Imagining the universe is an impossible task, for it stretches, and continues to stretch, to infinity. And though it may initially seem like less of a demanding task just imagining what it would be like to try to imagine the infinite rather than actually imagining it, even this concept of a second-order attempt seems obtuse, since for it to make sense would require us to be able to imagine what it might mean to imagine the infinite in the first place! Now let us see how we can understand this—a supposedly common-place concept: to imagine, of all the infinitely imaginable spots in the universe, one which is "the holiest" or "second holiest" site. What does that—could that—mean?

Consider the following verse from the Qur’an, where, after sixteen months of the practice of turning to Jerusalem in prayers, Muhammad is finally instructed to break from this Jewish tradition (apparently so he could draw the line between those among the peoples of the Book who have truly come to believe in him, and those who were simply "posing" or pretending to believe he was the genuine and ultimate messenger of God in the Abrahamic tradition), and is addressed thus by God:

We may see your face turning about in the heavens in search of a praying focal point (qibla): and we shall provide you with one that you may like: turn your face to the Sacred Mosque; and from wherever you may be, turn your face henceforth towards it [...] (2.144).

Two verses earlier (2.142), in anticipation of those who will deride the prophet for changing the qibla from Jerusalem, God addresses his messenger thus: "The fools will deride you saying: what made them change their qibla? Say: the east and west belong to Allah [...]"

On a first reading, one doesn't get the impression that God Himself feels strongly about a particular spot, including the Ka’ba (the Sacred Mosque): notice that His assignment of it is textually predicated on Muhammad’s preferences, and not on some mysteriously divine
quality inhering in the spot itself. Likewise, in providing a “defense” for the changeover of the qibla from Jerusalem, God reminds Muhammad of His infinite dominion: Jerusalem is important to God, but it is just one spot among many, stretching east and west.

God, then, in what seems to be a perfectly logical attitude, does not feign to “unveil” or “reveal” a divine quality inhering in some physical spot, one for which Man is called upon to turn in prayer: quite the opposite, God reminds Man of the objectively neutral status of any physical spot, assuring him that God’s dominion is immanent, and unbound by physical dimension.

Nonetheless, physical spots, like the Rock and its environs in Jerusalem, or like the Ka’ba in Mecca, clearly do acquire “sacredness.” Where, we may ask, does this sacredness come from?

One ready—and logical—answer is Man: if a physical spot is not inherently divine, then surely what is regarded as its divine status must be conferred upon it by Man. The spot’s sacredness in this manner would be subjective rather than objective. Furthermore, being subjective, one could perhaps better understand such sacredness being a matter of degree—being “more” or “less” sacred—meaning, in this respect, being regarded as such by human beings, rather than meaning the presence of different material shades or hues of holiness in the object itself.

But another answer, more common in the case of idolatrous religions, may actually bring “God” Himself into the picture, for example by claiming that “God” dwells in such and such a spot, thus making the spot divine by virtue of God’s own sacredness. The phrase “a/the House of God” is not uncommon, and may be a leftover from such primitive periods. Jerusalem’s legendary Temple, for example, may have been such a House (where the Shekhinah dwelled, attended to and served by high priests). Certainly, Mount Olympus where Zeus and the other, lesser gods dwelled was such a spot. The Ka’ba itself, we know, harbored fake “gods” right up to Muhammad’s re-entry into Mecca.

Or, the spot may acquire sacredness for its being a “transitory meeting point” between the two worlds, the earthly and the divine. Thus, again, God’s intervention at Abraham’s sacrifice, or His intervention in Mount Sinai; thus, also, Muhammad’s ascension from Jerusalem’s Rock to Heaven, or Adam’s descent from Heaven—according to an Islamic tradition—unto that same Rock on Earth.

Of course, to understand sacredness in this “homo-centered” manner is not in any way to diminish from the holiness of a holy place. To claim that Man confers holiness or sacredness to a place—or that its holiness appertained to it as a result of having been a spatially-accidental crossing-point between the earthly and the divine—does not make it less sacred, or less inspiring of awe or commanding of respect. If one can stand in awe before monuments that are totally secular, without a hint of a divinity about them, then how much more awe and respect must there be in those ethereal locations where, as legend would have
it, God (or one of His angels) actually revealed Himself in one manner or another to Man!

It is not being argued here that God never actually confers sacredness to the mundane: Canaan's holiness is certainly conferred upon it by God, as when (e.g., 5.21) He addresses the children of Israel thus: “Enter Ye the Holy Land which God has assigned for you [...]”. Indeed, we are not told why God has blessed this land. But bless it He did. God also confers a certain distinction to Man himself. “Verily We have blessed the Son of Adam.”

But whether a spot is initially and inherently sacred, or becomes so through practice, or even following upon the occurrence of some miraculous experience, it is still hard to see how God can “be made to feel better” by men fighting over that spot, killing and getting killed over it, dismantling or demolishing it, or whatever. The only “party” or “parties” that can hope to “feel better” by such gruesome contestations must surely be men themselves. In the final analysis, spilling (human) blood over the Rock can only be a secular practice, not a divine wish or command!

Muslims of course continue to perform the rites of animal sacrifice. They do not await the Second Coming or the rebuilding of the Temple to do this. These rites are performed annually (typically, at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca) to mark God’s last-minute intervention as Abraham was about to offer his own son in sacrifice. Indeed, non-Muslims may pause at this fact: that Islam’s major day of celebration is the Festival of the Sacrifice (al-Adha). On the other hand, Muslims are on the whole not aware of, and should perhaps give pause to, this corollary fact: that Jews (and Christians) take Jerusalem’s Rock to have been the location where Abraham was about to make this sacrifice (Muslims assume the location was Mecca).

Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac. Mosaic of the sixth-century synagogue of Beth Alpha
Now imagine this: just as the son of Adam (viz., Abraham) was about to slaughter his own son in proof of his unflinching loyalty to God Almighty, God Himself intervenes and provides the son of Adam with an alternative: a lamb! Jerusalem’s Rock being proposed as the location of that miracle, what better or clearer divine message can there be to the sons of Adam in this day and age, but that killing each other or themselves over the Rock in an attempt to prove their loyalty or faith to Him is not at all what He wishes us to do!

Indeed, given the earlier remarks concerning the sources and meaning of sanctity, it is often hard for us to own up to the fact that our zealotry is driven by our own “baser” instincts (such as our egos) than by some divine wish or calling. Our egos (our sense of our own importance) can often blind us (i.e., make us totally disrespectful of and oblivious to) “the other”: consider, for example, the mutual (and justified) accusations between Jews and Arabs concerning the desecration, between ’48 and ’67, of their respective graveyards in Jerusalem (East and West). Closer to our time, consider the digs now underway in Bab al-Magharibah, where a one-dimensional pursuit of historical relics disrespectfully threatens to scatter the historical relics of another dimension. Surely, such practices, done in the name of God, totally flout what is divine!

The said digs (in Bab al-Magharibah) seem to be aimed at unveiling a (now-subterranean) doorway along the western wall, which, some say, can also open up to a staircase leading to a small mosque on the other side (i.e., within the Haram precinct) which Muslims call “the Buraq Mosque,” after the prophet’s winged horse (¿). You could (in theory, but the window is closed) look out from this small mosque onto the Wailing Wall plaza, where the Jews congregate to perform their prayers.

Now consider how these digs, in that small area, happen to encapsulate the entire ethos of mutual denial between the followers of the two religions: the small mosque, we recall, is called “al-Buraq” (you could “smell” the etymological connection with the Arabic and Hebrew words for “lightning”): al-Buraq is the legendary animal which brought the prophet Muhammad to Jerusalem across the desert, where he ascended from the Rock to the Divine Presence, then returned him to Mecca, all within the lightning space of one night! (Conspicuously, by the way, this is the only miracle, besides the revelation itself, associated with Muhammad!) Because the legendary animal was tied to “that wall,” Muslims have taken to calling the Wailing Wall “the Buraq Wall”—hence the name “the Buraq Mosque,” adjoining the Wall from its eastern side!

Here, then, we have almost a physical point of contact between the two traditions, one on each side of the same wall, a point threatening like a powder-keg to explode if the Israeli Government decides unilaterally to pursue those digs. But there is more: it is not just a one-sided affair where a Jewish government department seems by its action to disrespect or disregard (or deny, at some deep psychological level) Muslim tradition. Likewise, Muslims seem similarly disposed to a state of denial, for if asked, “Was there a
reason or a significance for the prophet’s legendary animal to be tied specifically to that wall (and hence for calling that wall ‘the Buraq Wall’)?” one would only manage on the whole and in all likelihood to elicit a blank stare in response.

So why was al-Buraq tied to that wall? Indeed, why was the Prophet flown to Jerusalem in the first place? Why didn’t God simply import (fly over) the prophet directly from Mecca? After all, the prophet’s angelic companion, Gabriel, did not seem to have any problems about descending directly from the heavenly spheres unto the mountains of Mecca, to reveal the Holy Qur’an to the Prophet. One imagines that a direct “return flight” was also possible. The Jerusalem detour, so to speak, must therefore have had an explanation.

We must, at this point, return to the Qur’an, and to an oft-cited verse: “Glory unto Him Who transported His minion from the sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque whose environs We have blessed [...]” (17.1). And now our question, beyond merely being one concerning the winged animal and the Wall, comes to be about this Furthest Mosque—al-Aqsa: if asked, “What Mosque?” many Muslims may again respond with a
blank stare. Surely, this Mosque, some of them might say, pointing to one or both of the mosques now occupying the Noble Sanctuary (al-Haram al-Sharif). But, according to the tradition, neither mosque was there when Muhammad made his night-journey. So, which or what Mosque (masjid)⁶ is being referred to in the Qur’ân?

Of course, many “wise” interpretations may be forthcoming. But it is beyond doubt that the actual physical spot in question couldn’t have first acquired its holiness or sanctity from Muhammad’s visit: rather, Muhammad’s visit must have been made because of the spot’s already-existing sanctity (“[…] whose environs We have blessed”). And the episode unquestionably added—in the Islamic context—to that sanctity.

Muslim tradition also has it that Muhammad led all the other prophets in prayer in that spot, as if to confirm the sanctified continuity between the earlier prophets, and the last. The Haram precinct (the Noble Sanctuary) thus marks not only the point of contact between the earthly and the divine, but also that between the three Semitic religions.

In explaining how Buddhism easily fitted Shintoism in Japan one is sometimes told the reason is the distinct domains of the two religions: they deal with respectively different requirements of the earthly and the hereafter. Religions typically “conflict” with one another, on the other hand, when they address the same domain, but produce different stories. One example is that of the location of Abraham’s attempted act of sacrifice of his son. The attempted sacrifice by Abraham of his son embodies what Islam is all about. The act explains the etymological origin of the name, to “surrender” one’s will to that of God. And yet one wonders whether it is conceivable, in some imaginary world, or in this, for Muslims ever to identify that act which embodies what their faith is all about with that physical location, consistently with the Jewish belief? Could Muslims ever see Abraham leaning over that Rock, about to sacrifice Isaac? Or would there be an inherent contradiction in such a postulate, making its realization even logically impossible?

And if it’s impossible for the different religious narratives to somehow melt into one another; and if, furthermore, the various episodes associated with that holy precinct seem only to prod and push towards confrontation, hatred, disrespect, and even bloodshed, wouldn’t all of that simply deflate from the divine status of the narratives themselves?

Sometimes, confronted with those questions, the beautiful serenity of the place threatens to be metamorphosed in my mind into an apocalyptic trap, where death in its ugliest forms voraciously stretches out its long fingers in sadistic hunger to throttle the multitudes of innocent human lambs scattered in its vicinity. I shudder to think about the excesses that can be practiced in the name of religions—at the human blood that has been, and can still be spilt. I ponder with disbelief how Man could believe in the ephemeral—conferring upon it a value that is worthier than that which He confers upon Himself, a status for which he is prepared to kill and be killed. But then, as I gaze onto the precinct’s
splendid serenity, at the trees interspersed with the smaller and larger domes, another thought presents itself to my mind: this is the thought that, in the noble human effort at "feeling out" the "farthest" horizons of the universe, to understand the spiritual core from which an entire existence proceeds forth, a place on earth may be marked. Before being marked, this spot may be just like any other; but by becoming marked, this spot comes to be conferred upon with a holy reverence that accumulates and grows by generation after generation of like-minded believers and worshippers, often becoming imbued as the generations pass with aspects of the divine that did not even cross the minds of the previous generation, so that in the end, though in one respect remaining the same spot of earth it began as, in another respect it becomes infused with a holiness that commands respect and imposes awe. So even if such a spot is not, as the religious narrative may tell us, made of wondrous stone transported from the heavens, it can still celebrate that which is noblest in Man: the yearning to discover, to fly out in one's imagination to the farthest corners of the universe, to try to probe into the core of existence, to defy the four-dimensional structure of time-space, to bring oneself into the presence of the mysterious origins of all things – in short, it can still celebrate limitation's expression of the limitless.

"Could Muslims ever see Abraham leaning over that Rock [...]?" There is an implicit corollary to that question: Could Jews (and Christians) ever see Muhammad descending by Heavenly fiat into that precinct, and then being lifted up from that Rock unto the Divine presence? Could Jews in particular, who it would seem at first accepted Muhammad as their expected messenger, as Abraham's spiritual inheritor, and fell into performing their prayers after him towards Jerusalem, ever accept to see themselves still praying after him, as they perform their rites facing their Holy of Holies? Or is he (generically) condemned to having to separate between "his followers" and those of the earlier prophets? I look upon Muhammad's night-journey to the Haram as a first attempt to bring people (Abraham's spiritual inheritors) together. If the circumstances were not ripe, whether then or now, for the true believers in the one God to become united in their endeavors, can we still not entertain the hope that the holy precinct—what it is and what it symbolizes—will nonetheless one day succeed to inspire people who believe in the one God themselves to become united in their faith? That then would indeed be a reason for which any physical spot in this universe would be well-worth being considered sacred. Lifting the veils of prejudice and ignorance-through-denial concerning what this precinct is all about may well be a step in this direction. Perhaps scholarly works such as those contained in this volume may help bring that moment of revelation sooner.