Transcendence*: Statements that communicate feelings that extend beyond the limits of ordinary experience (e.g., awe, wonder, amazement, surreal).
8. *Safety*: Statements that include words or phrases indicating a sense of feeling protected or freedom from negative experiences (e.g., safe, secure, not being judged by others, able to be myself).

A pair of undergraduate research assistants were trained in the use of the codebook using pilot data (n = 6) and a randomly selected subset of participant responses (n = 10). Following training, both assistants then independently coded all responses, and any discrepancies were resolved in discussion with the research team. Both writing prompts were treated as a single unit for the content analysis, and codes only indicated whether the theme was present or absent.

In addition to these themes, coders also evaluated two other components of the participant's response. First, they coded whether the participant's response described a specific place (e.g., my neighborhood church) or a general category of place (e.g., churches). Second, we drew on past methodology (Scannell & Gifford, 2017) to assess the scale of the place using categories developed by Freundschuh and Egenhofer (1997). This taxonomy of places is based on the degree of manipulability and the amount of locomotion required to experience what is being discussed. The four possible categories were (a) *manipulable object space*, a small space or objects that could be manipulated (e.g., a chair, a rug); (b) *nonmanipulable object space*, a larger space or object that is not manipulable and requires some locomotion to fully experience (e.g., a room in their house, an office, a coffee shop); (c) *environmental space*, a large space requiring locomotion and involving route knowledge (e.g., the inside of a building, a neighborhood, or a park); and (d) *geographic space*, a very large space that often could not be fully perceived through locomotion (e.g., a city, a country).[2]

[2] A small minority of participants described both a general category and a specific example of that category in their response (e.g., first describing a bond to oceans, before then describing a particular beach). In these cases, coded values were based on the most specific response given by participants.

Results

Table 2 shows the frequency with which participants wrote about particular themes and categories of places.[3] The vast majority of respondents discussed a specific place (rather than type of place) that they felt a spiritual connection to (85.5%). A chi-square test did reveal a small difference across our three religious groups, $\chi^2(2) = 6.56$, $p = .038$, with Muslims slightly more likely to discuss a general type of place (18.1%) and Jews the least likely (10.4%).

In terms of scale, environmental space was by far the most common type (66.1%), which included churches, small parks and trails, and local neighborhoods. Geographic space was the second most common scale (16.8%), which included cities (e.g., Mecca, Jerusalem) and large natural locations (e.g., Yellowstone National Park). Nonmanipulable object space was discussed by 12.5% of the sample, which included places like bedrooms, backyards, and small gardens. Manipulable object spaces were far less common (2.3%), but examples included beds, dining room tables, prayer rugs, and private altars. Differences were present across the three religious groups, $\chi^2(6) = 20.47$, $p = .002$. Jews were the group most likely to discuss geographic space (24.6%), doing so at a rate double that of Christians (12.3%). In contrast, Jews were least likely to discuss nonmanipulable object space (9.5%) and Muslims the most likely (16.7%).

The most commonly discussed place types were places of worship (39.2%), followed by natural sites (31.0%) and home/private places (22.8%). The religious groups differed in terms of the types of places they discussed. Over half of the Muslim sample wrote about a place of worship (57%), compared to just 24.1% of the Jewish sample, $\chi^2(2) = 62.76$, $p < .001$. However, Muslims were far less likely to write about a natural site (12.9%) compared to either Christians (39.1%) or Jews (40.7%), $\chi^2(2) = 62.52$, $p < .001$. Interestingly, discussing home or private spaces was equally likely across all three groups, $\chi^2(2) = 2.30$, $p = .316$.

Among the measured themes, sociality (i.e., the other people associated with the place) was discussed most frequently (40.3%) and was equally present across all three religious groups. Religious/spiritual praxis was discussed by about a third of the sample (33.8%), although the rates differed substantially across the groups, from nearly half of all Muslims (48.2%) to just 20% of Jews, $\chi^2(2) = 48.13$, $p < .001$. Slightly over a third of the sample discussed particular memories (34.9%), but this was less common among Muslims (24.6%), $\chi^2(2) = 19.84$, $p < .001$. Peacefulness was the most common emotional experience discussed (39.5%), with no evidence of differences between the three groups, $\chi^2(2) = 5.81$, $p = .055$. Less common emotions were a sense of God's presence (17%), uplifting (8%), safety (7.3%), and transcendence (6.8%). The three groups did differ in terms of God's presence, $\chi^2(2) = 28.92$, $p < .001$, with nearly a quarter of Christians (24.9%) describing this feeling compared to just 7.8% of Jews.

LCA

In order to identify the basic varieties of spiritual ties to place present in our sample, we employed LCA using the R package *poLCA* (Linzer & Lewis, 2011). The goal of LCA is to derive meaningful classes from a sample using categorical indicator variables. Drawing on Scannell and Gifford's (2010) tripartite model of place attachment, we included variables in our model that characterized the place, person, and process components of this relationship. Specifically:

- *Place Variables*: scale, specificity, and type.[4]
- *Person Variables*: age (divided into quartiles), education, gender, region, and religion.
- *Process Variables*: frequency of visiting, peacefulness, uplifting, transcendence, safety, God's presence, sociality, memories, and spiritual praxis.[5]

To identify the optimal number of classes, LCA solutions of 1 to 6 classes were tested. Model fit criteria are shown in Table 3. All six solutions showed high levels of entropy, and the AIC and BIC fit measures decreased in value up until the six-class solution, indicating improved fit with a higher number of estimated parameters. Despite its marginal improvement in fit statistics from the four-class solution, the five-class solution produced a class representing just 7% of the sample. Previous simulation studies have shown that small classes are difficult to recover, and it is generally preferable to maximize parsimony and avoid selecting potentially overextracted classes that cannot be replicated (Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018). Thus, we selected the four-class solution as the optimal model for analysis.

Place type proved to be the primary variable differentiating the four classes. All members of Class 1, making up 32% of the sample, had written about a place of worship. All members of Class 2, making up 27.9% of the sample, had selected a natural site. All members of Class 3, making up 15.8% of the sample, had selected a home or private space. Although not entirely mutually exclusive (e.g., 12% of those in Class 2 also indicated that the setting was a home or private space), for ease of interpretability, we labeled these classes *Spiritual Ties to Worship Places* (STP-W), *Spiritual Ties to Natural Places* (STP-N), and *Spiritual Ties to Private Places* (STP-P), respectively. Class 4, accounting for 24.2% of the sample, showed a quite different pattern, with a wide range of place types represented: 30.1% places of worship, 30% pilgrimage sites, 16.5% a home or private space, 6.5% natural sites, and 45.8% some other type of place (e.g., historical sites, cultural venues). However, it proved most distinguishable in terms of its (in)frequency of use. Among those in Class 4, 73% reported having visited the place only once or not at all in the past few years (compared to 34% in STP-N, 10% in STP-W, and 3% in STP-P). In contrast, just 3.2% of Class 4 reported being in the setting on at least a weekly basis (compared to 20.5% in STP-N, 43.7% in STP-W, and 77.7% in STP-P). Thus, we chose to label Class 4 as *Spiritual Ties to Unfrequented Places* (STP-U) to capture its most defining feature.

Figures 1 and 2 show the conditional item probabilities across these four groups for the coded process variables and person variables, respectively. For STP-W, the most common process themes included sociality (58.3%) and religious/spiritual praxis

[3] We also report the frequencies across the three religious samples. However, substantial sociodemographic differences existed between the three groups (e.g., age, religious commitment), so direct comparisons should be interpreted with some caution.

[4] Types of places that accounted for less than 5% of responses were collapsed into the category of "other."

[5] Additional analyses (e.g., the odds ratios for these codes) can be found in our Supplemental Materials.

Table 2
Percentage of Place Themes and Categories Written About

	k	*n*	Total sample	Christian	Muslim	Jew	χ^2
Specificity, %	.83						5.45
General type of place		118	14.3	14.6_{a}	18.1_{a}	10.4_{a}	
Specific place		704	85.5	85.4_{a}	81.9_{a}	89.6_{a}	
Scale, %	.66						20.61**
Manipulable object space		19	2.3	2.5_{a}	2.3_{a}	2.3_{a}	
Nonmanipulable space		103	12.5	$12.3_{a, b}$	16.7_{b}	9.5_{a}	
Environmental space		544	66.1	72.8_{a}	66.3_{a}	63.6_{a}	
Geographic space		138	16.8	12.3_{a}	14.8_{a}	24.6_{b}	
Themes, %							
Sociality	.68	332	40.3	39.5_{a}	38.6_{a}	43.0_{a}	0.91
Memories	.74	287	34.9	42.0_{a}	24.6_{b}	37.8_{a}	20.40**
Religious/spiritual praxis	.71	278	33.8	33.1_{a}	48.2_{b}	20.0_{c}	48.65**
Peacefulness	.74	325	39.5	$40.2_{a, b}$	44.1_{b}	34.1_{a}	6.94*
God's presence	.76	140	17.0	24.9_{a}	18.0_{a}	7.8_{b}	28.11**
Uplifting	.67	66	8.0	10.7_{a}	6.6_{a}	6.7_{a}	4.01
Safety	.71	60	7.3	5.0_{a}	9.6_{a}	7.4_{a}	5.22
Transcendence	.71	56	6.8	6.4_{a}	4.8_{a}	9.3_{a}	5.61
Place types, %							
Place of worship		323	39.2	36.7_{a}	57.0_{b}	24.1_{c}	63.59**
Natural site		255	31.0	39.1_{a}	12.9_{b}	40.7_{a}	68.48**
Home or private space		188	22.8	25.6_{a}	20.2_{a}	22.6_{a}	2.18
Pilgrimage destination		63	7.7	0.0_{a}	16.5_{b}	6.7_{c}	54.70**
Historical site		31	3.8	0.7_{a}	2.9_{a}	7.8_{b}	19.69**
Burial site		19	2.3	2.1_{a}	1.5_{a}	3.3_{a}	2.50
Educational institution		15	1.8	1.4_{a}	2.2_{a}	1.9_{a}	0.78
Cultural venue		7	0.9	$0.4_{a, b}$	0.0_{b}	2.2_{a}	9.14*
Monastic or retreat center		7	0.9	1.4_{a}	0.0_{a}	1.1_{a}	3.62
Battlefield or memorial		2	0.2	0.4_{a}	0.0_{a}	0.4_{a}	0.98
Other		29	3.5	5.0_{a}	0.7_{b}	3.5_{a}	8.83*

Note. Chi-square tests of independence (χ^2) were used to evaluate differences across the three religious groups. Subscript letters denote a subset of groups whose proportions do not differ significantly at $p < .05$. Participants could select as many place types as they felt appropriately described the place they wrote about.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

(56.9%). In contrast, feelings of transcendence were exceedingly rare (1%), and it was the class where memories were least commonly discussed (27.2%). In terms of person features, this class was much more likely to have Muslim (49.3%) than Jewish (15%) adherents, and it had the highest frequency of young people (35.7% under 26 years old).

The most common process theme for the STP-N class was peacefulness (53.6%). Compared to the other classes, certain themes were far less likely to be discussed: safety (1.8%), religious/spiritual praxis (6%), and sociality (13.3%). However, feelings of transcendence were most likely among this group (15.7%). In terms of person variables, this class had the largest percentage of older people (35.9% over 50 years old), but they were least likely to be Muslims (11.35%) or live in an urban setting (30.9%) relative to the other classes.

The most common process theme for the STP-P class was religious/spiritual praxis (56.1%), followed by peacefulness (45.1%). This class was also uniquely high in terms of feelings of safety (14.6%) but low in terms of transcendence (0%), relative to other classes. Person variables did little to differentiate this class from the others, as it was the most evenly distributed variable across the three religious groups (36.4% Christian, 35% Muslim, 28.6% Jewish), as well as in terms of age and region.

The STP-U class was characterized most strongly by the themes of memories (53.3%) and sociality (50.9%). In contrast, it was the class with the lowest rates of feeling a sense of peacefulness (22.6%) or God's presence (8.7%). Members of this class had the highest likelihood of being male (50.2%), being Jewish (45.1%), and residing in an urban area (45.8%) across the four classes. It was also the most highly educated group (31% having a graduate degree).

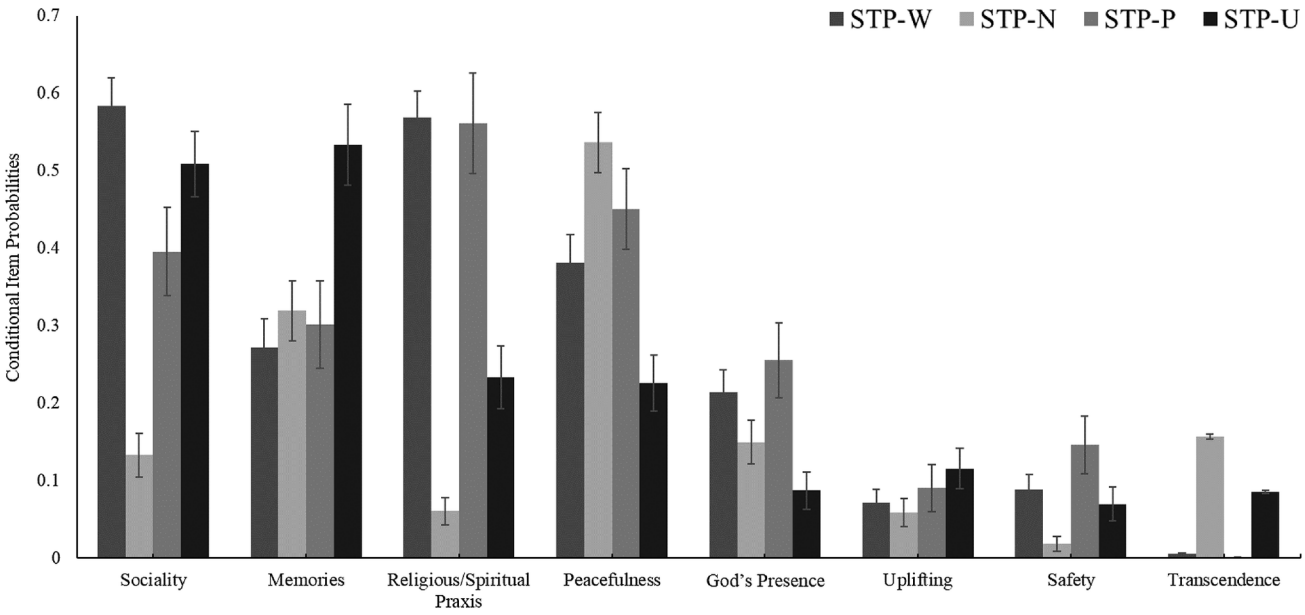
We explored whether the classes differed across a set of related attachment variables by assigning participants to their predicted class membership and evaluating differences using a series of one-way analyses of variance. There was evidence of a difference between classes on self-reported spiritual ties to place, $F(3, 799) = 22.65$, $p < .001$. A post hoc Tukey HSD test revealed that spiritual ties to place were higher for those in the STP-W class ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.47$) than for any other class: STP-P ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.55$),

Table 3
Model Fit Indices for Latent Class Analysis of One to Six Solutions

Class	*df*	Log-likelihood	AIC	BIC	aBIC	Entropy
1	767	−12,167	24,610	24,574	24,460	
2	728	−11,592	23,761	23,686	23,447	.955
3	689	−11,217	23,311	23,197	22,835	.941
4	650	−10,942	23,061	22,908	22,422	.922
5	611	−10,762	22,999	22,808	22,198	.921
6	572	−10,649	23,074	22,843	22,109	.918

Figure 1

Conditional Item Probabilities for Coded Process Variables

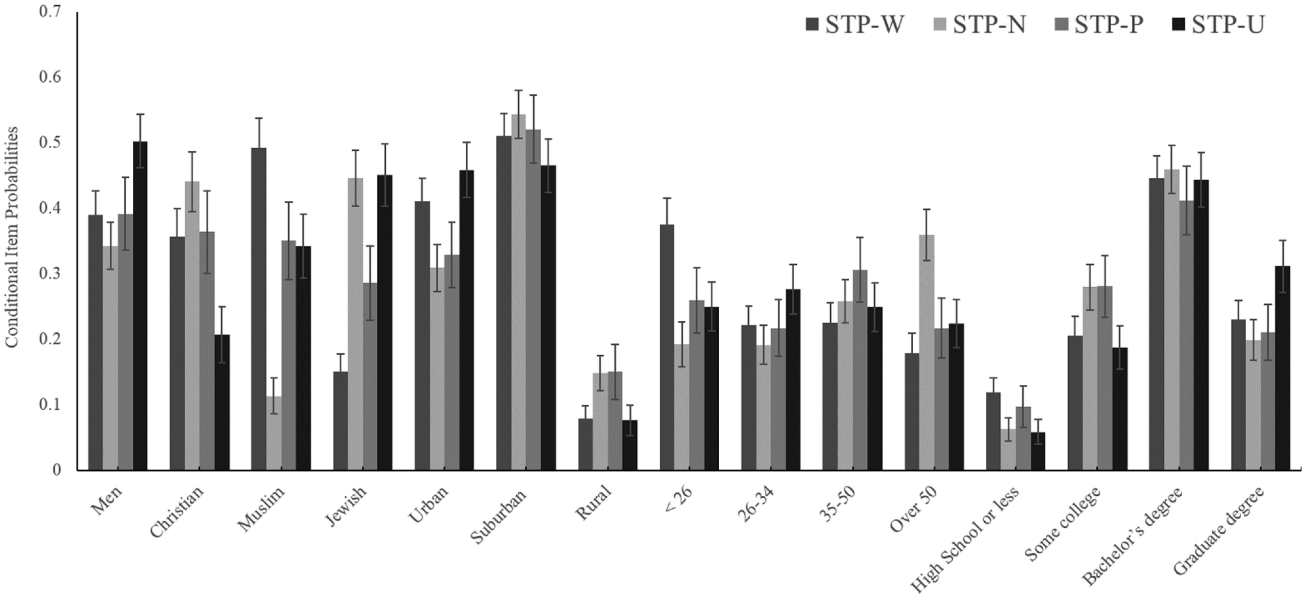


Note. STP-W = spiritual ties to worship places; STP-N = spiritual ties to natural places; STP-P = spiritual ties to private places; STP-U = spiritual ties to unfrequented places.

$p = .006$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.38]; STP-N ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.65$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.54]; STP-U ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.71$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.53]. The STP-P class also scored higher than the STP-N class, $p = .032$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.35]. In contrast, the four classes did not differ from one another in terms of general place attachment, $F(3, 799) = 1.71$, $p = .164$. However, evidence of a difference between the classes was found for attachment to God, $F(3, 799) = 18.74$, $p < .001$. A post hoc Tukey HSD test revealed

Figure 2

Conditional Item Probabilities for Person Variables



Note. STP-W = spiritual ties to worship places; STP-N = spiritual ties to natural places; STP-P = spiritual ties to private places; STP-U = spiritual ties to unfrequented places.

that members of the STP-W class ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.19$) were higher in God attachment than those in Class STP-N ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.34$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.54, 1.14], or STP-U ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.38$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.31, 0.95]. The STP-P class also scored higher on God attachment than those in Class STP-N, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.94]. No other post hoc comparisons between classes excluded the null.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to develop a better understanding of how spiritual ties to place tend to manifest, focusing on adherents of the three Abrahamic religions in North America. Drawing on participants' own descriptions of places they feel a spiritual connection to, we sought to identify what types of spiritual bonds to place were common. Our analysis, drawing from Scannell and Gifford's (2010) tripartite model, revealed that place type was the factor most strongly distinguishing responses. We found that places of worship, natural sites, and homes/private spaces were the most common types of places adherents of these religious traditions formed spiritual ties to. Although certain responses could satisfy multiple criteria (e.g., a home garden), these three locations were associated with quite distinct experiential profiles. Notably, despite being equivalent in terms of their general place attachment, the spiritual and process variables differed substantially from one latent class to another.

Worship spaces represented the most common type of spiritual bond. This finding is perhaps not surprising, as it is a space explicitly designed to afford religious behavior and elicit spiritual emotions (Kilde, 2008). The majority of these respondents discussed the religious behaviors (e.g., worshiping, praying) they do there as a reason why they feel a spiritual connection. However, an even larger percentage discussed social attributes of the setting, whether that be the family they attend with or the community of worshipers more broadly. Social bonds have long been recognized as an important component of general place attachment (Lewicka, 2011), as well as a central reality of religious life (Durkheim, 1912). In fact, previous research has shown a number of ways in which social ties impact spiritual outcomes. Individual congregants model their spiritual lives on religious exemplars in their communities (Meagher & Kenny, 2013; Oman & Thoresen, 2003), they evaluate their own beliefs relative to how well they fit within the norms of their congregation (Hayward & Elliott, 2011; Meagher, 2019), and they form closer relationships with those community members as a product of their shared faith (Graham & Haidt, 2010). Consistent with such arguments, other people were the most common theme reported in the present study, particularly for those with STP-W.

The second most common group were those who wrote about natural sites, such as parks, trails, forests, and beaches. In contrast to those describing worship spaces, this STP-N class very rarely referred to other people or explicitly spiritual practices. Instead, the participants explained their spiritual connection to the place most by the sense of peace they experience there, using terms such as tranquil, restorative, or serene to describe it. A large body of research has shown that time spent in natural environments can be restorative (Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich et al., 1991), aiding in both cognitive and emotion regulation (Bratman et al., 2021; Vitale & Bonaiuto, 2024). Thus, natural spaces may have a distinct advantage in eliciting these types of positive experiences. Although less common, those in the STP-N class were also the group most likely to discuss transcendent emotions, such as awe, wonder, or amazement. Here too, existing research suggests such experiences are most likely to be triggered within natural spaces (Arzy et al., 2005; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Thus, from our analysis, the spiritual bonds people form with nature seem to be uniquely characterized by particular emotional experiences.

Homes and other private settings were also frequently described as places of spiritual connection. Primary territories such as these often reflect important characteristics of the individual who lives there (Gosling et al., 2002). A resident's capacity to personalize this setting can allow them to reinforce their spiritual self-concept (e.g., through decorations, religious objects) and create a space that affords desired behaviors. Interestingly, like STP-W, the most common theme in this class was the spiritual practices they engage in there. Moreover, the theme of God being present was higher here than in any other class, even those discussing worship places. Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1993, 2009a) have written extensively on the concept of "home as religious space," albeit primarily among Hindu populations. The present study reveals a similar sentiment among members of all three Abrahamic traditions.

Additionally, members of the STP-P class, like those in STP-N, also frequently described their home or private place as a setting that provides them with a sense of peace. As noted above, the vast majority of research on restorative settings has focused on natural environments. However, recent research has begun to demonstrate that home environments can also be emotionally restorative (Delgado, 2022; Meagher & Cheadle, 2020; Meagher et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2023). By being able to personalize their private rooms and homes, residents are able to create desired ambiances, such as relaxation, calm, and peace, which can make these places uniquely valuable refuges away from sources of stress. Based on the present study, this quality appears to be relevant in how people form spiritual ties to place.

Finally, members of the fourth class, STP-U, varied among themselves in terms of the type of place they described. What tended to unite them was describing a place they visit rarely or have not visited in a long time. Such places included pilgrimage destinations, childhood homes, and other important places from their past. Thus, the spiritual bond that was formed tended to be rooted in a particularly valuable memory. Notably, this class accounted for nearly a quarter of the respondents, indicating that frequent use is not at all a critical requirement for experiencing a spiritual bond to place. Rather than buttressing regular spiritual practices, these types of places seem more likely to be supporting a particular sense of self. One's narrative identity, an internalized life story, represents a fundamental component of personality (McAdams & McLean, 2013). A place that serves an important role in that life story will itself be incorporated into one's identity (Proshansky et al., 1983). Thus, the site of a uniquely important spiritual experience, even if singular, may nevertheless play an ongoing role in the individual's spiritual life through its regular retrieval from memory.

Even for those without a specific personal memory tying them to a place, an unfrequented setting may still play an important role in one's spiritual identity if it expresses their collective faith tradition. For example, a Jew's spiritual bond with the land of Israel may come about not through personal experience but through its prominence in their religious and cultural tradition. Ledgerwood and colleagues

have demonstrated that valuations of physical spaces increase when that space is associated with one's group identity, particularly when that group is under threat (Callahan & Ledgerwood, 2016; Ledgerwood et al., 2007). These places function as symbols of the group itself and, in so doing, increase the perceived entitativity and cohesion of that group (Callahan & Ledgerwood, 2016). Thus, the spiritual significance of these places is their ability to reify the faith tradition to which individuals belong.

Our comparison of the four latent classes in terms of our three auxiliary attachment variables revealed a clear pattern. Although all classes wrote about a place they felt a spiritual bond to, self-reported spiritual ties to that place were strongest among those in the STP-W class. The fact that worship places are explicitly designed to facilitate spiritual practices and religious life suggests that spiritual bonds to them are particularly strong when formed. Notably, the same pattern was also observed for attachment to God, suggesting that a strong emotional bond with a Higher Power often co-occurs with a strong emotional bond with the place in which that Higher Power is worshiped, a finding consistent with prior research (Meagher, 2023). Notably, the four classes did not differ in terms of their general attachment to place. Thus, the spiritual component of the person–place bond proved capable of differentiating the classes in a way general emotional bonds did not.

Limitations and Future Directions

Research on spiritual ties to place represents a still nascent area of inquiry, and the goal of the present research was to provide an initial effort to identify several common ways in which it manifests. Consequently, a number of limitations should be addressed in future work on the topic. The sample used here, though substantial and representing several different faith traditions, is nevertheless nonrepresentative of the broader population to which they belong. Thus, firm conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the true prevalence of different forms of spiritual ties to place, either in the general population or within these specific religious groups. Differences observed between religious groups should also be interpreted with caution. Moreover, because the focus of the current work was purely on the experiences of those within the three major Abrahamic religions, it is possible that different types of classes could emerge across different types of faith traditions. Attitudes about nature (Fabjański & Brymer, 2017), worship space use and preferences (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009b), and religious practices in the home (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009a) vary substantially across different cultures and theologies. Thus, investigating this topic among non-Western religious groups would be particularly valuable.

Our cross-sectional design provided a snapshot of participants' spiritual ties to place at a single point in time. Therefore, longitudinal research is needed to understand how spiritual ties to place form and change over time. It is possible that certain life events, personal struggles, or other types of situational variables influence the extent to which people rely on particular places to satisfy spiritual needs. Moreover, although the present study identified several common types of spiritual ties to place, it is not yet known what individual differences in psychological variables are predictive of bonding to a particular type of place. For example, what type of individual forms a strong spiritual connection with their home, as opposed to some other type of place? It is possible that certain personality traits, religious orientations, or God concepts can explain variation in this particular form of person–place bond, but further research is needed to test these possibilities.

Finally, while the present study demonstrates different types of spiritual ties to place and explored differences between unobserved subgroups on several auxiliary variables, little is known about the consequences of spiritual ties to place. Although research has demonstrated that sanctifying certain interpersonal relationships can have social benefits (e.g., Kusner et al., 2014), comparable research is needed to test whether there are equivalent positive impacts for sanctified bonds to place. For example, does a spiritual connection to place influence people's sense of responsibility for or conservation behavior within that location, above and beyond general place attachment? At the same time, it is also important to explore any potentially negative consequences that may also emerge from forming a spiritual connection to place. For example, during the restrictions that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, places of worship were closed for extended periods. For many people, this represented a forced separation from an important place in their lives, leading to strong emotional responses and political protest (Counted et al., 2020, 2021). Thus, attachment disruption has the potential to produce its own form of spiritual struggle (Exline, 2002). Moreover, with the sanctification of a place comes a new potential psychological concern for the occupant: the fear of invasion and desecration by outsiders (Lyman & Scott, 1967; Raiya et al., 2008). How spiritual ties to place relate to feelings of collective ownership, territoriality, and outgroup attitudes therefore represents an important question to assess the overall value of sacred place bonding in people's spiritual lives.

Conclusion

This study provides an initial overview of how spiritual ties to place vary across members of three monotheistic religious traditions. Importantly, these findings highlight the range of place types that may be experienced as sacred among adherents of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism: most commonly, worship spaces, natural sites, private settings, and unfrequented (yet still personally meaningful) places. In terms of objective, physical features, these settings are extremely varied. One's home is quite different from a national park, which in turn is quite different from a small neighborhood synagogue. However, spiritual and psychological needs are also varied and multifaceted. For example, all three religions emphasize the importance of personal spiritual practices, such as private prayer and introspection, while simultaneously imploring adherents to love and serve one another in community. It is unlikely that a single location will easily facilitate both activities. Thus, different types of places will aid in the satisfaction of different types of spiritual needs and obligations. This study provides an initial framing for understanding common spiritual ties to place, with the hope that it will encourage future work to identify how these bonds develop over time and affect the lives of individuals.

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Received October 21, 2024
Revision received January 15, 2025
Accepted March 3, 2025 ■