

# Religious experience and religious commitment

## Is there a missing link?

*Rosemary L. Haughton*

### *Filling the 'church-shaped' hole: new commitments*

SOME FRIENDS OF MINE HOLD what they call a 'spiritual tea' on Sunday afternoon once a month, in their family home. The small group that comes includes some who regularly attend a church or religious organization (one is a minister) but attracts especially people who experience not so much what a recent writer called a 'God-shaped hole' in their lives as a 'church-shaped' hole. The shape of that hole is not altogether clear; in conversation, it seems that there has not been more than a brief and unsatisfactory experience of church, though one or two have dropped a religious practice that once seemed satisfying. The man who started the group does not want any kind of organized religion, believing – and he is far from unusual – that to institutionalize spiritual experience is to deaden it. The basis of this gathering is a sharing of spiritual experience, and the person who started it did so because a huge and life-changing personal spiritual experience had left him wondering, in some sense, what to do with it. Part of the answer seemed to be to share it with others who also admitted to some kind of important spiritual experience, but were equally unsure what it required beyond a personal *metanoia*, and indeed how far such a personal change might go: its nature, its practical consequences in terms of life decisions.

There are hundreds of thousands of such groups across the world, maybe millions. They are not usually in touch with one another in any organized way, though some recognize themselves as part of a movement – perhaps a 'new age' one, or one related to some version of Buddhism or Native American religion, for instance, even of Christianity. They find their cohesion much less in any common set of beliefs than in a common respect for personal religious experience and desire to nurture and support it. They include middle-class people in a neighbourhood setting, students' groups, co-operatives of

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various kinds, and also people from the same religious traditions drawn together by discontent with the spiritual fare offered them, but as seekers rather than reformers or rebels.

All the evidence is anecdotal but not therefore worthless, and the category is in any case very broad. It is happening, and it is happening because humans are spiritual beings and 'our hearts are restless' but for many there is no recognizable 'thee' to rest in.

### *Shifting frameworks and the search for language*

The significant thing about this phenomenon, from the point of view of this essay, is that the emphasis is all on the side of religious *experience*. People moved to seek and to share religious experience in this way may have a strong personal commitment to pursue the insights and values they perceive, but this commitment is not the result of a common articulation of belief or common moral system. This is in no way to undervalue such a personal spiritual commitment, or its effects in private, or even in public, life. It is only to say that it is a very different thing from what is traditionally perceived as a religious commitment, which supposes a pre-existing system of belief and related behaviour. A 'committed Christian', or Muslim or Jew is presumed to adhere to something already existing, which may manifest itself in a variety of ways but which displays a recognizable institutional shape.

The fact that the tide of spiritual experience may not be rolling many people towards the harbours of commitment to defined religious bodies is clear enough from the great efforts made by churches and other bodies of faith to encourage commitment to themselves. They attempt various kinds of renewal and revival programmes, such as cursillo, and the organization of rallies and events intended to rekindle personal spiritual enthusiasm within a particular organizational context. It is noticeable, and ironic, that all of these efforts (like their nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century counterparts) are aimed at fostering personal individual religion, even though the context of the event or programme may be communal.

In reflecting on this reality, what emerges for me is the sense of something missing in the middle – between 'experience' and 'commitment'. By this I mean that at this time in history in all kinds of ways the search for spiritual experience is recognized and fostered and shared in and out of specific religious contexts, and established religious bodies seek to contain and nourish this search within their own structures. But between the experience and the structural com-

mitment there is a gap which churches do not want to recognize, because no helpful description of it is to hand. The gap is hard to identify because the inherited language of most western religion assumes that there is none, and when symptoms of its existence are experienced the remedy itself accentuates the gap.

Since my particular tradition is a Catholic Christian one it is the phenomenology of this gap in terms of that tradition with which I am best acquainted, and I cannot adequately make comparisons with the history and spirituality of other major religious traditions. But even in my own tradition the subject has not been fully addressed because there has not been any adequate language with which to articulate the problem.

In seeking the beginnings of a language that might respond to the unease, the 'absence' which so many experience, I want first to locate the problem (rather literally) in human experience and to look at some implications of that location; next I want to situate it theologically, after which I want to show how some people in 'western' culture have recognized a gap, have tried to identify and even 'map' it, in a sense more literal than we might expect. Finally I want to suggest ways and means – some already at work – whereby the spiritual challenge of the 'gap' might be met.

### ***Recognizing the gap: the culture of separation***

It is because it is no longer possible even to pretend that all genuine religious experience emerges from and can be contained in the structure of a recognized form of religious commitment that it in fact becomes possible to recognize a gap between experience and commitment and to try to identify the nature of that gap and talk about it.

I am suggesting here that the nature of this religious gap is connected to another, better recognized gap in the experience of western culture – a gap which is being exported as fast as global markets can manage it. This latter gap has been commented on, lauded, lamented and analysed in all kinds of contexts and is variously perceived as a separation between homes and jobs, as a loss of 'neighbourhood', as the result of labour mobility, as the loss of family farms and the control of food products by vast agribusinesses, as the 'medicalization' of childbirth and death and the general depersonalization of health care (including the demise of cottage hospitals), as the result (or the cause) of women working outside the home, as the

'inevitable' (beneficial or destructive) globalization of trade, as the decline of rural life, and so on and so on.

*Place as the point of connection*

The gap, one way or another, is between people and place, and this is also where the gap between religious experience and commitment is located, though the size, shape and depth of the gap is variously experienced. That may sound like a gross over-simplification, but if it does, that is precisely because the resonance of the idea of 'place' for us is so weak. 'Place', in most discourse, is a neutral kind of word indicating simply a location, where one stands physically or intellectually or socially. And of course that is what it does mean, but it also seems to be the only available single word to express something much wider ranging, more powerful and more integral to human beings. 'Place', for this purpose, indicates the human connection to the land and to the community in and on the land from which all that is needed for life is drawn – and is perceived to be drawn. 'Place' is about tradition, about memories of ancestry, about stories and skills, about celebration and lamentation. It is about the Highland Clearances and about the Battle of Britain and about genocide in Bosnia and about organic farming and about pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. It is about a great number of words in everyday speech – hearth, season, parochial, civilized, source, boundary, backwoods, exile, urbane, courtesy, to name a few.

It helps if we notice the connections to place, of a simple and factual kind, that we do not usually make, and by not making them display the gap in question. For instance, we use plastics all the time but often do not know or care what are their raw materials and where they come from, or what effect the manufacturing process has on specific environments and the human communities involved. Plastics are 'place-neutral': modern, scientific, essential to our way of life. The idea and use of them is normally quite cut off from the not at all mysterious facts that connect plastics to the earthly systems within which they are produced and used. Plastics are everywhere but have no 'place', in the extended (and, I would maintain, essential) sense of the word 'place' such as, for instance, bread has, or bricks, though those connections too are much weakened. The effort of imagination needed to make such a connection witnesses to natural systems which determine the quality – even the fact – of daily existence in a specific community location.

'Place', finally, is a strongly spiritual word, and a theological one. Contained in the concept of place is the fact of literal and inescapable human interrelatedness with all other kinds of beings – animal, vegetable, mineral and spiritual. The sense of humanity as one inseparable part of a cosmic web of exchanged being is something we have relearned intellectually from twentieth-century physics and biology, and we have learned it from men and women who, in acknowledging its scientific implications, expressed an awe that can only be called religious. The sense of the awesome nature of human connection is one that, ironically, churches have sometimes been reluctant to acknowledge because, once more, it challenges the boundaries of the territories regarded as their own.

It may not seem to follow from the perception of cosmic interrelatedness that the concept of 'place' is essential to it, but if it does not, then that is another indication of how difficult it is for us to recognize the obvious. Human beings, and animals and trees and boulders are categories, but they are only that because there are a lot of them around, easy to see and touch and count. They occur in specific contexts, they occur in *places*. Christians, of all people, should recognize the theological importance of this but they frequently do not. It has been easier, philosophically, for Christians to say that God became 'man' (or even 'human') than to say that an incarnate God needed his sandals made a particular size and on his travels carried in his mind images of a particular home, particular neighbours, fields, smells, sounds. Human beings have, and need to know, 'a local habitation and a name', otherwise they remain 'aery nothings'. 'Place', in the context of the notion of incarnation (and this is true even without necessarily asserting, as Christians do, that Jesus was incarnate God) is a vital theological concept, because incarnation is particular or it is nothing, and particular means, among other things, geographically and culturally located.

A faith in which the divine is generalized to the point of disconnection from the particular will have no context in which to give theological meaning to 'place', and 'place' will lack the possibility of expressing or nurturing the sacred. The particularity of the concept of incarnation in *one* sense is the key to a recovery of 'place' as an essential spiritual experience – the 'ground' from which spirituality grows.

In the context of this essay this most important point shows that 'place' is a spiritual experience of unique profundity.

If 'place' was where life developed, where one's roots were, where God was normally to be found, if at all, there were also other 'places' even more holy than the places of daily life. Places of pilgrimage antedate Christianity by millennia and the holy places of earlier religions often became the places of Christianity. To go on pilgrimage was a way to escape, for a while, the constraints of the lifelong struggle to make a livelihood and survive the stresses of local politics and oppressive hierarchic or social relationships, but its goal was a spiritual experience – to gain healing of mind or body, to do penance, to seek vision, or just to experience holiness. The sacredness of sacred places had and has to do with an event, or a person – a miracle, a saint, a vision – but above all it has to do with the shared experience, the fact of many feet walking that ground, people all together seeking the elusive mystery.

### *The diminishment of place*

We cannot recover that inevitable and unquestioned sense of the sacredness of place. Cities increasingly became concentrations of population for the purposes of industry rather than as centres of culture and government. In turn that gave way to efforts to deal humanly and, of course, profitably with huge urban populations washed up there by industry but no longer needed for that purpose. As both city and countryside have become increasingly resources to be mined for the profit of global corporations, the sheer inhumanity of the processes has become intolerable, not only to those who suffer varying degrees of degradation, poverty and hopelessness, but to many who observe it. It has been, indeed, those able to survive, who have not had imagination crushed out of them by narrowly vocationally oriented 'education' and a mental diet of media distortions, who have been able to become aware of what has happened and to denounce it and to offer alternatives.

Even when western seekers visit, admire and seek to learn from Buddhist, Hindu and other religious cultures which, in different ways, display the integration of life and belief in the local and the daily, it has not been possible to transfer this awareness directly into a western context except in the form of personal religious life-style and practice, sometimes together with like-minded others.

The sense of life rooted in a particular place has been admired, even envied, but the connection, the crucial significance of place as the integrating spiritual power – the 'sacrament' of community – has not, I feel, been adequately studied until recently.

That is changing, however. I want to give two widely different examples of a recognition by educated modern people that the deep experience of place is vital not just to personal spiritual experience – nature mystics have never been lacking – but to agricultural, economic and political decisions, which are religious in nature because of their integration through the commitment to place in its fullest sacramental sense. One example is the real-life, contemporary experience of people trying to share the life-style and practice of Andean peasant economy, and to find ways to articulate that for a ‘western’ audience. The second is the phenomenon of the unexpected impact of a fictional work, Tolkien’s *The lord of the rings*, on large numbers of people in many countries and cultures, and the reasons for that.

***Experience and commitment: an Andean peasant community***

My first example I discovered through the work of Kathryn Pyne Addelson, professor of philosophy at Smith College in Massachusetts, who has been involved in studying the political and economic effects of spirituality as something integrated into daily life. The work of the anthropologist Frédérique Apffel-Marglin is central to her study. For a number of years Apffel-Marglin has worked closely with a Peruvian group called PRATEC (in English the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies). It was founded in 1987 by three men whose background was in the peasant culture but who were university trained and in top-level jobs respectively in development, government-run agricultural research, and in the National University, teaching plant genetics in a faculty involved in bringing the ‘green revolution’ to the Peruvian Andean agricultural economy. It is a long story, but the main point of it is that these men found not only that the ‘green revolution’ technology failed, as did various other attempts to make improved agricultural techniques work in this setting, but that in the process they found themselves forced to ask quite different questions about the economy, about agriculture, and about human community.

I quote (with some abbreviations) from a paper by Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Kathryn Pyne Addelson:

The green revolution was born in Iowa with the development of hybrid corn . . . A seed’s ability to regenerate itself had proved a formidable barrier to commodification [of seed] but the development of hybrid corn was achieved through political machinations

and the infusion of massive research funding . . . No research was conducted on plant population improvement through open pollination, the manner in which peasants worldwide improve their crops . . . It was one way of opening vast global markets for the commodified hybrid seed (HYV) and many other industrial products that the HYV's require for viability.

(In this context we need to note that the recent and aggressive attempts by Monsanto and other corporate agricultural giants to take control of food production globally through bioengineered seed is a much greater and potentially more lethal version of this tactic. But that is another story.)

The three members of PRATEC had devoted themselves to development in the belief that this was the way to help their people. They lived through many phases and fashions in development . . . they tried everything available, always striving to capture the reality of Andean peasant agriculture . . . At long last they came to the conclusion that the problem lay in the very idea of development . . . Development had failed. The evidence lay scattered throughout the Peruvian landscape in . . . ruined infrastructure, abandoned after the project officials left, uncared for by the peasants. The evidence also lay in the repeated efforts to devise better methodologies and their final realization that within their professionalized perspective . . . it was impossible to . . . make development relevant to peasant lives.

After this came what can only be called a conversion process. In all the studies the authors read,

the peasant reality was being described from a position outside that reality, which split the reality into distinct academic disciplines of agriculture, anthropology, sociology, and so on. They [the PRATEC pioneers] finally became convinced that native agriculture was not only adequate to the native environment but alive and vibrant . . . [it] embodied a totally different mode of being in the world, of being a person, of relating to others both human and non-human, and of notions of time, space and nature. It was only from the point of view of western science and commodified thinking that peasant agriculture and culture looked backward . . .

The result was that these men left their jobs and devoted themselves to sharing the Andean peasant culture and to teaching others to understand a way of life integrated with the land in which it



flourished, one which respects the whole person and the whole community – of land, crops, animals, people, and of divinity. For this way of life – which works – depends on what I have called the sacramental quality of place. In this context, cultural practices such as rituals, festivals, ways of organizing labour and kin groups, and much more were all geared to the nurturance and regeneration of their world, both natural and cultural, the two being inextricably interwoven.

'Development', of whatever kind, might enable people to grow more crops more often, but it 'destroyed the cycle of rituals, that is to say both the biological and cultural regenerativity, transforming these peasants into individuals dependent on the market rather than each other, nature, and the *huacas* (deities)'.

***Place: the common point of commitment***

The spirituality that nurtures such an intertwining of every aspect of common life is one that depends on the place. One of the members of PRATEC wrote of:

the whole landscape which is called the *Pacha* . . . The *Pacha* and all that is part of it is alive, and all these beings speak. The *Pachamama* is also *Pacha* but refers more specifically to the land that offers us its fruit . . . These ritual acts of mutuality between all the members of *Pacha* regenerate the world.

This writer and the other two chose to become part of all this – not to lead or theorize but to share, driven to despair by the results of development and development attitudes. They 'deprofessionalized' themselves (the very phrase is calculated to send shivers through academe) in order to be able to act, write and teach from within the Andean experience. They live there as peasants, reclaim land once taken from them and re-establish their own way. As the authors of the paper put it, 'It is a collective way of making knowledge'.

This is a religious phenomenon; the age-old Andean culture is religious and so is the response and decision of the PRATEC members, though it can be misleading to use the word, since for western culture 'religion' is so automatically assigned to a separate personal and cultic category of experience. The experience of the peasant is a religious experience, a spirituality that informs every aspect of personal and communal life. The religious commitment also is total,

because not to be committed would be to separate oneself from life, people, place. The commitment of the members of PRATEC is also religious, but of a kind we more easily recognize because it involves what we can name as a conversion: there is a change and a deliberate choice of a different belief system, a different behaviour. And what unites the experience and the commitment is the place, the vast sacramental exchange of being, the giving and receiving of life in a specific context of land, custom, community. The experience grows in and from the place – yet it is universal: the knowledge of it, when shared, evokes a sense of common love and purpose across centuries and continents and faiths.

It is a peculiar experience to find signs of hope for humankind in news of the deliberations of capitalism's emperors, but reports of some of the things that were said in the course of meetings in Davos in January 1998 gave grounds for modest optimism. And that modest optimism is reinforced by the existence of a kind of undertow in our society, a society that welcomes affluence and is apparently easily persuaded that consuming is what life is about and yet indulges in fits of obstinate nostalgia, that flocks to re-creations of medieval life, that takes holidays in 'remote' places in order to see people who (at least for a while) live a 'simpler' life. There is 'something else' going on, and I think it has to do with that felt gap between religious experience and religious commitment, the need for something that integrates emotions and work and relationships and beliefs – the desire for the regenerative power of a community in and through place.

### ***The longing for re-enchantment: The lord of the rings***

One extraordinary indication of the nature of this nostalgia is my second example, much more briefly sketched because its subject is well known. This has to do with the kind and extent of the influence of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The lord of the rings*. The appeal of this story to millions upon millions in many different cultures and countries has baffled critics who would like to dismiss the book as an escapist fantasy which can do harm by distracting from the 'real' world, from scholarly 'rigour' and so on. Tolkien has been denounced as fascist, racist, sexist and much more. Despite the flood of denunciations and the refusal, in most academic settings, to take the book seriously as a work of literature, the sales have continued to grow for decades, and even now it is hard to find a bookshop that does not have *The lord of the rings* in stock.

Many explanations have been offered for the huge and – to its author not least – unexpected success of this unique book. The one I find most important (though I am not excluding other considerations) is the fact that in it Tolkien created a *place*. ‘Middle Earth’ is vast, contains many different kinds of landscape, peoples, flora, climate, but all are specific, and they are interrelated. The peoples of Middle Earth are intimately linked each to their own particular place, developing a culture out of it or, in the case of the Elves, living only lightly on it because of an allegiance to another and stranger place, the reality of which yet informs and transforms the forests of exile. Even those who, like the chief characters in the book, must travel far from their origins, are the product of a culture – a spirituality – nurtured and shaped by experience of place, which is both their strength, their joy and, at times, their grief.

As Patrick Curry says, in his book *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, myth and modernity*:<sup>1</sup>

Tolkien’s attention to ‘local distinctiveness’ is one of the most striking things about his book. It contributes greatly to the uncanny feeling of actually having been there, and known it from inside.

And again:

Middle Earth’s most distinctive places defy the separation, so beloved of modern scientific reason, into ‘human or social and therefore conscious subjects’ and ‘natural and therefore inert objects’. They are both: the places themselves are animate subjects with distinct personalities, while the people are inextricably in and of their natural and geographical locales.

Patrick Curry then goes on to name what he perceives as the ‘implicit project’ of Tolkien’s work: ‘the re-sacralization (or re-enchantment) of experienced and living nature, including human nature, in the local cultural idiom’. This ‘re-sacralization’ is what the members of PRATEC are about too, and all those who respond to the message, though in PRATEC’s case it is more a matter of defending an *existing* sacredness or sacramentality.

*The lord of the rings* is about place as sacrament – place as the nurturer and guide of soul and body, inspirer of courage, focus of love and sacrifice and on occasion high art, as well as the commonplace but ever-wonderful delights of companionship, productive

work and good food. There is plenty of spiritual experience in *The lord of the rings* of awe, of encounter with mystery, of the fierce ecstasy of battle and the soaring joy of deliverance or love as well as of despair and deep grief. There is also very explicit and formal commitment, both personal and communal, for the sake of the common good. Making sense of both the experience and the commitment is the place, source and sacrament, integrating all.

It is one thing to recognize this dynamic in the book, another to draw conclusions about the perception of the book by its millions of readers over the globe and over half a century. Patrick Curry, in talking to Russian, Irish and Italian readers, discovered that, for instance, each one had found in the hobbits an accessible native tradition, centred on 'small, simple and rural people – and self – with which to begin, and end renewed'. (Peruvian readers could no doubt have shared this perception and certainly the PRATEC people, if they ever read it, would recognize a familiar 'world'.) There are other peoples and situations in *The lord of the rings* which have resonated with readers all over the world. The point is that the themes are demonstrably of global relevance, not in spite of their local specificity but because of it.

Virginia Luling says in her paper, 'An anthropologist in Middle Earth':<sup>2</sup>

What Tolkien audaciously embarked upon was the 're-enchantment' of the world . . . [but] not just of any part of the world but of his own part, 'the northwest corner of the old world', and that simply because it was his own: 'if you want to write a tale of this sort you must consult your roots, and a man of the Northwest of the old world will set his heart and the action of his tale in an imaginary world of that air and that situation'.

'Re-enchantment', indeed, is in some ways a better word than 're-sacralization', because our use of religious language has attached concepts of sacredness to very specifically cultic contexts. 'Enchantment' can imply that enveloping experience or quality of life.

### *Signs of hope*

The places in the world where people consciously know place as sacred, enchanted, sacramental, and are guided and nurtured by it

are few, yet there is a growing awareness of the importance – the sheer necessity – of this now endangered spiritual experience.

There are small witnesses of hope and bigger ones; all kinds of alliances can occur. The architect Richard Rogers demands, in his little book, *Cities for a small planet*, that planners work with local people to create neighbourhoods for people where many aspects of living go on together. He quotes the amazing experience of Curitiba in Mexico, a city of one and a half million, whose mayor worked with the people of a vast shanty town to envision and, with their co-operation, to create a place of community, of vibrant economic and social life which is geared to the needs of its own people. With a very different aesthetic approach, Prince Charles has also given powerful public voice to the desire of ordinary people to live in places that are meant for all kinds of human interaction, not in boxes for storing off-duty workers. There are the huge economic powers, shaken into new thoughts by the drastically demonstrated fallibility of their global markets or their currencies. Organic farmers, architects, environmentalists – whoever they are, they are all going through a religious, or spiritual, experience, though they might seldom call it that. The catalyst and integrating power to all these is the phenomenon of place.

### *Seeds of awareness*

This article began with a small group that gathers to share spiritual experience. It is suspicious of religious language, it has no ritual, it is not consciously rooted in a location. Yet it meets always in the same home, and each meeting ends with a shared pot-luck meal. In the nature of the people who come, that meal is likely to consist of food bought, or grown, with an awareness of where it comes from – it will often be organic, locally grown. There is an awareness of being part of a wider community whose problems and hopes are part of the lives of those who come, often to the point of 'activism'. It is, indeed, such values that make participation in the group likely – there has to be something more – 'patriotism is not enough'. But this, too, is not enough.

We have a long way to go. If there are signs of an awareness, awareness at least of a lack, that awareness mostly has no philosophical or theological definition. If there are clear examples of ways to go, they lack overarching description, so they do not tend to form coalitions, still less to express a common creed.

The purpose of this article is to suggest the beginnings, at least, of a possible language in which to talk about a multi-faceted reality. Place as sacrament, the project as re-enchantment or re-sacralization, provides a kind of theological nexus which might suggest connections in a number of directions, and perhaps begin a conversation.

**Rosemary Luling Haughton** was born of an English/Jewish mother and an American father, became a Catholic in her teens, and is now resident in the United States. Despite her 'scrappy' education during wartime, her interest in theology led to the writing of books and articles, and lecture tours in the USA. She now lives and works with a small organization in Massachusetts which has developed comprehensive programmes to address local poverty. She married Algy, with whom she had ten children and fostered several others. Some months of each year she spends in England with her children, 27 grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren.

#### NOTES

1 Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle Earth: Tolkien, myth and modernity* (Floris Books, 1997).

2 Virginia Luling, 'An anthropologist in Middle Earth' in Patricia Reynolds and Glen H. Goodknight (eds), *Proceedings of the J. R. R. Tolkien Centenary Conference* (Milton Keynes: The Tolkien Society, and Altadena: The Mythopoeic Press, 1995).