On the Edge: Sacred Boundary Making in the Time of Covid-19

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Abstract

Working with the concept of “the edge,” and its relationship to boundaries, spaces and distinctions, I consider what inviolable beliefs and values surfaced during the first phase of Coronavirus. As people were exposed to new risks and dangers, sent into isolation by their governments and forced online, how was the sacred impacted, and what places and boundaries became significant? I draw on theories from urban design, cognitive linguistics and the anthropology of religion to situate the “sacred” as a category boundary before undertaking an interpretive exploration of three cases: the domestic secular sacred, alternative spirituality and evangelical Christian practice. These illustrate the production of the sacred in a period of crisis, with new boundaries acquiring significance, and tried-and-tested but also novel rituals employed to reify non-negotiable beliefs. But two verities hold true. People remained concerned to protect those things they held to be sacred, and they sought the solace of community and solidarity with others.

Keywords

sacred boundaries; sacred space; Coronavirus; secular sacred; alternative spirituality; evangelical Christianity

In this essay I invoke the concept of "the edge," and its relationship to boundaries, spaces and distinctions, in an interpretive investigation of the dynamics of the sacred in the UK during the first year of the global Covid pandemic.[1] I consider what inviolable beliefs and values surfaced during this period of anxiety and uncertainty. As people were exposed to new risks and dangers, sent into isolation and forced online, how were sacred beliefs and practices impacted, and what places and boundaries became significant? Did emerging sacred formations represent continuity with the past or discontinuity in space or time? This is far from being either an exhaustive or a rigorous social scientific study of the subject. Rather, it is a selective and interpretive exploration of three cases – focused respectively on the domestic secular sacred, alternative spirituality and evangelical Christian practice – in order to approach the question of sacred boundary-making in a challenging period from differing perspectives.[2]

I have used the terminology of "the edge" on the one hand to refer to fundamental boundaries, the work they do and the "edge spaces" they generate, and on the other to signal the period of Covid-19 as an "edge time", one that produced profound uncertainty and anxiety. Being "on the edge" in these ways struck me – in theory at least – as more likely to drive new sacred spaces, experiments, and breaks with tradition, rather than "more of the same." At the outset, my hypothesis was that discontinuity rather than continuity would best describe the sacred formations emerging in the UK during the first year of coronavirus. As I later found, however, I had failed to factor in the degree to which people would seek the solace of the familiar at such a time.

Before turning to the three cases, I examine the concept of "the edge," and its relationship to theories of boundary-marking, making distinctions, and the emergence of the sacred through ritual practice and the setting aside of things, spaces and times. I draw on the work of selected theorists, from urban design, cognitive linguistics and the anthropology of

religion, in order to situate the "sacred" – as a concept, practice and human experience – in broader ideas about boundary-making and the production of space. I go on to discuss the time of Covid in 2020, the UK context, questions of method, and my rationale for case selection. Accounts and analyses of the three cases follow, focused on sacred boundary-making (a) "on the doorstep," during secular ritual at the domestic threshold, (b) "at the gate" of an alternative spiritual site on the edge of an ancient graveyard in London, and (c) "across a legal boundary," through acts of transgression among otherwise law-abiding Christians. In the final part, I will tabulate the differing approaches and impacts associated with these three examples and draw conclusions about sacred boundary-making in a time of crisis.

Edges, spaces and the sacred: Definitions and theory

Indulging so deeply in the metaphor of "the edge" may at first sight seem to be poetic rather than analytical but, as Oxford Lexico shows, the concept is in fact complex, with physical, affective, social and cognitive characteristics. An "edge" is defined as,

> The outside limit of an object, area, or surface; an area next to a steep drop; the point or state immediately before something unpleasant or momentous occurs; the line along which two surfaces of a solid meet; an intense, sharp, or striking quality; a quality or factor which gives superiority over close rivals.[3]

The lexicologist has drawn out the many meanings of "edge" by making reference to a wide range of other notions – limit, area, surface, point, state, line, quality and factor – many of which have spatial implications. Furthermore, the meanings all point to a basic principle, that an edge is something that distinguishes between sides, entities, times or people, and is where difference happens.

Understood in locative terms, edges separate zones, protect property, enclose and bind people or keep them out, facilitate entrances and exits, and operate as surfaces on which things can be placed, though often at their peril. They exist in time as well as space. Furthermore, as I elaborated in an earlier article on walls and other unremarkable boundaries, such material edges may inhibit or allow new social relationships to develop and transformative experiences to take place.[4] The aim here will be to consider how and why, during the first year of Covid-19, some edges emerged as significant social and cultural markers or thresholds of the sacred.[5] In order to do that, I will summarize the theoretical resources on which I base my understanding of edges, their spatial, social and cognitive function and potentiality for analysing the sacred.

In his 1960 book, *The Image of the City*, the urban design theorist, Kevin Lynch, analysed how people explained and represented their neighbourhoods and journeys to work. His analysis led him to produce a model of five types of elements – paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. All five are interesting in their own ways, but here I limit myself to his conception of "edges." For Lynch, urban edges were "boundaries between two phases, linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, walls… [They] may be barriers, more or less penetrable, which close one region off from another; or they may be seams, lines along which two regions are related and joined together."[6] Lynch's sense that edges needed to be understood in relation to the "phases" or "regions" around them is significant. As he noted, edges represent "breaks in continuity"; they also close off or join together adjacent regions. Despite being commonplace and taken-for-granted, they are boundaries which interrupt unbroken space, and as such bring to the fore abstract notions of dis/continuity, separation and the possibility of unification. Generally unnoticed and unmarked, such material boundaries or edges nevertheless have the potential to become charged with meaning and significance.

In urban geography, an edge not only signals a break in continuity but acts as a marker of differentiation, separating or joining two regions. But what is the relationship between this spatial conception and the deeper cognitive and social processes that ground the theory on which I draw here, of "the sacred as a category boundary"?[7]

In the mid-1970s, the social psychologist David Herbst advanced the idea that the process by which infants distinguish themselves from their environments was a matter of "co-genetic logic," an act enabling the construction of a world of differences.[8] In making that distinction, an infant generates a triadic set of elements: the emergence of a form, its environment and the boundary between them; inside, outside and boundary. The triadic unit is *co-genetic*, with the three parts arising together, and being *non-separable*, *irreducible* and *contextual*.[9]

Whether making a mental or material distinction, or differentiating concepts, categories, groups or values, this co-genetic logic is at work, as scholars from other disciplines have gone on to show. Cognitive linguists, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, stated that we are evolved to categorize "because we have the brains and bodies we have and because we interact in the world the way we do."[10] They drew on this co-genetic logic to explain a crucial pre-conceptual resource on which humans draw for making a difference.[11] The "CONTAINER image schema", as they theorized it, "consist[s] of a boundary distinguishing an interior from an exterior", and provides a vital resource for separating and categorizing things of all kinds, and ultimately for distinguishing complex entities such as religions, cultures, nations and institutions.[12]

It was a Finnish cultural anthropologist, Veikko Anttonen, who set these ideas of co-genetic logic from behavioral science and cognitive linguistics in a neo-Durkheimian context in order to explain the generation of sacred boundaries and the distinction between sacred and profane with reference to the human body, territory and beyond.[13] Building on Durkheim's

conception of the sacred as "setting things apart" and his observation that, whilst nothing is inherently sacred, everything has the potential to be designated as such, Anttonen wrote that,

> Sacrality is employed as a category-boundary to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions … People participate in sacred-making activities and processes of signification according to paradigms given by the belief systems to which they are committed, whether they be religious, national or ideological.[14]

Working on the principle that the three elements, of boundary, inside and outside, are co-genetic and non-separable, Anttonen denoted the "sacred" as a category boundary differentiating two adjacent spaces, one of "non-negotiable value," the other of "continuous transaction."[15] Through ideologically-inflected human activity, this difference is made and culturally and spatially instantiated.[16] As people make a categorical distinction, denote a boundary and ritually mark it, they sacralize particular places, times, objects and values and set them apart. They do so, of course, in association with their situation, time, context and jurisdiction, with categories and boundaries experienced differentially according to social location, identities, and access to power. I will return to this understanding of the production of the sacred with reference to three normally unremarkable edges and edge-spaces in the case studies below.

Edges and adjacent spaces in the time of Covid-19: Context, cases, method

What does it mean to speak of a time of Coronavirus or Covid-19? What were the key characteristics of this period that had the potential to generate new sacred boundaries and spaces? I referred to it at the outset as a time of uncertainty and anxiety. Although it was not the first global pandemic, it was the first pandemic of significance to occur in a period of globalisation underpinned by new technologies that would allow for near instantaneous social

communications and economic transactions. Although scientists had alerted governments to the likelihood of a global pandemic, with other items on their agenda government preparation had been half-hearted and citizens were caught largely unawares. As the virus spread in 2020 from country to country, with its transmission then speeding up in urban areas, in workplaces, social settings and households, the uncertainty of the unknown spiralled even as scientific knowledge about Covid-19 grew. Who was most at risk from it? How close was it? How could we protect ourselves and our loved ones? Family members and neighbours had the potential to infect us; the surfaces of our local environments became dangerous carriers of viral load.

And on top of these risks and uncertainties, attempts at mitigation brought about their own problems. People feared for their livelihoods and their children's education as economies and schools were closed down. "Lockdowns," social isolation and physical distancing confined people to home, cut them off from others, and drove many to loneliness and anxiety, even to madness and violence. People were affected differently, with class, race and ethnicity impacting experiences of lockdown, and attitudes and access to healthcare, and later vaccination. Technology was on hand with its own solutions to offer alternative provision and to bridge broken connections. Working and learning from home, exercising online, staying in touch, virtual worship all offered a degree of continuity, the possibility of normalizing an abnormal situation, even the opportunity to explore new avenues and have new experiences. Such a process, however, could not be without human cost: the anxiety of staying positive in the face of fear and risk-awareness, the proximity of illness and death, inequalities of treatment and care, and existential as well as economic and social uncertainty. This, then, was the edge-time of Covid. But would it offer more of the same or something new: continuity or discontinuity? Would this edge-time reinforce the need for stability and familiarity or usher in innovation and change?

Within this context and with these questions in mind, I have focused on several normally unremarkable edges and the spaces around them that, during the first year of Coronavirus, became dense with meaning, charged with sensory power, and made sacred through ritual. Informed by Kevin Lynch's account of edges and their spatial function and Veikko Anttonen's analysis of the sacred as a category boundary, I will discuss three cases from the UK that emerged during this first phase. As well as examining how the three edges in question became the focus of ritual activity and the production of the sacred, I will consider whether they constituted barriers representing non-negotiable breaks in continuity or seams enabling interaction, continuous transactions and the potential erasure of differences.

The edges under scrutiny are, first, the doorstep or domestic threshold, second, a large metal gate on a London street, and third, a legal boundary (an emergency health regulation introduced in November 2020). Although these may appear to be quite different in terms of both nature and context, they are all unremarkable and might have passed unnoticed had they not become the focus of intense activity brought on by Covid and its management. Although the three case studies are specific to the UK, they are connected beyond it, with two mirrored by similar cases in Europe and beyond. The three offer different types of boundaries and differing ramifications for the production of the sacred.

The doorstep, a mundane threshold separating the private domestic interior of the home from the world beyond, came to public attention when it took on a new significance during the first period of quarantine or Covid "lockdown" when householders were asked to "clap for carers." In many countries, at an appointed time, local people opened their doors or windows and stood on the threshold, clapping, banging pans, singing or playing music in recognition and celebration of health workers and other carers. In this case study, I examine the emergence of the doorstep as a sacred boundary in response to the risks and uncertainties of the time, what it signified and how it became ritually marked.

The second case, a gate on Redcross Way in Southwark, London, had first come to public attention in 1998, but had soon acquired sacred significance as a memorial for the "outcast dead."[17] By 2020, it was well known to Londoners and visitors alike who came to the gate to remember not only the dead of the past but those outsiders who had died more recently. As an existing physical boundary and site of monthly vigils, how would it be affected by the lockdowns of 2020? Would its nature, purpose and ritual usage dwindle or be given new meaning?

The third boundary is not first and foremost a physical barrier, but a regulatory one, a new edge separating what is permitted from what is not. During the pandemic researchers examined how religious institutions and groups responded to limitations on collective worship and festivals, whether by going online, ceasing altogether or by making the case for special treatment. Here I investigate the tensions that arose between divine authority and the law of the state and any sacred innovations occurring as a result of the introduction of new legal prohibitions.

Given the practical research limitations arising from these self-same Covid restrictions, the data for my analysis of these three cases was acquired online from documents, such as blogs and legal texts, and ethnographic resources, including live-streamed worship and video materials. As the cases did not spring up in an interpretive vacuum – given that thresholds, public boundaries and legal prohibitions had already received scholarly attention, I also drew on theoretical and other empirical resources where appropriate. In each case, I considered the historical, social and religious context, and examined how and why apparently mundane edges became vibrant with activity and acquired new significance in the time of Covid. In the final section, I draw the cases together to consider how the production of the sacred and sacred boundaries was impacted, and what this might reveal about human responses to the uncertainties and anxieties of the time.

On the doorstep: Solidarity in isolation

In order to understand how, in 2020, the domestic door and doorstep transitioned from being a mundane opening separating the interior of the home from the external world to a sacred boundary, I pursue two lines of enquiry: the first being the functional and symbolic meanings of the door as a category boundary; the other, what people in the UK held to be of sacred significance at this time, and why. In the context of the threat and uncertainties of Covid-19 and the anxieties brought on by social isolation, these two factors combined in the development of new rituals, the marking of an everyday boundary in novel ways and its transition to the sacred.

In his 1909 essay, *Brücke und Tür*, Georg Simmel used representations of the "bridge" and the "door" to reflect on the human necessity to separate and bind or unify.[18] To Simmel, the bridge emphasized "unification" rather than separateness. The door, however, with its potential to be both closed and open (a barrier and a seam, in Kevin Lynch's terms) "demonstrates that the acts of separating and relating are but two sides of the same act. […] The door cancels the separation of the inside from the outside because it constitutes a link between the space of the human and everything which is outside of it."[19] Both on the edge of the home and a seemingly commonplace threshold, the door simultaneously offers protection from the limitlessness of nature whilst signifying "the possibility of at any moment stepping into freedom and out of being limited."[20] With a further twist, offsetting the value of unlimited freedom against the sacrality of home with its life-sustaining hearth, in the 1930s the comparative religion scholar, Gerardus van der Leeuw, concluded that, "The door is there to separate the space inside the house from the power existing outside, the door that protects and constitutes the transition from the secular to the sacred enclosure."[21] This threshold, like

its adjoining spaces, was sacred too, being the site of gods and guardians and a place where ritual practices were enacted.

Generally, we give little attention to the external doors of our homes, beyond ensuring they are secure, and opening them when required. As physical and conceptual thresholds, however, they have symbolic potentialities, including those noted by Simmel and Van der Leeuw. They reconnect us with the co-genetic logic discussed earlier, of making a distinction between entities through the co-generation of a boundary and its adjoining regions or sides. They also signify transition and movement between spaces.[22] But, for doors to realize their symbolic potential, they need to be marked; they need to come into being as sacred thresholds. And for this to happen, something needs to change.

In the UK, the population was first placed under Covid quarantine in late-March 2020, and was required by government to "Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives."[23] In addition to being a place of safety away from the threat of the virus, homes became central in the government campaign to save lives – a campaign focused on the nation's treasure, the National Health Service (NHS). The importance of this was stressed repeatedly by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, who, as cases rose again in a second wave of Covid-19 in the autumn, referred to the "existential threat to our NHS."[24] Without a second lockdown, he said,

> […] we would also reach a point where the NHS was no longer there for everyone. The sick would be turned away because there was no room in our hospitals. That sacred principle - of care for anyone who needs it, whoever they are and whenever they need it – could be broken for the first time in our lives. Doctors and nurses could be forced to choose which patients to treat, who would live and who would die.[25]

This secular "sacred principle", of universal access to healthcare, is an example of what Anttonen (2000, 280-81), in his argument about sacred category boundaries, had in mind when he referred to those paradigms given by the belief system to which people are

committed, whether religious, national or ideological.[26] Following his line of argument, the people of the UK do in general hold the principle of universal healthcare (represented by the NHS) to be a sacred tenet of their national belief system.[27] Two British sociologists of religion writing early in the Covid crisis endorsed this. Linda Woodhead, who had written previously about the shift from Christian responsibility for health and welfare to reliance upon the secular welfare state,[28] was adamant that,

> When faced with a biblical plague, the British turn not to God but the National Health Service. It is our national religion, the one thing sacred. It is here rather than in our national churches that we now affirm our shared values, reinforce a sense of collective identity, deal with evil and suffering, reaffirm hope […] Generous and free, untainted by mammon, available to anyone in need, caring and kind. It will help us pull together and come through.[29]

Gordon Lynch, taking an explicitly Durkheimian perspective, referred to the reverence for the NHS as an expression of the "humanitarian sacred."[30] Asking how we explain "the phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of people stepping outside their homes to applaud the NHS", he restated Durkheim's argument that "people's sense of society is organized around what they take to be sacred, and that rituals [are] a central means by which people create a sense of moral community by powerful collective engagement with these sacred forms."[31] Lynch was linking activity on the doorstep with the sacred and the generation of a moral community.

In the UK, clapping for the NHS and other carers was initiated on the 26 March 2020 following a similar practice already taking hold in other European countries including Italy, France and the Netherlands.[32] This involved householders standing at open doors, on balconies or at open windows and clapping, banging pots and pans, or making music in gratitude to those fighting on the Covid frontline in hospitals and care homes.

At this time, the inside of the home became a haven from the external threat of the virus (whilst also becoming a place of imprisonment for increasing numbers of people with mental health problems and those at risk of domestic violence). From this perspective, the barrier of the closed door kept the danger at bay. Cross the domestic threshold and one emerged into the "limitlessness of nature", as Simmel called it, with its freedom, but also its risks – not only to individuals from the invisible virus, but to the NHS and its carers who were working to save lives. It was perhaps not surprising then that the sacred principle of healthcare for all should imprint itself on the already powerful sacred boundary of the domestic threshold. This is after all the place where householders for centuries have warded off malevolent spirits and unwanted outsiders, and – during plague times – prayed and sung in solidarity with others from the safety of their homes. During periods of quarantine in sixteenth century Milan, for example, on the instruction of the Archbishop Carlo Borromeo, litanies that had once been sung during public religious processions were transferred to the domestic setting. The sound of church bells would call people to prayer and "those who were able would stand at windows, doors and balconies to join in community devotions, with spoken and sung responses."[33] As one chronicler from the time noted, "It was a sight to see, when all the inhabitants of this populous city […] united to praise God at one and the same time, sending up together an harmonious voice of supplication for deliverance of their distress."[34]

Week after week in the spring of 2020, people would stand at their doors or windows at an allotted time, united in sharing with others a few moments of thanksgiving for healthcare workers, thus recalling the well-established ritual practices of using bodies and homely objects to make a noise at the threshold, whether a melodic and musical celebration or just a din to ward off danger. Whilst this did not represent a communal invocation of the divine as such, it recollected a shared – if secular – belief in a national symbol associated

with deliverance of distress. Beneath the symbol and its reification, however, were unacknowledged differences which would become more apparent as the virus continued to rage: black and ethnic minorities and those from other disadvantaged groups, as a significant percentage of the NHS workforce and those least able to work from home, were more exposed to the virus and the risk of dying.[35] Furthermore, the NHS and its workers were increasing undermined by a lack of trust in the biomedical model.

Opening the door of the home on Thursdays at 8pm for this ritual flipped the door from being a barrier, a break in continuity between safety within and the virus without, to a seam allowing those inside to flow out into an expansive moral community engaged in protecting and honouring the NHS, sharing in a sense of collective identity, warding off evil and suffering, and reaffirming hope. Although there was some historical continuity with other rituals on the domestic threshold, the ritual of clapping for carers emerged out of the specific circumstances of Covid-19. It generated a sense of solidarity at a time of isolation whilst sacralizing the NHS as a national institution.

This ritual activity on the doorstep was something I was able to witness and participate in during lockdown from the threshold of my own home. Despite its proximity, however, the emergence of this act of thanksgiving and solidarity was novel and unexpected. It occurred at a time when religious practices in sacred spaces were anything but normal, being subject to the same constraints as other public institutions and social groups: closed until further notice. In the final case study, I will look at how some evangelical Christian communities in the UK responded to this during the second period of quarantine, in November 2020. Before that, however, I turn from the physical activity of clapping for carers to the provision of ritual online.

At the gate: Lifting the veil to other worlds online

Covid-19 and the lockdowns and social distancing measures put in place to control its transmission drove social life, education, culture, commerce, and collective religious practice online. Although this enabled some relationships and activities to continue, albeit constrained by the virtual environment and the limits of technology or people's ability to use it, other activities were unable to survive the transition or were so changed by it that users lost interest. Research conducted at the time on how Christian churches were managing, found many moving their services online, either by live-streaming in real time from places of worship (when allowed), using video-conferencing technology from the homes of clergy, or by filming services and making them available for download.[36] Until they became more adept, those responsible "engaged in a rapid continual improvisation process based on learning to apply technology to support the delivery of both pastoral care and weekly services."[37] Their results attracted significant interest, not just from regular local participants, but at times from newcomers surfing religious provision online. Only time would tell whether wider interest was sustained or was conditional upon such services being made available online, and whether it represented a willingness to interact and engage more fully with the experience or merely a chance to observe from a safe distance. Even at the time, some religious specialists found their online provision worked best for those with whom they already had a regular relationship, who shared their beliefs and already knew the order of service.[38]

Bearing in mind the tensions and constraints arising from the novelty of "telemediated virtual worship" and the difficulties of conducting ethnographic research during lockdown, I decided to return to familiar territory.[39] In 2015, as part of a broader project, I had worked with a research colleague on the case of Crossbones Graveyard in South London, a historical site generating new ritual practices and narrative creativity.[40] The focus had been on a locked gate on Redcross Way in Southwark, an edge separating the public space of the street from

private land owned by Transport for London which incorporated a medieval graveyard (now known as Crossbones). Since 1998, when the first vigil was held at the gate for the "outcast dead" buried in the graveyard, events and relationships between the gate, its borders, regions and interest groups have changed and found new expressions, the timeline of which is well documented by researchers and on Crossbones' dedicated website.[41] Here I consider how Covid-19 and its consequences affected an existing sacred boundary and the rituals sustaining it. What happens when, out of necessity, a sacred boundary and its rituals go online? To answer this, we first need to understand more about the gate at Crossbones, its narrative and ritual life, and its operation as a portal between the living and dead.

Crossbones is now known and loved by Londoners and visitors alike as a place to remember the dead, not only the outcast women buried there, but the marginalized who died more recently, including sex workers, asylum seekers, the homeless and those who took their own lives. The gate allows visitors to recall and connect with the dead through poetry, story, imagination and eclectic ritual at monthly acts of worship, including the Halloween vigil held annually in recollection of the first procession and vigil held there.[42]

When that first ritual occurred in 1998, the locked gate – a break in the fence around land belonging to London Transport – acquired sacred significance. On the far side of this unremarkable urban edge lay unconsecrated ground in which generations of bodies had been buried (burials had ceased there in the mid-19th century). There was no signage or formal recognition by church or state authorities that this was hallowed ground. In fact, it only came to light, like so many other sites of historical interest in London, because of the legal requirement placed on developers to undertake an archaeological survey. Archaeological excavation and historical research, accompanied by the creative energy of a local poet and playwright, John Constable, imaginatively revealed the story of the earliest people to be buried there: "The Geese of Winchester, medieval sex workers licensed by the Bishop of

Winchester to work in the brothels of the Liberty of the Clink [today's Southwark], which lay outside the law of the City of London."[43] Following a visitation by his Goose spirit guide several years earlier, at which she had recalled the lives and deaths of the Geese, John Constable, in his shamanic persona as John Crow, had set down *The Southwark Mysteries*.[44] It was these mysteries that, on Halloween in 1998, were performed at the local playhouse. Following the drama, players and audience processed to the graveyard. Unable to access the site, they honoured the dead at the gate with candles and precious offerings.[45]

Thus it was that a locked gate on a public road bordering private land was ritually marked and transformed. To this day, despite being under threat and being moved further down the street, the gate has continued to attract worshippers, offerings, rituals and prayers as well as casual visits by passers-by and tourists. The Halloween vigil remains an important time, coinciding with the pagan new year festival of Samhain, "when the veil between the worlds is thinnest."[46]

In 2020, during the first phase of Covid, Crossbones vigils were held "on the Astral", live-streamed on Zoom and available via Facebook, with participants – local and global – able to join from their homes, and encouraged to create their own altars and rituals.[47] The full liturgy, with sung and spoken words, was shared on the website so that those present could follow and participate as appropriate. In 2020, Halloween too was celebrated in this way, with the secret history of the Geese recalled, the outcast dead remembered, and pathways through the spiritual portal ritually lit and opened. All this was enacted virtually in an interactive ceremony lasting more than an hour.[48]

A high degree of continuity with regular Halloween vigils was evident, but what – if anything – had changed? And what of the gate, the threshold at the centre of Crossbones' ritual life? Did it disappear as ritual moved inside people's homes? It did not. The gate remained central to the proceedings. At the outset of the ritual, participants were welcomed to

the gate by the female ritual guide, Bee Durban, in what was to be the transformation of a sad place to one of "healing, joy and peace": "In our imaginations we are standing at the gates of Crossbones Graveyard", she said.[49] Heightening this sense of time and place, the gate was then visually portrayed in an affecting video and song which depicted a previous night-time vigil, and no doubt reminded those online of *being there*, of their own embodied presence and experience of making offerings on the roadside by the gate. Then, following prayers and intercessions to Our Lady of Guadeloupe for protection, help and comfort in these dark times, the ceremony of "Binding and Loosing" was enacted, with the guide explaining what normally happens at the gate and encouraging those online to imagine tying ribbons on the gate just as they would if they were there in person. These "small offerings" – of beautiful, desirable and precious items – were understood as sacrifices representing "everything we would want for ourselves [which we then] release for others."[50] During this ceremony, "the veil between the worlds dissolve[d]", and the names of the Winchester Geese were recited, followed by those of loved ones who may have suffered or died.[51] Those present were asked to "connect to all spirit" and bring the outcasts "in from the cold".[52] After this, the participants took over, bringing their own concerns and offering items of spiritual solace, such as readings or recollections.

In the Astral Halloween ceremony no less than in the annual performance on Redcross Way, the gate is simultaneously both a barrier separating temporal and spiritual spaces and representing "all who are shut out", and a portal or seam which opens up between the two worlds as participants imaginatively cross over to connect with those who have passed and those who are isolated by their suffering. Far from the gate disappearing from view or losing its significance in the virtual enactment, people were invoked to gather there, to recall its beauty and significance, and to make real offerings which they imagined tying there. On the one hand, the material representations and imaginative visualisations of the gate

in this vigil "on the Astral" facilitated a high degree of continuity with earlier in-situ performances. On the other, the time of Covid-19 and the isolation generated by it disrupted the ritual life of Crossbones whilst sharpening the need to remember loved ones and to connect with a wider spiritual community.

This virtual ritual closely replicated those in-person events of earlier years, with the Internet and Zoom merely the mode of delivery rather than a significant "third space" in its own right.[53] As a sacred boundary, the gate has remained at the heart of Crossbones ritual and has retained its meaning and power despite the shift online. With a history of resilience in the face of change, its strong narrative identity, established community, and symbolic presence as a physical and imaginary boundary and portal have ensured its survival.

Across a legal boundary: Following God's commandment in defiance of state regulation

With many religious communities, like the friends of Crossbones, moving their services online during the time of Covid, why were a minority of worshippers willing to defy a government-imposed lockdown to gather in person? Early in the crisis, many Christian churches and other religious groups in the UK sought to serve their congregations by providing pastoral care and regular worship online.[54] During the second lockdown, however, in November 2020, leaders from different religions challenged the UK Government's decision to close places of worship for all but private prayer. In a joint letter addressed to the Prime Minister they stated that there was "no scientific justification for the wholesale suspension of public worship."[55] Church leaders then sought a judicial review on the grounds that restrictions on public worship breached Article 9 of the Human Rights Act on freedom to express religious beliefs.[56]

The edge in question here, though not a physical threshold like a door or gate, is a material legal boundary, imposed by the state: Statutory Instrument 2020 No. 1200: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No.4) Regulations 2020.[57] This boundary was specific to the time of Covid-19 in so far as it was initiated solely in response to it, with its duration stipulated accordingly. It came into force on November 5, 2020, and covered the period of England's second lockdown (until midnight, December 2). It was enforceable by law and its contravention could lead to sanctions, generally the imposition of fines. The particular clauses in question were 18(7) and 18(8): "18(7) A person who is responsible for a place of worship must ensure that the place of worship is closed, except for uses permitted in paragraph (8) and regulation 11(18)."[58] Paragraph 18(8) then stipulated the permissible reasons for opening a place of worship, chief among those being to conduct a funeral, to broadcast an act of worship, to carry out voluntary or public support services, for childcare purposes or for private prayer.[59] Normal collective worship was not permitted.

Why treat this legal regulation as a potential sacred boundary? If we return to the co-genetic logic discussed earlier, a statutory instrument of this kind is introduced to make a distinction, to distinguish the legal from the illegal, to mark the boundary between permitted and prohibited behaviors. With Covid-19 quickly emerging as a major threat to the health of national populations, governments soon found existing health regulations needed amending or reinforcing. Quarantining populations locally or nationally to halt the transmission of the virus required a legal basis in order to be enforceable. And individuals, groups, organisations and businesses needed clarity about what they were or were not permitted to do during such periods. In normal times in the UK, collective public worship is commonplace and its conduct unquestioned, not least because it is underwritten by human rights legislation on freedom of religion, specifically the right to manifest one's religion or belief in worship. The

new regulation, which required the closure of places of worship in all but exceptional cases, brought into force a behavioral boundary that many found unacceptable.

A mundane edge or boundary springs into life and acquires symbolic significance when attention is drawn to it. It becomes sacred once it comes to denote a fundamental difference marked by ritual. When this legal restriction was introduced, in late 2020, it was immediately opposed by religious people who believed its imposition contravened a greater human right, of freedom of religion, including the right to worship.[60] But this was not merely the trumping of one secular law by another, but a deeper violation, of the divine commandment to gather to praise God and worship in God's name. Despite this, although faith leaders registered their discontent, the majority of mainstream religious groups agreed to comply with the restrictions. This was not the case with all Christian churches, however, with some meeting in secret and others doing so publicly, in open defiance of the law.

On November 15, one Evangelical church in North London made the decision to defy the regulations by holding a service. Interviewed ahead of the event, the pastor, Regan King, stated that he held the ban on collective worship to be unlawful and that "Our priority is our fear of God … We serve a greater law."[61] Police halted the ensuing service and prevented people from going into the church. Those barred from entry conducted a service outdoors in a local public space.[62]

The following week, one newspaper carried a story that showed this defiance to extend well beyond this one congregation, often occurring below the public radar and out of reach of law enforcement.

> It sounds like the build-up to an illegal rave. Invitations are passed by word of mouth to trusted people. Minimal information – time, directions – is quietly given with pleas for discretion. Once everyone is assembled in a barn on a remote farm – "away from prying eyes," says the organiser – it begins.

> This is no rave, but an English church service under lockdown, and the organiser is a Protestant pastor. The Christians who will gather illegally in the west of England on Sunday morning – as they have for the past two Sundays – will pray, read from the scriptures, sing hymns and listen to a sermon.[63]

Christian churches were taking events into their own hands, going underground, with one minister stating, "We answer to a higher authority. When there is a contradiction between the laws of the country and God's command, the Bible is very clear that God's command must win out."[64] This minister explicitly pointed to the distinction brought about by the imposition of this new statutory boundary, between two spaces – of God's command and the state's law. By breaching this secular legal boundary through the transgressive enactment of collective Christian rituals, he and others conferred sacred status upon it. However, by such a move, they also overrode the state's prohibition and (re)claimed the territory for God.

This was not subversion for its own sake, nor a mere act of defiance against an opponent. Rather, a secular sacred boundary was exposed and then transgressed in the name of a higher authority – or so it was understood by these underground Christians. What is not known – because it was hidden from view – is how these acts of transgression by various evangelical congregations might have changed those involved or their ritual proceedings. Were these Christians merely carrying on as normal, following the same order of service but in new places such as barns, cafés and other undisclosed settings, or was the transgression transformative? Arguably, because it is necessarily reflexive, transgression always embodies change.[65] Attention is drawn to that which has been breached, to the act of transgression and to those undertaking it. The meaning of what takes place "on the other side", once a transgressive act has occurred, is necessarily altered. It is understood and experienced anew. So, although we lack the ethnographic evidence to support a claim for change, in this case of Christian defiance, those taking part of necessity recreated their rituals in new places, aware

they were breaking a legal taboo; they experienced a reaffirmation of the supremacy of God's command, and its priority over all worldly things.

Such acts of transgression and the boundaries to which they refer are themselves in constant tension. They are not as fixed as might commonly be thought; neither are the differences – of physical, social or mental space – that they produce. They are "flashing line[s]" rather than fixed boundaries, signalling transgressions that have "always already occurred."[66] The Gospel observation (Matthew 18:20), that "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them," has come to support a fluid approach to Christian worship, its location and the people involved.[67] The fact that churches are where Christians normally meet for worship does not mean that Christian gatherings for worship beyond their walls are prohibited. Equally, Christians' tacit acceptance of the "law of the land" is not a foregone conclusion. For many, the legitimacy of secular legal boundaries and their power to confine are always open to challenge and transgression when weighed against God's command. For those who "answer to a higher authority",[68] the simple Gospel statement justifies the breaching where necessary of both normal church practice and secular prohibitions on collective worship.

Conclusions on the edge

Many religious boundaries appear permanent and fixed – the walls of places of worship, for example – generating a sense of inside/outside, and insiders/outsiders, and setting sacred space apart from the arena of everyday transactions.[69] Doors and other thresholds, however, represent breaks in such impenetrable barriers – vents, as I have called them elsewhere – allowing people to transition between qualitatively different spaces.[70] Power is at work, of course, and such a process is carefully managed, with sacred areas and objects continuously regenerated by prescribed rituals enacted by recognised specialists.[71] Other officiants,

according to accepted theological codes, dictate who may enter, times and terms of entry, and appropriate appearance and behaviors. And, in general, participants do behave and express themselves within the expected norms of the community.

Seen from an emic as opposed to etic perspective, however, as they cross the threshold from the outside to the inside of a sacred place, committed practitioners understand themselves to be leaving behind the secular for the religious, the worldly for the spiritual or divine, and see themselves as transformed in the process. Recent research has asked what such transitions mean "on sensory, emotive and intellectual levels."[72] What cognitive and emotional changes occur as a sacred threshold is crossed? Drawing on earlier work by Van Gennep and Turner, writers have explored the salience of "liminality" and discovered useful practical, experiential and metaphorical links between time, space, rituals, narratives and journeys.[73] For some, liminality has become a key concept for drawing together all that happens at a threshold and as that boundary is crossed.

It is not a term I have used here though, where the focus has been on the generation of new sacred boundaries rather than on how such boundaries are experienced (which would have required different research questions and methods). In order to illustrate the dynamic production of the sacred, I chose to eschew established sacred spaces and their known boundaries in favour of unremarkable edges made (temporarily) sacred during a period of crisis.[74] I wanted to examine the potentiality of any commonplace edge, not least of all those interrupted by doors, thresholds or other breaks, to become sacred – through ritual and transgression – according to time, context, norms and beliefs.

Three quite different cases were presented here, representing the secular sacred, alternative, eclectic spirituality, and evangelical Christianity. The following table summarizes the earlier discussions, highlighting the edges in question, the production of sacred boundaries and places, and the incidence of continuity and/or change. What the table and the

supporting research cannot reveal are the experiences of those involved or the way in which power and identity struggles informed the generation, maintenance or interpretation of these boundaries. Further research will be needed to do justice to these issues.

[Table 1 here]

Starting with unremarkable edges, I sought out the inviolable beliefs and values that arose during the first phase of Covid-19. I asked what distinctions were generated as rituals were performed on and across the thresholds. Did newly emerging sacred formations represent continuity or discontinuity, and had we witnessed the reaffirmation of traditional practices or a move to innovation and change?

As the table shows, as unremarkable edges were marked and transformed by prohibition, contestation and ritual activity into sacred boundaries, all three constituted "barriers" rather than "seams."[75] But each, in its own way, could be temporarily opened or crossed. Once mundane and unmarked, the three edges generated new activity and meaning and acquired added significance as category boundaries. The door, whilst retaining its role as a barrier separating a world of risk and danger from the safety of home, once opened on Thursdays at 8.00pm, signified a new sense of solidarity focused on the national, secular sacred principle of universal healthcare and gratitude to those charged with securing it. The gate, already a site of sacred significance before the arrival of Covid, transcended the potentially secularizing effects of going online, with its guardians ensuring its continuity as both ritual axis and spiritual portal. And, in the third case, as Christians fought to continue their practice of serving God and following his commandments, a new regulatory barrier to collective worship pressured them into acts of transgression, often hidden from public view.

The three cases suggest different patterns of continuity and discontinuity, tradition and change. The time of Covid not only required a flexible approach from those wishing to

continue with familiar practices in existing sacred places, but also threw up new challenges: raising the status of other spaces – domestic and online settings – and turning spiritual practitioners into innovators, even law-breakers. The cases demonstrate the production of the sacred in a period of crisis or edge-time, with new boundaries acquiring significance, and tried-and-tested but also novel rituals employed to reify non-negotiable principles. But it is also clear that, despite the uncertainties and anxieties of Covid, two verities were sustained. People remained concerned to protect those things they held dear, whether these were sacred principles, beliefs, places or activities. And, secondly, they sought the solace of community, of solidarity with others. To ensure these goods, they were willing to go beyond their normal routines, whether by turning out each week to publicly affirm and thank key workers, by embracing a new mode of delivery for interactive worship, or by following their consciences and breaking the law.

Taking a longer view, historical examples suggest that cases such as these were not without precedent in times of crisis. But, as societies moved on from quarantine and isolation to vaccination and other forms of Covid mitigation, what were for a short time important boundaries, novel rituals and sacred transgressions have since died away. The need to mark and set aside things as sacred is dynamic, changing according to time and context. Future crises and controversies will no doubt continue to spark such processes, whilst the generic significance of boundaries, crossings and the rituals that create and sustain them holds true.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was given at the online workshop, "Sacred Places in a Post-Secular and Globalized World," December 8-10, 2020. I am grateful to the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, and to the organizers, participants and article reviewers whose comments proved so useful for finalizing the manuscript.

[2] Academic discussions of sacred boundary-making and the distinction between sacred and ordinary spaces have to date focused on several key concepts: sacred space itself, but also liminality and

thresholds. I have chosen not to engage with those literatures – which are extensive – but to explore sacred boundary-making through the mundane concept of the "edge".

[3] From the list of definitions of "edge" (noun): https://www.lexico.com/definition/edge.

[4] Knott, "Walls and Other Unremarkable Boundaries."

[5] It should be noted that the edges, sacred boundaries and entailments in question were informed by their social, cultural and historical context in Western Europe. They should be understood in that light, and cannot be taken as globally representative.

[6] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 47.

[7] Anttonen, "Rethinking the Sacred," 36–64.

[8] Herbst, "What Happens When We Make a Distinction?" 357.

[9] Ibid. Italics in original.

[10] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 18.

[11] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, and *Philosophy in the Flesh*.

[12] Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, 272.

[13] Anttonen, "Rethinking the Sacred," 36–64.

[14] Anttonen, "Sacred," 280-81. Cf. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 40–41, 47, 122–123.

[15] For Anttonen, the "sacred" is an etic concept or cultural category used to stipulate the emergence, through socio-cultural activity, of significant boundaries and their adjacent spaces (Anttonen, "The Making of Corporeal and Territorial Boundaries," 1–2). He recognizes that both religious and non-religious actors employ the "sacred" as a vernacular or emic term according to their own belief paradigms, but distinguishes such usage from his own and others' social scientific use of the term. On this understanding, Anttonen then drops the speech marks.

[16] Anttonen, "Sacred," 280–81. Cf. Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

[17] Crossbones, "History."

[18] Simmel in Kaern, "George Simmel's *The Bridge and the Door*."

[19] Ibid., 409.

[20] Ibid., 412.

[21] Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 396.

[22] Van Opstall, "General Introduction," *Sacred Thresholds*, 1–27.

[23] UK Government, "Stay at Home." Cf. ITV, "Government Launches New Coronavirus Advert."

[24] UK Government, "PM Commons Statement."

[25] Ibid.

[26] Anttonen, "Sacred," 280–281. Cf. Knott, "The Secular Sacred."

[27] It should nevertheless be noted that trust in the UK's NHS was not universal, as became increasing evident during the vaccination roll-out in 2021.

[28] Woodhead, "Introduction," 14–17.

[29] Woodhead, "The NHS, Our National Religion."

[30] Lynch, "Coronavirus and the Sacred." Cf. Lynch, *On the Sacred*, 69–100.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Clap For Our Carers.

[33] Brundin, Howard and Laven, *The Sacred Home*, 308. Cf. Chiu, "Singing on the Street and in the Home," 38–39.

[34] Giovanni Pietro Giussano, cited in Chiu, "Singing on the Street and in the Home," 39.

[35] Amnesty International, *Exposed, Silenced, Attacked*, 18–19; Bambra, Lynch and Smith, eds, *The Unequal Pandemic*; Nazroo and Bécares, *Ethnic Inequalities in Covid-19 Mortality*.

[36] Bryson, Andres and Davies, "Covid-19"; Edelman, Vincent, Kolata and O'Keefe, *British Ritual Innovation*.

[37] Bryson, Andres and Davies, "Covid-19," 369.

[38] From a discussion with Paulina Kolata, BRIC Project, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2021. Cf. Edelman, Vincent, Kolata and O'Keefe, *British Ritual Innovation*.

[39] Bryson, Andres and Davies, "Covid-19," 361.

[40] The project was entitled Iconic Religion and the colleague was Steph Berns, to whom much of the credit goes for the data. Berns, "In Defense of the Dead"; Knott, "Walls and Other Unremarkable Boundaries."

[41] Hausner, *The Spirits of Crossbones Graveyard*; Slade, *The Outcast Dead*; Berns, "In Defense of the Dead"; Crossbones, "History – Crossbones."

[42] Crossbones, "Halloween – Crossbones." Monthly and annual vigils continued online, "on the astral," throughout 2021, though an increasing number attended in person at the gate.

[43] Crossbones, "Crossbones."

[44] Ibid.

[45] Crossbones, "Halloween – Crossbones."

[46] Ibid.

[47] Crossbones, "Events – Crossbones."

[48] Durban, "October's Crossbones Vigil."

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Soja, *Thirdspace*.

[54] Edelman, Vincent, Kolata and O'Keefe, *British Ritual Innovation*.

[55] Leaders of UK Faith Communities, "Faith Communities Letter."

[56] Christian Today, "Christian Leaders Seek Judicial Review." For a discussion of the UK Government's restrictions and religious responses, see Hill, "Coronavirus and the Curtailment of Religious Liberty," 6–12.

[57] UK Government. *Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions).* Cf. UK Government. "COVID-19: Guidance for the Safe Use of Places of Worship." These regulations applied to England only, though other parts of the UK introduced similar codes. In Scotland, for example, church leaders launched legal action over the closure of places of worship in February 2021 (The Christian Institute, "Scots Pastors").

[58] UK Government. *Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions).* Section 18:7.

[59] Ibid., Section 18(8).

[60] Hill, "Coronavirus and the Curtailment of Religious Liberty," 2–4.

[61] Sherwood, "Police Stop Lockdown-Busting Service."

[62] Ibid.

[63] Sherwood, "Let Us Disobey."

[64] Ibid.

[65] Chris Jervis in Jenks, *Transgression*, 9.

[66] Hegarty, "Undelivered," 107. "The flashing line" is from Michel Foucault, cited by Paul Hegarty; "always already occurred," is from Hegarty. Edelman et al also note that "rituals did become flash points for contestation against guidelines, restrictions, and the manner in which they were implemented." Edelman, Vincent, Kolata and O'Keefe, *British Ritual Innovation*, 107.

[67] Matthew 18:20, King James Bible, *The Bible Hub*.

[68] Sherwood, "Let Us Disobey."

[69] Anttonen, "The Making of Corporeal and Territorial Boundaries," 1–2.

[70] Knott, "Walls and Other Unremarkable Boundaries," 31. Van Opstall, "General Introduction," *Sacred Thresholds*.

[71] Smith, *To Take Place*, Chapter 1.

[72] Van Opstall, "General Introduction," 2.

[73] Ibid. Carson et al, *Crossing Thresholds*.

[74] Knott, "Walls and Other Unremarkable Boundaries."

[75] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 47.

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Table 1: Edges, the production of the sacred, continuity and change in the UK during Covid-19

	Doorstep	**Gate**	**Legal regulation**
Nature of edge	Domestic threshold separating home from outside world	Break in boundary fence on side of road	Legal boundary (health protection regulations)
Adjoining regions	Interior domestic space/external public space	Disused graveyard on privately-owned land/public highway	Permitted activities/ prohibited activities
Ritual	Clapping for NHS & carers; banging of pots & pans on the threshold	Monthly vigils for the "outcast dead"; offering of objects at the real or virtual gate	Illegal gatherings for collective worship
Sacred category boundary	Boundary distinguishing enclosed haven of safety & unbounded world of risk	Boundary distinguishing the temporal world and the spiritual world	Boundary distinguishing divine commandment and the state's legal sphere
Sacred space	Space of national solidarity protecting the sacred principle of universal healthcare	Portal connecting the living and the dead	New Christian sites made sacred by acts of transgression
Edge as barrier or seam	Physical barrier, but also temporary seam leading to solidarity with others	Physical barrier, but spiritual seam of interconnectedness through which healing power flows	Legal barrier, but acts of transgression keep open the possibility of obedience to God's command
Continuity or discontinuity	Values associated with home/outside world retained, but	Continuity of ritual enabled by virtual delivery; the gate	Discontinuity generated by legal barrier, but continuity

	temporarily transcended	retains its symbolic prominence	of worship only briefly interrupted
Tradition or change	New practice specific to time of Covid-19 (but see historical precedents)	Traditions retained, but with change in mode of delivery (online).	Traditional programme of worship, but with meaning transformed by act of transgression and new context of secrecy.