

Article

Embodied Sacred Orientation: A Comparative Spatial Theology of Ritual Directionality in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Architecture

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Abstract

This article examines the orientation that emerges during worship in the Abrahamic religions through the interrelation of bodily experience and architectural space. Drawing jointly on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the "lived body" and Mircea Eliade's theory of sacred space, the study discusses how the directionality of worship in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam produces distinct spatial theologies. Methodologically, the research is based on a hermeneutic reading of selected sacred texts, rabbinic and liturgical sources, and on a comparative analysis of synagogue, church, and mosque spaces according to the criteria of orientation, architectural focus, bodily posture, congregational alignment, light, axis, threshold, and ritual surface. The proposed tripartite schema distinguishes between the horizontal covenantal orientation toward Jerusalem in Judaism, the vertical/transcendent axis associated with the cross, resurrection, and ascension in Christianity, and the downward orientation intensified around prostration in Islam. These orientations are not merely ritual prescriptions; rather, they constitute intentional structures through which the body is situated in relation to God, others, and the world. In the synagogue, the Torah ark and the direction of Jerusalem; in the church, the apse, cross, and luminous order; and in the mosque, the qibla wall, the alignment of prayer rows, and the surface of prostration are examined as architectural foci that materialize these intentional structures. The study brings together three domains that are often treated separately in literature: the phenomenology of religion, Eliadean cosmology, and architectural spatial analysis. In doing so, it proposes a comparative model of "spatial theology" among the Abrahamic traditions, articulated through the relationship between body, text, and worship structures. Ultimately, sacred space is interpreted as a dynamic order that is reconstituted in every act of worship through the convergence of bodily orientation, historical memory, and cosmic reference.



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1. Introduction

Sacred space signifies far more than a physical area set apart for worship. Structures of worship such as the synagogue, church, and mosque acquire meaning through the conjunction of bodily orientation, ritual movements, sacred texts, and architectural order. This meaning is continually reproduced during worship through the manner in which the body

enters into relation with the sacred. The central problem addressed in this study is that ritual orientation is often treated merely as a matter of technical direction or architectural placement. Yet such orientation is closely related to the believing body's mode of approaching God, establishing a bond with the sacred center, and experiencing divine presence. This article proceeds from the following question: How does the worshipping body spatialize the idea of proximity, contact, and orientation toward God through sacred texts and architectural space in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? This question is addressed through three interrelated dimensions. First, the study examines how ritual orientation in each tradition is associated with the ideas of divine proximity, sacred center, and contact. Second, it discusses which spatial elements represent this orientation in the architecture of synagogues, churches, and mosques. Third, it asks how these different modes of orientation can be interpreted within a comparative model.

The main argument of the study is that distinct forms of orientation come to the fore within the worship spaces of the three Abrahamic traditions. In Judaism, the horizontal orientation toward Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Holy of Holies carries the memory of the covenant and the desire to approach the presence of God. In Christianity, the resurrection and ascension of Christ, together with the altar, apse, cross, and luminous order, enable the relationship with God to be articulated through images of elevation, manifestation, and transcendence. In Islam, the congregational order directed toward the qibla acquires meaning through the body's movement toward the ground in prostration, expressing proximity to Allah, humility, and submission. Accordingly, the tripartite schema is used not primarily to compare physical directions, but to examine different modes of contact established with the sacred. This tripartite schema does not reduce the traditions to a single axis. Each tradition contains historical, denominational, and geographical diversity within itself. Therefore, the model is treated as an analytical tool for comparing dominant ritual-spatial tendencies.

The study discusses this approach through the spaces of the synagogue, church, and mosque. In these structures, the architectural foci through which ritual orientation becomes visible are examined according to the comparative criteria defined in the methodology Section 2. In this way, the article aims to demonstrate how ritual orientation acquires spatial expression in relation to the idea of proximity to God. The contribution of the article can be defined on three levels. First, it conceptualizes sacred space as a dynamic order constituted through bodily orientation and the search for contact with God. Second, it examines Judaism, Christianity, and Islam within a shared comparative framework. Third, it discusses the relationship between direction, focus, axis, threshold, light, and ritual surface in the architecture of synagogues, churches, and mosques. Thus, the study interprets sacred space as a relational order jointly produced by body, text, memory, and architectural foci.

2. Method and Comparative Reading Framework

This study adopts a comparative methodology that combines phenomenological interpretation, the reading of sacred texts, and architectural spatial analysis. The inquiry is based on three groups of sources. The first group comprises the Torah, the New Testament, the Qur'an, rabbinic texts, and liturgical sources. The second consists of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the lived body and Eliade's concepts of sacred space, center, threshold, and axis mundi. The third draws on architectural history, religious space studies, and ritual studies concerning synagogue, church, and mosque architecture. The architectural foci have been selected from among the elements in which ritual orientation is most explicitly inscribed into space in each tradition: the Torah ark, the mizrah wall, and the bimah in the synagogue; the altar, apse, cross, and luminous order in the church; and the mihrab, qibla

wall, alignment of prayer rows, and surface of prostration in the mosque. The study approaches these elements not as detailed architectural monographs, but as typological foci that reveal the architectural counterparts of ritual orientation. This typological use of architectural examples also requires attention to the concrete processes through which sacred buildings are designed and used. Krinsky's study of the Lincoln Square Synagogue shows that even a contemporary Orthodox synagogue emerges through negotiations among the building committee, rabbi, architects, and congregation, rather than through form alone (Krinsky 2019, pp. 3–6, 8–9). Accordingly, the examples discussed here are not treated as normative representatives of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam as wholes, but as cases in which ritual orientation becomes legible through liturgical practice, communal decision-making, bodily movement, and architectural focus. The comparison is conducted through the same set of questions for each tradition: With which sacred focus does the body enter relation? How does this orientation convey the idea of proximity to God or contact with the sacred? Which bodily postures render this relationship visible? Which architectural elements fix this orientation within space? What roles do congregational alignment, light, axis, threshold, and ritual surface play in this relationship? This study does not aim to exhaust the three traditions in all their historical and denominational diversity, nor to homogenize them. Rather, it comparatively reads the dominant ritual–spatial tendencies that come to the fore in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The tripartite schema is not a closed classification, but an analytical tool that makes visible the relationship between body, belief, and architectural order. Accordingly, the analysis is organized around the following categories: target of orientation, primary bodily posture, architectural focus, congregational order, theological meaning, and the limitations of the model. As shown in Table 1, the comparative reading framework organizes the main bodily, architectural, congregational, and theological dimensions through which ritual orientation is analyzed across the three Abrahamic traditions.

Table 1. Comparative Reading Framework of Bodily Orientation and Architectural Space in the Abrahamic Religions.

Criterion	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Target of orientation	Jerusalem, the Temple, the Holy of Holies	Christ, altar, apse, east, light	Qibla (Ka'ba), surface of prostration
Primary bodily posture	Standing prayer, turning/orientation, rhythmic swaying	Standing, kneeling, making the sign of the cross, elevation of the gaze	Qiyām, rukū', sujūd, sitting
Architectural focus	Torah ark, mizrah wall, bimah	Apse, altar, cross, dome, light	Mihrab, qibla wall, alignment of prayer rows, surface of prostration
Congregational order	Shared memory oriented toward Jerusalem	Liturgical orientation around the altar/apse	Prayer rows aligned parallel to the qibla
Theological meaning	Covenant, memory, approach to the sacred center	Resurrection, ascension, transcendence	Submission, humility, proximity to Allah
Limitation	Horizontal orientation does not exclude mystical and vertical imagery	Vertical orientation does not exclude horizontal and processional orders of worship	Downward orientation does not exclude horizontal alignment toward the qibla

The table presents the basic reading framework to be used in the comparative analysis of the study. The categories are employed as analytical tools for understanding the ritual–spatial concentrations that come to the fore in each tradition.

2.1. Merleau-Ponty: *The Lived Body and Intentional Space*

Merleau-Ponty argues that approaches which explain experience solely through relations among objects obscure the very texture of lived experience. For him, the origin of the object lies directly within lived experience itself. The object is not merely an external entity, but a focus of meaning that emerges at the center of perceptual experience within the network of intentional relations established between the embodied subject and the world (Merleau-Ponty 2005, pp. 81–83). The body, likewise, is neither a merely physical object nor simply an instrument of consciousness. Rather, it appears as the expression of the subject in the world and as the inseparable ground of intentionality. The body is therefore not an object that we “possess,” nor a fragment of space. It is a center oriented toward the tasks it undertakes, and it also constitutes the condition through which space opens itself to the subject (Merleau-Ponty 2005, pp. 115, 117). Intentionality, in turn, refers to consciousness directing itself toward the world through the body. The body cannot be described as a container in which experiences accumulate; rather, it is the precondition that makes experience possible (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, pp. 5, 104, 202).

Within this framework, the body is not only the bearer of “my” immanent lived experience, but also the constitutive ground of the experiential bond I establish with others. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the subject does not withdraw into a closed interior world; on the contrary, embodied existence is from the outset constituted as an openness already “laden with others” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 181). The body’s “hereness” is not a simple location, but a mode of being situated in relation to a particular action and situation (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 115). Space consists of multiple “heres” organized in relation to the body. In every act of perception, one of these emerges as figure, while the others recede into the horizon. The coordinate system itself is, in fact, an abstraction derived from countless body-centered experiences of “here” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 117). Every perceptual figure appears against a double horizon composed of external space and bodily space. The body is the third element that connects these two domains (Merleau-Ponty 2005, pp. 115–16). Temporal experience is similarly understood as a structure in which past and future are knotted around the “now.” Accordingly, the “here and now” denotes the lived point at which temporal and spatial horizons intersect (Merleau-Ponty 2005, pp. 79–80). Vision is an entry into the world of beings that show themselves, and it always occurs from a particular bodily position and through a particular orientation (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 79). The object is never given from all sides and in its totality; it is always partially concealed and surrounded by horizons. For this reason, vision is an unfinished process of discovery (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, pp. 5–6). When the gaze “anchors” itself in a particular object, that object becomes figure. Other objects withdraw to the periphery and remain “dormant” within the horizon (Merleau-Ponty 2005, pp. 77–78). The figure–ground relation thus provides a fundamental framework for understanding how the body organizes perceptual space.

Yet this organization operates not only at the level of “self–world,” but also at the level of “self–other.” The body of the other does not appear within my perceptual field merely as an object; rather, it opens itself as a bearer of meaning that “matches” my own bodily orientations. Merleau-Ponty describes this relation as a bodily “coupling.” For him, understanding the other is not merely a mental inference; it is a bodily “grasping” or “taking up” that is already operative in perception. The gesture of the other awakens a response in me, just as my own gesture may become a “target” for the intentionality of the

other (Merleau-Ponty 1951, p. 118). In this way, intentionality moves beyond an act arising within the boundaries of a single consciousness and is reproduced within bodily contact with the other—that is, on an intracorporeal ground of sharing. This understanding of the body also requires worship and ritual gestures to be reconsidered. Merleau-Ponty regards the body and movement as fundamental intentionality. The movements performed during worship are not merely the external expression of a belief previously formed in the mind; rather, they are the very bodily formation of the relationship that belief establishes with the world (Merleau-Ponty 2005, pp. 158–59). The body is the “general medium for having a world,” and habit constitutes a ground through which the body assumes new meanings (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 169). From this perspective, ritual gestures are not merely the internal discipline of an individual body; they are the entry of embodied existence, already “laden with others,” into a shared order of orientation (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 181). In the space of worship, the synchronization of movements and the way gestures call forth one another can be understood through the logic of “living through” the other, even from a distance (Merleau-Ponty 1951, p. 118).

According to Gallagher, who distinguishes between the objective/physiological body and the lived body, the former is the object of scientific investigation, whereas the latter is the body active in perceptual acts such as seeing, hearing, and touching (Gallagher 1986, pp. 139–40). This distinction indicates that ritual postures cannot be reduced to externally observable forms; what is decisive is the bodily mode of orientation toward God, others, and space. Merleau-Ponty similarly defines the body not as an object viewed from the outside, but as a being “lived from within” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 231).

Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of “oriented space” brings this understanding of the body together with the conception of space. Directions such as “up” and “down” are neither merely sensory qualities nor abstract coordinates; they have meaning only for a subject who takes them up (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 288). Accordingly, bodily space appears not as an external system of coordinates, but as a “situational space” constituted according to the task undertaken at a given moment (Merleau-Ponty 2005, pp. 114–15). In sum, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is not a mechanical instrument that carries worship, but the lived ground of orientation toward God and the world. For this reason, the postures and orientations enacted during worship also organize architectural elements such as the mihrab, qibla, threshold, door, altar, or Torah ark in terms of meaning. For the purposes of this study, Merleau-Ponty’s significance lies in the possibility he offers for thinking ritual orientation as the production of a lived space through which relation with the sacred is established. In the following sections, bodily posture, target of orientation, congregational alignment, and architectural focus will be read together within this framework.

2.2. Eliade: Sacred Space, Hierophany, and the Axis Mundi

The understanding of bodily situatedness and orientation provides an appropriate ground for reading Eliade’s analysis of space based on the sacred–profane distinction. When the perceptual space described by Merleau-Ponty, organized in relation to the body, intersects in Eliade with centers that rupture profane continuity and disclose a more intensified mode of being, a direct relationship can be established between the space constituted by the worshipping body and the structure of sacred space. From this perspective, turning toward a particular direction, crossing a threshold, or gathering at a specific point may be understood not merely as perceptual–kinesthetic choices, but as spatial gestures necessary for the manifestation of the sacred in the world, that is, for hierophany. Eliade elaborates the sacred–profane distinction underlying these gestures and explains how space is organized around “sacred centers.”

According to Eliade, the first way to understand the sacred is to conceive it as the absolute opposite of the profane. The sacred, which signifies a mode of being that is “more real” and charged with power in relation to the profane, is not a quality recognized by itself; rather, it is a reality recognized when it manifests itself. Eliade calls this manifestation hierophany. A simple stone or tree, for instance, is venerated not merely because it is a stone or a tree, but because the sacred is believed to appear within it. While the object preserves its natural existence, it simultaneously becomes a window opening onto the sacred order. The paradox of hierophany emerges precisely at this point (Eliade 1961, pp. 10–12). For archaic and traditional societies, the sacred is not merely a special “religious sphere,” but directly signifies power and reality. The sacred is “saturated with being,” whereas the profane is relatively “deficient” and semi-real. For this reason, religious man seeks to live near sacred centers where he experiences himself at a more intensified level of being and attempts to organize his life around these centers. Accordingly, the sacred and the profane do not refer so much to two separate regions as to two different modes of being in the world (Eliade 1961, pp. 12, 14–15).

Eliade describes sacred space as a “break” that interrupts the continuity of profane space. For religious man, space is not homogeneous; certain points are qualitatively distinguished from others. In Exodus 3:5, God’s command to Moses—“Do not come closer; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground” (Jewish Publication Society 2001, p. 160)—indicates a transition into an entirely different mode of being while remaining in the same bodily location. The declaration of a specific piece of ground as sacred disrupts the continuity of ordinary space and establishes a new spatial order (Eliade 1961, pp. 20–22). In this sense, being in sacred space does not merely mean occupying a geographical location but being ontologically situated at a particular “level.” Entering sacred space, likewise, cannot be reduced to a physical change of location. It signifies a transition between two modes of existence. The threshold is an intensified symbol that both separates the profane from the sacred and represents the passage between these two domains (Eliade 1961, p. 25).

For Eliade, sacred space is not limited to an island isolated from its surroundings; rather, it is a “center” that opens both upward and downward. With hierophany, an axis mundi emerges, linking earth, heaven, and the underworld. Images such as the cosmic pillar, sacred mountain, tree, or column function as representations of this vertical line. The point through which this line passes is experienced as the “navel of the world,” the center of the habitable world (Eliade 1961, pp. 36–37). The city, temple, village, and even the house organizes themselves in relation to this center and become, at their own scale, an imago mundi. Religious man arranges his space according to the desire to “live at the center,” whatever the scale may be (Eliade 1961, pp. 43–44).

Hassner emphasizes that Eliade’s conception of the “center” and the axis mundi is not merely an abstract volume but provides a bodily point of reference for the entire universe. According to this view, the bond established with the center moves beyond a mental representation and finds its counterpart in bodily orientation itself (Hassner 2013, p. 45). During prayer, the head, chest, hands, and gaze are positioned in relation to this axis; thus, Eliade’s cosmological center becomes a concrete focus of orientation in the body of the praying subject. The body’s placement around this center is not a static posture, but an existential movement enacted at the boundary between this world and the other world—that is, at the “threshold.” To describe the experience of “transition from one mode of being to another” indicated by this bodily situatedness, Eliade analyzes the recurring images of bridges, narrow gates, and thresholds in world mythologies. These images express entry into a “new life” through death, initiation, mystical ecstasy, metaphysical knowledge, or faith. The Chinvat Bridge in Zoroastrian tradition, passages described as “thinner than a

hair and sharper than a sword,” the “narrow gate” in Christianity, and the Upanishadic motif of a path “as sharp as the edge of a razor” all share, according to Eliade, a common schema of passage that stages not simple differences of degree, but radical ontological leaps (Eliade 1961, pp. 180–83).

The motifs of center, axis, and threshold in sacred space are not treated in Eliade’s analysis as scattered architectural details; rather, they are different manifestations of the same structural diagram. Threshold, vertical axis, and center cease to be merely individual architectural elements and become a symbolic language expressing the general movement of existence from the profane toward the sacred, from “below” toward “above,” and from the periphery toward the center. This inference is also consistent with Eliade’s discussions of cosmic order: sacred space is a domain transparent to transcendence, in which the elements it contains acquire symbolic meaning (Campbell 1994, as cited in Hunter 2022, p. 6 of 27).

When a person enters such a domain, the sacred–profane distinction is felt bodily. The concept of hierophany defines the “manifestation” of the sacred in a particular place through this qualitative rupture (Eliade 1961, pp. 20–22). In contemporary readings, Eliade’s approach further expands the scope of the concept. Berner follows the path opened by Eliade by emphasizing that the concept of hierophany has become a phenomenological tool for describing the emergence of forms of sacred space without necessarily depending on a direct theological presupposition (Berner 2025, pp. 39, 48). Similarly, following Eliade, Rao defines sacred spaces as nodal points that rupture the homogeneity of profane space and organize a cosmological universe. These spaces belong both to the “here and now” and, by virtue of their threshold-like character, function as relational fields that connect the human world to the transcendent (Rao 2018, p. 1). Consequently, within the framework outlined by Eliade, sacredness should be understood not as a singular building type, but as a relational space experienced through the production of center, axis, and threshold. Within this theoretical framework, Merleau-Ponty explains the bodily orientations that constitute worship from within, while Eliade explains how these orientations acquire spatial form through sacred centers, thresholds, and axes. This study employs Eliade’s concepts to explain how architectural foci in worship buildings become points of contact with the sacred. In this context, the direction of Jerusalem and the Torah ark in the synagogue, the altar, apse, and light in the church, and the mihrab, qibla wall, and surface of prostration in the mosque are read as spatial mediators of contact with the sacred.

2.3. Abrahamic Religions

The term “Abrahamic religions” encompasses the different ways in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam establish a relationship with Abraham. In each of the three traditions, this relationship is positioned differently: for Jews, Abraham is the ancestor of Israel; for Muslims, he is a prophet associated with the establishment of the Ka’ba as a place of pilgrimage; and for Christians, Abraham represents the starting point of the divine promise opened to all humanity in Christ. Nevertheless, all three traditions share Abraham as a common monotheistic point of reference in relation to faith in the one God (Knowles 2011, p. 318). This shared reference is not limited to an abstract similarity of belief; it also reflects a historical transformation common to the three traditions. Indeed, this transformation is the outcome of a process that unfolded in the Eastern Mediterranean basin and radically altered the history of religions. The process that Stroumsa describes as the “Abrahamic movement” corresponds to the centuries between Jesus and Muhammad, during which the practice of animal sacrifice was gradually abandoned, and prophetic monotheism came to occupy a central position in the Eastern Mediterranean. This religious revolution established the historical ground shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Stroumsa 2015,

p. 189). In these traditions, God is conceived not merely as a cosmic principle, but as a deity who speaks through prophets and places ethics at the center of religion. Stroumsa refers to this trajectory as “prophetic monotheism” and regards it as a genuine novum in the ancient world (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 190, 197). Crosby emphasizes that in the three religions, God is understood as an “ineffably holy” being: the sole creator and sustainer of the universe, the ultimate source of meaning and value in human life, as well as a just judge and merciful redeemer (Crosby 2018, pp. 30–31). This elevated conception of God constitutes a powerful and influential framework of belief, historically associated with both sublime goodness and terrifying forms of evil.

This monotheistic understanding shapes not only the doctrinal contents of the religions, but also their structures of sacred text, community, and authority. Stroumsa notes that no religion is founded solely upon a doctrinal or purely charismatic form of religiosity; rather, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam combine scriptural–institutional or dogmatic elements with prophetic–charismatic or imagistic elements in different proportions, thereby producing their own patterns of rationalization and spatial–ritual orders (Stroumsa 2015, p. 51). Burrell and colleagues summarize this structure through a tripartite schema consisting of “the creator—the revealed word—the community that receives and interprets this word”; the word of God becomes effective only within the community that bears and interprets it (Burrell et al. 2002, p. 9). At the political level, the concept of theocracy can also be applied only to monotheistic societies grounded in the one God. While Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share certain commonalities in viewing God as the source of political and legal sovereignty, they configure the relationship between religious authority and political power in markedly different ways. In early Islam, the caliph’s being understood as “God’s representative on earth” and the organization of the ummah from the outset as both a political and religious community transformed the imamate/caliphate into a theocratic model in which divine sovereignty was directly represented. Thus, the unity of divine and political authority was often regarded in Islam as either a natural or an ideal order (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 123–24, 128–29). This intertwining of political and religious authority also turns social order into an unshakable field of ethical responsibility.

Faith in the one God also produces a strong ethical orientation within this structural order. According to Stroumsa, the distinctive feature of the Abrahamic religions lies less in the unity of God than in the centrality of God’s ethical demand. This emphasis both raises the dualistic question that keeps the problem of evil constantly in view and produces, in Christianity and Islam, more universalist models of monotheism, while in Judaism it generates a more particularist model through the paradox of the “universal God–chosen people” (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 16–17). As Burrell and colleagues indicate, the Torah’s command to love the stranger, Jesus’ ministry directed toward the marginalized, and the Qur’anic emphasis that “your God is one God” demonstrate that belief in the one God produces a powerful ethical obligation that becomes concrete in the space of encounter with the stranger (Burrell et al. 2002, p. 15). Crosby reads the human position before God through the creator–servant relationship and the metaphor of the “way”: while turning toward God with one’s entire being represents the possibility of the full realization of human nature, the gravest sin is a mode of life that proudly rejects or ignores God’s holy being and will. Such an attitude opens the way not only to individual loss of meaning and direction, but also to structural evils that generate injustice and conflict at the social level (Crosby 2018, p. 32).

This ethical and theological intensity is also reflected in discussions of interreligious relations. Crosby argues that the “my way only” approach, grounded in the claim of a single and absolute religious path to God, has caused unnecessary conflict and destruction throughout history; by contrast, the mysterious and transcendent nature of God makes the

existence of multiple valid religious paths and interpretations across different cultures and traditions possible, and even necessary. This pluralist perspective develops an approach to relations among the Abrahamic religions that prioritizes mutual learning and cooperation rather than conflict (Crosby 2018, pp. 24–25). Swidler likewise notes that throughout history, when Judaism, Christianity, and Islam encountered other religions, they generally sought to defeat the rival by claiming exclusive possession of truth. In the modern period, however, especially within Christian and Jewish circles, the idea of dialogue has gained strength, acknowledging that something of truth may also be learned from other religions; Islam's participation in this dialogical process has largely been shaped through its encounters with these two traditions (Swidler 1992/1993, p. 444).

All these discussions show that the category of “Abrahamic religions” is itself neither fixed nor unproblematic. Drawing on Paul's account in the Epistle to the Galatians, Knowles interprets being Abrahamic as being bound to the gospel that proclaims justification by faith in Christ. From this Christian perspective, Judaism may be described as Abrahamic because of its specific role in preparing for Christ; Islam, however, which does not recognize Christ as the Son of God and the center of universal salvation—and which may even lead its reader away from Christ—cannot be included in the “Abrahamic” category in this narrower sense (Knowles 2011, p. 320). Therefore, the term should be read not as a neutral academic umbrella category, but as a dynamic field of debate continuously redefined through each tradition's own truth claims.

2.4. Sacred Texts

In the Abrahamic traditions, the relationship established with God is largely mediated through revealed texts. Revelation is first heard as word; it is then written down, memorized, preserved, and incorporated into the rhythm of worship. In this way, it becomes a fundamental point of reference that determines doctrinal content, communal identity, and the connection of ritual practices with time and space. Stroumsa reads the “long Late Antiquity” extending from Jesus to Muhammad within the framework of a “scriptural movement” that includes Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, early Islam, and Manichaean/Mandaean traditions. In this framework, the compilation, preservation, and ritual reading of revealed text's structure these religions as part of a shared religious field in interaction with one another (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 26–27, 53–54). In the same period, both the Christian ideal of *visio Dei*, shaped around the promise of “seeing God” in Matthew 5:8, and the Jewish mystical traditions of *Shi'ur Qoma*, *Hekhalot*, and *Merkavah*, which address the body, palace, and chariot of God, form parallel mystical trajectories that express the most intense experience of proximity to God through the themes of “vision” and “ascent” (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 118–19).

When Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are considered together, it becomes evident that sacred text is not only a source of belief and law, but also an element that determines the orientation of the body and the organization of worship space. For this reason, sacred texts are read in this study not merely as sources of theological content, but as ritual-spatial references that determine bodily orientation, the location of the sacred center, and the organization of the space of worship.

2.4.1. Judaism

In Late Antique Judaism, the principal elements of the Abrahamic ground are formed around belief in the one God, God's covenant with Israel, the status of the Torah as binding law, the sacrificial cult that could be performed only in the Jerusalem Temple, and the practices of Torah reading and prayer on the Sabbath in synagogues dispersed throughout the world (Ehrman 2012, p. 216). Thus, the revealed text maintains the same theological focus

both in the Temple as the center of sacrifice and in the diasporic network of synagogues. This monotheistic faith finds its most concentrated expression in the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4–9. The text proclaims the unity of God with the address: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” It is immediately followed by the command to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and might, to teach these words to children, and to recite them at home and on the road, when lying down and when rising. The same passage also emphasizes that these words are to be bound as a sign upon the hand, placed as a reminder on the forehead, and written on the doorposts of houses and on city gates (Jewish Publication Society 2001, p. 529). Thus, the unity of God does not remain an abstract doctrine; it becomes embodied as an orientation continually enacted through the body, threshold, and everyday movements. These words inscribed on doorposts ensure the continuation, at the scale of the house, of the relationship established with the Torah scrolls preserved in the Temple and with the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. The text recalls the same covenantal direction both in the central space of the Temple and across dispersed domestic thresholds.

Deuteronomy 10:14–21 and 11:1–8 state that the entire universe, including the “heaven of heavens,” belongs to YHWH, while also emphasizing that God lovingly chose the ancestors and “upholds the cause of the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.” Israel is likewise commanded to love the stranger, to worship God alone, and to embody this love through obedience to the commandments (Jewish Publication Society 2001, pp. 542–44). In this way, the covenant is constituted as a field of belief in which spatial chosenness and ethical demand are inseparable.

In Deuteronomy 12:5–7 and 10–14, worship is centralized around the place that God will choose “to establish His name.” The Israelites are commanded to destroy the dispersed places of worship of other peoples and to bring their burnt offerings, vows, tithes, and first fruits only to this place chosen by God, where they are to rejoice before the Lord with their families. It is particularly emphasized that no one may offer sacrifices wherever they wish (Jewish Publication Society 2001, pp. 547–48). In Late Antiquity, this “chosen place” becomes identified with the Jerusalem Temple and produces a geographical focus for both sacrificial worship and the direction of prayer. Mishnah Berakhot 4:5 states that a person in the diaspora should direct the heart toward Israel; one in Israel toward Jerusalem; one in Jerusalem toward the Temple on the Temple Mount; and one in the Temple toward the western Holy of Holies (Guggenheimer 2000, pp. 391–92). When considered together with Merleau-Ponty’s conception of bodily space (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 291), even if the praying Jew is physically distant, the moment the head and torso turn toward the direction representing the Temple area and the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, different geographies are re-knotted within the same bodily “here.” The question of “where one is” is answered not by physical distance, but by the meaning of the center toward which the body is oriented.

2.4.2. Christianity

In Late Antiquity, the transition from scroll to codex and the emergence of silent reading radically transformed the circulation of sacred texts and the relationship between text and body. Stroumsa emphasizes that Judaism, with its “scriptural community” grounded in a strong oral tradition around a single revealed book, encountered in Christianity a different model of book-based religiosity shaped through multiple texts that directed believers toward the imitation of the life of Jesus (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 31, 36).

This scriptural religiosity converges with the New Testament’s theology of the body. Romans 12:1 calls for bodies to be offered to God as a “living sacrifice,” while 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 defines the body as the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ 2014, pp. 1432, 1445). Thus, the posture and orientation of

the body as a site of worship cease to be ordinary gestures of decorum and become theologically charged expressions. Morrill notes that collective movement, posture, and vocal production in liturgy concentrate the individual's experience of being in the presence of God within a vertical field of attention shared with the congregation (Morrill 2024, p. 16). This vertical spatial order is nourished by the conceptions of east and heaven in early Christian cosmology. It is likely that the first Christians continued Temple-centered worship and the practice of turning toward Jerusalem; however, as Christianity spread across different geographies, eastward worship (*ad orientem*) became established in many communities. From the second century onward, the placement of crosses on the eastern walls of houses and the references of some Church Fathers to eastward orientation as an "unwritten apostolic tradition" gave this practice theological weight. The east was conceptualized as the direction of paradise and the beginning of humanity, of the glory of God, and of Christ's resurrection as the "Sun of Righteousness" (Ghaemmaghami and Vafai 2025, p. 3). Thus, *ad orientem* intersects the vertical "upward orientation" with a horizontal line of light, inscribing the hope of resurrection and the Second Coming of Jesus into the organization of church space.

In the New Testament, Christ's being "taken up" (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9–11), the call in Colossians to "set your minds on things above" (Colossians 3:1–2), and the description in John 1:1–5 of Christ as the "Word" who was with God and as the "Light" that shines in the darkness make it possible to read ascension as a bodily and cosmic movement of drawing near to God (The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ 2014, pp. 1324–25, 1366, 1496). According to patristic tradition, the orientation of churches in such a way that the priest faced east during the liturgy, the symbolism of the east as Christ the "Sun of Righteousness" and as the direction of resurrection on the Day of Judgment, and the alignment of many apses with sunrise on equinoxes or saints' feast days are examples of this cosmic symbolism inscribed into space (González-García and Belmonte 2015, pp. 354, 362, 374; Hoare and Sweet 2000, p. 162). In this way, the emphasis on a center directed toward a particular city or structure in Judaism is transformed in Christian worship into a cosmic sign system associated with the themes of resurrection and ascension. Case observes that Christian history has often centered miracle narratives, high Christological claims, and metaphysical speculation, while insufficiently attending to Jesus' "own religion," consisting of his personal, inward, and historical relationship with God (Case 1910, p. 234). This observation points to the complex unity between the centrality of the text and embodied life, that is, the manifestation of the Logos in the body.

2.4.3. Islam

In Late Antiquity, the intense cultural interaction between Judaism and Christianity provided, in Stroumsa's words, an important background for the emergence of Islam. After the conquests, Jews and Christians were placed within the same legal framework under the statuses of "People of the Book" and *dhimmi*, and the three Abrahamic traditions came to be considered within a shared historical-theological context. From the fourth century onward, Judaism and Christianity had transformed from sacrifice-centered temple religions into religious communities organized around texts. Thus, both traditions had already prepared the identity form that Islam would conceptualize under the framework of *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book) by becoming "text-based communal religions" (Stroumsa 2015, p. 105).

Black notes that rituals such as Shavuot in Judaism and the Night of Power in Islam organize revelation around the historical descent of the sacred text, whereas in Christianity the incarnation of Jesus as the Logos emphasizes that revelation is disclosed essentially not in text, but in body and life (Black 2018, p. 156). Thus, although the relationship between

revelation, body, and time is configured differently in the three traditions, the descent and recitation of the sacred text become one of the determining axes of the rhythm of worship.

In the Qur'an and the hadith, prostration is presented as a central expression of drawing near to Allah by abandoning pride. In Sūrat al-Sajdah, those who, when reminded of the divine signs, "fall down in prostration without arrogance" are described as true believers (al-Sajdah 32:15); the command in Sūrat al-'Alaq, "Prostrate and draw near to your Lord," defines downward orientation as the concrete path of proximity (al-'Alaq 96:19). Sūrat al-Qamar, al-Hijr, and al-Insān relate prostration to praise, glorification, and intensified acts of servitude during particular portions of the night; David's falling into prostration when he realizes his trial dramatically reveals the connection between prostration, repentance, and reorientation (al-Qamar 54:62; al-Hijr 15:98; al-Insān 76:26; Šād 38:24) (Al-Hilali and Khan 1997, pp. 556, 346, 611, 723, 843). The revelation-based framework outlined here shows that throughout history prostration has not been perceived merely as a ritual obligation, but as a practice in which bodily descent, humility, and proximity are intensified. This spiritual and bodily character of prostration is also decisive in the organization of the mosque interior. Mosque architecture fixes the act of prostration toward a specific direction and places the body along the qibla axis. Within this order, the body in worship becomes situated in an orientation that connects worldly space with a divinely determined point on earth (Hayati et al. 2019, p. 60). In the Qur'an, this spatial orientation is associated with justice and sincerity: the command "direct your faces toward Him at every place of prostration" calls for external direction to be considered together with inner intention (al-A'rāf 7:29) (Al-Hilali and Khan 1997, p. 204). Prostration is the most intense moment of the bodily order directed toward the qibla in mosque space. At this moment, the ground ceases to be merely a surface on which one stands; it becomes a ritual surface upon which humility, submission, and proximity to Allah are bodily experienced.

The verses in Sūrat al-Baqarah describing the change of the qibla from Bayt al-Maqdis to the Ka'ba define the turning of believers' faces toward a single center as a constitutive principle related to faith and unity (al-Baqarah 2:144–150). The same surah emphasizes that turning east or west alone is not the measure of righteousness; what is decisive is faith and righteous action (al-Baqarah 2:177) (Al-Hilali and Khan 1997, pp. 29–31, 35). Thus, the Qur'an makes the organization of body and space around a shared qibla axis obligatory, while the meaning of this orientation is completed by inner intention, ethical action, and the idea of divine proximity intensified in prostration.

2.4.4. Ritual Body and Orientation

This section applies the comparative criteria defined in the methodological framework to the three traditions. Its aim is to demonstrate how the orientations described in sacred texts are transferred into the postures of the worshipping body and the architectural foci of sacred space. In Judaism, the memory of Jerusalem and the Temple; in Christianity, Christ, the altar, and the luminous order; and in Islam, the qibla, prayer rows, and the surface of prostration constitute the principal nodal points of this transfer. In this section, the concepts derived from Merleau-Ponty and Eliade are applied to the ritual bodily orders of the three traditions. The orientation toward the center representing the Holy of Holies in Judaism, the orientation structured around Christ, the altar, and light in Christianity, and the bodily movements concentrated around the qibla, prayer-row alignment, and the surface of prostration in Islam are examined comparatively.

Stroumsa emphasizes that in Late Antiquity Judaism and Christianity were transformed into religions that no longer practiced actual sacrifice yet structurally preserved the legacy of sacrifice. While the synagogue or beit ha-midrash became a multifunctional center combining worship and Torah study, the church and the monastery spatially sep-

arated worship from cultural activities in Christianity; thus, the fundamental difference between the architectural and spatial configurations of the two traditions became more apparent (Stroumsa 2015, p. 110).

The Western Wall had become a place of Jewish prayer by the early Middle Ages at the latest; in the nineteenth century, with the rise of European interest in Palestine, it became a symbol of this attachment in both Jewish and non-Jewish discourses under the name “Wailing Wall” or Kotel (Saposnik 2015, p. 1657). Within Hungarian Neolog Judaism, religious experience increasingly shifted from everyday domestic practice toward a more institutionally concentrated synagogue life. In Szeged, this produced a collective bodily choreography organized through orientation, seating arrangement, lines of sight, and liturgical roles (Oszkó and Pataricza 2023, p. 489). This case should therefore be read not as representative of Judaism as a whole, but as a historically specific Hungarian Neolog configuration in which the relocation of the bimah to the eastern side, east-facing benches, organ and choir, and Israeli–Hungarian floral symbolism reframed the Jerusalem-oriented covenantal axis within a modern synagogue layout (Oszkó and Pataricza 2023, pp. 482, 489, 503).

Levin’s study of choral synagogues in the Russian Empire offers a comparable caution: such buildings should not be simply identified with Reform Judaism, since many innovations concerned decorum, social prestige, and architectural prominence rather than a distinct religious movement or a change in the essence of prayer (Levin 2020, pp. 1–2, 35–36). Yet the relocation or fusion of the bimah with the Torah ark could reshape embodied worship by creating a single focal point and reorganizing the hierarchy between worshippers and liturgical specialists (Levin 2020, pp. 30, 33). Modern Israeli synagogue architecture extends this point: Simhony shows that, apart from orientation toward Jerusalem, the synagogue exterior is not bound to a fixed historical style, allowing experimental modern forms to preserve the Jerusalem-oriented axis within new national and material vocabularies (Simhony 2020, pp. 1–2, 9–10).

From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, this diversity does not weaken the orientation toward Jerusalem; rather, it indicates that intentionality sedimented in the body incorporates new synagogue typologies into the “body schema” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 239). For the believer in the diaspora, turning toward the Temple is not an abstract principle, but a concrete form of “place-making” that connects the space of exile to the sacred center through bodily participation. As the body turns toward the Temple in Jerusalem, the geography of exile becomes a secondary yet inhabitable sacred place (Casteel 2017, p. 99). Levine interprets the orientation of most synagogues in Late Antique Palestine toward Jerusalem as a spatial device carrying Temple-centered memory. He further notes that even the exceptional deviation in the Sepphoris Synagogue points to the construction of a symbolic center representing Temple ritual (Levine 2000, pp. 226–32; Bokedal 2022, p. 15). Thus, geographical direction becomes a horizontal covenantal orientation that gathers past destruction, present worship, and the hope of future restoration into a single bodily axis.

The Kotel is one of the most intense foci at which orientation and memory intersect. With its emergence as a site of worship in the early modern period, it became an accepted center of Jewish religious attention, a status supported by narratives that established continuity with the Temple tradition (Charmé 2005, p. 8). Gestures such as touching the stones, placing written prayers between them, and rhythmic swaying before the wall demonstrate that centrality is not merely conceptual, but is continuously reconstituted through repeated bodily movements. At the Kotel, the body is not merely a “visitor” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense but becomes a focus of perception and expression that reproduces the continuity of the sacred center each time.

From the late nineteenth century onward, the transfer of Torah scrolls, reading tables, and gender partitions to the Kotel transformed the site into a sacred space that functioned outdoors yet in a synagogue-like manner, strengthening rabbinic authority and a male-centered order of sanctity (Charmé 2005, p. 18). In this context, Eliade's concept of the center becomes a political category that not only reactivates historical memory, but also materially and bodily determines who possesses the space and how it is appropriated. Menorah-shaped Shiviti calligraphies and surfaces that make visible the principle of "setting the Lord always before me" place the body oriented toward Jerusalem within a textual order of remembrance. At the Kotel, orientation becomes a horizontal practice of remembrance that condenses the lost Temple, exile, and the hope of return into a single chain of gestures (Cohen 2022, p. 99). The relationship between body, space, and center becomes most explicit in Jewish worship through the practice of turning toward Jerusalem. When the praying person turns the torso and face toward Jerusalem, the body's direction is connected to a particular city and to the center concentrated around the Temple and the Holy of Holies. Today, this focus is experienced most intensely in the posture of prayer before the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Within the synagogue, the same line is inscribed into space through the mizrah wall and the Torah ark placed upon it. The ark is the principal center that gathers the covenant and textual authority before the eyes of the congregation. Thus, alignment toward Jerusalem functions not merely as geographical directional knowledge, but as a bodily bond established with the memory of the Temple and the Holy of Holies. In the synagogue, the Torah ark, the mizrah wall, and the bimah carry this bond into architectural order; at the Kotel, the same orientation is intensified through stone, touch, prayer, and rhythmic bodily movement.

Early Christianity positioned itself as a new kind of sacrificial religion through the Eucharistic rite, in which Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is enacted as anamnēsis, and through the interpretation of martyrdom as "the sacrifice itself becoming body." The most intense moments of approaching the divine occur both in the Eucharist, where the sacrifice of Jesus is liturgically re-presented, and in martyrdom, the most radical expression of *imitatio Christi* (Stroumsa 2015, p. 37). This structure implies a theology of space and body that extends Eliade's concept of the axis mundi from the temple altar to the church altar and the cross, and Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "lived body" toward the experiences of martyrdom and Eucharist, in which sacrifice itself becomes embodied.

Stroumsa notes that although Judaism, paganism, and early Christianity differed in their conceptions of God in Late Antiquity, they largely shared a common architecture of worship and spatial order organized around temple, sanctuary, altar, and purification rituals. The gradual disappearance of bloody sacrifices during the Christianization process led to the rationalized transformation of this shared sacrifice-centered understanding of sacred space (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 13, 19). This transformation can be read as the redefinition of Eliade's sacred spatial configuration built around sacrifice and sanctuary in favor of a new axis mundi centered on text, preaching, and congregation, and as the transformation of Merleau-Pontian bodily orientations into a practice that establishes religious identity through repeated movements within the space of worship.

Case emphasizes that Jesus organized moral life around two axes: loving God with one's whole being and loving one's neighbor as oneself. Worship, therefore, is not an activity limited to temple rituals. It is embodied through acts of love performed in everyday spaces shared with the poor, sinners, and the excluded, through hidden almsgiving and prayer free from display. Jesus' presence in the same ranks as the poor and sinners should be understood as the social and spatial expression of a "God-like" life in accordance with the will of the Father (Case 1910, pp. 251–52). The social and moral orientation presented by Jesus is transformed within the church interior into a symbolic bodily choreography.

In this study, the vertical orientation in Christian worship is treated not as the sole determining axis, but as a dominant spatial tendency concentrated around Christ, resurrection, ascension, the altar, the apse, and the luminous order. The body's orientation toward the apse, the cross, or the image of Christ makes the orientation toward God spatially visible through the gaze's relation to the altar, light, and upper covering. The eastward alignment frequently encountered in churches (*ad orientem*) is an important spatial device that relates this orientation to the cosmology of resurrection and ascension. Yet Christian worship is an activity that encompasses the whole body and is transformed together with the sociocultural conditions in which it takes place (Morrell 2024, p. 30). For this reason, vertical orientation should be understood not as a fixed schema, but as a bodily-architectural emphasis operating together with processional movements along the nave, the horizontal arm of the cruciform plan, and the liturgical placement of the congregation.

Daelemans's account of "synaesthetic space" further supports this non-reductive reading of Christian architecture. Defining synaesthetic space as the atmosphere or *genius loci* that emerges when a human being dwells in, walks through, or simply is in a place, he emphasizes that church architecture engages the body through texture, light, sound, movement, and architectural skin rather than through visual form alone (Daelemans 2020, pp. 2, 7). Since Daelemans explicitly treats his case studies not as universal claims but as situated spatial practices, his approach also supports reading the Christian examples discussed here as phenomenologically specific cases rather than as representative models of Christianity as a whole (Daelemans 2020, pp. 2, 8–9).

This qualification is necessary because Christian church architecture does not express the vertical/transcendent tendency through a single spatial formula. Kieckhefer's distinction among sacramental, evangelical, and communal traditions shows that the altar–apse–light constellation examined here is especially legible in sacramental settings, while pulpit, proclamation, assembly, or multiple liturgical foci may become more decisive in other Christian contexts (Kieckhefer 2004, pp. 11–15). The vertical/transcendent axis should therefore be read as a recurrent theological-spatial tendency, not as a universal architectural rule for Christianity as a whole.

Doig's historical account reinforces this methodological caution by showing that Christian liturgy and architecture developed through changing settings rather than through a single spatial formula. Since liturgical text, gesture, choreography, movement, and architectural setting together interpret the rite, Christian worship repeatedly reconfigured its spatial setting according to liturgical need and historical circumstance (Doig 2016, pp. xxi–xxii, 1–4). The vertical/transcendent axis should therefore be understood historically: it becomes especially legible in altar-, apse-, light-, and procession-oriented settings, but is mediated by changing liturgical practices and architectural forms rather than by a timeless spatial formula.

This historical mediation becomes particularly visible in postconciliar Catholic architecture. Cucco and Fessia García show that the Second Vatican Council reshaped sacred space through active participation, a closer relation between celebrant and congregation, altar reorientation, the recovery of the ambo, and new visual and auditory connections with the assembly (Cucco and Fessia García 2024, p. 174). In the Church of the Holy Family in Salerno, this logic appears through centrality, circular spatial organization, vertical light cuts, and the natural illumination of the altar (Cucco and Fessia García 2024, pp. 176–77). Fernández-Cobián's study of open Catholic worship spaces in the Philippines further shows that Christian liturgical orientation may also be mediated by climate, landscape, public space, and communal identity, rather than by an enclosed apsidal interior alone (Fernández-Cobián 2025, pp. 1–3, 20). This postconciliar reconfiguration also corresponds to a broader European liturgical-architectural movement. Katona reads the "spirit

of Vatican II” through *ressourcement*, that is, a return to early Christian communal models that generated new spatial and contextual programs in twentieth-century church architecture (Katona 2023, pp. 46–56). In this context, Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral may be read as a particularly legible example of a centralized Catholic worship space in which the altar and congregation are brought into closer visual and liturgical relation (Kieckhefer 2004, p. 279). Sert’s St. Botolph project in Boston offers a further postconciliar modern Catholic variation: developed after *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it organizes worship through a central plan, an altar accessible from both sides, the cross as the principal figurative focus, and natural light entering from above (Ugalde-Blázquez et al. 2025, pp. 3, 11–12). This suggests that the Christian vertical/transcendent axis may be mediated through centralized Eucharistic focus and overhead light as well as through traditional altar–apse arrangements.

Experimental studies show that prayer and worship postures in the Christian tradition carry different emotional and theological meanings. In postures associated with gratitude and love, the body is upright, with the head directed forward and upward; in repentance and confession, the body is more closed and downward-oriented (Van Cappellen and Edwards 2021a, pp. 546–47, 554–55). This distinction indicates that verticality in Christian worship is not merely upward orientation, but a flexible axis that organizes different bodily states such as praise, repentance, and abasement. In Gothic cathedrals, rising naves and light descending from above reinforce this axis at the architectural level. Christian liturgy situates the community within a narrative of salvation that remembers the past and extends toward the future, thereby transforming orientation from a merely spatial element into one with a historical dimension (T. Jones 2021, p. 3). Because Christian faith is grounded in embodiment, it is intrinsically sacramental. Creation is understood as the bodily expression of God’s grace, while liturgy is seen as the privileged stage of bodily participation in Christ’s sacrifice. Therefore, no gesture is a “neutral” movement independent of spatial orientation. It has been argued that those who receive the Eucharist while kneeling at the altar rail display greater reverence and solemnity than those who receive it while standing in line, and that kneeling facilitates the experience of the Eucharist as direct participation in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (Smith 2024). In Western Christianity, the interpretation of the cruciform plan as the body of the crucified Jesus and of the sanctuary as the head of Christ transforms the church into both a temple and a spatial image of Christ; the architectural order functions as a theological framework that directs the body and gaze toward the altar (Nivakoff 2020).

David Mills’s testimony shows that Eucharistic theology is transmitted not only through dogmatic texts, but also through spatial organization and the directions followed by the body. According to him, Jesus is “there” in the tabernacle even if the church is ugly or the liturgy poorly performed. Yet stained glass, Stations of the Cross, side chapels, statues of saints, and the crucifix either make this truth perceptible or conceal it. In a traditional Italian immigrant church, all these elements repeat the message “He is here,” and the kneeling believer responds to this visual language through the body (Mills 2019). Thus, Christian worship renders the dimension of transcendence perceptible through bodily gestures and spatial organization.

In this context, Christian worship may be summarized within the proposed tripartite typology as a “vertical/transcendence-oriented” axis of worship. More precisely, Christian worship produces a vertical/transcendence-oriented spatial theology through the embodiment of Christ, the liturgical order around the altar, and images of light and ascension. However, this orientation operates together with horizontal and processional orders such as the cruciform plan, movement along the nave, and congregational placement. In Islamic worship, orientation toward the qibla, the alignment of prayer rows, and prostration can-

not be read separately. During prayer, the body participates both in a horizontal congregational alignment and in the downward orientation intensified in prostration through the sequence of standing (*qiyām*), bowing (*rukūʿ*), prostration (*sujūd*), and sitting. Therefore, in the section on Islam, downward orientation is not treated as a movement independent of the qibla axis, but as the most intense bodily moment of the ritual order attached to the qibla.

As the second pillar of Islam, prayer is an institutional act of worship performed at specific times through a fixed sequence of movements; the body is rhythmically situated on the ground within the mosque prayer hall through repeated movements of bowing, prostration, and standing (Ridzwan et al. 2011, p. 182). In Islam, prostration is the posture that carries the downward-oriented axis of worship to its most extreme point as the most intense expression of bodily descent and submission. This contact of the believing body with the ground concentrates humility, fear, trust, and proximity within a single movement. From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's concept of bodily intentionality, prostration is the fundamental movement pattern that turns the Muslim body's horizon of "I can" toward the ground. The body is organized in the direction of shrinking, bending, and drawing close to the earth, gathering sensory attention along a single line of "downward orientation" (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 169).

In Islamic thought, the balance between acting for the glory of Allah and seeking individual benefit is embodied when the servant renounces any claim to personal greatness and turns toward divine majesty (Rueda Garrido 2025, p. 5). This normative religious framework also corresponds with findings in contemporary psychological literature. Experimental studies show that postures based on prostration and kneeling are associated with submission and reverence, whereas the gesture of raising the hands is more closely related to praise and glorification (Van Cappellen and Edwards 2021b, pp. 62–63). These findings support the interpretation that downward-oriented movements such as prostration and bowing in prayer embody humility and submission, while raising the hands embodies gestures of *takbīr* and praise.

In addition to the bodily and affective dimensions of prostration, its cognitive and attentional dimension has also been emphasized. Jawaid draws attention to the cognitive dimension of prostration and argues that because Allah cannot be identified with any image, the servant can draw near to Him only at a threshold where the content of thought diminishes. The rhythmic repetition of the formulas "*Subhāna Rabbiyal-Aʿlā*" and "*Subhāna Rabbiyal-ʿAẓīm*" during bowing and prostration produces a sustainable state of remembrance without overburdening memory, carrying the person to a level of attention that is "awake and present, yet without determinate thought content"; this state is interpreted as the moment of greatest proximity to Allah in prayer (Jawaid 2019, pp. 1–7). Phenomenological body theory offers an explanatory framework for conceptualizing this experience. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is the general medium for having a world (Merleau-Ponty 2005, p. 169). In prayer, the Muslim body that reaches prostration combines a movement that occurs biologically as falling to the ground and muscular tension with intention and remembrance, transforming it into a symbolic world that carries the consciousness of *tawhīd*, servitude, and mortality. Thus, the prostrating body becomes the principal bearer of a new world of meaning oriented toward the divine and transforms the understanding of the earthly surface upon which it takes place.

The meaning through which prostration transforms the ground into a sacred center becomes clearer when considered together with Eliade's concept of hierophany. Sacred space may be defined as a hierophany that creates a "rupture" in profane space and reveals the center; in the Islamic context, this center is the earthly ground toward which the body turns during prostration. The hadiths stating that the earth has been made a

mosque allow every surface upon which prostration can be performed to be interpreted as a potential field of hierophany. The cosmic axis is thus understood not as a vertical line ascending toward heaven, but as a downward movement of centering in which the body becomes integrated with the ground at the moment of prostration. This downward-oriented axis is effective not only in individual piety, but also in historical and political contexts. Tottoli notes that in the generations after Muhammad, the prostration of gratitude was almost always performed in connection with military victories. When caliphs and commanders received news of victory, they fell to the ground, attributing success to Allah and using this act both as a visible sign of piety and as a legitimizing ritual of power (Tottoli 1998, pp. 312–13). The ruler's prostration produces a bodily language that limits sovereign claims before divine authority. Thus, prostration becomes a public act of worship that inscribes upon the ground not only the servant–Lord relationship, but also critical moments that determine the destiny of the community.

In the Islamic context, the mosque interior organizes worship around the senses of direction and place. When the believer stands in prayer, enters the row, and turns toward the qibla wall, the chest, shoulders, and gaze participate in a single direction extending across the prayer hall. The alignment of the rows strengthens this shared line and gives worship a spatially visible unity. Prostration, however, focuses this sense of direction from the scale of the prayer hall onto the boundary between body and ground. The body contracts into its smallest volume; the face and hands approach the ground. In this position, the believer is visually alone with the earth and mentally alone with Allah. Intermediary elements and distractions that might intervene between the servant and the Lord recede from the scene. Prostration is the posture in which the servant bodily discloses a state of helplessness and complete submission to Allah.

2.5. Architectural Space

The third plane in which worship gestures are situated consists of the architectural spaces that carry them: the synagogue, the church, and the mosque. These three examples concretize bodily orientations, the centers described by sacred texts, and Eliade's figures of center, axiality, and threshold within specific plan schemes and volumetric configurations. In the period following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, Rabbinic Judaism moved away from sacrifice-centered temple ritual toward a form of religiosity shaped around prayer, fasting, charity, and the individual obligations of halakhah, transferred from the public sphere to the private domain. The idea that the presence of God now resides within "the four cubits of halakhah" indicates that sacred space expanded from a single axis mundi into dispersed micro-centers (Stroumsa 2015, p. 36).

Even before 70 CE, synagogues primarily functioned as spaces in which the Torah was read and interpreted, and this function continues to constitute the core of Jewish worship today (Magness 2024, p. 2). The absence of a single central authority and unified legislative body entails strong plurality in terms of plan, decoration, and worship orientation. Local communities may develop different synagogue types reflecting regional style, liturgical order, and donor expectations (Magness 2024, p. 4). Archaeological findings show that synagogue space transformed as communal practices changed; in the cases of Priene and Sardis, the interior was reorganized through the addition of a narthex in the second construction phase (Burkhardt 2014, p. 201). Thus, the synagogue emerges not as a fixed typology, but as a flexible stage of worship that reconstitutes, within different architectural orders, the common axis representing the Temple area in Jerusalem and the Holy of Holies.

The continuity of orientation toward Jerusalem is maintained both through text-based obligation and through material and visual reminders within the synagogue. Mizrahim panels prepared within the tradition of ritual writing indicate the direction of Jerusalem,

concretizing bodily alignment in the worship space and transforming orientation from individual intention into a collective and repeatable spatial order (Cohen 2022, p. 102). Hirschfeld analyzes the concept of mizrah as a threefold structure of orientation: for Jews in the West, turning “eastward” toward Jerusalem; the direction of progress and restoration; and, through the Hebrew root qedem—east, beginning, ancient times—the idea of returning to primordial sanctity (Hirschfeld 2006, p. 289). Thus, orientation toward Jerusalem exceeds the status of a merely spatial axis and becomes a theological line that gathers within the body an expansive temporal sequence extending “from origin to eschaton.” The spatial reforms of nineteenth-century Hungarian Neolog Judaism clearly demonstrate the embodiment of this line within the synagogue. In the New Synagogue of Szeged, the relocation of the Torah reading platform (bimah) from the center to the eastern (mizrah) wall and the reconfiguration of congregational seating to face this wall produced an institutional order of orientation that aligned the direction toward Jerusalem along a single axis (Oszkó and Pataricza 2023, p. 489). From the perspective of Rao’s understanding of “relational sacred space,” the body turned toward Jerusalem, mizrah panels, and textual–ritual practices transform orientation into a repeated body–memory–space nexus (Rao 2018, p. 5).

Like mosques, synagogues are designed as spacious interiors capable of accommodating congregational worship (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004, p. 389). Within this volume, the synagogue establishes a logic of “covenantal space” organized around an axis oriented toward the Temple area in Jerusalem, and particularly toward the Western Wall, and around the aron ha-kodesh, in which the Torah is preserved; “the Torah ark is the focal point of all synagogue worship” (Nashman Fraiman 2020, p. 1). Thus, while the synagogue is also a place of gathering, its fundamental meaning derives from its role as a worship stage in which the covenant is bodily re-enacted through the direction understood to face the Western Wall.

Levy interprets the transformation from Temple to synagogue as an “inverted” mechanism in terms of sacred space, mediating figure, and congregational domain. According to him, while the Temple foregrounded privileged sacred space and a strong emphasis on mediation, in the synagogue spatial sanctity assumes a more flexible structure, and the office of mediation becomes a status that any believer may represent (Levy 2025, p. 6). By contrast, the congregation comes together in a single volume around a shared axis of orientation toward the text and Jerusalem. In the New Synagogue of Szeged, the dense decoration and symbolism of the east-facing mizrah wall transform this axis into a perceptual point of attraction. The Torah ark placed there is the material center in which gaze, auditory rhythm, and bodily movements are knotted together (Oszkó and Pataricza 2023, p. 495). The organization of the synagogue in relation to the sacred center is further reinforced textually through plaques such as the mezuzah and mizrah. Texts written by the sofer transform the order of orientation within the synagogue into a spatial norm and an applicable guide (Cohen 2022, p. 102). Thus, space is directionally fixed within a network of textual sanctity. Casteel emphasizes that the synagogue functions as a “place-making” practice that, on the one hand, keeps alive the consciousness of “another sacred land,” and, on the other, produces stable belonging through bodily practices repeated in the diaspora (Casteel 2017, p. 100). In this sense, the synagogue is a spatial interface in which orientation and place-making operate simultaneously, bringing dispersed spaces in the diaspora together around the direction that represents the Temple area in Jerusalem and especially the Holy of Holies.

The center–space structure of Jewish worship becomes more concrete when viewed from within the synagogue. For the praying person, the starting point is the position occupied before the Torah ark placed on the mizrah wall. Body, voice, and gaze are orga-

nized according to the direction in which this ark opens. Synagogue architecture does not merely terminate attention in this object; the positioning of the Torah ark in the direction of Jerusalem and the association of the Torah scrolls within it with the Temple tradition connect every prayer to a single line extending toward the imagined Temple area and the Western Wall. Although the body is physically located in the synagogue, during worship it enters relation through this line with “there,” that is, with the space in which the covenant took place. Thus, synagogue, Western Wall, and Temple memory are understood not as disconnected centers, but as nested rings that carry, at different scales, a single focus of worship in which proximity to God is felt along the same direction.

In Late Antiquity, the abandonment or destruction of temples and the construction of churches dispersed across neighborhoods transformed worship from open-air sacrificial rituals accessible to all into a new architectural–ritual order organized around the congregation and sacred text within an enclosed interior. In this process, the direction of the sacred–profane and public–private distinctions were also reversed (Stroumsa 2015, p. 38). The aniconic Holy of Holies in the Second Temple, the empty tomb monument in the Anastasis, and the empty mihrab niche indicating the qibla in the mosque function, in Stroumsa’s words, as deliberately preserved “sacred voids” that spatially represent the invisible God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Stroumsa 2015, p. 160).

This vertical orientation is also embodied in the church plan. The traditional church plan represents both the cross and the body of Christ. The nave and transept correspond to the arms of the cross, the main body to the congregational body, and the altar to the head. The Chapel of St. John is used here not as a representative model of Christian architecture as a whole, but as an illustrative case of a sacramental and traditional Catholic spatial language in which altar, apse, dome, iconography, relics, and axial movement are densely coordinated. The Chapel of St. John in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, offers a concrete example of a volume conceived in continuity with Christian sacred-space symbolism, constructing orientation along horizontal and vertical axes through the body. The body of Christ, the congregation, and the architectural body converge in the idea of the “living church”; the cruciform church becomes a spatial theology that overlays Eliade’s schema of the axis mundi with the body of Christ (Hassner 2013, p. 44).

Used here not as a representative model of Christian architecture as a whole, but as an illustrative case of a sacramental and traditional Catholic spatial language, the Chapel of St. John in Milwaukee offers a concrete example in which altar, apse, dome, iconography, relics, and axial movement are densely coordinated within horizontal and vertical axes of bodily orientation. The body entering from the narthex crosses the threshold between the sacred and the profane and is drawn into a journey along the solar axis, defined between the light of the rising sun in the east and the darkness of the setting sun in the west, where the temporal and the eternal intersect. As one advances toward the apse along this axis, the nave represents the earthly realm, while the circular apse and dome represent the divine realm. Thus, the material world and the spiritual realm encounter one another within architectural form as a microcosm, and the Eucharistic sacrifice is performed beneath Christ Pantocrator, that is, the glorified Risen Son.

This spatial configuration also shapes the Christian’s visual focus in a directive manner. While classical architectural language operates at both conscious and unconscious levels through mass, void, proportion, and continuity, Ionic columns proportioned according to the measures of the human body draw the gaze forward toward the apse. The dome and its iconographic program direct the gaze upward toward the heavenly realm. The four-tiered decorative bands of the dome stage the continuous “working” of God’s creation and open an uninterrupted narrative field within the dome. The eye is first drawn along the nave toward the apse, and then slightly upward toward the dome and icono-

graphic order. Thus, a rhythmic visual movement is formed along the nave–dome–apse sequence, oscillating between forward directionality as liturgical focus and upward directionality as the heavenly. Here, the “upward gaze” is not directed vertically toward the ceiling but rises gently along the axis of the apse. The semicircular form of the apse, as the horizontal projection of the dome, functions as a threshold between the visible and the invisible; although an image of “heaven” is offered to the senses, this invisible realm can only be approached through the altar, as an approximation and an intimation. The icons of St. John and the Theotokos on either side of the apse call the gaze beyond its material limit as angelic figures bearing witness to this invisible realm. The elevated sanctuary, altar rail, marble altar table, richer Corinthian framing, and relics of saints are the principal elements of this configuration. Together, they direct body and gaze from earth toward the heavenly, from the visible toward the invisible, and from the community of the living toward the witness of the saints. In this way, a dense sacred stage emerges, organizing movement and vision through gradual transitions (Woodbury 2005).

From the earliest periods, priest and congregation, in accordance with the *ad orientem* understanding, faced east—the direction of the rising sun—as if awaiting the Second Coming of Jesus. For this reason, Catholic churches were traditionally oriented toward the east. In parallel, because the north was associated with darkness, cold, and evil, it was assigned to Old Testament scenes; the south, associated with light and grace, was assigned to New Testament narratives. The western façade, identified with human history and the flow of time, was reserved for the Last Judgment. Thus, the believer crossing the cathedral threshold entered through a boundary that recalled the passage “from time into eternity.” This four-directional configuration does not merely turn the body toward one façade; it also situates the body within a cosmological scenario concerning history, salvation, and judgment. The gaze of the congregation is directed not toward a single image, but toward a coherent theological narrative encoded through directions (C. A. Jones 2025).

This phenomenological verticality acquires a distinct spatial language in Gothic architecture. Gothic architecture translates theological ideas into a language of spatial orientation and constructs the transition from Romanesque horizontality to extreme verticality through light, depth, and height. Rising naves and towers transform upward orientation into the sensible expression of the desire to approach God. The cathedral axis combines Eliade’s idea of the cosmic center with the experience of light and height within the church. The example of Beauvais Cathedral demonstrates that, in the medieval mindset, height functioned as a metaphor for proximity to God and that the gaze of the worshipper was inscribed into the geometry of the church (Elizalde 2025, p. 2). While preserving its identity as a classical space of worship, the cathedral also becomes a spatial apparatus that directs the human being beyond his or her limits toward the transcendent. Verticality gathers both the individual desire for transcendence and a shared identity at the urban scale along the same axis (Elizalde 2025, p. 22).

In Christian worship, this order of direction and center gains concrete expression in the Chapel of St. John. As the congregation enters from the narthex and proceeds along the nave toward the apse, bodies are turned toward the center of the liturgy. Worship is first experienced as a horizontal movement of approach. When the apse area is reached, the line of sight becomes as significant as walking. The image of Christ or the cross located above the level of the altar establishes an oblique line of vision in which the head is slightly raised, gathering the congregation’s attention at this upper focus. The iconography within the dome and apse continues this line of sight, concentrating the themes of resurrection and ascension in this direction. Thus, in the Chapel of St. John, the center does not remain frozen at a single point. It is experienced along the direction in which the horizontal movement from entrance to apse intersects with the gaze turned toward the upper region of the

apse, pointing to the glorified state of Christ. The church interior becomes an architectural theology that constructs this vertical axis opening toward ascension and transcendence through bodily movement and the line of sight.

The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, rather than being the “navel” of a single culture like Delphi, functions as a historically and theologically layered axis mundi and intercivilizational boundary-space that has attracted the competing myths and rituals of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for approximately two millennia (Stroumsa 2015, pp. 159–60). Mosques are more than buildings in which prayer is performed in Islamic society; they are nodal points where spirituality, collective identity, and urban memory are concentrated (Al-Khalifa and Ghasrah 2025, p. 3052). Religious teachings, local practices, and modern design approaches have transformed the form of mosque architecture and the meanings associated with worship. Thus, the mosque becomes a multifunctional focus that carries together the classical space of worship and the stage of everyday life, politics, and urban belonging. This institutional and spatial ground provides the starting point for understanding the downward-oriented axis of worship centered on prostration.

As noted above, the derivation of the term masjid from the root sujūd defines these structures etymologically as “places of prostration.” This shows that sacred space in Islam is closely tied to the ground and to bodily action. The fact that any piece of land can acquire the status of masjid once it is set apart by the congregation for prayer reveals that sacredness is concentrated primarily in the ground and in the act of prostration (Hajamaideen 2014, p. 76).

In the mosque prayer hall, broad, as unobstructed and column-free spatial configurations as possible support both the shared orientation of the congregation toward the qibla and visual continuity. The large single volume enables worshippers to perceive the qibla wall and bodies aligned in rows within a single visual horizon. While centrally planned mosques strengthen this effect, multi-columned hypostyle arrangements weaken the sense of center (Ali and Mustafa 2023, p. 29). Within this spatial order, the prayer hall may be read as a space of worship in which bodily descent through prostration and collective orientation toward the qibla coincide, and in which downward-oriented theology is inscribed into space. At the center of this order lies the bodily experience of worship based on prostration. Mosque architecture establishes an organization that inscribes the downward-oriented theology of prostration into the ground and the qibla axis. The shoulder-to-shoulder and gapless arrangement of rows produces a strong sense of unity on the horizontal plane. The distance between rows makes possible the body’s orientation toward the ground. Horizontal compression and downward orientation merge within the same order (Hajamaideen 2014, p. 89). Since, according to Islamic belief, Allah is omnipresent, turning toward the qibla does not mean confining divine presence to a single direction, but symbolically gathering Muslims from different parts of the world into unity along one direction (Hayati et al. 2019, p. 60).

Within this framework, the mosque is interpreted in some readings as a structure with a double orientation toward the qibla and the sky: the obligatory orientation is toward the qibla, while the recommended secondary orientation is toward the heavens (Adiputra and Salura 2021, p. 157). The Qur’an mentions night, day, sun, and moon as signs of Allah’s existence, yet commands prostration not to these celestial bodies, but to the One who created them (Fuṣṣilat 41:37) (Al-Hilali and Khan 1997, p. 647). Thus, the vertical horizon opened by the dome and upper apertures does not signify worship of created entities, but functions as a cosmic frame that recalls the Creator. The downward-oriented axis of prostration and the vertical horizon opening toward the sky unite as complementary directions within a single space of worship. This order centered on prostration inscribes a downward-oriented theology of the body into architectural space through contact with the

ground and shared orientation toward the qibla. For this reason, the mosque prayer hall can be read, within the proposed tripartite typology, as the spatial counterpart of Islam's prostration-centered downward axis of orientation.

3. Comparative Analysis and Theological Orientations

Within the phenomenological–cosmological framework, ritual orientation should be understood not as a simple technical preference, but as a theological language of orientation that expresses how the body situates itself in relation to God, others, and the world. At this point, the tripartite order becomes distinct: the horizontal covenantal orientation toward Jerusalem in Judaism, the vertical/transcendent orientation represented by the crucified and risen Christ in Christianity, and the downward orientation concentrated around prostration in Islam. These orientations can be traced not only in bodily gestures, but also in the plan schemes, axial configurations, hierarchies of level, and lighting structures of worship spaces. Architecture becomes a material interface that sustains this orientation across time and space.

Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the "lived body" and oriented space make it possible to understand these orientations as forms of bodily intentionality. The body does not merely occupy a given space; through worship gestures, it constitutes the horizon of meaning of that space. Focusing elements such as colonnades, naves, arcades, the mihrab, apse, or Torah ark function as architectural devices that frame these intentions along specific directions. The direction chosen by the body becomes an axis sustained within the organization of plan and section. Eliade's concepts of center, axis mundi, and threshold show that this intention produces sacred foci and axes that interrupt profane continuity. Thus, the orientations in the three traditions become comparable on both phenomenological—body, perception, affect—and cosmological—center, axiality, threshold—planes.

3.1. Phenomenological and Cosmological Background

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an anatomical object or a simple instrument of the mind, but a general medium of orientation lived from within and opened toward the world. The world is experienced not from the position of a static observer producing representations, but within the body's possibilities of "I can." In this context, worship ceases to be an ordinary activity added to a neutral volume. It becomes a specific mode of situatedness in which gestures, postures, and rhythms reorganize the world in relation to God. The interior arrangement of worship spaces is configured through axes, focal points, level differences, and directions of light in order to support this mode of bodily situatedness. In this sense, plan and section can be read as the "architecturalized" traces of bodily orientation.

Looking upward, turning toward Jerusalem, or falling to the ground are not merely changes of position or posture; they are intentions that reconstitute the perceptual figure-ground order from the outset. A particular direction comes to the fore, while other directions recede. The body's "hereness" is therefore not an abstract point, but a state of being positioned in relation to a specific focus of meaning.

When Eliade's sacred–profane distinction is considered together with his concepts of center and axis mundi, sacred space appears as a point of rupture within homogeneous space. Here, a more intense mode of being and meaning is experienced. Door and threshold are not merely ordinary points of passage, but symbolic boundaries that carry the discontinuity between profane and sacred space, as well as the possibility of transition between them. In architecture, this rupture is often expressed through the emphasis placed on thresholds, sudden changes in light and ceiling height between entrance and worship

area or shifts in the direction of the plan axis. As the body crosses these spatial ruptures, it also experiences “stepping into” a different mode of existence.

In Late Antiquity, the destruction or functional transformation of temples and the construction of synagogues and churches in their place marked a transition from a single temple center to multiple micro-centers. The axis mundi function of the Jerusalem Temple continued later in smaller centers such as the synagogue, beit midrash, church, monastery, and individual inner world. The placement of basilica-plan churches on former temple platforms and the establishment of new foci through the Torah reading platform and ark within synagogue interiors constitute architectural counterparts of the transition from a singular temple center to plural and layered centers. In this process, the body, too, becomes situated not so much through singular pilgrimage journeys, but through local centers repeatedly formed within different spaces such as synagogue, church, monastery, and domestic interior through daily practices of prayer, learning, and charity.

Read together, phenomenological and cosmological discussions show that ritual orientations in each tradition concentrate around different theological foci, and that the body’s mode of taking up the world in relation to God and the formation of sacred space are shaped by these foci. What is common is the body’s placement along the direction in which proximity to God is most intensely felt; what differs is the center and gestures through which this proximity is conceived. The plan, section, and façade organizations of worship buildings emerge as arrangements that express this common orientation through different material languages: the same theological orientation takes architectural form sometimes along a horizontal line, sometimes within an ascending volume, and sometimes on a contact surface intensified toward the ground.

3.2. *Scriptural Rhythms, Affects, and Embodied Alignment*

Sacred texts become determinative not only through doctrinal content, but also through the ritual intensities they generate within the year and the bodily rhythms they establish. Rituals such as Shavuot in Judaism and the Night of Power in Islam make it possible to conceive the descent of revelation as a special moment of orientation opened between heaven and earth. It is assumed that on nights the opening between heaven and earth intensifies. In Christianity, by contrast, revelation is concentrated especially around the event of the incarnation of the Logos. This emphasis enables the body itself to be understood as the stage of the sacred.

In Judaism, prayer and Torah study often converge within the same interior space; the synagogue/beit midrash is both a place of worship and interpretation. In Christianity, the church is primarily the space of liturgical worship, while monasteries and schools serve as spaces of theological and intellectual production. Thus, in Judaism, body, text, and orientation are organized within the same volume; in Christianity, they are organized within a spatially differentiated order between liturgy and doctrinal thought. In Islam, Qur’anic recitation and prayer produce a rhythmic time–space framework in the mosque prayer hall, within which the body is situated according to the qibla, the ground, and the repeated sequence of bowing, prostration, and standing.

These rhythms are not merely acts of reading and repetition. Through the sensory participation of the body, they generate shared affective fields. Responses such as awe, peace, and belonging are shared through the synchronized movement of bodies during ritual. Physiological and psychological states draw closer to one another. Bodies that are near and aligned in the same direction transform abstract group identity into a concrete experience of proximity and togetherness. The spatial patterns of ritual inscribe communal memory into the fabric of sacred space.

Empirical studies support this picture. Van Cappellen and colleagues show that bodily posture affects the perception of God and emotional tone. More contracted and gathered positions are associated with a sense of proximity to God and avoidance motivations, whereas more open and expansive positions are associated with praise and gratitude. Therefore, gestures such as prostration, kneeling, standing, and raising the hands do not merely express already existing emotions; they also actively shape affect and the conception of God.

Research in secular contexts similarly reveals that bodily configurations such as a bowed head, slumped posture, or head tilted backward are systematically associated with emotions such as submission, stress, arrogance, and pride; a slightly backward-raised head and expanded chest are recognized cross-culturally as a “pride posture” (Riskind and Go-tay 1982, p. 295; D’Errico and Poggi, 2019, p. 70). These findings phenomenologically rationalize the deep connection between dominant worship postures and theological themes such as praise, resurrection, fidelity, humility, and submission.

Believers who adopt prescribed gestures and postures are not passive subjects merely carrying out ritual instructions. Here, the body becomes one of the constitutive elements of the encounter with sacred presence. Entering a specific posture of worship goes beyond representing an existing emotion; it directly constructs affect, the experience of sacred space, and the theological structure of orientation. Thus, the three proposed axes emerge as distinct phenomenological–theological modes of expression organized through gestures, affective patterns, and spatial arrangements.

3.3. Centers, Axes, and Local Focal Points

The theoretical background provides a suitable basis for considering centers, axes, and local focal points together in the three traditions.

In Judaism, the most intense experience of proximity to God historically concentrates around the Temple area and especially the Holy of Holies. Today, this intensity is embodied most clearly before the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Approaching the wall, touching the stones, and placing written prayers between them transform this surface into a privileged point of contact for the body and word oriented toward God. In the synagogue, this center is represented by the Torah ark placed on the mizrah wall. The Torah scrolls preserved in the ark embody the covenant and textual authority, and the ark is aligned, as far as possible, toward Jerusalem. While the praying person bodily turns toward the ark in the synagogue, this direction is experienced mentally as a single orientation extending toward Jerusalem through the Western Wall and the Temple tradition. Jerusalem, the Western Wall, and the Torah ark are in fact different scalar manifestations of the same covenantal center. The experience of being closest to God is reconstituted and intensified around this single focus according to where the body is located.

In Christianity, the ultimate center is the glorified and risen Christ in an eschatological sense. Narratives of ascension, calls to “think on things above,” and images of light give this orientation a vertical/transcendent dimension. In Gothic cathedrals, rising naves, towers, and light descending from above transform this vertical direction into a spatial reality both in the interior and in the urban silhouette. The center is concentrated in the image of Christ located in the apse; however, this center is experienced gradually within the orientation jointly constituted by the horizontal process of worship moving from narthex to apse and the gaze rising toward the figure of Jesus in the upper zone of the apse.

In Islam, the moment when the believer is closest to Allah is described in classical hadiths as the state of prostration. For this reason, the phenomenological center of worship is the small piece of ground touched by the forehead, hands, knees, and toes during prostration. The fact that the eyes are not closed during prostration but directed toward the

narrow area immediately in front of the body pushes the width of the prayer hall and the effect of the elevated dome into the background. The body intensely feels its downward-oriented contact with the place where it is located. Each prostration turns this contact surface into a local focus where proximity to Allah is most intensely experienced.

The Ka'ba is the global geometric and symbolic center that orders all qibla orientations on earth; the qibla axis may be defined as the orientation that begins from the chest and gaze of the praying body and extends conceptually toward the Ka'ba through the mosque's qibla wall and mihrab. The mosque interior fixes this axis and provides the congregation with a shared direction. Yet the experience of divine proximity is often lived not at the abstract point of this global center, but on the concrete ground surface where prostration takes place. Thus, the Ka'ba expresses the global center of orientation, the qibla axis expresses bodily alignment, and the surface of prostration expresses the actual focus of worship in which proximity is experienced.

This comparison shows that, in each tradition, the figures of center and axis move beyond architectural detail and become foci that intensely unite the body, memory, and the conception of God.

3.4. *Three Axes as Theological Orientations*

The analysis so far has shown that ritual orientations concentrate around three dominant axes: the horizontal axis based on historical covenant and remembrance, the vertical axis associated with the themes of incarnation and ascension, and the downward axis gathered around prostration. This tripartite distinction aims to translate the relationship between gesture, space, and text—described in detail in the previous sections—into a concise theological reading framework.

The horizontal axis embodies situations in which the relationship with God is understood particularly through fidelity to a promised history and a specific center. Dispersed geographies are connected to a single covenantal line through bodies turned in the same direction; orientation is not merely a turning toward a particular center, but the re-enactment of the memory and attachment inscribed in that center. The vertical axis implies a theology woven around God's descent into the world and ascent from the world; incarnation, the cross, resurrection, and calls to "think on things above" structure worship as an ascending movement opened toward heaven. The downward axis, by contrast, conceives divine proximity through gestures of humility and submission experienced in the servant's descent, prostration, and contact with the earth; the earthly surface becomes a contact plane in which worship directed toward the transcendent is intensified.

These three axes reveal not only different spatial emphases, but also how the temporal, ontological, and ethical dimensions of the God–human relationship are encoded: time as memory and hope, ontology as transcendence and incarnation, and ethics as fidelity, praise, and submission. The horizontal line gathers the given promise and the hope of expected restoration into a single sense of direction; the vertical line generates a continuous call to "open upward" between creation and eschatological ascent; and the downward line bodily manifests the consciousness of finitude, the renunciation of claims to power, and servanthood. Thus, rather than repeating the descriptions elaborated in the previous sections, the three axes may be read as three distinct yet partially overlapping languages of orientation that place the same phenomenological material within different theological centers of gravity.

3.5. *Limits of the Tripartite Scheme*

Although the tripartite order makes visible the distinctive lines of ritual orientation in the Abrahamic traditions, it remains a limited and schematic tool.

First, each tradition contains considerable internal diversity. Intense remembrance and dance in Hasidic Judaism, spontaneous bodily movements in Pentecostal Christianity, and *samāʿ* and different forms of *dhikr* in Islamic Sufism produce additional possibilities of gesture and orientation beyond the three axes foregrounded here. This three-axis description should not be understood as a closed schema that exhausts the entirety of worship experience; rather, it should be read as a descriptive tool that highlights dominant tendencies. Second, these orientations are not fixed throughout history. Reforms in synagogue plans and changes in the location of the Torah reading platform; liturgical debates surrounding church orientation and the position of the image of Jesus or the altar; and modern interpretations of dome, minaret, light, and prayer-row arrangement in mosque architecture show that the same theological emphasis can find different spatial counterparts in different periods. Therefore, the tripartite order should be read not as a set of immutable types, but as continuities that change form according to historical contexts. Third, the three orientations are not separated from one another by rigid boundaries. Images of heavenly ascent in Jewish mysticism, Christianity's sensitivity toward the "Holy Lands," and the symbolism of the *Miʿrāj* and the dome in Islam show that, in each tradition, elements evoking the other axes are also present, even if more weakly. Finally, this framework is not used to propose a normative "interreligious theology," but to open a common ground of discussion that makes ritual orientations phenomenologically comparable. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim subjective experiences are too complex to be explained solely through bodily and spatial orders. Ethnic origin, social context, gender roles, and individual life histories are reflected in these orders with varying degrees of intensity. The tripartite order should therefore be regarded not as a closing framework, but as an open-ended analytical tool that encourages a return to concrete ritual practices and spatial solutions.

4. Conclusions

This article proposes a three-axis schema for reading ritual orientation in the Abrahamic religions through the relationship between body and space. The horizontal covenantal direction oriented toward Jerusalem, the vertical/transcendent axis woven around Christ and ascension, and the downward axis intensified toward the ground through prostration are understood as languages of orientation through which the God–human relationship becomes embodied in different ways in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This tripartite framework offers a phenomenological approach that reads worship not merely at the level of doctrinal content or ritual inventory, but through the body's mode of being situated in relation to the world and to God.

Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the "lived body" and oriented space make it possible to understand worship gestures not as external expressions subsequently added to belief, but as constitutive bodily forms of orientation toward God. Eliade's sacred–profane distinction and his figures of center, axis mundi, and threshold make visible how these bodily orientations intersect with sacred spatial foci differentiated from profane continuity. Thus, phenomenological body theory and cosmological–symbolic spatial theory converges within a common interpretive ground for the ritual practices of the Abrahamic religions. The examples of synagogue, church, and mosque provide concrete fields showing that these three axes are embodied not only in theological discourse, but also in plan schemes, axial configurations, level differences, and lighting arrangements. The horizontal covenantal line toward Jerusalem, the vertical axis of light opening toward the east and heaven, and the downward focus oriented toward the ground in prostration are situated within the body's order of orientation through architectural elements such as the *mihrab*, apse, Torah ark, dome, nave, and arcade. In this sense, architecture functions as a material interface that places ritual orientations within time and space.

From the perspective of the literature, the study aims to make a simultaneous contribution in three areas. The phenomenology of religion, philosophy of the body, and architectural history are generally treated along separate disciplinary lines. Here, however, the concepts of Merleau-Ponty and Eliade are read together with the sacred texts, ritual choreographies, and worship spaces of the Abrahamic traditions; in this way, a “spatial theology” schema that is comparable both phenomenologically and architecturally is proposed. The three-axis model does not claim to offer a normative interreligious theology; rather, it provides an open-ended and plural analytical tool that invites a return to concrete ritual and spatial arrangements. Future studies may expand this schema by applying it to different denominational traditions, modern worship spaces, or the relationship between body and orientation in secularized public spaces. In this way, the relationship between body, space, and theology can be examined not only through historical examples, but also in contemporary religious and quasi-religious experiences.

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