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Mark R. Wynn

# FAITH & PLACE

An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology

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*An Essay in Embodied  
Religious Epistemology*

MARK R. WYNN

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*For Christina, Storm, and Amber*

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The places which have meant most to me have always been those places where I have felt on the edge of this world, places where something mysterious has seemed nearby.

When I was very young primary school age the wood up the lane at Bielside had this feeling especially a little half circle of trees against the North wall looking up towards the farm, and to the Northern sky.

I could write, now, in almost any direction from that one image of the wood. So much of my own life seems caught up in it every corner of it having its own special, peculiar atmosphere, an intensity of feeling which is partly me sensing a magic, an innocence, a stillness, in the place itself, and partly because, having been made aware of those deep layers of feeling in myself by being alone there, the same place serves as a sure route to bring them back.

(Edmund Cusick, from his blue notebook, December 2006/  
January 2007)

Christianity . . . developed in a wider religious culture that assumed human experience of the divine to be mediated through the body; that utilized the body further to express human divine relation; and that understood human expectation of life to come in and through bodily sensations. In each of these areas, it was the body as a sensing and sensory entity that mattered.

(Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*, 2006, p. 223)

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# The Differentiated Religious Significance of Space and Some Secular Analogues for Religious Knowledge

## THE DIFFERENTIATED RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF SPACE

This discussion of the religious significance of place is intended as an exercise in philosophical theology. That comment might provoke a degree of puzzlement. Of course, philosophical theologians have wanted to affirm that God is present in the world, and present at particular places. But the notion of divine presence has typically been articulated via the idea of God's *omni*-presence – and that idea suggests that, in certain fundamental respects anyway, God's relationship to space is undifferentiated. And doesn't this show that 'place' cannot be a very interesting category for philosophical theology? Thomas Aquinas makes the point with characteristic clarity: 'God exists in *everything* by his power (inasmuch as everything is subject to this), by presence (inasmuch as everything is naked and open to his gaze), and by his essence (inasmuch as he exists in everything causing its existence . . . ).'<sup>1</sup> A similar emphasis is evident in the work of recent commentators. Richard Swinburne, for example, represents God's presence in the world as a function of his

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.8.3, in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds., *Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, Questions on God* (Cambridge, 2006), my emphasis. See also Thomas's comment that: 'One approaches God, and one draws away from him, not by bodily movement, since he is everywhere, but by movement of the heart': *ibid.*, 1a.3.1.



power and knowledge – where this power and knowledge are of a specially intimate kind, since they have no need of causal mediation.<sup>2</sup> On this approach too, God is present in all places on the same basis, since all regions of space are equally open to God's knowledge and sustaining activity.

While all of this may be true enough, it seems that there is at any rate more to be said. As enacted, religious belief is after all, in many ways, relative to place: the faithful seek out certain places for prayer, they find certain locations especially conducive to religious experience, and they undertake sometimes rather arduous journeys to sites which are associated with figures of outstanding sanctity, or with events which have played a defining role in the formation of their own tradition. All of these facts are overwhelmingly apparent from even a cursory examination of the practices of believers, and all would fall readily within the scope of an anthropological or sociological appreciation of the phenomena of religious life. Yet it is unclear, I suggest, how the differentiated religious significance of place that is manifest in so much religious belief and practice is to be understood given the idea, affirmed in the doctrine of divine omnipresence, that God's relationship to space is (in certain fundamental respects) uniform or free from differentiation.

It is not difficult to see why philosophers have been reluctant to pare down the doctrine of divine omnipresence. In the words of Luco van den Brom, 'the localizability of a divine being poses a constant threat to his worthiness to receive worship'.<sup>3</sup> And as Saint Anselm says, it is 'a mark of shameless impudence to say that place circumscribes the magnitude of Supreme Truth!'<sup>4</sup> So an adherent of the Abrahamic faiths – of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam – will, evidently, want to repudiate any suggestion that the differentiated religious significance of place implies that God is confined by particular places. And

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford, 1994), p. 127. Similarly, he notes that divine omnipresence follows directly from divine omnipotence and omniscience (p. 150).

<sup>3</sup> Luco van den Brom, *Divine Presence in the World* (Kampen, 1993), p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> *Monologion*, Chapter 20, cited in Edward R. Wierenga, 'Omnipresence', in Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, eds., *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 1997), p. 286. He gives as his source *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, tr. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL, 1962).

upholding this perspective will require, no doubt, something like the traditional doctrine of divine omnipresence.

But it is not sufficient, I am going to argue, to make do with a merely psychological or pragmatic account of the differentiated religious significance of place – by saying, for example, that some places are specially conducive to prayer just because they are quiet, or that others are specially favourable for worship just because they provide a large covered space and a good acoustic, or because it is generally known that at 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning there will be a minister here who is willing to lead a service! One recurrent theme of this study will be, then, the insufficiency of purely psychological accounts of differentiation in the religious significance of place. To see the implausibility of this sort of account, if taken to provide a comprehensive view, it is perhaps enough to note for now – by analogy – the inadequacy of a purely psychological account of the rationale for visiting the grave of a loved one. This act is in part about providing an occasion to recall the deceased person; but it also matters to us, very often anyway, that we should be physically alongside the remains of the dead person – and there is more to standing in this relationship than simply thinking certain thoughts or undergoing certain experiences. So in this connection, and in other, more explicitly religious contexts, I shall argue, location matters independently of its implications for our mental life.

Another kind of account might seek to give a metaphysical rather than psychological edge to the idea of differentiation in the religious significance of place, by recalling Aquinas's remarks on the connection between God's presence and God's activity, and proposing that God's activity varies with place – especially in so far as this activity is sometimes 'miraculous' or 'direct', that is, independent of the framework of secondary or creaturely causality. If God's causal relationship to events is differentiated in this way, it might be said, then we can allow for a correlative differentiation in the mode of God's presence (while still affirming that God is everywhere present) – by supposing that God is present in an especially intimate or 'immediate' way in certain events, and in turn therefore in the places where those events unfold. And it might be thought that this sort of account can provide a rationale for some place-based religious practices. Why not suppose, for example, that pilgrimage to a place such as Lourdes is

grounded in the belief that miracles of healing are relatively likely to occur here – so that the religious significance of the shrine is relative to the special character of God's agency there?

As with psychologizing perspectives on the significance of place, I do not want to suggest that these ideas are of no interest for an account of the religious meaning of place – but I do think that, even when taken together, 'psychological' and 'metaphysical' approaches fail to provide a comprehensive view. More exactly, I am going to try to identify a kind of middle ground – one which roots the differentiated religious significance of place neither in some purely psychological conception of the importance of place, nor in some metaphysical claim about divine 'intervention' within the framework of secondary causation. Intuitively, the plausibility of this middle ground consists in the fact that when the believer assigns a special religious significance to a place, they need not suppose that being at the place is at all likely to effect some transformation in their consciousness – and they need not think, therefore, that it is the possibility of this sort of transformation which explains the place's religious importance; but equally, when they find a place to be of special religious significance, the believer need not be committed thereby to some metaphysical speculation concerning the 'mechanics' of divine action at this place. There are analogies here with other fields of theological discussion. For example, we might well wish to say that the significance of the eucharist is not simply that of a memorial meal (the psychologistic reading of the meaning of the practice) – but equally it is not dependent upon the truth of some speculative (and perhaps as yet unformulated) account of the metaphysics of divine action at the moment of consecration.

#### THE USE OF SECULAR ANALOGIES FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF

So here is one intellectual context for the present work: I am interested to see how the doctrine of divine omnipresence might be set within some larger theoretical framework which gives proper

recognition (one that is neither psychologically reductionist nor metaphysically overbearing) to the place-relative character of religious belief and practice. A second intellectual context is provided by recent work in analytic religious epistemology. This tradition of enquiry has for some time been occupied with the fruitfulness of various secular analogies for religious knowledge. (For ease of reference, I shall continue to talk of ‘knowledge’ here, but others may prefer to substitute some other epistemic success term – and this should not disturb the main thread of the argument.) For example, some writers have thought that knowledge of God is akin to scientific knowledge – since both kinds of knowledge involve the postulation of an entity which is not itself observed but which can help to explain the data of observation. Providing that it satisfies criteria such as simplicity and predictive power, so the argument runs, a postulate of this kind will count as a good explanation; and reference to God generates, therefore, a powerful account of certain structural features of the universe, such as its conformity to natural law – where ‘explanatory power’ is defined by the same standards of theory construction as obtain in the natural sciences. Richard Swinburne’s writings provide the most detailed and, justly, the most celebrated working out of this approach to the epistemology of religious belief.<sup>5</sup>

Other commentators have given a larger role to the idea that religious experience is analogous to ordinary perceptual experience – so that religious knowledge has an epistemic status which is broadly comparable with that of our everyday perceptual knowledge of the material world. William Alston, for example, has argued that certain objections to the epistemic worth of religious experience, if applied consistently, would have, equally, a tendency to impugn the trustworthiness of ordinary perceptual experience. This is, he suggests, a case of applying ‘double standards’ – of holding religious experience accountable to a more exacting set of requirements than we would deem fitting in the context of ordinary sense experience.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See especially Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (2nd edn, Oxford, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> See William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), Chapter 6. It is worth noting that Swinburne also offers an argument from religious experience: *The Existence of God*, Chapter 13.

Of course, Alston's case is not straightforwardly an argument for the idea that religious and ordinary perceptual experience are analogous; he is also keen to emphasize that on certain points the two are answerable to different epistemic standards. Otherwise, he suggests, we will fall into 'epistemic imperialism' – allowing one mode of experience, and its associated doxastic or belief-forming practices, to determine the epistemic standards which apply to experience in general. And we know from everyday sensory contexts that this is not appropriate – we would not, for instance, apply the same standards to the discrimination of the finer gustatory properties of a wine and the identification of the large-scale structural properties of a table. Nonetheless, Alston's project can be seen to form part of this broadly defined trend in recent philosophy of religion to ground the epistemic status of religious belief in analogies drawn from other epistemic contexts. (Even his criticism of 'epistemic imperialism', with its recognition of the *sui generis* character of religious experience in certain respects, rests more broadly upon an appeal to the domain of sensory experience, in so far as our appreciation of the inappropriateness of over-generalizing accounts of the grounds for belief derives from our practice within this domain – as when we distinguish between beliefs about wines and about tables.)

These strategies, whether rooted in scientific or perceptual analogies, make obvious apologetic sense – since they trade on the evident fact that ordinary sensory beliefs and scientific beliefs enjoy, for most of us anyway, a certain epistemic prestige. But whatever their merits in this respect, both strategies have a tendency to break the connection between religious knowledge and our embodied and practical – including here our ethical and aesthetic – engagement with the material world. The first strategy represents religious knowledge as the product of a quasi-scientific inference. It should be said that Swinburne's formulation of this approach actually turns on a sharp distinction between 'personal' and 'scientific' modes of explanation – and he holds, of course, that theistic explanation is 'personal'. In general terms, his argument is that some features of the universe are in principle scientifically inexplicable (for example, its large-scale structure, or the very fact of its scientific intelligibility). Even so, he maintains, these features call for explanation of some kind – and

since there are in general only two varieties of explanation, the personal (which deploys the notions of belief and intention) and the scientific (which appeals to natural regularity), we must therefore have recourse, in these cases, to a personal explanation. Nonetheless, Swinburne still assimilates religious belief to a quasi-scientific inference in so far as he thinks that theistic explanation is properly accountable to the criteria which regulate theory construction in science – especially simplicity and predictive power.

So here religious knowledge is represented as an inference – one which starts from observation of general structural features of the world, and then carries the mind away from the material order to the non-material, unobserved God who is postulated as its source. Such an approach is disconnected from our practical engagement with the material world in various respects: it is concerned not with specific environments, or ‘places’, and our embodied interaction with them, but with general structural features of the universe of the kind disclosed in, for example, cosmology; it turns upon an inference of an abstractly theoretical kind; and the explanans which it postulates, namely God, is taken to be a non-material entity, whose character and powers can be specified, in general terms, independently of any reference to what is revealed in our experience of the material world.

Alston’s kind of approach also seems to be disconnected, in fundamental respects, from our practical knowledge of the world. For the most part, he is concerned with religious experience conceived as a non-sensory encounter with God – and an experience of this kind will bypass our material context altogether.<sup>7</sup> In fairness, we should add that Alston acknowledges the possibility of ‘indirect perception’ and ‘indirect recognition’ of God, where God is perceived or recognized in (rather than being inferred from) the data of sense observation – rather as we might indirectly perceive someone when we see a television image of them, or indirectly recognize an aeroplane in a vapour trail, even if we cannot make out the plane itself.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, by taking ‘direct’, non-sensory perception of God as the focus of his discussion, Alston inevitably deflects attention away

<sup>7</sup> Alston sets out the idea of non sensory experience in *Perceiving God*, pp. 14–20.

<sup>8</sup> Alston gives these examples in *Perceiving God*, p. 21. He notes the possibility of religious parallels for both cases on p. 28.

from the material context of religious experience;<sup>9</sup> and his preference for thinking of other kinds of religious experience by analogy with, say, seeing a television image or a vapour trail invites the thought that even in cases of ‘indirect’ perception or recognition, God is known simply by looking, rather than by virtue of our moral, aesthetic and otherwise engaged response to the material world.

I noted above that I did not want so much to reject psychologizing or metaphysical accounts of the differentiated religious significance of place, as to question their capacity to provide a comprehensive view. Similarly, I do not wish to deny the worth of scientific and perceptual analogies for religious knowledge. In fact, the disciplined unfolding of both analogies in recent discussion has helped to throw various features of the epistemology of religious belief into new and helpful relief. However, I do think that both strategies have a tendency to occlude the connections between religious knowledge and our practical, engaged knowledge of the material world. So a further aim of the present volume is to consider how this connection might be articulated in theoretical terms.

### THE ANALOGY BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND KNOWLEDGE OF PLACE

For this purpose, I am going to rely upon another secular analogy – by thinking of knowledge of God as analogous to knowledge of place. Knowledge of place consists, at least in part, in an embodied, practical and, very often, theoretically inarticulate responsiveness to a given region of space. So to this extent, knowledge of place will of course form a more promising starting point for an account of knowledge of God *if* our concern is to bring into clearer view the relationship between knowledge of God and our practical, engaged knowledge of the world. But on behalf of the other perspectives

<sup>9</sup> Alston notes this decision in *Perceiving God*, p. 28. He also shows some reluctance to give a substantive epistemic role to emotional feelings in religious experience – which again suggests a tendency to abstract from the embodied character of such experience (see pp. 49–50).

I have mentioned – those rooted in scientific or perceptual analogies – it might be wondered why we should suppose that there is any such connection. This book is intended to constitute one extended response to this question, but in brief my approach is bound up with the belief that knowledge of God, in the theologically or religiously interesting sense, involves a commitment of the person in their affective-practical-cognitive integrity. One might in a purely inferential way, or perhaps by means of some non-sensory intuition, come to form the belief that there is a God, without this belief carrying any implications for one's behaviour. But 'belief' of this kind, shorn of any consequences for one's life practically and affectively, is not what is standardly meant by 'belief' in the religious context.<sup>10</sup>

Peter Winch makes this sort of point when he comments that ceasing to pray is more like an *aspect* than it is like a *consequence* of ceasing to believe in God. By contrast, my ceasing to address letters to the Yugoslav ambassador, he notes, is naturally viewed as a consequence (and not an aspect) of my ceasing to believe that there is such an individual.<sup>11</sup> Here Winch is proposing that when we ascribe a religious belief to someone we are not, in the normal case, attributing to them some purely theoretical belief – that is, a belief which is not of itself action-guiding or in some other way implicated in activities such as prayer. By contrast, I could very well believe that there is a Yugoslav ambassador without this belief carrying any implications for my life from a practical point of view. And this is why ceasing to write to the ambassador can count as a 'consequence' of giving up the belief that there is an ambassador – because the belief in this case has the requisite logical independence from the practice to allow

<sup>10</sup> For a further attempt to provide an existentially 'denser' characterization of the notion of 'belief' as it operates in religious contexts, one that I have found particularly helpful, see John Cottingham's proposal that 'character' is relevant to the epistemology of religious belief, and his related suggestion that religious belief can be grounded in the recognition of moral and aesthetic 'traces' of God, rather than in some supra sensory experience: *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge, 2005), Chapter 7. For a further perspective which also stands in distinction from Alstonian and Swinburnean kinds of approach, see Douglas Hedley's instructive defence of a contemporary form of Christian Platonism in *Living Forms of the Imagination* (London, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Winch, 'Meaning and Religious Language' in Stuart Brown, ed., *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, NY, 1977), pp. 207–8.



a change in the practice to count as a consequence, rather than simply an ‘aspect’, of a change in belief.<sup>12</sup>

This issue is connected with another. There are two standard routes into the subject matter of philosophical theology or the philosophy of religion. As we have seen, one route is epistemological: we can start by asking ourselves about the grounds and status of religious knowledge claims. The other route begins, rather, with the content of religious belief – by asking about what we should understand by ‘God’ or ‘the sacred’ otherwise conceived. Of course, these two routes are typically mutually defining – a given epistemology of religious belief will standardly issue in a certain view of the ‘object’ of religious belief, and vice versa. For example, Aquinas’s First Way lays down one account of the epistemic basis of belief in God – seeing such belief as derivable from the need to explain change. But this strategy also commits us, in his judgement, to a certain conception of God – as changeless, and in turn therefore as immaterial and impassible. Similarly, though inversely we might suppose, Anselm begins from a conception of God, as ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’, and on the basis of this conception, he goes on to provide a set of reasons for supposing that God cannot but exist.<sup>13</sup>

This connection between religious epistemology and the concept of God also holds in broad terms, I think, when we consider the secular analogies for knowledge of God that have been proposed by Swinburne, Alston, and others. If we postulate God in rather the way that we postulate an electron, in order to explain the data of observation, or if we suppose that in religious experience we encounter

<sup>12</sup> Although I shall not explore the connections here, the perspective defended in this book could easily be aligned with recent feminist epistemology. See for example the concern for questions of ‘place’ and embodied practice that is apparent in Lorraine Code’s remark that: ‘In their commitment to honouring complexity, ecofeminism and ecological thinking require sensitivity to detail, to minutiae, to whatever precisely... distinguishes this woman, this contestable practice, this social intervention, this place, this problem of knowledge, this injustice, this locality from that’: Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 17–18. For a clear account of how feminist perspectives might be brought to bear on questions in the epistemology of religion in particular, see Pamela Sue Anderson, ‘An Epistemological Ethical Approach’, in Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack, eds., *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London, 2004), pp. 87–102.

<sup>13</sup> See respectively *Summa Theologiae* 1a.2.3 and 1a.3, and *Proslogion*, Chapters 2–3.

God in rather the way that we encounter tables and chairs (albeit that religious experience is perhaps non-sensory), then it is natural to think of God as a kind of individual entity – as a particular non-material item which can stand as the focal object of our experience, or as a particular non-material intelligence whose beliefs and intentions help to explain the character of the world in various respects. Again, I don't want to suppose that these ways of modelling God's reality are flatly mistaken, but I do think that they are liable to issue in misunderstanding unless they are set within some larger intellectual context.

This is not least because there is a broadly based tendency, which appears to cross the boundaries of the major faith traditions, to represent God, or the sacred otherwise conceived, in supra-individual terms. Mircea Eliade picks out this trend when he remarks that: 'The great paradox common to all religions is that God in showing Himself to mankind is free to take any form whatsoever but that, by this very assertion of His freedom, He "limits Himself" and reduces Himself to a mere fragment of the whole which He represents.'<sup>14</sup> On this view, God is not so much another individual thing, as an overarching context or framework in light of which individual things can be assigned a meaning or sense. The same sort of point is put in specifically Christian terms in this exposition of the thought of Gregory Palamas, arguably the foremost eastern theologian of the post-patristic period:

God... is not a 'nature' or 'being', in the sense that he is not to be regarded as one existent object among a plurality of such existent objects. If we say 'God exists', then the word 'exists' bears in his case a connotation fundamentally different from what it has when applied to created things. For this reason Palamas employs the *hyper* language, prominent in the writings ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500): God, he says, is *hyperousios*, 'beyond

<sup>14</sup> Mircea Eliade, 'Divinities: Art and the Divine', in Diane Apostolos Cappadona, ed., *Mircea Eliade: Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts* (New York, 1985), p. 56. Another cross faith study which reaches similar conclusions is Keith Ward, *Images of Eternity: Concepts of God in Five Religious Traditions* (London, 1987). Ward maintains that major thinkers in the five main faith traditions (of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) adopt a 'dual aspect' account of God where in each case one of these aspects involves a conception of the sacred as supra individual.

being'. . . Yet, if God is 'no thing', in the sense that he is not one among many existent objects, yet he is also 'All', in the sense that without his continual indwelling and the uninterrupted exercise of his creative power, no created power, no created person or object could exist in any way whatsoever.<sup>15</sup>

So knowledge of place may be of interest to philosophical theologians for this further reason: not only is such knowledge obviously embedded in our practical relationship to the material world, it is also knowledge not so much of another individual entity as of a context, in light of which we can assess the significance of individual entities. Again, these are themes I shall explore at greater length as we proceed. Here I just want to indicate in general terms why the analogy between knowledge of God and knowledge of place, around which this work is organized, might give some appearance, at least initially, of being able to sustain conclusions which will mesh constructively with various strands of theological tradition. In brief, this analogy promises to bring into clearer view than do scientific and perceptual analogies the practical, engaged character of religious knowledge and the supra-individual nature of God.

## THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

I have been trying to locate the concerns of this book within an intellectual context that is provided by recent work in the epistemology of religion, and by discussion of the concept of omnipresence. The book also has a more autobiographical context. In part, this is because it represents an extension of various themes drawn from my earlier work. In *God and Goodness: A Natural Theological Perspective*,<sup>16</sup> I tried to show how the argument from design can be rooted in a distinctive evaluative stance towards the world, and how it can be connected

<sup>15</sup> Kallistos Ware, 'God Immanent yet Transcendent: The Divine Energies according to Saint Gregory Palamas', in P. Clayton and A. Peacocke, eds., *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2004), p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> London, 1999.

thereby to a religiously attractive view of God – one which takes seriously the doctrine of divine supra-individuality. So this earlier book sought to cast the argument from design in a somewhat unconventional form – by anchoring the argument in phenomena whose recognition calls for a degree of evaluative engagement, and by showing how the argument need not represent God simply as a kind of celestial engineer, or in some other way which is religiously impoverished because disconnected from religious practice. My next book, *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding*, was also concerned with the relationship between religious belief and evaluative commitment.<sup>17</sup> Here the focus of discussion was more directly the embodied, affectively toned character of religious apprehension, and the connections – of form and content – between religious and ethical knowledge, especially in so far as the latter is rooted in emotional feelings which light up the significance of the world in their own right, rather than simply by virtue of their association with some discursive thought. So the current discussion carries forward the enquiries of these earlier volumes. Like them, it is occupied with the question of how religious knowledge may be grounded in an evaluatively committed appreciation of the material world, and like them it is concerned with the question of what is implied hereby for the concept of God – but it is distinctive of course in taking ‘place’ as the fundamental category in terms of which these matters can be explored.

The book also has a more strictly autobiographical context. The poet Edmund Cusick died on the 15 January, 2007, at the age of 44. Edmund was a close friend of mine of many years’ standing, and when I learnt of his illness and impending death I found myself thinking over the things we had said and done together. As I did so, I came to see that, at root, our friendship consisted in a shared sensibility for certain places. I also realized that my interest in the religious significance of place must derive in large part from our shared encounter with certain places, especially in the early years of our friendship. Edmund was later to become a poet, and I like to think that the sensitivity for particular places which is displayed in his writings also has its origins, in some degree, in those times. So this

<sup>17</sup> *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling* (Cambridge, 2005).

book and his poetry constitute, I would say, two independent but convergent lines of development – I say ‘independent’ since we did not discuss these questions in later years – each putting to use the resources of a different home discipline to draw out the meaning of certain formative, place-grounded experiences which we shared as students in Oxford from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s.

So the book has for me this further significance: it is an attempt to provide a philosophical and theological context for understanding the life of my friend, and also his work – and I hope of course that, in this small way, the book will stand as a memorial of him. I trust that this further dimension of my discussion has not been artificially grafted on to the book’s other concerns. On the contrary, as I have already intimated, we might well suppose that a place-based religious epistemology will help to bring the aesthetic dimension of religious knowledge into clearer view. Epistemologies which root religious knowledge in a chain of inference, or in a non-sensory intuition, are unlikely to be very hospitable to the thought that the kind of knowledge that we associate with the aesthetic contemplation of material forms can be vitally implicated in knowledge of God. But it is common knowledge that for a deep-seated appreciation of place we need to turn often enough to literary sources, and perhaps especially to poetry. So locating the poetry of Edmund Cusick, and its unfolding of the human and religious meaning of certain places, within the compass of this enquiry has not required any sleight of hand. However, I am also sure that I would not have broached these matters here but for his untimely death.

## THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Let me conclude these introductory remarks by saying something about the structure of the book. I am going to begin, in Chapter 2, by reciting a recollection of a place-based friendship. Here I aim to show, by means of an existentially ‘dense’ description, how relationship to particular places can contribute to the deep structure of a human life. I do not claim that the experiences which are recorded

here are in matters of detail at all typical of human experience of place more generally – on the contrary, they bear very clearly the stamp of a particular time of life, and a particular set of material circumstances. However, these experiences do point to three general ways in which places may acquire a special or differentiated religious significance. Expounding these connections more fully and more rigorously will provide the subject matter of the remainder of the book.

The first of these approaches focuses upon the capacity of a place to image microcosmically the significance of the created order as a whole. The second supposes that our embodied appropriation of a material context can constitute an act of reference to God, or enable some sort of apprehension of God. And finally, I consider the possibility that the meaning of events which have occurred at a particular site, including events of religious significance, can be stored up and then encountered there – where the language of ‘encounter’ signifies that these embodied meanings are ‘presented’ to us, rather than simply being entertained in thought. These proposals will be set down much more fully in the discussion which follows – here I only list them somewhat sloganistically, to provide an initial indication of the structure of our enquiry.

These three models of the differentiated religious significance of place will be sketched out in the course of Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 will then argue that the concepts of God and of place are analogous on various points. This exercise will provide a further, more abstractly conceptual way of grounding our three models. It will also establish a general presumption that knowledge of God will have, in certain fundamental respects, the same character as knowledge of place. Chapter 5 will offer a more sustained analysis of the nature of knowledge of place – and will apply these findings to our developing account of the nature of knowledge of God. Chapter 6 will extend the discussion by looking at what is perhaps the single most obvious example of a place-based religious practice: pilgrimage. Here I aim to show how the theoretical perspective forged in Chapters 3–5 can be applied with profit to the data of religious life. The three models of the differentiated religious significance of place outlined in Chapter 2 will provide, once again, a key analytical framework for organizing the discussion. Chapter 7 will use the same theoretical apparatus to consider the connections between various places, including natural

as well as built environments, and a range of religious practices and knowledge claims. The final chapter in the main body of the book, Chapter 8, will then draw out some of the implications of our approach for the aesthetic dimension of religious understanding – with particular reference to the poetic appreciation of place.

But before turning to more theoretical matters, I am going to begin with an admittedly rather dreamy account of how relationship to particular places may help to constitute a friendship.

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## Friendship and Relationship to Place

### INTRODUCTION

As promised, this chapter will begin with a brief biographical essay concerning a friendship and its rootedness in particular places. In this way, I hope to provide, among other things, a relatively thick psychological description of some of the themes which we shall examine more theoretically later – and to show how the perspectives that emerge in later discussion are not mere abstractions, but have their roots in familiar kinds of experience. The essay needs to be set in context a little, though I shall try to leave the reader to form their own judgement on the kinds of significance that the text assigns to place – before setting out my own reading of this question.

The essay was written by a friend of the poet Edmund Cusick and recalls their experiences as students in Oxford. Some analytically trained readers may find the tone of the account a little feverish, so it may be best to begin with a word of explanation on this point. If you do not find yourself reassured by these remarks, you can always bypass the essay, by proceeding directly to the commentary upon it that I have provided in later parts of the chapter! Once again, my own view is that these biographical reflections do not amount to mere ‘psychological’ adornment of the more serious, theoretical work which is to come – rather, they provide a benchmark against which that work needs to be judged. Indeed, in my own view, much of the remainder of the book is best read as an extended commentary on this text.

Edmund learnt that he was dying in December 2006. At that time he was told that he could expect to live for some months – but in the event



he was dead within a month. When he met with the author of this essay, shortly after his diagnosis, he explained that he was trying to write down various episodes from his life – so that his young children could get to know him better, in time. And he asked his friend if he would help in this exercise by recording some of his recollections of their time together as students. His friend set to work as soon as he had opportunity. His aim was partly to fulfil Edmund's request – but he also wanted to address Edmund on the matter of their friendship.

So the tone and sometimes rather idiosyncratic content of the essay have to be understood in these terms. Edmund's friend is writing first of all for him – and these words and these themes have been chosen because he thought they would resonate with his friend. He is certainly not seeking to contribute to the literature in philosophy of religion! So the reader may find some of the references in the letter of no great interest – and some may even be of dubious intelligibility. Nonetheless I have decided to reproduce the text in full, since its central themes are hard to excerpt. The main body of the letter and the accompanying note were both hand-written, and I have kept some of the original notation in this printed version. It may be relevant to add that Edmund did not get to read the letter. It was waiting for him at his home – but he never returned from hospital to find it.

I am grateful for permission to use this material here.

## A BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACE

New Year's Eve 2006

[Dear Edmund]

This represents with one or two exceptions a 1st draft – and I have decided to leave it as a first draft, despite the many obvious imperfections of expression and developments of idea. Many of the things recalled here I have not thought about for 15 or more years – and some have never been set down in words. By leaving this account as a first draft, I want to keep the vividness of some of those first impressions – rather than allowing them to be scuffed over by (my

professional predisposition for) systematization (though there is already too much of that!) I have come to think that our friendship is partly a matter of our shared sensibility for certain places – and here I try to explore how that could be so. I have also tried to include enough geographical detail to allow Christina + the girls to retrace our steps at points if they ever wish to do so.

With thanks for those times and my love, [your friend] x

\* \* \*

December 2006

We got to know one another at no 11 Norham Gardens – a large Victorian house on the northern boundary of the University Parks and a place we sometimes referred to simply as ‘the premises’ – so as not to give away the fact that our place of residence was a Sacred Heart convent – attached to which was a student annexe with about 20 rooms. For us the emotional geography of Oxford was built around the convent and 2 or 3 other places of special significance to which we would make regular forays. Although we never really said as much, so far as I remember, it was common ground between us that by visiting such places, and attuning ourselves to them, we could set other matters in proper perspective. So these were the places in which we tried to root ourselves, and when we later spoke of Oxford, it would be these places that we would recall first, and that would give shape + vitality to whatever else we had experienced there.

One such place of significance was Port Meadow. It mattered I think that to reach PM from Norham Gardens you had only to travel W – so there was no need to go through the city, + negotiate the bustle of student life + city traffic – instead we would move away from all of that, and since these visits were often made in late afternoon or early evening, we would be heading into the setting sun. So Port Meadow was always a kind of portal to another world, a world removed from the everyday concerns of traffic + commuting + even of study. As we approached we would often pause at the railway bridge, to survey the meadow below, to look back along the railway line towards the station (so for this reason too, PM must have seemed to us a stepping off point, for movement away from Oxford + its

characteristic concerns – it was here that I would often farewell Edmund, standing on the platform as he departed N for the summer, each waving to the other, + anticipating our next meeting in the hills around Aberdeen... ) and we would also pause to lay our hands against the southern face of the bridge, and to feel the accumulated heat of the sun which had soaked into the brick... I remember the surprise occasioned when we first made this discovery. It was here too that we discussed Edmund's departure from the University Press, + agreed that no judgement could be reached on whether this development was for bad or for good until we knew what lay ahead. So PM was for us a kind of liminal zone – at the margins of the city, suspended between night and day, somehow storing up the energy + bustle of the day and releasing it in the form of a gentle suffusing warmth that would kiss our faces as we gazed W, and seep into our fingers + bones as we sat astride our bikes with arms outstretched towards the bridge, and passing beneath our feet would be others being swept to or from Oxford, and also the canal boats, the dwellings of people who had made the margins a way of life.


After absorbing these things, in my case only subliminally I think, we'd push off, always at Edmund's bidding, and swoop down towards the meadow. We'd feel the air rushing past our faces and hear the clang of the sprung gate closing behind us – all the senses partook in this sense of being released from the world we were leaving behind – a world which was even for a student in Oxford in the 1980s, one of responsibilities, of appointments to be kept, and particular paths to be followed, to navigate the traffic of ordinary living – whereas the meadow was all open expansiveness, flat and at times flooded, + even frozen over, so that its surface would collect + throw back the light of the sky. In its way it was a place of transfiguration – where even the motes suspended in the evening air, stirred up by the passage of our bikes across the dusty tracks of the meadow, would be caught + irradiated so revealing their true nature, and giving them the appearance of their own kind of life + their own kind of glory. And we would look back at the city + see its spires irradiated in the same light – and, often without articulation, we would set the business and congestion of our lives there against the open airiness of the meadow, and feel our ordinary concerns transfigured – a kind of disengagement in the name of a deeper, more compassionate re-engagement with the objects of those concerns.

If there was one point on the meadow for which we would make it would be the point at which the Thames or Isis divides – after rattling over the wooden boards of a first bridge, we would then pause before crossing over a second bridge, + place ourselves on the concrete pontoon projecting out into the flow of the stream. From here you could see the sweep of the meadow to your right, and ahead you could see the river snaking across the meadow bound for the city and the sea. This too was a kind of liminal zone – on the one side the solidity + permanence of the meadow, and on the other the lapping of the waters of the river, itself at that point undergoing a change of identity as it was channelled to left + to right. Again what I remember most, though we did not really advert to it at the time, are the sensory qualities of the place – the breezes coming from the exposed N and playing upon the surface of the water and upon our faces, and disturbing the image of the moon.

Lastly, though again we never really said as much, it mattered I think that Port Meadow was common ground, endowed in perpetuity to the citizens of Oxford. Although our reflections here only rarely had any political reference, we knew the expansive embrace of the meadow to be not just spatial but also social.

By contrast the grounds of the colleges could only be entered by passing a sign setting out the conditions of entry. And this was true of the second focus of our wanderings – New College cloister. We would normally approach the cloister from Holywell St, so would have to pass the porters' lodge – as members of the University we had a right to entry, but even so we preferred not to be challenged, so we would strike out with a rather forced confidence as we crossed the gaze of the college officials. We would then pass through the old city wall where the royalist forces had once been besieged – here again there was a contrast with the meadow, and a powerful sense of being admitted to a space that was not common ground but hedged about by restrictions and by the intimation of danger. Often we would visit this place by dark – commonly on our return from some engagement in the city – most likely at the cinema. Although there was no necessity to do so, we found ourselves stooping, self protectively, as we pressed on through the passageway leading under the wall, and into the quadrangle beyond. Here we found ourselves already in a kind of ethereal

world of manicured lawns and a gentle diffuse light which was thrown upon the yellowing crenellated walls of the quad. If we spoke here at all it was in hushed tones. Bearing right we would then exit the quadrangle, passing I remember a rose bush trained against the wall . . . If Port Meadow was about the open expansiveness of nature, here we found ourselves enclosed in a world of human making where nature itself seemed to have taken on the disciplines of the order of a human design. But these disciplines for their part served a suprahuman purpose, which came into view as we rounded the corner into the cloister set beside the college chapel. Again this was typically an experience of visual obscurity – the cloister was not lit by artificial means and our eyes would strain to pick out the lineaments of its walls. At times the experience was more auditory than visual – if we could hear music from evensong or a rehearsal for evensong, or the crazy chiming of the clocktower which stands at the corner of the cloister. But most often our approach would be in silence. Turning right and diagonally we would feel as much as see our way to the opening from the cloister on to the lawn. Here we knew ourselves to be in the centre of the city – at the heart of a college which stands at the heart of the University, around which stands the modern city. The overwhelming sensation was one of stillness – no breeze could reach us here, nor the sound of any traffic, and the stones looked on motionless. Here we felt ourselves at the centre of a community centuries old – it was here that scholars in the 14th century and later would have come to collect themselves – before departing for the neighbouring spaces reserved for their communal life – of worship and dining and study. It was here that the significance of their lives in these other respects would have been scrutinized and set in due order. Where Port Meadow stood at the margins of the University + the city, here we were at its epicentre – but this too was a kind of liminal space, one set apart from ordinary experience, not now because of its openness + expansiveness, but because of the contraction and concentration of the structures of ordinary experience into an image of integration and a stillness that was not mere stasis but the stillness-in-movement of the graceful lines that wound themselves sinuously around the stretch of lawn that stood at the centre of the cloister. If there was any doubt that this image was of an order deeper than any of

merely human making this was dispelled by the tree, an evergreen oak, that stood in the corner of the cloister, spreading its branches across a region of bare earth. The tree too was motionless, always the same in appearance regardless of season, but stretching up into the night sky it brought the order + integration of this particular space, itself symbolic of the wider order of the University and surrounding city, into unity with a still wider, cosmological order that would gaze back at us from the night sky. Here we knew that this larger order was not one that we could encompass – even the siting of the tree off-centre from the point of view of the humanly constructed symmetry of the cloister spoke of that – but it was one in which we could participate, and especially here at this still point not simply apart from but in and through all the bustle and hubbub of the city beyond. In notes to me Edmund would sign himself with the image of a tree like this  (very roughly!) and though I did not consciously rehearse the identification during our time in Oxford, at some level I am sure my image of Edmund and of the oak in New College cloister were mutually informing (it was Edmund after all who introduced me to the cloister, and whose gestures as much as his words set out its meaning) and that these images spoke of one and the same underlying reality – not itself directly conceptualizable but known in these moments of stillness, by gesture or ostensive definition, more than by speech. At the cloister we rarely spoke at great length as we did at the Meadow – even time itself seemed to be compressed here, in a duration that was not punctuated by any event, until the next chime of the clock revealed that time had after all passed. Typically we would not wander on to the lawn, or if we did we would keep ourselves to the margins, as though afraid of disturbing some symmetry which we were invited to witness + to be shaped by rather than to shape.

So our life in Oxford was framed by a point of integrated dense singularity on the one side and by a sweep of unconstrained unconfined space on the other. And standing between these places, or supra-places, each of which undid the normal conventions of place, whether in the direction of concentration or diffusion of structure, stood the place that was our home, the convent.

Port Meadow + the cloister must have borne the same appearance to us in the 1980s as they did to our forebears centuries before. The

convent was also a building of some age – of late 19th century construction I guess – but it spoke to us of change. No doubt it had been acquired by the order at a time when Lady Margaret Hall, 2 minutes' walk along the road, was still a college for women only – so that the nuns, all of whom were teachers or prospective teachers, could pass their time whether en route to study or when engaged in study free from the risk of enduring exposure to men. Sister Bea was able to recall the time when they were only allowed to leave the house with an escort provided by a more senior member of the order. Other nuns seemed to embody the old traditions – notably Sister Nora, a softly spoken Irish woman with a playful sense of humour, whose lean features seemed to speak of times of physical as well as mental discipline. But the younger nuns were different – employed in different capacities, some were on their way more fully into the order, while others were on their way out, and some had recourse to Hindu categories as readily as to Christian. So here Catholicism in general, as well as this particular order and these particular women, was in a state of flux – traces of the old dispensation remained, but a new identity had yet to emerge. I myself was only admitted to the student community attached to the convent after acknowledging to Sr Betty that I found myself suspended somewhere between belief and nonbelief.

Of course the student population of the convent was at least as much in flux as the religious community – as we negotiated the change from home, or the comparative seclusion of a 1st year college environment, to a more fluid + various set of circumstances + the ever closer prospect of a life outside the University.

Edmund epitomized these wider changes. In terms of surface identity anyway no one was undergoing a more fundamental change than him – as he sloughed off the evangelical-Protestant traditions of his north of the border university years and began to search out a new kind of warmth. And the insistent ringing of the bell that made it hard to study the papers in the library without interruption was occasioned more often by visitors for Edmund than by anyone else (these visitors were usually svelte + rather glamorous).

So the convent was a kind of nursery for life – as we attempted to bring into new alignment the religious values of our youth, or broader religious traditions, and new allurements. In Edmund's case this interchange was embodied in his room. Amid the chaos of

discarded clothing and books he had displayed various pieces of stained glass – while behind the door of his walk-in wardrobe was a collection of images from *Cosmopolitan* and other, racier sources. His room + clothing had its own particular scent – not unpleasant, but suggesting perhaps a degree of neglect. And on his door were posted various cartoons – the one I recall best pictured a clerical figure gesturing to the night sky and declaiming to his interlocutor: heretic, it's made of milk! Although I did not articulate this for myself at the time, this image spoke to our sense that for us mere recapitulation of the tradition was possible only on pain of absurdity.

So like the rest of us Edmund found himself pulled by not obviously reconcilable visions of the good – as he moved between the translucence of sacred glass and the lustre of the female forms that inhabited his wardrobe, and between the chaos of his room, and the buzz of the bell and the ensuing patter of feet (Edmund's own footfall was always inimitably his own – a kind of soft, slippered shuffle), on the one side, and the blue carpeted quiet of the nuns' oratory on the other, or between the madonna with her outstretched arms in her niche in the garden, and the quiet order of the beds in the convent grounds, onto which his room faced, and the succession of sinuous forms that presented themselves at his door. What we knew in all of this was that the world of the convent was passing away – this particular point of interplay between these various forces did not represent any lasting equilibrium (in fact even our broader context was also soon to be swept away, by the values of employability and 3-year phds). And in these circumstances Edmund stood for an ideal + a method. His ideal was that what endured from this flux should be measured by the imperatives of the inner life – extraneous, contingent context could not enduringly define him, whether that context was the Scottish evangelicalism of his undergraduate years, or his work for the O.E.D. on behalf of its search for rigorously public, shared meanings. So with time Edmund became ever more emphatically Edmund and less and less the product of contingent outward circumstance.

His method, in terms of his research and his personal reflections, was in many ways a matter of applying Jungian language about the unconscious. But to my mind, in retrospect at least, his method was as much about recognizing that places such as Port Meadow and New College Cloister had the status of ideas – only their intelligible content had to be



apprehended not so much by means of discursive prose as by embodied encounter – this is why it was necessary, as the demands of various visions of the good were weighed, repeatedly to visit these places. But so far as their content can be set down in words, what they showed us was that our world of flux was destined to pass away – this we knew from the dying embers of the day and the dissolution of form that we found at Port Meadow. But the meadow also showed us that when viewed in their true nature, some fragments of our experience anyway had a kind of ultimate brilliance. & in the darkness + obscurity of the cloister we came to sense that these fragments might somehow be integrated into a larger, enduring order – and that even our inimitabilities might somehow fall into place within a set of further inimitabilities.

To reach Edmund's room it was necessary to penetrate into the furthest corner of the convent – no 20 (is that right?) lying at the very end of the upper corridor facing the University Parks. And sitting there with him talking over various matters, I often had the sense that we were touching upon the things that mattered most of all – though I doubt now that many of those early conversations would withstand close analytical scrutiny. In any case, in thought we often felt ourselves to be pushing as far as we could – until we both felt ourselves against a limit, and at that limit could at last find occasion for retiring to bed. On one such occasion I remember we were struggling to think over the respective claims of particular + universal, + stumbling over Platonic + other categories along the way. But more importantly as I now see Edmund came to embody this connection – as he pressed on in the direction of ever greater singularity, allowing extraneous attachments + allegiances to fall away, but without thereby choosing mere eccentricity – and in this he was faithful both to the gentle afterglow of the meadow's light and to the obscure tree-rooted wisdom of the cloister.

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## TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF PLACE

These remarks set out a kind of place-based 'spiritual' practice, and the rootedness of a friendship in that practice. The friends would

have visited the two places which are the focus of this discussion, the cloister and the meadow, repeatedly in the course of an eight-week term – so they would have made their way to each place dozens of times over the six or seven years of their time together in Oxford. What, we might well wonder, could be the point of such behaviour?

In making these visits, the friends' goal was not, presumably, to acquire new information about places which they anyway knew very well. Moreover, they do not seem to have been treating these places as simply a kind of container for their activities – as when one goes to the park to play football. The places seem to enter more integrally into the friends' practice than this picture would suggest: they try to reckon with their character, rather than treating them as just a backdrop for their behaviour, or as the enabler of various activities where value attaches to the activity rather than the conditions which make it possible.

There is an analogy here with human friendship. Friendship involves among other things a desire to spend time with a person repeatedly – and for its own sake. So if someone is my friend, then I will not seek out their company simply for the sake of gaining information – not even if that information concerns them. What matters, rather, is my relationship to them, and other dimensions of our activities together will be subordinated to the goal of sustaining this connection. Similarly, while being with my friend may enable me to undertake activities which I could not otherwise undertake, the friend's role is not typically, if the relationship is genuinely one of friendship, to provide a kind of extrinsic enabling of the activity: rather, so far as the meeting is for the sake of some activity, the friend will enter into that activity more integrally, so that enjoyment of the activity is also enjoyment of the friend. The places which are described in the letter, which are visited repeatedly, and not for the sake of extrinsically enabling some further activity, seem to have acquired in these respects something like the status of a friend.

Of course, friendship is not the only analogy which will fit here – the repeated non-instrumental appreciation of anything, a familiar piece of music for example, will display these same qualities. However, in Chapter 3, we shall consider various other ways in which places seem to lend themselves to personification, and to being treated as 'ends' rather than simply as means – so the analogy

with personal relationships and with friendship in particular will prove to have a special resonance as our account unfolds.

We might wonder, then, how these places are able to function as though they were ‘friends’ – how are they able to enter repeatedly and non-instrumentally into the activities of the friends? One route into this question is provided by the letter’s proposal that both places have the status of ideas – I refer the reader to the letter for a more detailed exposition of the particular idea, or cluster of ideas, that Edmund’s friend takes to be embodied in each place. Taking up this proposal, we might suppose that by visiting these places the friends were able to affirm certain thoughts – and perhaps, then, this is the point of the practice? But in that case we still need to understand the nature of the connection between the friends’ thinking and the places. How are these places able to enter integrally into this thinking – rather than just constituting an extrinsic enabler or ‘backdrop’ for it? And even if the places did enter integrally into these thoughts initially, why can they not now be set aside, and the thoughts rehearsed instead at another place? In the language of the letter, why was it necessary to continue to apprehend this ‘intelligible content’ by means of ‘embodied encounter’ with the places themselves?

The letter suggests various responses to these questions. First of all, it seems that there is a kind of embodied knowing that is achieved in the practical appropriation of a place that does not rise in every case to the level of conscious awareness. It is striking that while Edmund’s friend is able to articulate the meaning of Port Meadow for them (taking stock of the time of day of their visits, the location of the meadow in relation to the rest of the city, its topography and so on, and also the gestures they performed while there, such as pausing by the bridge, or ‘swooping down’ to the sprung gate), he is at the same time clear that very little of this intelligible content was brought to the level of thematic awareness at the time. Similarly, the friend is able to set out the significance of their visits to the cloister (speaking of its darkness and quiet, of the need to stoop as they approached, and of the integrative role of the tree), but again he is clear that these matters were not consciously rehearsed, let alone discussed, at the time. This suggests that their visits to these places enabled the friends to affirm certain thoughts, and in turn their commitment to certain

values, by means of embodied interaction with the places, rather than by way of explicit articulation. How we might understand this possibility more exactly, from a theoretical point of view, is a matter to which I shall return in later chapters – here I simply note the phenomenon.

So the intelligible content of these places was perhaps open, at least in principle, to discursive articulation – but it seems that the friends did not always succeed in laying out their meaning in these terms, and perhaps they did not even try to do so, since they were able to rehearse this content by another, apparently more straightforward, more reliable means, namely, by way of their embodied appropriation of the place. Drawing on this perspective, we have an answer to the questions which we posed just now. How do these places enter integrally into the friends' activities? We may say: by entering integrally into their thinking about the 'intelligible content' which they take the places to convey. And why do the friends feel it necessary to visit the places repeatedly? Here we may say: because this 'content' is apprehended in their embodied interaction with the places, and is not readily abstractable from that interaction.

At one point the letter suggests that some of the thoughts that were rehearsed at the cloister in particular, by virtue of what was done there, could not be transposed even in principle into words. The essay speaks here of a reality which was made known by gesture or 'ostensive definition' and which was 'not itself directly conceptualizable'. These remarks suggest that the friends visit this place because they are able to *point* to some reality there – a reality whose character can be conveyed only very imperfectly in any description. This account implies a rather different model from the one I described just now. What matters now is what one perceives, rather than what one does through enacted engagement with the place (through swooping or stooping, for example) – albeit that what one perceives is introduced by means of a gesture. So in this case, it seems to be the phenomenology of one's experience, rather than the expressive posture of the body in its engagement with a particular environment, that is the locus of understanding. Let's think a little more closely about this approach to the nature of the places' 'intelligible content'.

## THE EMOTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE OF PLACE

There is an analogy here with some recent work in the philosophy of emotion. Peter Goldie notes how a person who has fallen on ice for the first time may come to a new, emotionally informed appreciation of the dangers presented by ice – and he comments that the content of this new appreciation may not be readily representable in verbal terms. Goldie gives this account of what it is to think of ice in this new, ‘emotionally relevant’ way:

Coming to think of it in this new way is not to be understood as consisting of thinking of it in the old way, plus some added on phenomenal ingredient feeling perhaps; rather, the whole way of experiencing, or being conscious of, the world is new . . . The difference between thinking of *X* as *Y* without feeling and thinking of *X* as *Y* with feeling will not just comprise a different attitude towards the *same* content – a thinking which earlier was without feeling and now is with feeling. The difference also lies *in* the content, although it might be that this difference cannot be captured in words.<sup>1</sup>

On this account, first-hand experience of something – here it is first-hand experience of falling on ice – can contribute to a deepened understanding of the world. And yet we may be unable to pick out this additional increment of understanding by means of some discrete, linguistically communicable idea – because it may be that what is new in our understanding resides in emotional feeling and ‘cannot be captured in words’. Perhaps the epistemology of place, of the kind described in the essay, also works somewhat in these terms: such knowledge rests upon first-hand, affectively toned experience of a place, and for this reason its content cannot be set down, in full, in linguistic terms. This proposal seems to fit in some measure the essay’s description of the cloister – and in particular it coheres with the idea that what is revealed here is made known by being shown, rather than by being described.

This account is suggestive for the further reason that Goldie’s example is concerned with action-guiding knowledge. The knowledge of the dangers of ice that is gained through falling on ice, as

<sup>1</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 59–60; Goldie’s emphasis.

distinct from the knowledge of ice that may be acquired in a purely abstract or 'text-book' fashion, implies a shift in the phenomenology of one's experience of ice. As Goldie intimates, it implies that 'the whole way of experiencing, or being conscious of, the world is new'. Ice will now assume a new salience in the person's awareness of the world. And this is connected to the fact that it is now perceived in terms which carry a strong affective charge. In general, the emotions serve as ways of viewing the world with salience: to be afraid of the large, fast-advancing dog is, at least in part, to have my attention fixed upon this particular item in my visual field, while other matters, such as the colour of the linoleum floor on which I am standing, are consigned to the periphery of my awareness. Hence emotionally laden ways of seeing the world are motivationally effective: they set the agenda for our thinking, identifying what needs to be attended to as a matter of priority – or urgency even, should a development impinge, potentially, upon some vital concern of the organism. Similarly, we might suppose that emotional feelings are motivationally relevant just by virtue of their status as feelings: to feel anxiety at the approach of the dog is to that extent to desire to be safely removed from it. And in general the hedonic tone of an emotional feeling (be it one of pleasure or pain, comfort or discomfort, and so on, where the kind of comfort or discomfort that is involved will vary in some degree with the emotion type) will imply attraction to or repulsion from the object of the feeling, and hence a predisposition to act accordingly in relation to the object. So the kind of additional understanding that Goldie is describing is in these ways integrated into a new perceptual and practical responsiveness to the world.

In the same sort of way, we might suppose that when they are at the cloister, the friends come to apprehend some quality by experiencing it first-hand (not now the slipperiness and hardness of ice, but some other quality). And in apprehending this quality they take on a correlative set of affectively toned responses (rather as the person in Goldie's example comes to view ice with new salience, or to experience it with heightened affective resonance). And in this further case too, the resultant understanding of the world is, we might suppose, not readily communicable in words. Moreover, this new understanding will imply a commitment to certain behaviours – for

this kind of knowledge, as rooted in felt response, is of itself action-guiding, rather than needing to be conjoined with some relevant but logically independent desire before it will acquire motivational force. My knowledge that there is a cup of water on the table will, in the normal case, only acquire action-guiding force once I become thirsty. By contrast, the kind of knowledge that Goldie is describing (a knowledge that is realized in first-hand experience and a correlative affectively resonant way of perceiving the world) is integrally tied to a certain predisposition to action – here, it is integrally connected to a predisposition to behave self-protectively in relation to ice.

This perspective suggests a further response to the two questions that we posed earlier. Does the cloister enter integrally into the friends' activities there? Yes – because it is the meaning or 'intelligible content' of this place that is the focus of their attention, as they try to view the tree and the surrounding space with proper salience. It is worth noting that while the friends' experience here may be directed at a sacred reality, it is also focally of the cloister and of the tree – if a sacred reality is revealed here, it is made known via their awareness of this material context. And secondly: why do the friends feel it necessary to visit this place repeatedly? Well, if their knowledge of the cloister is an affectively informed experiential kind of knowledge, whose content cannot be captured in purely verbal terms, then they will not be able to rehearse that content in abstraction from the place, simply by calling to mind a relevant description – and perhaps this is what gives them reason to return to the cloister repeatedly? Let us think about this issue a little more closely.

It is true that I can recall imaginatively (rather than by description) what I have learnt from first-hand acquaintance with something – as when I have tasted pineapple for the first time, for instance. And in this sense, it may be said, the content of knowledge by acquaintance can be retrieved independently of further first-hand experience. However, knowledge of a place such as Port Meadow or the cloister may not be so readily detachable from ongoing experience of the place itself. It is after all harder to recall the phenomenology of a whole place by imaginative means alone – just because of the extended and multifarious nature of places. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, if the knowledge which is at issue here is action-guiding knowledge, which resides in an affectively toned perception

of some object (or some place), then it may be that to recover that knowledge, or at any rate to root it more securely in one's character over time, it is necessary to have repeated experience of the object – since a merely imagined or recollected object is likely to give rise at most to a pale replica of the relevant affective response, and a replica emotion will not carry the same motivational or habit-forming or perceptual-field-structuring force. So we have here the elements for a further answer to the question of why the friends felt it necessary to re-visit the cloister, rather than trying to re-think the thoughts which they affirmed there in abstraction from the place.

We have been considering two ways of understanding the kind of knowledge of place that is evident in the letter of Edmund's friend: (i) some knowledge of place can be achieved, it seems, in embodied interaction with the place – and such knowledge may be tacit, and may resist articulation in abstraction from the place; (ii) when it involves an affectively informed, experiential kind of knowledge, knowledge of a place may, once again, be difficult to articulate verbally or apart from the place – because it is intrinsically action-guiding and rooted in a particular pattern of salient perception. (i) and (ii) are both suggestive when we are trying to theorize the connection between knowledge of place and religious knowledge, given what we have said already about the practical dimension of 'belief' in religious contexts.

It might be wondered what is the relationship between these two ways of apprehending the 'intelligible content' of places – one of which is realized in embodied interaction with the place (take for example the kind of reckoning with the significance of Port Meadow that is implied in the friends' swooping down from the railway bridge), and the other of which involves phenomenal knowledge of the place, deriving from first-hand experience of it. Embodied interaction with a place and phenomenal knowledge of it can of course work hand in hand – for example, a certain behaviour (falling on ice, for instance) may direct our attention onto some subject matter (the slipperiness and hardness of ice), which is then known by acquaintance; and this encounter may then engender a new felt perception of the world (one acquires a new fear of ice), which in turn may generate a further set of embodied behaviours (such as that of taking additional precautions when in the presence of ice).



Here embodied behaviours frame phenomenal knowledge – certain behaviours enable the relevant phenomenon to be picked out, and others then flow from the new phenomenal understanding of the world that results.

Again, recent work on the emotions can help to fill out our picture of these connections, especially in so far as it takes the intentionality of emotional feelings to be a function of their capacity to register the character of relevant states of the body – which in turn have a world-directed intentional content because they are bound up with a readiness to act in the world, and are tied therefore to an assessment of the practical demands posed by a given environment. Robert Solomon explains the point in these terms:

Anger involves taking up a defensive posture. Some of the distinctive sensations of getting angry are the often subtle and usually not noticed tensing of the various muscles of the body, particularly those involved in physical aggression. All of these are obviously akin to kinaesthetic feelings, the feelings through which we navigate and ‘keep in touch with’ our bodies. But these are not just feelings, not just sensations or perceptions of goings on in the body. They are also *activities*, the activities of preparation and expression.<sup>2</sup>

Here we see a dual yet integrated intentionality, which ties together emotional feelings and the readiness of the body for action: emotional feelings have an intellectual content because they register the body’s readiness for action, and thereby share in the reckoning with the character of the world that is implied in that practical stance.<sup>3</sup> It is plausible to suppose that knowledge of place involves at least in part

<sup>2</sup> Robert Solomon, ‘Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings: What is a “Cognitive Theory” of the Emotions, and Does it Neglect Affectivity?’, in A. Hatimoyis, ed., *Philosophy and the Emotions* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 14; Solomon’s emphasis. A closely related model is developed by Hannah Pickard in her essay in this same volume, ‘Emotions and the Problem of Other Minds’, pp. 87–103. Compare William James’s suggestion that emotional feelings keep track of bodily changes which are induced by ‘the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact’: see his ‘What Is an Emotion?’, in Robert C. Solomon, ed., *What Is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings* (2nd edn, Oxford, 2003), p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> This registering of the body’s condition need not be a matter of focal awareness analogously, I can register the character of the letters on a page while my attention rests focally with the linguistic meaning which they disclose. I am grateful to Robert Roberts for putting this analogy to me.

an intentionality of this kind. Think again of how the friends' bodily behaviours at Port Meadow and on their approach to the cloister are caught up in various movements of feeling (as release is implied in 'swooping' and trepidation in 'stooping', for example), and how bodily movement and emotional feeling together involve some genuine taking stock of the character of these places. Solomon's account suggests more exactly that our two models of knowledge of place – phenomenal knowledge and the sort of knowledge that is realized in enacted appropriation of an environment – need not be related to one another simply in successive terms. Instead, we may have here two perspectives on the same movement of understanding – for a given emotional feeling may help to structure the phenomenal field (consider again how fear of ice implies assigning ice a certain salience in one's experience of the world), and may at the same time register a given expressive posture of the body (in this case, one of caution or self-protectiveness when in the presence of ice). So phenomenal knowledge of the world may be directly connected to the knowledge that is embedded in embodied interaction with the environment (the knowledge that is realized in the body's expressive posture) – and their content may be identical, in so far as both spell out the content of the same emotional feeling, and involve therefore the same judgement about what matters or is worth attending to in a situation of practical choice.

It may still be tempting to look for a causal sequence here: perhaps the body's expressive posture gives rise to an emotional feeling, which in turn generates an affectively structured phenomenal field? Or does the emotional feeling for the environment come first, and give rise to an embodied response? Both of these directions of causation, and various feedback loops involving the two, seem to be possible, though, again, I do not think that we are bound to think of these relationships in terms of succession. In any case, we could argue, the knowledge embedded in a particular affective structuring of the phenomenal field will be much the same as that which is embodied in an associated expressive posture of the body, whether the body's posture is considered as a response to that field or as helping to structure it. Applying this to the case of falling on ice, the dangerousness of ice, following a fall, may be registered both in the new self-protectiveness that is displayed in my bodily

behaviour, and in the new salience that ice assumes in my phenomenal field.

So far, we have been concerned with the formal character of the sort of knowledge of place that the letter to Edmund describes or presupposes: this knowledge has partly to do with the embodied, verbally tacit appropriation of a place, and partly to do with salient perception of the place – where these two perspectives can be connected by reference to the role of emotional feelings in the ways we have been discussing. In Chapter 5, I would like to think more closely about the nature of knowledge of place – but for now, I hope I have managed to show how this formal characterization of knowledge of place arises fairly straightforwardly from the account of the meadow and the cloister that is given by Edmund's friend.

THE RELIGIOUSLY SIGNIFICANT  
CONTENT OF KNOWLEDGE OF PLACE:  
PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

Next, I want to think a little about the content of knowledge of place – and specifically about how the letter takes this content to be religiously important. These are matters which will occupy us for much of the remainder of the book. Here I shall simply note three ways in which the letter conceives of the religious significance of the meadow and the cloister.

First, both the meadow and the cloister seem to be religiously meaningful in part because they stand microcosmically for the nature of things more generally. This connection is made especially clear in the discussion of the cloister, which is taken to stand at the centre of the University and the city, and to anchor the order of these places within a wider, cosmological frame of reference. Here then is one model of how knowledge of place may be religiously significant – namely, when the place epitomizes or bodies forth in miniature some fundamental truth concerning the nature of things in general. This sort of truth is directly of religious importance because of the

concern of the faiths to articulate an encompassing truth about human beings and their predicament. As Gerardus van der Leeuw puts the point: 'The religious significance of things . . . is that on which no wider nor deeper meaning can follow. It is the meaning of the whole.'<sup>4</sup>

This way of construing the religious significance of a place suggests another perspective on the importance of first-hand encounter with place. No doubt it is possible to subscribe purely theoretically to the idea that embodied human experience has some ultimate and enduring significance. But this belief is unlikely to be held with any real conviction (it is unlikely to have any purchase upon the affections or to be motivationally effective) unless a person has experienced first-hand certain scenes or situations which seem to be irradiated by that hope, and which in this sense body forth this truth microcosmically. The description of Port Meadow given in the letter to Edmund provides one illustration of how a place may contribute towards the experimental confirmation of such a belief. Of course, I am not suggesting that the experience described in the letter of itself constitutes good evidence for the claim that human experience has an ultimate and enduring meaning – I mean simply that if this claim is true, then that should carry some implications for the phenomenology of our experience, or for the character of our embodied interaction with the world, at least on occasion; and in turn therefore anyone who subscribes to the belief should feel a need to point to at least some experiences which exhibit the requisite phenomenology or to certain places which permit the right kind of embodied interaction. Perhaps some such experiences need not be place-based – they might involve simply an elevated state of consciousness, which is not directed at any material thing. But if the conviction is that *this-worldly* experience is of ultimate and enduring significance, then one would expect certain material things, and a correlative material context, or place, to figure integrally in the experience.

These thoughts point towards another account of the significance of re-visiting a place – such visits may provide a way of re-affirming or of checking, and celebrating, a general truth concerning the nature of things that is made known there experimentally and

<sup>4</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, tr. J. E. Turner (London, 1938), p. 680.

representatively. Again, this need not imply that the place is being treated merely as the backdrop or extrinsic enabler of some activity. On the contrary, the general truth which is apprehended here is made known only by reckoning with the character of this particular place.

This first account of the religiously significant character of knowledge of place turns on the idea that a particular place can body forth the meaning of human experience more generally, and thereby assume a representative function of metaphysical dimensions. As we have noted, this connection does not have to be rehearsed consciously for the place to carry this sort of significance, but it will need, at least, to be implied in some way if a place is to play this role. This account can be combined with particular ease with the first of our models of the formal character of knowledge of place – the embodied appropriation of a place such as the meadow may reveal it to be hospitable to human concerns and aspirations, and the place may then be taken as a marker for the nature of human beings' circumstances more broadly. In the example of falling on ice, the counterpart for this sort of knowledge would be practical knowledge of ice's dangerousness. This knowledge could also assume religious significance in principle – if it were taken to be somehow representative of the human condition more generally.

We may, then, be able to specify the respect in which a place's character stands for some larger truth about the world or the human condition. But it may also be that we simply understand *that* a place bears some microcosmic meaning – without being able to indicate what it is about this place that can be generalized to the nature of places more generally. The friends' experience at the cloister appears, at points, to have this character – they seem to take this place to be 'central' or microcosmically significant without at the same time committing themselves to an interpretation of the respect in which its qualities epitomize the nature of things more broadly. The example of the friends suggests, then, that a site can acquire religious importance simply by way of a recognition that it carries some microcosmic significance – and independently of any clear appreciation of the content of its microcosmic import.

The letter contains I think a second account of the religious significance of place. Here God or the sacred otherwise conceived is

identified as it were ostensibly, rather than by means of a place's microcosmic significance. In pointing to the tree in New College cloister, Edmund is alluding to a reality which does not itself emerge into focal awareness – but which is somehow presupposed in the material context which is the object of focal awareness. So this reality is not encountered directly in some non-sensory intuition, nor is it postulated on the basis of an inference – nor need there be any thought, conscious or simply implied, that this material context matters religiously because it carries some microcosmic significance. Instead, here a religiously important 'presence' or 'meaning' is made known non-inferentially, and without becoming a direct object of perception, in and under the material forms that are the object of contemplation. At the same time, this case is not closely analogous to Alston's examples of 'indirect perception' or 'indirect recognition' of God (see the discussion of Chapter 1) – since seeing someone on television or non-inferentially recognizing the presence of a plane by perceiving its vapour trail both imply a kind of neutral observation. By contrast, the letter to Edmund is describing a perception which is affectively structured and intrinsically action-guiding. This account of the religiously significant content of knowledge of place fits most directly with the case of emotionally informed phenomenal knowledge. The counterpart for this kind of knowledge in the example of falling on ice would be the emotionally charged, experiential knowledge of the dangerousness of ice, where this knowledge is tied to a correlative organization of the perceptual field.

The letter to Edmund describes how this sort of knowledge can be communicated by means of ostensive gesture – specifically, it is by pointing to the tree that Edmund draws his friend's attention to the sacred meaning that is revealed here. Of course, gestures can be ambiguous – when I point in the direction of the bookcase in my room, you may wonder whether I am intending to pick out the bookcase itself, or the particular hue of its shelves, or some other feature. Determining which of these things I wish to draw to your attention will, standardly, depend upon your having the same set of interests or concerns as me, so that we view the scene with the same framework of salience. If you are a carpenter and you are here to repair the bookcase, then it is the buckled shelf, let us hope, that will leap to your eye. In the same way, we could see the friends' approach

to New College cloister as providing them with a shared practical and emotional context, as they stoop protectively, struggle to orient themselves in the dark, and so on – so that when Edmund gestures at the tree, they know together which framework of salience to employ. It follows, then, that this second account of the religious significance of knowledge of place can also appeal to the quality of our embodied interaction with a place: a certain mode of bodily appropriation can help to frame the meaning of a gesture of ostensive definition, so enabling some subject matter to be known by acquaintance.

These two accounts of the religious significance of knowledge of place are of further interest given our comments (in Chapter 1) on the idea of divine supra-individuality. In the first case, God is revealed not as a specific item of experience, but rather as a meaning which infuses situations in general and which is made known representatively in this particular place. And in the second case too, God does not emerge as a focal object of experience or as an individual thing, but as what is presupposed in some reality which is introduced by means of ostensive definition.

There is, I think, a third perspective on the religious significance of place which is adumbrated in the letter, although it does not receive the same, sustained attention as the first two. This is the idea that places are significant as the bearers of history. So in this case, it is knowledge of a place's history that helps to define its religious import. The author refers, for example, to Port Meadow's history as common ground, and to the cloister's history as the setting for the life of a monastic community. Although the thought is not developed in the letter, it seems to be implied at least that by standing at these places, the friends can bring themselves into physical rather than simply mental or description-relative relationship to these histories. And it is implied that this is a further reason for visiting the places – so as to achieve this more direct kind of relationship to the events that have taken place there. A place's history may be revealed in embodied appropriation of the place, or in first-hand experience of it, but it might equally be known simply by means of some description – so this model is not connected so tightly as the others to the formal qualities of knowledge of place that we have identified.

Of course, this third approach will provide an understanding of the religious significance of a place most straightforwardly when the

events in question are themselves of religious importance. This is a possibility that I shall explore in more detail in the chapters which follow – for instance in the discussion of pilgrimage in Chapter 6. It is worth noting that on this model too, God is not represented as a particular object to be encountered in present experience. Here it is, rather, the storied identity of a site that is the ‘object’ of ‘encounter’. Despite the differences between these three models, they can in principle be combined – for example, a site may succeed in summing up the significance of things in general by virtue of its storied identity.

This third model of the significance of place suggests a further perspective on the question of why the friends should have found it worthwhile to return repeatedly to the cloister and the meadow – perhaps this was a way of ‘encountering’ certain storied meanings, rather than simply rehearsing them in thought. Although the letter does not broach this possibility, we might also suppose that by revisiting these places, the friends were able to achieve a kind of bodily contact with the accumulated history of their own friendship – given the role of previous visits to these places in forming that friendship. More exactly, it seems clear that the friends would examine significant developments in their lives at these places. It was at Port Meadow, for example, that they wondered about what to make of Edmund’s departure from the University Press. And more generally, it was here that they would scrutinize the events of each week. As the author of the letter comments: ‘we would set the business and congestion of our lives there [in Oxford] against the open airiness of the meadow, and feel our ordinary concerns transfigured.’ Or as he says again, speaking of Edmund’s reckoning with various life choices:

his method was . . . about recognizing that places such as Port Meadow and New College Cloister had the status of ideas – only their intelligible content had to be apprehended not so much by means of discursive prose as by embodied encounter – this is why it was necessary, as the demands of various visions of the good were weighed, repeatedly to visit these places.

So the places have significance not just by virtue of their history as a stretch of common ground (in the case of the meadow) or as the site of a religious community’s enacted relationship to God – but as the



locus of the friends' deliberations about their lives as they weigh 'the demands of various visions of the good'. So in re-visiting these places, the friends are able to enjoy some physical, and not merely description-relative, contact with their own past – and in particular, to encounter their past considered as a set of value choices that have contributed to the development of a correlative character and friendship. Hence the places come to encode the moral personalities and relationship of the friends themselves – and visits to the places provide a more-than-mental way of being related to the formation of those personalities, and contribute to the further elaboration of them.

A similar connection is made in Edmund's comments in the passage from his journal which stands at the head of this book. There he recalls the half circle of trees in the wood near his home and he continues:

I could write, now, in almost any direction from that one image of the wood. So much of my own life seems caught up in it – every corner of it having its own special, peculiar atmosphere, an intensity of feeling which is partly me sensing a magic, an innocence, a stillness, in the place itself, and partly because, having been made aware of those deep layers of feeling in myself by being alone there, the same place serves as a sure route to bring them back.

Edmund finds that this place calls to mind various significant episodes in his life – because it was here that he came to experience certain things deeply. I am suggesting that a place can serve not only as a storehouse of memory in this way, but also as a vehicle for 'encounter' with one's past – that is, not just as an aid to recalling it, but as a way of being brought into physical relationship with it. Again, this is a theme that will be expounded more fully later – in Chapter 6 in particular.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have made a start on setting out the formal character of knowledge of place – and we have taken note of the relevance in this regard of bodily movement and affectively informed

perception. We have also sketched three models of the religious significance of place. And we have identified some connections between the formal features of knowledge of place and the religiously significant content of 'placial' knowledge.

We have also been considering how friendship may be rooted in a shared sensibility for place. Friendship depends upon a capacity to hold certain thoughts in common; and we have seen how the relationship of friends to a place may enable them to share various thoughts which it would be difficult to articulate in abstraction from the place. I have also noted that when friends reckon non-instrumentally with the character of a place, then their relationship to the place can come to assume, in some respects, the guise of a friendship.

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## The Supra-individuality of God and Place

### INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1, I set out three main proposals: (i) the failure to attend to the differentiated religious significance of place, and the associated tendency to subsume the question of God's relationship to space under the theme of divine 'omnipresence', constitutes a lacuna in the philosophical literature; (ii) the recent literature in religious epistemology, in so far as it relies upon secular analogies for religious knowledge, drawn from sense perception and scientific enquiry, is apt to overlook the connections between religious knowledge and our embodied, engaged relationship to the material world; (iii) both of these concerns can be addressed by considering the relationship between knowledge of God and knowledge of place – and here I added that the poetry of Edmund Cusick offers one way into the question of how the appreciation of specific places, in aesthetic and other terms, may be religiously important.

In Chapter 2, I tried to carry forward these various themes by showing how our encounter with particular places, each characterized by its own phenomenology and distinctive possibilities for bodily appropriation, may prove to be religiously significant. Here we distinguished three cases: (a) a place stands microcosmically for the nature of things in general; (b) God is taken to be presupposed in some material context whose salient features are introduced by ostension; and (c) a place stores up and re-presents the meaning of various events of religious import which once unfolded there. So in

these ways I have tried to show how problems (i) and (ii) above do indeed have a common solution in (iii): if we can suppose that knowledge of God is grounded in knowledge of particular places in these various ways, then we have some purchase on the possibility of differentiation in the religious significance of space; and at the same time, we will have another route into the central themes of religious epistemology – one which is of its nature more attuned to the connection between religious knowledge and our embodied, practical relationship to the material world.

In the next two chapters, I want to consider more closely the nature of the connection between knowledge of God and knowledge of place by examining the concepts of God and place. My aim is to establish that these concepts are analogous on various points. If this can be done, then we will have a further foundation for the thought that knowledge of God is likely to be akin to 'placial' knowledge, at least in some fundamental respects. As in Chapter 2, I shall also consider the bolder thesis that knowledge of place is in part constitutive of knowledge of God.

I am going to explore three points of analogy in particular: (i) the idea that divine supra-individuality is analogous to placial supra-individuality; (ii) the idea that God and place are alike in so far as both exercise a narratively mediated agency; and (iii) the idea that there is a resemblance between God and place in so far as both are presupposed in any existentially dense specification of the identity of individual human beings. The first of these analogies will be investigated in this chapter, and the other two in Chapter 4.

As I noted in Chapter 1, it is a commonplace of philosophical theology that God's reality has, in some sense, a supra-individual character. This idea is also evident in the pronouncements of philosophically literate Christian pastors. John Paul II writes for example that: 'In the incarnation of the Son of God . . . the Whole lies hidden in the part.'<sup>1</sup> Here it is acknowledged that God can of course be revealed in particular individuals, and pre-eminently in the incarnate Christ, but that even in these cases the connection between God's reality and that of 'the whole' is preserved. Similarly, Rowan Williams, a pastor who can speak with authority for another central

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Sydney, NSW, 1998), Section 12.

strand of the Christian tradition, comments that talk of God 'is structurally more like talking about some "grid" for the understanding of particular objects than talking about particular objects in themselves'.<sup>2</sup> Here again we find the idea that God's reality is to be assimilated not so much to that of individual things, but rather to an overarching frame of reference, which encompasses individual things, and determines the sense which they bear.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly, I shall give closer consideration to the question of how, more exactly, we might understand the notion of divine supra-individuality. But first let's ask what might be said on behalf of the idea that places too have a supra-individual character.

### THE SUPRA-INDIVIDUALITY OF PLACES

Of course, there is a sense in which places will count as supra-individual simply by comprising a set of spatio-temporal particulars. But places are not mere collections of things. In normal usage anyway, to speak of a region of space as a 'place' is to imply that the things that fall within it exhibit a degree of unity, rather than constituting an arbitrarily demarcated conglomeration of individual items. Edward Casey puts this point by saying that place 'is situated between the Charybdis of sheer singularity and the Scylla of contingent commonality'.<sup>4</sup> In other words, places are in a sense supra-individual (because they are not 'sheerly singular') – and yet they are not simply collections of individual things (because their parts do not exhibit a merely 'contingent commonality').

Let's think a little more closely about the nature of the unity of places. Clearly, the things which fall within a place are not free from

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, "'Religious Realism": On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt', *Modern Theology* 1 (1984), p. 15. In this remark, he is expounding a comment of Wittgenstein.

<sup>3</sup> Compare again Gerardus van der Leeuw's comment that: 'The religious significance of things... is that on which no wider nor deeper meaning can follow. It is the meaning of the whole': *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 680.

<sup>4</sup> Edward S. Casey, 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena', in Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe, NM, 1996), p. 32.

'contingent commonality' by virtue of having the same colour, or belonging to the same natural kind, or in some other way conforming to a precisely defined type. Rather, the unity of a place such as Dartmoor (the English national park) resides in the fact that its parts all partake in a common character or spirit or 'atmosphere'. This atmosphere is given in the prevailing colours and scents of the moor in different seasons, in its geology, in its characteristic cloud and other climatic effects, in the stories associated with the place (most obviously perhaps, one thinks of the hound of Conan Doyle's tale), in the style of building which typifies the region – and so on. Moreover, these various dimensions of our appreciation of the moor are not as it were simply bolted on to one another. Instead, our appreciation of the moor's architecture, for example, is conditioned by our knowledge of its climate, and colours, and geology – for if any of these things were different, then the architecture would strike us differently, and vice versa. Hence the 'atmosphere' of the moor is not so much an agglomeration of individual features (architecture, climate, and so on) as a kind of alloy produced from the interpenetration of these various qualities in our experience of them. This unified sense of place will I am sure be familiar to anyone who has travelled on Dartmoor, and contrasted its character with that of, say, Snowdonia, or the Lake District, where again there are upland areas, but where the overall impression, or 'mood', conveyed by the landscape is very different. This is I suggest a general truth about place, which applies not just to 'natural' or sparsely settled environments but to places more generally.

So when we speak of the unity of a place, and think of its parts as united by something other than their membership of a tightly circumscribed kind, it is, I take it, this sort of phenomenon that we have in mind: the various parts of the place form a unity in so far as they all participate in a unitary 'atmosphere', which pervades the place as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The notion of 'atmosphere' is important in phenomenological thought. See for example Christian Norberg Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York, 1980), p. 7. Compare Mikel Dufrenne's account of the unitary sensory impression or 'atmosphere' conveyed by the palace at Versailles and its surroundings: 'Versailles speaks to us through the rigor of its layout, the elegant equilibrium of its proportions, the discreet pomp of its embellishment... Its pure

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We have some initial reason, then, for taking both God and places to have a supra-individual character – where the supra-individuality of place and also (needless to say) of God is not that of a mere collection of things. Let's think a little further now about the nature of God's supra-individuality. We might begin by considering the religious point of the doctrine of divine supra-individuality – why have Christian pastors, such as John Paul II and Rowan Williams, found the doctrine worth upholding? The religious import of the doctrine is basically negative, I suggest: its aim is to repudiate any representation of the divine nature which would imply that God is simply another individual thing. For once God is represented in those terms, then it becomes intelligible to suppose that the good which is God might stand in competition with created goods; and the various monotheisms have wanted to affirm, on the contrary, that the divine good is incommensurable with any number of created goods, so cannot even in principle be weighed against them. This is part of what is involved in the idea, common to all the major monotheistic traditions, that God alone is deserving of worship. So the religious significance of the doctrine consists then, at least in part, in its underwriting of the idea of God's evaluative supremacy in this specific sense: the good which is God is not intelligibly in competition with other goods. To this extent the doctrine is fundamentally of practical import.

The religious rationale for the doctrine is preserved and helpfully articulated in Aquinas's account of divine supra-individuality. (Indeed, it is likely that his formulation of the doctrine is presupposed in the comments of John Paul and Rowan Williams which I quoted just now.) Aquinas observes:

and measured voice expresses order and clarity and sovereign urbanity in the very countenance of stone... And the surroundings – the park, the sky, and even the town – which the palace annexes and aestheticizes speak the same language. The setting is like a bass accompaniment to the clear voice of the monument': Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, tr. E. S. Casey et al. (Evanston, IL, 1973), pp. 179–80.

God planned to create many distinct things, in order to share with them and reproduce in them his goodness. Because no one creature could do this, he produced many diverse creatures, so that what was lacking in one expression of his goodness could be made up by another; for the goodness which God has whole and together, creatures share in many different ways. And the whole universe shares and expresses that goodness better than any individual creature.<sup>6</sup>

Here again we find the idea that God's goodness is not that of an individual thing – and the related idea that in so far as it can be represented at all, the divine goodness is best imaged by reference to the sum of individual things. Now this sort of insight, I have been suggesting, is common to Christian theology and a good range of monotheistic thought.<sup>7</sup> But Aquinas's doctrine of subsistent existence offers a very particular way of developing this theme. He comments for example that:

Whenever different things share something in common, there must be some cause of this sharing; precisely as different, they themselves do not account for it. Thus it is that whenever some one element is found in different things, these receive it from one cause, just as different hot bodies get their heat from one fire. Existence, however, is shared by all things, however much they differ. There must therefore be a single source of existence from which whatever exists in any manner whatsoever, whether invisible and spiritual or visible and material, obtains its existence.<sup>8</sup>

There are a number of ideas in this passage. First, Aquinas takes existence to be a kind of 'common something' which is shared by all creatures. And he maintains that in general any such 'something' will have a single source.<sup>9</sup> It follows then that existence (a common

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 1a.47.1, in T. McDermott, ed., *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (London, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Again, a good comparative study of the issues, which crosses faith boundaries, is provided by Keith Ward in his *Images of Eternity: Concepts of God in Five Religious Traditions* (London, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 1a.65.1, tr. William Wallace O.P. (London, 1967; ed. T. Gilby).

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary theistic argument has also maintained that a 'common something' calls for a single source. See for example Richard Swinburne's claim that the recurrence of fundamental particles by kind suggests the existence of a common source, rather as the existence of various coins by kind points to the existence of a common mould from which they all derive: *The Existence of God* (revised edn, Oxford, 1991), p. 145; see also the second edition of this book (2004), p. 160.



‘something’ in creatures) has a source – and this source is of course God. Moreover, Aquinas also thinks, although the question is not addressed directly in this passage, that any such source of a ‘common something’ must possess the same quality pre-eminently.<sup>10</sup> His reasoning here runs along these lines: the source must in some sense have the quality, Q, in order to communicate it to other things; but at the same time, it must have Q in a special or unrestricted sense – for if it were to have Q in the same fashion as the things whose possession of Q it is introduced to explain, then its own exemplification of the quality would stand in just as much need of explanation as theirs, which would threaten a regress of explanations.<sup>11</sup>

So Aquinas’s suggestion is that all creatures share a common quality or activity or ‘something’ in so far as they exist; moreover, they exhibit this ‘something’ only partially or imperfectly, and derivatively, whereas the source which confers existence upon them displays the same ‘something’ pre-eminently or unrestrictedly, and non-derivatively.<sup>12</sup> This account gives a clear formulation of the doctrine of divine supra-individuality: God is not an individual existent, because God is the unrestricted act of being, or being itself – or *ipsum esse per se subsistens*, in Aquinas’s terms.<sup>13</sup> The account also preserves the religiously important truth that I have taken to be embedded in the doctrine, because it implies that God’s goodness cannot be weighed against that of any creature, or against the goodness of the sum of creatures, since even the sum of creation presents only a fragmentary and imperfect image of the goodness which God has ‘whole and together’. Aquinas’s proposal also explains why it is

<sup>10</sup> See his approving quotation of Aristotle’s remark that: ‘when many things possess some property in common, the one most fully possessing it causes it in the others’: *Summa Theologiae* 1a.2.3, tr. T. McDermott O.P. (London, 1964; ed. T. Gilby).

<sup>11</sup> See his comment that ‘any perfection found in an effect must also be found in the effective cause of that effect – either as it exists in the cause, when cause and effect are of the same sort . . . or in a more perfect manner, when cause and effect are not of the same sort’: *Summa Theologiae* 1a.4.2, in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds., *Aquinas*. In the case we are considering, cause and effect will not be ‘of the same sort’.

<sup>12</sup> Compare his comment that: ‘all things which are diversified by their diverse sharing in existence, so that some are fuller beings than others, are caused by one first being which simply *is* in the fullest sense of the word’: *Summa Theologiae* 1a.44.1, tr. T. Gilby O.P. (London, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 1a.4.2

the creation as a whole which best images God – because each individual thing bodies forth what it is to be in its own limited way, according to its particular kind, and therefore the sum of things, which will include entities of differing modes of existence, will offer a clearer indication of what it is simply to be, without restriction, than will any individual thing.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, many have thought Aquinas's doctrine of subsistent existence of dubious coherence. It has also been deemed problematic on theological grounds. I want to consider now how reflection on the concept of place, or the ontology of places, might enable us to articulate a notion of divine supra-individuality which is structurally like that of Aquinas, and which shares its religious merits, while keeping clear of these objections, which for many have been enough to show that his account is irremediably flawed.

#### RE-CASTING AQUINAS'S DOCTRINE OF DIVINE SUPRA-INDIVIDUALITY IN PLACIAL TERMS

Let us think again about the quality which pervades a place like Dartmoor – the quality which earlier I called the 'atmosphere' of the place. For ease of reference, even if rather infelicitously, I shall refer to this quality, in the case of Dartmoor, as 'Dartmoorishness'. Now Dartmoorishness is, plainly, a kind-transcending quality – it is exemplified not simply by trees, or rocks, or buildings, but by all of these things in so far as they participate in the character of the moor as a whole. Hence 'Dartmoorishness' does not pick out the mode of being that belongs to a particular kind of thing, but instead the manner of being that is exemplified by the moor as a whole and by individual things in so far as they form part of the moor.

<sup>14</sup> For further consideration of this question, see 1a.93.2.ad.3. Here Aquinas allows that there is a sense in which the universe is more perfect than the 'intelligible creation' and a sense in which it is not. By representing God as subsistent being, he is committed, I think, to allowing that there is a significant sense in which the universe images God more perfectly than does the 'intelligible creation' because the universe contains a broader range of creaturely types and therefore comes closer to a representation of what it is simply to be.

We might suppose, then, that individual things on the moor, considered in themselves, exemplify Dartmoorishness only partially, if at all – for when they are excerpted, in imagination, from this wider context, they may display the quality in some degree, but clearly they will not possess it in full, because the quality in its integrity involves a kind of fusion of the qualities of trees and clouds and buildings, and so on, together with the story-constituted significance of the place. So Dartmoorishness is an emergent property, in so far as its existence is contingent upon that of the moor as a whole. Of course, one might say the same in relation to any thing which is made from a number of parts: the property of being that thing will only ‘emerge’ once all the parts are in place; and none of the parts individually will be able to body forth this property fully. However, we should recall that in the case of places, ‘the whole’ is not an arbitrarily demarcated collection of things. So the emergence in this case is not just that of any whole vis-à-vis its parts, but marks a new kind of integration of the parts – their coming to be constituents of a new and non-arbitrarily defined region, with its attendant ‘atmosphere’.

From all of this it follows that we can state a doctrine of placial supra-individuality which is formally like Aquinas’s doctrine of divine supra-individuality. Aquinas supposes that there is a kind-transcending ‘common something’ that is displayed in (or perhaps we should say: is an activity of) all created things; this ‘something’ is displayed by creatures in partial and derivative form; and it is displayed pre-eminently and non-derivatively by the source of that quality in creatures. Given our analysis of qualities such as Dartmoorishness, this relationship between God and creatures turns out to be structurally parallel to the relationship between a place and its parts. The parts of Dartmoor, considered in themselves, display the quality of Dartmoorishness only partially. Moreover, in so far as they exhibit the property more fully, they will do so only derivatively – that is, because of their participation in the moor as a whole. And it is, then, the moor as a whole which possesses the quality pre-eminently, and also non-derivatively – since by contrast with its parts, the moor’s possession of the property does not depend upon its being inserted within some still larger context.

So on Aquinas’s scheme we can say of created things that they display, partially and derivatively, a common, kind-transcending

property or ‘something’, and that this property is displayed pre-eminently and non-derivatively by God. And likewise we can say of the parts of a place that they display, partially and derivatively, a common, kind-transcending property, which is displayed fully and primordially by the place itself. (In the first case, of course, the kind-transcending property or ‘something’ is existence, whereas in the second it is a property conceived by analogy with Dartmoorishness.) This parallel invites the thought that we can think of the God–creature relationship as analogous to the relationship of a place to its parts, and the further thought that we can preserve hereby the structure of Aquinas’s doctrine of divine supra-individuality – while at the same time respecting the religious import of the doctrine. For instance, we can say that the parts of a place cannot intelligibly stand in competition with the place, because any place will subsume its parts.

I want to think a little further about the idea that the place–part relationship offers a fruitful way of modelling the God–creature relationship. We need to know: what is there to gain by thinking of the relationship of God and creatures in these terms, rather than in the terms proposed by Aquinas? Here we should recall the various difficulties which have been posed for Aquinas’s doctrine of divine supra-individuality. Many commentators have found the idea that ‘existence’ is a common, kind-transcending ‘something’ that is displayed by, or is an activity of, all creatures intolerably murky.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have also disputed whether it makes any coherent sense to attribute to God a mode of existence that is not this or that particular mode of existence, but the mode of existence which consists in simply being.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, one might wonder about the connection between God’s existence and that of creatures: Aquinas’s ‘common something’ argument invites the Neoplatonic thought that creatures

<sup>15</sup> Compare the standard objection to the Ontological Argument, summed up famously in Kant’s slogan that ‘being is not a real predicate’: ‘Critique of Pure Reason’ in *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (2nd impression, London, 1933), B626, p. 504.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, commenting on a similar passage to the one that I cited in footnote 12, in *De Potentia* 7 2C, Anthony Kenny remarks: ‘if the “esse” which denotes God’s essence is like the “esse” which is predicable of everything, except that it does not permit the addition of further predicates, then it is a predicate which is totally unintelligible’: Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas* (Oxford, 1980), p. 58.

owe their existence to their ‘participation’ in subsistent existence – just as several hot things owe their heat to their participation in heat itself.<sup>17</sup> But what sense are we to assign to the language of ‘participation’ in this context?

Whatever may be said of the capacity of Aquinas’s account to withstand objections such as these, it seems clear that the place-based version of his doctrine does not generate these same difficulties – and to this extent that version of the doctrine will enjoy an apologetic advantage over his approach. There is after all nothing too puzzling, I take it, in the idea that there are kind-transcending qualities such as Dartmoorishness. And there is I think nothing too hard to fathom in the thought that the parts of Dartmoor display this quality in so far as they ‘participate’ in the moor. And there is, similarly, nothing too vexing in the suggestion that the moor itself possesses this property fully and integrally, and in its own right, rather than by virtue of its location within some larger context.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, the success in these respects of a place-based rendering of the idea of divine supra-individuality may well come at a cost: perhaps the place-based model will prove to lack certain desiderata that can be more easily articulated on Aquinas’s approach? Specifically, we might wonder whether the proposal that the God-creature relation is analogous to the relationship of a place to its parts is able to sustain a sufficiently robust account of the distinction between God and the world. But let us put that issue aside for one moment to consider a further objection that is commonly brought against Aquinas’s doctrine. (I mention the issue here only to reassure the reader who is already exercised by this matter that it will be addressed!)

<sup>17</sup> Compare again the argument of the Fourth Way: *Summa Theologiae* 1a.2.3. See too the use of the term ‘participation’ in 1a.3.4. In fact, Aquinas is not committed hereby to some general doctrine of participation in the style of Plato. See for example *Summa Theologiae* 1a.15.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, given the laws of nature, the destruction of the rest of the planet would presumably remove the conditions which make possible the existence of Dartmoor and its associated ‘atmosphere’. Nonetheless, the nature of Dartmoorishness can be set down fully, we might suppose, without any reference to places other than Dartmoor being required: it is this conceptual rather than causal independence of the quality from any wider context other than the moor itself that is being affirmed here.

## THE PERSONHOOD OF PLACES AND GOD

Aquinas's conception of God as subsistent existence is bound up of course with his thought that God is immaterial, impassible and immutable – and, in sum, simple. Anything which was material, or changeable, or capable of being acted upon would turn out, on Aquinas's account, to be a thing with a particular mode of existence – changing in this way rather than that, and so on. Many have thought of course that a conception of God as changeless and impassible is hard to reconcile with the idea that God is personal. Persons it may be said exist in relations of reciprocal dependence – and the deeper an individual's capacity for being affected, the more fully personal will be its mode of being. A case of this kind is made by Charles Hartshorne when he contrasts the responses to the recital of a poem of, first, a glass of water (the water trembles in the glass . . .) and then, in turn, an ant, a dog, a person who does not understand the language in which the poem is written, and a person who is a fluent speaker of that language and is sensitive to poetry.<sup>19</sup> It is the last individual who is most deeply affected by the poem (if it is a good poem!), and whose appreciation of it is therefore the most profound and the most personal. It follows, Hartshorne urges, that if we wish to represent God as personal, then we should think of God not as changeless and impassible, but as supremely responsive.<sup>20</sup>

The burden of this objection to Aquinas is that his stance does not allow a rich enough account of divine personhood. Now it might be said that a similar objection can surely be brought against the idea that the place–part relation provides a good analogy for the God–creature relation. After all, places are not 'personal' in the sense of being able to entertain thoughts or frame purposes – or respond sensitively to the reading of poetry. Allowing that this is so, it is

<sup>19</sup> See Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven, CT, 1948), p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Hartshorne seems to suppose that the ideas of divine impassibility, immutability and incorporeality are bound together by relations of reciprocal entailment, but this has been disputed. See William Alston, 'Hartshorne and Aquinas: A *Via Media*' in Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), pp. 121–43.

striking how quick we are, nonetheless, to invoke personal categories in our thinking about place. The philosopher of place Jeff Malpas comments in this connection that:

Perhaps one could say of the places to which Proust attends, as Heaney says of the Lake District landscape that occupied Wordsworth, that they are . . . both 'humanized and humanizing'. The 'humanized', 'personalized' character of place can be viewed as itself indicating, first the character of places as unitary structures possessed of a certain identity and particularity of their own . . . and, second, the obtaining of a certain *interdependence*, rather than simply a one way dependence, between place and person.<sup>21</sup>

On this view, our willingness to humanize places, or to speak of them in personal terms, has two sources. First of all, places have the sort of individuality that we associate with persons. In other words, individual places are not members of a general kind in the way that apples, say, are members of a kind. Knowing that something is an apple will, in the normal case, allow us to say a fair bit about its character in advance of acquaintance with the individual apple, whereas the nature of a place cannot be read off so straightforwardly simply from a knowledge of its membership of the general category 'place' – the character of places (or some places anyway) is too individual, too singular, for that. In this respect, then, places are more like human beings than they are like apples or even spaniels. The ability of places to take on this individually distinctive character is bound up with the phenomenon we earlier labelled 'atmosphere' – it is their atmosphere that allows places to exhibit the 'unity' of which Malpas speaks here, and to display a 'particularity of their own'.

Secondly, Malpas attributes the openness of places to personification to the fact that they can enter into relations of interdependence with human beings. This sounds like the sort of point that Hartshorne wished to make in relation to the personhood of God. So if Malpas is right about places on this score, then it may be that Hartshorne's objection to Aquinas's rendering of the doctrine of divine supra-individuality can be accommodated with relative ease within the

<sup>21</sup> J. E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 184–5. We might see the idea that places can also be 'humanizing' as confirmed in the experience of the friends described in Chapter 2 – in so far as their friendship turns out to be rooted in their shared relationship to certain places.

framework of a place-based formulation of the doctrine. The idea that places can ‘interact’ with us, in the sense that is implied here, is I think a familiar fact of ordinary experience – and it is strongly implied in the description of Port Meadow and New College cloister that we examined in Chapter 2. We saw there how a place can draw out of us certain moods and thoughts that are typical of the place. In this sense we may speak of places as having a ‘character’ in something like the sense in which human beings have a character: a human person, too, may change in all sorts of respects over time, and yet we know that they commonly retain a certain ‘style’ of doing things, one which elicits in others various moods and thoughts that are characteristic of being with that person.

Edmund Cusick’s description of his home in the Berwyns, in mid-Wales, offers a good example of this sort of personification of place – and of the idea that places have their own purposes, and meet us, or interact with us, to some extent on their own terms. He writes in his journal of how one evening, while he was in hospital, he came to:

a sense of the importance of the place that we live – of there being a reason for us being in the heart of the place we are in. Not a clear reason, but a purpose half hidden, tangled up, concealed. And in part deliberately held back by the land. The dour farmers, the language that we are still outside of, the thorn hedges & fences, gates, laced with extra barbed wire. It has not been a welcoming land. But against this, last night, the sense of those moments of opening, of welcome, where by slow persistence of being there, I have felt great peace – watching the clouds drift over the hills, and up by my rock, & by the waterfall, & by moonlight in the Summer, it has seemed like a true gift to be there.<sup>22</sup>

This passage reminds me of nothing so much as of writings about relationship to God in prayer – and of the need to persist in the face of experiences of ‘dryness’ in prayer.

<sup>22</sup> Taken from his brown journal, written in January 2007. The passage is reproduced in Edmund Cusick, *Between Fields and Stars: New and Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Gladys Mary Coles (West Kirkby, 2008), p. 104. Compare Edward Casey’s suggestion that in our dealings with wilderness ‘What matters is *letting the land take the lead*’: *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), p. 260.



Edward Casey brings together these themes of the individuality of place, and the dialogical character of our relationship with place when he writes that:

A place is more an *event* than a *thing* to be assimilated to known categories. As an event, it is unique, idioloical. Its peculiarity calls not for assumption into the already known – that way lies site, which lends itself to predefined categories, uses, and interpretations – but for the imaginative constitution of terms respecting its idiolocality (these range from placenames to whole discourses).<sup>23</sup>

Here Casey leads us back to the thought that the character of a place cannot be predefined by reference to general type in the way that the character of an apple, for example, might be. And he connects this fact with the capacity of places to take us by surprise – to defeat our expectations, and thereby to draw us into deeper encounter with them. Once more, these reflections have obvious theological resonances. God too cannot be pinned down according to kind. (This is part of the point of saying that God is subsistent existence: unlike creatures, God cannot be defined by membership of a general type, plus a set of differentiating characteristics that set God apart from other examples of the type, since God is not a particular kind of thing, with a particular mode of being.) Similarly it is of the nature of God's reality that it cannot be exhausted by any number of human encounters with it, but always draws the person who is sufficiently responsive in the direction of a deeper engagement.

Although Casey does not make the connection here, we might add with Malpas that these characteristics are also reminiscent of persons. A person is not simply a 'means' to be 'used' (is not like a 'site', in Casey's terms). And in part this is because a person's character does not lend itself to precise pre-definition – from which it follows that a person cannot rightly be treated simply as a resource which we may bend to our will without taking the trouble to 'encounter' them or to have first-hand acquaintance with them. The reality of persons, like that of places, calls then for a more 'personal', more intimate mode of knowing because, once again, it escapes simple definition. (And if Cusick is right, then we might add that places as well as persons can

<sup>23</sup> Casey, 'How to Get from Space to Place', p. 26.

withhold themselves from us – coming to know a place depends to some extent therefore upon the gracious cooperation of the place.) It might be countered: but the content of *any* instance of knowledge by acquaintance will elude simple description – whether the object of knowledge be a person, an apple, or an oak tree. One might take this thought to invite a quasi-personal characterization of things in general. But one might also fairly say, I think, that while the phenomenology of an individual apple – for example the particular hue of green or red that is displayed by a given apple – may not be knowable in all its detail in advance of an ‘encounter’ with the apple, and may not be communicable to others by description alone, the apple is unlikely, even so, to take me by surprise, simply on phenomenological grounds; and it is unlikely to lead me into a sense of deepened relationship to it, on the basis of what I come to know of it through first-hand experience. At the same time we should allow (following the letter to Edmund) that the sight of an oak tree, for example, can sustain a sense of cosmological wonderment! (However, we might also see the capacity of this particular tree to bear this sort of meaning as rooted in its relationship to the dense singularity of a correlative place.)

These reflections will certainly not satisfy all Hartshorneans, but they do show, I suggest, that the openness of places to personification is a deep and pervasive feature of our relationship to them. To this extent, a placial formulation of the doctrine of divine supra-individuality may well be better equipped to meet Hartshornean concerns about divine personhood than is Aquinas’s version of the doctrine. To put the matter otherwise, it seems that the idea of personhood, or the kind of relationship that is typical of interpersonal encounter, lies very close to the root of our conception of place – and it may be doubted whether the same can be said of our conception of subsistent existence, or of a reality which is defined in the first instance by reference to notions such as immutability and impassibility.

These remarks are consonant with the idea (which we explored in Chapter 2) that our relationship to places can take on some of the attributes that we associate with friendship. We have been considering how we can relate to places in a quasi-personal way. And drawing on the material of Chapter 2, we may add that this connection may

be more exactly like that of friendship – if we seek out the ‘company’ of a place repeatedly, and allow it to figure non-instrumentally in our enjoyment of various activities, and in our articulation of correlative thoughts and values.

A Hartshornean who wants to associate with God a different sense of personhood from this is likely to say that the personhood of God should be modelled on the personhood of individual human beings: a person is, rather, a particular consciousness who acts upon, and is acted upon by, various other consciousnesses together with the material world. Famously, Hartshorne himself thought that the relationship of God to creatures was to be compared not to the place-part relation, but to the relationship of a mind to the parts of its body.<sup>24</sup> This analogy yields a further formulation of the doctrine of divine supra-individuality: God’s reality corresponds to the sum of creation, on this view, in so far as creation is the body of God.

However, just because it conceives of God by analogy with individual human consciousnesses, this approach seems to miss some of the religiously important content of Aquinas’s account. While, for Hartshorne, it is true that the creation as a whole can be regarded as the body of God, this thesis does not show that it is creation as a whole which best images God. Creation as a whole is, rather, best construed as a part of God (if we adopt a ‘panentheistic’ reading of his thesis) or as a kind of appendage to God (if we prefer a dualistic reading). And in the first case, it is presumably the human person considered as a mind–body composite that best images God, and in the second case the individual human consciousness that best images God – rather than the creation as a whole. To put the matter otherwise, creation as a whole is regarded here as the body of God, and not God – and to represent God we should therefore refer either to an individual consciousness or to a mind–body composite, since in these cases we are dealing not simply with a body, but with minded life of the kind that God enjoys. Moreover, on this view, it seems only too easy to understand the possibility of competition between the good which is God and created goods. In particular, given Hartshorne’s libertarian conception of creaturely freedom, it makes

<sup>24</sup> The analogy is developed in his essay ‘The God of Religion and the God of Philosophy’, in *Talk of God*, Vol. II (London, 1967–68), pp. 155–6.

ready sense to suppose that I can find my fulfilment in a human being *rather than* in God, since a human being will enjoy a degree of causal independence vis-à-vis God, and is like God an individual mind – and, indeed, a mind which is more accessible to me.

In general, the difficulty for this account is its (unabashed) anthropomorphism. When trying to expound the divine nature (when speaking of God's responsiveness to creatures, or God's knowledge of the world, and so on), Hartshorne repeatedly has recourse to analogies drawn from the human case – and this is no coincidence, but reflects his view about how we come to assign a meaning to the terms we use of God. In general, he thinks, our understanding of the divine attributes will have to be grounded in our knowledge of the human correlates of those attributes, given the way in which the relevant concepts are learnt. Here is a representative observation along these lines – in this passage, he is applying this perspective to the question of divine agency in particular:

Linguistic analysis, the favourite tool of contemporary philosophy, has an important clarification to effect here. If God determines all events, decides whatever is decided, then what human meaning do words like 'determine' or 'decide' retain? Do we learn how to use these words by observing the decisions or doings of God, or of men? What can it mean to speak of God doing or deciding something unless it first of all means something to speak of men in this way? And if the meaning is derived from the human paradigm, how can we also use the word to attribute a sheer monopoly of acting or decision making to deity?<sup>25</sup>

Given this approach, where God's nature and mode of activity are conceived quite explicitly by analogy with their human correlates, it seems easy enough to envisage the possibility of competition between the divine good and that of creatures, since God is conceived from the outset as a kind of creature writ large – as an individual consciousness, in interaction with the world, with limited knowledge and powers, and so on. Of course, this is not to say that on Hartshorne's view, the choice of a creature over God would be fully rational – but nonetheless the idea of such a choice seems to have some logically coherent content. By contrast, on Aquinas's view,

<sup>25</sup> 'The God of Religion', p. 159.

while a person may make this same choice, it is harder to see what intelligible content the choice would have, since even the sum of creation only bodies forth in partial and fragmentary form the goodness which God has 'whole and together'.

I have been arguing that we have reason to favour a broadly Thomistic rendering of the doctrine of divine supra-individuality over a Hartshornean approach, as a way of preserving the religiously important content of the doctrine. I have also proposed that there is some reason, at least on apologetic grounds, and perhaps on grounds of philosophical principle, to favour a place-based reading of this Thomistic perspective over an account which trades on the idea of subsistent existence. However, as I have noted, there remains an important objection to the place-based account that we have yet to address: namely, the thought that such an account is unlikely to yield a sufficiently rich conception of divine transcendence.

THE PLACIAL ANALOGY FOR GOD AND  
THE IDEA OF DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE:  
GOD AS A *GENIUS LOCI*

It might be said that the relationship between a place and its parts is simply one of constitution: once the parts have been laid alongside one another, then the place will also exist. Of course, we should allow that these parts will then exhibit a kind of unity, of the special form that we associate with places, rather than just adding up to a conglomeration of individual things. And to this extent the place as a whole, it might be said, enjoys a degree of transcendence over its parts: when these parts are brought together, the result is not just a collection of things, but a supra-individual entity, the place, which involves an integration of the parts, rather than simply their juxtaposition. However, this kind of transcendence, it may be said, still falls far short of what is implied in God's transcendence of the world. To see this, it is enough to note that if the parts of a place were to cease to exist, then so would the place, whereas if creatures were to cease to exist, then God (on any standard account) would not.

What should we make of this line of thought? A ‘non-realist’ conception of talk of God might suppose that the place–part account does in fact sufficiently recognize the kind of transcendence that God enjoys in relation to creatures. To talk about God, on this sort of perspective, would be simply to talk about the world as a whole, in respect of its unity and ‘atmosphere’. I do not think that such an approach is religiously useless. But, clearly, it does not capture in full what has been meant, in mainstream monotheistic thought, by the doctrine of ‘creation’, since this doctrine involves the idea that God sustains the world in existence – and places as we know them manifestly do not sustain their parts in existence, even if they do account for the fact that these parts come to display various ‘emergent’ properties (such as the property of Dartmoorishness) as a result of their participation in the place. Moreover, it is not apparent how the concept of place might be extended to meet this difficulty – whatever else we mean by a ‘place’, we surely mean something whose reality supervenes on that of its parts, so that the ceasing to exist of the parts would entail the place itself ceasing to exist.

However, this point of distinction between the relationships of place-and-part and God-and-creature does not wreck the usefulness of the place analogy for theological reflection. It suggests only that one way of developing the analogy (by seeing the relationship of place and part as comparable to that of God and creature) will not do as an account of what has traditionally been understood about God as creator. But there are other ways of unfolding the analogy. In due course I want to consider the thought that God is a kind of place – but not a place whose parts are worldly things.<sup>26</sup> But for now, let us take another tack.

We might ask: what is it that we come to know when we acquire knowledge of a place? One answer would be that to know a place, as distinct from a ‘site’, is to grasp the human significance of the correlative region of space. This is the kind of knowledge that the friends described in Chapter 2 seem to have of various places in Oxford – in their experience, these places come to bear a certain existential meaning, and in apprehending that meaning they grasp

<sup>26</sup> I take up this idea in the closing comments of the book.

what kinds of bodily movement, affective response, and salient perception befit the place. To use an ancient idiom, we might say, then, that to know a place is to have knowledge of a correlative *genius loci* – it is to know what we might call the ‘spirit’ of the place. The ‘spirit’ of Dartmoor is, we could say, in the sense we have indicated, Dartmoorishness.<sup>27</sup>

Now it might be thought that this terminological elaboration does not really advance our discussion. For a *genius* surely enjoys as limited a transcendence vis-à-vis the parts of a place as does the place itself: if the parts of Dartmoor were to cease to exist, it is not only the moor that would cease to exist, but also Dartmoorishness. Perhaps this is true in the case of a place such as a Dartmoor. However, it seems that the concept of a *genius* is at least in principle open to extension: while a place could not, logically could not, survive the destruction of its parts, the meaning of a place stands in a different relation to the parts of the place. Unlike the place itself, the meaning of a place is not constituted of parts. After all, such a meaning is presumably not a material thing, nor even a supra-individual material thing, and it has no spatial extension. To this extent, then, it seems at least intelligible that the meaning of a place might survive the destruction of the parts of the place. To take an example, while New College cloister would not survive the destruction of its parts, the meaning that the friends take to be embodied there might in principle survive – especially if that meaning is conceived as a reality which infuses material contexts, and confers significance upon them, rather than as supervening upon those contexts and as logically dependent upon them therefore. In the description given in Chapter 2, the friends are I think attributing to the cloister a meaning of this kind.

Let us allow, then, that the *genius* or spirit or meaning embodied in a place is in principle capable of existing independently of the place. When we speak of the spirit of a place such as Dartmoor, I doubt that we are committed to this sort of transcendence. Nonetheless, I want to propose, the concept of a *genius* or ‘spirit’ in principle admits of extrapolation in this way – whereas the concept of place does not

<sup>27</sup> Compare Christian Norberg Schulz’s discussion of the concept in his *Genius Loci*, p. 18. He distinguishes various kinds of ‘spirit of natural place’ on pp. 42–9.

admit of such an extension, since it belongs to the concept of a place that its existence should cease along with that of its parts, because a place is a composite of those parts, albeit that it is not simply a collection of them. In fact, we might plausibly speculate that the notion of a *genius* was fashioned in the first instance in order to *explain* the special unity-in-diversity that is characteristic of places, by in effect hypostasizing (and at the same time personifying) that unity. If that is so, then we have further reason to doubt that a place-relative meaning is *qua genius* dependent upon the parts of the correlative place.

So while the place-part relation may appear to be defective as a model for the God-creature relation, because the concept of place does not lend itself to the kind of analogical or other stretching that would be required to articulate God's role as creator, the relationship of a *genius loci* to the parts of the correlative place may not be subject to this same difficulty. So on this point at least, conceiving of God by analogy with a *genius loci* may seem preferable to conceiving of God by analogy with a place. However, we might wonder whether the *genius* model will be able to meet the various desiderata which are satisfied by the analogy between God and place. Let's consider this question now. For these purposes, I am going to construe *genius* language in the way that is relevant for its application to God – that is, as entailing the ontological independence of the *genius vis-à-vis* the parts of the correlative place.

The parts of a place such as Dartmoor exhibit a common, kind-transcending property – the sort of property that, in the case of Dartmoor, we have labelled 'Dartmoorishness'. If a place has a *genius*, then the *genius* will possess, we might suppose, this same kind of property pre-eminently and non-derivatively. After all, if asked, for example, what the *genius* or spirit of Dartmoor is, we might reply simply (assuming that there is such a *genius*, and assuming familiarity with the terminological conventions of this volume!): Dartmoorishness. (Again, I am not claiming here that Dartmoor has a *genius* in this sense – I am just using the term *genius* in the special sense that is pertinent for our enquiry, in order to make a conceptual point.) The idiom of the *genius loci* involves, then, a concretizing of the common, kind-transcending property that is displayed by the parts of a place in so far as they share in the spirit



of the place – and the *genius* itself therefore shows forth this property pre-eminently and in its own right, since it just is the property as hypostasized. Similarly, we might say that the *genius* of a place is best imaged not by any individual item in the place, but by the sum of such items considered as an integral whole – just as Dartmoorishness is best imaged by the moor taken as an integrated whole.

In these ways then, it may appear that the various desiderata for a doctrine of divine supra-individuality which are satisfied by the place–part analogy will be satisfied in much the same way by the *genius*–part analogy. And we might conclude, therefore, that an account of the doctrine of divine supra-individuality which is rooted in the idea of a *genius loci* will offer all the advantages of a model which trades on the place–part relationship – plus the further significant advantage of allowing us to articulate a robust doctrine of divine transcendence, once the notion of a *genius* has been extended in the way we have discussed. However, it is worth noting that the shift from a place-based to a *genius*-based model does not leave things just as they were, with the exception of the point about divine transcendence. For if it is the meaning which attaches to a place, then a *genius* will be, as we have noted, non-material. So when we say that a *genius* possesses pre-eminently the common, kind-transcending quality that is bodied forth in fragmentary form by the parts of a place, in so far as they share in the spirit of the place, we should remember that what it is for a *genius* to display such a property is not what it is for the place to do so. Dartmoor displays the property of Dartmoorishness by exemplifying the property, in material form – the *genius* of Dartmoor, or the spirit of the place, embodies Dartmoorishness by simply being the quality as hypostasized.

So the proposal we have been examining, and which we are now in a position to commend, at least provisionally, is this: the relationship between God and creatures can be understood by analogy with the relationship between a *genius loci* and the parts of the correlative place. Or to put the point otherwise, the God–world relationship can be understood by analogy with the *genius*–place relationship. This model will need to be further refined as our discussion unfolds, but I want to review just one further objection at this point. It might be

said: while we can understand the thought that particular places such as Dartmoor have a spirit or *genius*, what sense is there in the idea that the world as a whole has a *genius*? Surely the world as a whole does not constitute a 'place' in the sense that matters here – because it does not exhibit a unitary meaning of the kind that we have been associating with localized places?

It is not too difficult to imagine someone whose experience of the world would appear to fit this picture. Perhaps a person finds themselves with a variety of life commitments which are stubbornly plural, in the sense that they cannot be subsumed within some larger, self-consistent and unified view about the ultimate meaning or point of a human life. From the vantage point of such a person, the world will not bear the sort of unity of meaning that is implied in the idea of a *genius mundi*. However, while such a life may be possible from a psychological point of view, the monotheistic traditions will unite in supposing that a life of this kind is not properly attuned to the real nature of things. Just because they postulate one God, who constitutes the beginning and end of each human life, these faiths are committed to saying that the world does exhibit a fundamental unity of meaning – and more exactly, they will say that a human being should take as their basic life project, the project against which other ventures are to be measured and set in due order, the goal of being properly oriented towards the one God. So any doctrine of the relationship between God and the world which implies that the world displays a unity of meaning is to this extent true to the believer's perspective on the nature of things – so on theological if not simply on psychological grounds, the *genius loci* model seems able to withstand the objection that the world is not in the relevant sense a place.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> There are also philosophical traditions which have taken very seriously the idea that the world or the cosmos exhibits a unity that admits of personification – take for example Plato's idea of a 'world soul', or Plotinus's suggestion that there is a cosmic 'Intellectual Principle'. See respectively *The Timaeus of Plato*, ed. R. D. Archer Hind (New York, 1973), Section 30, p. 93; and Plotinus, *The Enneads*, tr. Stephen MacKenna (2nd edn., revised B. S. Page: London, 1956), v.9. Again, the approach that we are exploring here will eschew the Hartshornean thought that this 'soul' is to be represented as an individual consciousness unfolding through time.

## CONCLUSION

We have been considering the thought that there is a close analogy between the concept of God and the concept of a *genius mundi*. This is in part because God and the *genius mundi* both enjoy a supra-individual mode of existence. More exactly, if we think of God as the *genius mundi*, then we can articulate a broadly Thomistic account of the idea of divine supra-individuality – and suppose that creatures possess in fragmentary and derivative form a common, kind-transcending quality that is displayed pre-eminently and non-derivatively by God. I have also suggested that the *genius* concept can be extended so that the existence of a *genius* need not be dependent upon that of the parts of the correlative place. And if we do extend the concept in this way, then we can use the language of the *genius mundi* to formulate the thought that God is the source of the world's being. And granted all of that, we may wish to say not simply that the concepts of God and of a *genius mundi* are in certain respects analogous, but that God just is the *genius mundi*.

I have also been arguing that this account of divine supra-individuality is superior on certain points to Aquinas's own doctrine – especially in so far as his doctrine gives the impression of endorsing a sub-personal view of God, and is mired in the difficulties that attend the idea of 'subsistent existence'. At the same time, the *genius mundi* model is, I think, preferable to Hartshorne's construal of the idea of divine supra-individuality, since his approach fails to preserve the religiously important core of the doctrine – namely the thought that the divine goodness cannot intelligibly stand in competition with any creaturely good, nor even with the sum of creaturely goods.

In the course of our discussion we have touched on two further models of divine supra-individuality – those advanced by John Paul II and Rowan Williams. According to John Paul, in the passage I cited at the outset of this chapter, the concept of God is in some way connected to that of 'the whole'. The *genius mundi* model allows us to see in what sense this is true. God is not the same as 'the whole' understood simply as the sum of creatures – but may be identified with the whole in so far as God is the *genius* or ultimate meaning of the whole. Williams represents God's reality as like that of a 'grid'.

Again, the discussion of this chapter could be read as one way of explicating this comment. The *genius* of the world comprises a kind of 'grid' for understanding individual things in so far as it is not itself an individual thing, but is rather the overarching meaning which allows us to see the significance of creatures. Again, in the absence of elaboration, 'grid' language may seem to suggest a sub-personal view of God, or a view which is at best equivocal about the idea of divine transcendence – and the *genius mundi* model shows how Williams' proposal may be drawn out satisfactorily on these points.

We have been reviewing various creaturely analogies for God's supra-individual relationship to creatures, including the relationships between: a grid and the things that fall within it; a whole and its parts; a human person and their body parts; a place and its parts; a *genius loci* and the parts of the correlative place. And I have been suggesting that the last model yields the fullest picture, and shows how the import of these other accounts needs to be unfolded if it is to be consistent with mainstream theistic thought. We might wonder whether there are other creaturely analogies which might be used to model the idea of divine supra-individuality. Perhaps there are – but to say no more, the history of philosophical theology has not thrown up many other suitable candidates. And this fact should condition our sense of the significance of the *genius mundi* model: it is, arguably, not just one more model to set alongside a range of others, but a particularly useful instrument for thinking through the various dimensions of a satisfactory doctrine of divine supra-individuality.

In this chapter we have been making a case for the idea that knowledge of place is analogous to knowledge of God – and, more ambitiously, for the idea that knowledge of the *genius* of the place which is the world is, at least in part, constitutive of knowledge of God. This account can be grafted onto the first of the models of the differentiated religious significance of place that we expounded in Chapter 2. That model maintains that a place can acquire religious meaning when it stands microcosmically for the nature of things. Using the terminology of the present chapter, we can re-cast this thought by supposing that our knowledge of places such as Port Meadow or New College cloister is more exactly a knowledge of the *genius* of these places. And this knowledge will be religiously meaningful when these localized *genii* in some way epitomize the *genius* of

the locus which is the world – for (our argument has been) knowledge of the *genius mundi* is knowledge of God. So the microcosmic relationship that we identified in Chapter 2 can be represented more exactly, in the light of the discussion of the present chapter, as a relationship of localized to global *genius* – where the religious significance of the idea of a global *genius* can be elaborated in the ways that we have been considering.

We have been examining the concepts of God, place, and the *genius* of a place, and the connection of each to the idea of a supra-individual mode of existence. In the next chapter, I want to consider two further respects in which the concepts of God and place prove to be related. This exercise will help us to round out the two remaining models of the differentiated religious significance of space that we identified in Chapter 2.

## 4

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# The Grounding of Human Agency and Identity in God and Place

We have been considering one dimension of the relationship between the concept of God and the concept of place. In this chapter, I want to attend to two more, by examining (i) the narratively structured character of divine and placial agency, and (ii) some of the ways in which human identity proves to be rooted in places and in God. Let's review these themes in turn.

### THE NARRATIVELY STRUCTURED CHARACTER OF DIVINE AND PLACIAL AGENCY

#### **The Narratively Structured Agency of Places**

In Chapter 2, we saw how the friends construe their behaviours at Port Meadow and New College cloister by reference to (among other things) the histories of these places – and we saw how they are led to behave in certain ways at these places because of that history. Accordingly, we may speak of places exercising a narratively mediated agency: a place may elicit a certain kind of practical response because of the role of its history in fixing the sense of the behaviours which are performed there. Perhaps most obviously, certain behaviours may turn out to be incongruent with the history of a place. For example, in the 1980s, the Catholic Church sought to establish a convent at Auschwitz – and this suggestion was vehemently opposed

by Jewish groups.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the rights and wrongs of this particular dispute, we find this response perfectly intelligible, I think: the objectors felt that the history of this site set constraints on what could properly be done there. This is partly a matter of according the dead respect – of not doing something which would cause them offence, or which fails to take proper stock of what they have undergone. But we also need to make reference to the place to understand what is at stake here: it is not the dead in general that count, nor even simply dead Jews, but those Jews who died at this particular place – it is their memory which must not be dishonoured. Moreover, to see what is at issue we also need, of course, to make reference to what happened at this place: it matters that Jews were murdered at Auschwitz, rather than simply dying of natural causes. So here a certain ethical judgement – the judgement that it would be wrong to site a convent at this place – turns out to be rooted in the storied identity of the place. In this sense then, the place is exercising a narratively mediated kind of agency in our dealings with it in the present.

These same connections have been treated theoretically by Katya Mandoki in her essay ‘Sites of Symbolic Density’.<sup>2</sup> As the title of her paper indicates, Mandoki thinks of space as having a variable ‘density’ or significance – which in turn is connected to the differing histories of places. The central theme of our own enquiry is the differentiated religious significance of space – Mandoki is concerned with the related but more general question of differentiation in the existential significance of space.

In illustration of her view, Mandoki cites the history of Mexico City. According to Aztec legend, the site where Mexico City now stands was originally settled because it was here that an eagle had

<sup>1</sup> The case is described in Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979* (Athens, OH, 2003), ‘Epilogue’. It would be easy to multiply examples. For another Polish case, see David M. Smith’s discussion of the reaction of Warsaw city council to the proposal to locate a bank on Piłsudskiego Square, the site of the tomb of the unknown soldier: *Moral Geographies: Ethics in a World of Difference* (Edinburgh, 2000), p. 46. I am grateful to Stephen Clark for drawing my attention to this volume.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Sites of Symbolic Density: A Relativistic Approach to Experienced Place’, in Andrew Light and Jonathan Smith, eds., *Philosophy and Geography III: Philosophies of Place* (New York, 1998), pp. 73–95.

alighted upon an opuntia cactus. The first settlers read this event in allegorical terms – the eagle was taken to represent the Aztec Empire, and the red, heart-shaped fruit of the cactus the hearts of the human victims who were to be sacrificed to the god Huitzilopochtli to sustain the order of the empire and the cosmos.<sup>3</sup> What matters for our purposes is not the particular theological gloss that was attached to this event, but rather the fact that, from the beginning, the significance of the site was understood not so much by reference to its usefulness in providing fortification, or a commanding view, or easy access to resources, but in storied terms.

So the city of Tenochtitlán came to be built at this place. In 1521, some two centuries after its construction, the city was overrun by Cortés and the conquistadors, and rendered largely uninhabitable. Even so, and despite the fact that the city's location was in some respects ill-suited to his strategic purposes, Cortés decided that the capital of New Spain should be built at this same place – where Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, had stood. (And Cortés himself took up residence in Moctezuma's two palaces.) Here again, we might suppose, it is the storied identity of the place that matters: by locating his capital at the site of the Aztec capital, Cortés was able to give material expression to the supersessionist pretensions of the new, colonial order.<sup>4</sup>

Mandoki goes on to trace the history of this site over subsequent centuries. Over and over, she notes, the history of the place has exercised a kind of gravitational pull upon its inhabitants and the inhabitants of the surrounding region: people have been drawn to the site, and moved to perform certain actions here, because of its past.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'Sites', pp. 79–81.

<sup>4</sup> As Mandoki comments: 'One could think of no other reason for choosing the ruins of Tenochtitlán than the symbolic meaning of the place': 'Sites', pp. 84–5.

<sup>5</sup> Mandoki takes the idea that the site exercises a kind of gravitational pull quite seriously – she even asks whether this sort of pull is better understood by reference to a Newtonian or an Einsteinian theory of gravity. Her reasoning on this point is not important for our purposes – though it is worth noting that she favours a model which understands gravitation in terms of a field of force rather than in terms of the influence exercised by one thing upon another. We could in principle map this supra-individual conception of the agency of places onto our earlier discussion of divine supra-individuality.



And throughout, it is not just the city in general that carries this importance, but the very spot where the eagle was said to have alighted, where the main square of Tenochtitlán once stood – for the main square of Mexico City occupies, to this day, this same site. Mandoki gives this overview of these developments:

The main city square of Tenochtitlán became the colonial *Zócalo* during the sixteenth century and is still not only the city's main plaza but also the country's main center. It was there, of course, where the great Metropolitan Cathedral was built, with its combination of gothic, baroque, and neoclassical styles in fashion for the three centuries it took to build it, where the Inquisition's hangings took place, where a Montgolfier was elevated, where the main civic and religious ceremonies were performed, where goods and services were offered and acquired, and where revolts were ignited... The *Zócalo* is now a place of peregrination from all parts of the country to demonstrate against the president and express dissidence.<sup>6</sup>

So the main square of the modern city stands on the site formerly occupied by the main square of the Aztec city. And throughout the intervening period, Mandoki notes, this site has served as a focus for the lives of the people of the surrounding region – first for the Aztecs, and then for the people of New Spain and of Mexico.

What should we make of all of this? For Mandoki, the story of Tenochtitlán and Mexico City is important because it reveals the enduring potency of this site – which has continued to draw people to itself, and to shape their activities, over centuries, notwithstanding the changes in religion, language, and customs that have unfolded meantime. Accordingly, she suggests, the site turns out to be of foundational importance for an understanding of the history of this region. As she puts the point: 'The character of political power has changed, the religion substituted, the language replaced, but the site remains immutable through time.'<sup>7</sup> Mandoki concludes that 'the place, as a sponge that has absorbed various layers of time and history, is ultimate.'<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 'Sites', pp. 85–6.

<sup>7</sup> 'Sites', pp. 86–7.

<sup>8</sup> 'Sites', p. 87.

## The Narratively Structured Character of Divine Agency

Several features of this account are reminiscent of standard conceptions of divine agency. God too has been accorded an ultimate role in explaining the development of human cultures. And God's agency in these matters also seems to be exercised, at least in part, by means of stories – or by means of what God has done, rather than by God simply shunting things around, as it were. In this sense, we might say, God's agency is transacted at the level of meaning, and not just by the application of 'force' or by means of efficient causation.

These connections between story and divine agency are regularly displayed in discussions in Christian ethics. A Christian ethicist, if they are handling their sources with a degree of sophistication, is likely to approach the question of how to act, or how to feel, in a given practical context not so much by appeal to isolated biblical verses (taking these verses to provide a kind of proof text for a certain ethical conviction), but instead by asking how the wider sweep of the biblical narrative generates a framework for understanding the meaning which attaches to human behaviours – determining that some are broadly context-congruent, even context-required, while others are inconsistent with their context. Exemplifying this sort of approach, and rooting his own reflections in those of Saint Augustine, Michael Banner argues for example that a Christian sexual ethic needs to be framed by the biblical account of what God has done in creation, reconciliation, and redemption.<sup>9</sup> From the doctrine of creation, we know that sexual activity is not of itself sinful, since sexual differentiation belongs to the pre-Fall order of things. But from the doctrine of the Fall, we know that our capacity for rational choice is now damaged – and we know in particular that the passions can subvert our judgement in our sexual choices as elsewhere. Hence the view that sexual activity is simply innocent (a view which Banner dubs 'Pelagian') is just as unacceptable as the view (which he dubs 'Manichean') that sexual activity is essentially sinful. Lastly, looking towards the eschaton, and the non-particular

<sup>9</sup> Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 21–6.

mode of relationship that is said to be realized there, Banner argues that even now celibacy constitutes a proper Christian calling – in so far as it anticipates this more broadly defined commitment to the common good, as distinct from the kind of concern that is circumscribed by ties of blood or family. Perhaps to this point Banner's conclusions will seem fairly uncontentious, from the point of view of mainstream Christian teaching on sexuality, but it is worth noting that he uses this same method to ground more controversial claims – as for example in his teaching on homosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

For our purposes, what matters here is not so much the plausibility of Banner's conclusions as the character of his method. We could summarize this method by saying that while Mandoki takes the history of Tenochtitlán Square to provide a storied context for human activities there – marking out some activities as appropriate, or at any rate as advantageous (if we think of Cortés's choices), and others as not – Banner believes that various divinely authorized stories establish a context in the light of which we can determine which kinds of human activity are appropriate or context-congruent. In the latter case, these stories concern not so much some localized place, as the cosmos as a whole – for these are stories which concern the creation of the world, and the redemption of human beings, and perhaps of the cosmos in its entirety. So we might suppose that Banner's account involves a kind of generalization of Mandoki's – on his approach, the material order in its entirety bears a storied identity, and issues a summons to a correlative mode of life. We might say, then, that the concept of place is, implicitly, being enlarged in Banner's account, so that it applies not simply to a specific locality such as Tenochtitlán Square, but to the creation as a whole.

We have come across some of these same themes in our discussion of the concept of divine supra-individuality. We saw in Chapters 2 and 3 that localized places can be taken to have a *genius* or existential sense – where this *genius* is given partly in the phenomenology of the place, and partly in the possibilities for bodily appropriation that it affords. In our discussion of Mandoki we have seen how story, rather than phenomenology or mode of embodied appropriation, may become the focus for our sense of the significance of a place. And

<sup>10</sup> See *Christian Ethics*, Chapter 8.

in the present chapter as in the last, we have seen how the concept of a *genius* can be generalized from particular localities and applied to the sum of the created order. So in the last two chapters, we have in effect been exploring two parallel lines of argument – in each case moving from the idea of the existential import or *genius* of particular places (whether this is understood in terms of phenomenology and opportunities for bodily appropriation, or in terms of story) to the idea that the world might constitute a place in this sense.

### Narrative and Divine Ultimacy

Mandoki's account throws into new and helpful relief the theological resonance of the idea that the world can be conceived as a place. When speaking of Tenochtitlán Square, she comments (as we have seen) that the place enjoys a kind of ultimacy – since it has continued to order human activity, while whole civilizations have run their course. It might be more accurate to say that on her account it is really *stories* which are properly ultimate – it is the stories associated with a place such as Tenochtitlán Square which persist, and it is because of its connection with these stories that the place retains an enduring significance. In other words, if you were to take away the story, then the place would cease to shape, so profoundly, the activities of human beings – so arguably it is the story which has precedence in the order of explanation, while the place enjoys special significance simply by virtue of its association with the story.<sup>11</sup>

This way of putting the matter invites us to think similarly that it is not the place which is the world that is ultimate so much as the stories which frame its significance and thereby confer a stable meaning upon human behaviours – determining that some are fitting and others not. This 'take' on the importance of story is

<sup>11</sup> Compare John Inge's observation that 'the holiness of place' can 'disappear if the meaning associated with it recedes from human memory'. He gives as examples Stonehenge and Carnac. See John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 84. In fact, it seems to me that places such as Stonehenge and Carnac retain a kind of sacred charge – and in these cases it may be that the phenomenology of a place, and the possibilities for bodily appropriation which it affords, are capable of operating to some extent independently of any knowledge of its storied identity. These are matters to which I shall return in later chapters.

strikingly consonant with talk, in the Christian context, of the Logos as divine. It was through the Logos that the world was created, and it was the Logos that became incarnate and led the life of a first-century Palestinian Jew. So to specify who the Logos is, we need to make reference to the stories of creation and incarnation – and to acknowledge how these stories frame the significance of the place which is the world. And we might say, therefore, that these stories enjoy a kind of ultimacy: they tell us the meaning of the world, and provide a final and irrefragable standard against which to measure our efforts to live fittingly – that is, in ways that are true to our storied context. To this extent, then, these stories have a kind of divine status; or failing that, they have anyway an ultimate status in so far as they are not just created by the Logos, as creatures are, but supervene directly upon the Logos's own activity in creation and incarnation. Similar connections could be traced in other monotheistic traditions I suggest – for instance, in the tendency to see the Torah or the Koran as having a kind of divine status in so far as, like the Logos, they are eternal, and serve as the agents of God's self-revelation. So Mandoki's account of the ultimacy of places and by implication of stories coheres suggestively with Logos theology, and with the fundamental normative status of those stories which concern God's creative, reconciling and redemptive activity.

This account also meshes nicely with the perspective of the last chapter – where we argued that God should be conceived not so much as the place which is the world but rather as its *genius*. Similarly, we are now suggesting that God's ultimacy is to be understood not so much by reference to the world but, rather, in terms of the various stories which define the nature of the world's *genius*. This account also fits with the idea that God enjoys a supra-individual mode of existence – only here it is stories which specify God's identity and provide the 'grid' or framework of interpretation which helps to fix the sense borne by particular things and their behaviours.

### Final Causation and the Nature of Divine and Placial Agency

As well as helping to illuminate the idea of divine ultimacy, Mandoki's discussion of the agency of place is also reminiscent of

theological accounts of God's status as a final cause. Of course, divine agency is often represented as a matter of efficient causation – as when God is said to will an event to occur, with the result that it does (without any causal intermediary being required). But theologians have also wanted to say that God is the ultimate goal of human life – so that God acts not so much by 'shunting' human beings around, in the manner of an efficient cause, as by drawing us into a pattern of life that is congruent with our divinely constituted *telos*.<sup>12</sup> Mandoki's description of the 'symbolic density' of a place such as Tenochtitlán Square in effect attributes this sort of teleological agency to places. The place does not act by, as it were, 'pushing' human agents into behaving one way rather than another; instead it acts by fixing the meanings that attach to various prospective behaviours, so eliciting some behaviours rather than others – by establishing a 'fit' between those behaviours and their storied context. Here human behaviour is governed by the goal of congruence with context – where the context, for Mandoki, is defined in narrative terms.

Similarly, we can think of the world as a place whose sense is given in the stories of creation, reconciliation, and redemption – and we may suppose that these stories fix the meaning of various behaviours (see again Banner's discussion of sexuality), so making possible a mode of life whose goal is congruence with this narratively constituted context. If we add that God's identity or that of the Logos is given in these stories, since they specify the nature of the *genius mundi*, then we might add that the goal of congruence with this narrative context is the same as the goal of congruence with God. So in these ways, Mandoki's reflections on the nature of placial agency can help us expound the idea that God acts as a final cause.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> It might be said that even when God acts as an efficient cause, this is not a question of our being shunted into activity, to the extent that God sustains our wills in existence. But this account still invites us to see God's will as prior to our own, and even as determining our own – whereas a conception of God as final cause suggests that it is the goodness or attractiveness of the divine nature, rather than God's will, that is the ultimate wellspring of our agency. So on this second view, it is our love of God rather than God's beneficent love of us that provides the basis for an understanding of human agency.

<sup>13</sup> It might be objected that an account such as Banner's is intelligible without invoking the concept of place. That may be right, but I trust that the appeal to place,

This account is somewhat different in emphasis from the prevailing approach in recent philosophical theology – where God’s agency is treated either as a matter of efficient causation, or in terms of God presenting to human beings a kind of ‘lure’, whereby they become conscious of the desirability of certain outcomes on particular occasions of practical choice. The model we are considering is like the second approach (the ‘lure’ model) in thinking of divine agency as a case of final causation, but it differs from that model in giving closer attention to the cosmological reach of divine agency – because it is not just the desirability of an outcome relative to some localized context that drives the account but, more exactly, the congruence of this outcome with the world’s storied identity. To put the point another way, on the view we are considering, the well-lived life is context-sensitive, where the relevant context is defined by the story-constituted identity of the place which is the world. This emphasis is religiously important, I think: it helps to show how the religious life from a practical point of view rests upon knowledge of relevant meanings (and not just upon God’s ‘shunting’ us around, or simply upon our observance of various abstractly defined rules of conduct). The account also makes the related point that religious knowledge is knowledge not of mere ‘facts’ (of the kind that figure in scientific theory construction say) but is, rather, a particularly broad-reaching knowledge of meanings – or a knowledge of the nature of a particularly wide-ranging *genius*.

### The Dependence of Stories upon Places

We have been considering the idea that places depend upon stories – in so far as the identity of a place is given in the stories with which it is associated. But one could also postulate a dependence relation running in the other direction. After all, stories in the normal case

in the style of Mandoki’s discussion, helps to throw light on the connections to which Banner appeals – by showing them to be of the same type as those with which we are familiar from other, conventionally placial contexts. We might even say, more speculatively, that it is our familiarity with the way in which these connections operate in everyday placial contexts that tacitly grounds their intelligibility in the context which concerns Banner.

depend on places, in so far as they require a setting in which to 'take place'. Of course stories also depend on time in which to unfold, as well as upon place, but we might think that it is place that is the more fundamental category here, in so far as time itself is recalled in spatialized form. David Harvey makes the point in these terms: 'if it is true that time is . . . memorialized not as flow, but as memories of experienced places and spaces, then history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space, as the fundamental material of social expression'.<sup>14</sup> In any case, there is clearly a sense in which stories depend upon places – so we should add to Mandoki's picture the observation that there is here a relation of reciprocal dependence. As Philip Sheldrake comments: 'If place lends structure, context and vividness to narratives, it is stories, whether fictional or biographical, which give shape to place.'<sup>15</sup>

This second dependence relation – of story upon place – actually helps to explain the relation which interests Mandoki. She is concerned with the way in which places acquire significance through their association with stories. But a place can only enjoy this sort of significance, we might suppose, if there is an integral connection between the place and a correlative story. And this connection is provided by the fact that, in the normal case, a story is not just accidentally associated with a certain place, but depends upon that place – if it is to be the story it is. See for instance how the story of the friends, given in Chapter 2, depends for its meaning upon the sensory qualities and topography of Port Meadow and the cloister. The same kind of connection holds in the case of sites of religious significance. Jerusalem for example is important for Jews, Christians, and Muslims because of what has happened there. But, again, this is not because the place forms merely the backdrop for various events of religious significance which have taken place there. Instead, these events depend for their identity, to a degree, upon the place – so that the place is caught up in the divine initiative that is at work in these events, rather than just being loosely associated with it. Similarly we

<sup>14</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989), p. 218. We shall find a similar theme in the writings of Gaston Bachelard – which I discuss in Chapter 5.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (London, 2001), p. 17.



have been considering the view that the world as a whole is a place, and that the significance of this place is relative to its role as the setting for God's creative, reconciling, and redemptive work – this work sanctifies the place in so far as it is the context or, better, the medium for the work.

In Chapter 3, we examined the ideas of divine and placial supra-individuality, and, on that basis, we saw how we can think of the world as a place and of God as the meaning of that place. In the present chapter, we have seen how similar conclusions can be reached if we start from the idea that God and places exercise a narratively mediated agency. In concluding the last chapter, I noted that the thought that God and place are alike because both are supra-individual fits particularly well with the first of our models of knowledge of God – namely the model which takes knowledge of God to involve knowledge of some place which stands microcosmically for the meaning of the sum of things. Our discussion in the current chapter, of the narrative agency of God and of places, meshes most directly with the third of the models I outlined in Chapter 2 – because it specifies in further detail the ways in which the history, including the religious history, of a place can help to determine its significance. We have also been considering how various global stories (of creation, reconciliation, and redemption) may help to fix the identity of God considered as the *genius mundi*. This thought points to the possibility of a connection between our first and third models – in the case when a local narrative, grounded in a local place, stands microcosmically for a larger, world-encompassing story, so that the *genius* of that place is able to stand microcosmically for the *genius* of the place which is the world.

### THE GROUNDING OF HUMAN IDENTITY IN PLACE

I want to turn now to a further way in which the concepts of God and of place are connected – by examining how both concepts are implied in the specification of human identity.

## Place and Story

We have been considering some of the ways in which the identities of places are story-mediated. The identities of human beings are also rooted in story. Of course, there is a sense in which I would still be me even if I had done none of the things that in fact constitute my life story – even if I had been born elsewhere, or acquired different interests, formed different friendships, and so on.<sup>16</sup> However, there is a looser, more familiar, and existentially denser sense of identity which is in play when we seek to introduce ourselves to a relative stranger. In this kind of context, I am likely to explain who I am by rehearsing various episodes from my past – depending on context, I may make reference to where I grew up, or to formative personal relationships, and so on. So unsurprisingly, there is a sense in which human identity turns out to be relative to the stories that we tell about ourselves. Of course, it matters that these stories are true: if I tell a story in which I represent myself as having done various things which I have not in fact done, then the story will fail to specify who I am in the sense that is relevant here (though my willingness to tell it even so, which itself constitutes an episode in my developing story, may tell you quite a lot about me!). However, a person's life story is not simply a given – since it falls to the individual to decide which storylines from their past they take to be significant, and to be worth projecting into the future, by means of their activities in the present.

So there is a sense in which my identity is tied to my life story. But if I am to tell this story, it is not enough to make reference to various episodes of bodily behaviour, or of thought and feeling – I will also standardly need to refer to the places in which my story has unfolded. We have seen an instance of this truth in Katya Mandoki's work. As she notes, to bring out the significance that attaches to a particular behaviour, we need to refer to the storied identity of the place where the behaviour is performed – it was, we have seen, knowledge of this kind that led Cortés to construct the capital of New Spain at the site formerly occupied by Tenochtitlán. But it is not only stories which fix

<sup>16</sup> We could make this point by saying that 'Mark Wynn' functions as a 'rigid designator' – compare Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, 1980), p. 48.

the identity of a place, or contribute to its 'atmosphere'. As we have noted, the prevailing topography, climate, architecture, and mode of life of a place such as Dartmoor are all relevant to its identity. We might say: all of these features help to determine, in mutually defining ways, the character of its *genius*. And the behaviours enacted on the moor will depend for their significance upon this *genius*. The same truth holds, I take it, for the thoughts we rehearse or the feelings we experience at a place – they too can be assessed for fittingness to placial context, not least because they carry implications for behaviour.

We could express this point in general terms by saying that the action that is constituted by a given stretch of behaviour will be place-relative. To take a crude example, my behaviour in applying paint to a wall will count as one kind of action when carried out at a school and another when performed at home. The application of paint to a wall at a school will, granted standard assumptions (assuming for example that I am not a workman who has been contracted by the governors to paint over some graffiti!), count as an act of 'vandalism' – which is to say, among other things, that this behaviour is incongruent with its context. We have seen a further, generalized instance of this relationship in Michael Banner's proposal that a Christian ethic should be founded upon the narratively constituted identity of the place which is the world – so that the fittingness of various behaviours is to be assessed by reference to their congruence with this 'place'.

So there is a sense in which human identity is tied to story. And there is reason to suppose that these identity-defining stories can only be told by reference to a correlative set of places – since places do not provide merely the backdrop for a story, but enter integrally into its sense, by conditioning the meaning of the behaviours which make up the story. There is also a connection, we have seen, between the ability of places to determine the meaning of behaviours and their capacity to shape our conduct in the ways noted by Mandoki and others: it is because they fix the normative significance of behaviours, and because some behaviours turn out to fit their placial context while others do not, that places are able to elicit a particular practical response.

Jeff Malpas traces some of these same connections in his remarks upon the significance which we find in the places of our upbringing or early experience:

The importance of memory to self identity, and the connection of memory with place, illuminates . . . the way in which the experience of places and things from the past is very often an occasion for intense self reflection . . . The way in which such memories and places often become more important to us as we age, and the strong feelings (whether of fondness or, sometimes, of revulsion) that are typically associated with the places of our growing up and of our early life, can be seen as indicative of the founding role of those places in our narratives about ourselves and the establishing of our sense of self identity.<sup>17</sup>

So there is, we might suppose, a connection running between: a person's sense of self – the story they tell about themselves – their memory of the various events which comprise this story – and their memory of the places where these events unfolded. I am suggesting in addition that the connection between recollection of events and recollection of places is not one of loose association – rather, standardly, we can specify the meaning of various events, including episodes of bodily behaviour and of thought and feeling, only by putting them in their placial context. Hence reference to placial context helps to fix the meaning of a life story. And as Malpas notes, this truth is reflected in the emotional resonance of childhood and other places.

### **Place and Social Formation**

So here is a first connection between the concept of human identity and that of place – one which is mediated by means of the concept of a life story. Of course, there are other ways of drawing this connection. For example, Christian Norberg-Schulz has argued that when I say that 'I am a Liverpudlian', or whatever it might be, my observation yields a substantive specification of my identity because different places are associated with different customs or modes of life. Hence to tell you where I come from is to indicate something

<sup>17</sup> J. E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 182.

about the evaluative perspective into which I have been socialized – and which very likely I continue to hold, even if unwittingly or to some extent unwillingly. He comments:

When a person wants to tell who he is, it is in fact usual to say: ‘I am a New Yorker’, or ‘I am a Roman’. This means something much more concrete than to say: ‘I am an architect’, or perhaps ‘I am an optimist’. We understand that human identity is to a high extent a function of places and things.<sup>18</sup>

So different places are associated with different sets of formative influences, and in this sense too we might suppose that places can enter integrally into a person’s identity – not now because they determine the meaning of various stretches of behaviour, but rather because they contribute to the formation of a certain ethos or sense of the world. These two accounts are not in contradiction with one another – instead, they are addressed to different dimensions of the question ‘Who am I?’ The approach we have associated with Malpas answers this question by reference to significant episodes from my past; and the approach we are associating with Norberg-Schulz replies by reference to the mode of life, and associated values, to which I have been habituated.

### **Place and Recollection of the Past**

I would like to take note of one further way of connecting place and human identity. We have seen how places help to fix the sense of what we have done or what has befallen us. But places may be connected to our recollection of the past not only at the level of meaning, but also in so far as they serve as a storehouse of memory. On this further model, places act as a kind of organ of our own thinking, conserving memories which can then be retrieved on the basis of renewed first-hand encounter with the place. Perhaps the most obvious example of this sort of connection is given in our experience of the places of early childhood – it is common to find that re-visiting these places produces a stream of memories which could not have been retrieved but

<sup>18</sup> Christian Norberg Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York, 1980), p. 21.

for renewed experience of the place. In these cases, recollection is not an achievement of my memory alone – but of the place and memory conjoined, so that the place serves as a kind of extension of memory, as a repository of recollections which can be re-activated through renewed acquaintance with the place. As Edward Casey puts the point, in such cases, memories ‘belong as much to the place as to my brain or body’. He explains:

Think only of what it means to go back to a place you know, finding it full of memories and expectations, old things and new things, the familiar and the strange, and much else besides. What else is capable of this massively diversified holding action? Certainly not individual human subjects construed as sources of ‘projection’ or ‘reproduction’ – not even these subjects as they draw upon their bodily and perceptual powers. The power belongs to place itself, and it is a power of gathering.<sup>19</sup>

So here is another way of thinking about the agency of places. Not only do they elicit actions by determining the significance of our behaviours (in the ways noted by Mandoki and others), they are also able to preserve and then to release our memories of events. And in this way, they enter into our sense of self – not now by constituting the meaning of our life story, but by helping us to gain access to that story, in rather the way that memory does. This fact provides another perspective on Casey’s claim that ‘places’ are distinct from ‘sites’. For these reasons too, we may say, what a place reveals cannot be fully anticipated before encounter with it – for to think otherwise would be to overlook the fact that some memories cannot be retrieved independently of renewed experience of the place.

## THE GROUNDING OF HUMAN IDENTITY IN GOD

We have been considering three kinds of connection between the concepts of place and human identity – let’s call these connections

<sup>19</sup> Casey, ‘How to Get from Space to Place’, pp. 24–5. This kind of approach is reminiscent of ‘vehicle externalism’ in the philosophy of mind, where entities

those of constitution (where a place helps to constitute the sense borne by some stretch of behaviour), social formation (where a place fixes the habits of life into which a person is inducted), and causal enablement (where a place functions like an organ of thought, in so far as it enables a person to retrieve various memories). I want to argue now that each of these accounts can be extended in ways that are relevant to the question of how the concepts of God and human identity might be connected. Let's consider the three connections in turn.

### God and Story

Our first model points to the general truth that the significance of behaviour, thought, and feeling depends on context. But there is a sense in which the functioning of context in this regard is itself context-dependent – since the contribution of a context to the meaning of a given stretch of behaviour will itself vary with the location of that context within some still broader context. For instance, behaviours at Dartmoor will depend for their significance not only upon the character of the moor, but also upon a broader set of circumstances – where this wider context will determine, for instance, the relative scarcity of areas of 'wilderness' in England and further afield.<sup>20</sup>

So contexts, as well as behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, are themselves context-relative – in the sense that their conditioning of the meaning which attaches to behaviours will be a function of their relationship to still broader contexts. Using the terminology we have been developing in this book, we could rephrase this point by saying that: (i) the *genius* of a place will condition the meaning of the

external to a person's skull are taken to be integral to their mental life. See Mark Rowlands, *Externalism: Putting Mind and World Back Together Again* (Chesham, 2003), Chapter 9.

<sup>20</sup> We could see this as a consequence of, among other things, the law of diminishing marginal utility. In Chapter 3, I suggested that Dartmoor displays the quality of Dartmoorishness non derivatively. This claim can still be affirmed, in so far as Dartmoorishness is given in the climatic effects, architecture, and so on, that typify the area. Here I am suggesting that the significance of this property will depend in part upon a set of truths concerning the world beyond Dartmoor.

behaviours performed there; (ii) the contribution of this *genius* to the meaning of these behaviours will be a function of the *genii* of the larger places within which this place is nested; and (iii) this truth can be reiterated with reference to broader and broader places, until we reach the *genius* of the 'place' which is the sum of material reality. Hence establishing the meaning which attaches to the things I have done, and the things that have befallen me, will depend ultimately not only upon reference to the localized places (and associated *genii*) which provide the immediate scene for these events, but upon reference to the *genius* of the world as a whole. And given the case we have been making in this chapter, this is to say that fixing the sense of my life story, and therefore specifying who I am, will depend ultimately upon reference to God.

We have already seen a version of this claim in Michael Banner's formulation of a Christian sexual ethic. To determine the normative significance of a person's sexual behaviours (or, equally, their abstention from such behaviours) it is necessary, Banner suggests, to cite a narrative context which concerns the world as a whole – by recalling the stories of creation, reconciliation, and redemption. To put this point in our terms, to fix the sense of these behaviours, or non-behaviours, it is necessary to make reference to the *genius mundi* (that is, God), where the identity of this *genius* is given, in part, in various stories which concern the world as a whole. The latter way of framing the matter confers two advantages, I suggest: it makes the connection between God's identity and various global stories explicit; and it draws attention to the relationship between the role played by God-language and that played by place-language in familiar mundane contexts. We are now proposing a generalizing of this sort of point: it is not only my sexual behaviours and non-behaviours whose meaning or normative significance is fixed in this way, but my behaviours, and omissions to behave, more generally. And this is to say that the sense of my life story, and therefore my identity, can only be specified in full by reference to my ultimate context – which is to say, by reference to the *genius mundi*.

It might be wondered: how large a role does the *genius mundi* play in fixing the meaning of my life story? Perhaps the meaning of many of my actions is not significantly sensitive to variations in context – not even to variations in global context?



A related issue has been much discussed in contemporary ethical theory. On some accounts, the moral status of certain actions is invariant across all possible worlds.<sup>21</sup> Others have supposed that context always makes a difference to the moral status of an action. This second approach can allow that a particular moral prohibition such as ‘do not break your promises’ may be context-invariant to the extent that the promise-breaking character of an action *always* has a tendency to show that the action is wrong. However, reference to context may be needed even so, it could be said, to determine whether this consideration is overriding in a particular case. It may be, for example, that duties of promise-keeping will override those of beneficence in some contexts, but not all – as when I come across someone who is seriously injured, and whom I alone can rescue, even if this would require me to break my agreement to meet up with a friend for a cup of tea.<sup>22</sup> More radically, some have supposed that we cannot make context-independent claims even about the *prima facie* status of promise-keeping and other such injunctions. This suggestion is surely implausible if it is intended to represent the way in which moral discourse normally functions. After all, moral debate frequently proceeds by appeal to the general type of an action (as when we think it relevant to note that a particular action would be an instance of promise-breaking) – rather than terminating in some particularistic intuition whose force cannot be spelt out in more general terms.<sup>23,24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> This position is uncontroversial if the action in question is picked out in terms which imply some judgement about its moral unacceptability – as when we say that *murder* is wrong – but I am interested here in non-trivial versions of the thesis.

<sup>22</sup> I have adapted this example from W. D. Ross’s discussion of *prima facie* duties in *The Right and the Good* (Oxford, 1930), p. 28. Robert Audi has defended Ross’s general stance in the context of recent debate in his *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton, NJ, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> For a defence of radical ‘particularism’ in ethics, see Jonathan Dancy, ‘The Particularist’s Progress’, in Brad Hooker and Margaret Little, eds, *Moral Particularism* (Oxford, 2000), Chapter 6. For a contrary view see Margaret Olivia Little’s paper ‘Moral Generalities Revisited’, in the same volume, Chapter 12.

<sup>24</sup> Act utilitarianism is one popular position in contemporary moral philosophy which implies both that the moral status of actions is context relative (because an action’s consequences are context relative) and that the context relativity of the moral status of an action does not imply that moral argument should terminate in brute intuition – since appeal to consequences (for the general happiness) is a relevant

For our purposes, it is significant that most faith traditions assume that context does make a difference to the moral status of at least many actions – in particular the context that is provided by the stories of creation and redemption, or by some counterpart for such stories in non-theistic traditions. This is, of course, one reason why the faiths consider it important to propagate their favoured account of the world's origins and destiny. For example, if a believer speaks of creation, then they are committed to representing the world in its entirety as a divine gift. And if our attitude towards a particular possession is rightly conditioned by our knowledge of whether it is a gift, then we might well suppose that our attitude towards possessions in general should also vary depending on whether the world is conceived as a gift. It is not difficult to make a case along these lines. Take for instance Robert Nozick's example of a skilful basketball player who is able to amass a fortune by playing demonstration games – since people are willing to pay to watch him play. In this case, Nozick says, the player is under no obligation to transfer any of his wealth to the less affluent, even supposing that this would be a good thing to do – because his wealth derives from his own efforts, and he is therefore entitled to it. This kind of argument will be much harder to sustain if we allow that the player's physical and mental aptitude for the game, for instance, can be construed as a divine 'gift' – rather than the product simply of his own efforts, or just a matter of biological good fortune (or some combination of these things).<sup>25</sup>

So, drawing on the resources of moral philosophy, and the perspective of the faiths, it is possible to argue that context, including global context, is likely to make a substantial difference to the normative significance of a broad swathe of human behaviour.

### **Place, Social Formation, and Freedom**

We have been considering how the sense-ful telling of a person's life story depends not only upon reference to various stretches of

consideration in all contexts. This sort of point still holds if we treat act utilitarianism as relevant at the 'critical' rather than 'intuitive' level of moral thinking. See R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 43–53.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 160–3.

behaviour, but also upon reference to correlative places and their *genii*. And I have been suggesting that this connection between life story and localized places also holds when we consider the world as a place, and God as the *genius* of that place. So here is one way of connecting the concept of human identity to those of place and God. Let's move now from this 'constitution' model to the 'social formation' model of the relationship of place and identity. Here we are concerned with the question of how places shape the socialization of a person.

As we have seen, Norberg-Schulz endorses the 'social formation' approach – and he takes it to imply that a person can be properly free only if they are securely rooted in place:

It is characteristic for modern man that for a long time he gave the role as a wanderer pride of place. He wanted to be 'free' and conquer the world. Today we start to realize that true freedom presupposes belonging, and that 'dwelling' means belonging to a concrete place.<sup>26</sup>

Norberg-Schulz is suggesting, I think, that our socialization fits us for a certain mode of life – and that this mode of life will typically be place-relative. Or to cast his point in terms of identity: who I am is a function of the habitual modes of thought, feeling, and behaviour into which I have been inducted through my membership of a particular society at a particular place – and in the normal case, therefore, the secure enacting of my identity will depend upon continued membership of that society, and continued residency in the correlative place.

Of course, there is a degree of truth in this observation. Anyone who has moved away from their native place, to a place where somewhat different customs prevail, will acknowledge that a change of place can induce a degree of existential disorientation. It can lead us to feel, as we say, 'uprooted' or 'deracinated'. Even so, some commentators have taken a view precisely contrary to Norberg-Schulz's. Karsten Harries celebrates the idea that in 'modern' times, place need no longer be 'destiny': a person need no longer be defined

<sup>26</sup> Norberg Schulz, *Genius Loci*, p. 22. This reference to 'dwelling', and the associated idea of rootedness in place, recalls Martin Heidegger's discussion of these themes. See his essay 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), pp. 145–61.

by the conditions of their birth, or the mode of life or work into which they have been socialized, but can instead be self-defining. Thanks to our freedom of movement, we can now take on other social roles and other, non-place-relative identities.<sup>27</sup>

Harries's idealization of rootlessness seems to represent genuine freedom in terms of unconstrained choice – as a capacity to choose that is unconstrained by the material context of human life, or at any rate by the context that is provided by upbringing and place. Theologians are unlikely to warm to a view of this kind. True freedom, they will say, consists in the service of God – and such service implies constraint, since it renders some choices inadmissible. I want to argue now that Norberg-Schulz's vision can be extended in the direction of a theological perspective of this kind.

I doubt whether continued residence in one place (where 'place' can range across cities and whole regions) is a prerequisite of freedom. However, in the spirit of Norberg-Schulz's account, we might suppose that my being genuinely free does imply that my life should exhibit a significant degree of narrative coherence – so that later phases of my life can be seen to emerge intelligibly from earlier phases. If, by contrast, my life is marked by ongoing and fundamental dislocation in friendships and values, then it may be doubted whether it could exhibit any kind of freedom that would be worth having. This account is in the spirit of Norberg-Schulz's view in so far as it gives a person's native place an enduring role in their life story – for genuine freedom, the later phases of their story have to be tied intelligibly to the earlier phases, including those phases whose sense is bound up with the *genius* of their native place.

We might suppose not only that there is some such connection between freedom and narrative coherence, but also that the person who is genuinely free should *know*, in at least some fundamental respects, the sense in which their life constitutes a coherent narrative. After all, if I cannot discern the narrative coherence that is presented by my life story so far, then I will be unable to locate my present choices within that narrative context, and I will then be unable to see, with any clarity, the sense which attaches to those choices – and what

<sup>27</sup> Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), Chapter 11.

kind of freedom could be exhibited by such a choice? Or we might argue along similar lines that even if my life has proved to be narratively coherent so far, if I do not know the nature of that coherence, then there seems little chance that my choices in the present will cohere narratively with my story to date – and enduring narrative coherence is, we have suggested, a condition of genuine freedom of choice.

So freedom in the sense which is perhaps implied in Norberg-Schulz's account, a freedom which rests upon the preservation of some coherent narrative connection to formative events and places, turns out to require in addition an ability to rehearse, in at least some significant respects, the ways in which one's life story presents a coherent narrative. But we have seen already that the ability to rehearse one's life story is tied (if we are interested in more than mere 'behaviour') to the ability to specify the identity of God, or the *genius mundi*. So bringing together these two themes, we might say that Norberg-Schulz's account of the connection between identity and place, and his associated comments about the connection between freedom and place, provide a basis for the idea that genuine freedom depends upon knowledge of God.

This proposal sits very comfortably with a familiar perspective in theological ethics. John Paul II, for example, speaks of 'the fundamental dependence of freedom upon truth, a dependence which has found its clearest and most authoritative expression in the words of Christ: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8.32).'<sup>28</sup> According to John Paul, it is more exactly knowledge of God's law that is a precondition of genuine freedom – on this view, knowledge of God and observance of the law are not constraints on freedom, so much as constitutive of it. Similarly, on the account that we have derived from Norberg-Schulz, genuine freedom consists not in a criterionless choice of maximal scope, but in knowledge of the *genius mundi* – and in a correlative action-shaping knowledge of the respects in which one's life presents a coherent narrative.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor: Encyclical Letter Addressed by the Supreme Pontiff Pope John Paul II to All the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching* (London, 1993), Chapter 2, Section 34.

To return to a familiar theme, if we think of God as the *genius mundi*, then God is active in human life not so much by ‘shunting’ us around, as by providing the framework (or ‘grid’ as we might say, following Rowan Williams) in terms of which our choices can be assigned a sense. To this extent, then, God’s agency does not constitute an obstacle to our own agency, so much as make meaningful choice possible. Similarly, God does not threaten our identity, in the way that an entity of magnified human powers might. Rather, as the *genius* of the place which is the world, God is the precondition of my life story having a meaning – and in turn therefore, God is the presupposition of my identity. Drawing on Norberg-Schulz, we have now seen how, considered as the *genius mundi*, God is equally no threat to our freedom – on the contrary, genuine freedom depends upon knowledge of God. In these ways, the account of human identity and freedom that we have drawn from Norberg-Schulz and others proves to be similar in spirit to John Paul II’s stance on the connection between human agency and knowledge of theological truth.

It might be objected that a place can surely be oppressive – and in that case, will it not constitute an obstacle to my agency? And might not the same be true, therefore, of the ‘place’ which is the world – and of its *genius*? It is true that contexts and not just individuals can constitute an impediment to my flourishing. But there remains an important distinction between these two cases. Since I am myself a particular individual, my relationship to other individuals can intelligibly be construed as one of opposition: for instance, I can intelligibly find myself in competition with other individuals for material goods, or ‘fame’ and recognition, or access to sources of pleasure. By contrast, I cannot intelligibly compete with my context for any of these things. And my context stands therefore in a different logical relationship to my projects: not as a source, potentially, of competition, but as the environment which fixes the meaning of my choices. So while it is true (as the objection proposes) that some environments may pose a threat to the possibility of my flourishing, this sort of obstacle to my fulfilment is to be distinguished from that which may be presented by particular individuals.

It is worth adding that not only can we not intelligibly compete with our context for particular goods, but equally our context is not

itself a particular good for which we can compete in our relations with other individuals – or at any rate the *genius* of our context is not such a good. While I can intelligibly get more money, or more recognition, for example, than you, I cannot get more of the meaning which attaches to our context – since that meaning is not a particular thing that might be parcelled out between us.<sup>29</sup> So by thinking of God as the meaning of the ‘place’ which is the world, we can give further content to the distinction between individual creatures and God – since God is neither something for which we might compete, nor something with which we might compete.

### Encountering the *genius mundi*

This general approach may well provoke a sceptical response. It might be said: if our knowledge of our identity, and if our freedom of choice, require not just knowledge of the *genius* of localized contexts, but knowledge of the *genius mundi*, then how is it possible for finite, cognitively frail creatures such as ourselves to achieve any real knowledge of our identity, or any real freedom?

Saint Augustine was also exercised by the question of how relationship to God might enable a person to achieve a narrative unity of life, and to recognize that unity. It is encounter with God which makes these things possible, he thinks:

You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you.<sup>30</sup>

Augustine is proposing that, through encounter with God, a person’s life story may be rescued from ‘incoherence’, and assume an order which they can understand. Of course, he has his own Plotinian understanding of the nature of such an encounter. But we might

<sup>29</sup> Compare Alasdair MacIntyre’s distinction between external goods and the goods ‘internal to practices’: only the former are subject to competition. See *After Virtue* (2nd edn: London, 1985), pp. 187–91.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), XI, xxix, 39. I am grateful to Brutus Green for helpful discussion of this passage.

re-cast his point in the terms of our discussion by saying that the narrative unity that is achieved here derives not so much from union with a transcendent 'One' – nor from some supra-sensory experience of God. Instead, this narrative unity is realized when a person comes to apprehend the *genius* of the place which is the world. For the argument of this chapter has been that if I understand the nature of that *genius*, then I will be able to assign a sense to my life story.

The objector might insist: but how are we to arrive at such an apprehension of the world's *genius*? Here we might appeal to the causal-enablement model of the connection between place and identity. On this account, a place can function as a kind of storehouse of memory – it can conserve our recollections, and then release them when we encounter the place again. Now we might extend this model by supposing that it is not just the place that we need to re-encounter, but the spirit or *genius* of the place – because it is the spirit of the place that will help to fix the meaning which attaches to our behaviours there. In other words, it is not enough to be reminded of certain stretches of bodily behaviour – we need to be re-acquainted with those behaviours in conjunction with the relevant *genius loci*. And plausibly this is what happens when we are reminded of our behaviours through renewed encounter with a place. We are reminded of them as carrying a certain meaning, or as constituting certain actions, because we are reminded of them in relation to a particular spatial context.

Drawing out these thoughts, we might seek to give a placial rendering of Augustine's account of encounter with God, and of the importance of such an encounter for the narrative unity of our lives, in these terms: just as encounter with the spirit or *genius* of a localized place can help us to recover the significance of certain episodes from our life story, so encounter with the *genius* of the world can confer a new coherence upon our life-narrative as a whole – so revealing our identity and making possible our freedom. We can speak of this new coherence being 'conferred' and not just 'revealed' because it may be that such an encounter is itself a significant episode in a person's life-narrative – so the experience extends the story, rather than simply revealing an already-constituted meaning. The friends' experiences at Port Meadow and New College cloister provide one indication of the form which might be taken by



such an encounter. It's not that the world as a whole enters their perceptual field, of course – rather, they encounter the *genius* of these localized places and, non-inferentially, they take this *genius* to disclose the identity of the wider place which is the world.<sup>31</sup>

We could say, then, that the experience of the friends at the cloister and the meadow is one of recognizing (or seeming to recognize) a world-embracing *genius* in recognizing a local place-relative meaning. We might add that this experience involves therefore some apprehension of God, considered as the *genius mundi*. And in that case, we could think of this picture as one way of developing the second of our three models of the differentiated religious significance of place. (Recall that on this model, God or a sacred meaning is apprehended under some material form which is focally the object of experience.) However, it is also true that this experience needs to be understood, at least in part, by reference to the first of those models – since the religious import of the experience is tied to the idea that it reveals the character of the wider cosmos, or the conditions of human existence more generally.<sup>32</sup>

In these terms, we can begin to provide a theoretical framework, and a phenomenology, that will constitute a response to the objection that knowledge of the *genius mundi* is not a realistic possibility for cognitively frail creatures such as ourselves. We might also suppose that Casey's account of place as a storehouse of memory, when extended in the way we have suggested, throws new light on the friends' willingness to return repeatedly to the meadow and the cloister. Perhaps these further visits helped them to recall their earlier experiences there – and at the same time gave them renewed access to the *genius* and microcosmic import of these places.

<sup>31</sup> Compare Quentin Smith's account of the phenomenology of experiences of 'global importances': *The Felt Meanings of the World: A Metaphysics of Feeling* (West Lafayette, IN, 1986).

<sup>32</sup> The possibility of direct perception of God *as God* has been disputed in the recent literature in philosophy of religion. I trust that the experience I am discussing here is not subject to these strictures, since it involves a kind of indirect recognition – namely, the experience of seeming to recognize the global *genius*, or God, in recognizing a local place relative *genius*. See Nick Zangwill, 'The Myth of Religious Experience', *Religious Studies* 40 (2004), pp. 1–22.

## CONCLUSION

In Chapter 2, I presented three models of the differentiated religious significance of place. In the last two chapters, we have seen how these models may be embedded within a new intellectual context. In Chapter 3, I argued for an account of God as the *genius mundi*. This account fits directly with the thought that a place can carry religious significance in so far as it stands microcosmically for the global meaning of things – for on the view defended in Chapter 3, God just is the global meaning of things. Another of our models maintains that the religious import of a place is given in its history. In the present chapter, we have seen how that idea too can be set in a larger context – by taking stock of the connections between a site’s past and its significance for our agency, identity, and freedom. We have also seen how the idea of a place-relative ‘encounter’ with God, the theme of the remaining model, may be developed in conjunction with the idea that an experience’s religious significance is given in its microcosmic import.

In the last two chapters, we have been considering how we might use a placial idiom to expound the following proposals: God is supra-individual, is a final cause, exercises a narratively constituted agency, and serves as the foundation of human identity and liberty – and I have argued that these are not just discrete proposals, but can be seen as various facets of a single conception of God whose root analogy or guiding principle is the relationship between God and place, or between God and the *genius* of a place. More exactly, we have come to see how knowledge of God is not just analogous to our knowledge of localized places, but is a knowledge of that place which is the world – or, more precisely, is a knowledge of the *genius* of the place which is the world.

In general terms, the implication of these remarks is that knowledge of God is not so much like scientific or simple observational knowledge – it is, rather, like the storied and sensuous knowledge that we have of particular places when we view them with proper salience. On the perspective we have been expounding here, we could say more exactly that knowledge of God consists in an integrative or synoptic appreciation of the significance of localized places.

Having noted a number of connections between knowledge of God and knowledge of place, I want to think a little more closely now about the nature of knowledge of place. This is the task of the next chapter – where I shall examine some secular accounts of such knowledge. The findings of this enquiry can then be folded into our reflections on the placial character of knowledge of God.

## Knowledge of Place

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last three chapters, we have been developing an answer to the two questions that I posed in Chapter 1: (i) how are we to understand the differentiation in the significance of places that is evident in so much religious practice? On this point our answer has been, provisionally, that places vary in their religious significance because of differences in their contribution to our embodied apprehension of religious meanings, and because of differences in their histories. And (ii) how might an analogy between knowledge of God and knowledge of place, as distinct from analogies which appeal to observational knowledge or the kind of knowledge that is typical of scientific theory construction, help to bring into clearer relief the connections between religious knowledge and our embodied, engaged relationship to the world? On this point, our answer has been, provisionally, that knowledge of places (rather than ‘sites’) is rooted in the practical orientation of the body, and a correlative affective phenomenology and mode of salient perception.

In this chapter I want to think more closely about the character of our everyday knowledge of place. I am going to proceed by examining the work of four contemporary writers on space and related matters. First of all, I shall comment on the thought of three French authors, taking them in chronological order.

GASTON BACHELARD: KNOWLEDGE OF  
THE SPACES OF OUR INTIMACY

In his sometimes rather riddling book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard considers our knowledge of the places of childhood, and of the childhood home in particular.<sup>1</sup> This kind of knowledge, he argues, is not readily communicable in the language of descriptive prose – because it is affectively toned and inscribed in the body. From this brief summary of his approach, it will be evident already that Bachelard’s characterization of the formal qualities of knowledge of place is broadly consonant with the account which we have been developing. I am going to suggest that what he has to say about our knowledge of houses can be applied to knowledge of place more generally – and especially to our knowledge of places of ‘psychic weight’, which serve as a focus for our sense of the wider significance of things.<sup>2</sup>

Bachelard begins by considering how our memories are spatially organized – so time, as recalled, turns out to be subordinate to space. He writes:

Memory... does not record concrete duration... The finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space... Memories are motionless and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.<sup>3</sup>

This account rings true phenomenologically: memory is not typically of ‘video clips’ so much as of scenes considered statically. We might wonder whether we can explain why memory should be dependent thus on space. We have already seen one reason for thinking that we need to recall events in their spatial context (though this is not directly to explain the fact that such recollection is static): this requirement obtains, we might suppose, because spatial context fixes the meaning of events. Bachelard is also interested in the

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, tr. Maria Jolas (Boston, MA, 1969; first published in French in 1958).

<sup>2</sup> This expression occurs in *Poetics of Space*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 9. Compare David Harvey’s comment on the priority of space over time – cited in Chapter 4.

space-relative character of our access to the meaning of events, and here he emphasizes the importance of getting beyond 'external history'. He comments:

To localize a memory in time . . . only corresponds to a sort of external history, for external use, to be communicated to others. But hermeneutics . . . must determine the centers of fate by ridding history of its conjunctive temporal tissue . . . For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.<sup>4</sup>

This might strike the reader as a somewhat exaggerated claim: the location of an event within a narrative can surely make a root-and-branch difference to its meaning. But we might draw out or reconstruct Bachelard's thought in these terms. The cloister and meadow function as 'spaces of intimacy' (in Bachelard's sense) in the experience of Edmund and his friend – and these places also provide them with a window onto the nature of their ultimate context. Generalizing from this case, we might suppose that spaces of intimacy help to constitute our sense of our ultimate context, and thereby they shape the significance which we attach to sequences of events or to the 'conjunctive temporal tissue' of our lives. And to this extent, we may say, knowledge of space does indeed precede knowledge of time, in the order of meaning. On Bachelard's account it is the childhood home in particular that is the focus for this encompassing appreciation of the significance of things – and this appreciation is then carried forward into adult life, shaping a person's reading of the world in the round. Let's think a little more closely about his development of this theme.

The childhood home is a domain of 'dreams' or, as Bachelard more characteristically says, of 'daydreams':

the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams . . . do not readily lend themselves to description. To describe them would be like showing them to visitors. We can perhaps tell everything about the present, but about the past! The first, the oneirically definitive house, must retain its shadows. For it belongs to the literature of depth, that is, to poetry, and not to that fluent type of literature that, in order to analyze intimacy, needs other people's stories . . . All we communicate to others is an orientation

<sup>4</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 9.

towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively... What would be the use, for instance, in giving the plan of the room that was really *my* room?

Here Bachelard is describing how a person's recollection of the childhood home, if it is to be faithful to a child's eye view, has to capture the dimension of 'daydream' in the child's relationship to the place. To put the point otherwise, we might say that this recollection has to acknowledge the desires and aspirations of the child, and the way in which they take root in this particular place, and condition its significance for the child. This is why prosaic description will not suffice to communicate the character of the childhood home. Rather, we need to penetrate beyond any merely geometrical description of the house, and beyond any matter-of-fact account of its sensory qualities, so as to discern what the house signifies for this particular child – and doing this will depend upon appreciating the particular affective-phenomenological complex that the child associates with the house:

I alone in my memories of another century can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that it takes a lot of imagination to smell. But I've already said too much. If I said more, the reader, back in his own room, would not open that unique wardrobe, with its unique smell which is the signature of intimacy.<sup>5</sup>

Again, we can give our own gloss on this passage. When Bachelard holds that the 'unique smell' of a place is its 'signature of intimacy', he is recognizing the close connection between the sensory phenomenology of our experience and its affective resonance. More exactly, drawing on our earlier account, we might say that emotional feelings need not be simply a reaction to some perceived content, but can themselves enter into our perceptual field, giving it structure or 'salience'. So the particular smell of a place can be integrated into a correlative mode of salient perception – and in this way it can serve as a marker for a person's affectively toned sense of the significance of the place.

<sup>5</sup> *Poetics of Space*, pp. 13–14.

Bachelard suggests here that if we are to bring another person to apprehend the significance of their own childhood home, then we will need to appeal to *their* first-hand experience, and to engage their desires and aspirations (or ‘daydreams’); and if we are to do this, he says, then it will be necessary to have recourse to ‘poetry’. In Chapter 8, I shall return to the question of the role of poetry in communicating the existential significance of place. For present purposes, Bachelard’s comments are noteworthy because they throw further light on the question of why memory should be spatially indexed. Bachelard is concerned in particular with the recollection of places of ‘intimacy’. And the significance of this domain will be revealed, we have been supposing, in a correlative, affectively informed structuring of the perceptual field. So here we have a further reason for thinking that an existentially resonant recollection of the past will need to be spatially indexed.

Bachelard goes on to suggest that this knowledge of the childhood home is preserved in the body, rather than simply in some abstractly mental representation. He writes:

over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years... we would recapture the reflexes of the ‘first stairway’, we would not stumble on that rather high step... We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark of the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands... In short, the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of various functions of inhabiting... The word habit is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget, with an unforgettable house.<sup>6</sup>

Here Bachelard speaks of how knowledge of the childhood home is preserved in the body’s reactions. We can think of related examples in other spheres: for instance, my knowledge of a computer keyboard, assuming I can touch-type, is we might suppose a knowledge in my fingers – rather than a matter of my being able to summon up some mental image of the keyboard, or recall its layout in verbal terms.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Poetics of Space*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Merleau-Ponty’s observation that:

Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of [intellectual or conceptual] knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the



Similarly, when we revisit places, we often find that it is a knowledge of bodily orientation, rather than some image or descriptive memory of the scene, that enables us to recall the place. I had such an experience recently when returning to Calderstones Park in Liverpool after many years. On entering the park, my orientation in the place was given directly in the knowledge that I needed to bend my steps to the left to reach its main thoroughfare, rather than in some mental map of the park's layout or in some verbal recollection of what to do – in other words, the sense of needing to turn my body in a certain direction was registered in the first instance in bodily terms, as an urge of the body, rather than via some mediating item that could serve as a kind of guide or instruction to the body.

Bachelard's comments here can also be read in the light of our observations on the relationship between a given affectively informed organization of the perceptual field and the posture of the body. Bachelard has already described how recollection of the childhood home depends upon evoking the right affective-phenomenological complex, so that the person grasps the-house-and-what-it-signifies-for-this-child – rather than starting from, for instance, some geometrical appreciation of the character of the house, and then laying over that recollection a set of significances. Similarly, to grasp the phenomenology of my experience after I have fallen on ice, it is necessary to register the way in which certain features of the environment (patches of ice especially) will now loom out at me – rather than just fitting into a pre-given geometrical scheme, as a kind of gloss on that scheme. Having set out in his earlier remarks this way of recalling the childhood home, Bachelard here notes another way – that given in our recollection of our embodied appropriation of the house, where this recollection is rooted in an enduring disposition of the body to negotiate the space in relevant ways. Our earlier discussion suggests that these two modes of recollection can be regarded as different perspectives on the same intellectual content, where that

object . . . which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary . . . [To know how to type] is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort.

(cited by John Haldane in John Haldane, ed., *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the Thomistic and Analytical Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN, 2002), p. 57; bracketed phrases are in Haldane).

content concerns the human significance of a given space. This significance may be understood both by means of a relevant salient perception and by means of the body's posture and an associated readiness to act in the space – where a given pattern of salient viewing and a given posture of the body will both be implicated, potentially, in emotional feelings.<sup>8</sup>

So far we have been concerned with Bachelard's treatment of the question of how we are able to recall the significance of the childhood home. He is also clearly of the view that a person's conception of the home can serve as a marker for their appreciation of a wider, cosmological context – even when this connection is not consciously drawn. He writes for example of how 'our houses are no longer aware of the storms of the outside universe . . . The house does not tremble . . . when thunder rolls.'<sup>9</sup> On this view, the house expresses, and helps to constitute, a certain conception of the person's relationship to the world – and to this extent it stands microcosmically for the nature of the world. Bachelard's thought on this point becomes clearer in the following passage, where he is recounting Baudelaire's depiction of Thomas De Quincey's house. He gives this assessment of the 'microcosmic significance' of this description:

If I were asked to make an expert evaluation of the oneirism in De Quincey's cottage, as relived by Baudelaire, I should say that there lingers about it the insipid odor of opium, an atmosphere of drowsiness. But we are told nothing about the strength of the walls, or the fortitude of the roof. The house puts up no struggle . . . The dialectics of the house and the universe are too simple, and snow, especially, reduces the exterior world to nothing rather too easily. It gives a single color to the entire universe which, with the one word, snow, is both expressed and nullified for those who have found shelter.<sup>10</sup>

So this house represents De Quincey in his relation to the wider world – its lack of strength and lack of engagement with its

<sup>8</sup> Compare Mary Midgley's comment that 'the apotheosis of the intellect' (in distinction from the body and emotion) will issue in a very different conception of knowledge of place: 'Philosophy and the "Body"', in Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 65–6.

<sup>9</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 40.

surroundings, and the absence of differentiation in those surroundings, all speak of De Quincey's self-absorbed relationship to the world. And in general houses which do not resonate with the world (like the house which does not tremble at thunder) suggest a kind of insensitivity to or disconnection from the world. Bachelard gives a further example of how a house may correlate with a conception of the world in this summary of Henri Bosco's representation of the house La Redousse in his *Malicroix*:

faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body. Such a house as this invites mankind to heroism of cosmic proportions... And the metaphysical systems according to which man is 'cast into the world' might meditate concretely upon the house that is cast into the hurricane, defying the anger of heaven itself. Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world... In this dynamic rivalry between house and universe, we are far removed from any reference to simple geometrical forms.<sup>11</sup>

So Bachelard's suggestion is this: not only is the house recalled by means of the body, but it can also stand for the body, and its relationship to a cosmological context – where that relationship may be one of opium-induced stupor, or resistance, or one of shutting out and exclusion. It is partly for this reason, he notes, that a child's representation of its home can be psychologically so revealing – and here he cites Anne Balif's comment that:

Asking a child to draw his house is asking him to reveal the deepest dream shelter he has found for his happiness. If he is happy he will succeed in drawing a snug, protected house which is well built on deeply rooted foundations.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly then, the embodied, affectively toned, non-geometrical recollection of the childhood home has this further significance: it encodes a deeply rooted conception of how we stand in the world.

<sup>11</sup> *Poetics of Space*, pp. 46–7. Compare his comment that 'the house's situation in the world... gives us, quite concretely, a variation of the metaphysically summarized situation of man in the world': *Poetics of Space*, pp. 27–8.

<sup>12</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 72.

And Bachelard's view seems to be that this initial orientation in the world, which is achieved in childhood, is not easily cast aside, but persists into later life, conditioning the kind of significance that we find in the world thereafter.

Bachelard gives other examples of how particular things can bear a larger, cosmological reference. He notes for instance how the 'naïve wonder' that a child feels on discovering a bird's nest can stand for an attitude to life.<sup>13</sup> And he writes of: 'the nest found in natural surroundings . . . which becomes for a moment the center . . . of an entire universe, the evidence of a cosmic situation'.<sup>14</sup>

These themes in Bachelard intersect with our earlier discussion at a number of points. His epistemology of the childhood home fits very closely with our account of what it is to know the existential meaning of a place – in both cases, phenomenological salience, emotional feeling, and the expressive posture of the body all converge upon a common content, which is the person-relative significance of the place. In a similar vein, Bachelard notes how 'imagination, memory and perception exchange functions. The image is created through the cooperation between real and unreal . . . To use the implements of dialectical logic for studying, not this alternative, but this fusion, of opposites, would be quite useless, for they would produce the anatomy of a living thing'.<sup>15</sup>

So the kind of knowledge that is at issue here resists any simple dichotomy of subject and object, according to which the 'object' is 'out there', and the 'subject' registers the character of what is out there partly in terms which are 'objective' (which 'correspond to' the object) and partly in terms that reflect its own concerns and interests (which produce an interpretive 'gloss' peculiar to this particular kind of being, or to this individual). By contrast with this model, Bachelard is describing our knowledge of the significance of a place. And this kind of knowledge, he is saying, is given in an experience which cannot be straightforwardly disaggregated into an objective component and a subjective component – because the perceptual field in these cases is not primordially 'objective' and

<sup>13</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 59. I take it that Bachelard intends a contrast between mere 'anatomy' and the living body itself.

then overlaid with values, but from the start shot through with desire and a sense of the practical possibilities afforded by a space. So this mode of knowing is neither merely 'subjective' (mere daydreaming, for example) nor merely 'objective' (giving the perspective of a disengaged observer). And equally the content of what is known is not merely 'subjective' (because it concerns the practical and other possibilities that are genuinely afforded by a place) nor merely 'objective' (because this sort of knowledge is affect-infused and inherently normative).<sup>16</sup>

As the reader will have noticed, Bachelard's account meshes with our earlier discussion in this further significant respect: he takes houses, and especially the childhood home, to have a kind of micro-cosmic significance – and we have been considering how various places, among them Port Meadow and New College cloister, are capable of bearing this same sort of significance. Our more broadly defined approach is preferable I think. After all, the childhood home will not always carry the sort of significance that Bachelard assigns to it. For some, the home may not be a realm of 'intimacy' at all (in this sense, it may not be a 'home'). And a displaced person may, for other reasons, have nowhere they can call 'home'. But all of us, we might suppose, will come to associate certain places microcosmically with whatever meaning we detect in the world at large. Or perhaps it would be better to say: for most of us, the meaning we find in our global or cosmological context will be *shaped by* our encounter with certain spaces which hold for us, even if unreflectively, a larger, representative significance.

It is noteworthy that Bachelard refuses to see the image of the home as conveying a merely derivative meaning – one which could be communicated more clearly and originally in other terms:

can this transposition of the being of a house into human values be considered as an activity of metaphor... a matter of linguistic imagery?... But phenomenology of the imagination cannot be content with a reduction which would make the image a subordinate means of expression: it

<sup>16</sup> For another perspective on the need to avoid any simple disjunction of 'subject' and 'object' in an account of the significance of place, see Jane Howarth, 'In Praise of Backyards: Towards a Phenomenology of Place', Thingmount Working Papers in the Philosophy of Conservation, First Series (Lancaster University, 2006), pp. 9–10.

demands, on the contrary, that images be lived directly . . . When the image is new, the world is new.<sup>17</sup>

In the same spirit, but generalizing again, we may say that our knowledge of the microcosmic significance of particular places need not offer a derivative representation of our sense of the meaning of things more generally – or an account that only stammers out what may be known more clearly by other means. If our knowledge of the significance of a place depends upon adopting the relevant affectively informed mode of salient perception, and a correlative bodily posture, then we might suppose similarly that our knowledge of a place's microcosmic meaning is not going to be readily transposable into the language of prose or descriptive metaphysics. This thought offers one more route into the question of why renewed experience of a place is required, if its implicit 'intelligible content' is to be enduringly understood. Given Bachelard's discussion, we have reason to say that this content will not be readily translatable into the medium of prosaic description or metaphysics – and we might add that it will remain most securely available through repeated encounter with the place.

Bachelard closes his book by citing a passage from Rilke – and he offers this expository comment: 'around a lone tree, which is the center of a world, the dome of the sky becomes round, in accordance with the rule of cosmic poetry'.<sup>18</sup> Here Bachelard supposes that a tree can bear a microcosmic significance. And rather as with the friends' experience of the holm oak at New College cloister, this phenomenon is associated with the tree's perceived centrality, and its reaching into the sky, and also its stillness. Bachelard notes, for example, how 'Rilke's tree propagates in green spheres a roundness that is a victory over . . . the capricious events of mobility'. In the final sentence of his book, he observes: 'Rilke's tree would open an important chapter in my album of concrete metaphysics.'<sup>19</sup> Whatever exactly we are to make of this comment, we might draw the conclusion that just as houses can provide shelter, and in the mode of

<sup>17</sup> *Poetics of Space*, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> *The Poetics*, p. 239. He quotes this verse: 'Tree always in the center/Of all that surrounds it/Tree feasting upon/Heaven's great dome': p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> *Poetics of Space*, pp. 239–40.

shelter which they offer bear witness to a certain conception of the world and a correlative estimation of the world's receptiveness or otherwise to human projects, so a tree can carry this same sort of significance.

## HENRI LEFEBVRE: THE NATURE OF REPRESENTATIONAL SPACES

Henri Lefebvre's book on *The Production of Space* is nothing like so 'dreamy' as Bachelard's. Far from being concerned with the child's solitary experience of a domestic space, the focus of his reflections is the way in which public space is generated from a particular set of productive forces and associated social relations.<sup>20</sup> Even so, Bachelard and Lefebvre share a number of interests – and an examination of Lefebvre's work will help us to carry forward our discussion of some of the themes we have identified in Bachelard.

Lefebvre's account hinges upon a distinction between what he calls 'representations of space' and 'representational spaces'. The first category concerns 'conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers'.<sup>21</sup> So a representation of space typically involves the quantification or measurement of space, or its homogenization – so allowing it to serve a certain mode of production. To put the point in Lefebvre's terms:

Fluctuations in the use of measures, and thus in representations of space, parallel general history and indicate the direction it has taken – to wit, its trend towards the quantitative, towards homogeneity and towards the elimination of the body.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See his comment that 'the shift from one mode of production to another must entail the production of a new space': *The Production of Space*, tr. D. Nicholson Smith (Oxford, 1991), p. 46. He distinguishes his approach from Bachelard's, speaking of the latter's work and that of Martin Heidegger in these terms: 'this obsession with absolute space presents obstacles on every side to the kind of history [of space and its production] that we have been discussing': *Production of Space*, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 111.

In contrast to representations of space, 'representational spaces' concern 'space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"'.<sup>23</sup> Or as Lefebvre says elsewhere: 'Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre. . . . It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations'.<sup>24</sup> Lefebvre's distinction between a representation of space and a representational space corresponds to Bachelard's distinction between space as depicted in geometrical terms or in prosaic description and space as understood poetically or as inhabited – where to inhabit a place is to root oneself, and one's desires and aspirations, in the place, so that its significance is registered in salient perception and habitual bodily movement.

Like Bachelard, Lefebvre is interested in the distinctive epistemology of 'representational spaces'; and like Bachelard, he maintains that knowledge of this kind is not initially verbal, and may resist verbalization. Hence he comments that: 'representational spaces may be said . . . to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs'.<sup>25</sup> By contrast: 'Conceptions of space [or representations of space] tend . . . towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs'.<sup>26</sup>

The description of Port Meadow and New College cloister that we examined in Chapter 2 evidently defines a representational space in Lefebvre's sense. At the meadow, the friends assign a significance to the rush of air as they swoop down from the railway bridge, and to the clanging of the gate as it swings shut behind them; similarly, they find a meaning in their need to stoop as they approach the cloister, and to trust to hearing as much as to sight as they try to orient themselves in this space. In these ways, the significance of various objects is registered not in verbal terms, but by means of affective response and embodied gesture. So the friends are genuinely reckoning with the character of these spaces – but this knowledge is not as Lefebvre would say 'conceived' so much as it is 'lived'. Lefebvre doubts whether what has been understood in these terms could be re-cast in words:

<sup>23</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 39.



Among non verbal signifying sets must be included music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and certainly theatre, which in addition to a text or pretext embraces gesture, masks, costume, a stage, a *mise en scène* in short, a space. Non verbal sets are thus characterized by a spatiality which is in fact irreducible to the mental realm... To underestimate, ignore and diminish space amounts to the overestimation of texts, written matter, and writing systems, along with the readable and the visible, to the point of assigning to these a monopoly on intelligibility.<sup>27</sup>

So like Bachelard, Lefebvre takes our apprehension of spatial meanings to be original and not fully verbalizable, and like Bachelard he believes that the meaning of 'representational spaces' has an aesthetic dimension. He also thinks, again like Bachelard, that poetry in particular offers a point of access to this sort of significance:

Inasmuch as the poet through a poem gives voice to a way of living (loving, feeling, thinking, taking pleasure, or suffering), the experience of monumental space may be said to have some similarity to entering and sojourning in the poetic world.<sup>28</sup>

So in so far as a poem can replicate the affectively toned and gesturally structured response to the world that is implied in a given representational space, it can help thereby to communicate what is understood by an inhabitant of that space. This is a possibility to which I shall return in later discussion – when we consider the poetry of Edmund Cusick, and its account of the significance of a number of built and natural environments.<sup>29</sup>

So Lefebvre and Bachelard both believe that there is a knowledge of space which is realized, in the first instance, not in words but in affectively charged bodily response. Once again, it is striking how the prevailing epistemological models in the philosophy of religion tend to privilege a different kind of knowledge – the knowledge that, in Lefebvre's terms, typifies a representation of space rather than

<sup>27</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 224. In fact, he goes on to add that theatre might present an even better example, because of its dialogical character.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Frank Burch Brown's comments on the role of the arts in offering 'something like a resemblance of lived experience, or the world imagined freshly and uniquely by means of fictions and sensuously embodied ideas: organic wholes whose meanings are felt more than thought': *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford, 2003), p. 83.

a representational space. As we have seen, Richard Swinburne takes religious knowledge to be rooted in (among other things) our knowledge of the lawlike regularity of the world. And he supposes that religious and scientific knowledge are answerable to the same canons of explanation (notably, simplicity and predictive power). In so far as his approach has this character, Swinburne's conception of religious knowledge seems to be grounded in a broadly scientific representation of space. We might understand ordinary observational knowledge in similar terms, in so far as it is like the knowledge that I have right now as I gaze at the tree outside the library window. This sort of knowledge is, equally, not affectively engaged, and it is not (not without elaboration of the example anyway) implicated at all directly in any practical, enacted relationship to the world. (It is for this reason, I take it, that Lefebvre takes an 'overestimation' of 'the visible' to imply a failure to attend to the kind of knowledge that is typical of 'inhabitants'.) So an Alstonian account of religious experience – to the extent that it privileges the analogy with ordinary sense perception, and minimizes the contribution of emotional feeling to such perception – might also seem to be wedded to the kind of knowledge that is characteristic of a 'representation of space'.<sup>30</sup>

If, instead, we take the kind of knowledge that is implied in a 'representational space' as a paradigm for religious knowing, then we will arrive at a rather different religious epistemology – one which is more attuned to the tacit, embodied, and affectively structured character of at least some varieties of religious knowledge. So, in these ways, it could be argued that the philosophy of religion has tended to assign a 'monopoly of intelligibility' to the kind of knowledge that we have via representations of space, while overlooking other, existentially denser modes of engagement with the world.

As we have seen, Bachelard takes our knowledge of the childhood home to imply a kind of tacit metaphysic. Lefebvre shares this interest in the relationship between representational spaces and

<sup>30</sup> Compare Alston's reluctance to allow that the 'phenomenal content' of religious experience is purely affective on the grounds that this would suggest that the experience is simply a response to a believed presence, rather than a way of registering a mind independent reality: *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), pp. 49–50. I discuss this point more fully in my book *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 8–10.

metaphysical or religious commitment – but characteristically he is more sensitive to the way in which religion *qua* social phenomenon may be grounded in a representational space, rather than concentrating, as Bachelard does, on the ‘concrete’ metaphysics of the individual in their solitude. Similarly, he takes note of the ways in which the spatial organization of whole cities, and the mode of social life that is implied therein, can articulate a community’s allegiance to a correlative set of values.

Anyone who has been to Moscow will have been struck by the expansiveness of the main thoroughfares which radiate out from Red Square. And a visitor to the city may well register this spaciousness, first of all, in visceral terms – by feeling their smallness in the presence of the imposing facades and long vistas that surround them, and by as it were crouching in acknowledgement of their vulnerability in a space which allows them to be viewed from all angles, and which channels their movements according to a centrally orchestrated geometry. This is a representational space which speaks of, and helps to constitute, totalitarian control. Lefebvre’s preferred example of a cityscape which invites a correlative mode of life is Venice: ‘every bit of Venice’, he comments, ‘is a part of a great hymn to diversity in pleasure and inventiveness in celebration, revelry and sumptuous ritual.’<sup>31</sup> Or as he puts it elsewhere: ‘one does not have to...be a “connoisseur”, in order to experience Venice as festival...Here everyday life and its functions are coextensive with, and utterly transformed by, a theatricality as sophisticated as it is unsought, a sort of involuntary *mise-en-scène*.’<sup>32</sup> In other words, when we register the character of Venice not cartographically, or by means of some representation of space, but more immediately, in our affective and enacted appropriation of its sensuous qualities, then we can grasp the meaning of the city as ‘festival’ – where this meaning is conveyed in the kaleidoscopic array of the city’s buildings and squares, in the gravity-defying movement of facades which rise out of waterways, and in the

<sup>31</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> *Production of Space*, pp. 73–4. The reference to a *mise en scène* recalls his comment (see footnote 28 above) that the theatre (as well as poetry) offers a sure route into the nature of representational space – see p. 224.

play of light on aqueous surfaces, casting the surrounding space in colours and moods as various as those of the sky above.

In the same sort of way, Lefebvre maintains, a religious or cosmological sense of the world's meaning can be cast in a correlative style of urban development – or equally in the organization of a 'natural' landscape. He notes for example how in medieval times:

Representational spaces...determined the foci of a vicinity: the village church, graveyard, hall and fields, or the square and the belfry. Such spaces were interpretations, sometimes marvellously successful ones, of cosmological representations. Thus the road to Santiago de Compostela was the equivalent, on the earth's surface of the Way that led from Cancer to Capricorn on the vault of the heavens, a route otherwise known as the Milky Way – a trail of divine sperm where souls are born following its downward trajectory and falling to earth, there to seek as best they may the path of redemption – namely, the pilgrimage that will bring them to Compostela ('the field of stars').<sup>33</sup>

So the spatial organization of the medieval town specifies a correlative mode of life – where worship and labour and family life are all assigned a certain 'place' spatially-and-socially, so enabling the town to express and engender a commitment to a set of values of metaphysical reach. Evidently, modern western settlements are ordered around a rather different set of preoccupations – broadly those of consumerist convenience.

Given our earlier discussion of New College cloister, two of Lefebvre's examples of the interface between a representational space and a cosmological or religious scheme are of particular interest. Imagining a western philosopher summarizing the view of his Japanese interlocutor, Lefebvre comments:

You suggest that there is an underlying grid, or deep structure, which explains the nature of places, the ways in which they are put to use, the routes followed by their occupants, and even the everyday gestures of those occupants... The remarkable institution of the garden is always a microcosm, a symbolic work of art, an object as well as a place... It effectively eliminates from your space that antagonism between 'nature' and 'culture' which takes such a devastating toll in the West: the garden exemplifies the appropriation of nature, for it is at once entirely natural – and thus a symbol

<sup>33</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 45.

of the macrocosm and entirely cultural and thus the projection of a way of life.<sup>34</sup>

The use of the term 'grid' in this passage recalls Rowan Williams's suggestion that talk of God is akin to talk of a grid. Williams means, I suggest, that when we speak of God we are concerned not so much with a particular individual, as with a framework of meaning in terms of which we can assign a proper significance to individuals. So here we see, once more, how God's supra-individuality can be compared to the supra-individuality of places. A place, Lefebvre is proposing (or this Japanese philosopher is proposing), can constitute a grid or framework of significance – by leading us into certain activities, and committing us thereby (at least implicitly) to a correlative judgement about what matters in a human life. Lefebvre also notes here how a representational space, and in particular a garden, may assume a cosmological significance, by standing microcosmically for the nature of things. These same connections are evident when the friends assign a microcosmic significance to New College cloister. The cloister, and the quadrangle which it abuts, constitute a kind of 'garden', where nature and culture meet: a rose is trained against the walls of the quad, and the oak tree stands within a space that is framed by the cloister walls. These arrangements witness then to the harmony between a certain way of life (one defined in significant part by the activities of pacing the cloister, and entering the adjoining chapel) and a scheme of values which participates in the order of nature – where this order is patterned, ultimately, upon the divine essence. So the experience of this sort of space implies a breaking down of the subject-object distinction (in so far as the significance of the place is registered in affectively informed perception) and also a breaking down of the collective counterpart of that distinction – the distinction between nature and culture.

Elsewhere Lefebvre turns explicitly to the significance of cloisters, and their role in establishing a particular representational space. Here he notes, once more, how the body realizes its own kind of understanding in its enacted relationship to the world – rather than thinking of the body's movements as deriving from some prior

<sup>34</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 157.

understanding that is cast in non-bodily terms. In the following passage, for instance, he comments on how a given demeanour of the body can constitute and communicate a correlative conception of the self in its social and cosmological context:

A highly dignified demeanour, for instance, demands that the axes and planes of symmetry govern the body in motion, so that they are preserved even as it moves around: the posture is straight, the gestures are of the kind that we think of as harmonious. By contrast, attitudes of humility and humiliation flatten the body against the ground: the vanquished are supposed to prostrate themselves, worshippers to kneel, and the guilty to lower their heads and kiss the earth. And in the display of clemency or indulgence the inclining of the body parallels the bending of the will in compromise.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, Lefebvre is quick to emphasize that the meanings which attach to such gestures and postures are culturally defined.<sup>36</sup> But it is tempting to think that some of these bodily movements have a larger significance. For instance, a similar set of bodily movements to those which Lefebvre associates with 'dignity' seems to be implied in Aristotle's depiction of the 'magnanimous' man. It is striking that here too the relevant meaning is communicated not so much by what the 'great-souled' man says – by the content of his pronouncements – as by his style or demeanour. And Aristotle's explanation of the meaning of these behaviours is one that we have no difficulty in understanding in our very different context:

His gait is measured, his voice deep, and his speech unhurried. For since he takes few things seriously, he is not excitable, and since he regards nothing as great, he is not highly strung; and those are the qualities that make for shrillness of voice and hastiness of movement.<sup>37</sup>

The kind of conduct that is described here is reminiscent of the character type that we know as the 'English gentleman' (think for example of the values which are implied in the ideal of the 'stiff upper lip'). In each case, we might suppose, a privileged social class has had recourse to a similar style of bodily demeanour – to ensure that its

<sup>35</sup> *Production of Space*, pp. 214–15.

<sup>36</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. J. A. K. Thomson, revised by Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 158 (Book II).

values (those of effortless superiority!) are not just verbally professed but 'lived'.<sup>38</sup>

Lefebvre goes on to envisage the contribution of cloisters in particular to the creation of a space which will serve to elicit a set of bodily gestures and an associated sense of self and world:

When a gestural space comes into conjunction with a conception of the world possessed of its own symbolic system, a grand creation may result. Cloisters are a case in point. What has happened here is that, happily, a gestural space has succeeded in mooring a mental space – a space of contemplation and theological abstraction – to the earth, thus allowing it to express itself symbolically and to become part of a practice, the practice of a well defined group within a well defined society. . . . As a space for contemplatives, a place of promenade and assembly, the cloister connects a finite and determinate locality. . . . to a theology of the infinite. Columns, capitals, sculptures – these are semantic differentials which mark off the route to be followed (and laid down) by the steps of the monks during their time of (contemplative) recreation.<sup>39</sup>

Here again, the meaning of the space is apprehended in the body, rather than in the 'mind' which then issues instructions to the body – since the body registers the significance of the space directly, in its own movements. Emotional responses are also integral to our appreciation of the meaning of such a space – and they are, of course, caught up in a correlative disposition to bodily movement. As Lefebvre says: 'The affective level – which is to say, the level of the body, bound to symmetries and rhythms – is transformed into a "property" of monumental space.' He continues:

<sup>38</sup> For an account of the relationship between culturally specific contexts and a cross cultural tendency to perceive and appropriate the world in certain ways, see Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge, 1995). Fitter distinguishes four 'primary drives' or 'matrices of perception', which he takes to be 'perennial' (p. 15), and the 'nature sensibility' of a particular culture, 'which is always a product of its particular economic structure, and its working relations with the earth, its social conditions and formal thought' (p. 9).

<sup>39</sup> *Production of Space*, pp. 216–17. Michel de Certeau also explores the connection between walking and a set of 'semantic differentials', in his essay 'Walking in the City', in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 91–110.

Monumental qualities are not solely plastic, not to be apprehended solely through looking. Monuments are also liable to possess acoustic properties, and when they do not this detracts from their monumentality. Silence itself, in a place of worship, has its music. In cloister or cathedral, space is measured by the ear... Architectural volumes ensure a correlation between the rhythms that they entertain (gaits, ritual gestures, processions, parades, etc.) and their musical resonance. It is in this way, and at this level, in the *non visible*, that bodies find one another.<sup>40</sup>

This appreciation of a cloistered space is of course of the same general type as the friends' reckoning with the character of New College cloister. In each case, it is the ear which guides the body's responses, so coordinating the activities of the 'faithful', and constituting the place as a particular 'representational space'.

One final element in Lefebvre's account of space is of some interest for our purposes – not least because this consideration is not so obviously present in the friends' appropriation of Port Meadow and New College cloister. Lefebvre is keenly conscious of the ways in which a particular organization of space can serve the interests of a dominant class. And he puts into the mouth of his western philosopher, in his exchange with the Japanese thinker from which I quoted just now, these words: 'Your space... has one drawback: it belongs to Power. It implies (and is implied by) Divinity and Empire – knowledge and power combined and conflated.'<sup>41</sup> Our interest in this book lies mostly with the ways in which particular 'representational spaces' can carry religious significance, but we need to acknowledge of course that not only religious but also political values can be folded into a particular disposition of space. We have seen this much in the geometry of the streets in central Moscow. So when we consider the kinds of significance which the friends find at Port Meadow and New College cloister, it is reasonable to ask what political vision is implied thereby – and if we cannot discern such a vision, then we might wonder whether their appreciation of these places is, at least tacitly, acquiescent in an unjust social order.

Although the question of social justice is hardly in the foreground of the letter to Edmund, I think that the friends' understanding of the

<sup>40</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 225.

<sup>41</sup> *Production of Space*, p. 157.



meadow and of the cloister points towards the possibility of a political vision which is emancipatory rather than complicit in the values of 'power' and 'empire'. When they are at the meadow, the friends are conscious of the history of this place as common land – and their acknowledgement of this fact is connected, I suggest, to their recognition that accustomed social roles and distinctions, and correlative obligations, cease to apply here. (Recall the comment of the letter that on arrival at the meadow: 'all the senses partook in this sense of being released from the world we were leaving behind – a world which was even for a student in Oxford in the 1980s, one of responsibilities, of appointments to be kept, and particular paths to be followed'.) And at the cloister, the friends are conscious of how, in medieval times, this place served as the focus for the life of a religious community – and as a site for its practices of self-examination. And on their visits to the cloister, they seek to 'encounter' the significance of the monks' lives, and to re-enact their self-understanding – by according the place a similar role in their own lives. So in this connection, the friends act in solidarity with one particularly marginal group, whose voices in the normal case quite literally cannot be heard – namely, the dead. So while no political vision is explicitly enunciated in the description of these places, in each case the account points towards the possibility of a society which has overcome exclusions based on property or temporal location – and to this extent, these places, as they are understood here, witness to an ideal which has set its face against the defining concerns of 'power' and 'empire'.

PIERRE BOURDIEU: KNOWLEDGE  
OF SPACE AND THE *HABITUS*

We have been examining the work of Gaston Bachelard and Henri Lefebvre. I want to consider now the work of a further French author, Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu is not so directly occupied with the nature of knowledge of space, but he is concerned with practical knowledge,

and this turns out to be little different from a knowledge of how to orient oneself appropriately in space.

Bourdieu is keen to differentiate his own approach to the 'logic of practice' from two others. First there is the perspective which he labels 'objectivism' – where behaviour or practice is understood from an 'objective', third-person point of view. In his terms, objectivism 'sets out to establish objective regularities (structures, laws, systems of relationships, etc.) independent of individual consciousnesses and wills'.<sup>42</sup> The difficulty with this sort of account, Bourdieu comments, is that it 'ignores the relationship between the experiential meaning which social phenomenology makes explicit and the objective meaning'<sup>43</sup> – in other words, it fails to acknowledge that human behaviour involves the pursuit of goals and the realization of attendant meanings, since it is content to think of such behaviour simply in terms of objectively discernible regularities. On the other hand, there is the perspective which Bourdieu labels 'phenomenological'. This approach 'sets out to reflect an experience which, by definition, does not reflect itself, the primary relationship of familiarity with the familiar environment'. The problem with this account, he suggests, is that 'it excludes the question of the conditions of possibility of this experience'.<sup>44</sup> In other words, an approach of this kind deals simply with the content of immediate experience – without being able to give an account of how it is that experience can have this character.

Already we can see here a connection between Bourdieu's concerns and those of our other focal authors. Although his theme is 'practice' rather than 'space', Bourdieu, like Bachelard and Lefebvre, wants to delineate a 'non-objective' account of human-behaviour-in-space. And like them, he wants to preserve something of the felt meaning that attaches to such behaviours. But equally, Bourdieu repudiates any account which terminates in the felt content of the experience – and this is because, it turns out, he wants to see such experience as rooted in the primordial intentionality of the body in its enacted relationship to the world. So on this point too, Bourdieu's approach is like that of Bachelard and Lefebvre, in so far as they also seek to locate human experience within the context of our embodied

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, tr. R. Nice (Cambridge, 1990) p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> *Logic of Practice*, pp. 26–7.      <sup>44</sup> *Logic of Practice*, pp. 25–6.

appropriation of particular spaces – where it is in this embodied appropriation, rather than simply in ‘looking’ or gazing for example, that the significance of a space is disclosed. (Recall, for instance, Bachelard’s suggestion that our recollection of the childhood home is ‘inscribed’ in our bodies.)

So Bourdieu, like Bachelard and Lefebvre, is trying to sketch a distinctive kind of knowing – different from the kind of knowledge which operates in natural science (since science is governed by an ‘objectivist’ epistemology), and different from the kind that typifies a purely observational appreciation of the world. Like them, he is trying to develop an epistemology that is rooted in our practical, embodied appreciation of the world.

The key concept for understanding the character of this engagement is, according to Bourdieu, the *habitus*. He sets out in these terms the intellectual difficulty which this concept is intended to resolve:

if one fails to recognize any form of action other than rational action or mechanical reaction, it is impossible to understand the logic of all the actions that are reasonable without being the product of a reasoned design, still less of rational calculation; informed by a kind of objective finality without being consciously organized in relation to an explicitly constituted end; intelligible and coherent without springing from an intention of coherence and a deliberate decision; adjusted to the future without being the product of a project or a plan.<sup>45</sup>

The kind of action that Bourdieu describes here is the kind that is evident in the friends’ enacted relationship to Port Meadow and New College cloister. Their behaviours at these places cannot be understood simply in terms of ‘mechanical reaction’. We cannot, for instance, think of their actions in purely behaviourist terms – by supposing that they result from the reinforcement of those responses which have tended to generate favourable outcomes. This is to miss the meaning of what they are doing. But neither is their behaviour to be understood simply in terms of ‘rational action’ – if by this expression we mean behaviour which involves the calculated adoption of various means for the sake of some goal. Too much of

<sup>45</sup> *Logic of Practice*, pp. 50–1.

the meaning of the friends' activity remains tacit, too much of their sense of what they are doing is realized in embodied apprehension and felt response, rather than being articulated discursively, for this account to work. The possibility of this further sort of behaviour, which is to be distinguished from 'rational action' and 'mechanical reaction', is best understood, Bourdieu maintains, by reference to the idea of the *habitus*. He explains the concept in these terms:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.<sup>46</sup>

So the *habitus* consists in a set of habits, rooted in previous interactions with the world, which ensure that the body is predisposed to respond appropriately to the practical challenges that are posed by its environment – without having, in any reflective way, to review its options on each further occasion of practical choice. Compare the experience of cycling to work: the cyclist observes the traffic lights, makes various turns, and so on, without any of this requiring the conscious specification of a purpose and a set of means which are adapted to that purpose. Bourdieu offers a rather different example of the sort of unreflective practical responsiveness that is implied in the *habitus*:

A particularly clear example of practical sense as a proleptic adjustment to the demands of a field is what is called, in the language of sport, a 'feel for the game'. This phrase... gives a fairly accurate idea of the almost miraculous encounter between the *habitus* and a field... which makes possible the near perfect anticipation of the future inscribed in all the concrete configurations on the pitch or board.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 66. The same analogy is used by Joseph Fletcher in his account of moral knowledge – he is also trying to explain the possibility of a practical, context sensitive judgement which is not simply a matter of applying an explicitly articulated rule of behaviour: see his *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (London, 1966), p. 28.

A chess-player, for example, need not consciously rehearse all of the moves that are in principle open to him, together with all the possible successor moves of his opponent, and his own successor moves in turn – though on occasion this sort of calculation will of course be relevant. Instead, the experienced player will have a ‘feel’ for what response is appropriate, which derives from previous experience of similar situations.<sup>48</sup> It is partly for this reason that it proved so difficult to construct computer programs that could match the play of leading human chess-players. Early programs worked by crunching through various combinations of possible moves, in an attempt to ‘see’ several moves ahead – and this exercise is apt to generate very quickly an unmanageably large set of possibilities! By contrast, flesh-and-blood players can rely on ‘feel’ and habit grounded in accumulated experience of the game.

The chess example reveals why it is essential that we human beings should have such behavioural predispositions – the attempt to review all of the options, and all of the consequences of those options, in each new situation of practical choice would place an intolerable load on limited intellects such as ours. This is, incidentally, one reason why act consequentialism seems such an unattractive option in ethics, when it is conceived as a decision procedure.<sup>49</sup>

A number of features of the *habitus* are worth highlighting for our purposes. First of all, the understanding of the world (or of a chess game, or whatever it is) that is implied in the *habitus* is inherently action-guiding. As Bourdieu comments:

The practical world that is constituted in the relationship with the *habitus*, acting as a system of cognitive and motivating structures, is a world of already realized ends – procedures to follow, paths to take – and of objects endowed with a ‘permanent teleological character’.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> The sense of the term ‘feel’ here is not to be conflated with the meaning of the term when we speak of emotional feelings – as Gilbert Ryle notes in his essay ‘Feelings’, in his *Collected Papers*, Vol. II (London, 1971), pp. 272–86. However, we might suppose that a ‘feel’ of this kind will, standardly, involve some kind of salient perception – and a correlative appreciation of what practical response is appropriate.

<sup>49</sup> Again, emotional responses can play a role here – as forms of salient perception, emotional feelings direct our attention on to specific features of our environment, which can save us from informational overload. Keith Oatley and Jennifer Jenkins describe how this feature of emotional responses forms part of their evolutionary rationale in *Understanding Emotions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 257.

<sup>50</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 54.

So this kind of understanding resembles the understanding that is realized in an affectively toned salient perception: it is of its nature oriented to action (rather than having motivational force simply because of its association with some extrinsic desire). On this point, Bourdieu's account helps to fill out our earlier discussion. A particular understanding may be inherently action-guiding not only because it is affectively toned, or realized in a mode of salient viewing, or rooted in the expressive posture of the body – it may also have this character because it is grounded in past experience and in an associated practical responsiveness that has become habitual. Of course, these accounts are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are most naturally regarded as complementary perspectives upon the same phenomenon.

It is worth noting that because the *habitus* is grounded in past experience, it tends to perpetuate former behaviours – by taking them as a basis for later conduct. To this extent the *habitus* has a 'conservative' character:

Unlike scientific estimations, which are corrected after each experiment according to rigorous rules of calculation, the anticipations of the *habitus*, practical hypotheses based on past experience, give disproportionate weight to early experiences.<sup>51</sup>

This point is reminiscent of Bachelard's treatment of knowledge of the childhood home – again, early experience is taken to be deeply formative, and to shape our reading of the world thereafter. Bourdieu offers a fuller explanation of this phenomenon: early experience carries this disproportionate weight because it can stand at the origin of the formation of various habits of understanding. Of course, on this point too, spatial knowledge is reminiscent of religious knowledge – in so far as religious belief is, famously, rooted in early experience.

Like the other authors we have been examining, Bourdieu supposes that this sort of practical knowledge is not simply a matter of outward behaviour, but infuses perception and thought. Hence he comments that the *habitus*

<sup>51</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 54.

ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.<sup>52</sup>

So on Bourdieu’s account, the connection between (i) the patterns of salience that structure a given perceptual field, (ii) the affective responsiveness to the world that is implied thereby, and (iii) a correlative expressive posture of the body, is given in the *habitus* – as a disposition to behave which carries with it a certain propensity to perceive, feel, and think.

Of course, if our thinking and doing are so much a function of the *habitus*, then it is likely that the concomitant ‘picture’ of the world will be hard to dislodge. And in this respect too, the *habitus*, and the conception of the world which it implies, proves to be akin to religious faith. Bourdieu acknowledges this connection when he comments that:

Practical belief is not a ‘state of mind’, still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrines (‘beliefs’), but rather a state of the body. Doxa is the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between a *habitus* and the field to which it is attuned, the pre verbal taking for granted of the world that flows from practical sense.<sup>53</sup>

So in these various ways, Bourdieu’s account helps to amplify our earlier discussion of the integrated bodily-affective-phenomenological intentionality that is implied in, for example, the friends’ appreciation of Port Meadow and New College cloister. In particular, his remarks throw into sharp relief the habitual and deeply entrenched nature of such knowledge. This account also offers another window onto the friends’ willingness to visit the meadow and the cloister repeatedly – perhaps these visits helped them to lay down various habitual modes of seeing-feeling-and-acting, so generating an unwavering and unreasoned (which is not to say irrational) allegiance to a correlative set of values.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 54.

<sup>53</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 68.

<sup>54</sup> Something like this kind of perspective is implied, I think, in Wittgenstein’s characterization of religious belief as inherently connected to, or as simply identical

Like our other authors, Bourdieu is also sensitive to the ways in which the body's postures may be connected to a set of values of cosmological or metaphysical reach. And he emphasizes that the embedding of values in habitual forms of bodily movement is a particularly effective way of inculcating a normative scheme – because it gives the scheme the appearance of being 'natural', rather than rationally contestable:

One could endlessly enumerate the values given body, *made* body, by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy which can instil a whole cosmology, through injunctions as insignificant as 'sit up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand', and inscribe the most fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of a culture in seemingly innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners, so putting them beyond the reach of consciousness and explicit statement.<sup>55</sup>

It is worth noting here, once more, how ways of standing and walking – in other words, ways of appropriating a space from a practical, embodied point of view – just as much as conscious thoughts are the means by which an evaluative scheme takes root. I am reminded here of the trips I used to make to the Cairngorms with the poet Edmund Cusick. Because we were evenly matched for stride, we would often walk side by side for miles at a stretch, sometimes saying little – and this shared cadence in bodily movement would gradually spill over into a shared mental attunement, whose object was the meaning-for-the-body of this place.

Bourdieu also observes how certain bodily responses correlate with social role. He notes for example how gender roles can be inscribed in distinctive postures and dispositions to behave. (In one sense, this fact is, of course, utterly familiar, but as a rule it is not brought to the level of thematic awareness in actual behaviour.) For instance, he offers this description of the Kabyle tribe:

with, various attitudes and associated behavioural tendencies – so that such belief is, as he observes, 'not reasonable' (which is not to say, he notes, that it is 'unreasonable'). See his *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford, 1966), p. 58.

<sup>55</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 69.



The man of honour walks at a steady, determined pace. His walk, like that of a man who knows where he is going and knows he will get there on time, whatever the obstacles, expresses strength and resolution, as opposed to the hesitant gait . . . announcing indecision, half hearted promises . . . , the fear of commitments and inability to fulfil them . . . It is a measured pace, contrasting as much with the haste of the man who 'walks with great strides' . . . as with the sluggishness of the man who 'trails along'. A gaze that is up in the clouds or fixed on the ground is that of an irresponsible man, who has nothing to fear because he has no responsibilities in his group.

One is reminded here, once more, of Aristotle's depiction of the magnanimous man. By contrast, Bourdieu continues:

the specifically feminine virtue, *Lah'ia*, modesty, restraint, reserve, orients the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, the inside, the house, whereas male excellence, *nif*, is asserted in movement upwards, outwards, towards other men.<sup>56</sup>

Bourdieu's account is focused on the question of 'practice', especially as it touches on a person's social role. But as these examples make plain, practice in this sense is not much different, if at all different, from embodied relationship to place. And Bourdieu acknowledges as much when he comments that:

socialization instils a sense of the equivalences between physical space and social space and between movements (rising, falling, etc.) in the two spaces and thereby roots the most fundamental structures of the group in the primary experiences of the body.<sup>57</sup>

In so far as his account is a theory of bodily movement (understood as the locus for an understanding of place and its practical demands), and in so far as he treats such movement as distinct from mere behaviour (because of its sensitivity to meanings), and also distinct from movement which flows from some consciously entertained purpose – in so far as his account has these features, then

<sup>56</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 70. Yi Fu Tuan has also noted how the human body's posture and organization are correlated with various 'spatial values', to some extent cross culturally: see his 'Body, Personal Relations, and Spatial Values', in his *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London, 1977), Chapter 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Logic of Practice*, p. 71. Compare the approaches to Bourdieu's work in Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby, eds., *Habitus: A Sense of Place* (2nd edn: Aldershot, 2005).

Bourdieu is evidently addressing the very questions with which we have been occupied in earlier chapters, and in our review of Bachelard and Lefebvre. As I have tried to show, Bourdieu's discussion also helps to round out the perspective that we have been developing – especially given his remarks on (i) habituation, and the practical certainty that is implied therein, and (ii) the gender- and otherwise group-specific character of certain habits of bodily movement.

#### DAVID SEAMON: THE PLACE-BALLET

I am going to close this chapter by taking note of the work of one further commentator, who stands in a rather different intellectual tradition. He is a human geographer rather than a philosopher, and his approach is based to some extent on the use of interview data. Even so, his findings are very much congruent with those of Bachelard, Lefebvre, and Bourdieu – and to this extent his work can serve as a useful independent check on our discussion so far.

In his essay 'Body-Subject, Time-Space Routines, and Place-Ballets', David Seamon sets out, like Bourdieu, to distinguish his own account of knowledge of place from two others.<sup>58</sup> These other perspectives he calls 'behaviourism' and the 'cognitive map approach'. These alternatives correspond pretty closely to the theories which Bourdieu labels 'objectivism' and the 'phenomenological' view.<sup>59</sup> Like Bourdieu, Seamon finds that the first account fails to recognize the goal-directedness of our embodied appropriation of place. And, again like Bourdieu, he takes the habitual character of everyday bodily movement to count

<sup>58</sup> 'Body Subject, Time Space Routines, and Place Ballets', in Anne Buttimer and David Seamon, eds., *The Human Experience of Space and Place* (London, 1980), Chapter 7.

<sup>59</sup> Seamon does not reference Bourdieu's book. It is reasonable to suppose, I think, that it is their common indebtedness to Maurice Merleau Ponty that explains at least some of the resemblances between their approaches. Compare the distinction which Merleau Ponty draws between his own approach and those of 'empiricism' and 'intellectualism' in his 'Introduction: Traditional Prejudices and the Return to the Phenomena', in *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London, 1962).

against the second approach – noting that such movement is freed thereby from the need for conscious oversight and direction.<sup>60</sup> He also emphasizes, like Bourdieu once more, the way in which such dispositions to bodily behaviour imply a purposefulness in the body – as distinct from a purely mental directedness which is then translated into bodily behaviour. Here he quotes one of his interview subjects, who comments that when driving, he was aware of:

a directed action *in the arms*: my arms were turning the wheel . . . they were doing it all by themselves, completely in charge of where I was going. The car was halfway through the turn before I came to my senses and realized my mistake.<sup>61</sup>

So on this perspective, the body is not just a passive respondent to the environment, as a behaviourist, stimulus-response model might suggest – it is actively and intelligently (and fallibly) engaged in the pursuit of its own purposes.

The ‘cognitive’ or ‘mental map’ approach offers its own account of the kind of practical intelligence that is exhibited in such behaviours – maintaining that they are governed by conscious evaluations or anticipations of events.<sup>62</sup> Of course, our interaction with space sometimes has this character – as when we reason about ends, and the means which will serve those ends. But, Seamon insists, it is a mistake to suppose that *in general* our practical knowledge of place rests upon this sort of mediating cognition. Instead, there is a knowledge of place which resides in the body itself and in its predisposition to respond appropriately to a given environment. So Seamon’s ‘mental map’ approach is rather like Bourdieu’s ‘phenomenological’ account – since both accentuate the role of conscious thought in our relationship

<sup>60</sup> ‘Body Subject’, pp. 152–3.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Body Subject’, p. 154.

<sup>62</sup> Compare this defence of the perspective:

Admittedly, much of spatial behavior is repetitious and habitual – in travelling, you get the feeling that ‘you could do the trip blind folded’ or ‘do it with your eyes shut’. But even this apparent ‘stimulus response’ sequence is not so simple: you must be *ready* for the cue that tells you to ‘stop now’, or *evaluate* the rush hour traffic that tells you to ‘take the other way home tonight’. Even in these situations you are . . . using your cognitive map.

Roger Downs and David Stea, eds., *Image and Environment: Cognitive Mapping and Spatial Behavior* (Chicago, IL, 1973), p. 10, quoted by Seamon on p. 153.

to the world. It is also reminiscent of the idea, again noted by Bourdieu, that 'rational action' is the basis of our knowledge of place. Seamon finds both of these accounts defective – on the grounds that they fail to recognize that much of our embodied behaviour is not shaped by any consciously articulated objective, but is even so purposeful and properly responsive to the specificities of a given space.

Like Bourdieu, Seamon is also interested in the social dimension of knowledge of space, and the possibility of interpersonal coordination in our practical appropriation of particular places. In this connection he speaks of 'place-ballets' – intending to refer thereby to the rootedness in place of certain standardized or 'choreographed' bodily movements, where 'choreography' need not imply, of course, any conscious design. He comments:

*The place ballet is a fusion of many time space routines and body ballets in terms of place.* Its result may be an environmental vitality like that found in the streets of Boston's North End or New York's Greenwich Village. It generates a strong sense of place because of its continual and regular human activity.<sup>63</sup>

So, like Bourdieu and Lefebvre, Seamon is struck by the way in which knowledge of place may be the possession of a community. In this respect, it is like other kinds of knowledge – since it involves the possibility of inter-subjective convergence upon a common understanding.

## CONCLUSION

In this book, we have been exploring the possibility that knowledge of place offers a richer analogue for knowledge of God than do some of the alternatives (based on perception and scientific theory construction) which have been canvassed in recent discussion in the philosophy of religion. In this chapter, we have been considering how, more precisely, we might understand the nature of knowledge of place. For our purposes, several findings in recent writing on the epistemology of place have special significance.

<sup>63</sup> 'Body Subject', p. 159.

First, this literature is emphatic about the distinction between (i) knowledge of 'place' of the kind that is typical of the 'inhabitant' of a 'representational space', and (ii) scientific or purely observational knowledge of 'space'. So the literature agrees that the epistemology of 'place' has a distinctive character – and to this extent, it corroborates the thought that by taking knowledge of place, rather than perceptual or scientific knowledge, as our preferred analogue for knowledge of God, we will arrive at a significantly different conception of religious epistemology.

More exactly, this literature is concerned with the bodily character of knowledge of 'place' – so such knowledge is not to be understood as the product of some purely 'mental' insight, or as devoid of its own embodied kind of intelligence and directedness. The literature on place also unites around the theme that this sort of knowledge is infused by desire. And it maintains that knowledge of place is of its nature connected to a certain kind of perception – not simple observation but salient perception, which implies a correlative readiness of the body for action. For these reasons, knowledge of place is not a matter of tentatively entertaining some hypothesis, but consists, standardly, in a deeply grounded predisposition to certain kinds of behaviour.

In all of these respects, we have been considering the formal qualities of knowledge of place. We have also seen how such knowledge may acquire a religious content. Knowledge of the childhood home or of a cloister, for instance, can help to define a conception of human life in its cosmological or metaphysical context.

In all of these ways, the work of Bachelard, Lefebvre, Bourdieu, Seamon, and others confirms the thought that knowledge of place can provide the basis for a rich and nuanced account of religious knowledge – one which gives due recognition to the perception-structuring, action-guiding, feeling-informed, socially normative, and habit-grounded character of such knowledge. This literature also meshes with the three models of the differentiated religious significance of place that we examined in Chapter 2 – most obviously by providing examples of how houses, gardens, and other places can assume a religious significance by standing microcosmically for the wider circumstances of a human life.

In Chapters 3 and 4, our focus was mostly upon the ‘objective’ pole of knowledge of place – upon the character of places themselves, as supra-individual, and as sources for human action and identity. In this chapter, as in Chapter 2, we have been considering placial knowledge more from the side of the human subject – by examining the subject’s affective and embodied response to specific places. These various perspectives provide complementary vantage points on the same phenomena. For instance, the discussion of place and social role in this chapter extends our earlier remarks on the relationship between place and identity. Norberg-Schulz’s treatment of these issues bears a particularly close relation to the material we have examined in this chapter – given his interest in the connection between a person’s place of origin and their induction into a certain mode of life and associated habits of thought.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, we can now assign a further meaning to the idea that the history of my activities at a place may carry enduring significance – this truth holds not only because the import of those behaviours will be ‘stored up’ at the place (the theme of our earlier discussion), but also because these activities can help to lay down various behavioural propensities, and to constitute thereby a *habitus*.

In our discussion so far, we have set out a fairly broad theoretical account of: (i) the formal qualities of knowledge of place – and the role of affect, salient perception, the *habitus*, bodily responsiveness, and so on, in this regard; and (ii) the possibility that such knowledge will have a specifically religious content – most notably because of the ability of a place to function microcosmically. We have also taken note of two other ways of grounding the differentiated religious significance of place – (a) a place-relative gesture may enable some sort of mental directedness to God, or an encounter with God, and (b) the religious meaning of an event may be conserved at a place, and may then be ‘presented’ there.

In the remainder of our discussion, I want to test, and to elaborate, the various dimensions of this perspective against a range of case studies. I am going to begin, in the next chapter, with what is perhaps the single most obvious example of a place-based religious practice,

<sup>64</sup> See my discussion of Norberg Schulz in Chapter 4, in the section on ‘Place and Social Formation’.

namely, pilgrimage. I shall then review, in Chapter 7, a variety of built and natural environments, and examine some of the ways in which they can mediate a religious meaning. Finally, in Chapter 8, I shall return to the theme of the aesthetic dimension of knowledge of place – and take this theme as a way into the question of the aesthetic dimension of religious knowledge.

## Pilgrimage and the Differentiated Religious Significance of Space

### INTRODUCTION

We have been exploring three accounts of the differentiated religious significance of place – (i) the idea that this differentiation tracks differences in the history of sites; (ii) the idea that a site can acquire special religious significance in so far as its meaning or *genius* stands microcosmically for the meaning of the sum of things; and (iii) the idea that a site’s religious meaning can be given in the gestures which are performed there, where those gestures serve as a way of identifying or referring to God. In this chapter, I shall argue that each of these perspectives can play some part in a conception of the religious meaning of pilgrimage. I am going to begin by setting out three objections to pilgrimage practices. I shall then seek to respond to these objections using our three models of the variable religious significance of space.

Pilgrimage practices are evident in all the major faith traditions<sup>1</sup> – despite the objections voiced by some of the founding figures of these traditions.<sup>2</sup> In the Christian context as elsewhere, pilgrimage has long

<sup>1</sup> See Victor and Edith Turner’s affirmation of pilgrimage’s ‘importance in the actual functioning of [Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam], both quantitatively and qualitatively’: *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford, 1978), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> As David Brown observes, the Buddha and Guru Nanak were both critical of pilgrimage. Even so, pilgrimage traditions have emerged in the faiths which they founded: Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 216–17.



been the subject of theological reflection and critique. Alexander Schmemmann offers this assessment of the early church's attitude towards place-based religious practices:

Christians had no concern for any sacred geography, no temples, no cult that could be recognized as such by the generations fed with solemnities of the mystery cults. There was no specific interest in the places where Jesus had lived. There were no pilgrimages... There was no need for temples to be built of stone: Christ's body, the Church itself, the new people gathered in Him, was the only real temple.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the truth of this assessment, pilgrimage was later to become common practice among Christians – but it has also been, of course, enduringly contentious. Famously, the reformers criticized such practices on the grounds that they were implicated in a theology of works, and a conception of the saints as mediating figures in the believer's relationship to God. Some of these traditional objections have ceased to have much currency. The idea that 'indulgences' might be 'earned' by feats of long-distance travel will strike many modern Christians as obviously muddle-headed – especially when combined with the thought that there is a precise exchange rate which fixes the relative merit of such journeys (so that a visit to Rome, for example, counts for twice as much as a visit to St David's in Pembrokeshire).<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary objections to pilgrimage are likely, then, to have a rather different focus. In his recent television documentary on religion, Richard Dawkins suggested that pilgrimage to Lourdes and other such places is rationally indefensible. At the core of his protest is the thought that such practices are rooted in superstitious beliefs (especially the belief in miracles of healing), and are saturated in a reason-sapping, crowd-induced emotionality.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, many modern Christians are likely to think that relationship to God is vouchsafed most securely in moments of interior communion with the divine – and they are likely, then, to see pilgrimage practices as mired in a falsely

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (New York, 1973), p. 20. I shall return to these comments later in the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> See Douglas Davies, 'Christianity', in Jean Holm with John Bowker, eds., *Sacred Place* (London, 1994), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> The programme was titled 'The Root of All Evil?' and shown on Monday 9 January and Monday 16 January 2006, on Channel 4 in the UK.

materialist understanding of how relationship to God is sustained, since such moments of interior encounter can after all take place anywhere. These three objections – from superstition, from emotion and its tendency to subvert rational judgement, and from God’s accessibility in interior prayer – are more likely to provide the substance of contemporary objections to pilgrimage than is, say, a critique of indulgences. I shall concentrate, therefore, upon these difficulties. Let’s consider them in turn.<sup>6</sup>

### THE OBJECTION FROM SUPERSTITION

Just because pilgrimage has long been a source of theological controversy, educated pilgrims have had reason to feel a degree of self-consciousness about their practice – and accordingly they have sometimes tried to articulate their reasons for pilgrimage, and to note the distinction between these reasons and those which might be professed by less enlightened believers. Take for example the self-understanding of nineteenth-century Anglican pilgrims travelling in Palestine. These pilgrims were often ministers, along with their families. So they were theologically literate, and some of them sought to differentiate their practice from that of Orthodox pilgrims of the day. The ceremony of the Sacred Fire is perhaps the single most obvious example of the sort of practice from which these Anglican pilgrims wished to dissociate themselves. This gathering was held (and continues to be held) on Easter Saturday at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. On this occasion, a priest would enter the tomb with an unlit taper, and without any evident means of lighting it, before emerging some time later with the taper alight – a development which was taken to provide ‘miraculous’ confirmation of Jesus’s resurrection.

The Anglican pilgrims took exception to the rank ‘superstition’ of this practice. They also objected to its material context, since the

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of objections to pilgrimage, see David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, pp. 154–63, and John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 98–101.

Church of the Holy Sepulchre was encrusted with the accretion of centuries of Christian tradition, rather than bearing clear and simple witness to the Jerusalem of Jesus's time. Here is one Anglican pilgrim of the period admitting to being affected by the Holy Sepulchre site, but at the same time registering his reserve about Christian practice there:

though we cannot be affected by the Holy Sepulchre, as others may be, yet when we think of the thousands who have made this spot the centre of their hopes, and in a spirit of piety though not untinged by superstitious feeling of bygone ages, have endured danger, and toil, and fever, and want to kneel with bursting hearts upon the sacred rock; then, as regards the history of humanity, we feel that it is holy ground.<sup>7</sup>

Here the history of the site is deemed significant – but not its history in the scheme of salvation, so much as its human history. And its human history is taken to matter not because the site has provided a proper vehicle for Christian devotion (on the contrary, Christian piety here has been corrupted by 'superstitious' elements), but because it has served as the focus for a deeply felt, even if intellectually unsustainable, Christian faith.

Orthodox pilgrimage to the 'Holy Land', in the nineteenth century as now, was organized around the major religious festivals – especially Christmas and Easter. And as the ceremony of the Sacred Fire makes clear, these pilgrims took themselves to be not just recalling various events from the story of Jesus, but participating in some sense in their meaning, and being caught up causally or metaphysically in their transformative power. Against this sort of practice, focused upon certain times of the year, and upon established holy sites overlaid by the evidence of centuries of Christian devotion, Anglican pilgrims aimed to ground their practice in a more 'interior' and biblical understanding of the significance of the holy places – by seeing these places as an aid to a livelier imagining of various biblical scenes. As Thomas Hummel observes, 'the English Protestant pilgrim was for the most part an educated literate person who visited Jerusalem and the Holy Land in order to vivify the Bible as well as

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hummel, 'The Sacramentality of the Holy Land: Two Contrasting Approaches', in David Brown and Ann Loades, eds., *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time* (London, 1995), p. 83.

to have the adventure of visiting an exotic place'.<sup>8</sup> So these Anglican pilgrims tended to withdraw from the established holy sites – because of their association with superstitious practices such as the ceremony of the Sacred Fire, and because of their failure to offer a window onto the world of first century Palestine. The Anglican commentator whom I quoted just now remarks, for example, that rather than recalling the death of Jesus by visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 'we would rather go forth, without the walls, and seek some solitary spot, and endeavour, with the page of the New Testament before us, in silence to image forth the awful scene'.<sup>9</sup>

Here pilgrimage has been assigned an interior or psychological meaning. The practice is being construed as an aid to recollection – and independent of any metaphysical or other claim which might provoke an objection of superstition. So it is not only religious sceptics such as Dawkins who have wanted to distance themselves from pilgrimage practices on the grounds that they are associated with a superstitious conception of divine agency. Believers, too, have felt the force of this sort of objection, and they have tried to construct forms of pilgrimage that will evade the charge – and give bodily form to the idea that it is the biblical revelation, rather than 'spooky' events or presences, which mediates a person's relationship to God.

#### A RESPONSE TO THE OBJECTION FROM SUPERSTITION

Having seen some of the religious as well as secular rationalist roots of this kind of objection to pilgrimage, let's examine the objection a little more closely. These nineteenth-century Anglican pilgrims, and their modern counterparts, are presupposing, I suggest, a simple typology of the range of meanings which pilgrimage might bear.<sup>10</sup> In effect, they are supposing that there are two possibilities: either the

<sup>8</sup> Hummel, 'The Sacramentality of the Holy Land', p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Hummel, 'The Sacramentality of the Holy Land', pp. 82–3.

<sup>10</sup> It is striking that these variations in the sensibility of nineteenth century pilgrims of different denominations seem to map fairly directly on to the differences of attitude displayed by modern Christian pilgrims to Palestine. See for

practice is rooted in metaphysical truths concerning the character of divine agency here and now, or it has a purely psychological significance, since it is concerned with the operation of the imagination – and with the ‘revivification’ of various biblical or other scenes. I am going to argue now that this dichotomy overlooks a third, intermediate possibility – one which does not rest upon any metaphysical speculation, but which is equally independent of the psychological reductionism that is implied in the self-understanding of some Anglican pilgrims. To help us define this further possibility, let’s begin by examining some secular analogues to pilgrimage.

### The Significance of the Post-mortem Body

It is common practice to visit the grave of a loved one. The point of this practice is no doubt, in part, to provide an occasion to recall the deceased person: standing at the graveside, one’s thoughts are naturally drawn to the person who is buried there. But the rationale of the practice is presumably not exhausted by its role in providing a stimulus to thought about the deceased person. After all, recollection of the person could be achieved as readily in the normal case by examining a photograph of them, or by some other means which does not require the labour of a journey to the grave. To put the point another way, this sort of account overlooks the physicality of the practice: the bereaved person seeks not just some mental – for example, an imagistic or description-relative – contact with the deceased person, but wants to achieve a kind of embodied connection to them, by placing themselves in physical proximity to the body. It seems more exactly that there are two relationships which matter here. First of all, the body of the deceased person is taken to store up the significance of their life in some fashion – and this connection holds because the post-mortem body is *physically continuous* with the body of the living person. Secondly, what is conserved in the body, by way of the relationship of physical continuity,

example Glen Bowman, ‘Christian Ideology and the Image of a Holy Land: the Place of Jerusalem in the Various Christianities’, in John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: the Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London, 1991), pp. 98–121.

can then be encountered in the present, when the bereaved person stands beside the grave – so placing themselves in a relationship of *physical proximity* to the body.

It is easy to imagine various kinds of unease being provoked by these observations. On the one side, in an empiricist spirit, it may be said that the idea of the body ‘storing up’ significance makes no sense. What is this ‘significance’ and how might it be detected by sensory means? It might be thought that our willingness to assign sentimental value to objects involves the same kind of mistake. For example a person may consider a wedding ring, worn over many years, to have a special significance – and may prefer this ring to another ring which is indistinguishable from it in terms of its properties of colour, dimensions, chemical composition, and so on. Here again, the history of a thing seems to condition our attitude towards it. But, it might be urged, this preference is surely irrational – because the two rings are after all qualitatively identical.<sup>11</sup> Of course, if we adopt this sort of empiricist perspective upon what counts as real, and suppose that only currently exemplified sensory properties are ‘real’, together with any further properties which supervene upon them, then the preference for the ring worn on one’s wedding day over a perfect replica is bound to appear rationally unmotivated. But this conception of reality is surely implausible: even on a strictly empiricist view, there is a difference between these two rings, in so far as they have different histories – and why should a difference in value not supervene on this difference in history? If a ring has served to express a person’s commitment in marriage, then it is organically connected to

<sup>11</sup> I am reminded here of the perspective attributed by *The Times* newspaper to Professor Bruce Hood, an eminent psychologist (the report was reproduced in *The Australian*, on 6 September 2006, and this is my source). The paper summarized his views, presented at the British Association Festival of Science, in these terms: ‘people ultimately believe in these ideas [ideas such as creationism and the paranormal] for the same reasons that they attach sentimental value to inanimate objects such as wedding rings or teddy bears’. The scientist’s larger case seems to have been that the same sort of defective rationality is at work in religious belief (of more conventional varieties too) and sentimental belief. Bracketing the question of whether this scholar’s views have been accurately summarized here, I think that the phenomena of sentimental attachment are indeed related to certain kinds of religious commitment – but, of course, I do not think that we need to be sceptical about the rational propriety of such attitudes. I am grateful to Dr John Masel for supplying me with the passage from *The Australian*.

a defining value in their life – and why should it not bear a special significance for that reason?

The same kinds of connection are acknowledged when we visit the grave of a loved one. The post-mortem body was once, we might say, the medium for the expression of the beloved's life choices – it was in or through this body that the beloved enacted a particular set of commitments. (I intend this way of phrasing the point to be neutral between different perspectives on the mind–body 'problem'.) The connection here is even tighter than in the case of a wedding ring: the body does not just stand for, or publicly communicate, a set of life-defining commitments, such as those involved in marital love and fidelity; rather, such commitments are often realized in the body – for they are, in significant part, commitments to a certain use of the body. Similarly, while we may assign a special significance to some of the beloved's possessions, they will not normally hold the same importance as the post-mortem body. For whereas relevant movements of the body constitute the beloved's embrace or, in general, their words and behaviours, a house or car, or whatever it may be, typically serves as an instrument of the body, and does not possess, therefore, such an intimate connection to the meaning that is displayed in the beloved's life – not even if (as with a wedding ring) it symbolizes that meaning.

Although we are mostly concerned here with the post-mortem body, its significance in these respects indicates the propriety of certain attitudes towards the living body. Whatever one's theory of the mind–body relation, the body is not just another possession of the person – and accordingly it may not be simply pushed around without the person themselves being violated.<sup>12</sup> We might wonder whether the practice of visiting saintly figures provides a religious counterpart for this sort of appreciation of the body. Perhaps this practice derives its point not so much, or not simply, from a wish to hear the sage's theological teaching or receive their practical guidance, as from the desire to place oneself in proximity to their

<sup>12</sup> Compare the importance which Judith Thomson assigns to treatment of the body in her discussion of the 'trolley problem': 'Killing, Letting Die and the Trolley Problem', *The Monist* 59 (1976), pp. 204–17.

body – since the body is taken to store up the significance of their thoughts and deeds.<sup>13</sup>

I am proposing, then, that certain kinds of existential meaning may be conserved through the relationship of physical continuity. As we noted in Chapter 4, it is easy to multiply examples of our practical acknowledgement of this truth. Think, for instance, of the recent debate in the United States concerning the question of what sort of building, for what sort of purpose, it would be fitting to erect on the site of the 9/11 attacks. We can imagine a certain kind of empiricist objecting that this site is surely no different from other potential building sites – once it has been cleared of debris, its sensory qualities will be no different from those of other sites which share its dimensions, soil chemistry, and so on. But, of course, this consideration does not weigh with most of us. Instead, we suppose that the history of the site sets constraints, ethical constraints, upon what can properly be done there. Once again, the relationship of physical continuity is crucial here: it matters that ‘Ground Zero’ is physically continuous with the site where the World Trade Centre once stood. The relationship of physical proximity is also ethically important: the question to be decided concerns what forms of construction and other behaviour are appropriate at this site. Of course, this is in some ways a rather unusual example – but the connection between the storied identity of a site and the practical claim it makes upon us is one we routinely acknowledge in other, more familiar contexts, as when we lay flowers at the scene of a traffic accident.

These reflections intersect with our earlier discussion of the work of Katya Mandoki and Michael Banner<sup>14</sup> – since they also postulate a connection between the history and the current significance of individual places or of the meta-place which is the world. Mandoki maps out the relationship between the history of the site on which Mexico

<sup>13</sup> Compare for example the role of the *starets* in Russian Orthodoxy. It is noteworthy that in the Orthodox tradition as elsewhere, the wisdom of such individuals is associated with a period of silent withdrawal rather than formal education. See for example Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 47–8. If the desire of the pilgrim to see such a holy figure is taken to be motivated simply by a desire to receive practical advice, or to hear some theological teaching, then that end could presumably be achieved in many cases by some less arduous means than by visiting them in person.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion of Chapter 4.



City stands and the meaning which attaches to this place in the present. I have been suggesting that this connection between history and present significance holds not only for places but also for the post-mortem body, and for some kinds of object, such as a wedding ring. Similarly, Michael Banner maintains that the history of the world, as the object of God's creative, reconciling, and redemptive activity, conditions its significance in the present – this history helps to constitute a context in terms of which we can assess the fittingness or context-congruence of various human behaviours. On Banner's account, judgements about the nature of the 'good life' cannot be grounded simply in the empirical data – since some of the relevant goods will concern, for example, the proper alignment of human practice with the pre-Fall ordering of things, and that alignment may have no empirical correlate. (The alignment need not show up in, for example, any social scientific measure of 'happiness' or 'well being'. Or to put the point another way, these terms turn out to be theory-relative rather than having a purely psychological or empirical content – so there is no reason to expect Christian and social scientific renderings of them to have the same reference, bearing in mind that the latter account is methodologically atheistic.)<sup>15</sup> Again, I have been arguing that this sort of connection, between history and present significance, holds more generally – in so far as examination of the current sensory qualities of an object (be it a body, a wedding ring, or whatever) is not enough to determine how we ought to behave in relation to it. Instead, we need to set the object within a larger, storied context if we are to establish what practical demands, if any, it makes upon us.

We have been discussing the idea that existential meanings can be conserved by means of the relationship of physical continuity, and can then make a practical claim upon us by means of the relationship of physical proximity: for example, when I am in the presence of the post-mortem body, it is incumbent upon me to behave in ways that connote respect. It is worth emphasizing that this relationship of the person to a storied meaning is not purely mental. If I believe that my beloved is buried at a certain place, and she is not, then while my visit to that place may still count as an act of paying respect to her, I will

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Tim Gibson for helpful discussion of these matters.

not in the same way be claimed by, or 'encounter', the significance of her life. Similarly, if I do not believe that my beloved is interred here, and she is, then the site may still carry an existential importance that is rooted in my relationship to her: for example, if I disturb her body and do not know as much, then it may be appropriate to think of me with pity.

I shall mark the non-mentalistic character of this sort of encounter by using the language of 'presentation' – the meaning or significance of the person is, in some degree, 'presented' to me at the graveside, rather than being apprehended simply by virtue of the thoughts that I affirm while I am there. In the normal case, my thoughts will still be necessary for 'presentation' – if I do not know the body is buried here, then while the meaning of my actions may be conditioned by the fact of the body's burial at this place, the significance of the person will not in that case be 'presented' to me. So the language of presentation as I am using it is like the language of 'perception' – where perceiving a bird, for example, implies both that a bird is really present and that I take it to be a bird.

I noted just now that when I stand at the graveside the significance of the person is 'in some degree' presented to me. The expression 'in some degree' is important: I am not maintaining, of course, that the post-mortem body is rightly accorded the same respect as the living person. We do not, after all, treat them the same, and what it takes to dishonour a corpse is not the same as what it takes to dishonour the living person – and we might even think that if we had to dishonour one or other, we would in the normal case choose to dishonour the corpse (although I do not think that we can make any easy generalization on this point). Nonetheless, the post-mortem body has a significance which is, as it were, an 'echo' of the significance of the living person – that is, the post-mortem body owes its significance, in so far as it is entitled to respect and honour, to the fact that it was once the body of a living human being, and in some degree to the fact that it was the body of this particular human being (in so far as the body of the beloved, for example, makes a more serious claim on me than does that of a relative stranger). Hence the significance of the post-mortem body is not identical with that of the living person, but is in some way derived from that of the living person – and we might put this by saying that the significance of the living person is

conserved in part by the post-mortem body, and can then be 'presented' to someone who stands in an appropriate relationship of physical proximity to the post-mortem body.

So far I have been trying to resist a narrowly empiricist reading of the significance of the post-mortem body. That reading seeks to ground whatever significance attaches to the body in its current sensory properties – so removing the body's history from an account of its importance. On the other side of the debate, it might be said: of course, special significance can attach to a body or a place, or a wedding ring, or whatever it might be, a significance that distinguishes one place (or ring, or whatever) from another empirically indistinguishable place; but to understand the possibility of this sort of supra-empirical significance, we need to invoke a metaphysical kind of explanation – by supposing that the spirit of the deceased person lingers on in the body, or something of that kind. On the perspective I have been unfolding, this attempt to shore up the possibility of the significance of the post-mortem body is bound to seem insufficiently motivated. On this perspective, the significance of the post-mortem body supervenes upon the relationship between various parts of the material world – specifically, it supervenes on the relationship between the post-mortem body and the living body, and then upon the relationship between the post-mortem body and the body of the bereaved person. We might put this by saying that the kind of significance which arises here is not so much metaphysical as ethical or existential.

If we did suppose that the 'spirit' of the deceased person lived on at a particular place (if we thought that their spirit remained there in non-material form, and was able to witness events which took place there with particular immediacy) – here I simply pass over the question of the coherence of this supposition – then this putative fact would, I think, make a difference to the significance which attaches to the place. (It might after all make a difference to our behaviour at the site.) So the metaphysical hypothesis is not, I think, entirely devoid of explanatory force. However, in this case, it is I take it redundant – it is enough to attend to relevant relationships of physical continuity and physical proximity to see how a given place, or the post-mortem body, can acquire the sort of significance that is implied in the practice of visiting a grave. There is no need to

postulate some further set of metaphysical facts to explain this significance.

We can see this by thinking again about what is involved in the practice of grave-visiting. The bereaved person need not, and typically does not, take the post-mortem body's significance to depend upon the truth of some metaphysical hypothesis. After all, such a hypothesis would always be a somewhat speculative matter: we would have to admit the possibility of being wrong about whether, say, some non-material entity was present alongside the corpse. But no such uncertainty attaches to the belief that the post-mortem body is entitled to respect. So this latter conviction seems to rest not upon a metaphysical speculation, but instead upon beliefs which we take to be incontrovertible. Those beliefs concern, I am suggesting, the relations of physical continuity and proximity, and what follows directly from them. And our attitudes in these matters do seem to track fairly straightforwardly our beliefs about these relations – if for example my belief that my beloved is buried here comes to be shaken, then my conviction that certain attitudes are appropriate at this site will be shaken proportionately.

These observations suggest, incidentally, that the hypothesis of mind–body substance dualism has an ethical dimension. For on this thesis, the body can be represented as a kind of possession. It is to be worn, like a garment, for the duration of this life – and on one standard extension of this view, it can then be discarded at death, when the soul, or the real self, proceeds to the afterlife. On this account, it would seem that our regard for the post-mortem body ought to be of much the same nature as our regard for special possessions of the beloved following their death – especially possessions which were instrumental in some deep and enduring way to their pursuit of their life-goals. In so far as we ascribe a deeper significance to the post-mortem body than this (and as a rule we do, I think), then we are implicitly committed, on ethical grounds, to the falsity of mind–body dualism.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Compare Socrates' response when his companions enquire about how his body is to be treated after his death. He replies teasingly: 'However you wish . . . provided you catch me, that is, and I don't get away from you' – his point being that the real Socrates is not to be confused with the body, and that the fate of the post-mortem body is therefore of no great consequence in itself. Plato, *Phaedo*, tr. David Gallop (Oxford, 1993), 115c.

So for present purposes I am proposing to take as basic, or not in need of any metaphysical or other justification, the fact that a certain existential significance supervenes upon the relations of physical continuity and proximity in the ways that we have been examining. I do not want to suggest that there is no possibility of further elucidating the question of why the post-mortem body is entitled to respect. There is for example a distinguished philosophical tradition which has supposed that the dead can be harmed by events which follow their death. As Aristotle comments: ‘it appears that the dead are affected to some extent by the good fortunes of those whom they love, and similarly by their misfortunes’.<sup>17</sup> And we might wish to associate the idea that the post-mortem body is to be accorded a certain respect with the idea that failure to do so will constitute a harm to the dead person. But while the exploration of this sort of possibility is I think a worthwhile intellectual project, I doubt whether any such explication of the appropriateness of honouring the post-mortem body could augment or unsettle the conviction we anyway feel, in a relatively theory-independent way, of the appropriateness of assigning such dignity to the body. It seems to me that when we treat the body with such dignity, we standardly see that it was the vehicle, in the specially intimate sense that we touched upon earlier, for the realization of a certain life-meaning – and this recognition is sufficient to guide our responses.

### The Storied Significance of Place

We have been exploring various secular analogues for the case of pilgrimage. And drawing on these examples, we might suppose that the practice of visiting a ‘holy site’, such as Jerusalem, can be rooted in the belief that the significance of certain events, in the life of Jesus

<sup>17</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, Section xi: *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. J. A. K. Thomson, revised by Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth, 1976). For a modern attempt to use the idea that the dead can be harmed, or benefited, to inform ethical reflection see Michael Ridge, ‘Giving the Dead Their Due’, *Ethics* 114 (2003), pp. 38–59. Ridge is concerned in particular with the idea of compensating the dead. The case we are considering appears to have a different character – as here the appropriateness of a certain ethical stance is evident independently of the hypothesis of harm or benefit to the dead.

or some other figure, is in some degree conserved here, and can then be 'presented' here – where 'presentation' involves more than a revivification of the imagination, in the manner proposed by the nineteenth-century Anglican pilgrims whose views we noted earlier. Similarly, a pilgrim who visits a place such as St Peter's in Rome, to venerate the saint's relics, may believe that these bones store up in some degree the significance of his life story. On the empiricist-reductionist account of value, these behaviours are rationally defective. If we take this line, then we might suppose that consideration is owed to persons because of their capacity for rational, self-directed agency, or to sentient creatures more generally because of their capacity to feel pleasure and pain; but the post-mortem body, and a place considered simply as a place, do not display these qualities – so to seek to accord them 'respect' or 'honour' is to fall into a kind of category mistake. Evidently, I have been arguing against this view – and implicitly therefore against the comprehensiveness of standard treatments of ethics in the style of Kantian, utilitarian, and flourishing-based traditions of thought. I have also been arguing that in order to make sense of pilgrimage to a place where an event of religious import took place, or where certain relics are preserved, there is no need to invoke some metaphysical hypothesis – by supposing for example that the laws of nature are currently suspended at this place, or that some non-material entity lives on here. Instead, it is enough to identify relevant bits of the material world, and to note the spatial relations (of continuity and proximity) that obtain between them.

The upshot of this discussion is, of course, that the dichotomous account of the rationale for pilgrimage that I mentioned earlier is too restrictive. Yes, place-based and relic-based pilgrimage practices can make sense independently of any metaphysical speculation concerning the mechanics of divine agency in the present. But this is not to say that their meaning should be construed simply in naturalistic terms – by reference to the sensory properties of a pilgrimage site, or its contribution to the religious imagination. Instead, we may speak of various meanings being 'presented' at a site, and of a correlative practical response being required. So there is a middle ground here which relies neither upon metaphysical assumptions (contrast the Sacred Fire ceremony's dependence on the idea that a transcendent

cause explains the lighting of the taper) nor upon a naturalistic stance (contrast the naturalistic, imagination-relative basis of the practice of our Anglican pilgrims).

This account of the significance of pilgrimage fits most readily with the last of the three models of the differentiated religious significance of place that we distinguished in Chapter 2 – it amounts to a fuller defence of the view that the religious import of a place can be grounded in its history (or in the history of items such as relics which are located at the place). On this perspective, the ‘metaphysical’ and ‘reductionist’ accounts of pilgrimage both overlook the physicality of the practice – the first by trying to ground the sense of the practice in a set of supra-physical facts, and the second by trying to root its meaning in the interior or mental life of the believer. Against any account which sees one or other of these perspectives, or some combination of them, as comprehensive, we should say that, in at least some cases, it is the relations of physical continuity and proximity that explain the sense of pilgrimage practice.

While the perspective on pilgrimage that we have been exploring is rather different from that favoured by some nineteenth-century Russian and Anglican pilgrims, there are other pilgrims whose self-understanding seems to be much closer in spirit to the view defended here.<sup>18</sup> For example David Hunt has commented of early Christian pilgrims that their practice ‘transplanted them . . . temporally backwards into the history of their community – actually, so it was firmly held, into the presence of the sainted martyr.’<sup>19</sup> Similarly Gregory of Nyssa records in these terms the veneration accorded to the relics of the martyr Theodore: ‘those who behold them [the remains] embrace

<sup>18</sup> This account is also different from that provided in the Vatican document ‘The Shrine: Memory, Presence, and Prophecy of the Living God’ (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrant and Itinerant People, 1999, available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/migrants/documents](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents); (accessed 1 August 2005). The three kinds of significance which are distinguished here all point to a role for memory. The account I have been developing is consistent with the idea that shrines are important as a stimulus to memory, but has concentrated upon other aspects of their significance.

<sup>19</sup> David Hunt, ‘Space and Time Transcended: the Beginnings of Christian Pilgrimage’, in David Brown and Ann Loades, eds., *The Sense of the Sacramental* (London, 1995), p. 63. See too his comment that early Christian pilgrimage cannot be understood simply as ‘travel helpful for making scripture vivid’: p. 64.

them as though the actual body... and bring forward their supplications as though he were present.’<sup>20</sup> The implication of these examples is that, in many cases anyway, Christian pilgrimage has involved not so much some speculation about the present occurrence of a law-suspending event, but rather the idea that it is possible to encounter the saint in their relics. The pilgrim seems to aim, then, not simply at commemoration of the saint, but at placing herself in the saint’s presence, by standing in the requisite spatial relationship to the physical remains. The account we have been considering is consonant with this perspective in so far as it takes the significance of pilgrimage practice to be a function of the believer’s physical presence to the saint’s body or to a place – rather than depending upon what is happening in metaphysical or psychological terms.

The physicality of pilgrimage practice is also apparent in the determination of medieval pilgrims ‘to get as close to the relics as possible.’<sup>21</sup> It is also noteworthy that in the ancient world, the vision of a relic was commonly assigned a significance which depended upon a conception of sight as affording a kind of tactile encounter with the object perceived – since sight was thought to involve the eye’s emission of a ray which touched the perceived object and then returned to the viewer. As one commentator on early Christian pilgrimage has observed: ‘Thus, Christians cultivated a religious epistemology that combined the noblest of the senses (sight) with the most animalistic one (touch).’<sup>22</sup> In all of these respects then, the

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Hunt, ‘Space and Time Transcended’, p. 63. At the same time, it is striking that Gregory of Nyssa and other patristic authors registered, to say no more, a degree of reserve about pilgrimage. Philip Sheldrake recalls this comment of Gregory’s: ‘A change of place does not effect any drawing nearer to God.’ And he comments that here Gregory ‘was defending the apophatic pole of Eastern theology’ that God is not only beyond human language but is essentially inaccessible’: Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (London, 2001), p. 49. Wendy Pullen remarks on the ambiguities in patristic attitudes towards pilgrimage in her essay ‘“Intermingled Until the End of Time”: Ambiguity as a Central Condition of Early Christian Pilgrimage’, in Jaś Elsner and Ian Rutherford, eds., *Pilgrimage in Graeco Roman and Early Christian Antiquity* (Oxford 2005), Chapter 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Nilson, ‘The Medieval Experience at the Shrine’, in J. Stopford, ed., *Pilgrimage Explored* (Woodbridge, 1999), p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> Georgina Frank, ‘The Pilgrim’s Gaze in the Age before Icons’, in Robert S. Nelson, ed., *Visibility Before and Beyond the Renaissance* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 107. Cynthia Hahn summarizes this theory, ‘commonly accepted in the medieval West



general drift of the account that we have been exploring, and specifically its attention to the physical connectedness of believer and relic, appears to be confirmed in pilgrimage practice.

So the third of our models of the differentiated religious significance of space (according to which places and things can conserve the meaning of past events) can be applied to the question of the religious meaning of pilgrimage. Given this approach, we can rebut the charge that pilgrimage practice is committed to a 'superstitious' conception of divine agency – and we can do this without recourse to a psychologistic reading of its sense.

#### THE APOPHATIC OBJECTION FROM EMOTIONAL AROUSAL

I want to examine now a second objection to pilgrimage: the apophatic objection from emotional arousal. Once again, I shall seek to reply to the objection by appealing to one of our earlier models of the differentiated religious significance of place. This further objection also holds that pilgrimage is rationally defective – but now the objection is that the practice is epistemically suspect because of its association with states of emotional arousal. As with our first objection, this difficulty has been posed by Richard Dawkins. And once more, these are matters which have exercised believers as well as religious sceptics. For example, Denys Turner comments:

We think of personal experience as unmediated by anything so impersonal and distanced as doctrine. It is the assumption which is contained in that lingering moment of wishful thinking which lurks in the thought of how decisive it would have been to meet the person of the historical Jesus, of how immediately convincing that would have been by comparison with the historically distanced figure we find in the Scriptures, or in the doctrinally and theologically mediated reality of the Eucharist or service of prayer. It is

since Augustine', in these terms: 'The extramission theory holds that the eye emits a visual ray. This ray, strengthened by the presence of light, goes out to encounter its visual object, is shaped by that object, and finally returns to the eye': Cynthia Hahn, 'Viseo Dei: Changes in Medieval Visuality', in Nelson, ed., *Visuality*, p. 174.

that same wishful thinking which leads some to be more excited by the witness of the Shroud of Turin, or the experience of the Holy Places, than by their own, often uninspiring experience of Christian worship.<sup>23</sup>

Here Turner associates pilgrimage with the search for a kind of epistemic ‘immediacy’. At least some pilgrims, he is suggesting, aspire to the sort of knowledge which is rooted in sight or touch, and which is therefore free from the mediating influence of theory or doctrine. Turner sees such knowledge, or the desire for it, as a source of emotional arousal or ‘excitement’. So his objection to pilgrimage is in some respects like that of Hummel’s Anglican pilgrims. They too commented on the tendency of the holy places to inspire outpourings of emotion<sup>24</sup> – and they seem to have thought that this intensity of feeling was in some way implicated in a superstitious conception of a site’s significance. Moreover, again like Turner, these Anglican pilgrims associate some forms of pilgrimage practice with the search for a false immediacy to God – only for them, this false immediacy involves the idea that God is intimately present in the suspension of the laws of nature, whereas for Turner it turns on the idea that God is directly and compellingly manifest to the senses in objects such as the Shroud, or in the body of the incarnate God. Our earlier account of pilgrimage is, it must be said, rather like the view that is the target of Turner’s strictures – since we have been trying to understand the significance of pilgrimage by emphasizing the physicality of the practice, and the centrality to its meaning of the relationship of physical proximity.

Like our nineteenth-century Anglican pilgrims, Turner allows that some forms of pilgrimage are licit. But given his rather different conception of the errors into which a pilgrim may fall, he has of course a rather different account of the nature of legitimate practice. On his view, the pilgrim must forswear not so much the idea of law-suspending events occurring in the present, as the idea that we have unmediated or ‘tangible’ access to the divine. And, by implication, he is suggesting that an emotion cannot count as authentically

<sup>23</sup> Denys Turner, *Faith Seeking* (London, 2002), p. 119.

<sup>24</sup> See the passage cited above, in Hummel, ‘The Sacramentality of the Holy Land’, p. 83.

Christian if it is grounded in the belief that one has encountered God directly, in one's experience of a sacred place or relic.

So for Turner, a proper conception of pilgrimage requires not so much an affirmation of the power of the biblical sites to revivify the imagination, as a disavowal of sentimentalism or 'experientialism', for the sake of a proper apophaticism about God. On this view, God is not presented to human beings as a perceptual object (leaving aside the special case of incarnation), and the divine nature is not straightforwardly open to description.<sup>25</sup> What should we make of this objection?

No doubt some pilgrims have journeyed in the hope of achieving some sort of emotional transformation, or for the sake of the kind of 'excitement' which Turner mentions. After all, believers have sometimes taken states of emotional arousal to signify divine favour: as Turner implies, these states may be seen as a measure of the immediacy of one's connection to God. And, presumably, believers have sometimes sought out emotional states simply for their pleasant or thrilling phenomenological feel.<sup>26</sup> In so far as a pilgrim is motivated by such considerations, then their practice will invite a psychologically reductionist kind of explanation – for it can then be understood simply as a technique for engendering certain states of feeling.

However, the account that we have been developing shows that there is no need to understand pilgrimage (and any emotions with which it is associated) in these terms: the practice can, instead, be about the acknowledgement of materially mediated meanings. Moreover, while this account of the practice does emphasize the importance of the believer's proximity to the site or the relic, this is not to call into question an apophatic understanding of God, since it is not God who is encountered here, nor is God's inward nature taken to be revealed – instead it is the enduring significance of certain

<sup>25</sup> The apophatic cast of Turner's theology is evident in this comment on the eucharist: 'For the Word made Flesh in Jesus becomes the flesh made Word in us. That is our resurrection, a mystery of faith, beyond all experience': *Faith Seeking*, p. 120. He defends apophaticism in detail in his book *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> To cast the point in David Pugmire's terms, a pilgrim who is so motivated would be aiming at a 'dramaturgical' or 'narcissistic' kind of emotional experience: see David Pugmire, *Rediscovering Emotion* (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 119.

events which is 'presented' to the pilgrim. It is also noteworthy that the central theoretical resource of this account is not so much 'experience', let alone some specially elevated state of consciousness, as embodied relationship.

### A RESPONSE TO THE OBJECTION FROM APOPHATICISM: IDENTIFYING GOD IN PLACE

So in response to Turner's objection we could rehearse various themes drawn from the first of our accounts of the significance of pilgrimage. But I want to offer, instead, a further perspective on the significance of the practice – and to argue in particular that far from being opposed to an apophatic conception of God, pilgrimage can be understood as a practical response to one central challenge for the religious life that emerges given the truth of apophaticism. The account I am going to develop may also be of some interest to religious naturalists – that is, to those who suppose that the divine nature is revealed not so much in putative encounters with God, but rather in general truths concerning the character of the cosmos. Like Turner, theologians of this persuasion are likely to doubt whether our mode of access to God is of the kind that would support a detailed description of the divine nature, or of God's 'real essence'.<sup>27</sup>

Suppose, then, that we are in this position: we cannot pick out God as the object of particular episodes of experiential encounter, and we have at best a shaky descriptive appreciation of the divine nature.<sup>28</sup> In these circumstances, we might wonder: how are we to

<sup>27</sup> The 'nominal essence' of a thing is relative to its appearance in experience; its real essence is its inner nature, which will explain why it appears in this way. See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), Book III, Chapter VI, Section VI.

<sup>28</sup> Both assumptions are endorsed I think in Willem Drees's *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (Cambridge, 1996). And despite his suggestion that there are precedents for the divine nature within creation, Peter Forrest's version of religious naturalism also involves the idea of divine ineffability: Peter Forrest, *God Without the Supernatural: A Defense of Scientific Theism* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), p. 24. This position

succeed in referring to God? After all, on this view, we cannot point to God as we might point to a perceptual object – nor, it seems, can we identify God with confidence by description, if our knowledge of the divine essence is only very sketchy, and perhaps, on certain fundamental points, simply mistaken.

To find a way forward here we might refer, once again, to secular analogies. I may have a very shaky grasp of who Demosthenes was – suppose that my descriptive knowledge of him is not enough to allow me to identify him uniquely, by purely descriptive means, in distinction from every other ancient Athenian. And, evidently, I cannot pick out Demosthenes simply by pointing to him. Even so, it would appear that I am able to refer to this man pretty straightforwardly – simply by use of the name ‘Demosthenes’. We might suppose that I am able to do this because I belong to the relevant linguistic community – one which has handed down the name ‘Demosthenes’. On this view, I am able to refer to Demosthenes when I use the name ‘Demosthenes’ providing that I intend hereby to refer to the man who was picked out on earlier occasions of the name’s use – and, ultimately, to the man who was identified when the name was first introduced, and applied ostensibly to Demosthenes himself.<sup>29</sup> On this account my ability to refer to Demosthenes depends not upon my knowing enough about him to construct a description that will be satisfied by this man uniquely, nor upon my having any direct encounter with him, but upon my participation in the relevant linguistic community, which has handed on his name across the centuries.

Similar issues arise when we consider the ability of scientists to refer to entities which are not directly observable. In this case too, it seems that a thing cannot be identified simply by ostension. But equally we may doubt whether reference of this kind is secured solely by descriptive means – after all, earlier and later generations of scientists can refer to the same theoretical entity while having quite different, and indeed incompatible, accounts of the entity’s nature. We might suppose, then, that in these cases the reference is fixed not

has proved somewhat unpopular in recent philosophical defences of theism, but is of interest even so.

<sup>29</sup> Compare the account given in Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 96–7.

by means of ostension or description, but instead by what scientists do: the referent of talk of ‘viruses’ or whatever it might be is pragmatically implied in the scientist’s experimental manipulation of relevant bits of matter.

Evidently, both of these theories of reference (one appealing to continuity of linguistic community and the other to experimental context) invite more detailed formulation to handle prospective counter-examples. But for present purposes, let us suppose that they offer at least the rudiments of an account of how deficiencies in our perceptual and descriptive knowledge of a thing are consistent with our being able to refer to the thing. We might wonder then whether some analogous account can be given of the believer’s ability to refer to God – given the apophatic assumption that God is not encountered as a perceptual object, nor known in any detail by means of description. I do not want to suggest, needless to say, that pilgrimage practices are indispensable if we are to succeed in referring to God under these conditions – but it appears that on both of our theories of reference, pilgrimage is able to play some sort of reference-securing role.

For example, we might suppose that the act of pilgrimage enables the believer to anchor themselves within a correlative religious tradition – one which traces back through time to some moment when the Sacred, as it is understood in that tradition, was first of all, or paradigmatically, identified and named. More exactly, we might suppose that by encountering the significance of some figure of exemplary sanctity (by placing themselves in a relationship of physical proximity to a saint’s relics), or equally by encountering the significance of a certain event of defining importance for a religious tradition (by placing themselves at the site of this event), the pilgrim is able to denominate themselves as a Christian, or whatever it might be. More exactly still, we might suppose that the pilgrim’s gestures at the relevant site, or when in the presence of a relic (gestures of reverential touching, for example), do not just report the pilgrim’s membership of the correlative tradition, but are themselves a way of constituting that membership. The gestures function therefore rather as do the words ‘I do’ in the context of a marriage

ceremony – by bringing about some state of affairs, rather than simply describing it.<sup>30</sup>

This reading of the significance of pilgrimage behaviour is confirmed by commentary on the practice. David Hunt remarks, for instance, that the practice of early Christian pilgrims ‘was an assertion of identity’.<sup>31</sup> And this is surely uncontroversial: to venerate a relic, for example, is to identify oneself with a particular saint, and in turn therefore to align oneself with the tradition which has assigned this figure an exemplary importance. I am suggesting, then, that far from aiming at the cultivation of elevated states of consciousness, pilgrimage may derive its point, at least in part, from the fact that the believer is able hereby to situate themselves practically – by embodied gesture, rather than by what they say or consciously experience – within a particular faith community. And in that case, pilgrimage may help to explain how a person can refer to God on the assumptions of an apophatic or naturalistic theology – namely, by locating themselves, by means of embodied gesture, within a faith community which stretches back to some tradition-defining encounter with the Sacred. So in this way, the believer may be able to refer to the Sacred even if they have had no direct experience of it, and even if they are unable to identify it simply by means of description.

A similar account can be given if we start from the case of reference in science, and suppose that this sort of reference is secured, on occasions, through the scientist’s manipulation of relevant bits of matter in an experimental context.<sup>32</sup> Analogously, we might suppose that when a pilgrim places themselves at the site of an event of religious importance, or when they handle some relic, then their gestures pragmatically imply a correlative referent for their talk of God. God is identified, we might say, as the power which was at work in the life of this saint, or in the events which unfolded here – rather as a virus, say, is identified as the ‘power’ which is at work in the

<sup>30</sup> Compare J. L. Austin’s distinction between perlocutionary and illocutionary acts. See his *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962), for instance Lecture X.

<sup>31</sup> Hunt, ‘Space and Time Transcended’, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> I am indebted here to Peter Byrne’s comparison of reference in religion to reference in science. See his *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (Basingstoke, 1995), Chapter 2.

phenomena which comprise the explanandum of a particular experimental investigation. Here again, the idea is not that God is encountered directly in experience, or picked out by means of some description – rather, God is identified in the practical appropriation of certain material objects. Like the first account, this approach should appeal to religious naturalists – because of its scepticism about our knowledge of the divine nature, and the possibility of unmediated experiential access to God, and because it understands reference to God by comparison with the mechanisms of reference in a material context.

A critic might object that this discussion has overlooked one important point of distinction between the scientific and religious cases. In general, it might be said, a scientist cannot succeed in referring to an entity such as a virus simply by making relevant bodily movements: they need in addition to have a truthful, even if minimal, description of the entity. In particular, they need to have at least some rough and ready characterization of the type of thing that is the focus of their enquiries. If a scientist believed, for example, that a ‘virus’ was a variety of blue cheese, or if they had no thought at all about what kind of thing was the focus of their enquiries, so admitting the blue cheese hypothesis as a possibility, or if they had a purely negative account of this focus (the focus is not blue cheese, nor anything else that we might specify), then it is hard to see how we could intelligibly suppose that their bodily gestures, whatever they may be, form part of an investigation into the nature of viruses, and that their talk of ‘viruses’ is to be understood accordingly. In brief then, the scientist needs, at least, to appreciate that the focus of their enquiries is some microscopic entity. However, their theoretical understanding of viruses may be, even so, too sketchy to pick out this particular entity uniquely – other kinds of microscopic entity may also satisfy the description which they associate with viruses. And there remains, therefore, a reference-enabling role to be played by the scientist’s embodied practice.

But, the critic might continue, when we turn to the case of reference to God (or the Sacred otherwise understood), it is much harder to see how such an account might work – because the minimal description that the believer associates with ‘God’ (this description will be the theological counterpart for ‘microscopic



entity') will presumably be something like 'the maker of heaven and earth'. And this description is itself sufficient (according to the Christian and other faiths) to identify God, so leaving no reference-securing role to be performed by the pilgrim's bodily practice. An analogous objection could be put using the terms of the linguistic community theory of reference. Why not suppose, for example, that the believer is able to place themselves within the relevant faith community by purely intellectual means – as when they think 'I belong to the same community as Saint Anselm'?<sup>33</sup>

There is perhaps an analogy here, once more, with the case of reference in science. A modern enthusiast for science could no doubt succeed in picking out a particular electron by descriptive means alone – but even so, identifying an electron by means of experimental enquiry constitutes arguably, for some purposes, a more satisfying mode of reference. Similarly, a pilgrim may be able to achieve some purely mental or description-relative contact with God, and it may even be that contact by description is presupposed in the God-directedness of their act of pilgrimage – even so, the pilgrim may prefer to be tangibly connected to various religious significances and to be oriented to God by this embodied means, rather than trusting to description alone. This mode of reference may be religiously more satisfying – in so far as it brings the believer body-and-soul, and not just the believer's intellect, into a state of directedness towards God. This sort of reference is, we might say, an achievement of the whole person and is, for this reason, religiously more appropriate – since the religious life has as its ideal (to return to a familiar theme) a commitment of the person in their affective-bodily-intellectual integrity. And the same sort of thing might be said for the religious counterpart of the linguistic community theory of reference – here again the directedness to God that is achieved by the pilgrim is an expression of the whole person. This line of argument will hold I suggest even if we suppose, with the objector, that these embodied modes of reference piggyback on an already presupposed mental directedness to God.

<sup>33</sup> I am grateful to Brian Leftow for suggesting this formulation of the difficulty and for posing, in discussion, the general objection that I am presenting here.

These responses concede the objection and seek to accommodate it. Another reply might dispute the thought that the Christian God, for example, can be picked out by description alone (or by means of experiential encounter). It might be said, for instance, that the descriptions that many Christians associate with God are likely to be mistaken on various points, by the standards of Christian orthodoxy – and in that case, granted the truth of Christian orthodoxy, these Christians may fail to refer to God by description alone. This seems to be a difficult line to take. It is open to the believer, after all, to limit the descriptions which they deploy for the purpose of identifying God to certain minimal and (from the Christian point of view) incontrovertible descriptions (such as the description of God as the creator) – and these descriptions will still suffice to fix the reference, on the assumption that Christian orthodoxy holds true. (And if we admit the possibility of knowledge of God by acquaintance, then we might suppose, equally, that God can be identified by ostension notwithstanding significant errors of belief. Compare the case where I succeed in referring to a person who is actually eating a cucumber sandwich by saying ‘the person eating the lettuce sandwich over there’).<sup>34</sup> However, we might say, once more, that while it is possible to refer to the Christian God relatively abstractly by descriptive means alone, the pilgrim is able to achieve an existentially denser, religiously more profound kind of reference, which reckons with the details of what God has done in particular places and in the lives of particular people.

I have been arguing that pilgrimage practices need not stand opposed to an apophatic conception of God – and need not imply that God is precisely pin-downable in thought or in place. On the contrary, they may help to explain how *on apophatic assumptions* the religious life remains possible – or how it is possible, under these conditions, to achieve a religiously satisfying reference to God.

So here we have a second account of pilgrimage. This account, like the first, is reminiscent of one of our earlier models of the differentiated religious significance of place. This time, it is the

<sup>34</sup> See Keith Donnellan’s distinction between attributive and referential uses of descriptions, in ‘Reference and Definite Descriptions’, *Philosophical Review*, 75 (1966), pp. 281–304.

second model which is recalled most directly. That model built on the thought that Edmund and his friend are able to relate themselves to sacred reality by virtue of what they do in particular places, as much as by what they say or 'think' there in a purely mental way – where these doings direct their attention to a relevant feature of their material context. The letter to Edmund supposes, for example, that it is by pointing to a tree, or by gestures such as stooping or swooping, that God or some sacred meaning is made known under the material forms of the meadow and the cloister. The second of our accounts of the significance of pilgrimage seems to rely similarly upon the role of bodily movement in directing the person, in their perceptual-affective-intellectual integrity, to a reality which is not directly experienced and does not lend itself to confident identification by descriptive means alone, but which is taken to be revealed under certain material forms. See again the letter's suggestion that the reality which the friends encounter at the cloister is 'not itself directly conceptualizable'.

So we might suppose that this second account of pilgrimage fits the experience of the friends – and their experience of the cloister in particular. More exactly, we might suppose that it is the scientific model of reference, and the idea that an unobserved entity may be identified ostensibly under relevant material forms, which presents the closest analogy to the kind of reference which the friends take themselves to achieve at the cloister.<sup>35</sup> These reflections also suggest another perspective on the well-worn question of why the friends found it worth their while to return to the cloister: perhaps they were able to achieve thereby not a purely description-relative contact with God, but a more integral, religiously satisfying kind of reference.

<sup>35</sup> The analogy with reference in science might be elaborated on various points. For example, we could appeal to the idea that religious meanings can be stored up at a place, or in a relic, in order to develop the thought that God's power can somehow be 'encountered' when manipulating a material object such as a relic. We can also apply the linguistic community model of reference to the friends' activities at the cloister – given that they identify themselves hereby with the community of monks who once inhabited this space.

### The Microcosmic Significance of the Pilgrimage Journey

I want to consider now a further response to the objection that pilgrimage is implicated in an anti-apophatic theology, since it involves a desire for some immediate encounter with God. This response will draw upon the third of our models of the differentiated religious significance of place.

So far we have been concerned mostly with the destination of the pilgrim – with the place where a relic is preserved, or where an event of religious importance once occurred. But of course the significance of pilgrimage is also bound up with its status as a journey. Viewed from this perspective, pilgrimage practice can be seen as a recapitulation of the Christian conception of life – since Christians have thought of life itself as a journey. This dual meaning of pilgrimage – as a journey to a particular place and as a way of pacing out a certain conception of life – is apparent in Wendy Pullen’s assessment of the significance of the practice in the early Christian centuries:

Rendered by the tension between this world and the next, early Christian pilgrimage can first of all be described as an alien citizenship, where the terrestrial sojourn was understood to be in a state of perpetual estrangement, regarded as a journey beyond earthly concerns, on the way to, but not yet arrived at, the heavenly kingdom.<sup>36</sup>

Later, she is clearer still about the microcosmic significance of the pilgrimage journey:

In its spatial and temporal ambiguousness, pilgrimage is the vehicle through which the world is seen and experienced; and yet, as a fundamental condition of Christian life on earth, it also becomes the world.<sup>37</sup>

So on this account, the practice of the pilgrim, in departing from some relatively secure, familiar environment, to journey to a place which may be known only very imperfectly, along a route which may not have been travelled before, represents typologically the Christian conception of life – and the practice is then a way of giving bodily

<sup>36</sup> Pullen, “Intermingled Until the End of Time”, p. 388.

<sup>37</sup> Pullen, “Intermingled Until the End of Time”, p. 389.

form to that understanding of life. Here the metaphysics and the practice converge on a common meaning:

Within such a [metaphysical] context, we cannot be surprised to find pilgrimage appear in a highly concrete guise, as a physical journey to a sacred place or person.<sup>38</sup>

On this reading, pilgrimage serves as an embodied marker of the fact that Christians are still on the way to God – rather than enjoying a state of enduring immediacy with God. So viewed from this perspective, pilgrimage appears as a way of living out precisely the sort of theology that Turner commends. It is not to be confused, then, with any search for a false immediacy to God. This reading depends in part upon emphasizing the status of pilgrimage as a journey – but even when she reaches her destination, the pilgrim will retain a sense of distance from God, since the physical terminus of the journey only anticipates the eschatological goal of the journey of life. As Pullen comments:

The physical cannot be separated from the spiritual; it represents and prefigures it, with arrival at the earthly haven offering a glimpse of a pilgrim's destiny at the end of time.<sup>39</sup>

The thought that 'the physical cannot be separated from the spiritual' fits of course with our continued emphasis upon the religious life as a commitment of the person in their bodily-affective-intellectual integrity. And we might infer that it is not just permissible for Christians to cast their metaphysic in embodied terms, in acts of pilgrimage and in other ways – this is, in fact, the proper order of things.

So here is a further response to the criticism of pilgrimage which is implied in Turner's comments. Far from implying an attachment to exalted experience, of the kind that might be taken to betoken proximity to God, pilgrimage can embody the believer's sense of her directedness towards *and* distance from God. This account of the significance of pilgrimage fits most directly with the first of our models of the differentiated religious significance of space. Here the

<sup>38</sup> Pullen, "Intermingled Until the End of Time"; p. 392.

<sup>39</sup> Pullen, "Intermingled Until the End of Time"; p. 406.

pilgrimage journey functions microcosmically to express, and to enable participation in, the Christian vision of life. Perhaps any place to which we travel can play this role to a degree, but our reflections suggest that certain places will provide an especially fitting terminus for the pilgrimage journey.

For instance, Christian pilgrims have long supposed that by following an appropriate route in the 'Holy Land', it is possible to re-enact the story of Jesus – and to anticipate its final outcome in the Parousia, by visiting the Mount of Olives (since this place has commonly been thought to be the site of the second coming).<sup>40</sup> A journey of this kind offers a particularly potent microcosmic recapitulation of the meaning of things – since it re-traces the central events of the incarnation, the meta-event in which the import of the sum of things is disclosed. We might understand pilgrimage to other places in similar terms. For example, we might suppose that a site can stand for the eschatological goal of life when it stores up and 'presents' the significance of certain persons or events which reveal that goal – proleptically – with particular clarity.

The friends' experiences at the meadow and the cloister can also be understood using the categories of this third account of the significance of pilgrimage. They think of the meadow as a kind of liminal zone or itinerant space at the margins of the city; and they take the dissolution of form that is apparent there to stand for the transience of human life. So in these ways, the meadow could be taken as a type for the migratory, provisional character of life in this world. And the friends' presence there could then be interpreted as a microcosmic re-enactment of the sense of life as a pilgrimage journey. The meadow is also a place of transfiguration, where the true nature of things is revealed. (Even particles of dust take on a transfigured appearance!) And from this point of view, the meadow could equally be read as a type of the eschaton.<sup>41</sup> At the cloister too, the conventions of space are undone, this time in the direction of a dense concentration of form. This place can also function, therefore, as an allusion to the eschaton. So the microcosmic significance of

<sup>40</sup> The connection is noted by Pullen in "Intermingled Until the End of Time", p. 408.

<sup>41</sup> These two accounts are not in opposition: as we have seen, pilgrimage itself combines the themes of transience and eschatological anticipation.

both places might be understood, in part, in terms of their ability to bear an eschatological sense. I am reminded here of Edmund's comments which I have reproduced at the head of this work, where he speaks of his attachment to places which seem to lie 'on the edge of this world'.

### THE OBJECTION FROM DIVINE ACCESSIBILITY

I would like to conclude this chapter by noting one final objection to pilgrimage. The critic might say: not only are pilgrimage practices mired in superstitious beliefs about law-suspending events, and wedded to an experientialist and sentimentalist conception of religious faith – they are also implicated in a primitive conception of divine localizability, since they imply that God is somehow attached to specific places. On the contrary, the objector may urge, God is known most directly in the inward experience of prayer, or perhaps in relationships of agape love – and in any case not in any manner which implies God's confinement to particular places. The quotation from Alexander Schmemmann with which I began this chapter suggests one way of developing this objection. He suggests that the idea of the 'temple' as a particular building, or as having a particular location, has been transcended in the Christian dispensation. To put the point in his terms, for the early Christians, 'Christ's body, the Church itself, the new people gathered in Him, was the only real temple.'<sup>42</sup> A related attitude is expressed in these words of R. S. Thomas. Here he is reflecting on his decision not to visit Kierkegaard's grave:

What is it that drives a people  
 To the rejection of a great  
 Spirit, and after to think it returns  
 Reconciled to the shroud  
 Prepared for it? It is Luke's Gospel  
 Warns us of the danger  
 Of scavenging among the dead

<sup>42</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, p. 20.

For the living so I go  
Up and down with him in his books,  
Hand and hand like a child  
With its father, pausing to stare  
As he did once at the mind's country.<sup>43</sup>

Here Thomas suggests that rather than visiting Kierkegaard's grave, it would be better to read his books – in order to stare with him 'at the mind's country'. On this point, his perspective is rather like that of the nineteenth century Anglican pilgrims whose views we considered earlier – like them, though in a different way, Thomas is proposing that the significance of a place, so far as it has significance, is reducible to its meaning for 'the mind'. This passage also suggests that pilgrimage is problematic because it fails to heed 'the living' – it turns away from the living Jesus, by turning away from his body which is the Church.

To summarize this final objection, it might be said: pilgrimage implies an attempt to localize God, whereas Christian teaching represents God as omnipresent, and as knowable in experiences of prayer which can in principle occur anywhere; moreover, the Christian faith thinks of Jesus in particular as present in the community of the church, rather than in buildings or in specific places in Palestine.<sup>44</sup>

## A RESPONSE TO THE OBJECTION FROM DIVINE ACCESSIBILITY

The various strands of this objection can all be addressed, I think, using the models of pilgrimage that we have been exploring in this

<sup>43</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'A Grave Unvisited' in R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems, 1945–1990* (London, 1993), p. 183. Of course, there is a particular irony in supposing that Kierkegaard's 'spirit' might be preserved under a monument of 'solid marble' that expresses 'the heaviness of a nation's respectability', as Thomas puts it.

<sup>44</sup> Compare these remarks of Michael Northcott, connecting the themes of incarnation and omnipresence – after noting that Christians 'have had an ambiguous relationship to place', he continues: 'Christians believe that... in the light of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ within creaturely space and time, all space, and all time, are... in continuous relationship with the Creator': 'The Word in Space: The Body of Christ as the True Urban Form Which Overcomes Exclusion', in John Vincent, ed., *Faithfulness in the City* (Hawarden, 2003), p. 247.



chapter. First, pilgrimage need not imply any denial of God's omnipresence. Following our first model, it is enough to suppose that certain people and events carry special religious significance (this is, of course, a commonplace of religious thought), and that this significance can then be stored up and 'presented' in correlative places. Moreover, this perspective does not entail that God cannot be encountered as a perceptual object, or quasi-perceptual object, in the experience of prayer. Even if God can be known thus, pilgrimage can retain the significance that we have been assigning to it – for example, it can still serve as an enacted recapitulation of the Christian vision of life as a movement towards closer intimacy with God. However, it is also true that the broader theological scheme which we have been commending in this book, which represents God as 'supra-individual', is unlikely to issue in a conception of God as a kind of perceptual object. And given this perspective, the need to uncover other, more embodied modes of directedness to God will assume a special importance.

Lastly, this account is consistent with the thought that the Church is the body of Christ. Indeed, this thought can be built into the picture that we have been developing. For example, we might say with Richard Swinburne that the Church is the body of Christ 'in a far fuller sense than that in which the inanimate world is God's body' – because 'not merely our [i.e. Christians'] bodies, but our wills and feelings are the vehicle of Christ, of his interaction with the world'.<sup>45</sup> On this view, God stands in a special, more intimate relationship to members of the Church, since their conformity to God's purposes is a product of their will, rather than being a matter simply (as with inanimate things) of their bodily movements conforming to the divinely instituted laws of nature.<sup>46</sup> This proposal offers one way of understanding how it is possible for certain human beings, and

<sup>45</sup> Richard Swinburne, 'What is So Good About Having a Body?', in T. W. Bartel, ed., *Comparative Theology: Essays for Keith Ward* (London, 2003), p. 141. Compare the 'reply' in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.8.3.

<sup>46</sup> To see the full force of this account on Swinburne's perspective, we should bear in mind that he is a libertarian about human freedom – so on his view, the will of God, and the laws of nature, do not determine the human will. He is also a substance dualist – so on his view, our willing has special significance because it is like the non-material willing of God himself. See Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (rev. edn.: Oxford, 1997).

correlative chunks of the material universe, to carry special religious importance. And granted that possibility, we can then allow, following our first account of pilgrimage, that this special significance may be stored up and ‘presented’ to pilgrims at later times.

Other distinctively Christian doctrines could also be cited in support of this first model of pilgrimage. For example, Christians have traditionally held that the resurrection body is at least in part identical with the post-mortem body. And if that is so, then the post-mortem body of the saint can be understood in rather the way that we think of the body of the sleeping saint: in each case the saint is not currently acting in this bundle of matter, but in time will come to do so.<sup>47</sup> And we might say therefore that when we stand in a relationship of physical proximity to the body of the deceased saint, we are present to them in rather the sense in which we are present to someone who is asleep. So this Christian teaching gives a further way of explicating David Hunt’s observation that early Christian pilgrims took themselves to be ‘transplanted...into the presence of the sainted martyr’.<sup>48</sup> On this view, it is not just the significance of the saint’s life that is ‘presented’ via the post-mortem body but, in an everyday sense of this idea, the saint themselves.

## CONCLUSION

We have been considering three objections to pilgrimage practice – and in dialogue with these objections, I have set out three accounts of the religious import of pilgrimage. These three accounts are, in turn, informed by the three models of the differentiated religious significance of space that we presented in earlier chapters. So this chapter has shown, I hope, that these three models are not of theoretical interest only, but can help to illuminate the character of one particularly well known place-based religious practice.

<sup>47</sup> Compare David Brown’s comment: ‘Speaking of a “cemetery” rather than of a “necropolis” indicates the new emphasis within Christianity. It was not a place for corpses of the “dead”, but for those who were “asleep”’: Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, p. 216.

<sup>48</sup> Hunt, ‘Space and Time Transcended’, p. 63.

It is worth emphasizing that on this approach, the special religious significance of particular people or places need not be construed in purely epistemic terms – as if it were a function simply of their capacity to reveal truths about God, although this is, of course, one way in which a person or place can carry special significance. For example, a person's life may be religiously important because of the alignment of their will with God's will (to take up Swinburne's point) – and while we may know that there is such an alignment because of the person's godly life, the alignment itself is a metaphysical rather than an epistemic truth. Moreover, when the significance of such a life is 'presented' to the pilgrim, this need not be a matter of the pilgrim undergoing some special experience, or finding that their understanding or imagination has been expanded in some respect. So in these various ways, our account keeps clear of a mentalistic view of the religious significance of place. Contrary to mentalistic or experientialist approaches, we have understood the significance of pilgrimage in embodied terms. By means of the pilgrimage journey, the believer is able: (i) to encounter the significance of certain people or places (where this 'encounter' depends upon the believer placing themselves in a relevant relation of physical proximity); (ii) to achieve an embodied rather than purely mental or description-relative directedness to God; and (iii) to enact microcosmically, and so participate in, the Christian story – rather than simply professing that story in words.

In the next chapter, I want to put our three models of the differentiated religious significance of place to further use – by seeing how they can throw into helpful relief the religious meaning of a number of built and natural environments.

## The Religious Significance of Some Built and Natural Environments

### INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6, we were concerned with a place-based practice which is explicitly religious in intent. In this chapter, I want to consider how various built and natural environments may come to acquire a religious significance, even if they are not embedded within some practice which is avowedly of religious import. We shall also be concerned with buildings which do have an explicitly religious function – but now we will be interested in the ways in which these buildings acquire significance independently of any connection to pilgrimage. A focal aim of this chapter will be, once again, to test the fruitfulness of our three models of the differentiated religious significance of place, and also to elaborate these models, against a range of test cases. I am going to begin by considering two accounts of how we apprehend the human or existential meaning of ‘natural’ spaces.

### WENDELL BERRY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF ‘NATURAL’ SPACE

In his essay ‘An Entrance to the Woods’, Wendell Berry recalls how he once made a camping trip to some woods within driving distance of his home in Kentucky. In this passage, he is describing his feelings once he has set up camp, as he sits alone, while evening draws in:

a heavy feeling of melancholy and lonesomeness comes over me. This does not surprise me, for I have felt it before when I have been alone at evening in wilderness places that I am not familiar with. But here it has a quality that I recognize as peculiar to the narrow hollows of the Red River Gorge. These are deeply shaded by the trees and by the valley walls, the sun rising on them late and setting early; they are more dark than light. And there will often be little rapids in the stream that will sound, at a certain distance, exactly like people talking... These are haunted places, or at least it is easy to feel haunted in them, alone at nightfall. As the air darkens and the cool of the night rises, one feels the immanence of the wraiths of the ancient tribesmen who used to inhabit the rock houses of the cliffs; of the white hunters from east of the mountains; of the farmers who accepted the isolation of these nearly inaccessible valleys to crop the narrow bottoms and ridges and pasture their cattle and hogs in the woods; of the seekers of quick wealth in timber and ore. For though this is a wilderness place, it bears its part of the burden of human history. If one spends much time here and feels much liking for the place, it is hard to escape the sense of one's predecessors. If one has read of the prehistoric Indians whose flint arrowpoints and pottery and hominy holes and petroglyphs have been found here, then every rock shelter and clifty spring will suggest the presence of those dim people who have disappeared into the earth. Walking along the ridges and stream bottoms, one will come upon the heaped stones of a chimney, or the slowly filling depression of an old cellar, or will find in the spring a japonica bush or periwinkles or a few jonquils blooming in a thicket that used to be a dooryard... That sense of the past is probably one reason for the melancholy that I feel.<sup>1</sup>

So the sadness Berry feels here is not just the sadness he associates with unfamiliar wilderness in general, but a sadness that answers to these sensory qualities in particular – framed by the 'narrow hollows' and deep shadows of the Red River Gorge. He is acknowledging, then, the singular 'atmosphere' of this particular place. His appreciation of this place is also conditioned by his knowledge of its history – and the role the place has played in the lives of particular human beings. Although Berry does not reflect on the point here, we might suppose, in the spirit of our earlier discussion, that this response is entirely fitting: this place is not just accidentally associated with the lives of these people, as a kind of backdrop for their activities;

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, 'An Entrance to the Woods', in *Recollected Essays 1965 1980* (San Francisco, 1981), pp. 232–3.

instead, it stores up and 'presents' the experiences of 'isolation', of economic desperation, of home-making and displacement that have unfolded here. The sadness he feels is, then, a way of registering, not in abstractly intellectual terms, but more viscerally, the passing of these lives – he is feelingly taking stock of the violence, suffering, and futility which are evident in the dilapidated buildings and the archaeology of this place.<sup>2</sup>

It is noteworthy that on first arriving at this place, Berry is, as he puts it, 'inexplicably sad'<sup>3</sup> – and only later is he able to unfold the implicit content of this feeling by reflecting upon the history and other characteristics of this place. So here again, the meaning of a place is comprehended in the first instance not in discursive terms, but in a response of the body – in this feeling of sadness, where sadness is not to be construed by analogy with a simple sensation, as a mere throbbing or twinge, but as a state of mind with its own intentionality, which implies some reckoning with the character of an environment.

Berry goes on to draw out other reasons for his sadness:

One is that, though I am here in body, my mind and my nerves too are not yet altogether here . . . In the middle of the afternoon I left off being busy at work, and drove through traffic to the freeway, and then for a solid hour or more I drove sixty or seventy miles an hour, hardly aware of the country I was passing through, because on the freeway one does not have to be. . . . Once off the freeway, my pace gradually slowed, as the roads became more primitive, from seventy miles an hour to a walk. And now, here at my camping place, I have stopped altogether. But my mind is still keyed to seventy miles an hour. And having come here so fast, it is still busy with the work I am usually doing . . . When the Indians and the first white hunters entered this country they were altogether here as soon as they arrived, for they had seen and experienced fully everything between here and their starting place, and so the transition was gradual and articulate in their consciousness. Our senses, after all, were developed to function at foot speeds . . . The faster one goes, the more strain there is on the senses, the more they fail to take in, the more

<sup>2</sup> Compare Seamus Heaney's discussion of the way in which the history or folklore associated with a natural place can shape our perception of its significance: Heaney, 'The Sense of Place' in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London, 1980), pp. 131-49.

<sup>3</sup> 'An Entrance', p. 232.

confusion they must tolerate or gloss over – and the longer it takes to bring the mind to a stop in the presence of anything.<sup>4</sup>

Here Berry recognizes feelingly his dislocation in this place – or the lack of attunement between the place and his embodied appropriation of it. So here emotional feelings are being assigned a kind of meta-function: not only can such feelings register the significance of a place (as when Berry acknowledges feelingly the experiences of the people who have lived here) – they can also alert us to a mismatch between our embodied responses and the character of a place.

This second source of sadness is connected to a third: accustomed to an environment which accords him some recognition, just by bearing the imprint of his own activities, Berry is aware that his projects and concerns now meet with no immediate echo in his surroundings. With time, he notes, this change of condition will not be registered in melancholy – but as his body adjusts to its new circumstances, his initial feeling is one of loss. For now, he is conscious of the absence of familiar things:

In the places I am most familiar with – my house, or my garden, or even the woods near home that I have walked in for years – I am surrounded by associations; everywhere I look I am reminded of my history and my hopes; even unconsciously I am comforted by any number of proofs that my life on the earth is an established and a going thing. But I am in this hollow for the first time in my life. I see nothing that I recognize. Everything looks as it did before I came, as it will when I am gone . . . Lying there in my bed in the dark tonight, I will be absorbed in the being of this place, invisible as a squirrel in his nest. Uneasy as this feeling is, I know it will pass. Its passing will produce a deep pleasure in being here.<sup>5</sup>

Having acknowledged that here he is removed from his familiar environment, Berry is led to a further insight – that this place stands for the character of wilderness in general:

Wilderness is the element in which we live encased in civilization, as a mollusc lives in his shell in the sea . . . It is a wilderness that for most of us most of the time is kept out of sight, camouflaged, by the edifices and the busyness and the bothers of human society. And so, coming here, what

<sup>4</sup> 'An Entrance', pp. 233–4.

<sup>5</sup> 'An Entrance', p. 235.

I have done is strip away the human facade that usually stands between me and the universe, and I see more clearly where I am. What I am able to ignore much of the time, but find undeniable here, is that all wildernesses are one: there is a profound joining between this wild stream deep in one of the folds of my native country and the tropical jungles, the tundras of the north, the oceans and the deserts.<sup>6</sup>

So this particular wilderness brings Berry to a realization of the 'mollusc'-like character of his ordinary, routine existence – and thereby it brings him to a new consciousness not only of this wilderness, but of wilderness in general.

Finally, as he spends time in this place, and walks about in it, Berry begins to find that this stretch of wilderness, and the wider nature of things that is represented here, need not be experienced as alien, or as indifferent or hostile. Instead he discovers that the place appears to be receptive to his particular mode of embodied experience. Speaking of the second day of his trip, Berry writes:

All day I have moved through the woods, making as little noise as possible. Slowly my mind and my nerves have slowed to a walk. The quiet of the woods has ceased to be something that I observe; now it is something that I am part of. I have joined it with my own quiet. As the twilight draws on I no longer feel the strangeness and uneasiness of the evening before. The sounds of the creek move through my mind as they move through the valley, unimpeded and clear.<sup>7</sup>

Here again, the author's appreciation of the place is realized in his bodily appropriation of it – by his walking about in it. And once more, the movements of body and of mind are taken to be mutually defining, if not one and the same – a point which Berry makes with particular succinctness in his observation that 'slowly my mind and nerves have slowed to a walk'. And this new understanding of the significance of the woods, like his initial sense of the place, is registered in emotional feeling: he no longer feels 'the strangeness and uneasiness' of the first evening but instead, we may surmise, a kind of attunement to his surroundings.

In the ways I have been intimating, Berry's account of the phenomenology of this particular 'natural' space is broadly congruent

<sup>6</sup> 'An Entrance', p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> 'An Entrance', pp. 243–4.



with the three models of the differentiated religious significance of place that we have been exploring. First of all, Berry acknowledges, in feeling, the history of this place – this is one dimension of his reckoning with its human meaning. Then he comes to apprehend its significance in the act of walking: by moving about the place on foot, he feels its impact upon his body – and thereby he comes to see that he is fitted for life here.<sup>8</sup> So here the significance of the space is disclosed in a set of behaviours and a correlative phenomenal appreciation of the place. Finally, his sense of the place is given in his recognition of its microcosmic significance. Because its character is not defined by human concerns, this space is representative of the broader, natural context of human life – and accordingly, his sense of attunement to this place reveals that, in certain fundamental respects, the cosmos itself is hospitable to the human mode of being.

So although he is not directly concerned with the religious meaning of this place, Berry's account meshes very directly with the three models of the religious significance of place that we have been developing. This suggests that these models have a wider significance: they apply not only to the recognition of place-relative religious meanings, but to the acknowledgement of existential meanings more broadly. While Berry's reflections have no explicitly religious import, it is also true that they can be extended in that direction: in particular, his reflections on the 'fit' between our specifically human mode of

<sup>8</sup> Many commentators have thought that human beings are especially suited to certain kinds of natural environment for evolutionary reasons. Jay Appleton remarks: 'in the opinion of most authorities, if there is a type of environment which we as a species can recognize as our natural habitat, it has to be the savannah, that type of plant association which takes a variety of forms in different parts of the world but consists essentially of trees spaced widely enough to permit the growth of grasses between and underneath them. This is now generally agreed by the anthropologists to be the kind of environment in which the first recognizable hominids made their home.' Appleton sees our modern attraction to parkland as an enduring testament to this evolutionary truth. See his *The Symbolism of Habitat: An Interpretation of Landscape in the Arts* (Seattle, WA, 1990), p. 15. At the same time, it is clear that human beings have been able to find a kind of beauty in environments which are manifestly inhospitable to human life. See for instance Yi Fu Tuan's account of Fridtjof Nansen and Richard Byrd's aesthetic appreciation of the polar regions: 'Desert and Ice: Ambivalent Aesthetics', in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge, 1993), Chapter 7.

embodied life and our planetary context could easily be glossed in theological terms.

Berry's account converges with our own discussion at a number of further points. For instance, his description of this place seems consonant with the various attributes of 'place' that we have distinguished in earlier chapters. The Red River Gorge, as Berry understands it, seems to be 'supra-individual' in the sense that we assigned to that term in Chapter 3: this place is not just a conglomeration of individual things, but has a unitary character or 'atmosphere'. Moreover, Berry's relationship to this place is reminiscent of interpersonal relationships – the place demands respect, and it draws him dialogically into a deeper encounter with itself. The woods also exercise a narratively mediated agency: Berry's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours here are all shaped by his knowledge of its history. And although the place does not bear the stamp of his concerns, in the way that his everyday environment does, it impinges profoundly upon his sense of himself.

The formal qualities of knowledge of place that emerge in Berry's discussion are also of the kind that we have been examining in earlier chapters. He takes stock of the history of this place feelingly: it is in his felt responses that he acknowledges his initial estrangement from the place and his later attunement to it. And as we would expect from our earlier discussion, these responses are, at points, shot through with a discursive appreciation of the place, while at the same time deepening that appreciation. So his feelings reveal, and in part they constitute, the place's meaning for him. (I say 'constitute' because, for example, being 'at home' in a place just is, in part, a matter of how one feels when there.) Berry's description is also consonant with our account of the interconnectedness of a given emotional feeling with a correlative bodily posture and mode of salient viewing. He speaks, for example, of the rock shelters and ruined buildings that can be found at the gorge, and it is natural to suppose that these features of the environment stand out in his perceptual field – because of what they signify for the history of human settlement here. We might also suppose, reasonably, that the salience of these features is caught up in a correlative disposition of his body, and an associated pattern of emotional response, as he inclines his steps towards them, or pauses to examine them.

ERAZIM KOHÁK AND THE EXPERIENCE  
OF DIVINE PRESENCE IN PLACE

I want to consider now a second example of how a ‘natural’ place may be appropriated in embodied terms. Here our author’s reflections are more evidently theological, and more clearly informed by philosophical categories. In his book *The Embers and the Stars*, Erazim Kohák presents what he calls ‘a philosophical inquiry into the moral sense of nature.’<sup>9</sup> Much of his discussion concerns some woods near his home in New Hampshire, and what he takes to be revealed there. We could read Kohák’s remarks as a kind of phenomenological rendering of some of the traditional proofs of the existence of God. Take for example this passage:

The illusion of our own necessity may seem tenable in a context in which our dependence on our human and natural world is so thoroughly mediated as to become invisible. It becomes far more evident with self sufficiency: solitude teaches thanking. We are, though only by a hair. We could easily not be. The stark white glow of the January moon, pressing down on the frozen forest, sears away the illusion of necessity... There is, in nature and in human mind, no ultimate reason why the massive boulder, the oak sapling rising beside it, the chipmunk searching for seed, and I, the human who watches them in wonder, should be rather than not be. And yet, *we are* our being testifies to its Creator. It is not an argument, and would fail if so presented. Rather, it is a testimony, the presence of God made manifest.<sup>10</sup>

These comments recall the cluster of arguments that are conventionally grouped under the name of ‘the Cosmological Argument’. But as Kohák notes, he is not attempting to give an argument here. Rather, we might see his experience as somewhat like Berry’s – both of them are registering feelingly a truth which they anyway know in a more discursive fashion. For Berry, this is the truth that the woods of the Red River Gorge do not bear the imprint of his activities. For Kohák, it is the truth that there is no necessity that we should exist. And each of them comes to see in depth, as it were, or in ways which engage

<sup>9</sup> Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago, IL, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> *The Embers and the Stars*, pp. 188–9.

them in their affective-intellectual-behavioural integrity, what these truths signify. For Kohák, this familiar truth, when it is apprehended ‘in depth’, teaches the appropriateness of thankfulness.

At other points, Kohák seems to be developing a phenomenological counterpart for the argument from design. He continues:

The natural world, abandoned by a human dweller, does not disintegrate into a meaningless aggregate. It may seem that way as the ridge of the abandoned barn sags and caves in, the laboriously erected stone fences yield to the winter frost, and the forest reclaims the hard won fields of yesteryear. That, though, is only the order of human passing. The forest that replaces it has an order of its own, in the rhythm of the seasons, the cycles of its flora and fauna. Nothing is random here . . . The nature abandoned by humans is not yet abandoned. It is not simply that it is lawlike in performance, manifesting observed regularities. Its order is far more intimate than that. It is the order of a sphere of *mineness* . . . It is a sense of presence such as humans experience on entering a home in the dweller’s absence. Unlike the abandoned, looted dwellings left in the wake of revolutions or the gutted shells of the inner city, the refuse of law and order, a dwelling, though empty, feels cared for, as if there were a cherishing and a rightness. The house *belongs*: on entering it, we sense its order not simply as an order, but specifically as the order of a *Lebenswelt*, of an inhabited context ordered by a caring presence . . . So, too, the forest meets the dweller, not simply as an order, but as a sphere of mineness. Not my own: though parts of it can become that, the forest is too vast, too autonomous for that. Nor does it belong to the animals who dwell therein, not even to the trees that make it up. Walking down from the orchard, past the cellar hole to the boulder at the narrows where the first wheel may have stood, the recognition comes slowly – the mineness is God’s, the world is God’s household, *die Lebenswelt Gottes*. That again is not an argument . . . Far more, it is another mode of God’s presence.<sup>11</sup>

Here again, a certain insight is realized in the author’s bodily appropriation of this place. The ‘mineness’ that is under discussion here is presented not to the person who overflies this place or who drives through it, but to the ‘dweller’ – it is made known to the person who walks through these woods, and who in walking ‘slowly’, in ways that implicate the whole body, comes to see how this place might constitute a home. So this slow recognition is again (as in Berry) the fruit of bodily

<sup>11</sup> *The Embers and the Stars*, pp. 189–90.

labour. And once more, we should suppose that the behavioural habits which are implied in this recognition will define and be defined by a correlative affectively informed organization of the phenomenal field. The particular structuring of the phenomenal field that arises here helps to constitute the sense of 'mineness'.

It is easy to imagine an objector complaining that Kohák has done no more than describe his psychological reaction to a stretch of woodland. But his remarks have, I think, a larger significance. The concept of God's 'presence' in the world is given, Kohák is suggesting, in part anyway, in experiences such as this. And accordingly one cannot specify what is meant by the 'presence' of God simply by reference to the idea that, as the creator and sustainer of the world, God is causally active, and in this sense 'present', at every point in space. That account fails to recognize the particular sense in which every point in space (or at any rate, every point in a place such as this) belongs to God. These points belong to God in the sense that God indwells them – where indwelling here connotes more than just causally sustaining in being. What this 'more' amounts to, Kohák might reasonably maintain, can be specified only by reference to the phenomenology of the experience he is describing: we can know that the forest constitutes a realm of 'mineness' not because we can identify, independently of our felt responses, some individual, 'God', who lives here and has ordered things so as to be 'at home' here, rather as we might see a human construction as a realm of mineness because of what we anyway know about human beings and their needs. Rather, we can see this place as a realm of mineness because that is how things strike us in our felt appreciation of the place. In other words, to speak of 'mineness' in this sense is to say that things are ordered in ways that befit a dwelling – but the fittingness of this order will not show up in any scientific investigation, nor is it relative to the needs of human beings or of the creatures of the forest. This fittingness is revealed in feeling and not otherwise.

If this is so, then the significance of the experience that Kohák is describing is not just 'psychological' – rather, the experience conditions in part our sense of what it is for God to be present at a place. Intellectual creatures with a different sensibility from ours might also speak of God as present in their world – but the idea of God's presence will connote something different for them, if they are incapable

of the sort of paced-out, felt appreciation of a place that Kohák describes here.<sup>12</sup>

So Kohák's account suggests a way of connecting the formal qualities of knowledge of place to the religious significance of place. On his view, knowledge of God's presence at a place, or knowledge of one's contingent existence at a place (where the concepts of 'presence' and 'contingency' bear the existentially dense sense that is implied in Kohák's discussion), is realized in affectively toned perception of the place – and in a correlative set of bodily responses.

An objector might concede that the concepts of contingency and divine presence have a phenomenal content in these ways, but maintain that this content is just an 'add-on', and not relevant to the concepts' core meaning. But this might be doubted on broadly anthropological grounds. We might plausibly speculate that the concept of divine presence, for example, came to have application in human societies because of the sense that the world is indwelt in some way – because of the sense, to put the point in Kohák's terms, that it constitutes a realm of mineness, rather than because of the work of some prototypical philosophical theologian.<sup>13</sup> But however that may be, we should suppose that *as enacted* the religious life will depend upon some such construal of the concept. And to return to a central motif of this book, to believe, in the religious context, is not just to commit oneself intellectually to a certain conception of God or of God's presence, but to enter upon a particular form of life, and to adopt a correlative affectively informed vision of the world.

<sup>12</sup> A related argument to the one that I am developing here is presented by Rudolf Otto when he maintains that the concept of 'the Holy' cannot be fully explicated in 'rational', discursive terms, but requires reference to what is revealed in the feeling of dread, where the dread in question is of a specifically religious kind. A similar line of reflection is evident in Raimond Gaita's discussion of the concept of moral accountability – he takes this concept to be connected to our recognition of the 'individuality' of others, where that individuality is not of a merely empirical kind, but is revealed in felt responses such as remorse. See respectively Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, tr. John W. Harvey (Harmondsworth, 1959), p. 44, and Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (rev. edn: London, 2004), p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Compare William James's comment that: 'When I call theological formulas secondary products, I mean that in a world in which no religious feeling had existed, I doubt whether any philosophical theology could ever have been framed': *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London, 1902), p. 431.

Kohák's account of 'mineness' provides one way of filling out what this mode of salient perception, and associated behaviours, might amount to, in the case of the belief that God is present.

We might see this cluster of ideas as one more way of explicating Rowan Williams' comment, which we discussed in Chapter 3, that talk of God is best construed not as an allusion to an individual entity, but as talk of a 'grid'. To set individual things within a religiously apposite pattern of salience is, we might say, to place them within an appropriate 'grid' – and it is therefore to see what is practically implied in a concomitant conception of God.<sup>14</sup>

We might also suppose that Kohák's reflections provide a further way of developing the second of our accounts of the differentiated religious significance of place. That model starts from the thought that various behaviours may direct the believer's attention onto certain phenomena, so enabling them to discover God, or allude to God, through their practical relationship to a correlative set of material forms. In Chapter 6, we saw how this account might be further specified by comparison with the way in which reference works in science. Kohák's observations on the nature of 'mineness' suggest another way of formulating this sort of approach – since he is proposing that certain behaviours (here it is the paced-out reckoning with the character of the woods around his home) can engender a corresponding phenomenal experience (the experience of 'mineness')

It might be objected that the application of concepts such as *water* and *lightning* was tied at first to the phenomenal appearance of these things, but that these concepts have, even so, no phenomenal content – something will count as water, for example, if and only if it has the right atomic structure. But if we grant the wider point of this book that religious belief is distinct from merely observational belief, because of its affectively toned, action guiding character, then we should suppose that it will not be so easy to remove all phenomenal content from concepts such as those of contingency and divine presence: as I go on to note, the phenomenal appearance of things, along with relevant habits of salient viewing and dispositions to behave, seems to be integral to these concepts.

<sup>14</sup> I am reminded here of Max Scheler's suggestion that different postures of the body in prayer reciprocally imply different conceptions of God. See Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, tr. Bernard Noble (London, 1960), p. 266. It is well known that the cultivation of certain bodily postures and techniques is integral to eastern spiritual disciplines. Compare Talal Asad's comments on Marcel Mauss's work in his 'Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body', in Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 48.

and thereby reveal God's presence within the structures of a particular material context.

Kohák also writes tellingly of the role of the past in constituting the significance of a thing. In the following passage, he is thinking about the nature of 'being' – but once again he takes this global insight to be vouchsafed microcosmically in our relationship to particular places and things:

The dual reference of being to matter and time – or, more prosaically, to the habit of explaining being in terms of a reference to its material instantiation or its temporal duration – is one we imbibe with our earliest experiences long before it is formally taught and theoretically justified in our schools. A parent typically consoles her child's pain over a shredded doll with phrases such as 'It was just a rag' or 'Tomorrow we'll buy a new one'. Here the material reference and the instrumental reference, respectively, are painfully obvious. The initial ineffectiveness of such consolation testifies that the child knows how utterly irrelevant both are to the irreducible fact of the broken doll, of love whose eternal clarity stands out with even greater intensity when its material presence in time is shattered. Still, no practicing parent would think of what is perhaps the only response adequate to the situation, 'We will pray together to thank God for all the years Dolly was with you.' . . . By the time we reach the age of reason, we have, for the most part, been thoroughly conditioned to the costly comfort of our familiar double reference, the reduction to materiality and instrumentality.<sup>15</sup>

Here again, affective responses both reveal and constitute value. The child's felt response to the doll's brokenness reveals that it is important to her. But it is also true that the doll's importance consists, in part, in the fact that the child has, over time, acquired feelings for it. A replica doll would not have the same importance as this doll, because it would lack this history of felt connection – or to cast the point in the terms that we have been using, no replica could 'present' the significance of this particular history.

So on Kohák's view, this example indicates that there is more to reality than simply 'matter' – in other words, things (some things anyway) are not just value-free stuff which can be freely discarded. (Compare the reaction: 'It was just a rag.') The child's response also shows that there is more to reality than 'temporality'. It reveals, in

<sup>15</sup> *The Embers and the Stars*, p. 198.



other words, that one thing is not straightforwardly replaceable without loss by another which shares its sensory qualities – because the history of a thing may also be important in determining its value. (Kohák associates this view with ‘temporality’, I take it, because it is future-oriented: it involves the idea that the value embodied in a thing can be preserved providing that we can, at some point in the future, replicate the thing.) In place of these ‘materialist’ and ‘instrumentalist’ perspectives, Kohák offers this vision:

The ultimate sense of being is the ingression of the Idea of the Good, of beauty, truth, goodness, of holiness, justice, tenderness, love, into matter and time, becoming actual within them and bestowing meaning upon them.<sup>16</sup>

Coming to recognize that this is the ultimate nature of things demands, if Kohák is right, more than intellectual enquiry – for at least three reasons. First of all, discerning God’s presence in the world, or that the world is a sphere of ‘mineness’, requires that we assume the paced-out perspective of the ‘dweller’. Appreciating the value of things also depends upon our capacity to enter into meaningful, affectively informed relationships with them – in the way exemplified by the child in her relationship to the doll. (Again, the significance of a thing is not just revealed but also partly constituted by the history of its participation in such relationships.) Lastly, seeing the value of things also requires that we attend to their sensory properties – bracketing here the role of bodily movement and feeling. It is these properties that are being described in a passage such as this:

Once more it is autumn, when the sunlight grows golden with the turning leaves and the air heavy with fruition and decay. Somewhere the grapes grow rich on the vine. The leaves of the red maple, whose color all summer anticipated the fall, grow tan . . . Around the clearing the forest floor lights up with the gold of freshly fallen leaves; the river bed is bright with them beneath the clear water.<sup>17</sup>

Theistic philosophers have often located the world’s intelligibility in its mathematical lawlikeness – and they have favoured a correlative conception of God, as the source of this sort of intelligibility. But on

<sup>16</sup> *The Embers and the Stars*, p. 197.

<sup>17</sup> *The Embers and the Stars*, p. 217.

Kohák's view, the kind of intelligibility that is exhibited in the world is, for religious purposes anyway, best understood not simply in terms of 'lawlikeness' but by reference to the phenomenology of experiences such as the one recorded here. More generally, we could say that the world's 'intelligibility' is revealed in the paced-out, affectively informed, saliently ordered, and sensuous experience of 'mineness', wherein lawlikeness is assigned a human meaning – when 'we sense . . . order not simply as an order, but specifically as the order of a *Lebenswelt*, of an inhabited context ordered by a caring presence'.

In these experiences, 'God' emerges not so much as an individual mind setting matter in motion according to mathematical principles, but rather as 'the Good', the ultimate value towards which material individuals, and particular places, tend – and to which they approximate under conditions such as those described in the passage I have just cited. This perspective is, evidently, broadly congruent with the account that we have been developing in earlier chapters – especially in so far as it invites us to focus upon final rather than efficient causation when thinking about divine agency, and in so far as it takes embodied experience, and the human meaning of particular places (rather than the perspective of the natural sciences, or mere 'observational' knowledge), as the starting point for a characterization of the world's significance from a religious point of view.<sup>18</sup>

So, like Berry, Kohák writes of how the significance of a stretch of woodland is given in its history, and in the possibilities for bodily appropriation (and attendant phenomenal experience) which it affords. On these points, his account could be read as confirming, and extending, the third and second of our models of the differentiated religious significance of place. His handling of the case of the doll, and his

<sup>18</sup> On the question of final causation, compare Kohák's comment that 'most of Western thought in all its dimensions has for some three centuries operated on the assumption that the cosmos is an accident, that matter is the ultimate reality, and that meaning is an afterthought produced by history. In an archaic idiom, we might say that it has attempted to reduce being to becoming – and becoming to efficient rather than final causality': *The Embers and the Stars*, pp. 203–4. There are various other points at which Kohák's analysis converges with the approach we have been following – see for example his exploration of the sense in which the place which is the world can be considered as personal (p. 209) and his suggestion that what is required for a proper appreciation of the natural world is not mere suspension of conceptual thought but its infusion by the insights of the body (p. 181).

willingness to generalize from various other examples, also indicates his openness to the microcosmic significance of things and places – and on this point, his approach recalls, of course, our first model. In Chapter 8, I am going to consider a further example of how embodied interaction with a wood may help to disclose its religious significance. There our source will be a poem by Edmund Cusick. From Kohák’s description of the autumn sunlight, we can already see how a mode of expression that is, broadly speaking, poetic may help to communicate the human meaning of a place – and we will examine this connection more closely in the next chapter.

### THE EXPERIENCE OF ‘SACRED PLACE’

But first, I would like to extend the present discussion by thinking about the religious significance of the built environment. I am going to begin with Thomas Barrie’s treatment of these questions in his book *Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture*.<sup>19</sup>

Barrie argues that sacred places, and the architecture that typifies them, have a number of distinguishing features. First of all, such places are ‘characterized by the marking of a sacred area and a clear separation from the secular world, principally established by enclosure.’<sup>20</sup> The enclosure, and the difficulties which need to be surmounted to traverse it, help to ensure that the believer enters the site in the right frame of mind – broadly one of focused attention and reverential seriousness. Barrie cites Mircea Eliade on this point: ‘The Sacred is always dangerous to anyone who comes into contact with it unprepared, without having gone through the “gestures of approach” that every religious act demands.’<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Barrie remarks that: ‘The path is rarely easy but is experienced as a trial, either physically

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Barrie, *Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture* (Boston, MA, 1996). The categories to which Barrie appeals are rooted in a wider tradition of thought, deriving from Mircea Eliade and others. I am taking his text as representative of this larger literature.

<sup>20</sup> *Sacred Place*, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Sacred Place*, p. 56. The passage from Eliade is taken from his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London, 1958), pp. 370–1.

or psychologically.<sup>22</sup> It is not difficult to multiply examples of this sort of structuring of sacred space – where the topography and other features of a place set it apart from the surrounding country. Barrie himself cites Mont-Saint-Michel and Lindisfarne as illustrations, as well as various examples drawn from ancient cultures.

This understanding of the construction of sacred space (this is not to say, naturally, that the believer will *experience* the sacredness of a site as ‘constructed’) relates very closely to the description of New College cloister that we considered in Chapter 2. On their approach to this place, Edmund and his friend have to ready themselves physically – they prepare to cross the gaze of the college officials with the requisite confidence, they stoop as they pass beneath the defensive wall that leads to the quadrangle adjoining the cloister, and then they struggle to orient themselves in the darkness that marks the entrance to the cloister itself. So there is we might say a three-tiered enclosure they have to traverse – formed in turn by the officials, the surrounding wall, and the visual obscurity of the cloister itself. Negotiating these various features implies, again, the taking on of a correlative mental state – one of heightened or focused attention. In general, we might say, the difficulties or ‘trials’ associated with the approach to a sacred place engender – and, at the same time, they help to express – the seriousness that is required of the believer if they are to appropriate the meaning of the place aright. So the first element in Barrie’s account of sacred space appears to fit very directly with our earlier discussion of the connection between embodied gesture and the recognition of a place’s religious importance. And here again, we find a mutually defining relationship between bodily posture, emotional feeling, and mode of salient perception. So we might see this first strand of Barrie’s account as another ‘take’ on the kind of insight that is recorded in the second of our models of the differentiated religious significance of place.

Next Barrie notes how: ‘In addition to being characterized as a place apart, separated from the profane world, and reached by a path and threshold, the sacred place also had other symbolic aspects. For example, in some cases the sacred place represented where the gods had been, a place where scenes of religious significance had taken

<sup>22</sup> *Sacred Place*, p. 59.

place.<sup>23</sup> This observation recalls our suggestion that the religious significance of place is given in part in its history. And the connection is obvious enough to require no further comment! Finally, Barrie notes that the sacred place ‘often symbolized the center of the world, the omphalos or navel of the world’, and was sometimes seen as an *imago mundi*.<sup>24</sup> This account fits most obviously with the first of our models of the differentiated religious significance of place – according to which the religious import of a place is rooted in its micro-cosmic meaning. Again, the cloister provides an illustration – think of how the friends take the holm oak which stands there to define the still centre of the University, and how they see this tree as bringing the order of the cloister into alignment with an order of cosmological dimensions.<sup>25</sup> So Barrie’s account of the religious significance of a number of built (and other) environments can be inserted, in these various ways, into the typology of place-relative meanings that we have been expounding.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and rigorous recent treatment of these themes from a comparative religions perspective is Lindsay Jones’s two-volume text *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*.<sup>26</sup> Jones’s aim is to develop an exhaustive cross-cultural account of the ways in which buildings have been assigned a religious significance,

<sup>23</sup> *Sacred Place*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> See respectively *Sacred Place*, pp. 61 and 64.

<sup>25</sup> Some commentators have understood the significance of Gothic cathedrals in similar terms. See for example Otto von Simson’s account of how these structures were intended to embody in miniature the geometrical principles which inform the universe: *The Gothic Cathedral: The Origins of Gothic Architecture & the Medieval Concept of Order* (London, 1956), p. 37. Simson also notes here how the cathedral could be taken as ‘an image of the Celestial City’ (p. 37), just as Barrie notes that sacred places may serve not only as an *imago mundi* but also as ‘an earthly representation of the celestial city’: *Sacred Place*, p. 64. This thought can be understood by analogy with the idea, which we examined in Chapter 6, that arrival at a pilgrimage destination can provide a foretaste of the eschaton. Similarly, L. Michael Harrington notes the way in which ‘the Roman temple is the symbol of all places and all gods: it is Pan theon’: *Sacred Place in Early Medieval Neoplatonism* (New York, 2004), p. 202. He observes the same habit of thought in some Christian theologians – remarking for example that for Maximus the Confessor, ‘the Christian church... becomes the symbol of the entire cosmos’ (p. 204). I am grateful to Stephen Clark for drawing my attention to this volume.

<sup>26</sup> *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

and he too presents a threefold typology: architecture as orientation, as commemoration, and as ritual context.<sup>27</sup> His scheme includes some cases which do not map very directly onto our typology, but it is easy enough to find counterparts for the focal cases of our discussion under each of his main types. For example, under 'architecture as orientation', he includes 'microcosmic images of the universe';<sup>28</sup> under the category of commemoration, he cites sacred history, including the case of 'memorializing mythical and miraculous episodes';<sup>29</sup> and under 'ritual context', he lists 'refuges of sacrality' and discusses the role of 'preparatory sanctifications of ritual context'.<sup>30</sup> Here he comments that: 'Perhaps the most elemental strategy for the sanctification of place... is the expropriation of some sort of natural sanctuary, most obviously a cave, or "a womb of the earth" as they are so often conceived.'<sup>31</sup> And he notes the connection between this sort of practice and the case where architecture is taken to provide a 'miniaturized replica of the universe' or 'conforms to a celestial archetype'.<sup>32</sup> The experience of the friends at the cloister seems broadly to match this last case, since it combines the themes of sanctification and microcosmic meaning. So in these ways, Jones's typology is consonant with the central examples that have guided our discussion. And this is perhaps unsurprising, since the typology that we have followed surely covers the main possibilities: it is to be expected that a place's religious significance will be a function of its past, or its sensory appearance in the present, or its fit within some broader, cosmological context.

We might suppose, then, that the phenomenological literature on sacred space can be subsumed relatively straightforwardly within the framework of our discussion to this point. However, it is important to note that there is a body of writing which doubts whether the concepts deployed by Barrie and others of like mind fit the Christian conception of the religious meaning of architecture. Harold Turner, for example, draws a sharp distinction between the *domus dei* and the

<sup>27</sup> See Parts I-III respectively of Vol. II: *Hermeneutical Calisthenics*.

<sup>28</sup> *Hermeneutics*, Chapter 14.

<sup>29</sup> *Hermeneutics*, Chapter 15, especially pp. 113-16.

<sup>30</sup> *Hermeneutics*, Chapter 24, especially pp. 272-9.

<sup>31</sup> *Hermeneutics*, p. 273.

<sup>32</sup> *Hermeneutics*, p. 296.

*domus ecclesiae* construals of the religious significance of a building.<sup>33</sup> The first corresponds, broadly, to the tradition expounded by Barrie – on this view, the sacred place stands apart from the places of everyday life; its sacredness is discovered rather than made; and it is the place which confers meaning on human activities, rather than vice versa. As its name indicates, this approach takes a building to have religious importance when it functions as a temple, or as a house of God or the gods – rather than because of the use to which it is put by a human community. Turner contrasts this account with what he sees as the authentically Christian view – according to which a building has religious significance in so far as it serves as a meeting place for the church. After all, did not the first Christian martyr die for saying that ‘the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands’?<sup>34</sup> The true temple is, then, not some building but (in Schmemmann’s terms) ‘Christ’s body, the Church itself, the new people gathered in Him’.<sup>35</sup> On this second perspective, a building’s religious significance is relative to its role as the place where the body of Christ assembles – and where it lives according to the norms of neighbourly love.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF ‘SACRED’ AND ‘PROFANE’ SPACE

These two approaches seem to present a fairly sharp antithesis: Barrie sees the sacred significance of a building as a function of its differentiation from the sphere of ordinary life, while Turner sees the religious meaning of a building, for Christians, as relative to its contribution to the gathering of a community.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the religious

<sup>33</sup> Harold Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship* (The Hague, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> Acts 7:48, in David Norton, ed., *The Bible: The King James Version with the Apocrypha* (London, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (New York, 1973), p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, we would expect temple architecture to use the finest materials and craftsmanship, as befits a divine dwelling. A particularly striking example of the

import of this gathering seems to be conceived in ethical or interpersonal terms – in so far as Jesus is made known in the breaking of the bread, and in the sharing of life-in-community that is implied thereby, rather than in some encounter with a ‘supernatural’ realm or some radically ‘other’ sacred power. However, closer inspection suggests that these accounts are not after all mutually exclusive.

To begin with, Turner acknowledges that if a Christian meeting place has been caught up over time into the life of the church, then its significance will no longer be relative, solely, to its use in the present. As he makes the point: ‘We are faced with the possibility of recognizing a certain degree of holiness *in the building itself* derived from association with the personalized temple of Jesus-in-community.’<sup>37</sup> He notes here the attitude of a young Quaker who, contrary to his officially avowed principles, admits to feeling ‘guilty if I smoke while taking my turn on the cleaning rota; or at a weekday committee meeting held in the “worship area”’.<sup>38</sup> Turner wants to allow the fittingness of this kind of response – which sees the building as having a special significance even when it is not in use as a meeting place (which is not to say that smoking in particular need constitute a violation of the space). He seeks to ground this acknowledgement of the importance of the place in these terms:

Instead of treating these impressions [such as those reported by the young Quaker] as either subjective and psychological effects, or unfortunate survivals from the temple tradition we prefer to understand them in terms of the organic nature of human existence whereby the personal and spiritual always has physical and historical embodiment. The building then has an integral relationship to the living temple as community and even though we place the locus of holiness in people we cannot exclude the participation of the physical including especially the building from this same holiness... We must say that even the *domus ecclesiae* exhibits a holiness derived not from mere external association with the holy community but from intimate and organic participation in its life.<sup>39</sup>

implementation of such a vision is supplied by Abbot Suger’s account of the design of Saint Denis. See *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures*, ed., tr., and annotated by E. Panofsky and G. Panofsky Soergel (2nd edn: Princeton, NJ, 1978).

<sup>37</sup> *From Temple to Meeting House*, p. 327, my italics.

<sup>38</sup> *From Temple to Meeting House*, p. 327.

<sup>39</sup> *From Temple to Meeting House*, pp. 327–8.



This proposal coheres with our earlier discussion of the way in which a site's history may set constraints on the uses to which it can properly be put in the present. However, on Turner's account, it remains true that the relationship between human behaviour and the religious meaning of a place is at root uni-directional. It is because of the use to which a place has been put that it comes to acquire a special religious significance: it does not possess such significance intrinsically.

Turner also grants a limited role to another kind of place-relative holiness – albeit that this further kind of holiness must always be subject to the limit-setting critique of the *domus ecclesiae* principle. Specifically, he notes that 'something of the temple form is needed to sustain even an intangible civil religion which cannot enter into the distinctives [sic] of the Christian tradition with its meeting house principles'. As an example of how a holy place may play this sort of role, he cites Dag Hammarskjöld's description of the Meditation Room at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Hammarskjöld comments that this is

a room of stillness with perhaps one very simple symbol, the light striking on stone... in the centre of the room there is this great block of iron ore, shimmering like ice in the shaft of light from above... a meeting of the light of the sky and the earth. In this case it is an empty altar... because God is worshipped in so many forms. The stone in the centre symbolizes an altar to the God of all... this massive altar to give the impression of something more than temporary. We also had another idea... that the material to represent the earth... should be iron ore, the material out of which swords have been made... and homes for man are also built. It is a material which represents the very paradox of human life... used either for construction or destruction... the choice between the ploughshare and the sword.<sup>40</sup>

Drawing out Hammarskjöld's comments, we could say that:

- (i) The sacred meaning of this space is given partly in the history of its constituent elements – above all in the history of iron ore.
- (ii) More exactly, what matters here is not the history of this particular block of ore, but the wider history, of 'construction and destruction', which this block symbolizes. So in this respect, the

<sup>40</sup> *From Temple to Meeting House*, p. 338.

space bears a representative meaning. Moreover, as the meeting point of earth and sky, the place also embodies microcosmically the possibility of a convergence between the values of human life and those of the cosmos or 'the heavens'.

- (iii) Finally, the significance of this space is also given in its meaning for the body – the monumental qualities of the block of ore, the controlled use of light, and the stillness of the space are all calculated to produce a response of physical restraint and hushed reverence.

These three perspectives map very directly, needless to say, on to the focal models of our discussion.

Turner allows that within a church community, there will typically be some 'immature' Christians whose religious orientation is in some respects that of civil religion. And rather than simply urging the fuller proselytization of these individuals, he suggests that elements of the tradition of temple architecture may have a part to play in engaging their religious sensibilities – along the lines of the Meditation Room in New York. But of course this can never be at the expense of compromising the *domus ecclesiae* principle, full expression of which is required if a place of worship is to conform to genuinely Christian values.<sup>41</sup>

So Turner makes various concessions to the idea that a place may be 'intrinsically' holy – he allows for a holiness that is 'intrinsic' in so far as it is not relative to *current* human activity at the place; and he acknowledges that even within the Christian community, there is a role for 'civil religion' and a correlative architecture. On the other side, Barrie's account invites extrapolation in a communitarian direction. As he notes: 'A meaningful place needs to possess an environmental identity that gives its inhabitants a sense of belonging and

<sup>41</sup> As Turner puts the matter, temple features 'must be controlled and constantly subordinated to the normative principle to allow for the emergence of the person alized temple form' (p. 342). Minimally, this seems to imply that temple features must not contribute too conspicuously to the architecture of churches, but only in ways that invite a gradually deeper, more properly ecclesial appropriation of the space. This approach suggests something like the view of George Pattison which we shall examine in the next chapter – in so far as it implies that elemental, non-Christian specific material symbols can fruitfully co exist with Christian symbols, and provide a route into a more fully Christian stance.

connection. Often this manifests itself in the belief that it is at the center of the world . . . A sense of community based on shared values is typically connected with a specific place.<sup>42</sup> In other words, a sacred place serves to bind a community together – not least because it is here that the shared values of the community are articulated and enacted. Moreover, if this place is at the ‘centre’ of the world, then to be a member of this community is also to be a citizen of the cosmos. So in these ways, the temple form, too, is intimately connected to the gathering of a community, and with the profession of a mode of life which has application beyond the precincts of the ‘temple’.

The same kinds of connection are evident in the letter to Edmund. The friends’ practice might seem, at first sight, to lack any reference to a larger social context. But in taking the tree at the cloister to be significant because of its ‘centrality’, they thereby identify themselves as members of the University and also the town of Oxford – for the tree will count as ‘central’ only from the perspective of a community whose boundaries are defined in these terms. And when they think of themselves as re-tracing the steps of the scholar monks of the medieval period, and find significance in the place for this reason, again they locate themselves hereby within a correlative community – broadly speaking, the community of Christian contemplative enquiry. And if this space counts as ‘central’ in a broader cosmological sense, then it is implied that every sphere of life is answerable to the values which obtain here. As the letter says: ‘this still point [was] not simply apart from but in and through all the bustle and hubbub of the city beyond’. So by reckoning with the character of this space, the friends commit themselves to an ethic which carries authority within a broader social and planetary context.

Richard Sennett has proposed a rather different account of the relationship between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ space. He suggests that medieval churches defined a zone of sacred space, which was then set in contrast with the surrounding secular, urban space – and that this secular space was handed over to the values of profit-making, and closed off to those of moral relationship.<sup>43</sup> This view echoes the drift

<sup>42</sup> *Sacred Place*, p. 52.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York, 1992), p. 18.

of Barrie's discussion on certain points: a sacred place is differentiated from the space of everyday life – and is subject to a distinctive set of behavioural norms. But, once again, this opposition can be too sharply drawn. Michael Northcott, for example, argues that far from implying a dualism of sacred versus profane space, and a correlative dualism of moral as against irreligious behaviour, the medieval cathedral, once it is placed within the context of an incarnational theology, stands for the 'redemption of the material created forms of matter'.<sup>44</sup> And he holds that 'the sacred space of the body of Christ represented by the cathedral in stone imbued the social body of the medieval city with a leaven of moral purposiveness and order' – in part because of the connection between the cathedral and the network of guilds and associations.<sup>45</sup> On this view, the cathedral gives material form to values which are supposed to infuse the culture as a whole. This connection between cathedrals and the wider life of a community is reflected, arguably, in the conditions of their construction. As Tim Gorringe notes, the cathedrals do not owe their existence simply to the decree of a moneyed elite – rather, they resulted from 'a deeply felt piety shared by the workers who put them up, and [were] often enough paid for by the alms of the poor'.<sup>46</sup>

Whatever the right account of the relationship between particular church buildings and their social context in particular periods of history, it is clear that a sacred space can in principle enshrine a set of values of general application – and to this extent, the 'sacred' need not be understood in antithesis to the 'profane', but rather as pervading it. Again, the experience of the friends bears out this point. By visiting the meadow and the cloister repeatedly, they come to acquire various habits of salient viewing, and correlative dispositions of feeling and behaviour. And the habitual character of these responses

<sup>44</sup> Michael Northcott, 'The Word in Space: The Body of Christ as the True Urban Form Which Overcomes Exclusion', in J. Vincent, ed., *Faithfulness in the City* (Hawarden, 2003), p. 251. Geoffrey Lilburne offers a similar reading of the significance of the incarnation in *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville, TN, 1989), p. 108.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Word in Space', p. 254. He acknowledges his debt to John Milbank for this point.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 28.

points to the possibility that they will infuse the friends' conduct in other spheres of life.

Some might argue that the meadow and the cloister assume a special significance for them not so much because of their intrinsic character, but because of the particular mode of viewing, and associated patterns of feeling and behaviour, that the friends themselves bring to these places. If that is so, then we might say that so far as there is a distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane', it rests not upon any differentiation in the intrinsic character of places, but upon differences in human attitude.<sup>47</sup> And if that is so, then the significance which the friends find at these places will be, in principle, generalizable to other spaces. However, this point should not be pressed too hard: the importance of the meadow and the cloister is given in part, I have been arguing, in their distinctive histories, and in the distinctive possibilities for bodily appropriation which they afford. So while attitudinal differences are important here, these differences are themselves a function, to some extent, of the distinctive sensory and historical properties of these places.

In summary, we should resist, therefore, any simple separation of the values which obtain within the confines of the holy place and those which befit other spheres of life. We might also wish to repudiate any crude prioritization of the intrinsic holiness of a space over the activities of human meaning-making – here agreeing with Turner; but at the same time we should deny that the sacredness of place is at root a function simply of human activities and attitudes – here siding with Barrie. A perspective of this general type emerges at various points in our earlier discussion. We might say, for example, that sacredness is indeed 'discovered', but that what is revealed thereby is the receptiveness of a place to a certain kind of embodied appropriation, and a correlative mode of salient viewing. This truth is not simply 'subjective': it really is the case that the place admits of this sort of appropriation. But equally, this sort of truth is not simply 'objective': this quality of the place is after all relative to the particular mode of embodiment, and correlative style of seeing and feeling, that

<sup>47</sup> Compare Jonathan Z. Smith's suggestion that a thing's sacredness depends not on its intrinsic properties, but on the special mode of attention which it is accorded: *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago, IL, 1987), pp. 103–4.

is characteristic of members of the human species – and perhaps of certain human beings in particular.

A similar kind of point can be made using the framework provided by our other models of differentiation in the religious significance of space. The history of a place cannot be simply invented; but equally this history will become religiously meaningful only when some of its elements are taken to be personally normative – and that will call for a commitment of the person in their practical-affective-intellectual integrity. (Compare the decision of the friends to assign an exemplary meaning to the lives of the scholar monks.) Similarly, we cannot decide arbitrarily whether a site can stand representatively for some larger truth concerning the human predicament. But neither is the microcosmic significance of a place simply given to me – any number of sites could carry a microcosmic significance in any number of ways, so there is a choice to be made about which sites I take to be personally normative, and in which ways. (Compare the friends' decision to take a particular microcosmic meaning of the cloister as a basis for their living.) So the capacity of a place to bear a particular historical or microcosmic meaning is an 'objective' matter; but that meaning can only figure in a person's life from a religious point of view once it has been creatively appropriated.<sup>48</sup>

#### CHRISTOPHER DAY ON THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

In recent pages, we have been considering the character of buildings with an explicitly religious purpose. In concluding this chapter, I want to broaden our focus a little, by thinking about the way in which buildings in general may acquire an existential significance. This exercise is intended to show how our three models of the differentiated

<sup>48</sup> Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the choice between genuine microcosmic or historical meanings is just a matter of whim – the friends cannot fix the relative potency of such meanings by a simple act of will. Nonetheless, there is a choice to be made, and this choice will be to some extent relative (quite properly) to the propensities and capacities of the individual person. It is partly for these reasons that a place based friendship can run so deep.

religious significance of space can be set within a larger picture of human beings' capacity to make and receive life meanings.

Christopher Day is a practising architect. In his book *Places of the Soul*, he wonders how a place is able to express a particular quality of feeling. He notes for example how

construction materials influence what buildings say. On the whole, we don't look at these. We breathe them in. Architecture provides an atmosphere, not a pictorial scene. Look at a photograph of somewhere attractive and you'll notice how much of it is ground surface. Our field of vision usually includes more ground than sky. Our feet walk on it. Its materials are *at least as important* as those of the walls.<sup>49</sup>

It is striking how the significance of a building is here as much paced out as it is registered by means of what we see. It is given, we might say, in the possibilities for bodily appropriation which it affords – rather as Lefebvre supposes in his discussion of cloisters.<sup>50</sup>

Extending these reflections on the contribution of construction materials to the 'spirit of place', Day comments that:

All materials have individual qualities. Wood is warm, redolent of life even though the tree is long felled; brick still has, to touch and eye, some of the warmth of the brick kiln; steel is hard, cold, bearing the impress of the hard, powerful industrial machines that rolled or pressed it; plastic has something of the alien molecular technology of which it's made, standing outside the realm of life and, like reinforced concrete, bound by no visible structural rules.<sup>51</sup>

Here Day unfolds a second theme with which we have been occupied: the role of the past in shaping the significance of places and things. The history of the *building*, and not just of its materials, will also make a difference, of course, to the kind of significance which it 'presents'. As Day observes: 'Generations of care and life give old buildings their charm; lack of it turns them rapidly into slums.'<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Day, *Places of the Soul: Architecture and Environmental Design as a Healing Art* (2nd edn: Amsterdam, 2004), p. 161.

<sup>50</sup> Rudolph Schwartz, another architect, makes the point in these terms: 'it is with the body that we experience building, with the outstretched arms and the pacing feet, with the roving glance and with the ear, and above all else in breathing. Space is dancingly experienced': cited in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), p. 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Places of the Soul*, p. 168.

<sup>52</sup> *Places of the Soul*, p. 166.

So the past matters at various levels: (i) the history of a building's materials (of bricks and steel, and so on) prior to construction can help to shape its 'feel' or human significance; (ii) the history of the building itself, and the ways in which it has figured, or failed to figure, in humanly meaningful relationships, is also important (compare Kohák's discussion of the child's doll); and we might add (iii) the history of materials of this type, and of buildings of this type, can also make a difference to the spirit of a place (compare Dag Hammarskjöld's comments on the significance of the block of iron ore in the Meditation Room at the UN).

The human significance of a building is also a function, Day maintains, of its scale, and of the scale of its constituent materials:

One aspect of traditional building materials is that they're all bound by the scale of the human body: bricks are sized to be laid by hand, prefabricated panels by crane... A large, simple roof can be at least acceptable, if not attractive, in subtly variegated tiling but dominating and place sterilizing in uniform asphalt. Swiss farmhouse roofs are huge but don't look it; metal warehouses do. Anthropometric measurements like the imperial system, and even more so the ell, imprint bodily measurements into buildings. Our main concern, however, is how many body heights something is, how much above eye level, how many paces away, how much within or beyond our reach. A few inches difference in wall height profoundly alters our spatial experience.<sup>53</sup>

Many of these features of a building – its scale relative to the body, the storied resonances of its materials, and so on – are not acknowledged in the first instance by means of conscious articulation: we do not ordinarily think to ourselves 'the proportions of this room are right (or wrong) in relation to the scale of my body'; nor do we, in the normal case, call to mind the history of a building's materials. But these things are registered even so – in the body. Commenting on his own building practice, Day acknowledges that: 'Rather than thinking my way, it's sensitivity to qualities that has led me in this direction – I started just by having a *feeling* for these things.'<sup>54</sup> 'Feeling' here can be assigned the sort of sense that it has borne in our study: in other words, this is emotional feeling, rather than feeling simply as sensation; and in turn therefore it is feeling which is folded into a

<sup>53</sup> *Places of the Soul*, pp. 172–5. The ell, Day notes, is the length from fingertip to elbow.

<sup>54</sup> *Places of the Soul*, p. 182.



particular expressive posture of the body, and a correlative recognition of environmental saliences.

So Day's architectural reflections reiterate, at various points, the central themes of the second and third of our models of the differentiated religious significance of space – by drawing attention to the connections between the human meaning of a place and (i) its history, and (ii) the opportunities for bodily appropriation and salient perception which it affords. He is also sensitive to the way in which the significance of a place can vary with its attunement to the passage of the seasons. He notes for instance how:

The life renewing rhythms of nature root us in time and place . . . Every half month has a definably different quality to the preceding and following ones. Almost every week of the year is distinct, yet in many places you can only experience seasons. When I lived in London the months had no individuality they were just summer and winter. It is the progression of nature's rhythms in one place that is so rooting, centring, stabilizing.<sup>55</sup>

Here Day associates a place's responsiveness to natural rhythms with its capacity to 'centre' a person. We might read this proposal in the light of the first of our models of the differentiated religious significance of place: a person will feel 'centred' at a place when their life at the place partakes in the encompassing rhythms of the cosmos; and this suggests that there is a connection between the spiritual resonance of a place (specifically, its 'centring' powers) and its capacity to bear a microcosmic meaning.

#### LIGHT, 'CENTREDNESS', AND SENSITIVITY TO PLACE

Day adds that this sort of 'centring' is bound up with the development of a non-acquisitive relationship to the world. As he comments: 'If we work sensitively with light [and the passage of the seasons], texture and space, even mundane rooms can be ensouled, can become welcoming, supportive places. They won't need to be personalized and

<sup>55</sup> *Places of the Soul*, p. 178.

enlivened by adding objects, decorations, possessions.<sup>56</sup> There is a long-established philosophical interest in the possibility of ‘centring’ in this sense – where the unity or ‘centredness’ of the person is associated with a non-acquisitive mode of life. The ideal of the soul’s unity which Plato propounds in the *Republic* is broadly of this kind. Plato notes that the person who is ruled instead by the ‘many-headed beast’ of appetite has no unity of life, no ‘centre’, but is driven back and forth, by whichever occurrent desire happens to be strongest.<sup>57</sup> But for Day, of course, it is not ‘reason’ understood as a capacity for contemplation of the Forms which centres the person, and enables them to transcend the dispersing, fragmenting effects of appetite, but embodied sensitivity to particular places and their connection to a larger cosmological context.

The poetry of Edmund Cusick also displays an interest in the connection between the human meaning of a place and its responsiveness to natural cycles. Take, for example, this poem – where he is writing about the oratory of the Sacred Heart convent in Norham Gardens:<sup>58</sup>

### Norham Gardens<sup>59</sup>

In this room measure the hours,  
the seasons, by light and birdsong only,  
by the triple bark of foxes  
in the dark, the fresh wet roses  
cut for Mary’s Day.

This room, made empty to the south  
fills with the rising moon  
holds silence as a breath  
waits for the coming of its Christ.

<sup>56</sup> *Places of the Soul*, p. 179.

<sup>57</sup> On the ‘many headed beast’, see *The Republic*, Part IX, Section XI, tr. H. D. P. Lee (Harmondsworth, 1959), pp. 365–6. On unity of life as an ideal, see Part V, Section III.

<sup>58</sup> The same theme is examined in his poem *Lindisfarne* – which I discuss in the next chapter.

<sup>59</sup> Edmund Cusick, *Ice Maidens* (West Kirkby, 2006), p. 23.

We might wonder whether this invitation to ‘measure the hours, the seasons, by light and birdsong *only*’ is intended to subvert the rhythms of the Christian liturgical year. But more plausibly, the poet is simply assuming that the chronology, and the meaning, of the natural seasons are folded into those of the Church’s year – so that there is no opposition between observing the Church’s calendar, here at the oratory, and attending to changes in ‘light and birdsong’.

It is well known that Neoplatonic tradition assigned a special religious significance to light, as the purest or most rarefied of the elements.<sup>60</sup> As Otto von Simson notes: ‘According to the Platonizing metaphysics of the Middle Ages, light is the most noble of natural phenomena, the least material, the closest approximation to pure form.’<sup>61</sup> This tradition traces back, of course, to Plato’s allegory of the cave – where exposure first to firelight and then to sunlight serves as a figure for intellectual ‘enlightenment’, and where the light of the sun represents the presence to the mind of the Form of the Good.<sup>62</sup> Christopher Day’s reflections, and the poetry of Edmund Cusick, invite us, by contrast, to see the spiritual significance of light in physical rather than allegorical or metaphysical terms – that is, in terms of what variations in light signify for the passage of the seasons and for our participation in the life of the material rather than the intellectual cosmos.

It is worth recalling here how large a part light, or its absence, plays in the experience of the friends at the cloister and the meadow – it is light that gives the motes on the meadow the appearance of animation and even of dancing; and it is visual obscurity that helps to constitute the cloister’s meaning. These light-mediated meanings are registered in each case in the responses of the body – in rapt enchantment at the movement of the particles of dust, or in hushed wonderment before the moonlit clearing formed by the lawned centre of the cloister. So here too, we might suppose, the spiritual

<sup>60</sup> The phenomenon is discussed in L. Michael Harrington, *Sacred Place*. But interestingly, Harrington detects a tendency in later Neoplatonism, for instance in Iamblichus and Dionysius, to insist upon the materiality of a place as a condition of its religious significance – on the grounds that ‘human beings are only capable of interacting with the material’ (p. 201).

<sup>61</sup> *The Gothic Cathedral*, p. 51.

<sup>62</sup> *The Republic*, Part VII, Section VII.

significance of light is to be understood in terms of bodily-emotional response, rather than by reference to allegory, or some metaphysical theory concerning, for instance, its rarefied constitution.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have considered how our three models of the differentiated religious significance of place can be applied to particular places – both buildings and spaces in the ‘natural’ world. We have also seen how these models are consonant with our recognition of existential meanings in familiar, non-religious contexts.<sup>63</sup> Finally, we have been able, in this way, to bring the perspectives of earlier chapters into fruitful conversation with a range of other disciplines or modes of enquiry – notably, architecture, the history of religions, and the phenomenological study of the natural world.

<sup>63</sup> The same kinds of existential significance are apparent in Lawrence Durrell’s book *Spirit of Place*. For example, in his chapter on Delphi, in the space of a few pages, he notes the storied meaning that is typical of places in Italy, the significance of Delphi as an *omphalos*, and the way in which a place’s import may be given in its meaning for the body. On this last point, he remarks: ‘each site in Greece has its singular emanation: Mycenae, for example, is ominous and grim – like the castle where Macbeth is laid. It is a place of tragedy, and blood. One doesn’t get this from its history and myths – they merely confirm one’s sensation of physical unease. Watch the people walking around the site. They are afraid that the slightest slip and they may fall into a hole in the ground, and break a leg. It is a place of rich transgressions, tears, and insanity’: *Spirit of Place: Mediterranean Writings*, ed. Alan G. Thomas (London, 1969), p. 274.

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## Knowledge of Place and the Aesthetic Dimension of Religious Understanding

### INTRODUCTION

We have already encountered the idea that the arts have a special role to play in communicating the significance of a place – in the work of Gaston Bachelard among others. As we have seen, Bachelard draws a sharp distinction between ‘geometrical’, or prosaic, knowledge of place and the poetically mediated knowledge of place-relative meanings. Our knowledge of places of ‘intimacy’, or of ‘psychic weight’, is not readily expressible in prosaic terms, he thinks, because it is affectively toned, rooted in the dense singularity of particular sensory properties, and registered in the body in the form of various dispositions to behave. On Bachelard’s account, to convey the content of this sort of knowledge, we need a form of words that will somehow incarnate the relevant affective-behavioural-perceptual ‘take’ on the world.

This distinction between two kinds of knowing (one belonging to the sciences, or more broadly third-personal observation, and one rooted in the posture of the body and a correlative organization of the perceptual field) is also evident, we have seen, in the work of Henri Lefebvre. The same dichotomy is implied in a broad swathe of twentieth-century landscape poetry. Edward Picot has dubbed the idea that there is a participatory rather than observational knowledge of landscape ‘the Eden myth’. And he traces the influence of this idea in the work of various twentieth-century British and Irish poets – notably R. S. Thomas, Ted Hughes, and Seamus Heaney.<sup>1</sup> The first

<sup>1</sup> Edward Picot, *Outcasts From Eden: Ideas of Landscape in British Poetry Since 1945* (Liverpool, 1997).

two in particular, he notes, subscribe to this 'myth' in supposing that 'we are separated from the non-human universe by our reliance on rational thought'.<sup>2</sup> Here is his summary of this perspective as it appears in the work of R. S. Thomas:

By analysing things it [science] separates them out from the continuum of the creative world and then chops them up into smaller and smaller pieces in order to find out how they work; and this process is begun by separating the human observer from the world in which he lives, turning him from a subjective participant into an objective analyst... Creative thought, unlike science, unites the poet or artist with the observed world through his imaginative response, and reunites different parts of the world with one another into a newly integrated whole.<sup>3</sup>

These thoughts are hardly novel to R. S. Thomas.<sup>4</sup> But it is striking that this view coincides with a broadly Bachelardian contrast between scientific (or we might say: prosaic) thought and another mode of thought – which is distinguished by its rootedness in the perspective of the 'participant', and their embodied, enacted, imaginative, and 'dream-infused' engagement with the sensory world. (It is also noteworthy that Picot associates the latter mode of thought with a feeling for the unity or integration of the material world, so allowing the part to stand for the whole – so this account is also reminiscent of our discussion of the ontology of places.) For the reasons that we have been examining in earlier chapters, we might suppose that this distinction between two modes of knowing is well founded, and that the participant's perspective does indeed resist reduction to that of the observer. (Compare Bourdieu's insistence on the irreducibility of 'practical belief' to a set of consciously articulated propositional beliefs – or the idea that what is known in emotional feeling concerning, say, the dangerousness of ice may not lend itself to exhaustive verbal paraphrase.)

So drawing on Bachelard, and the perspective of landscape poets such as R. S. Thomas, we might commit ourselves, tentatively, to the thought that poetry can have an important part to play in communicating a participatory knowledge of place – or the kind of knowledge

<sup>2</sup> *Outcasts*, p. 269.      <sup>3</sup> *Outcasts*, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> As Picot notes, this approach has a long and distinguished heritage, encompassing writers like Wordsworth, Blake, and D. H. Lawrence (p. 107).

that is bound up with what Lefebvre calls a 'representational space'. And in that case, we may have the beginnings of a response to a question which has long exercised theologians: how might the aesthetic appreciation of material forms contribute, if at all, to religious understanding? Let's consider these matters a little more closely.

### THE POSSIBILITY OF A THEOLOGICAL AESTHETIC

The idea of a theological aesthetic may seem problematic from the point of view of both of its constituent disciplines. An aesthetician might maintain that aesthetic value is to be distinguished from moral and religious value, and that there is no good reason to think that these values will even co-vary. After all, a thing has aesthetic value on account of its sensory or sensuous look or appearance – and not on account of its fittingness as a medium for the communication of moral or religious ideas. Hence a novel can be aesthetically pleasing, yet morally corrupting. As Nicholas Wolterstorff observes: '*being true to reality* [we might add: being morally true or religiously true] will not be an aesthetic quality of a story or anything else; for things do not and cannot *sound* or *look* true to reality.'<sup>5</sup> In other words, in so far as it is concerned with excellence in the sensuous appearance of things, where this excellence is considered in itself and apart from its usefulness in any respect, aesthetic value seems to be independent of the sort of value that consists in truth-directedness, whether that truth be defined in moral or religious terms, or otherwise.

On the other side, a theologian might reason that our non-instrumental appreciation of the sensuous qualities of material forms cannot be fundamental for an understanding of God's 'real essence' – because God is after all incorporeal.<sup>6</sup> Hence Thomas Merton can write, speaking

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Compare the problem that Patrick Sherry poses for the idea that the beauty of creation reflects that of God: 'how can a corporeal being be like God, who has no body or matter?': *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1992), p. 141.

of poetry in particular, and echoing here the work of John of the Cross: 'these human and symbolic helps to prayer lose their usefulness in the higher forms of contemplative union with God'.<sup>7</sup> So as the believer becomes more adept in the spiritual life, Merton is suggesting, their attention will shift away from material forms – so rendering aesthetic modes of understanding progressively less important in their relationship to God. Let's call these two difficulties for the possibility of a theological aesthetic: (i) the problem of the autonomy of aesthetic value, and (ii) the problem of divine incorporeality.

The discussion of this book suggests one line of response to these difficulties. We have been sketching a range of ways in which knowledge of material forms, and specifically of 'places', may be theologically important. At the same time, drawing on the work of Bachelard and others, we have been expounding the idea that knowledge of 'place' is aesthetically mediated. Putting together these two themes, we might suppose that the notion of a theological aesthetic need not, after all, seem oxymoronic. Using the terminology of earlier chapters, we might say that knowledge of God is, in part, an integrative knowledge of the human meaning or *genius* of localized places – and since knowledge of these localized places will often be aesthetically mediated, we should suppose that the same is true of at least some forms of knowledge of God. This account does not subvert the idea of divine incorporeality: God is represented here as an encompassing meaning, or *genius* – and not as a material particular, nor even as a collection of material things. And no more does this perspective call into question the autonomy of aesthetic value: following Bachelard, or equally the tradition of landscape poetry represented by Thomas, Hughes, and others, we might suppose that the understanding of place that is relevant here is irreducibly aesthetic – it is not to be confused, then, with any scientific, 'objective' or third-personal representation of the world.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> These comments are cited in Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford, 2003), p. 224. In fact, the full quotation reads: 'even if' these helps lose their usefulness, 'they still have their place in the ordinary everyday life even of the contemplative'. So the text is actually a plea for the enduring value of poetry, but one which acknowledges that this value may in the end have nothing to do with the vision of God. Of course, Thomas and John both make extensive use of poetic forms in their own religious writings.

<sup>8</sup> For a further account of the contribution of poetry to the appreciation of place relative sacred meanings, see Belden Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD, 2002), pp. 58–61.



One of the primary merits of the approach to religious epistemology that we have been exploring in this volume is, arguably, that it suggests a resolution (there are others, of course) to the question of the relationship between aesthetic and religious understanding – one which respects the distinctive character of each kind of knowing. By contrast, if we start from simple observational knowledge of the world, and take that as our model for knowledge of God, or if we start from scientific theorization of the world, and take that as our model, then it will be much harder to see how there might be any deep-seated affinity between aesthetic and religious understanding. On these approaches, it will seem, rather, that religious knowledge ought to be fully communicable in the language of prose or mathematics. And in that case, the knowledge of participants, or the placial knowledge which according to Bachelard is made known in poetry, will appear to be, at best, an adornment of insights which are revealed more soberly and more exactly (to religious adepts anyway) in other terms.

EXEMPLIFYING THE POSSIBILITY  
OF A THEOLOGICAL AESTHETIC:  
*COED Y FARDEN*

Our case for the idea of a poetically mediated knowledge of place has been, so far, mostly negative – a matter of showing how knowledge of place involves more than ‘observation’. To make further headway with these questions, I am going to turn now to a poem about a particular place. I have chosen a poem by Edmund Cusick, in which he is describing the woodland surrounding his home in the Berwyns in mid-Wales. After each section of the poem, I shall offer a few brief comments on how the poet’s methods and concerns might be brought into relationship with the themes which we have been exploring. My aim is to show how this poem is able to incarnate the affective-behavioural-perceptual complex that constitutes existentially dense knowledge of this particular place.

Coed y Farden<sup>9</sup>

## I

Coed y Farden: three square miles where no one comes  
 by foot, or land rover, for days on end:  
 bounded by crumbling dykes and rusting wire,  
 the river choked with flashflood branches;  
 lines of pines and spruce broken, thinned  
 by fifty years of storm, their fallen trunks  
 opening ragged glades to ash and rowan  
 seedlings of oak and holly: no longer  
 forestry plantation, not yet wild wood.

So the poem begins by describing the history of this landscape. We might say then that, to this point, its perspective conforms to the third of our models of the differentiated significance of place. Cusick's work belongs, broadly speaking, within the 'primitivist' tradition of British-and-Irish landscape poetry that I mentioned above. So it is significant that the history that is recounted here concerns the withdrawal of human influence, and the replacement of managed plantations by the 'wild wood' of indigenous trees – of holly and oak, ash and rowan. The land-rovers of the Forestry Commission come here only occasionally, and what marks there are of human presence – the wire and the dykes – are rusting or crumbling. So the story that is 'presented' by this place is one of nature's re-appropriation of the land. The place is beginning to rediscover, then, its voice as a region of 'wild' nature, in Berry's sense of this idea.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Coed y Farden* in Edmund Cusick, *Ice Maidens* (West Kirkby, 2006), pp. 74–6. The Welsh title translates as 'Farden's wood'. I gather that the pronunciation would be something like: 'coi id err var dun', with the accent on 'dun'. The author explained to me that the place in question is, roughly, the wood in the valley behind his house. Edmund coined this name for the place. Edmund's wife, Christina, has told me that he dedicated this poem to her.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, the localized history of this increasingly natural place can be inserted within a larger, cosmological history – a history which has involved, first, the production within stars of the heavier, life enabling elements, and then the emergence of progressively more complex material structures, including forms of life, as a result of evolutionary processes on this planet. We could take this cosmological history to be 'presented' at Coed y Farden, and indeed at any place on the planet – and this history can also be assigned a religious importance, of course. For instance, it

A place where silence holds  
 within it the surf surge of the spruce, the mutter of water,  
 yet rests unbroken, its stillness  
 not absence of sound  
 but strands of quiet through which the place itself listens:  
 the soft pad  
 as drifts of needles yield under my boots;  
 the changing in the river's voice  
 as I cross its current, the way it closes back again;  
 the flat chime of barbed wire springing back  
 vibrating from post to post into the soil.

Here the poet records his embodied appropriation of this place, speaking in turn of: the pad of his feet across its surface; the flow of water around his boots; and the chime of the wire twanging back into place, as he moves clear of the fence. So Cusick is construing the wood in terms of its meaning for the body – by registering gradations in its receptiveness or resistance to human movement. This appreciation of the place fits the second of our models: the poet is recalling the various auditory, kinaesthetic, and other sensations that are elicited by this landscape, and he is sketching, then, an embodied phenomenology of the place, through which he is able to apprehend a certain meaning. It is significant that this account is not, fundamentally, of the place as a visual field: what is being handed on here is not an abstractly observational knowledge of this place, but an enacted, walked-out reckoning with its import. I am reminded here of Ted Hughes's comment that:

The deeper into language one goes, the less visual/conceptual its imagery, and the more audial/visual/muscular its system of tensions. This accords with the biological fact that the visual nerves connect with the modern human brain, while the audial nerves connect with the cerebellum, the primal animal brain and nervous system, direct . . . Visualization in language

could be read as the enactment of a predisposition towards value intensification – as the simple elements of hydrogen and helium that were present at the time of the Big Bang are reorganized within more complex and, in time, more aware material structures. This story is told by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry in *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era – A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco, CA, 1992). See also Mark Wynn, *God and Goodness : A Natural Theological Perspective* (London, 1999), Chapter 2.

is at odds with immediately expressive dramatic action in that it is the conceptual substitute for physical action.<sup>11</sup>

In *Coed y Farden* too, it is 'dramatic action' rather than observation that provides the groundwork for the poet's appreciation of the place. To convey this tactile and auditory rather than merely visual sensitivity to the physical impact of this space, Cusick chooses words which re-present phonetically the sounds of the place – as when he writes of the 'mutter of water'. And even the non-auditory qualities of the place are communicated onomatopoeically: the expression 'the surf-surge of the spruce' gives voice to the place's pent up energy, which is grasped not so much by observation or hearing, but kin-aesthetically in the sprung responsiveness of the needles, the wire, and the swirling current.

Words as well as places have a history, of course – and just as a place can 'present' the significance of the events which have unfolded there, so a word, we might think, can 'present' an etymological history. Onomatopoeic words may have a special significance in this regard: the phonetic qualities of a word such as 'splash' recall the history of the human race's auditory relationship to water – and a particular word can 'present' that history if the word or its antecedents reach back to some primordial moment of apprehension, or a set of such moments, when the sounds of water and related phenomena were first reproduced in human speech.<sup>12</sup>

Hughes and Heaney have both speculated that there was once an indigenous language, now lapsed, whose phonetic qualities echoed the landscape's character more faithfully than does modern English.<sup>13</sup> And it is significant I think that Cusick has chosen a Welsh place name for this stretch of woodland – this name may not

<sup>11</sup> The passage is cited in Picot, *Outcasts*, p. 170 (including the ellipsis). Picot himself is dependent upon a passage quoted in A. C. H. Smith's book *Orghast at Persepolis*. Compare Lefebvre's discussion of our knowledge of cloisters, or the remarks of Christopher Day on how our appreciation of a building is paced out.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, 'mutter' may not be a good example of this phenomenon! According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term is a (Middle English) derivative of 'mute'. Nonetheless, we might speculate that the word has been found apt for its sense not only because of its association with a term signifying silence, but also because of its onomatopoeic qualities. See J. Pearsall and B. Trumble (eds.), *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1996), p. 955.

<sup>13</sup> Picot notes how for Hughes, and also for Heaney in his early poetry, 'the ancient relationship between the landscape and its inhabitants has been disrupted by more

share the onomatopoeic qualities of a word like ‘mutter’, but like that word it is perhaps rooted in the prehistory of language use in these islands – and in the practice of naming woods in particular.<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, it is noteworthy that in this section of the poem, the wood is personified, or assigned a *genius* – as the author says, ‘the place itself listens’. So the poet’s embodied appropriation of this place involves something like an interpersonal encounter. The wood is not a noisy presence, clamouring for attention – instead, it listens through ‘strands of quiet’. But it has an energy and directedness of its own, and in its way it takes stock of, and responds to, the poet’s presence – think again of the ‘surf surge’ that pulses through the place, and of the movements of the river, the wire, and the needles.

## II

It’s only here I know  
 this cleanness of the air, of pine and peat  
 Here under the rain, a cold stone at my back,  
 there whispers at the edge of thought a sense  
 of subtle territories of blood and scent  
 a cigarette smoked half a mile away,  
 the taint of diesel and exhaust  
 lingering on the track for hours  
 after the foresters have gone  
 a stillness that has me turning, sometimes  
 to the crow’s flight before I hear it  
 sometimes to see nothing visible.  
 Lives which compass mine  
 the way the buzzard’s circles hold  
 the lesser worlds of rook and heron;

recent events’ (*Outcasts*, p. 186). And later he comments of Heaney’s lines ‘The tawny guttural water/spells itself: Moyola’ that: ‘The voice of the river seems to pronounce its own name – it “spells itself”. The Gaelic name is thus directly derived from a physical experience of the landscape. Place, language and culture were once organically linked to one another – but the link has been broken by invasion and the near abolition of the Gaelic language’ (p. 223). Picot finds that Hughes’s work, in fact, lacks ‘a fidelity to what it actually feels like to inhabit a world which we only partly understand’ (p. 201).

<sup>14</sup> As I have noted, the title of the poem may be translated as ‘Farden’s wood’. It may be significant that Farden suggests a woman’s name.

which intersect with mine only the way  
the mud at dawn unites the tracks  
of fox and polecat, their hunger hours apart.

Here the olfactory qualities of the place emerge into salience – it is as if the poet, and through him the place, is seeking to address each of the senses in turn. Once again, the poet's aim is to establish the wood's significance for a person in their physical integrity – as a participant in the place, and not simply an observer of it.

We have noted how Lefebvre speaks of a 'gestural space' – where the significance of a place is conveyed in the kind of embodied responsiveness which it permits, more than by words. The poet seems here to be describing such a space – as he recalls how he stood with a cold stone at his back, under the rain. We might speculate that implicit in this gesture is a verbally tacit apprehension of the character of the place – one which 'whispers at the edge of thought'.

Here again, the place is shown to be broadly hospitable to the poet's presence – the air is clean and the stone affords him support. But its hospitality does not imply that the wood is subservient to human needs, or that it can be reduced to what is humanly intelligible. The stone remains after all cold; and the stillness of the place is partly a matter of the poet's deafness, or unresponsiveness, to its rhythms – and to the reality of creatures whose lives 'compass' his own. This last theme is important for the final section of the poem, where the author takes his experience of this particular place to point, albeit obscurely, to the nature of a broader, encompassing reality.

### III

It's only here that I acknowledge  
that this is my religion,  
underpinning everything, this bond  
I've made with you and never spoken,  
that you understand runs deeper  
than any marriage, a kind of parenthood,  
in which your spirit finds no rest  
but still a place to venture from

and to return. A faith  
 whose confirmations are all ambiguous:  
 voices in the wind;  
 an empty bed: mud on the stairs;  
 the grit your tongue discovers  
 between your teeth.

It's here, in Coed y Farden, that I believe  
 this love, patient, unforeseen, may redeem  
 all that is merely human, its proof  
 absolute discretion; the tenderness  
 of ordinary things: to wait  
 in the tired dawn and watch  
 for your eyes opening; to dress  
 the scratches on your limbs;  
 return you to your name.

In these closing lines of the poem, the language of desire is heard more insistently than before: the poet speaks now of marriage and parenthood, of venture and an absence of rest, and of faith and love. And like Bachelard, Cusick takes this desire-infused appreciation of the place to reveal its character most fully. Here the author is casting himself in the guise of a lover of the place. And it is by taking up this mode of relationship that he discovers how the place is to be saliently understood – as he hears it, touches and smells it, and is borne up by it. And what is given to him hereby is not some remarkable, let alone some supra-sensory experience, but simply ‘ordinary things’, which greet his tiredness and vulnerability redemptively. So the poet comes to understand that the *genius* of this place is, more exactly, regenerative love. Finally, it is striking that the poet comes, by these means, to discover his own identity, and at the same time that of the place – which he can now name.

This section of the poem conforms, of course, to the first of our models of the differentiated significance of place. The place's meaning is here tied to its disclosure of the nature of ‘ordinary things’ – so that it bears a microcosmic significance.

So although it might be rather artificial to do so, we could see the poem as unfolding, in turn, the three models of the differentiated religious significance of place that we have been exploring. And in

this case, these three kinds of significance prove to be connected. It is because of its history as an increasingly natural space that the wood can stand for the character of human life within a broader cosmological context. And it is because of the possibilities for bodily appropriation that the place affords that this context takes on the appearance of being 'redemptive'. The poem also gives particular form to various other themes which have been at the heart of our study – it speaks of the supra-individuality of this place, of its story-mediated and action-guiding significance, and of the reciprocal relationship between the poet's identity and that of the place. These attributes of the wood are also integral to its religious meaning: it is because of its supra-individuality that the wood can express a unitary meaning; it is because of its story-mediated significance that it can speak of a larger cosmological context; and it is because the place touches on the poet's sense of himself that it can speak to him so intimately.

*Coed y Farden* provides, then, one response to the question of the possibility of a theological aesthetic. It shows how the poetic appreciation of a particular complex of material forms, those which comprise Farden's wood, may bear a religious meaning. Significantly, it does this without challenging the idea of divine incorporeality. The poet is identifying the *genius* of this place, and thereby of the wider world. And this global *genius* is not a material thing, nor even a collection of such things. The poem's representation of 'the sacred' involves, then, no commitment to pantheism. It is true that the poem does not propound (nor does it presuppose) a precise view about the nature of the relationship between this global *genius* and the material order – but for this very reason, it is consistent with as robust a form of religious realism as anyone could want. At the same time, the poem can only be fully understood as a poem – the import of this place is communicated, therefore, in terms that are irreducibly aesthetic. So this particular poetic representation of a materially mediated religious significance respects both the autonomy of aesthetic value, and the doctrine of divine incorporeality. The poem also invites us to think that even the person who knows the wood first hand will understand its character best if they have recourse to aesthetic categories, and attend to its meaning for the body – rather than approaching it from a scientific or purely observational point of view.



## THE ARTS AND DOCTRINE

The adherent of a scripturally rooted faith might wonder whether Cusick's appreciation of this place can be inserted within a more extended doctrinal scheme. Let me sketch very briefly a few ways in which this might be done.

George Pattison has proposed that the arts provide a 'language before language' – meaning by this that their import may be apprehended primordially in the body's practical attunement to a material context, rather than in verbal terms. He writes, for example, of how 'language is only one dimension of a process that must always root itself in the unconscious, pre-linguistic, but still formed and expressive life of the body in its primordial continuity with the earth'.<sup>15</sup> The language of aesthetic expression is important for particular faith traditions, Pattison thinks, because it constitutes a matrix out of which a Christian or other faith-specific symbolism can grow. For example, it is only because water has primordially a certain significance for the body that it can take on the more precise meaning that it is afforded in baptism.<sup>16</sup> Art can have religious significance, then, by sensitizing us to the 'unconscious, pre-linguistic' meanings of water and other material symbols – and thereby it can provide the soil within which a more ramified doctrinal scheme can take root.

This approach treats art as art (rather than as illustrative of some truth which can be expressed more adequately in conventionally verbal or other terms). Yet it allows art to bear a religious meaning – by communicating bodily meanings which are in some way religiously apposite. Following this proposal, we might suppose that Cusick's

<sup>15</sup> George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith: Restoring the Image* (2nd edn. London, 1998), p. 183.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Pattison's comment on a video installation of Bill Viola, 'The Messenger', sited temporarily in Durham Cathedral: 'Although Viola himself is informed more by Buddhist than by Christian spirituality, the work projects itself almost effortlessly towards Christian appropriation precisely because of its use of a language before language that is the primary matrix of symbolic formation that is shared by Christian and non Christian art alike' (*Art, Modernity and Faith*, p. 185). The film projects a twelve foot high image of a man sinking into a tank of water: as he sinks, his form dissolves in light, before he re ascends, after a fairly long interval, and comes into clear focus again (p. 184).

poem works religiously by presenting a proto-phenomenology of our embodied encounter with a particular place – a phenomenology which gives some initial sense to notions such as ‘tenderness’ and ‘redemptive love’, and indeed ‘water’, and which provides thereby a context within which an explicitly Christian or other symbolism can be articulated. Similarly, we might think that Cusick’s poem *Norham Gardens* shows how the primordial meaning for the body of the passage of the seasons can help to give sense to the more elaborate set of significances that is inscribed in the Church’s calendar.<sup>17</sup>

This picture fits with two ideas from our earlier discussion: (i) the existential sense of a thing or place is a function of its meaning for the body, and (ii) this sense may be of religious interest when it bears a microcosmic significance. And it develops these ideas by supposing that while the microcosmic import of, for example, water may be, in the first instance, a function of its meaning for the body, that meaning can then be extended by inserting this material symbol into some faith-specific doctrinal scheme.

Another kind of approach might start from the doctrinal scheme, rather than our experience of the world. Nicholas Wolterstorff argues for example that the Christian doctrine of creation ought to generate a correlative phenomenology:

This world in which we live is an artifact brought into being by God. It represents a success on the part of God – God who is love – not a failure. In contemplation of what he had made God found delight. But also God knew that what He had made would serve well his human creatures. So God pronounced His ‘Yes’ upon it all, a ‘Yes’ of delight and of love. You and I must do no less.<sup>18</sup>

So Christian metaphysics implies, Wolterstorff is suggesting, that it is possible, and indeed desirable, for human beings to take delight in the world in its materiality – since such delight is part of the world’s divinely ordained *telos*.<sup>19</sup> This picture is in a way the obverse of Pattison’s: here we start from doctrine and seek to read its consequences into our experience

<sup>17</sup> This poem is discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, p. 69; variation in capitalization in the original.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Peter Fuller’s exploration of the connection between the appreciation of nature and the idea that it is divinely made, and his discussion of John Ruskin and

of the world – rather than our doctrinally uninformed experience providing a matrix out of which a Christian or other doctrinal scheme may grow. On this approach too, we can take Cusick's poem to carry a religious significance – by showing how a particular material context can be experienced affirmatively and even joyously, although *Coed y Farden* does not, of course, make explicit use of Christian categories.

These two ways of thinking of the poem's significance both draw a distinction between bodily experience and a doctrinal scheme – and then seek to establish a relationship between them, by prioritizing one over the other. In this book we have been more interested in the idea that discursive thought and our primordial responsiveness to place can interpenetrate. And we should also allow for this possibility when thinking about the relationship between doctrine and experience. A particularly striking example of how theological categories may inform the experience of a landscape, and vice versa, is provided in the writings of the desert fathers, where the apparent hostility of desert places is brought into dialogical relationship with a theology of death and resurrection – and connected to the idea of a restoration, at the eschaton, of the Edenic condition of harmony, in the relations between human beings and the beasts.<sup>20</sup>

others in this context. Fuller himself supposes that to sustain our appreciation of the natural world, we 'need . . . secular equivalents of the religious illusion': Peter Fuller, 'The Geography of Mother Nature', in Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds., *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> An insightful account of these connections can be found in Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford, 1998), Chapter 6. Lane notes the ways in which the theology emerges from the landscape. He comments for example on how the desert monastic's social role 'was rooted in a theology of death and rebirth that the desert monks read in part from the landscape itself' (p. 164). And by implication the theology is also 'in part' read *into* the landscape: it is Christians in particular who will find the landscape to bear this sort of meaning. The idea of a return to the conditions of Eden was also important in Celtic monasticism. See for example Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London, 1995), Chapter 6. See too Chris Fitter's discussion of the connection between 'cosmographic perception and description' and 'what in landscape illustrates philosophic beliefs and instincts about the structural order of the universe and the forces or laws governing it'. He gives the example of how belief in hell shaped the perception of fire in the Middle Ages (*Poetry, Space, Landscape*, p. 19).

This interpenetration of embodied experience and a set of doctrinal commitments is also evident in Edmund Cusick's work. Take, for example, this poem about one particularly well known Christian holy place.

### Lindisfarne<sup>21</sup>

Evensong is said slowly here. My responses  
stumble over unaccustomed pauses, trespassing  
into silence. Time is different, months marked  
by the flicker of flowers on sand, centuries  
by the weathering of script on stone. All  
infused with ritual, the liturgy of that bare mass  
served by the elements, in which the tide  
is heartbeat, and the gulls scream antiphon.

Each day, salt water is blessed and broken  
on the white table of the land.

All becomes epiphany: a church  
encircled by the sea, crowded  
with silence; poppies bleached thin  
as insects' wings; walls transfigured

to poems of stone. Here prayers  
rise, merciless as thorn.

The poet begins by suggesting that, in order to appreciate this place, it is necessary to slow down – even one's accustomed responses to prayer need to slow down! This is I take it much the same insight that is evident in Wendell Berry's realization that his mind needs to slow down from 70 miles per hour on his arrival at the Red River Gorge, if he is to appropriate the place aright. At Lindisfarne, one's rhythms of speech, as well as of bodily movement in other respects, need to fall into step with the mode of life that befits the place, before the place can make itself known. The meaning of this place is also given in its history: the weathering of script on stone suggests that it is century-spanning natural rhythms that hold sway here, rather than the

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Cusick, *Ice Maidens*, p. 36. As I noted in Chapter 7, Thomas Barrie cites Lindisfarne as an example of a sacred place that is physically set apart from its surroundings. Cusick is also interested in the sensory distinctiveness of this place.

hurried exchanges of everyday human interaction. And, doubtless, it is in part for this reason that attunement to the place requires a correlative deceleration of our normal responses. Finally, because it is caught up in the encompassing cadences of the natural world, this place also bears a microcosmic significance.<sup>22</sup>

For present purposes, what is most arresting here is the organic relationship between the poet's experience of this place and a set of specifically Christian categories. The cry of the gulls takes up the responses of evensong, and aligns those responses with the natural rhythms of the place. And the breaking of the sea upon the shore gives the life of the island a eucharistic significance – the water is offered up, it feeds the gulls, and its 'heartbeat' marks out the rhythms of a mode of life into which our bodies can be transformed. So the natural world is here being construed in eucharistic terms, but without its primordial implications for the life of the senses thereby being obscured, let alone denied; and the poet's eucharistic sensibility is not simply read out of this environment, but serves as an instrument for its creative interrogation. So rather than any simple prioritization, here we find an antiphonal interaction, and at points, from a phenomenological point of view, a fusion, of the 'language before language' of the material order and a specifically Christian conception of the nature of things. And we might suppose that something similar is true of *Coed y Farden*, even though Christian categories are not so explicit there, in so far as the vocabulary of 'faith', 'redemption', and 'parenthood' has a Christian provenance.

#### BEYOND POETRY: EXTENDING THE ACCOUNT TO OTHER ART FORMS

We have been considering the significance of poetry in particular for a theological aesthetic, but the same sort of point can be made in relation to other art forms. This generalization of our account will be

<sup>22</sup> So Cusick's approach to the religious significance of this place can be mapped, with no difficulty, onto our various models of differentiation in the religious significance of place.

simplest when, as with *Coed y Farden*, an artwork re-presents the phenomenology of our embodied relationship to a particular place. But there are other possibilities too. To give just one example, philosophers of music commonly suppose that the emotional expressiveness of music depends upon vocal and above all dynamic 'melisma'. On this view, the affective state expressed by a piece of music is not, fundamentally, a function of which affective response it arouses in listeners, nor a matter of which affective state it simply calls to mind. It is, rather, an objective feature of the music – concerning the resemblance between its dynamic properties (the qualities of movement in the piece) and the expressive movements of the human body, or (to take the case of vocal melisma) the expressive sound of the human voice. This proposal seems to make ready sense for at least some pieces of music – on occasions, the affective import of a piece surely is constituted by the resemblance between its movements and the emotionally expressive movements of the human body (taking into account the body's posture, gait, gesture, and so on).

Aaron Ridley notes that while the affective meaning of a piece of music is not, for these reasons, reducible to our felt response to it, this meaning is, even so, often apprehended by way of such responses:

It is rather like coming to appreciate the melancholy of a weeping willow only as the willow saddens me: I could, of course, merely identify the expressive posture that the willow's posture resembles; but instead I apprehend its melancholy through a kind of mirroring response. I respond to it *sympathetically*.<sup>23</sup>

Ridley is focusing here on the response of feeling – but given our earlier account of the mutually defining relations between feelings, patterns of salient perception, and predispositions to bodily movement, we might suppose that we can also grasp the expressive import of a piece of music, in some instances anyway, by registering the body's readiness to move in ways that befit the music (to jump up, or slump, or whatever it might be); and these responses will in turn be

<sup>23</sup> Aaron Ridley, *Music, Value and the Passions* (Ithaca, NY 1995), pp. 128–9. For a similar approach, see Stephen Davies's treatment of 'emotion characteristics in appearance', in his *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), p. 228.

folded into a correlative pattern of salient listening.<sup>24</sup> So here is another case where meanings are registered in the body – the expressive character of a piece of music may be grasped directly in the body, rather than being apprehended first of all in, say, musicological terms and only then, derivatively, by means of bodily movement. We might suppose, then, that in this respect the epistemologies of music and of place are close kin: in the musical as in the spatial case, our understanding consists in an attunement of the body.

This suggests that music (not just programmatic music) as well as space may be religiously sensible. As we have seen, the religious meaning of space is defined in part by the mode of bodily response which it elicits – as when the meaning of a sacred site is given in the bodily responses that are required to traverse the surrounding enclosure. Similarly, we are supposing, musical meanings can also be registered by means of bodily movement (when the body's movements mirror those of the music). And if these music-relative bodily movements can be religiously suggestive (if they involve something akin to 'swooping' or 'stooping', for example), then music, like place, will be capable of bearing a body-mediated religious sense.

Let's think a little more closely about the kinds of affective meaning that can be expressed in a piece of music. The dynamic properties of a musical composition can resemble, I take it, the effortful or excited or graceful movements of the human body – and a correlative set of affective (and behavioural) states can therefore be expressed in music. But it may be doubted whether variations in the dynamic qualities of a piece of music can track the distinction between, say, grief and a generalized, non-specific sadness – it is not clear, after all, that there is any distinction in the behavioural repertoire which befits these affective states. More exactly, we might suppose that an affective state will count as grief only if it is embedded in a narrative which alludes to the sustaining of some loss. Similarly, I can only be said to feel embarrassment, for instance, if I am conscious of having done something that may lower others' regard for me, and can only feel pity if I take someone to have suffered some misfortune. We

<sup>24</sup> Compare Geoffrey Maddell's discussion of the involvement of emotional feelings in the salient perception of the properties of a piece of music: 'What Music Teaches About Emotion', *Philosophy* 71 (1996), pp. 63–82.

might suppose, then, that the differentiae of these emotion types are a function, at least in part, of their narrative structure, and in each case we may doubt whether variations in behaviour are sufficient to pick out this structure. If that is so, then a piece of music will be unable to express an affective state such as grief or pity simply by virtue of its dynamic melismatic properties. Accordingly, we might suppose that music is only able to express generalized affective states – elation or sadness in general, for example, rather than states which depend upon reference to some specific narrative.

This account suggests another route into the question of the religious significance of music. Because these generalized affective states will lack any specific object (notably, they will not be directed at specific events within a narrative), they can colour one's experience in general, rather as moods do – and they can constitute, therefore, something like an affectively toned sense of the world as a whole. It is also possible that some such 'world-views' will be specific to a particular theological tradition and a correlative tradition of art and culture.<sup>25</sup> Here it is the generality of the affect that is expressed in a work of art, and not just its connection to religiously suggestive gestures of the body, that allows it to bear a religious sense.

So there are various ways in which a place-based account of the religious significance of poetry might be extended to other art forms – including those which are not directly concerned with the embodied appropriation of particular places. In these further cases, our discussion has been founded, once again, on the body's capacity to apprehend aesthetic and other meanings in its own right.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have been arguing that our account of the differentiated religious significance of place can illumine not only the practical, engaged character of religious understanding, but also

<sup>25</sup> I explore these possibilities more fully in my paper 'Musical Affects and the Life of Faith: Some Reflections on the Religious Potency of Music', *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (January 2004), pp. 25–44.



its connection to poetry and other forms of aesthetic expression. I have also tried to trace some connections between the kinds of significance which Edmund Cusick's friend attributes to Port Meadow and New College cloister, and the various religious meanings which are disclosed in Edmund's poetic appreciation of places such as Lindisfarne and Farden's wood.

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## Some Concluding Thoughts

### INTRODUCTION

The reader will not want me, in these concluding remarks, to rehearse the central findings of this study yet again – they have been recalled often enough already! Instead, I would like to examine from a new perspective two of the presiding themes of our discussion: why do the questions with which we have been occupied matter? And: how might we locate the approach of this book within the context provided by recent theological writing on ‘place’? I shall then leave the final word to the poet Edmund Cusick.

At the beginning of this volume, I suggested that despite their manifest strengths in other respects, recent ventures in the epistemology of religion might give more sustained attention to the practical, engaged character of religious ‘belief’. This is one reason for supposing that a study of the affinities between knowledge of place and knowledge of God may be of some interest. I also noted that the philosophy-of-religion literature has not been much concerned with the place-relative character of religious practice – and that the subordination of the idea of divine presence to the idea of divine omnipresence leaves this feature of religious practice at best mysterious. This is an additional reason for attending to the differentiated meaning of space in secular as well as religious contexts. Rather than revisiting these themes in general terms, let me offer now another route into the importance of the questions that we have been examining – by considering the work of the Devonian philosopher-theologian Friedrich von Hügel. My aim is not to expound von Hügel’s theological system in any detail, but to identify a number of questions

which he took to be fundamental to theological enquiry – and to show how our reflections constitute a response to these questions.

THE THOUGHT OF BARON FRIEDRICH  
VON HÜGEL AS A MODEL OF  
THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Von Hügel is interested in the action-orienting character of religious understanding. A religious epistemology has to give some account, he thinks, of the integral connection between (i) religious understanding and (ii) judgements about how to live and, in addition, the motivation so to live. He maintains that standard conceptions of ‘reason’ are of limited use for this purpose:

more and more we seem to see that Reasoning, Logic, Abstraction... does not move or win the will, either in ourselves or in others... Reasoning appears but capable, at best, of co ordinating, unifying, explaining the material furnished to it by experience of all kinds; at worst, of explaining it away; at best, of stimulating the purveyance of a fresh supply of such experience; at worst, of stopping such purveyance as much as may be.<sup>1</sup>

This passage speaks of ‘reason’ in the broadly Humean sense that we have already discussed. ‘Reason’ so understood can help to determine the means which are suited to the realization of various goals, but its office does not extend to the specification of goals. The definition of goals is, instead, the province of desire – which picks out various objects as possible sources of satisfaction. As Hume puts the point in a nicely provocative turn of phrase: ‘Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions.’<sup>2</sup>

Von Hügel thinks that such an account of ‘reason’ and its distinction from desire will not fit the religious case – because ‘reason’ as it

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion As Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (2nd edn, London, 1923), Vol. I, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, 1978), Book II, Part III, Section III.

operates in religious contexts is of its nature action-guiding. So according to the baron, religious epistemology needs to acknowledge that some varieties of understanding are both cognizant of relevant facts (and in this sense ‘reasonable’) and of themselves motivating (and desire-infused therefore).

Von Hügel aims to root such an epistemology in first-hand experience – since direct acquaintance with a thing involves, he thinks, both some reckoning with the character of the world, and at the same time a readiness to act:

Experience indeed and its resultant feeling are always, in the first instance, coloured and conditioned by every kind of individual many sided circumstances of time and place, of race and age and sex, of education and temperament, of antecedent and environment. And it is this very particular combination, just this one, so conditioned and combined, coming upon me just at this moment and on this spot, just at this stage of my reach or growth, at this turning of my way, that carries with it this particular power to touch or startle, to stimulate or convince.<sup>3</sup>

Von Hügel speaks here of ‘experience and its resultant feeling’ and of the ‘particular power’ of such experience to ‘stimulate’ and to ‘convince’. We might cast his point in our terms by saying: first-hand experience will be action-guiding not when it takes the form of simple observation, but when it is constituted by salient perception of some environment, and is caught up therefore in a correlative emotional feeling and predisposition to act. On this view, it is not so much that we have ‘experience’, then a ‘resultant feeling’, and then a movement of the will – it is more that experience, of the kind that is relevant here, is feeling-infused, and that this feeling already involves some recognition of the body’s readiness to act. It is also striking that von Hügel thinks of this sort of experience as informed by the ‘individual many-sided circumstances of place’. In our terms, we might say: the insight that is realized in salient perception of some scene cannot be communicated simply by means of the general connotation of terms, as when one says ‘the ice here is dangerous’. Instead, this kind of insight is rooted in the dense singularity of a particular, place-relative organization of the perceptual field.

<sup>3</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. I, p. 4.

So our account agrees with von Hügel on these two points: a religious epistemology needs to base itself on a cognitive state which is of its nature action-guiding, and such a state can be realized in first-hand experience of place.<sup>4</sup> Von Hügel continues by considering the implications of this view for the working of our language:

It is just precisely through the but imperfectly analyzable, indeed but dimly perceived, individual connotation of general terms; it is by the fringe of feeling, woven out of the past doings and impressions, workings and circumstances, physical, mental, moral, of my race and family and of my own individual life, it is by the apparently slight, apparently far away, accompaniment of a perfectly individual music to the spoken or sung text of the common speech of man, that I am, it would seem, really moved and won.<sup>5</sup>

On this point too, our accounts are in broad agreement. The content of this inherently action-guiding, or 'really moving', understanding cannot be recorded simply by reference to the general connotation of terms, or 'the common speech of man'. Instead, this content is given in the more exact (and more exacting) person-relative connotation that our terms come to assume by dint of relevant first-hand experience. Epistemologies in the style of Plato typically represent cognitive development as a movement towards a more impersonal mode of thought – where this development requires, for Plato, a training of the non-embodied intellect upon the realm of the Forms. By contrast, on the view we are considering here, deepened understanding is tied to an expanded, experiential immersion of the body in the material order, and a correlative personalizing or individualizing of our concepts.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sallie McFague has commented on the importance of first hand experience in grounding a motivationally effective appreciation of particular 'natural' places. See her *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (London, 1997), Chapter 6, especially pp. 120–9.

<sup>5</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. I, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> A similar perspective is evident in Iris Murdoch's suggestion that:

Words may mislead us here [in giving an account of the nature of moral understanding] since words are often stable while concepts alter; we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty. A deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process, takes place. There are two senses of 'knowing what a word means', one connected with ordinary language and the other very much less so. Knowledge of a value concept is something to be understood, as it were, in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal network... We do

The central thesis of von Hügel's major work, *The Mystical Element*, is that Christian understanding has three dimensions: what he calls its historical, intellectual, and experimental 'modalities'.<sup>7</sup> In the texts I have just cited, he is making the point that the 'intellectual' dimension cannot operate in isolation from the 'experimental' (or experiential) dimension – or it will become motivationally inert. But experiential and intellectual sources together are, he thinks, still not enough. From the title of his book, and from the fact that much of it consists of a biography of Catherine of Genoa, one might suppose that, for von Hügel, the root or flower of religious understanding must involve some sort of rarefied or 'mystical' experience. But actually the drift of his text defends a precisely contrary view. For example, speaking of Catherine, he remarks that: 'Religion is here, at first sight at least, all but entirely a thought and an emotion.'<sup>8</sup> And he goes on to suggest that it is not her thinking and feeling (or the intellectual and experiential dimensions of her religious life) that ensure the directedness of her faith towards the Christian God – it is, rather, her practice, and in particular her devotion to the eucharist. He explains:

a very little less than what remains in Catherine of these elements [the factual, historical, and institutional] and her religion would be a simple, even though deep religiosity, a general aspiration, not a definite finding, an explicit religion.<sup>9</sup>

So the experiential and intellectual dimensions of the religious life, while necessary, do not suffice for a 'definite finding' of the Christian God – to discover the Christian God, or to move beyond a generalized religious 'aspiration', the believer needs to participate in relevant historically grounded material practices. Von Hügel's treatment of 'quietism' reveals a similar line of thought:

it remains . . . true even for these as for all other souls, that the historical and institutional elements must ever remain represented, and sufficiently

not simply, through being rational and knowing ordinary language, 'know' the meaning of all necessary moral words. We may have to learn the meaning; and since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit, and not back towards a genesis in the rulings of an impersonal public language.

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, 1985), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. I, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. II, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. II, p. 121.

represented; indeed the persistence in these elements of religion will be one of the chief means for avoiding delusion . . . And if the prayer of Quiet will give a special colour, depth and unity to those more contingent seeming practices, these practices will, in return, give a particular definiteness, content, and creaturely quality to that prayer.<sup>10</sup>

So once more, it is by her participation in relevant practices, and through her identification with a correlative tradition of faith, that the believer's devotion achieves a certain 'definiteness' and 'content', and comes to be anchored in the Christian God.

Von Hügel's stance on this point is strikingly reminiscent of the account of pilgrimage that we developed in Chapter 6. There we considered the possibility that reference to the Christian God (or at least, a religiously satisfying mode of reference) depends not simply upon what the believer 'thinks' or experiences, but upon her practical engagement with a particular material context. Similarly, von Hügel doubts whether abstract thought or experiential encounter with God are enough to sustain the life of faith, even from an epistemic point of view. Hence he remarks that 'Rationalist fanaticism' in religion will result in 'a petty, artificial arrangement by the human mind of the little which, there and then, it can easily harmonize into a whole, or even simply a direct hypostatizing of the mind's own bare categories'.<sup>11</sup> And he finds that while direct experience of God is a universal human possibility, such experience is only 'dim'.<sup>12</sup> In these circumstances, he says, achieving a religiously satisfying directedness to the Christian God depends upon participation in the practices of the Church – or upon immersion in the 'historical and institutional' dimension of its life. He expands on this point, admittedly somewhat obscurely, in these terms:

though the sense of Reality . . . of the Abiding and Infinite . . . are doubtless awakened, however faintly and inarticulately, in the human soul from the

<sup>10</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. II, p. 137. See too von Hügel's discussion of Quakerism in his paper 'On the Place and Function, Within Religion, of the Body, of History, and of Institutions', in his *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion: Second Series* (London, 1930), pp. 59–88.

<sup>11</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. II, p. 389.

<sup>12</sup> See his comment that 'it is the great Mystical Saints and writers who continuously have . . . not a simply discursive apprehension, but a direct though dim Experience of the Infinite and of God' (*The Mystical Element*, Vol. II, p. 338).

first, as the background and presupposition of the foreground and the middle distances of its total world of perceptions and aspirations: yet all these middle distances, as well as that great background and groundwork, would remain unawakened but for those humble little sense perceptions on the one hand, and intercourse with human fellow creatures on the other. And in such intercourse with the minds and souls, or with the literary remains and other monuments of souls, either still living here or gone hence some two thousand years or more, a mass of mental and moral impressions and stimulations . . . offer themselves to any one human mind, or the minds of a whole generation or country, with the apparent homogeneity of a purely objective, [sic] as it were a sense impression. Especially in Religion the Historical and Institutional . . . come down to us thus from the past and surround us in the present, and either press in upon us with a painful weight, or support us with a comforting solidity, thus giving them many of the qualities of things physically seen and touched, say, a mystery play or a vast cathedral.<sup>13</sup>

So an awakening of the sense of God, or a directing of the mind to God, depends upon (i) participation in a community (upon 'intercourse with human fellow-creatures'); and it requires, more exactly, (ii) participation in a community which stretches back over time, and perhaps over millennia; and this implies (iii) an embodied relationship to various historical artefacts which can be 'physically seen and touched'. We can fill out this picture using the conceptual framework of Chapter 6. This seeing and touching of things has, we might say, a referential function, because of what is signified hereby for the believer's membership of a particular faith community – one which can trace its origins back to some initial occasion of dubbing or naming, when the Christian God was picked out paradigmatically. Or it may be that this referential function is tied to the capacity of bodily movements to direct our attention onto the Christian God – as that reality which has made itself known in and under various material phenomena (relics, for example) which are physically appropriated or 'manipulated' in relevant ways in the present. So here too, I think, von Hügel's concerns are precisely to the point. He is right to consider the contribution of the 'historical and institutional' strand of the Christian life in enabling a 'definite finding' of

<sup>13</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. II, p. 115.



the Christian God – and his appeal to what is ‘physically seen and touched’ sets our enquiries in an appropriate direction.

One might conclude from the passage I have just cited that when von Hügel talks of action-orienting, first-hand experience, he is thinking in particular of the experience of Christian artefacts (of cathedrals, mystery plays, and so on). There is some truth in this; but more fundamentally, it is on his view the lives of the saints which provide the necessary focus for this sort of experience. Let’s think a little about his development of this theme.

Von Hügel supposes, as we have seen, that first-hand experience is intrinsically motivating. And, plausibly, he thinks that the motivational force of such experience is connected to the fact that its object is presented to us not abstractly (by means of some description, or by appeal to the general connotation of terms), but in a densely singular way. (There is some truth in the old saying that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’!) Now the lives of the saints, von Hügel thinks, exhibit this sort of dense singularity to an unusual degree – so it is above all an experiential knowledge of the saints which undergirds the motivational pull of religious understanding. Saintry lives are, in von Hügel’s view, uniquely ‘persuasive’. He explains:

Only a life . . . which, in rightful contact with and rightful renunciation of the Particular and Fleeting, ever seeks and finds the Omnipresent and Eternal; and which again deepens and incarnates . . . this Transcendence in its own thus gradually purified Particular: only such a life can be largely persuasive, at least for us Westerns and in our times.<sup>14</sup>

This passage attributes two traits to the saintly life: affirmation of the world (or ‘rightful contact’ with it) and at the same time a refusal to treat the world simply as an object of appetite (there is then a role for ‘rightful renunciation’). Of course, we want to know more about the nature of this singularity or ‘purified particularity’ – and why it should be persuasive. Von Hügel comments:

the deeper and more unique the soul’s experience . . . the more entirely does all that the soul is, and ever was, wake up and fuse itself in one indivisible act, in which much of the old is newly seen to be dross and is so far forth excluded; and in which the old that is retained reappears in a fresh context,

<sup>14</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. I, p. 368.

a context which itself affects and is itself affected by all the other old and new ideas and feelings. It thus clearly bears the stamp upon it of the profound difference between Time, conceived as a succession of moments of identical quantity and quality, each in juxtaposition and exterior to the other... and Duration, with its variously rapid succession of heterogeneous qualities, each affecting and colouring, each affected and coloured by, all the others, and all producing together a living harmony and organic unity, all which constitutes the essentially unpicturable experience of a living *person*. Such a moment is thus incapable of adequate analysis, in exact proportion as it is fully expressive of the depths of the personality and of its experience: for each element here... becomes, in an intellectual analysis, when each is separated from the others, a mere dead thing and a quantity.<sup>15</sup>

The saintly life is 'particular' and persuasive, von Hügel is suggesting, not fundamentally because of any doctrine that the saint professes, nor because she enjoys unmediated access to God in moments of rarefied experience, but rather because of the 'organic unity' of her life. And it is implied in this passage that this unity is to be understood narratively, as a storied interconnectedness. The narrative theme which binds the saint's life together is not given in her pursuit of fame or reputation, or in any drive to accumulate possessions; nor even, suggests von Hügel, is it a function of her commitment to moral or other-regarding behaviour, although of course this is part of what is involved. In fact, the unity of life that distinguishes the saint is not in any simple fashion lawlike – we cannot represent it by reference to some general concept, from which the saintly details of the life can be simply read off. Rather, just as the particular hue of the apple that is before me now cannot be captured independently of experience, by appeal to the general connotation of colour terms, so, to an even larger degree, the dense singularity of the saintly life will elude any abstract description or analysis.

What we can say according to von Hügel is that such a life 'will have a multitude of warm attachments, without fever or distraction, and a great unity of pure detachment, without coldness or emptiness: it will have the, winning because rich, simplicity and wondrous combination of apparent inevitableness and of seeming paradox

<sup>15</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. I, pp. 105–6. Von Hügel is of course aware of Henri Bergson's treatment of duration. See his von Hügel, *Eternal Life: A Study of Its Implications and Applications* (Edinburgh, 1912), pp. 288–302.

furnished by all true life'.<sup>16</sup> So, to summarize, the unity of such a life implies a narrative choice about what of 'the old' is to be retained, and what is to be 'excluded' – but the principle of this selection and ordering, although not arbitrary, cannot be given formulaically. All we can properly say is that this principle will adhere to a mean, which is flanked by the vices of excessive (or 'feverish') and deficient (or 'cold') attachment to the world (where feverishness and coldness will be implicated, we may surmise, in correlative patterns of salient perception and behaviour). This view makes ready sense in the light of modern (and ancient) reflections on the impossibility of providing an algorithm for the virtues, and on the necessary role therefore of lived example in the epistemology of the ethical or saintly life.

On these questions too, von Hügel's enquiry is broadly convergent with our own. We have also been interested in the connection between the example of saintly living and the believer's practice. It is, I have suggested, the desire to encounter the meanings which are stored up in saintly relics, and in the places associated with saintly deeds, which moves the pilgrim to action. And when the believer is at such a place, or in the presence of a relic, then her practice there can help to anchor her thought in the Christian God. Moreover, like von Hügel, we have taken the good life to be defined, at least in significant part, by its narrative unity. We have taken a particular interest, of course, in the possibility of a place-relative unity of life, where the narratively and otherwise defined identity of particular places confers a coherent sense upon a person's life story. Finally, like von Hügel, we have been trying to sketch the possibility of a mode of life which is neither 'feverish' nor 'cold' – such a life is not 'feverish' because its relationship to the world is not 'appetitive', and not 'cold' because it gives due acknowledgement, in feeling and gesture, to the meanings which are embedded in particular places, and in the meta-place which is the world.

So von Hügel poses a number of questions for theological enquiry: how might religious understanding be intrinsically action-guiding? How might we achieve a 'definite finding' of the Christian God, while recognizing the constraints on religious thought and experience?

<sup>16</sup> *The Mystical Element*, Vol. II, p. 129.

And how might relationship to the saints, and the search for a narratively coherent mode of life, help to constitute the practical dimension of religious faith? These have also been the focal concerns of our study – and von Hügel’s work provides, then, one way of understanding the significance of the defining questions of this book. I have also been suggesting, of course, that von Hügel’s answers to these questions are broadly congruent with our own.

### THE THEOLOGY OF PLACE: SOME CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

I want to consider now some recent trends in theological writing on the theme of ‘place’ – and to see, more exactly, how our approach fits into this intellectual context. As with our review of von Hügel’s work, I hope that this exercise will throw some of the salient motifs of our discussion into new relief.

With von Hügel, I have been arguing that the history of artefacts and places is integral to their religious meaning. Susan White takes a rather different view in these remarks:

I can say that the ugly concrete block worship space in Telford can be a holy place, because it is occupied by and associated with a community of Christian people who are known, publicly known, for their acts of charity and peacemaking and who have drawn their building into the struggle for a radical openness to the will of God. And I would argue that to root the holiness of Christian sacred space in anything else is to be involved either in idolatry or in magic.<sup>17</sup>

On this account, the religious significance of a site is relative to the use to which it is being put in the present. In the same vein, White comments:

So what does it mean, then, to call a particular place a Christian sacred space? Is Durham Cathedral a sacred space? Well, I think it is, but its sacredness is not self evident, nor is it self perpetuating. It is not a Christian sacred space

<sup>17</sup> Susan White, ‘The Theology of Sacred Space’, in D. Brown and A. Loades, eds., *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time* (London, 1995), pp. 42–3.

because the land it sits upon called out to the friends of St Cuthbert and said 'here I am, I'm a holy place!'; nor because it sits on some ancient ley line or place of natural spiritual energy, nor even because of its great beauty, or the dim religious light that filters through it, nor even because people have been known to have had religious experiences there. If Durham Cathedral is a holy place, a sacred space, it is so because it has been, is now, and (God willing) will continue to be used by faithful Christian people who are striving to live according to the gospel . . . And . . . if it ever becomes associated with violence, greed, injustice, pride, division, it will stop being a holy place until those things are repudiated.<sup>18</sup>

Here White allows that the history of a place, specifically the fact that it has been used by faithful Christians, is relevant to its claim to be a holy site; but she also suggests that the validity of this claim is conditional upon the site continuing to be used in this same fashion in the present. On this view, a place will count as holy if and only if it is the scene of Christian or perhaps, more broadly, ethical conduct *in the present*. The perspective that we have been commending maintains, on the contrary, that the significance of saintly lives, or of other events located in the past, can be 'presented' to us now in correlative places. And if that is so, then these places will bear a religious significance which is, to a degree, independent of their current use. Of course, current use will also contribute to the cumulative storied meaning of a site – but this is not to say that some nefarious use of a site in the present will suspend or simply expunge the significance which derives from its history.

The approach that we have been following is closer to the stance which John Inge has propounded in his defence of a 'relational' view of the religious significance of place. Inge quotes George MacLeod's

<sup>18</sup> 'The Theology of Sacred Space', pp. 41–2. It is worth noting that this paper was delivered at a conference held in 1993, to mark the nine hundredth anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of Durham Cathedral. White's suggestion that Christian identity is tied to ethical practice invites some consideration of the parable of the good Samaritan, and its depiction of the nature of Christian love (Luke 10: 31ff.). Oliver O'Donovan notes how the 'universalism' of this parable may be taken either 'abstractly' or 'concretely'. In the second case, he says, transcending ethnic particularity need not imply any disregard for place but, rather, a closer attention to the person who is my neighbour in the sense of being physically proximate to me. See his essay 'The Loss of a Sense of Place', in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2004), pp. 296–320.

comment that Iona is a ‘thin place’; and he records Philip Sheldrake’s gloss on this observation – it is a place ‘where the membrane between this world and the other world, between the material and the spiritual, was very permeable’.<sup>19</sup> These remarks recall Edmund Cusick’s observations which I have set at the head of this volume – and they indicate that his sense of place has its home within a larger tradition of ‘Celtic spirituality’.

Taking up MacLeod’s comments, Bishop Inge notes that ‘if Iona is such a “thin spot”, it is so on account of its past as a site of divine disclosure, and not because it is intrinsically holy’.<sup>20</sup> On this view, a place can store up religious meanings deriving from the past – and it is implied, then, that a place’s significance is not simply a function of the use to which it is put in the present. So in this respect, Inge’s approach is distinct from White’s. But the significance of a place is, for Inge, still relative to the use to which it has been put, or relative to the kinds of experience or events which have occurred there – rather than being ‘intrinsic’. A site’s religious meaning, he is suggesting, is given in the history of the ‘relationship’ between God, people, and place that has unfolded there. (Compare Harold Turner’s suggestion that the *domus ecclesiae* account of the religious meaning of a building can be extended by considering the contribution the building has made to the life of a Christian community – this extrapolation mirrors the movement from White’s view to that of Inge.)<sup>21</sup>

While Inge’s position is distinct from White’s, in giving a larger role to the history of a site, these authors share a focus upon the contribution of human activity and experience in fixing the religious significance of a place, so that the ‘intrinsic’ properties of the site drop out of view. I have been proposing, on the contrary, that an account of the religious meaning of a place should not take the quality of human experience there, whether now or in the past, as simply a ‘given’ – rather, we need to recognize the ways in which places themselves can elicit and structure religiously meaningful experience. In this sense, we might say, reference to the ‘intrinsic’

<sup>19</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 79. MacLeod is the founder of the modern Iona community. See also Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *A Christian Theology of Place*, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 7.

properties of a place can be crucial for an understanding of its religious import. The beauty and 'dim religious light' of Durham cathedral, for example, may engender a response of reverential seriousness or of hushed wonderment, or enable some other religiously suggestive complex of feeling-seeing-and-doing. And if that is so then, contrary to White, an account of the religious meaning of this site should not be based *unilaterally* on the quality of human activity or experience there – it should also make reference to, for example, the sensory and topographical properties of the place, and their part in explaining the possibility of certain activities and experiences. At the same time, we should acknowledge that on this account too, the religious significance of a place will be relative to our human embodied sensibility, rather than inhering in it in the fashion of a property such as atomic structure. With Lefebvre, we could say that this sort of significance is rooted in a 'representational space', as distinct from a 'representation of space' – because it depends upon the phenomenal appearance of things.

It may be that this perspective is not so different from Bishop Inge's. His 'relational' account invites the thought that it is not simply human experience which determines the religious significance of a place – but experience-place-and-God together, in relationship. When he denies that places are 'intrinsically' holy, his intention is, I suggest, not so much to dispute the contribution of a place's sensory and other qualities to its religious meaning, but rather to insist that this meaning is always, in the end, a function of God's initiative. In other words, God is not constrained by place – so whatever the physical qualities of a place, God may still be revealed there, may still offer human beings relationship there, or not, as God wills. Without denying any of this, it seems to me that an account of the religious significance of place can, nonetheless, be built around a discussion of features such as topography, scale, and quality of light – on the grounds that the religious meaning of these features is not just fixed arbitrarily, by divine fiat, but is to some extent intrinsic to our embodied relationship to them. For this reason, we may prefer to continue to speak of the 'intrinsic' holiness of places – as a way of marking the fact that the physical qualities of a place can enter integrally and non-arbitrarily into its religious meaning. Think for example of how the religious significance of Port Meadow and of

New College cloister, and of other such sites, is given in the mode of bodily appropriation which they afford. Let's consider these matters a little more closely.

We might suppose that the religious import of a set of physical or 'intrinsic' properties derives from the fact that God wants human beings to take delight in these properties, or to derive some other kind of benefit from them. As we have seen, Nicholas Wolterstorff takes this sort of approach when thinking about the implications of the doctrine of creation for the phenomenology of human experience. In a similar vein, he comments:

Sometimes the reason offered for seeking aesthetic excellence in the music of the church is that thereby one pleases God. I think that is true. But not because we know what music God enjoys . . . Rather, because it is in the joy of his people that God finds delight.<sup>22</sup>

Here the religious significance of aesthetic excellence in music – or to generalize the point we might say: the religious significance of the phenomenal pleasingness of the natural world – is given in the fact that God desires the human good. So these excellences are religiously meaningful because they tell us something about the divine benevolence. That seems to be right. But we have been arguing, in addition, that the phenomenal properties of particular places, and the possibilities for bodily appropriation which they extend, may speak to us of the *genius* of those places, and thereby of the *genius* of the world. And this picture suggests that the world's sensory properties may reveal not simply God's good will towards human beings, but also something of the divine nature in itself, independently of its relation to the created order. If that is so, then these properties will carry a deeper, more sacramental significance than is apparent on Wolterstorff's account.

For example, the 'spirit' of places such as the meadow and the cloister, as the friends experience them, is given in their stillness and beauty, in their openness and enclosure, and so on. And the religious meaning of these qualities, for the friends, is not fully rendered by the observation that God wants human beings to experience such qualities.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), p. 172.



Rather, these qualities are taken to provide some intimation of the divine nature. In some appropriately analogical sense, God is all of these things too – and the religious significance of these places consists partly in this fact. So here we have a rather different, more sacramental account of how the physical qualities of a place may enter integrally into its religious meaning.

Of contemporary theological writing on place, it is perhaps David Brown's *God and Enchantment of Place* which offers, in terms of sensibility rather than details of method, the closest approximation to the approach that I have taken here. A central concern of his book is to recover a long-standing but of late neglected tradition of theological reflection, which he characterizes in these terms: 'Instead of always functioning as an inference [as in the traditional proofs of the existence of God], there was the possibility that a divine structure is already implicit in certain forms of experience of the natural world, whether these be of majesty, beauty, or whatever... Enchantment, I suggest, lies in the discovery of God under such forms, whether or not any further practical consequences follow.'<sup>23</sup> Our study has sought to articulate this same sort of perspective – by supposing that 'place' is religiously meaningful not only in so far as it provides the basis for some inference of religious import, or constitutes the backdrop for a non-sensory encounter with God, or reveals God's benevolence, but because material forms can themselves provide, non-inferentially, an intimation of the divine nature. In this sense, God can be discovered 'under' a material form – rather than the significance of the form having to be mediated by way of some inference, or some non-sensory experience, or by means of a doctrinal scheme which specifies God's will in creation.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford, 2004), p. 22. The account I have given remains distinct from Brown's in so far as I have tried to subsume phenomena such as those he describes here within our threefold picture of the differentiated religious significance of place. I have also developed an associated epistemology of place, building on the work of Bachelard and others.

<sup>24</sup> The perspective of Belden Lane is also broadly congruent with the approach that I have followed here – see for example his development of the thought that 'ontological', 'cultural' and 'phenomenological' methods all have their place in the study of sacred place: *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD, 2002), Chapter 2. Jeremy Sheehy's essay 'Sacred Space

These reflections provide a further way of elaborating the second of our models of the differentiated religious significance of place, according to which certain gestures can direct our attention onto some material context, and refer us thereby to the presence of a sacred reality under a correlative set of material forms. We have seen how that model might be given further definition by appeal to theories of reference in science – perhaps certain bodily movements, and an associated structuring of the phenomenal field, enable the believer's thoughts to be directed to God, in rather the way that a scientist's thoughts can be directed to an electron by virtue of what she or he does in an experimental context. Or we could follow the example of Erazim Kohák, and allow that certain behaviours, and associated experiences, can reveal a place as a domain of 'mineness' – and in this way disclose God's presence under the forms of a material context. Finally, in the light of our discussion just now, we might extend this second model by suggesting that the stillness, beauty, and other sensory properties of a place can fix the character of a localized *genius*, and thereby provide a window on to the ultimate nature of things. We might fill out this last picture by supposing that at Port Meadow and the cloister, the friends take themselves to encounter an encompassing *genius*, which does not so much supervene upon material contexts as infuse them, and confer a certain significance upon them. If we take this line, then we might say that the *genius mundi* is present under the material forms of these places, in so far as they bear the imprint of its character.<sup>25</sup>

and the Incarnation' is animated by similar convictions: in Philip North and John North, eds., *Sacred Space: House of God, Gate of Heaven* (London, 2007), pp. 9–20. See too Ellen Ross's sixfold typology of place relative religious meanings in her essay 'Diversities of Divine Presence: Women's Geography in the Christian Tradition', in Jamie Scott and Paul Simpson Housley, eds., *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York, 1991), Chapter 5. Her categories 'historical place as sacred presence' and 'created space as sacred place' are of particular relevance to the themes that we have been exploring.

<sup>25</sup> At the close of Chapter 4, I noted how the idea of 'encounter' with God might be spelt out with reference to the first of our models of the differentiated significance of place – by thinking of such an encounter as mediated by the recognition of the microcosmic meaning of some experience. The characterization of the friends' experience that I am giving here does not turn so evidently upon the idea of microcosmic meaning. The religious import of the experience is given in the fact that it refers the mind to qualities (of stillness, beauty, and so on) which are taken to provide an intimation of the divine essence – rather than depending at all directly upon the thought that these qualities are somehow representative of the nature of things more broadly.

THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF PLACE  
IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF  
EDMUND CUSICK

It will not have escaped the reader's attention that this work has been inspired very largely by Edmund Cusick – by his work, by the friendship which he extended to me, and by his death. In recognition of this fact, I would like so far as possible to leave the last word in our discussion to him, and to the example which he set. In my experience of him, Edmund gave bodily witness to the idea that living well requires the cultivation of a sense of place. Aristotle comments that the person of good character will be able to regulate their feelings appropriately – and he notes that this implies 'having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way'.<sup>26</sup> In his life and in his work, Edmund stood for the idea that place should also feature prominently in this list – so that virtue consists equally in ensuring that our feelings and our actions are place-sensitive, or located *in the right place*. Indeed, Edmund's own example suggests that the appreciation of place-relative meanings constitutes a kind of meta-virtue, which undergirds these other kinds of sensitivity.

To take just one instance of his approach to these matters, Edmund chose to give me the news of his impending death not on the telephone, when he told me simply that we needed to talk, nor when I arrived at his house a few days later, nor when we climbed into the car to drive up the valley at the back of the house – but only when we were out of the car, and after we had taken our first strides together along the track which winds up the wooded glen. In this way, whether consciously or not, he was locating this new episode in our friendship within a wider narrative – and establishing a connection between our encounter that day and the times when as youths we had walked side by side in the hills around Aberdeen, and arrived thereby at a shared, paced-out sense of ourselves. To use the language

<sup>26</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II. I am following Terence Irwin's translation (2nd edn. Indianapolis, 1999), reproduced in Russ Shafer Landau, ed., *Ethical Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford, 2007), p. 678.

we have adopted in this book, by speaking of these matters at this place, and by walking with me here, Edmund was able to confer a particular sense upon his behaviours – so allowing them to count as certain actions. The news of our imminent separation was situated, then, within an encompassing narrative of our connectedness; and this news was given to me not just at a site of the general kind that one might find in the Cairngorms, but here – at the place whose sense he sets out in his poem *Coed y Farden*, a place which stands in his mind for ‘the tenderness of ordinary things’, among which we should surely number death.<sup>27</sup>

So the themes that we have been exploring abstractly under the headings of *the narratively mediated agency of place*, *the connectedness of our storied identity to place*, and *the supra-individuality of place* are all in evidence here. Edmund’s example that day also speaks eloquently of the role of sensitivity to place in constituting a good life. Because he understood the meanings which are inscribed in this landscape, Edmund was able to fashion the sense which attached to his behaviours there – and thereby he was able to shape the construal which I and others would be able to place on his life and on his death. Here he embodies, we could say, the narratively structured, densely singular, and uniquely ‘persuasive’ mode of life that is, on von Hügel’s view, the mark of saintliness.

Edmund’s sensitivity to place is also revealed of course in his writings. In his poetry as in his life, place assumes for him something like the role which Plato ascribes to the Forms. Andrea Nightingale has noted how the language of philosophical contemplation as it was developed in Greece in the fourth century BCE had its origins in talk of the *theoros* – the person who leaves his native city to journey to a sacred space, where he will witness rituals and holy objects.<sup>28</sup> She comments: ‘*Theoria* at religious festivals – in which the pilgrim viewed

<sup>27</sup> In his brown notebook, Edmund explicitly identifies the Cairngorms with the region of Wales surrounding his house: ‘I still feel essentially lifted up in spirit when I pull Lola [his car] up at the head of the glen, get out and breathe in. It *is* mountain country, as surely as the Cairngorms is – the wild otherness of the spirit there, the absolute sense that this is no longer human territory’. This is the place to which he took me that day.

<sup>28</sup> Andrea Wilson Nightingale, ‘The Philosopher at the Festival: Plato’s Transformation of Traditional *Theoria*’, in J. Elsner and I. Rutherford, eds., *Pilgrimage in Graeco Roman and Early Christian Antiquity* (Oxford, 2005), Chapter 6.

icons, sacred images, and ritualized spectacles – offered a good model for this conception of philosophical “vision.”<sup>29</sup> Of course, it is in the work of Plato that this ideal of philosophical contemplation finds definitive expression. The philosophical contemplative, as Plato envisages him, radicalizes the example of his religious counterpart:

Like the *theōros* at religious festivals, the philosophic theorist detaches himself from ordinary social and political affairs in an effort to contemplate divine and eternal objects. But this theorist goes well beyond the traditional *theōros* in his visualization of divine essences: for the philosopher engaging in contemplation completely detaches himself from his city – and, indeed, from the entire human world – and enters a sphere that is impersonal, disinterested, and objective.<sup>30</sup>

We could enlist Edmund Cusick’s work in support of the idea that the notion of ‘seeing’ or ‘*theoria*’ should be extended in precisely the opposite direction. He would say that the language of contemplation should continue to be grounded in our experience of sacred place, but he has a broader understanding of religiously meaningful space than does the *theoros*. So instead of requiring disengagement from the world and its particularities, the kind of seeing that Edmund describes – the kind that is set down in *Coed y Farden* – implies a deeper rootedness in the material order, and a correlative sensitivity to the structures of human and more-than-human meaning that are displayed there. So there is a different epistemology here – one based on the sense-making capacities of the body, rather than on non-embodied philosophical thought or ‘sight’. But in each case, the object of contemplation is a supra-individual reality – in Plato, it is the Forms, and in the life and work of Edmund Cusick, it is places, or the meanings borne by places. And where a sensitivity to the Forms is required in Plato for a knowledge of how to act, in Cusick’s thought, it is above all knowledge of place that plays this role.

There is a ready sense, then, in which Edmund Cusick’s religious quest is directed at a non-material realm, in so far as he is interested in the meanings presented by places – and not simply in what is evident to the senses. But, of course, these meanings are meanings for the

<sup>29</sup> ‘The Philosopher at the Festival’, p. 163.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Philosopher at the Festival’, p. 164.

body – they have to do with the possibilities for bodily appropriation that are extended by a place, and it would make no sense therefore to try to apprehend them independently of the body. So in Plato's work and in the poetry of Edmund Cusick, we are invited to attend to a supra-individual, identity-defining, meaning-conferring and action-eliciting context – but the terminus of these enquiries is even so very different, and a correlative deep-seated difference in epistemology is implied.

There is also, implicitly, a difference of view about the role of desire. In the *Symposium*, Plato speaks of how desire can be re-focused, so that it tracks away from particular examples of mundane beauty, and is trained instead on the non-material, non-particular Form of Beauty. For Edmund too, bodily appetites, including sexual appetites, need to be integrated into a wider set of commitments and in this sense transcended. But the implication of his account is not that we should forsake our attachment to material things, in the name of communion with some non-material realm – it is, rather, that we should recognize the possibility of a relationship to the material order which is not founded upon appetite, and then see our identity as given in that relationship. This perspective is laid out in compressed form in some of his journal observations, notably in these remarks, written shortly before his death:

one intuition has been dawning in me for a while for much longer than the few days since I have known of my illness. This intuition is that the things I have spent most energy over, most desperation over, in trying to achieve in my adult life, are not in the end the most important to me. There is a still sureness, an absolute connection between my perceiving mind and what it is that I perceive, there is a communion of rightness in certain moments which ring down the path of my life like those little candlelights in the church yard that Mark and I saw one night at St Cross Church, St Cross Lane. They have nothing to do with striving, or with hunger. I've spent so much of my grown up life consumed with thoughts of desire, and that has always been the thing which has been outside me, which has been *not mine*... Yet the things which I value... the things I simply find are real for me now... are things that were simply freely given to me. This is the surprise not the thrill of the stuff I was desperate for, anxious for, needed to, wanted to possess, but the quietness of things that were unshakably my own.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> This passage is taken from Edmund's blue journal.

I want to let this passage speak for itself, but I will note just one point. Here Edmund alludes to the 'absolute connection' between his 'perceiving mind' and 'what it is that I perceive'. It is the absoluteness of this connection which means that there is no role for appetite here: the object of his perceiving is already perfectly possessed. More exactly, the absoluteness of this connection means that the 'object' is no longer merely an object, but integral to himself – so that his own identity, what is 'unshakably my own', is now given in 'what it is that I perceive'. And what he perceives, in the example he takes here as more generally, is things-in-place.<sup>32</sup>

Cusick's life and writings imply that the search for the sacred is a little like the search for action, as distinct from a colourless stretch of bodily movement – in each case, we are looking not simply for empirical data, and not simply beyond the empirical data, but for the meanings given in the empirical data.<sup>33</sup> For Cusick of course, divine meanings are relative not just to bodily movements, but to places. His religious quest is, then, a search for the meanings which are inscribed in particular microcosmically significant places. And as his poetry reveals, these meanings may in turn be given in the storied identity of a place, or in the mode of bodily appropriation which it affords.

This perspective is broadly consonant, I have been arguing, with the approach of Christian theology – especially in so far as Christians have seen God not so much as a further individual, but as the meaning which infuses the world. From a Christian perspective too, this divine meaning is given partly in the world's sensory qualities – see for example Wolterstorff's comments on the implications of the doctrine of creation for the phenomenology of human experience.<sup>34</sup> It is also given in story, and above all in the story of the incarnation. It is noteworthy that, to some extent, these sources of meaning can work independently of one another. Even if, from

<sup>32</sup> The theme of transcendence of appetite, which is not to be confused with mere renunciation of the world, is again reminiscent of von Hügel's depiction of saintliness.

<sup>33</sup> Compare John Wisdom's discussion of the connection between religious understanding and pattern recognition, in his essay 'Gods', in *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 149–68.

<sup>34</sup> The passage is discussed in Chapter 8 and referenced there in footnote 18.

a purely sensory point of view, the post-incarnation world has much the same character as before, its storied identity has nonetheless changed fundamentally – and the meaning presented by our cosmos will now be very different from that presented by any empirically indistinguishable cosmos in which there has been no incarnation.

Let me conclude by noting one final objection to the picture that has emerged in the course of this book. Here again the poetry of Edmund Cusick will prove to be a helpful resource. I have been proposing that the language of the *genius loci* is akin to the language we use of God, and that we can think of God as the meaning which pervades the world, or as the *genius mundi*. An objector might urge: if the world is ‘fallen’, how can its *genius* be simply identified with God? This difficulty can be handled within the framework that I have been using by recognizing that by ‘the world’ here is meant not just that stretch of cosmological and human history which has unfolded to date, but the whole sweep of the world’s story, including its eschatological consummation. Given that larger narrative context, we may say straightforwardly that the meaning of the world is God.

Another response to the objection, not flatly incompatible with this first response, would take the doctrine of the Fall, and the idea that language of God functions like *genius* language, to imply that there is some place *other than this world* in which a divine meaning is already uninhibitedly expressed – since *genii* are, after all, primordially realized in places. And we might think of this locus as itself divine, in so far as it realizes such a meaning unreservedly. This kind of perspective is not entirely alien to Christian theological reflection. Karl Barth, for example, has argued that God’s reality contains its own pre-eminent space.<sup>35</sup>

Some such idea is also implied, I think, in the poetry of Edmund Cusick. A poem like *Coed y Farden* is focused very much upon the *genius* of a particular this-worldly material context. But elsewhere

<sup>35</sup> See Karl Barth, ‘The Unity and Omnipresence of God’, in *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II: *The Doctrine of God*, Part 1 (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 460–90. Tim Gorringer provides an instructive account of Barth’s thought on these matters in *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge, 2002), Chapter 2. Compare too the idea that we have our being ‘in’ God: Acts 17:28.



Cusick writes about the afterlife, which he conceives as a place – a place which is like our present world in many respects, but perfected. This proposal can be given further definition using the categories of our discussion. If human identity is rooted in place, and if the afterlife involves some kind of affirmation or consolidation of our identity, then we may speculate that the place or places inhabited by the dead cannot be entirely different qualitatively from the places which constitute our own world. We might even suppose, on theological grounds, that it is in this future place that we will be able to be most fully ourselves – it is here that we will be able to realize our identity most securely.

Given our reflections on the role of material continuity in storing up existential meanings, and contributing thereby to the sensefulness of a human life, we might speculate further that this future place will be not just qualitatively like our world but, at least in part, materially identical with it. (The same sort of idea is involved, I take it, in the doctrine of bodily resurrection.) And if we think of such a perfected space as itself divine, because it expresses uninhibitedly a divine meaning, then we will be able to give a particularly straightforward answer to the question of how the world's sensory properties are able to provide an intimation of the divine nature – they do so, we could say, by providing an image of a divine place, which is like the places of this world, only compatible with a mode of life in which we can be fully ourselves. The relationship to place that we enjoy in our present life would be brought to fulfilment in such a world. Of course, this is the sort of place that I would wish for Edmund. In his poem *Morgana* he has envisaged just such a place. So here I end – and let Edmund himself tell out this hope.

### Morgana<sup>36</sup>

We will inherit that land of poppies, pomegranates  
the bright isle which drowning men have seen  
as the last darkness parts before their sight,

<sup>36</sup> Edmund Cusick, *Ice Maidens* (West Kirkby, 2006), p. 29.

which rests, they say, beyond the furthest west,  
but lies, in truth, beyond the stark horizon  
at every compass point; to which the soul must turn,  
quivering to stillness.

And while from that glittering sea we turn our eyes  
it sends its signs to us: the hush  
after birdsong in the dusk, the red sun  
sinking beneath the earth, and at the mass,  
looking from face to face, we see its light there,  
as each sips the blood of the eternal kingdom.

Apples, and apple wine, brewed sharp and sweet  
As the serpent's kiss, scents of cinnamon and clove  
twine round the trees of those green glades  
where we will meet again with those we loved,  
and know them beautiful, as in their youth,  
or in the hour when they were most themselves.

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