

SACRED SPACES

By PAMELA TUDOR-CRAIG

PEOPLE USED TO MOCK medieval theologians for debating how many angels could stand on a point of a pin. What modern folly! The question poses picturesquely a profound issue: what is at stake is the intersection of divine and human space—the ‘phenomenal’ space of this world versus the ‘real’ space of eternity. Does that intersection take up any physical room (or time) at all? It would be a privilege to overhear such a debate. If we want a serious glimpse of the depth of medieval philosophy in its attitude to spatial terms we could turn to the recent book by Richard Foster on the iconography of the Great Pavement at Westminster Abbey.¹ To read his chapter ‘Images of Divine Order’ is to be convinced that this critical pavement, where sacred space has been laid out within the most exact compass for the specific high purpose of coronation, reflects a vision of the universe which is more all-encompassing than the provisional concepts we tend to assemble nowadays.

Focussing upon a single point in space for a sacred purpose is older than Christianity. As Aldous Huxley saw it, the purpose of the Sacrament is to act as a burning-glass whereby we may identify the holiness inherent in bread and wine. Thence we may come to discover that all creation is sacred.²

In the last analysis, sacred space is internal and not external to ourselves at all. The holy is where we recognize it. However it is universally acknowledged that certain external experiences trigger off that sense of awe. Some of those external experiences are conditioned more by circumstance than by actual context. My first husband told me of a walk he took immediately he heard on the radio that the Second World War had been declared. He leant on a gate, looking into a field where cows grazed. The veil of ordinariness had been lifted by the crisis of the news, and he saw the sacramental dimension of that daily scene.

As the Psalmist knew, we look to the hills for our help. Along the crest of the South Downs, looking southwards to the sea or inland to the Weald, our preoccupations fall away. The very act of climbing above our immediate surroundings puts our little lives within the overarching prevenience of the Divine. On Mount Caburn for instance, geological height is further enhanced by the scars of the

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desperate Celtic defence against the relentless Roman invasion. Sites dearly defended by our ancient forebears—Masada, Troy, Jericho, Maiden Castle, Mount Sion—do not lose the memory of sacrifice. The holy high places set apart by our ancestors keep their vesture of awe whatever may have become of structures once erected upon them. Even floodlighting cannot destroy the Acropolis, nor English Heritage Stonehenge. The Greek gods keep their foothold on Mount Olympus and 'King Arthur' his seat outside Edinburgh. The high place at Petra, the ruined abbey at Glastonbury at the foot of the mysterious Tor, exert their old magnetism. Many ruefully admit that Rievaulx, Fountains and Fontenay resound with the plain chant of perpetual praise more audibly than the still functioning cathedrals with their turnstiles and tourist guides. Inheritors of the romantic movement, some of us reluctantly discover that we more readily imagine Wordsworth's nun 'breathless with adoration'³ among desolate ruins than before altars by Ninian Comper and windows by Clayton and Bell.

If most of us find something of the Divine on the crest of a hill, we may again be surprised by the sacred when we come unexpectedly through a narrow pass upon a broad horizon or wide water:

. . . he stepping down
By zigzag paths, and juts of pointed rock,
Came on the shining levels of the lake.⁴

In time of trouble, do you too seek water? For some of us the sea of Galilee lies at the heart of the experience of the Holy Land. Its shores are less busily inhabited than they were in Christ's time, but the line of distant hills over the great water must have been imprinted on his memory as it is on ours. The simple chapel by the lakeside commemorating his meeting with the apostles after the Resurrection marks one of the sacred spaces of this earth for all Christians.

The intensification of awareness may also be found in caves. The recent discovery on the shore of the Mediterranean of yet another cave painted in prehistoric times reminds us that the practice of ritual in vaulted spaces within the rocks is more ancient than any formal religion. The grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes is one in a long line of such caves, inhabited by images of Our Lady. The treasury at Venice owns a great hollow crystal containing a silver statue of the Virgin. Chartres cathedral was built where a statue of a Roman matron had been found in a cave. Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*, painted in 1500,

takes place in a shed which leans against the mouth of a cave, and through that cave we may glimpse a sacred grove. And there is the wholly unexpected holy place: the coming unawares upon the numinous. The whisper of divinity may float along the platform of Piccadilly underground station in the rush hour. Why not? In addition to 10,000 tired minds and tired skeletons clothed in flesh and winter coats, as many weary spirits are gathered there. You may meet the sacred on a railway station or at Heathrow Airport. Like the quick smile of a passing stranger, it is the more valued for being unsought. It used to come to me echoing through silent London streets at four o'clock in the morning as we staggered home to bed, while the first light caught the ragged leaves and trunk of a great plane tree that stood before our house, both to be destroyed within the month.

Whereas the religions of the Far East encouraged us to look within ourselves to find the sacred, those of the Near East have suggested that we look towards Mecca or Jerusalem—that we look east, outward, beyond ourselves. This is so well understood that the phrase 'looking east' can be a way of suggesting the spiritual journey. Placed as we are on a spherical globe, if we continue to go east with sufficient integrity we are bound to come back to where we began 'and know the place for the first time'.⁵

The urge to pilgrimage, the wish to step further than our daily round to find a special place, has been secularized in our day. I wonder sometimes whether the restless exploration of South Sea Islands and the bonanza of the tourist agencies is yet another way of expressing the longing to be taken beyond our ordinary selves.⁶ Is the standard tourist with a polaroid camera following the same urge as the prehistoric Polynesian travellers? There is a ratio between the effort needed to reach a special destination and our awareness of that destination when we get there. Perhaps the ultimate discovery of spatial sacredness was observed by Frank White in his discussion with the astronauts who had found 'universal insight' when they looked down upon our planet from outer space.⁶

Sacred spaces cannot be contrived—they grow. They are enriched by the repeated ploughing of their soil through the prayers of generations. A few new buildings can suggest the holy by their simplicity alone. The chapel at St Julian at Coolham in Sussex has an entirely voided east wall where an uninterrupted pane of glass only engraved with an outline of a cross looks down upon the beech trees and the lake. Underfoot are rushes only. Prayer wings east more

easily there than in the chapel of the retreat house at Pleshey, where the east wall is not glazed but solid, and without an inspiring image thereon it rebuts the imagination. The chapel of Burrswood near Groombridge carries another message. The first time I went there I turned to Dr Arnold and said 'I would like to come back'. Over the altar I had seen hanging a single silver shining cross of great length and slenderness. When I did return a month later the cross was not there, so I asked why it had been taken away. Dr Arnold said 'It had never been there, but I've always wanted it to be'. Perhaps by now it hangs where I saw it. Such incidents allow us to hope that recognition of the numinous is not entirely arbitrary.

Among sacred spaces that human beings have created it is inevitable that we think first of cathedrals and churches. The seesaw between the wish to build a temple on a symmetrical plan expressing the need to focus on the centre and the wish to make a temple longitudinal to provide for great processions is one of the main threads in the history of ecclesiastical architecture. On the whole the patrons who wanted length have won, not only in the distant past: at Coventry in the 1950s the longitudinal plan by Basil Spence was accepted, and the many alternative centrally designed plans by other architects 'which had been set aside' came to be built on a smaller scale in the new housing estates.

It does not any longer immediately appear that cathedrals were in fact articulated to provide a series of centres, of further degrees of privacy and holiness: beyond the nave screen, for those whose lives were set apart for worship; and beyond the High Altar around the shrine for the pilgrim.

The destruction of so many screens deprives us of the kind of surprise that was intended—for example in the Frari in Venice, where as you proceed through the screen, Titian's *Assumption* bursts upon you. The Rococo churches of Bavaria are not compartmentalized, but there a dynamic sense of movement is created by the paean of praise coming from plaster angels, gilt altars and riotous vault paintings, and above all by the liquification of architectural forms.

In Northern Europe we have somewhat lost the sense of the holiness of shrines, and yet the most hard-hearted Anglican is moved by the three simple coffins in the lowest part of the church of St Francesco in Assisi. Francis can still reach us where his more sophisticated brethren seem to have become mute Northerners. On my first visit to Santa Maria degli Angeli at Assisi I was appalled by

the cheap bookshop on the Portico and could go no further. Some years later I told an old clergyman of great wisdom what had happened, and he smiled and said 'and by being shocked at the Portico you failed to discover the heart'. Next time I was in Assisi I went further, and there in the middle of the elaborate Baroque church under the swinging dome is the little Portiuncula, home of St Francis and his brethren and perhaps of St Benedict before him. The Portiuncula, a simple eighth-century structure large enough to hold perhaps eight people at a time, must be again among the sacred spaces of the western world.

Those of us who have penetrated to the grotto in the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, or to the site of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, overlaid as they both are by the devotions and embellishments of later centuries, have been touched by the core of the Christian mystery which lies hidden there. For those in search of sacred spaces, may I commend the Olive Grove beside the Garden of Gethsemane? It overlooks the Golden Gate of Jerusalem which will not be opened again until Christ returns, winding down the little road from Bethany on the second Palm Sunday.

Nowadays we study cathedrals as great articulations of architectural science and engineering, but they were designed as settings for the real pearl within; that pearl being the shrine, or the high altar at Mass. Beyond their structural forms and visual climaxes, which were intended to convey the idea of a citadel of God, they were hives for the creation of the honey of prayer. It is meaningless to ask which is more holy—a great Rococo church or a simple wayside chapel. Some appeal more to one taste, some to another. There is room in the troubled human heart for delight and reassurance from both sources. But there is not room for the jarring, the affront, of a commercial approach to any kind of shrine, and that has been for some time an almost inevitable aspect of our encounters.

In Britain the provision for a deepening sense of mystery was swept away in neo-classical times by James Wyatt, aptly named the Destroyer for his havoc at Durham and Salisbury. Yet that destruction revealed the fundamental correspondence between the longitudinal arcades and an avenue of trees leading ultimately to an inner sanctum. Such an avenue of elm trees was actually planted outside both Wells and Exeter cathedrals in the 13th and 14th centuries, so that their processions made a smooth transition from a long approach through over-arching trees to the over-arching vaults of the nave. The eighteenth-century country gentleman secularized the idea,

which may well go back to the Druids, in order to enhance the approach to his mansion.

The builders of the great cathedrals realized that, gladly as our spirits might soar into their vaults to overhear the music of angels suggested by the carvings and paintings on high, and conveyed on special occasions by singers placed in high galleries, we need the little secret places too. Every cathedral is provided with quiet chapels for prayer, radiating from the east end or placed to the east side of the transepts. Westminster Abbey is clearly the most besieged of all holy places in England. Yet the chapel of St Faith is as quiet as a deserted country church. Parties mill around the Poets' Corner, but to cross the threshold into that chapel is to go through a sound barrier between confusion and pure silence.

It is a tragedy that most of the great altarpieces that were intended to provide a focus for prayer now hang in long serried ranks in museums, like suits of clothes on hangers in a shop. A work of art designed to form a point of holiness cannot operate properly in a crowded museum, any more than a lion can be itself in a zoo. The purpose of beauty must always be to still the restless mind, and it is therefore of its nature sacred whatever the ostensible subject. The setting of any masterpiece is essential to its understanding.

A sacred space has been created in the last few months in the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London. So sensitive is the setting that I wonder whether those who have designed it were quite unaware of what they were doing. Behind Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* there is a hidden 'chapel' where hangs alone his cartoon of the Holy Family. Before it was vandalized it used to hang in a quiet little room of its own within the main body of the National Gallery. In both these settings it has had the same effect: those who enter are hushed, and they pause for much longer than they do before other pictures. In between hanging in these two appropriate places the cartoon was temporarily placed in the basement of the National Gallery in an inadequate position. There it did not seem to have the same power to hold the eye or subdue the senses that it has now regained. The magnetism emanates from the mysterious picture; but it cannot be fully sensed without a special setting.

A sacred space is an interval in time as well as in place, an interval when we hear as we are heard; when we know as we are known. It is a flash of understanding—a memory perhaps of a wider country from whence we came and to which all pilgrimages must at last return. It is, to speak as a medievalist, a pinpoint upon which our Guardian Angel has fleetingly alighted.

NOTES

- ¹ Foster, Richard: *Patterns of thought: the hidden meaning of the Great Pavement at Westminster Abbey* (London, 1990).
- ² Huxley, Aldous: *The perennial philosophy* (London, 1946), p 71: 'Faith and devotion prepare the worshipper's mind for perceiving the ray of Godhead at its point of intersection with the particular fragment of matter before him. Incidentally, by being worshipped, such symbols become the centre of a field of force . . .' (p 72).
- ³ William Wordsworth, 'It is a Beauteous Evening' (1807).
- ⁴ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Passing of Arthur' (1859).
- ⁵ T. S Eliot, *Little Gidding* (1944).
- ⁶ The Polynesian travellers and the spaceship conversions are discussed by Dr Pamela Collarado in her article, 'A meeting between brothers: indigenour science' *Beshara* 13 (1991), pp 22-24.