

Colette COLFER

Creating Religious Place in Ireland: Hindu Public Places of Worship and the Indian Sculpture Park

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the creation of religious place. It argues that the designation of a place as “religious” is a subjective and creative act which is dependent upon the perception and past, or memory, of the viewer. The paper focuses specifically on the creation of public places of worship by Hindu groups in the Dublin city area of Ireland and on the varied perceptions of the Indian Sculpture Park in County Wicklow. The creation of public places of worship results in places classified as “religious” due to the intention of the creator, the terminology used and the types of activities that take place in the space. This is in contrast to places such as the Indian Sculpture Park in County Wicklow which was created as a secular space but which is viewed by some Hindus as an outdoor temple due to the presence of sculptures of the Hindu deity Ganesh. Other Hindus do not view the space as having any religious significance and so its religiosity is contested. This points to the fact that the creation of religious place is a creative act of interpretation which is dependent upon the perception and past of the viewer and which changes over time.

KEYWORDS: Ganesh, place, Hindus, Ireland

Colette COLFER is a part-time lecturer in world religions at Waterford Institute of Technology. Her main areas of interest are migrant religious groups, the creation of religious place and trajectories of religious change in contemporary Ireland. She is also an award winning radio producer and occasional journalist.

Introduction

This paper examines the creation of religious place. It argues that the designation of a place as religious is a subjective and creative act which is dependent upon the perception and past, or memory, of the viewer (see Davies 1994; Knott 2005; Massey 1994; Tuan 1977). It will begin with an exploration of the terms “place” and “space” and will outline how these are used in the context of this paper. It examines the creation of religious place, the interconnection of place and time, the distinction between religious and secular and the importance of narratives in the designation of a place as “religious”.

The paper focuses on the creation of public places of worship by the Hindu community in the Dublin area. It will give an outline of the Hindu population of Ireland before examining the types of places used for public religious worship by the four main Hindu organisations in Dublin. All of these places are rented and adapted for public worship. Some are used as full-time temple spaces whilst others are multi-purpose and only used as places of worship on a part-time or even once-off basis and so the designation of these places as “religious” changes fluidly depending upon the practices taking place.

The paper will then go on to describe the place known as “Victoria’s Way Indian Sculpture Park” in Wicklow which was created as a secular space in the 1990s. The intention of the park owner to create something as a secular space however, does not mean that the place is devoid of religion. Some Hindus view the park as an outdoor temple to the deity Ganesh. Other Hindus do not see the park as having any religious significance. Using material drawn from interviews with Hindus and non-Hindus, various responses to the sculptures of the Hindu deity Ganesh within the park will be outlined.

Much of the material for this paper is drawn from recordings I made for a series of radio documentaries which were broadcast on Newstalk, an Irish national radio station, in 2013 (see Colfer 2013). Additional interviews were also conducted in the Spring of 2014. In total there were three interviews with the park creator, Victor Langheld, conducted on site at the Indian Sculpture Park. Very short informal and unplanned interviews of two to three questions were conducted with visitors at the park one day in Spring 2014 (eight non-Hindus and seven Hindus). A number of interviews were held with a married Hindu couple in their home in Dublin where they have lived in Ireland for over thirty years. Interviews were also conducted with leaders from within the Dublin Hindu community in buildings used for worship as well as an interview with a Hindu man who works as a public servant and who has been in Ireland for over ten years. Phone-interviews were conducted with

two leaders from within the Hindu community specifically in relation to their views on the Indian Sculpture Park.

The paper argues that the creation of a place or space as “religious” is a dynamic process which involves the interplay of the physical and the mental but which primarily occurs in the imagination or the mind of the viewer and which is dependent upon the past and upon language for this perception.

Religious Place and Space

The term “place” is not simplistic and can have any one of a number of meanings (Castree 2009). As well as the material, geographers have identified the meaningful and lived aspects of place (Cresswell & Hoskins 2008). Knott (2005) suggests that place is “conceived in social, mental and physical terms”. This paper uses the term “place” to refer primarily to the physical or material aspect of place within which action occurs. It is acknowledged that places do have meanings, however, it suggests that meanings are not contained within the place itself but are created within the mind of the viewer and therefore a place can have multiple meanings. The mental and social aspects of place are more complex than the physical aspect. The identification of a place as “religious” involves the perception of a viewer and requires terminology or language. Therefore its designation as “religious”, dependent as it is on interpretation, is subject to change and can be contested.

Places are important for religions partly because they are where religions are performed (see Tweed 2006). Place can also be important for ensuring the survival of religions. Harvey (cited in Knott, 27) suggests that the Church survived over time in part because of “the successful creation, protection and nurturing of symbolic places”. The importance of place for religion is also illustrated by Tweed (2006, 59) who suggests that “religion is about finding a place and moving across space”. Tweed even uses spatial metaphors (dwelling and crossing) to analyse what religion is and what it does.

Religions are not only performed in physical places. They can also exist on the mental or internal level. The physical level includes place and objects which are built or created with some religious purpose in mind and can also include places and objects that are naturally occurring (see Davies 1994) but which have been given the label of religious in the minds of those who view or visit them. The existence of religion within the mind of a person means that the religiosity of a place or an object, whilst maybe not apparent on the physical level, may exist in the mind of the viewer and the perception of a place or object as religious is what creates the religiosity of the place.

Religions can exist on the external and internal levels simultaneously. This is what happens, for example, when a person who subscribes to a faith attends a place labelled as religious and actively participates both physically and mentally with an event. However religions can also exist on just one of these levels. Grace Davie's phrase "believing without belonging" (cited in Casanova 2004, 89) can be said to apply to an individual for whom religion exists on the internal level whilst Danièle Hervieu-Léger's phrase "belonging without believing" (cited in Casanova 2004, 90) applies to a person for whom religion is important on the external but not the internal level.

Religious places that exist on the physical level are engaged with differently according to the past of the viewer. Places labelled as religious, such as cathedrals, mosques, synagogues or temples, may be recognised and treated as religious by adherents. Others may recognise a place as religious but treat it as a place of cultural curiosity or as a tourist site.

Some places can potentially be recognised as religious by the type of building and its architectural elements such as spires, domes or minarets, by the name of the place (e.g. St. Brigid's well), or by the presence of man-made objects such as a cross, stupa or statue. Religious places however, can also include places which are naturally occurring in the physical environment but which have become associated with a religion through history and stories (see Davies 1994). In order for the religiosity of any type of place to be acknowledged it requires an engagement with the past.

The physical existence of a place recognised as religious by some, or the presence of an object symbolising religious significance, does not equate with an objective label of "religious". Whilst I was giving a lecture to a class about Buddhism two years ago, a mature student had an epiphany when I showed an image of a statue of the Buddha and she realised that the un-named head in her bathroom, which she had bought because it looked nice, was actually that of the historical Buddha. At that moment it "became" religious - her insight changed. This illustrates the fact that the religiosity of an object is socially constructed.

There is also a distinction to be made between public and private places of worship. Any place has the potential to be a private place of worship but public places of worship involve larger numbers of people and logistical considerations such as space available, planning restrictions and financial resources and these factors constrain the possible contenders for "public" places of worship. Another factor to bear in mind in relation to religious place is the difference between a moment set aside from the rest of the day to conduct a specifically religious act and a day that is regarded in its entirety to be religious. Everywhere, in the latter sense, has the potential to be religiously significant.

There are hierarchies of religiosity of place within various religious traditions and these are often created by and dependent upon narratives of the past (Davies 1994). Within Hinduism, for example, Banares on the River Ganges has a different level of significance to household shrines because of its connection to myths or narratives of the past (Davies 1994). The past of the viewer and their knowledge of myths, narratives and history is instrumental in whether or not a place is viewed as religious and how significant it is within a religion.

The creation of a “religious” place is an act which is embedded in time. If the place is one which was manually constructed, the edifice itself is intertwined with the lives of those who built it. Naturally occurring places are shaped by forces outside of it (such as weather for example) which not only existed at the time of its creation but which continue to shape it. The physical place is inseparable from the time in which it exists. Meanwhile, the perception of time is itself influenced by other factors including culture (see Tweed 2006).

The physicality of a place or of objects apprehended through the senses, in particular visually, sends signals of representation signifying meaning. There are different “ways of seeing” and different ways of perceiving what is seen. Just as when a tree falls in the forest there is no sound if no-one is present, so it is with the visual – something is only visible if there is someone to apprehend the sight (Lanza & Berman 2009). This idea can also be applied to religion whereby something only “becomes” religious when someone is there to perceive it as such.

Objects and places are not just “seen”, they are also interpreted. In order for interpretation and understanding to take place language is necessary (Dostal 1998). The place or object being perceived may not physically change but how it is understood is dependent upon the words used in the mind of the viewer. The words tumble into story and the relevance of places are created by these stories (Lane cited in Knott 2005, 96). Imagination, actions, memories, rituals – all are used to create a place as sacred or religious. “The particularity of a place arises from the complexity of its social relations and the sum of the stories told about it” (Knott 2005, 33). These stories vary according to a person’s past and present and so the story changes.

Sculptures are an art form but sight of the sculpture is comingled with the perception of the viewer. There is a “generative tension between sight and insight” (Davey 1999, 3). The insight aspect is tied up with language and with the past. Whether a place is seen as secular or religious, whether a sculpture is seen as a work of art or a representation of a deity (or even as the deity itself) is dependent upon the viewer and the viewer’s history. There is no one way of seeing a place or of seeing a sculpture.

Places, therefore, are interconnected with endless arrays, permutations and combinations of places and times. Places are neither

fixed nor closed. Rather, they are “both open and dynamic” (Massey 1999, 264). The identity of any place is “unfixed, contested and multiple” (Massey 1994) and the identification of a place as religious involves the interplay of past and present, of language and stories, of interconnections across time and place.

The term “space” is also contested and complex (Thrift 2009; Knott 2005; Massey 1994). In the context of this paper “space” refers to an area in which action takes place (see Thrift 2009). It draws on the work of Knott (2005, 21) to conceptualise action as social relations involving people and things, people and places, people and other people and people and symbols but also “the imagined relations between these” (Knott 2005, 21). It sees spaces as dynamic, potentially multilayered and complex (Massey 1994).

The imagined aspect of space (see Knott 2005) is important in the context of this paper. Spaces can exist in many different imaginations at once in many different ways. The way space is perceived changes depending on the imagination of the viewer in a kind of kaleidoscopic effect. The place is like a bead within a kaleidoscope whereby the bead is one but the image reflected in the mirrors produces many.

Space and place are sometimes thought of as parts of the same unity (Knott 2005). Tuan (1977) suggests that the ideas of “space” and “place” need each other for definition. Both can have physical, mental and social aspects (Knott 2005). Both are inextricable from the temporal. Both have changeable boundaries and are fluid, open and dynamic. Space, however, is more abstract than place (Tuan 1977). This is not to suggest that space is abstract, or passive, but that it is more abstract than place. “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan 1977).

The identification of either a place or space as “religious” can be connected with the creation of a social space and with issues of identity. The concept of identity is relational and involves understandings of sameness and difference, of Self and Other and these in turn entail issues of both power and resistance (Katz 2009). Places and spaces can therefore become contested with power-struggles between groups who are competing for the survival of their identity (see Trudeau 2006). The designation of a place or space as religious therefore has implications for issues of identity, power and resistance (see Davies 1994; Katz 2009; Massey 1994).

One element in the construction of a social space is the name given to a place. A name which overtly identifies a space with a specific religion creates a different type of social space to a name which includes no apparent religious significance. The social boundaries of a space are potentially created and shaped and changed by the use of a name. These boundaries, as much as spaces themselves, are imagined but the fact that

they are imagined doesn't mean they are any less powerful than physical borders. The boundaries of all spaces (including the secular) can be used to include or exclude (Knott 2005, 26).

Planning authorities have the power to classify areas and decide what types of development can be allowed in specific areas. In this way space is socially controlled. The production of social spaces is interconnected with power, belonging and exclusion (Massey cited in Knott 2005; Knott 2005; Trudeau 2006). Spaces can be contested socially with different groups claiming spaces as their own in an attempt to draw or redraw boundaries of belonging.

The intentional creation of a place as a secular space does not mean that religion is absent. Knott (2005, 2) points out that "there are no places in which religion may not, in some sense or other, be found". Knott (2005, 61) adds that spaces which are claimed as secular or belonging to culture can also be deemed religious at the same time.

The secularisation thesis itself has come under increasing scrutiny since the turn of the 21st century as it became apparent that religion, instead of declining in importance, as predicted, is becoming more visible almost everywhere across the world (Davie 2013). The idea of a "secular" Europe suggested itself in opposition to a "religious" Europe of the past or a religious presence of the "other" outside of Europe (see Casanova 2004). This suggested that "secular" and "religious" could not be coterminous. This is despite the fact that the secular and Christian identities of Europeans are intertwined albeit rarely verbalised (Casanova 2004). Also interesting is that even the secular can be viewed as something sacred (Casanova (2004) refers to the "sacred secularist principles of the Kemalist state"). Former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin spoke about the possibility of secularism becoming "a religion of France" (cited in Casanova 2004, 100).

This illustrates the complexity of the dualistic notion of the religious and the secular. Places and spaces can be contested in terms of their designation as secular or religious. However such bounded conceptions are simplified articulations or representations of the complex and changing nature of both place and space. A place or space can be both secular and religious at the same time. The designation is not an objective one but one that takes place in the mind of the viewer. Grace Janzten (cited in Knott 2005, 77) suggests that "rather than seeing the secular and the religious as opposites", they should be viewed "as two sides of a coin".

Space is also embedded in time and although there is a tendency to talk of space and time as if both concepts are, or can be, divorced from one another, both are interconnected and in fact "cannot be teased apart" (Knott 2005, 24; Massey 1999). Time is a process which happens in space. Space, meanwhile, can be measured by time - galaxies are "light years away".

Space, place and time are interconnected and so too are the spaces and places of the secular and the religious. Although there is a tendency to bracket concepts as though they are neat packages of meaning, concepts themselves are complex, fluid and interconnected and their interpretation is inextricable from the context in which they are interpreted. The paper now examines the creation of public places of worship by Hindu groups in the Dublin area and the creation of religious and secular space at the Indian Sculpture Park in Wicklow.

Hindu Public Places of Worship in Dublin

The National Census of 2011 recorded 10,688 people living in the Republic of Ireland who self-identified as Hindu (Central Statistics Office 2012). Over a half of these (5,925) were recorded as living in Dublin city and its suburbs. According to the census, the largest nationality represented amongst the Hindu community in Ireland is Indian, followed by Irish. It is, therefore, mainly a diasporic population. Although the term diaspora originally referred to populations dispersed from their original homeland it is now more often used to convey a “complex sense of belonging that people can have over several places, all of which they might think of as home” (Katz 2009, 241).

Diaspora groups invariably seek to re-create their religious lives in new places of settlement and one of the ways they attempt to do this is through architecture (Vásquez 2010). The Hindu population in Ireland grew tenfold between 1991 and 2011 but despite the growing numbers of Hindus there is still no purpose-built Hindu temple in Ireland. Members of the Hindu community have faced significant challenges in their attempts to establish permanent public places of worship. There are to date a number of Hindu temples housed in pre-existing buildings in Ireland and there are also buildings used by the community as regular and as once-off places of worship.

The term “Hindu” was originally a name that was imposed from the outside, by Persian Muslims, to refer to the people of Sind/India (Rodrigues 2006). The term “Hinduism” is more recent and was also imposed from the outside, by the British in the eighteenth century, to refer to the religion of the people of India excluding the adherents of other identifiable religions such as Islam and Christianity (Rodrigues 2006). The term Hinduism, therefore, refers to way of life and practices that encompasses a diverse set of religious beliefs, practices and ways of life (Doniger 2009; Rodrigues 2006). The Hindu population of India is diverse and this diversity is mirrored in Ireland albeit to a lesser extent (reflecting the much smaller Hindu population). Religious diversity relates to deities, types of worship, scriptural knowledge, pilgrimage, attendance at public

places of worship and membership of a wider religious group. Two of the most popular deities in Hinduism are Krishna and Ganesh. Their popularity in India is reflected amongst the Hindu population of Ireland.

Sacred places in Hinduism include buildings and shrines built or created for the purpose of religious practice as well as natural places in the outdoors such as rivers, mountains and groves of trees. There can be personal domestic shrines as well as public places of worship such as temples. The most important sacred place for most Hindu families is the home where the family will often have their own shrine at which lamps are lit, incense is burned, songs are sung and scriptures are chanted (Choudhury 1994, 85). The lack of any purpose-built Hindu temple in Ireland suggests that the household shrine takes on an added significance for Hindu families living in the country. It is important, however, to acknowledge that any place can be religiously significant.

Creating a religious public place on the physical level which is apprehensible through the senses entails very different challenges to the creation of a religious space which is not apprehensible visually. Hindus living in the Republic of Ireland have faced significant challenges in their attempts to create public places of worship in this country but have sought to overcome these challenges by adapting existing places (often not associated with any religion) and transforming them into public places of worship.

Although there are no purpose-built Hindu temples in Ireland there are a number of buildings used for Hindu public worship. In the Dublin area the four main Hindu organisations use places for regular public religious gatherings. One of the first organisations to set up a public place for public worship for Hindus in the Republic of Ireland was BAPS Swaminarayan. Although the organisation has been in Ireland for over ten years the group still rent a premises just once a month for public gatherings. The current premises they rent is a school hall in Palmerstown in Dublin. The space used by the group “becomes” religious during the public gathering. It is created as religious and perceived as religious by those who participate in the worship but outside of the times during which the space is rented it is seen as a secular space and an educational space.

The Ireland Vinayaka Temple (IVT) was set up in 2003. Since its inception the location of the temple has changed a number of times. At the moment it is located in a small rented room in the Ballyroan Community Centre in Rathfarnham in Dublin. This temple is open for public worship for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening on weekdays with extra hours at the weekends. The room that is used as the temple is also rented out to other community groups and individuals for various activities. This means that the images of the deities have to be moved in and out of the temple space on a daily basis. The temple engages the

service of a Brahmin (Hindu priest) from India who performs the services. For larger festivals the group rent out a bigger room in the same community centre. The main deity in this temple is Vinayaka (this is the name in Southern India for the deity which is called Ganesh in Northern India) but there is also worship to Lakshmi and Saraswati. Again, the religiosity of this space changes according to time, intention and practice.

The Hindu Cultural Centre of Ireland (see Figure 1) currently uses a room in the Eurasia Supermarket in Lucan for weekly worship and rents out larger premises for one-off festivals and major celebrations. It is in the process of purchasing a warehouse in a suburb of Dublin for use as a temple and of procuring planning permission for the change of use of the building. Between June 2013 and January 2015 the HCCI was located in a building owned by Stewart's Hospital in Lucan, County Dublin. The entire building was rented out on a long-term, full-time basis by HCCI and it included a kitchen space, office, library and one room used as a temple space. The name "temple" refers to the fact that it was the residence of a deity and in this case the temple housed many deities including Ganesh, Kali, Krishna, Sita, Rama, Hanuman, Sai Baba, Sarasvati and Durga. There were idols made of marble to represent the different deities in the shrine area. The fact that the building had no other use meant that the idols could be left permanently in the shrine area. Health and safety restrictions limited the use of fire which meant that many Hindu rituals could not be carried out in a prescribed manner. However, the fact that the premises was used solely by HCCI and open daily meant that it was used for worship but also for community gatherings on a regular basis. The building was sold and HCCI moved out of the premises at the end of January 2015. The idols were wrapped up and packed into storage.

For five years prior to the establishment of this temple the HCCI had been using makeshift places for worship and renting places for a few hours at a time each month. Prior to that, they had purchased a house near Clane in County Kildare in the first decade of the 21st century when houses prices in Ireland were almost at their zenith. Their intention was to turn the house in to a Hindu temple but when it became apparent that planning could not be procured the house was sold at enormous financial loss to the group as it was after the collapse of house prices. The closure of the temple in Lucan earlier this year also resulted in a financial loss for the HCCI as a substantial sum of money was spent on renovating the building and making it suitable for use as a Hindu place of worship.

The other place in the Dublin area which is open for regular public worship is the temple run by ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness). This temple opened in 2009 in the top floor of a building on Middle Abbey Street in Dublin City Centre. ISKCON hold regular public events in the temple.

The paucity of public places of worship for Hindus in Ireland has meant that some Hindus have improvised over the years and used existing non-Hindu religious structures as places of worship. One Hindu woman from India who has been living in Ireland for over thirty years told me that up to ten years ago she used to go regularly to the local Catholic church to pray and has also gone on pilgrimage to Knock with her local community group. She explained that for her there is only one god but there are different ways to worship the same god. This attitude towards worshipping the divine in different aspects translates into diversity when it comes to recognising places and objects as religious.



Figure 1: The building used as a temple by the Hindu Cultural Centre of Ireland (HCCI) June 2013-January 2015. Photo by C. Colfer.

Despite the fact that there are four places used as temples in the Dublin area, Hindu groups and organisations will often rent out larger premises such as community halls, church halls, sports facilities or school halls on a once-off basis in order to accommodate the larger numbers of people who wish to attend a public place of worship during a festival event. They will also sometimes hold events in naturally occurring places in the outdoors, for example, I attended a celebration of the Ganesh Chaturthi festival in 2012 with a group of Hindus on a beach in Dun Laoghaire in Dublin.

All four of the groups mentioned above (BAPS Swaminarayan, IVT, HCCI and ISKCON) have expressed the desire to have a purpose built or permanent temple space (and ideally both) in a building owned by the community.

The names used by the Hindu groups in Dublin for the public places of worship are also significant. The name "Ireland Vinayaka Temple", for example, indicates firstly a religious place in the form of a temple but also suggests that the temple caters for Hindus from southern India because in northern India the same deity is called Ganesh. Also significant is that the "temple" is not a permanent fixture but a room that is rented out in a community centre. The naming of the Hindu Cultural Centre of Ireland suggests a group that is not specifically for religious worship as it is called a "cultural centre". One Hindu man involved in the group told me that in his opinion the use of a cultural name rather than a religious name made it easier for Hindu groups to acquire planning permission. This is significant in that place names have ramifications for issues of identity and belonging (see Eriksen 2012; Helleland 2012).

Hinduism, like other religions (such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity), is often perceived by its adherents as a way of life rather than a religion. Everyday tasks and mundane routines can all be seen as imbued with the sacred or divine. There is no clear distinction in Hinduism between events or things or places that are religious or non-religious (Choudhury 1994, 62). Religious and secular activities are often inseparable (Choudhury 1994, 84). A secular activity such as visiting a sculpture park therefore could also be seen as being a religious activity regardless of the sculptures that are present in the park.

The buildings used as temples in Ireland are very different to the Hindu temples of India which are purpose built. Although the architecture of Hindu temples varies across different regions in India the temples are often complex structures with crowns or peaks that mimic ascending mountainous peaks (Choudhury 1994, 63). Temples are usually built in places which are considered sacred and once a temple is built "it becomes the focal point of religious activities, a centre for spiritual discourses, a meeting place for devotees" (Choudhury 1994, 69).

Temples are not necessary for Hindu worship as worship can be done at home but temples are believed to be the residence of a deity (Choudhury 1994, 77). Temples, whilst not necessary for worship are important nonetheless. All four groups mentioned above (BAPS Swaminarayan, IVT, HCCI and ISKCON) have encountered many difficulties in their attempts to establish temples in the Dublin area. Planning restrictions and lack of financial resources are the two most-cited challenges faced by these groups in their attempts to establish places of worship. Knott (2005, 48) points out that planning legislation in Europe can be used to either stifle or extend the opportunity of non-Christian

religious groups (including Hindus) to create new physical places of worship.

Some of the buildings used by the Hindu groups are places which are dedicated full-time to religion. The designation of these places as spaces which are “religious” is relatively straight-forward and uncontested. However, the fact that some of the buildings used for public worship have multiple uses means that the designation of the space as religious is dependent upon the activity taking place in the building as well as the objects placed in the space and the recognition of the objects and event as religious by those attending. Creating religious space therefore is a fluid process which changes through time. A space can switch from religious to secular and back again repeatedly depending upon the factors and actors involved.

Some Hindus believe that any place is sacred enough to meditate and they do not require a temple or shrine (Choudhury 1994, 85). Other Hindus believe that the only sacred place is actually the human body as this is where the divine resides (Choudhury 1994, 85). The diversity of views relating to sacred place is reflected amongst the Hindu population of Ireland in their attitudes to and perceptions of the sculptures of Ganesh in the Indian Sculpture Park.

The Indian Sculpture Park

Victoria’s Way Indian Sculpture Park is located near Roundwood in County Wicklow and is an area of grass, woodland, small lakes and streams on 22 acres of what was previously farmland. It originally opened in 1995 with just two sculptures – one sculpture of the Hindu elephant headed deity Ganesh and a sculpture of the fasting Buddha. The park today is dotted with over twenty sculptures which have been designed by the park owner Victor Langheld. Victor is in his 70s and is originally from Germany. He has spent many years of his life in India (and other parts of Asia) where he first travelled to when he was in his 20s. The sculptures were carved in India and imported to Ireland. The park is also dotted with signs, seating areas, short aphorisms on wooden boards and a shop and exhibition area which are housed in what were once a farm building and a barn.

The sculptures at the park range in theme and form and include statues of the Hindu deity Ganesh, a statue of the Hindu deity Siva, a selection of Buddhist-style stupas and statues of the Buddha. The sculptures also include the entrance tunnel to the park which was designed as a large *vagina dentata* (vagina with teeth) as well as a giant finger which has the words “create or die” inscribed on its fingernail. Some of the statues are clearly connected to Buddhism or Hinduism whilst

some were designed by Victor Langheld “to represent psychological states”.

The physicality of any place contains within it traces of topographies of the past as well as traces or impressions of the physical creators of the place via the objects present (see Knott 2005). The Indian Sculpture Park is not a place isolated in time or space. The park today reveals traces of the farm which once occupied the land (including the stone buildings and the barn) as well as revealing aspects of the life of the park’s creator Victor Langheld who lived for many years in India. It also contains traces of the sculptors who hands and tools created and carved the works (as is evident in the small photographic exhibition housed in the park).

Depending on the past or history of the viewer, the sculptures which are connected to Hinduism and Buddhism, can be designated as either secular or religious, or neither, or both. I myself first heard of the park from Hindu man who has been living in Ireland for over thirty years who told me I had to visit “the outdoor temple” in Wicklow. His designation of the park as a temple was connected to the presence in the park of the collection of statues of the Hindu deity Ganesh.

Ganesh (or Ganesha) “is one of the most widely worshipped deities in India” and “is many things to many people” (Grewal 2010). He is the elephant-headed god and is sometimes referred to as Vinayaka. He is believed to be the remover of obstacles amongst many other things.

In total there are nine statues of Ganesh in the Indian Sculpture Park. One is in the car park area and the other eight are just inside the entrance tunnel in a spacious grassy area which is bordered by hedges and trees. Seven of them are clustered together in various poses. There are a few points to note about these statues:

- Firstly, their inclusion in the park was almost accidental in that it was not part of the original plan for the park
- Secondly, their depiction is unconventional
- Thirdly, their designation as “religious” (or not) is contested

The creator of the park, Victor Langheld, designed the park as a secular space. He explained that the original idea for the park was to have seven sculptures in the forest depicting “psychological states that people get blocked in”, for example he explained that one sculpture called the “Split Man” represents a point, or period, of indecision in a person’s life when they are stuck because they cannot make a decision. Mr. Langheld wanted to have the sculptures of two “scantily clad women” at the entrance to the park but a lady friend said “you can’t do that in Ireland” and it was suggested at the time that he put statues of elephants instead and in Victor’s words “it took on a life of its own”. The choice of the type of

elephant sculptures was clearly influenced by Victor's past as he has spent many years living in India.

Secondly, the depiction of the Ganesh statues is highly unconventional. Normally, the representation of Hindu deities follows strict rules that are set out in the shilpa Shastras (Grewal 2010). Everything about the depiction of the deity is set out in these texts including the facial expression, hand gestures, colour, clothes, postures and weapons. It is believed that the deity only resides in an image that is made in accordance with these rules (Choudhury 1994). Every detail of the depiction is prescribed. According to these texts Ganesh has the body of a human, the head of an elephant, a big belly and a mouse in his company. One tusk is meant to be broken, his arms usually number four but can be more and in his hands there are normally traditional objects. Foods should be spread at his feet and a snake is normally depicted on his body (Grewal 2010).

The sculptures of Ganesh in the Indian Sculpture Park do have the body of a human, the head of an elephant, a big belly and a mouse. However, the sculptures have two full tusks, two arms each and unconventional modern objects such as a computer or a Sony Walkman. One sculpture is of Ganesh studying a book of "BASIC" computer language (see Figure 2). In another sculpture the accompanying mouse is leaning against the leg of Ganesh whilst typing on a miniature Mac laptop.

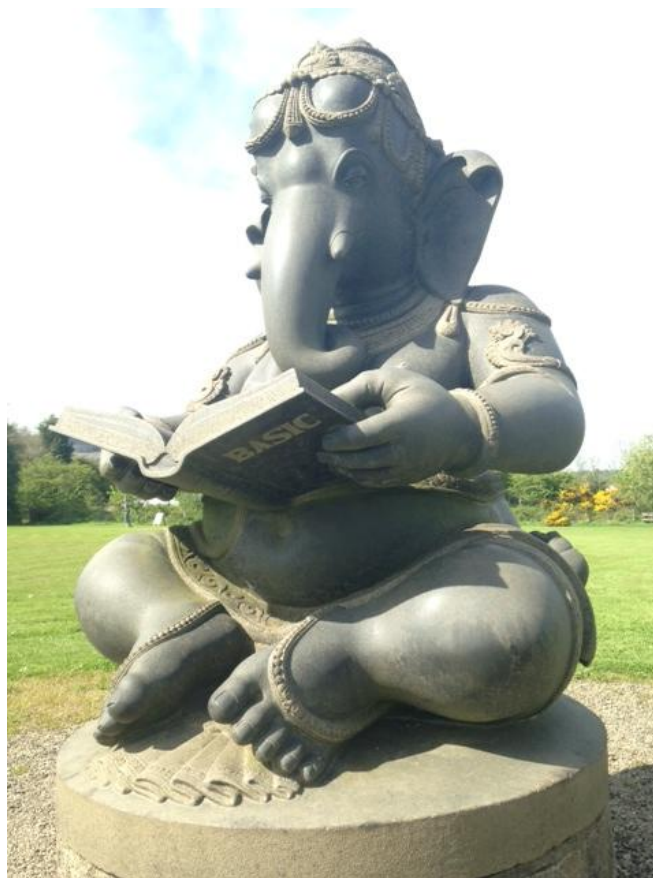


Figure 2: A sculpture of Ganesh at the Indian Sculpture Park. Photo by C. Colfer.

One sculpture has been given an Irish identity. It is called “Paddy Ganesh” and features Ganesh playing the uilleann pipes with a shamrock on his hat. The sash going across Ganesh’s back shows celtic knotwork whilst the mouse accompanying him is carrying a bodhrán and has a pint of “genius” in his hand (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: The mouse accompanying “Paddy Ganesh”. Photo by C. Colfer.

The unconventional nature of the sculptures could lead to the conclusion that the statues are not of the Indian deity Ganesh but are simply quirky statues of an elephant-headed human in various poses. However, there is a placard which clearly identifies the statues as Ganesh.

The fact that the statues are overtly identified as a Hindu deity is important because the name of the sculpture carries with it implications for how it is perceived.

This appropriation of a Hindu deity and its creation as “Irish” is interesting in terms of social space and boundaries. Trudeau (2006) points out that “orthodoxies draw boundaries, but they also define what should belong”. By creating an Irish version of the statue of Ganesh, the sculpture fits in with the orthodoxy of “Irishness” and arguably the social boundaries of the space expand.

Responses to the Indian Sculpture Park

People’s responses to the Indian Sculpture Park, and to the sculptures of Ganesh, is mixed. Some Irish non-Hindus recognise the sculptures as having religious significance but for them it seems the statues are mainly cultural curiosities. Some do not recognise any religious connection. One Hindu, as mentioned earlier, described the park as an outdoor temple and whilst I was in the park one day an Indian man and his wife came up to Victor Langheld saying “it is amazing” and Victor responded saying “it really is an ashram”. However, this view is not shared by everyone.

One Hindu man in his thirties who is living in Ireland described the area of the park with the Ganesh statues as “a bit spiritual” but said that the rest of the park wasn’t. Another young Hindu man, interviewed in the park, said he “wouldn’t see it as a religious place”. Two other Hindu men visiting the park said to me that some Hindus wouldn’t like it because the statues are not traditional. This view was confirmed by Victor who explained that “some Indians take offence, particularly when they are from small villages in India, when they come and expect the statues to be traditional”.

I interviewed a Hindu swami (in this context of this paper the term “swami” refers to a monk who has taken formal vows and is a member of a monastic order) who lives in Ireland about the Indian Sculpture Park. His overall attitude towards the park was one of positivity. He spoke about the beauty of the place, about the employment generated by the park for the people in south India who carve the statues, about the motivation of the park’s creator “for the welfare of the community at large” and about the atmosphere of the place.

The swami saw the inclusion of modern objects with the Ganesh sculptures as the insertion of a sense of humour which he said “is in keeping with the subject matter in that there is a kind of playful aspect to Ganesh”. He said the additions were in keeping with that aspect of the deity. “Obviously the designer has inserted something to convey something. But that’s the purpose of an image – to convey a message. So I

don't think he has detracted from the respect and reverence for the ideal depiction of Ganesh."

The swami did not agree with the designation of the Sculpture Park as an outdoor ashram. "I don't see it in that way" he explained. "An ashram is a place which indicates a community and a place which is dedicated to spiritual activities". He said that for him it isn't a temple either but he acknowledged that in Hinduism "you can sit by a river and consider that to be your temple, you can sit under the sky and consider that to be your temple".

Although the swami did not consider the park an ashram or a temple he acknowledged that others would view it as such. "It's anything to everybody" he said. He elaborated by saying that someone not interested in religion can go and admire the sculptural forms, or they can go with a philosophical bent and focus on the Buddhist sections, or that it can be treated as a religious place. "I know many Hindus and I know one couple in particular who go there regularly" he explained. "They happen to be ardent devotees of Ganesh. They also take visitors there. They see it as a park dedicated to their favourite form of god. That's their view. Whether that's the author's [Victor Langheld's] intention I don't know. It seems to have some appeal to everybody."

The swami explained that he personally did view the place as holy "because holy forms are there but then I would take the ocean as a holy place too. It can help to elevate the mind. That's the purpose of any form of god in Hinduism - the purpose of picture, statue, image, temple or ritual - to use these as aids to elevate the mind. For me when I go there, and the same for most Hindus, when you see a form of Ganesh the natural impulse is to put the hands together and tune the mind in to god's presence. These forms have come out of inspirational visions. You can meditate for hours on these forms and you can get multiple layers of meaning from them." When asked about the unconventional objects carried in the hands of the Ganesh sculptures he replied "I suppose god has a sense of humour".

One person from a Christian background but who now considers himself Hindu and has spent over ten years in India studying the culture, philosophy and spirituality of India said that for him sculptures of Ganesh (or any deity) should not be left outside unprotected from the elements and wildlife and that "they should receive daily offerings of lamps, incense, food and flowers. The more glorious and elaborate the worship the more auspicious the outcome for all concerned".

He also queried the presentation of the Ganesh sculptures with objects such as uilleann pipes and modern technology. "Whatever we do in relation to deities should be authorised by previous teachers and by scriptures" he said. He spoke about the Prana Pratistha ceremony "which normally takes place when deities are being installed in the place where

they will reside. The ceremony includes the devotees and followers requesting the original personality of the deity to come down and enter and take personal presence in the form created for them. The understanding is that once the prana pratistha ceremony has taken place then it's actually the deity on the altar, not just a sculpture".

I suggested that that ceremony may not have taken place and if it hadn't taken place would there be a problem with the Ganesh statues in the park. His response was "if someone isn't living in a house, does that make it okay to burn it down? We really shouldn't place a statue depicting any divine personality in a place where the elements and wildlife can interfere with them if for no other reason than offending someone, not to speak of offending the deities themselves".

The responses to the Indian Sculpture Park and the sculptures in the park are diverse and this in part reflects the diversity present within the Hindu community in Ireland.

Secular or Religious Designation of the Indian Sculpture Park

The name "Victoria's Way, Indian Sculpture Park" suggests that the physical space is a secular cultural space as no specific religion or type of religious building is mentioned. However, the meaning of the name is not fixed and can be interpreted differently depending on the background of the individual (see Helleland 2012). Indications of the secular nature of the park are suggested not only from its name. In the car park located beside the entrance there is a plaque which says that the park is dedicated to the cryptographer Alan Turing. Another signpost to the secularity of the park is some of the sculptures themselves which include a giant finger.

Some of the statues in the park are explicitly connected by Victor Langheld to either Hinduism or Buddhism by their name, for example "the fasting Buddha", and sometimes by the information on placards placed beside them. The connection between other statues and specific religions is not explicitly stated. These statues include the entrance to the park which is a tunnel in the shape of a *vagina dentata*, two life-size statues of voluptuous women at the entrance of the tunnel, a "wisdom seat" formed from a sculpture of a giant python and sculptures titled "split man" and "boat man".

The Indian Sculpture Park can be described as a social space (as well as the physical and imagined spaces mentioned previously). The boundary of the space exists beyond the purely physical and is also imagined. Arguably, the name "Victoria's Way Indian Sculpture Park" suggests a cultural space where the focus is upon sculptures rather than religion and therefore it becomes a public place that is not limited to or focused upon any one religion, or indeed, even to religion.

Gadamer (in Davey 1999, 6) suggests that “embedded within words are world-views” so the name “Ganesh”, elicits, or has the power to elicit, in the mind of the beholder an entire world-view. The exact world-view elicited is dependent on the viewer’s past. The word “deity” and “Hindu” would similarly elicit various responses and world-views, as would, arguably, the sculptures themselves. As Davey (1999) points out: “Though it might be seen by the mind’s eye, what we come to *see* in a work is not necessarily an object which is visually present”. Some see the deity as present within the sculpture, others see the sculptures purely as aesthetic physical objects.

The owner of the Indian Sculpture Park, Victor Langheld, said that the park “was designed as a contemplative space for adults who want a secular answer to a fundamentally biological question – namely ‘what do I, as a human being, need to do so that I feel happy in my skin?’” The sculpture park is his way of conveying his answer to that question. He focuses on the idea of creativity. “There’s nothing out there unless you put it there and then it becomes real and in the ability to create something as it were into an empty space and make it real, that’s where the truth emerges and the true self emerges, via a creative act.”

Victor Langheld designed the sculptures in the park in an attempt to convey a message. The modes of communication for his message are the various sculptures and the space of the Indian Sculpture Park which they inhabit. Visitors to the park, however, come with their own truths and beliefs and instead of seeing the “truth” that Victor Langheld is trying to communicate they see their own truth reflected or rejected in the space. There is no one way to see the sculptures of Ganesh in the Indian Sculpture Park. Even if the statues were conventional representations of Ganesh they would still be perceived differently and lead to various interpretations.

The Hindu couple who are devotees of Ganesh and have a shrine to Ganesh in their home have a different view of the sculptures to the man with the Christian background who has spent years immersed in Hindu culture who in turn has a different view to the person who is a practising Catholic. “All interpretation occurs against the backdrop of our prior involvement in tradition” (Clogher 2013, 119). Hans-Georg Gadamer (in Dostal 1998, 3) stresses the importance of history and tradition for interpretation. The recognition, or as is argued here, the creation of the park as a religious place is therefore a subjective act.

The recognition of the *vagina dentata* is also dependent on the past of the viewer. Some of those visiting the park recognise the tunnel as symbolising a vagina, others have no idea of its symbolism whilst others suggest describe the tunnel as a tunnel of birth. Victor himself suggested that visitors “immediately know what it is but their morality and background forces them to repress the recognition”. I asked a group of

three young Irish women in the car park if they recognised what the entrance tunnel was and one of them replied “oh yes, it’s our favourite thing in the park” without offering to name or identify exactly what it was (indeed I did not ask them to).

Space is “full of power and symbolism” (Massey cited in Knott 2005) and the statues within the Indian Sculpture Park are also spaces. The viewer (or participant in the space), like the space itself, is not a closed system. The perception of the viewer is interconnected with the sculpture itself which in turn is connected to the intention of the designer. One person’s interpretation does not exist in a closed space but is influenced by innumerable factors. Davey (1999) points out that “our experience of art is no isolated monologue on personal pleasure but a complex dialogical achievement involving the fusion of the horizons surrounding artist, subject-matter and viewer”.

Some of the religious symbols within the park, in the form of statues, have been extricated from their more usual cultural environment of the Indian subcontinent, transformed by the addition of symbols of modern life (such as laptops and walkmans) and symbols of Irishness and repositioned in an environment from which they are normally divorced – the Irish countryside.

All objects are imbued with meanings that are attached to them by the cultures where they exist (Sack cited in Knott 2005, 23). The statues of Ganesh have certain meanings when they exist within an Indian context but when transported and transformed the meanings can change, be remembered or even recreated as something entirely new.

Despite the intention of the owner of the Indian Sculpture Park to create a secular space, its perception as either secular or religious is tied up with the past of the viewer. The story about the place changes and evolves with the people who visit the space as they interact with the sculptures and read and then rewrite the stories as their own.

Conclusion

The creation of a physical place as “religious” is a complex interplay between numerous factors including the type of place (for example whether public or private), the intention of the creator, the perception and past of the participant or viewer, the words used to name the place, the objects within the place and the actions that take place in the place as well as the stories told about it. The place itself exists in time, contains elements of the past within in and is constantly changing. It is also connected to other places. It is not a closed system.

The creation of space as “religious” is something that is fluid and changing over time. Spaces designated as religious can overlap with other

types of spaces and even exist simultaneously with them. They are socially constructed. In order for a space to be designated as “religious” it has to be apprehended as such and this interpretation is not something that is fixed in time but constantly subject to change.

Public religious places can be permanent structures purpose-built as places of worship and recognised as religious (but not necessarily “treated” as such) or can exist in pre-existing structures which are adapted for either full-time or temporary use. The religiosity of a place is therefore something that is changeable.

The fluidity of place in relation to its designation as religious is apparent within the Hindu community in Dublin where there is, as of yet, no purpose built Hindu temple and where the four main Hindu organisations host public events in premises which are rented either long term, on leases of up to a decade, or short-term for just hours at a time.

Religious space can be created in places which are not designed as religious and even in places which are created as secular spaces. One example of this is the Indian Sculpture Park in County Wicklow. The park is not simply a physical place, a point on the map or a 22 acre site of land that is filled with woods, trees, plants, walkways, waterways and sculptures. It is also a place for social interactions and a place for the creation of religious and non-religious meaning.

Victoria’s Way Sculpture Park was not designed as an outdoor temple but the identification of it as such creates it as such in the mind of the viewer. The interpretations of the Indian Sculpture Park are diverse and are influenced by the background and history of the viewer. There is no one interpretation but a web of interpretations with many different strands. The religiosity of the park is dependent on the memory, traditions, background and culture of the viewer and is, therefore, a creative act, created by the viewer in an ongoing interplay between the imagination and the physical, the mind and the material. Regardless of the secular intent of the park’s creator, the space can be given religiosity in the creative act of the visitor’s imagination and memory.

References

- Casanova, J. (2004). It’s All About Identity Stupid, *Index On Censorship*. 4(33). pp. 88-103.
- Castree, N. (2009). Place: Connections and Boundaries in an Interdependent World. In: Clifford, N. et al. (eds). *Key Concepts in Geography*. (2nd ed.). London: Sage, pp. 153-172.
- Central Statistics Office (2012). *Profile 7: Religion, Ethnicity and Irish Travellers*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.
- Choudhury, A. R. (1994). Hinduism. In: Holm, J. & Bowker, J. (eds). *Sacred Place*. London: Continuum. pp. 62-87.

- Clogher, P. (2013). The Jesus Film and Tradition: A Hermeneutical Reflection. *Gregorianum*. 94(1). pp. 199-140.
- Colfer, C. (2013). Migrant Places of Worship in Ireland [Blog and downloadable radio documentaries]. Available at: <http://religioninireland.net/2013/10/27/migrant-places-of-worship-in-ireland/>. [Accessed 9 April 2015]
- Cresswell, T. & Hoskins, G. (2008). Place, Persistence and Practice: Evaluating Historical Significance at Angel Island, San Francisco, and Maxwell Street, Chicago. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 98(2). pp. 392-412.
- Davey, N. (1999). The Hermeneutics of Seeing. In: Heywood, I. & Sandywell, B. (eds). *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*. London: Routledge. pp. 3-30.
- Davie, G. (2013). *The Sociology of Religion*. (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Davies, D. (1994). Introduction: Raising the Issues. In: Holm, J. & Bowker, J. (eds). *Sacred Place*. London: Continuum. pp. 1-7.
- Doniger, W. (2009). *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dostal, R. J. (ed) (1998). *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2012). Places Names in Multicultural Societies. *Oslo Studies in Language* 4(2). pp. 71-80.
- Grewal, R. (2010). *The Book of Ganesha*. London: Penguin.
- Harrison, V.S. (2007). *Religion and Modern Thought*. London: SCM Press.
- Helleland, B. (2012). Place Names and Identities. *Oslo Studies in Language* 4(2). pp. 95-116.
- Holm, J. & Bowker, J. (1994). *Sacred Place*. London: Continuum.
- Katz, C. (2009). Social Systems: Thinking about Society, Identity, Power and Resistance. In: Clifford, N. et al. (eds). *Key Concepts in Geography* (2nd ed.). London: Sage. pp. 236-250.
- Knott, K. (2005). *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*. Durham: Acumen.
- Lanza, R. & Berman, B. (2009). *Biocentrism*. Dallas: BenBella Books.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place and Gender*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Massey, D. (1999). *Space-time, "Science" and the Relationship between Physical Geography and Human Geography*. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Rodrigues, H. (2006). *Introducing Hinduism*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Thrift, N. (2009). Space: The Fundamental Stuff of Geography. In: Clifford, N. et al. (eds). *Key Concepts in Geography* (2nd ed.). London: Sage. pp. 85-96.
- Trudeau, D. (2006). Politics of Belonging in the Construction of Landscapes: Place-Making, Boundary-Drawing and Exclusion. *Cultural Geographies*. 31(3). pp. 421-443.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tweed, T. A. (2006). *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Vásquez, M. A. (2010). Diasporas and Religion. In: Knott, K. & McLoughlin, S. (eds). *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*. London: Zed Books. pp. 128-133.