Locus, in quo missa est celebranda, debet esse sanctificatus, ut est Ecclesia regulariter, nisi ocurrererit casus necessitatis. De consecra.dist.l.Nullus.

—Otto Truchsess von Waldburg. TRACTATVS// DE ADMINISTRA-// TIONE SACRAMENTI EVCHÆ=// ristiae, & de celebratione Missœ=// ex Canonibus & probatis// authoribus (Dillingen: Sebaldus Mayer, 1558)

In 1547, when he re-entered the city of Augsburg, Bishop Otto Truchsess von Waldburg reconsecrated the Cathedral. For him, “the Restoration of Religion,” as the Emperor had called it, encompassed a particular understanding of space and the formal reinscription of different meanings in different places. “The site where the Mass was to be celebrated,” he wrote eleven years later, “should be consecrated”: in a church and on an altar, which a bishop had formally, according to the formula stipulated in the episcopal Liber ceremonialis, consecrated. That he held it necessary to reconsecrate both speaks directly to a chasm dividing Catholics and evangelicals, and points toward a loss this essay considers.

As scholars, we have attended to re-formation—of soteriology, of ecclesiology, of liturgy—but have accorded surprisingly little attention to the word’s spatial connotations. In the years before Bishop Truchsess von Waldburg’s formal act of reclaiming, European Christians had divided on every possible dimension of Christian life, from questions of salvation to questions of the organization of the personnel of their churches, to a plethora of questions about worship. While each of these questions led to debate, sometimes bitter and increasingly polarizing, few were as frightening to contemporaries as divisions over the space of churches. Those divisions have largely been obscured in the ways that contemporaries and then modern scholars have characterized them: contemporaries viewed those who entered churches and desecrated them as “the mob,” violent, mindlessly acting from inchoate
rage that was social or political or alcoholic in origin. Villages and towns across Europe witnessed what we have broadly labeled “iconoclasm,” in which individuals or groups entered churches, whitewashed walls or shattered altarpieces, smashed sculpture, or broke up altars. In accepting characterizations of irrationality, thoughtlessness, or wantonness, we have overlooked one of the most pervasive divisions among European Christians: whether a boundary exists between the mundane world and the space of churches, whether a place can be “sanctificatus” in Bishop Truchsess von Waldburg’s formulation, and what the relationship of the physical world to God ought to be.

Beginning around 1520, as individual Christians took it upon themselves to “purify” their spaces of worship, Christians across Europe discovered they did not agree on the meaning they accorded the place and the space where they worshipped. That is the first loss—the loss of a sense that Christians shared the same map, in which certain places were accorded collectively greater intensity of meaning, “the sacred” in modern parlance, and distinguished from other places, which were “mundane,” in the words of late medieval Christians. That terrain had been imposed both through a process medieval historians have called “Christianization”—the extension of claims of jurisdiction over all of western Europe and the implantation of a range of cultural practices—and through the expulsion of religious minorities from within the kingdoms of England, France, and Spain, and from Free Imperial Cities. By the 1520s, European Christians imagined a “Christian Europe,” which they contrasted with an Ottoman Empire

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