Is the Kumik in a skyscraper at Terrasses de la Chaudière in Hull, Quèbec a sacred space?

by Judy Jibb

This essay discusses whether the *Kumik* lodge is a sacred space. Built inside a skyscraper that headquarters Canadian government aboriginal affairs administration, it overlooks the sacred waterfalls *Asticou* also known as *Great Kettle of Boiling Water* or *Chaudière Falls,* in the Ottawa River landscape. French explorers met Algonquin hunters and gatherers here four centuries ago. Indigenous cosmologies are complex but typically held all nature as animate. Today the dominant paradigm of scientism is evident in the surrounding office towers and hydro turbines. In researching the sacred, Eliade recommended the phenomenological approach, he thought sacred space could occur naturally or could be human-built. From the evidence, the *Kumik* is a human constructed space made sacred in the acknowledgment and repetition within it of ideas from Algonquin spirituality. New trends are emerging where individuals are claiming back the landscape and small installations like the Algonquin lodge inside a workplace seem to be re-establishing this connection.

Introduction

This essay looks at an area inside a skyscraper and discusses whether it is sacred. Kumik, meaning 'lodge' in Algonquian, was built inside Les Terraces de la Chaudière, a public service workplace adjacent to a bend in the Ottawa River, which straddles Hull, Quebec and Ottawa, Ontario. [1] This landscape was the home of the Algonquin when French explorers first referenced the geography in describing their explorations in 1613.[2] The subsequent four centuries had European settlers from France, then England, moving into the landscape. Today the area is dominated by Canadian Parliament Buildings and hydro turbines girdling the circular waterfalls in the river at the bend. The essence of the Kumik will be examined referencing the work of religious historian Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), ecologist and philosopher David Abram, theologian Belden C. Lane, an interview with

[1] Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), *Kumik Council of Elders, Information* <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100013748/1100100013749> [accessed 11.12.2014] [hereafter AANDC, *Information*]

[2] Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain,* Trans. by Charles Pomeroy Otis, Vol. 3, 1611-1618, (Boston, The Prince Society, 1882) p.83 [hereafter Champlain, *Voyages*]

aboriginal author K. Dumont and photographs taken from inside the Kumik.[3] The regional landscape, the cosmology of the Algonquin, and spirituality in the workplace are discussed in exploring the sacredness of the Kumik space.

Sacred Space

A phenomenological approach is recommended by Eliade in researching religious subject matter like the sacredness of space.[4] For Merleau-Ponty the study of essences involved ones perceptions and 're-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world'.[5] Abram found the study of direct experience with the landscape to reveal the centrality of the earth in human experience, something that has been lost in the 'electronically-generated vistas' that claim our spaces.[6] The Kumik essence will be evaluated with themes found by Lane to be present in American spirituality.[7] Reference is made to Dumont's experience both assisting Elders in the Kumik and working on the eighteenth floor in the skyscraper, and also to photographs taken from inside the lodge.[8]

Space and place were commonly interchangeable words imbued with complex interwoven ideas that are difficult to define, according to Robert Trubshaw.[9] Used frequently in everyday speech they seemed to connect to the specific culture and landscape of the individual. Sacred was also found to be difficult to define by Anthony Thorley and Celia Gunn in their research on world sacred sites for the Gaia Foundation.[10] Linguistic roots for 'sacred' revealed wide usage that meant a dedication to the divine and a crossing between the earth and the sky. Eliade viewed the sacred and its opposite, the profane, as co-existing but

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[3] K. Dumont. *Interviewed by the author,* Ottawa, 4 December 2014 [hereafter Dumont, *Interview*]; all photographs by the author, Hull, Quebec, 7 November 2014

[4] Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), p.23 [Hereafter Eliade, *Sacred*]

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, Keyes and Paul: 1978), p.vii [Hereafter Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*]

[6] David Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p.x [hereafter Abram, *Spell*]

[7] Belden C. Lane. *Landscape of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002[1988]), p.74-93 [Hereafter Lane, *Landscape*]

[8] Dumont, *Interview*

[9] Robert Trubshaw. *Sacred Places: Prehistory and Popular Imagination* (Wymeswold: Heart of Albion Press, 2005), p.1-2 [hereafter Trubshaw, *Sacred*]

[10] Anthony Thorley and Celia M. Gunn, *Sacred Sites: An Overview,* (A Report for the Gaia Foundation, 2007), p.22 [Hereafter Thorley and Gunn, *Sacred*]

also thought that all space was in some way sacred even if just scarcely so. [11] He thought a sacred space could be ritually constructed using different techniques to access the divine.[12] Environmental historian Donald Hughes thought the 'traditional Indian view' to be that while all nature was sacred, some spaces held easier access to spirit because of, for example, unusual features in the geography. [13] The Algonquin heralded a site they called *Great Kettle of Boiling Water* as sacred, now Chaudière Falls on the map. Also, Samuel de Champlain (1574-1635) observed and recorded details of a tobacco ceremony here in mid-June 1613.[14] The experience of the sacred was primordial to Eliade and occurred in natural spaces like the Kettle, but it could also be constructed by humans, like a church or temple, by using divine imagery.[15]

In legend the Ottawa Valley landscape has always been the home of the Algonquin people, who believe they have always lived there.[16] Archaeologists thought that human habitation began in America after they crossed over a land bridge from Siberia during the last ice age at least 10,000 years ago. [17] In the Northeast Woodlands four hundred years ago, it was the Algonquin tribe who connected first with European explorers. [18] Since then conflicts have continued that commonly occur in human groups from entirely different bioregions due to, for Abram, the 'incommensurability of cultural universes'.[19]

The 'October Crisis' in 1970 involved a longstanding French-English conflict and resulted in the invocation of the War Measures Act; by 1975 a government concession brought the construction of new government workplaces

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[11] Eliade, *Sacred,* p.23
[12] Eliade, *Sacred,* p.52
[13] Donald J. Hughes, 'Spirit of Place in the Western World', in Swan, J. *The Power of Place: Sacred Ground in Natural and Human Environments*, 15-27 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/3984349> [Accessed 25.12.2014] [hereafter Hughes, *Spirit*]
[14] Samuel de Champlain, *Les voyages de Champlain Xaintongeois, capitaine ordinare pour le Roy, en marine; quatrieme voyage* (Paris; Jean Berjon, 1613) p.46-47
[15] Eliade, *Sacred,* p.20-21, 36-37
[16] James Morrison, *Algonquin History of the Ottawa River Watershed* in Omàmiwininì Pimàdjwowin, 'The Algonquin Way Cultural Centre' <http://www.thealgonquinway.ca/English/story-e.php> [accessed 25 11 2014] [hereafter Morrison, *Algonquin*]; R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones and Donald B. Smith, *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation,* Fourth Edition, (Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 2000), Chapter 1 'The First Peoples' [hereafter Francis et al, *Origins*]
[17] Morrison, *Algonquin*, p. 20; Francis, *Origins,* p. 2
[18] Francis, *Origins,* pp. 13-14
[19] Abram, *Spell,* p. 267

in Hull and the relocation of federal employees from Ottawa.[20] In 1990, another crisis concerning a Mohawk-French clash involved blockading sacred burial grounds from a proposed golf course; almost immediately Kumik was installed inside the government headquarters overseeing aboriginal affairs to deal with the aftermath in employee stress. [21] The lodge was to provide essential guidance and counselling services to all workers.[22] Engineers constructed special ventilation in the public building to allow for the smoke from the pipe and smudge ceremonies that are associated with Algonquin spirituality.[23] After twenty-four years of uninterrupted operation, the lodge continues to be presided over for two week stints each by Elders from across Canada. [24]

Algonquin Spirituality

More than a thousand highly-developed cultures developed independently over millennia and large distances in prehistoric America.[25] Lane thought that there was no typical early American cosmology but that it tended to express in five common themes that combined into an ambiance containing an essence of 'transcendence, a love of the earth, a renewed vision, a story worth telling, [and] silence in the presence of mystery'. [26] The five themes of American spirituality mentioned by Lane will be applied in the evaluation of Kumik's sacredness. Photographs reveal the inner lodge and outer skyscraper.

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[20] R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones and Donald B. Smith, *Destinies: Canadian History since Confederation, Fourth Edition*, (Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 2000), pp. 450-451 [hereafter Francis et al, *Destinies*]; Government of Canada, 'Les Terraces de la Chaudière' in *Directory of Federal Real Property* <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/dfrp-rbif/sn-ns/103699-eng.aspx> [accessed 27.12.2014]

[21] Kahentinetha Horn, 'The Confusion Between the Great Law and the Handsome Lake Code' in *Mohawk Nation News* <http://www.mohawknationnews.com/index_htm_files/Confusion_Great_Law_Handsome_Lake_Code_OPT.pdf>[accessed 29.12.2014], p. 7; Dumont, *Interview*

[22] Government of Canada, *Annual Report on The Canadian Multiculturalism Act 1999-2000*, <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/Ci95-1-2000E.pdf> [accessed 29.12.2014], pp. 31-32; AANDC, *Elder Information*

[22] Dumont, *Interview;* AANDC, *Elder Information*

[23] Dumont, *Interview*

[24] AANDC, *Elder Information*

[25] Lane, *Landscapes,* p.74

[26] Lane, *Landscapes,* p.74 in Chapter 3: 'Seeking a Sacred Center: Places and Themes in Native American Spirituality'

Sacred Hoop

The first of Lane's ideas was the central role of the circle or hoop as a representation of the creator.[27] This form was revered in early traditions as the place where the cosmic emerged or broke-through, as mentioned by Eliade and Lane, and where a vertical 'axis mundi' facilitated contact with the numinous.[28] The sacred hoop was mythically reconstructed in ceremonial sweat-lodges thus rehearsing and repeating creation. Inside the Kumik the circular hoop was evidenced inlaid in wooden floorboards around the circumference of a sweat-lodge or tepee. It was apparent in the shingle hanging at the entry way picturing a hoop welcoming the four races and other placements like a stone circle and various circular drums placed about the interior space.[29]

The Algonquin sacred circle can be marked out into the four cardinal directions.[30] Figure 1 shows a shingle announcing Kumik from the skyscraper atrium, which contains the demarcation of four arms reaching into the centre from four directions and grasping an inner braided hoop: white arm from the north, yellow east, red south, and black west. Lane pointed out that the shape of the sacred circle can include one break 'with a single door opening always to the east' representing to Eliade the place where heaven and earth meet, the opening to the cosmos.[31] The break establishes the centre and thus orientation with the divine is possible.[32] Dumont said that Kumik had a design flaw because the entryway to the lodge, the break in the circle, was not true to the east. Elders consequently practiced re-orientation movements upon entering; they walked 'to the left but of the western door so it's a little bit backwards', however Dumont said it works well, as 'we're adaptable'.[33]

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[27] Lane, *Landscapes,* p.74
[28] Eliade, *Sacred,* p.36; Lane, *Landscapes,* p.75
[29] Dumont *Interview*
[30] Dumont, *Interview*
[31] Lane, *Landscapes,* p. 75; Eliade, *Sacred,* p. 36; Jibb, *Photographs*
[32] Eliade, *Sacred,* p. 62
[33] Dumont, *Interview*

Figure 1: Sacred Hoop

Sacred Earth

A second theme common to first American cosmologies was respect for the earth. The Algonquin were hunters and gatherers in a territory defined by natural resource boundaries and organised by family groups.[34] Indigenous cultures experienced a sense of oneness with all nature mentioned by Abram and Lane who attributed the idea to scholar Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939).[35] There is no longer a balanced relationship with the earth, something Abram found sad and massive in scale.[36] Employees in Les Terrasses went to the Kumik space for solace from the 'bad energy' that can accumulate in the surrounding offices.[37] Dumont experienced increased tension going upwards in the elevators approaching the Minister's headquarters at the top. Looking down into the landscape from the 18th floor windows, the Kettle is visible at the river bend. Dumont thought the proximity of the Kumik to the sacred site was important and that they 'communicated with one another'.

Respect for the sacred earth is apparent inside Kumik through the use of imagery including wolves and ravens, natural fabrics and carved wooden objects, animal hide and feathers, stones and hanks of fresh greenery as well as rituals that mimick celestial movement and give thanks to the 'grandmother' earth.[38] The spirits of the ancestors inhabited the natural world for the Algonquin. The lodge

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[34] Francis, *Origins,* pp. 14-15
[35] Abram, *Spell,* p. 57; Lane, *Landscapes,* p. 80
[36] Abram, *Spell,* p. 267
[37] Dumont, *Interview*
[38] Dumont, *Interview*

organization is overseen by a Council of 26 Elders thus aligning with the lunar year: 13 grandmothers and 13 grandfathers.[39] North American ethnographer Frank Goldsmith Speck (1881-1950) found that Algonquin medicine practices included a deep association with earth's flora and included engagement with physical and spiritual healing through their 'supernatural realm in the north'.[40] Figure 2 shows an altar in Kumik graced with cedar, sage, sweet grass and tobacco, said by Dumont to be the four medicines associated with healing in Algonquin tradition.[41]

Figure 2: *Kumik* interior

Vision Space

The Kumik is a lodge symbolically set apart from the surrounding work space, something Eliade thought necessary for communing with the sacred and Lane's third theme for aboriginal spirituality.[42] For Hughes, we are challenged to find the places where we can connect with the divine.[43] For the Algonquin, the sweat-lodge experience was central in healing and vision questing.[44] In there, careful preparations were repeated in an individual's life on those occasions when spiritual direction was needed.[45] Merging the purifying qualities of smudged earth medicines with rites and sun-wise movements around the interior circle,

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[39] Dumont, *Interview*
[40] Frank Gouldsmith Speck, *Medicine Practices of the Northeastern Algonquians – Primary Source Edition*, (Washington: Nabu Public Domain Reprint, 1917), pp. 303, 308 [hereafter Speck, *Medicine*]
[41] Dumont, *Interview*
[42] Eliade, *Sacred;* Lane, *Landscapes,* p. 83
[43] Hughes, *Spirit,* p. 247
[44] Dumont, *Interview*
[45] Lane, *Landscapes,* p. 83; Dumont, *Interview*

while acknowledging the directions, provoked visions. For the Algonquin there were seven directions representing the four cardinal points, above and below, and inside. A pipe is involved and smoke is inhaled, then symbolically whished around ones body and is associated with communing with spirit. Lane thought that putting rocks into the sacred fire pit corresponded to purification and oneness with all. Abram thought sacred pipe smoke was associated with making the invisible visible, opening up previously unseen connections with other entities that dwell in the world like ones ancestors.[46] The air around us according to Abram is the most 'taken-for granted phenomenon' continually imbibed, and often unnoticed and representative of divine presence.[47]

The sweat-lodge dimensions are represented in the floorboards of the lodge hinting at the vision quest space. Lane and Dumont characterized a sweat lodge experience as intense, dark, smoky, steamy, confined and culminating when ice cold water is poured onto hot rocks provoking a divine interaction, a break-through which Eliade called a hierophany.[48] Dumont said the Kumik was used by people for solace from the 'bad energy' in their work relationships and their communities, to experience a peaceful sojourn from the pressures outside.[49] The Kumik, while not a formal vision space like the sweat-lodge, was a space where Elders taught about them.

Figure 3: The skyscraper

[46] Abram, *Spell,* p. 229
[47] Abram, *Spell,* p. 258
[48] Eliade, *Sacred,* p. 36
[49] Dumont, *Interview*

Stories and Songs

The oral tradition was central to the passing on of spiritual values to first Americans.[50] Kumik Elders hail from all parts of Canada bringing regional stories and songs.[51] The continuous repetition of sacred stories is a key part of making and keeping a space sacred.[52] They were a set of hunting and gathering instructions but also for Abram, provide codes of behaviour, customs, social taboos, interspecies etiquette and more. [53] Algonquin stories have an inseparable link to the landscape and their repetition in the oral tradition and in dream life illustrated a reciprocal relationship with the terrain. Lane thought aboriginal stories were uncomfortable for whites of European background who were more familiar with the written word.[54] Algonquin legends told of their origins and their interactions with the stars and earth.[55] Historian Nicholas Campion noted that imagery from the stars was a common theme in early lore, from his research on the roots of astrology.[56] Folklorist Charles G. Leland (1824-1903) compiled north-eastern Algonquin stories, which he said were once sung, like 'Song of the Stars':[57]

> We are the stars which sing,
> We sing with our light;
> We are the birds of fire,
> We fly over the sky.
> Our light is a voice.
> We make a road for spirits,
> For the spirits to pass over.
> Among us are three hunters
> Who chase a bear;
> There never was a time
> When they were not hunting.

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[50] Lane, *Landscapes,* p. 85
[51] AANDC, *Kumik Information;* Dumont, *Interview*
[52] Eliade, *Sacred,* p. 32
[53] Abram, *Spell,* p. 175
[54] Lane, *Landscapes,* p.87
[55] Dumont, *Interview*
[56] Campion, Nicholas, *A History of Western Astrology, Volume I The Ancient World* (London: Continuum, 2008)
Campion, *History,* pp. 12-13 [hereafter Campion, *History*]
[57] Charles G. Leland, *Algonquin Legends,* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992 [1884], pp. iii, 379 [hereafter Leland, *Algonquin*]

We look down on the mountains.
This is the Song of the Stars.

Folklorist Horace Beck went on an expedition in 1940 with Speck to Maniwaki, an Algonquin community in northern Ottawa Valley, to record their stories.[58] One legend spoke of a great flood and people floated in a canoe for a long time before arriving at a land of fish and game but no trees; '[H]ere they stopped. Later trees came to the land. These people called themselves Algonquin'. [59] Scholar of American oral literature Robert Bringhurst, in an on-line interview with Guernica magazine, said that the rich body of stories transcribed since the 1880s, if read and internalized by a new generation, would fundamentally change society from a culture inconsiderate and disrespectful of the earth to one of kinship with nature.[60]

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[58] Horace P. Beck, 'Algonquin Folklore from Maniwaki' in *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 60, No. 237 (Jul. - Sep., 1947), pp. 259-264 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/536379> [Accessed: 25 12 2014] [hereafter Beck, *Algonquin Folklore*]

[59] Beck, *Algonquin Folklore*

[60] Robert Bringhurst, Interviewed by Matthew Spellberg, in *Guenica Online Magazine,* <https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/myth-is-a-theorem-about-the-nature-of-reality/>[accessed 27 12 2014] [hereafter Bringhurst, *Guenica*]

Figure 4: Inside *Kumik* by window

Silence

The Kumik was established as a space for quiet meditation and repose from the hectic work spaces above it.[61] The Eskimo in northern Manitoba and Nunavut found silence to be the appropriate response to the harsh and extreme landscape, according to Lane.[62] Abram agreed that silence was important to humans, but was missing from modern life; what some call silence is for aboriginals a listening stance.[63] There is much to hear in silence, the roar of the rapids, birds and animals, wind and trees or spirits of the ancestors in visions and dreams. Abram thought that sacred space revealed 'synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and texture'.[64] He argued that the phenomenal world was 'remarkably stable and

[61] AANDC, *Elders Information;* Dumont *Interview*
[62] Lane, *Landscapes,* pp. 88-89
[63] Abram, *Spell,* p. 147
[64] Abram, *Spell,* p. 54

solid; we are able to count on it in so many ways, and we take for granted much of its structure and character.'[65] Religious studies lecturer Graham Harvey wrote that contemporary spiritual leaders or shamans in the west are engaged in a difficult task of introducing people back to listening to the living land.[66] From evidence, silence is regarded highly in the Kumik space through placement of articles, ritual movements, and summons the essence within by encouraging employees to take a quiet and listening stance while there.[67]

Spirituality and Workspace

Today humans work in landscapes that are rife with technologies. [68] This was evident in contemporary Canada for cultural critic Neil Postman (1931-2003) who thought the surrender of culture to technology was the result of scientism, the dominant underlying paradigm.[69] Spirituality needed acknowledgement to 'know the difference between the sacred and the profane'.[70] Research on sacred sites by Thorley and Gunn revealed the tendency in contemporary culture to separate religion from science but they found an emerging awareness in academic documents of the necessity for acknowledging the sacred in the secular world.[71] Abram thought this had started, with individuals and communities who were 'engaged in a process of remembering' or some call it 'reinhabitation' to restore their ecological regions.[72] The Kumik is an example of how aboriginal Canadians and one branch of the public service are working to restore what Abram calls a reciprocal relationship honouring the sacred earth and is no longer content with cultural genocide and the extinction of nature. [73] For author Mathew Sheep, spirituality in the workplace is a young area of enquiry long overdue and pertinent to the health and well-being of individuals, organisations and societies.[74] While studying a labour force of nurses in 2003, Don Grant, Kathleen

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[65] Abram, *Spell,* p. 35
[66] Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth,* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) p. 120-122
[67] Jibb, *Photographs*; AANDC, *Kumik Information Sheet*
[68] Abram, *Spell,* p. x
[69] Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology,* (Toronto: Random House, 1992), pp. 147, 185, 190-191 [hereafter Postman, *Technopoly*]
[70] Postman, *Technopoly,* pp. 14-l5
[71] Thorley and Gunn, *Sacred*, pp. 21, 151
[72] Abram, *Spell,* pp. 271-272
[73] Abram, *Spell,* p. 271
[74] Sheep, Mathew, 'Nurturing the Whole Person: The Ethics of Workplace Spirituality in a Society of Organizations' in *Journal of Business Ethics*, (2006) 66: 357-375 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/25123841>[Accessed: 10 12 2014], pp. 357, 372 [hereafter Sheep, *Nurturing*]

O'Neil and Laura Stephens found there to be a dearth of theories on spirituality in non-religious organizations. They argued that 'craft versions of sacred authority' was important because from the seedbeds of spirituality in the workplace there could emerge 'new sacred structures' within secular bureaucracies.[75]

Conclusion

To consecrate and make space sacred, for Eliade, required transforming it into an image of the cosmos, achievable by projecting the four horizons from a central point. This is apparent in the sacred hoop that first announces the entry to Kumik and thrives throughout.[76] The five themes observable in most native North American spiritualities, according to Lane, were evidenced in the Kumik: an essence of transcendence was present from the scores of circular representations in form and ritual; the earth was honoured throughout; vision quests were discussed but it was not a sweat-lodge experience; in there, stories were told, songs sung and teachings given; and silence was respected in this lodge. Problems such as the break in the circle, the entryway, not being true to the east were taken in stride by presiding aboriginal Elders. New trends have emerged that are claiming back the landscape and small installations like the Algonquin lodge inside a workplace seem to be re-establishing this connection. From the evidence it can be concluded that the Kumik is a human constructed space made sacred in the acknowledgment and repetition within it of ideas from Algonquin spirituality.

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[75] Don Grant, Kathleen O'Neil and Laura Stephens, 'Spirituality in the Workplace: New Empirical Directions in the Study of the Sacred' in *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 265-283 [hereafter Grant et al, *Spirituality*] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3712252> [Accessed: 25 11 2014]

[76] Eliade, *Sacred,* p.52-3; Dumont, *Interview*; Jibb, *Photographs*

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