

# LANDSCAPE AND SPIRITUALITY: A TENSION BETWEEN PLACE AND PLACELESSNESS IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN faith, landscape and spirituality are frequently intertwined. The call to a life of abandonment to God is often experienced as the call of a particular place evoking that spirit of abandonment. Athanasius, in his *Life of Antony*, tells how the first desert father sought out a high and remote hill in the upper Thebaid of Egypt. It was a site marked by clear, sweet water, with a few untended date palms, and wide plains beyond. We are told that ‘Antony, as if stirred by God, fell in love with the place’.<sup>1</sup> St Basil the Great described the chosen location of his own meditation as ‘a lofty mountain overshadowed with a deep wood, irrigated on the north by cold and transparent streams’. ‘My highest eulogy of the spot’, he exclaimed, ‘is that . . . it bears for me the sweetest of all fruits, tranquillity.’<sup>2</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux spoke enthusiastically of the site chosen for his Cistercian monastery in the Aube valley of north-eastern France. ‘That spot has much charm,’ he explained; ‘it greatly soothes weary minds, relieves anxieties and cares, helps souls who seek the Lord greatly to devotion, and recalls to them the thought of the heavenly sweetness to which they aspire.’<sup>3</sup> William of Malmesbury could even exult in the desolate land cultivated by the monks of Thorney, located ‘in the middle of wild swampland’. It impressed him as a veritable ‘image of paradise’.<sup>4</sup> In each case, the experience of God is also an experience of place. The spiritually-conceived landscape is one that metaphorically represents and concretizes the experience of faith generated there.

One readily discerns the prominence of place in the history of the spiritual life. Origen’s Alexandria, Thomas Becket’s Canterbury,

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Luther's Wittenburg, Thomas Merton's Gethsemani—all are inescapably a part of the truth encountered in those places. Religious experience is invariably centripetal in its tendency. The experience of the holy is perceived to occur at a sacred centre, an *axis mundi* where heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane, intersect.<sup>5</sup> To meet God is to be found there at the centre.

Yet religious experience is also subsequently centrifugal in its impulse.<sup>6</sup> The believer is driven beyond the sacred place of initial encounter to expect God in every other place as well. Jeremiah cautions the people of Israel against associating God exclusively with the Temple, pointing to the divine presence even in exile in Babylon (Jer 29,7). Jesus exhorts his followers to move beyond the city of Jerusalem, beyond even Judaea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth in their witness to his presence (Acts 1,8). In scripture and the history of spirituality alike, one finds a continuing tension between place and placelessness, between the local and the universal. God is *here*—in this place at Bethlehem, Lourdes, Iona, etc. But, at the same time, God is *not here*—not limited exclusively to this place, not *only* here.

Walter Brueggemann speaks of this 'preoccupation of the Bible for placement'.<sup>7</sup> One necessarily reads the scriptures with map in hand. Yahweh is disclosed, not just anywhere, but on the slopes of Mt Sinai, at Bethel and Shiloh, at the Temple in Jerusalem. The God of Old and New Testaments is one who 'tabernacles' with God's people, always made known in particular locales. When Paul celebrates the 'scandal of the gospel', this is a reality geographically rooted in Jesus, a crucified Jew from Nazareth, of all places. The offence, the particularity of place, becomes intrinsic to the incarnational character of Christian faith.

To sharpen the dialectic, however, biblical theology also insists upon the supra-locative character of the divine-human encounter. Yahweh, unlike the mountain and fertility gods of the ancient Canaanites, refuses to be bound to any geographical locale. All of the 'high places' pretending to capture the divine presence must be torn down as idolatrous in the highest degree. The prophet Nathan warns David, as he plans to build the Temple, that no one can presume to build a house for God. Yahweh, the one who dwells in thick darkness, will not remain 'on call' in Jerusalem, at the behest of the king (2 Sam 7). A theology of transcendence will never be fully comfortable with place. Hence, the tension between place and placelessness remains a fiercely vigorous one, struggling to understand the truth of a great and transcendent God revealed in the particularity of place.

The concern of this article is twofold. It seeks first to affirm the neglected importance of landscape and place in the study of Christian spirituality and then to ask how this tension between place and placelessness helps to illuminate the differing functions of the kataphatic and apophatic traditions. These two classic approaches to the life of prayer offer contrasting, yet complementary, attitudes toward landscape and nature. If God is known, on the one hand, by reference to concrete images, anchored in the material world, God's presence, on the other hand, will always remain elusive, beyond the grasp of human mastery, hidden within the deep mystery of creation.

*Suggestions for a theology of place*

Studies in Christian spirituality are enhanced by careful attention to the significance of place in the development of the spiritual life. The undeniable spatial dimensions of religious experience call us to the need for a theology of place. Conversion narratives, for example, often provide an opportunity for analysing the role of the immediate environment in the psycho-dynamics of change.<sup>8</sup> In the effort to recall and describe a vivid encounter of the holy, one instinctively reaches out to the senses—anchoring the experience in the memory of place. Hence, Paul's conversion is associated with a particular point on the Damascus road. Constantine tells of a vision seen in the sky over the Milvian Bridge. Augustine's life is changed in a garden of the Villa Cassiciacum outside of Milan. John Wesley's heart is 'strangely warmed' at a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in eighteenth-century London. Bonhoeffer's apprehension of 'religionless Christianity' takes shape in Tegel prison. Repeatedly, it is place which lends structure, contextuality, and vividness of memory to the narrative of spiritual experience. Yet, until recently in biblical and historical studies, questions of time have always taken precedence over questions of place.<sup>9</sup>

A textual analysis of words for 'place' in biblical and rabbinical usage is useful in recognizing the importance of spatial categories in the theological reflection of early Christians and Jews. It might also suggest a starting point for developing a more comprehensive theology of place. In biblical thought, the words for 'place' (*maqom* in Hebrew and *topos* or *chōra* in Greek) seldom refer to an empty, indifferent location, abstractly conceived. They speak, instead, of a place where events of human and divine significance have occurred—a dwelling place, a place of meeting, a site for the gathering together of being. In Hebrew thinking, therefore, 'not to have one's place is to

cease to be'.<sup>10</sup> Far from being a neutral, inert container of experience, place is an integral aspect of existence.<sup>11</sup>

It is not altogether surprising, therefore, to find in rabbinical Judaism the notion of place as an extension of the divine presence, a way of describing God's immanence in the world without compromising the divine transcendence. The word *maqom* becomes a name frequently used for God among the Tannaim.<sup>12</sup> The Psalmist, of course, had spoken much earlier of 'the Lord as our dwelling place' (Ps 90,1), but the rabbis describe God's 'place' as filling (even constituting) the world, in the same way as the divine light (*shekhina*) and the divine word (*memra*). Arguing as to whether God is the dwelling-place of the world, or the world is the dwelling-place of God, they affirm the former, insisting that all places discover meaning through their participation in God as place.<sup>13</sup>

What this line of argument does is to integrate the experience of God into the natural world of placed existence. One can still speak of divine transcendence, but without having to dissociate God entirely from the spatial and material dimensions of creation. In this way, the rabbis inherently understood a wisdom much later expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche, when he said, 'The more abstract the truth is that you would teach, the more you have to seduce the senses to it'.<sup>14</sup> To speak at all of a God who is 'Wholly Other' is ultimately to communicate in concrete categories of space and time.

In the search for subsequent efforts in the history of Christian theology to explore the parameters of a theology of place, we can suggest briefly a number of motifs by which place and landscape are authenticated as means of experiencing the divine presence. These categories of immanence function within a larger theology of transcendence to give sacramental value to the world of the ordinary.

1. John Calvin, among others, spoke of the natural world as a *theatrum gloriae Dei*, a theatre full of wonders in which God's glory becomes apparent.<sup>15</sup> In this motif, the various *loci communes* (the 'common places' of the earth itself) become stage settings for the great drama of divine revelation. The earth, as Hildegard of Bingen knew, provides a great green access to the heart of God. This idea is given vivid expression in the medieval depiction of the charted world as the Body of Christ. In the thirteenth-century Ebstorf map, for example, the earth is drawn as a large, circular body, with the head of Jesus at its top, in the East near paradise, and the feet in the West at the bottom, pointing towards an America still unknown.<sup>16</sup> Christ stands with the Antipodes at his left hand, the joining of Europe and

Asia at his right, inviting the reader of the map 'to see with his eyes and touch with his hands concerning the Word of Life' (1 Jn 1,1). In such a way, geography becomes a natural corollary of any deep interest in the incarnation.

2. Another theme echoing through the whole of the Christian tradition, from Antony of Egypt to Jonathan Edwards, is the notion of nature as a 'second book', offered alongside the first book of scripture as a way of 'reading' the presence of the Holy. The compelling landscapes of creation constitute a volume accessible to all. Thomas Browne, a seventeenth-century Anglican, declared that

surely the Heathens knew better how to joyne and reade these mysticall letters, than wee Christians, who cast a more careless eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of nature.<sup>17</sup>

Drawn from references to a double-sided scroll in Ezekiel 2,9 and Revelation 5,1, this metaphor of the second book has had an enduring influence in the Christian theology of nature. Raymond of Sabunde in the fifteenth century could even go so far as to suggest that the second book is less subject to misinterpretation than the first.

3. A still more central motif, developed in the theology and iconography of the Eastern Churches, is the dignity granted to matter in general as a result of the doctrine of the Incarnation. In response to those criticizing the veneration of icons in the Eastern tradition, John of Damascus argued, 'I do not worship matter. I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter, and who through matter wrought my salvation.'<sup>18</sup> Because of the sacramental mystery of Christmas, the material world of places and things assumes a new significance. As Teilhard de Chardin proclaimed in his 'Hymn to Matter', 'I acclaim you as the divine *milieu*, charged with creative power, . . . as the clay moulded and infused with life by the incarnate Word'.<sup>19</sup> All aspects of the material world are seen to shine in the glow of the Cosmic Christ. The created world of place and time shares fully in the redemptive hope of those awaiting the final consecration of matter (Rom 8,22-23).

4. Developing a Christian theology of place requires reckoning with the impact of Gnostic/Manichaean ideas on the history of Christian thought. Their repudiation of the natural world has had more influence than it should, despite their views having been consistently rejected by the Church. Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, produced a rich theology of creation in his reaction

to the Gnostic belief that an evil Demiurge gave form to the material world as we know it. He stressed instead that God's own 'hands' were intimately involved in moulding the earth and bringing it to redemption.<sup>20</sup> Augustine took a similar position in his opposition to Manichaean dualism in the fifth century, extolling 'the loveliness of the earth and sea and wide airy spaces', in his reaction to those who deny the beauty of the natural world.<sup>21</sup> Francis of Assisi's exuberant celebration of all creatures appears in bold contrast to the dark rejection of nature found among the Cathari in the thirteenth century. Francis knew, like Aquinas after him, that *asensuality* is always a vice in the Christian order of things.

One begins to suspect that the distinctive contribution of Christianity may lie in its refusal to dematerialize the world of matter. Maurice Leenhardt, a Christian missionary who worked for forty-five years with the Canakas of New Caledonia, asked a convert among the Canakas how he thought the coming of Christianity had changed the thinking of his people over the years. Leenhardt himself suggested that the new element Christianity might have brought was the notion of spirit. But the convert said no.

What Christianity brought was the conception of body. Before Christianity came, the Canakas had no notion of themselves as distinct persons. The new notion enabled them to grasp the notion of space, and thence distance, separation, and personhood.<sup>22</sup>

A deep respect for place, in all of its various aspects, undergirds the wholeness of the Christian revelation.

5. There is even, in the history of Christian thought, a tendency to celebrate the most diminutive and utterly ordinary dimensions of nature as sacramental signs of the divine glory. Meister Eckhart insisted, 'If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar, I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.'<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Augustine directed the human imagination toward ants and worms in the contemplation of God's glory.<sup>24</sup> The prophet Micah gave blessing to Bethlehem as the source of the Davidic hope, not in spite of, but *because* of its being least among all the places of Judah (Mic 5,2). Valuing the dignity-in-specificity of the created world becomes an important witness here to the reality of a God intimately engaged in all God has made.

If this principle is carried to its natural conclusions, one is led to its rich implications for environmental awareness and action. The value of species diversity and the integrity of endangered landscapes, for

example, become matters of theological, as well as economic and political concern, in the light of this truth. If a theology of place necessarily begins with creation and the incarnation, it properly ends with an attention to questions of eco-justice.<sup>25</sup>

*The role of place in kataphatic and apophatic traditions*

Having argued for the importance of 'place' in the study of Christian spirituality, we must go on to ask how the counterbalancing value of 'placelessness' offers a critique of the tendency to 'locate' God too specifically. God as *deus incarnatus* may be utterly accessible to human experience, yet God as *deus absconditus* is also 'free', unbounded by human efforts to assure the divine presence in any locale. There is an inescapable tension here between our human need for assurances (even guarantees) of God's presence and the absolute freedom of the divine being, in whom place itself coheres. It is a tension expressed by kataphatic and apophatic traditions within the history of spirituality.<sup>26</sup>

Prayer within the kataphatic tradition makes deliberate use of metaphor and image in contemplating the divine. It is highly oriented to place and thing. Here the imagination is directed 'according to the image' (*kata-phasis*) of the created world and is led to God by way of spatially-conceived analogies. This tradition expresses a keenly sacramental sensitivity to all the details of the natural world. Franciscan and Ignatian spiritualities are good examples. By contrast, the life of prayer in the apophatic tradition turns the imagination 'away from the image' (*apo-phasis*), emptying the mind of all efforts to comprehend the holy. Seen in the Byzantine and Dionysian traditions, from the Cappadocian fathers to the author of the *Cloud of unknowing*, it never denies the value of the natural world, but cautions that the use of human language (grounded as it is in time and space) is never sufficient to grasp the mystery of God.

The apophatic tradition, therefore, is very different from Gnostic/Manichaeic thought in its emphasis upon placelessness. The latter rejects the world of matter on principle, whereas the former offers a prophetic reminder that God as *deus absconditus* is never wholly available to us. There is no place where the presence of the divine can be guaranteed.

The differences between these two traditions of prayer are readily apparent in their respective attitudes toward place. The impulse of kataphatic spirituality grows out of biblical efforts to anchor the divine presence in particular places and in connection with material

things. Shechem, Beersheba, the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the ark, the tabernacle, the breaking of bread—all of these engage the senses in their suggestiveness of God's immanence. Prayer takes shape in the movement from the reconstruction of place in the imagination to the meeting of God in the human heart, through a process of interior pilgrimage.<sup>27</sup>

Beginning with a kinaesthetic place or thing as a starting point for contemplation, the imagination is led beyond and through the sacramental object to God alone. There is no promise here that the place or thing will in itself ensure access to the divine being, but this is the point at which the mind and body begins its approach to the divine. There is always the danger, of course, that one might focus on the exterior place as an end in itself, as if proximity to the place of the holy could substitute for the inner experience of the holy. Simply travelling to Medjugorje in Yugoslavia is, in itself, no assurance of encountering the presence of God.

Royal theologians under Solomon and his successors sought to guarantee the presence of Yahweh at the Temple in Jerusalem, associating the throne of the king with the cultic centre of divine power. Their effort was to connect the political stability of the kingdom with the life of prayer. But prophets like Jeremiah resisted this presumption that God's ritual presence could be controlled in any way whatever. They demythologized sacred space, attacking the myth of Zion and defending the elusive presence of a God who refuses to be bound to any location (Jer 7,4).<sup>28</sup> Stephen would do the same thing in his speech before the Sanhedrin, desacralizing the Temple and reminding his listeners that 'the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands' (Acts 7,48).<sup>29</sup>

This is the impulse of apophatic spirituality, with its concern to affirm the limits of God's accessibility to human understanding. Its object is to lead the believer into a process of abandonment, stripping away all images by which God is known and entering into 'a cloud of unknowing'. There God is met, not as an object to be understood, but ultimately as a mystery to be loved. This is characterized traditionally as 'negative theology'. Its encounter with God is dependent upon the negation of the self and all its efforts to manipulate access to the divine being.

Curiously, the apophatic tradition has made frequent use of mountain and desert landscapes in its concern to teach this relinquishment of control that is necessary for approaching God. The experience of Moses climbing Mt Sinai and entering there into the



dark cloud of God's presence is a theme repeatedly used by writers from Gregory of Nyssa to John of the Cross.<sup>30</sup> The mountain, like the desert, is a place of abandonment. There one is stripped of all ego-centric concerns, carried by the fierce landscape itself into an emptiness which only God can fill. The retreat to the desert in the history of spirituality is no accidental choice of landscape. Its desiccated barrenness, its sparsity of images, and utter indifference to human life has the effect of driving the believer out of herself and into the elusive presence of a wilderness God.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, we reach the ironic conclusion that apophatic spirituality (with its radical critique of images) makes use of landscape metaphors just as much as kataphatic spirituality. The places chosen are those that suggest surrender, renunciation, and the *via negativa*, but they are places nonetheless—vindicating our contention that place is an indispensable means for describing the experience of God.

Martin Heidegger insisted that 'place is the house of being'.<sup>32</sup> It is within the spatial connectedness of human life that we most deeply encounter the meaning of existence. Questions of place, therefore, are also questions of spirituality. We cannot ignore the material and living context by which the Otherness of God is apprehended by us. 'The greatest sin of the age', wrote Nicholas Berdyaev, 'is to make the concrete abstract.'<sup>33</sup> But this attention to place also requires a hermeneutics of suspicion—a warning that ultimately God stands beyond all places and times, beyond all the brokenness of human language. The pre-eminence of placelessness in prophetic thought calls us to a God known in exile as well as at home, a God who is radically free to stand alongside displaced peoples everywhere, a God discovered at the end of ourselves, in the experience of emptiness and loss. There it is that we are found and given a place beyond place. Only there do we discover ourselves, like T. S. Eliot, 'to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time'.<sup>34</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gregg, Robert C. (trans), *Athanasius: The life of Antony and the letter to Marcellinus* (New York, 1980), p 68.

<sup>2</sup> Letter 14 to Gregory Nazianzus. Quoted in Roger D. Sorrell, *St Francis of Assisi and nature* (New York, 1988), p 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, II, pp 461, 464. Cf Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian shore* (Berkeley, 1967), p 214.

<sup>4</sup> *De gestis pontificum Angliæ*, IV, PL 179, 1612-13. Cf Jean Leclercq, *The love of learning and the desire for God: a study of monastic culture* (New York, 1961), p 165.

<sup>5</sup> Eliade, Mircea, *The sacred and the profane* (New York, 1959).

<sup>6</sup> Lane, Belden C., *Landscapes of the sacred: geography and narrative in American spirituality* (Mahwah, N. J., 1988), pp 28–32.

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *The land: place as gift, promise, and challenge in biblical faith* (Philadelphia, 1977), p 3.

<sup>8</sup> These could be examined on an individual level, using the insights of Edward T. Hall's work on proxemics, or on a broader, socio-geographical level, after the manner of Whitney Cross's study of nineteenth-century revivalism in western New York. Cf Edward T. Hall, *The hidden dimension* (New York, 1965) and Whitney R. Cross, *The burned over district* (Garden City, N.Y., 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Cf Robert L. Cohn, *The shape of sacred space: four biblical studies* (Chico, Calif., 1981). Studies of various dimensions of place and its socio-religious significance can be found in Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: a study of environmental perception* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974); Edward Relph, *Place and placelessness* (London, 1976); and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not territory* (Leiden, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Koster, Helmut, 'Topos', *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, ed Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972), VIII, p 199.

<sup>11</sup> On the Greek words for place as used by Aristotle and Plato, see E. V. Walter's *Placeways: a theory of the human environment* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), pp 6–22, 115–131.

<sup>12</sup> Marmorstein, A., *The old rabbinic doctrine of God* (London, 1927), pp 92–93, 109–114.

<sup>13</sup> Cf Abelson, J., *The immanence of God in rabbinical literature* (New York, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Kaufmann, Walter (ed), *The basic writings of Nietzsche* (New York, 1968), p 277.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiv.20 and II.vi.1.

<sup>16</sup> Cf J. B. Harley and David Woodward (eds), *The history of cartography* (Chicago, 1987), I, pp 291, 310.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in George H. Williams, 'Christian attitudes toward nature', *Christian scholars' review* 2:2 (Spring, 1972), p 118.

<sup>18</sup> On the divine images, I.16. *Christian spirituality: origins to the twelfth century*, ed Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq (New York, 1989), p 384.

<sup>19</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *Hymn of the universe* (New York, 1961), p 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Against the heresies*, IV. 19.2. Cf Paul Santmire, *The travail of nature* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp 31–44.

<sup>21</sup> *Sermons*, 241.2. Cf Santmire, p 66.

<sup>22</sup> Fenton, John Y. (ed), *Theology and body* (Philadelphia, 1974), p 130.

<sup>23</sup> Fox, Matthew (ed), *Meditations with Meister Eckhart* (Santa Fe, 1983), p 14.

<sup>24</sup> *The city of God*, XXII. 24 and *Of true religion*, 41.77.

<sup>25</sup> Cf Moltmann, Jürgen, *God in creation* (San Francisco, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> Cf Egan, Harvey D., 'Christian apophatic and kataphatic mysticisms', *Theological studies* 39:3 (Sept. 1978), pp 399–426.

<sup>27</sup> The use of the five senses and reconstruction of place are prominent motifs in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola. Cf First Week, Fifth Exercise; Second Week, Fifth Contemplation.

<sup>28</sup> Terrien, Samuel, *The elusive presence: the heart of biblical theology* (San Francisco, 1978). Cf Walter Brueggemann, *The prophetic imagination* (Philadelphia, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Cf Davies, W. D., *The gospel and the land: early Christianity and Jewish territorial doctrine* (Berkeley, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses*, II.43–46 and III.152–167; Pseudo-Dionysius, *The mystical theology*, I.3; *The cloud of unknowing*, LXXI–LXXIII; and John of the Cross, *The ascent of Mount Carmel*, I.v.6. For a geographical study of mountains and spiritual experience, cf Edwin Bernbaum, *Sacred mountains of the world* (San Francisco, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Merton joined a love for the apophatic tradition with a fascination for mountain and desert experience. Cf John F. Teahan, 'A dark and empty way: Thomas Merton and the apophatic tradition', *Journal of religion* 58 (1978), pp 263–287.

<sup>32</sup> Cf Heidegger, Martin, 'Building dwelling thinking', *Poetry, language, thought* (New York, 1971), pp 145–161.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How can I help?* (New York, 1985), p 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Four Quartets*, *Little Gidding*, V.