

Sacred Space

Sacred Space:
Interdisciplinary Perspectives
within Contemporary Contexts

Edited by

Steve Brie, Jenny Daggers and David Torevell

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of essays is a contribution to an area of religious studies which has received surprisingly little attention to date and focuses on how sacred space is conceived and interpreted in a variety of contemporary contexts. Interdisciplinary in nature, it attempts to shed light on this phenomenon by grouping together a collection of papers delivered at a one day conference at Liverpool Hope University on September 16th 2008.

Contributors to this collection have reflected upon a broad spectrum of conceptions of sacred space, which are thrown into relief in their juxtaposition. As current formulations of what constitutes the sacred become dislodged from tradition-specific religious and theological conceptualizations, inevitably more fluid, amorphous and less easy-to-define understandings arise. As a consequence, the increasingly ambiguous relationships which are opened up between notions of sacrality and space call for a thorough discussion on how these two notions operate separately and in relation to each other in contemporary contexts. One might for example, make the point by contrasting twelfth century Christian Europe's understanding of sacred space, indelibly linked to experiences of divine power channelled through ecclesiastical structures, with postmodern understandings reflecting a vast range of conceptualizations, whereby notions of alterity and difference seem to sit equivalently alongside tradition-bound understandings of sacred space, for example, in liturgy and pilgrimage.

It may be helpful to the reader to make some further preliminary reflections on the provenance and predicament of sacred space in contemporary discourse. As all contributors are located in, or informed by, British – and in one case French – academic contexts, the provenance and predicament of sacred space within specifically *western* discourse is under scrutiny here. This observation is as relevant to David Weir's analysis of the Diwan in the Arab Middle East, as it is to Ron Geaves' 'Kavadi Festivals in Tamil Diasporas' or to Jan Brown *et al*'s reflections on the sacralizing of secular spaces in selected Indian and British contexts: western discourses frame these investigations, even when the

research material throws up challenges to continued Eurocentrism.

Traces of the fate of Christian notions of the sacred – Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox – in post-Cartesian modernity and in post-Christian and post-modern western trajectories can be glimpsed within these essays; the rise of religious studies – at once infused with Christian world views and determined to reach beyond these – is also evident in perspectives offered from within Muslim traditions of the Middle East and the Punjab. Through the work of scholars gathered here, who responded to a “call for chapters”, disparate “soundings” are taken concerning the provenance and predicament of the contemporary “sacred space”.

The perfectly judged opening chapter by Mark Barrett of Worth Abbey demonstrates a clearly articulated and sophisticated awareness of the enduring value and relevance of the Catholic monastic tradition to many contemporary searchers after sacred space. In this inter-disciplinary presentation of the monastic life, the spiritual resources offered by the focal sacred space of the Abbey are presented as they appear to the spiritual seeker – many of whom “rarely if ever visit a church”. The chapter is infused with the present day continuing of a Catholic tradition founded with the sixth century *Rule of St Benedict*, as a way of living the orthodox Catholic faith in the world, but yet this formative Christian commitment remains out of focus here. Rather, the experience of the seeker, who may discover “a deepened sense of what it means to be alive”, is foregrounded.

There is little expectation that the seeker will opt more permanently for the “scripted space” of the Abbey, or even for the more diffused commitment of joining a Church congregation, in order to locate his or her own story in relation to the Christian story; while both seeker and monk should, in Barrett’s closing words “discern in the monastic environment a way of ‘Seeing Salvation’, and having discovered it in one place begin to find it everywhere”, in these unchurched times, this spiritual experience will not necessarily find its interpretation within the ancient orthodoxies of the Christian story. Catholic Christianity thus endures while being in danger of its spiritual sources being detached from any perceived necessity to commit to the “scripted spaces” where its focal Christian story is told.

This distinctively Catholic perspective towards sacred space offered by Barrett differs considerably from Protestant approaches. The former tends to emphasize the sacramentality of the world *and* specifically designated spaces and places of sacrality, where God’s presence resides in a manner very different from those outside such designations. This Catholic attitude towards creation is underpinned by a strong doctrine of *analogia entis*, rooted in an incarnational theology – the sacred space of the cosmos really

is the arena of God's ongoing revelation. Specific sacred spaces, like liturgical spaces, are always in relation to this broader picture of how God reveals himself in the world. There might be a differently experienced divine presence within these two spaces, but *both* are regarded as being sacred. Mark Barrett's opening chapter reflects this position strongly. He argues that the sacred space of the Christian monastery has recently witnessed a noteworthy revival in lay interest by offering itself as a venue for transcendence. One reason he is able to account for this is because he believes it offers a unique opportunity for divine encounter and transformation which is founded upon a strong theology of space; in other words, such an encounter is far more likely to take place in the monastery than in other contexts and settings.

Protestant understandings of the sacred are different and often emphasize the split between the sacred and the secular. Consequently, they are less inclined to argue for a sense of sacred space different from other spaces. Such formulations are more likely to guard against tendencies to produce idolatrous attitudes towards space than they are to encourage such spaces. Some sociologists, like Berger, have famously plotted how this kind of Protestant viewpoint resulted in "an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality" (1980: 111) with the consequence that individuals started to inhabit a far more lonely universe than they did previously. This was one of the characteristics of the modern world, which, bereft of daily experiences of the sacred, allowed itself to become more easily susceptible to rational, empirical and secular investigations.

Whether we accept Berger's position or not, what is apparent is that an integrated social order based on a commonly agreed sacral and metaphysical system of meaning, became less easy to sustain. Consequently, more individual notions of what the sacred and its relationship to space might mean began to emerge. New understandings of space reflected many of the religious, social and political upheavals and presuppositions of modernity. It is worth remembering that before the Enlightenment space was believed to be symbolically constituted and consequently needed to be interpreted allegorically. The shift towards the autonomy of reason during the Enlightenment meant that space was no longer accepted as being linked to notions of the sacred. Those in power began to deny any claims about such relationships, as space became mathematically and empirically defined. Modernity, obsessed with origins, could see no reason for claiming space was determined according to a divine plan. Consequently, reformulated perceptions of space began to be divorced from traditional and historical patterns of understanding and, in turn, many began to float free from explicitly religious or theological contexts.

One of the consequences of this shift was that the relationship between the sacred and space became situated within a far wider net of meanings and interpretations, some religious, some not. Reformulated “modern” and “postmodern” understandings of the sacred up to the present day reflect a vast range of post-Enlightenment influences – intellectual, political, feminist, cultural, religious. For instance, contemporary conceptions are as likely to refer to human experiences of transcendence, self-fulfilment, authenticity and responsibility outside explicitly religious frameworks, as they are to concepts entailing an encounter with the God of classical theism. Emerging from an eclectic mix of such influences and sources, contemporary understandings of sacred space exhibit not only a more wide-ranging diversity of formulations, but at times point to conflictual barriers which seems to deny the possibility of any shared meaning. There really is no commonly agreed understanding of what constitutes sacred space any longer. However, on a more positive note, many disciplines previously divorced from the language of “spirituality” now wish to interpret aspects of their discipline in “religious” terms, even if that entails conceiving religion in new and perhaps idiosyncratic forms. Whether such reformulations overlap and satisfy readers’ own conceptualizations of sacred space can only be answered by the readers themselves.

What this book offers is an insight into a broad range of conceptualizations of sacred space which reflect shifting theological, post-Christian religious studies and postmodern understandings. What is noteworthy, in some cases, is how traces of the Christian tradition continue to influence and seep into apparently tradition-free formulations of the sacred; no approach reflected in the book is hermetically sealed from important historical, religious and cultural influences. One regret, however, is that the collection does not reflect sacred space in the practices of the many faith communities established in recent decades within western societies. Such perspectives would have enriched this project and might have begun a richer dialogue with the Christian and post-Christian perspectives represented in the book.

Those chapters which concern sacred space within the western world develop the themes opened by Barrett. Pascal Mueller-Jourdan returns this mode of seeing salvation everywhere to an explicit traditional Catholic position, wherein the ancient Stoic philosophy is deployed to argue for just such a homogeneity of sacred space: Mueller-Jourdan uses this Catholic version of the homogenous to challenge the reductive homogeneity of the post-Enlightenment modern scientific world view. David Torevell’s chapter introduces the interior “sacred space of the heart”, so investigating the spir-

itual formation of the nun or monk, the woman or man for whom the inner sacred space is more important than the outer, so linking monastic practice to apophatic theology. It is entirely consistent with the fascination of the contemporary unchurched searcher with the monastery that, in the monastic vision of Fitzpatrick – a key source for Torevell’s reflection – “the heart of the monk purified by ascetism becomes the space where all creation enters into the silence of God and the solitude of adoration”. The impetus outward from the sacred space of the monastic heart is traced in Torevell’s challenge to the modern university, to recover the balance between active and contemplative that characterized its medieval origin, so that the monastic dimension in each person (Pannikar) might be nourished through participation in university life.

Two chapters explore tensions over control of the terms of women’s access to the established sacred space of Anglican cathedral or church: Robin Hartley’s reflections on anxieties surrounding the sound of the mature female singing voice within the cathedral music tradition, and Jenny Daggers’ account of British Christian women’s liturgies at a moment of heightened concern over the position of women within their churches. The latter poses the crucial question, as relevant now as it was in the late 1970s: how are Christian women who resist patriarchal control to inhabit denominational sacred spaces, “to be present to the divine–human encounter mediated therein, when they find themselves excluded, or included only on terms set out by a male tradition”? It will be fascinating to see how the legacy of *Womanspirit Ritual* plays itself out within the contemporary framework of world, rather than simply western, Christianity at the start of the twenty-first century. Both chapters issue a reminder that officially sanctioned sacred spaces are subject to human regimes of control, which mediate, and possibly restrict, the potential divine–human encounter.

The same tension found in Barrett’s account between life-stories told within detraditioned secularizing narratives and the Christian story animates Rina Arya’s negotiation of post-Christian performance art, wherein the Christian narrative throws the simultaneous desecration and consecration of the wounded body into stark relief, and Caroline Bennett’s reading of the perpetuated sacrality of former sacred spaces, now put to use within the consumerist market economy. Similar themes emerge in a Bulgarian context in Pepa Grundy’s exploration of the intertwining of Orthodox sacred space with narratives that sacralise nationalism, and the contemporary potential of orthodox sacred space turned museum for the healing of past and thus present ethnic and religious divisions. In all these instances, Christian sacrality persists as subtext in a secularized space; also sacrality reappears

within spaces from which Christianity is considered to have been expelled. When Jan Brown *et al.* apply Hanlon's category of a belief system for an Age of Consumption comparatively in an Indian and British context, their thesis can be seen as an argument for the creation of yet another version of sacrality.

Several contributors refer to Durkheim's sociological approach to the study of religion, and to Eliade's universalized categories of the "sacred" and the "profane". These seminal thinkers have organised western understandings of sacred space in recent decades, but several contributors here seek to trouble this clear distinction. Thus, in his reassertion of a Catholic homogeneity, Mueller-Jourdan issues a direct challenge to Eliade's assertion of heterogeneity between sacred and profane spaces. For David Weir, "to define 'the sacred' in intercultural terms is a big task". With reference to the Middle Eastern Diwan, Weir seeks to destabilize the "categorical essentialism" invited by Eliade's sacred/profane distinction: he deploys the concept of liminality – again a western concept, first coined by van Gennep – to argue that boundaries between sacred and profane are differently drawn in Muslim societies, so what is liminal between these categories must also be reconstructed.

Both Steve Brie and Mark Godin present interpretations of literary texts in order to facilitate discussions of the concept of sacred space. Both writers are interested in the relationship between physical and mental geography and religious experience. With subtle and imaginative cross referencing to Urquhart's novel *A Map of Glass*, Godin posits the idea that sacraments are "'maps of flesh' since they offer a 'graphy', a writing and tracing out of bodies". He shows how liturgical participants engaging in symbolic acts of baptism and the reception of the Eucharist, "write on each other and are written upon". The chapter offers an illuminating analogy between the novelist's use of map imagery and sacramental maps as "they trace out space in which people move in their habits of touching". Brie's chapter explores the way in which spirituality can become located within natural spaces upon which the quality of sacredness is conferred. His contribution contextualises this approach within a Buddhist framework, a spiritual stance adopted by Kerouac during an influential but transitional stage of his life.

In conclusion, to speak of sacred space is to invite reflection on the continuing vitality of Christian traditions and to extend the long engagement of Christianity with the resolute secularising tendencies of western modernity. But to speak of sacred space also focuses our attention on the "big task" of forging investigative tools for exploring sacred space in the multi-religious

world beyond the confines and preoccupations of the western world, as shaped by Christendom. We offer this collection as a contribution to both projects.

Steve Brie
Jenny Daggers
David Torevell
(Editors)

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CHAPTER ONE

THE MONASTERY AS SACRED SPACE

MARK BARRETT

A surprise hit of London's Millennium celebrations in 2000 was a relatively modest exhibition at the National Gallery. From a quiet beginning, *Seeing Salvation – the image of Christ in art* became one of the most talked about Millennium events in the capital, and certainly among the most visited. Some 350,000 individuals attended the Sainsbury Wing of the Gallery for this exhibition; a very large number by National Gallery standards. Such statistics suggest that, even in the extensively unchurched world of contemporary Britain, attendees were undeterred by an "overtly Christian depiction" (Davie, 2003: 29) of the life of Christ. I begin this exploration of monastic spaces here, away from the monastery, because an exhibition which concerned itself with the representation of the Christian message through a structured use of physical objects and spaces offers a perspective on my subject: how is a monastery to be understood as sacred space in the contemporary context?

The exhibition's curator, Neil MacGregor, explains in his introduction to the accompanying catalogue that the artefacts used in the National Gallery show were originally created to build up Christian faith through their use in public worship and private devotion. Subsequently removed from their original, faith-based, settings these works would usually hang today in secular galleries, organised around a chronological narrative of art history rather than a devotional journey into faith (MacGregor, 2000: 6). In *Seeing Salvation* MacGregor reversed this movement. In stark contrast to an art-historical chronology, the exhibition involved a scripted space articulated around the theological dimensions of the Christian faith story. The sections had titles such as "The Word made Flesh", "Praying the Passion", "The Saving Body", and "The Abiding Presence". This is the language of a confessional catechism; while the thematically organised spaces these titles denote would not be out of place in a cathedral.

After seeing the exhibition, an unusually high number of visitors took the time to write to Neil MacGregor. Their letters indicate that an atmosphere of reverence and devotion had been generated among the exhibition-

goers by his organisation of the sacred objects. One correspondent writes that the exhibition “was far more devotional than many a sermon”. Other letters explicate this remark, one commenting that entering the gallery “felt like going into a cathedral, and the atmosphere among the people was quite astonishing – we were all full of awe, sorrow and reverence” (quoted in Davie, 2003: 33). Sociologist Grace Davie, who has published a study of the letters, comments: “Over and over again, they admit to being profoundly moved by the ‘experience’ of ‘Seeing Salvation’, and for many the encounter was as much spiritual as cognitive” (Davie, 2003: 33). What light can the responses of visitors to a London exhibition throw on our understanding of the monastery as sacred space?

Significantly, MacGregor himself does not regard Christian artists as simply offering a window into the past, a record of what people used to think and feel, but as attempting a public depiction of a continuing truth, which intends to address a contemporary audience: “We the spectators have to become eye-witnesses to an event that matters to us now. Theological concepts must be given human dimensions”. Paintings and sculptures created to bear witness to the devotional dimensions of Christian faith have an imaginative power that cannot be encountered in religious discourse alone, he argues: “If only words can tackle the abstract mysteries, paintings are uniquely able to address the universal questions through the intelligence of the heart” (MacGregor, 2000: 7). These universal themes of human living, such as the love of mother for child, innocence beset by violence or a love which endures through death, are at the same time profoundly significant topics in Christian theology. Here, in *Seeing Salvation*, they were localised in the public space of the gallery, and found speaking the symbolic languages of colour, shape, form and texture.

Two aspects of this exhibition and the visitors’ responses to it strike me as important here: one is the fact that this was an event taking place in public, in a shared space where many individuals were able to participate together in an encounter with their physical environment, and with one another; the second is that this exhibition invited its visitors to enter the realm of the creative imagination, of symbolic memory and archetypal pattern. This was a public space where, as MacGregor puts it, universal questions engage the intelligence of the heart, so that our “interior spaces” and the exterior space we inhabit achieve a degree of congruence.

Monasteries are self-evidently different from exhibition spaces. But any monastery shares with this exhibition the conscious aim of building a physical environment which mediates a series of meanings, a cultural framework which speaks both of the interior values and of the interpersonal perspec-

tives of the individuals who inhabit it. In the case of a monastery, this local culture, as we might term it, stands in contrast to the culture which prevails in the society around it. In the *Seeing Salvation* exhibition, gallery visitors were invited to sojourn within such an alternative culture for a shorter or longer time, and the letters they wrote to the curator reflect the varying results of their stay.

Christian monasticism, historically, has sought to achieve among those who follow its path a broad reorientation of thought and feeling, of moral and interpersonal perspectives, of internal awareness and aesthetic outlook; an extensive and demanding process which is intended to occupy a lifetime. The environment best suited to such a transformational process is unlikely to come about by accident. It is necessary for the sacred space to be more self-consciously constructed than even a millennium exhibition. However, like the National Gallery's millennial event, the sacred space of a monastery will be a shared space in which a number of people can encounter a self-consciously constructed culture together, a space characterised by the use of creative imagination, the engagement of symbolic memory and the deployment of archetypal pattern. When the effort is made to synchronise exterior and interior spaces the result is experienced as sacred space.

Historians and students of monasticism agree that the most striking feature of the monastic movement in Christianity has been a *fugate mundi*, a withdrawal or flight from society (Fry, 1981: 4). This has frequently involved a *physical* distance of the monastery from towns and cities but, whenever the monastic movement has been true to its ideals, it has always involved a *cultural* distance between the monastery and its surroundings. Although monastics do not withdraw from wider society simply in order to construct a cultural chasm between the monastery and the broader societal networks within which it exists, the distinctive local culture of a monastery requires, nonetheless, the provision of a sufficient distance from the "ways of this age" to allow for the generation, cultivation and sustaining of a way of living which contrasts with that of a secular society (Casey, 2003: 34–35). Specifically, a monastery exhibits a culture founded on and imbued with the Christian faith story, the sacred context within which we believe we are invited to "see salvation". And, like the designers of the "Seeing Salvation" exhibition, the builders of monastic spaces bring into being a context within which our encounters with the places we inhabit, and our encounters with one another within those places, will be qualitatively different from encounters which take place outside the monastery.

It is this understanding of the monastery as a space which allows for the cultivation of a special culture – one which foregrounds the sacred – that

concerns me here. Before turning to examine four dimensions of sacred space in monastic culture in their own right, I wish to note the phenomenon of interest in monastic culture among non-monks, an interest which itself appears to be, at least in part, the product of a search for sacred space. Whether or not postmodern eyes view monasteries as, in some sense, sanctuaries of the human spirit or as places imbued with a promise of the transcendent, the distinctive culture that exists within their walls continues to exercise a widespread attraction. What are we to make of this phenomenon?

“Going on Retreat”: Monastic Space as Sacred Space for the Visitor

A couple of years ago, the song of a nightingale in Berlin made front page news in the UK newspapers. It seems the constant din of city traffic is causing urban nightingales to sing so loudly that their melodies are technically breaking legal noise levels. Apparently, the nightingales in central Berlin are five times louder than their more laid-back rural cousins, generating decibels more usually associated with a motorbike on full throttle. One newspaper wryly commented that, under German safety laws, anyone encountering the song of a nightingale should require protective earphones.

The image of the hyper-aroused urban nightingale, attempting to out-sing an entire city, is powerful. Those of us who are or have been city dwellers are only too familiar with the need to shout our lives louder in an attempt to be heard over everyone else. The modern city is a total environment; its sounds, sights and smells are a constant stimulus to the senses. Nowhere, it appears, is urban culture to be found at rest. Thus, when city dwellers visit a monastery, the effect can be akin to stepping into a sensory vacuum. While the city moves at a breakneck pace, the monastic life moves slowly and values stillness; while the city involves continual change, the monastery prizes sameness and repetition; while the city invites ever-louder noise, the monastery is a place of silence.

In April of 2004, *The Times* correspondent, Andy Arkell, visited Worth Abbey, my own monastery, in Sussex. “Going from rush-hour London to a monastery feels almost dangerous,” he writes. “If there were such a thing as ‘psychological bends’ this would surely be the way to get it.” He comments that the change in pressure is so marked that it is “as if some crucial piece of elastic has snapped, dropping me back into just myself” (Arkell, 2004).

Arkell is right. Monastic culture is quite distinctive. At its heart is an environment consciously constructed to foreground a set of values which

make monks into “strangers to the city”, as Michael Casey puts it (Casey, 2005). The visitor discovers the natural sounds of the countryside, a rhythm of life much less hurried than that of a city centre, a sense of expansiveness and leisure, the space and opportunity to be alone: and all of these appear aspects of a rural idyll. But, in contrast to the exterior din of the metropolis, “all that inner noise that usually sits in the back of your mind, is suddenly in the foreground, loud and unnerving. It feels peculiar, these days, to be really alone” (Arkell, 2004).

Peculiar, perhaps. Nevertheless, monasteries continue to attract large numbers of guests, retreatants and visitors who want to encounter a different way of being, facing the challenge and opportunity of slowing down and finding time on their hands, in silence. My own community, in recent years, has witnessed a considerable growth in the number of retreat groups and individuals wishing to spend time doing – by secular standards – very little. And perhaps the most surprising dimension of this encounter between the monastic culture and the outside world is the extent of the interest in monastic communities among those members of our society who rarely if ever visit a church.

In May 2005 BBC 2 screened an unusual piece of what was, technically, reality TV. *The Monastery*, however, was about as far from *Big Brother* as would be possible to get. The three part documentary employed the reality TV convention of charting the journey of a group of “ordinary people” who set out into a situation which they had not previously encountered. Five men, from a variety of backgrounds, accepted the challenge of spending what the BBC’s publicity department decided (perhaps understandably) to call “forty days and forty nights” living as retreatants alongside the monks of Worth: praying the Divine Office with us in the Abbey Church, eating in our monastery refectory, working in the grounds and receiving a basic formation in fundamental monastic values from the Abbot and the Novice Master. The show attracted 2.5 million viewers, and inspired similar programmes in the USA and Australia as well as follow up shows in the UK. The international success in the following year of the (very different) cinematic epic, *Into Great Silence*, filmed among the hermit monks of the Grande Chartreuse in the French Alps, confirms the impression that contemporary audiences of all persuasions are interested to see what happens behind monastery walls.

Some of the many hundreds of men who applied to take part in *The Monastery* were committed Christians and regular churchgoers, but most were not. I took part in the interviews of “short list” applicants: very little awareness of or even interest in formal religion was apparent in what most had to say, but all were intrigued to take part in a way of life about which

they knew, perhaps, even less. Most had been attracted to the interviews by advertisements in the secular media, or by an email invitation circulated around the offices of central London media companies. Many potential participants appear to have believed that a monastery was a place which would enable them, in ways that were not entirely clear, to discover something about themselves which was not accessible to them in any other place.

Grace Davie has identified a phenomenon she terms “vicarious religion” (Davie, 1994; Davie, 2002). This is her term to describe a set of behaviours whereby members of our unchurched society can be understood as having effectively delegated to its religious institutions a task they themselves no longer intend personally to undertake but still wish, in some sense, to see maintained. I have no doubt that part of the fascination of the monastic way of life to contemporary society has this dimension to it: in a sense monasteries have always fulfilled a version of this role, being understood as the “praying class” in medieval society just as the knights were the “fighting class”. Part of the contemporary interest in monasteries can also be understood as the manifestation of the natural curiosity we all feel about a way of life completely different from our own. There is also, inevitably, the hope we may well cherish that someone out there has answers to the questions which life has presented to us – this might be described as the image of the monk as *guru*, a perception encouraged, perhaps, by some media presentations of eastern monasticism.

But the experience of working with the participants in *The Monastery* was that none of these perspectives fully accounts for a willingness to spend time in a monastery, especially since partial or mistaken apprehensions quickly fall away when the living reality of a monastic community is genuinely encountered.

To borrow Philip Groning’s *haiku*-like description of his film *Into Great Silence*, a time in a monastery offers for the retreatant “A meditation on life; a contemplation of time; silence, repetition, rhythm” (Soda Pictures, 2006: 1). Two experiences seem of particular significance to those who visit a monastery for a retreat. One is the experience of exterior silence, promoted by the lack of hurry, the freedom from time pressures and the strong rhythm of the day; the other is the accompanying awareness of interior noise, which stands out the more clearly in the context of the simplified patterns of monastic living. Such encounters are not encouraged by our secular society, perhaps because the discovery of this disjunction between interior and exterior worlds calls into question so many dimensions of the culture which promotes it. But this dis-comforting realisation has proven significant for those who come to monasteries as guests, hoping to explore within the sacred

space of monastic culture a deepened sense of what it means to be alive.

The *Rule of St Benedict*, the short sixth century text which has guided monastic living in the western Catholic Church, begins by asking its readers: “Who among you seeks *life*?” (RB Prologue:14). (The *Rule of St Benedict* (abbreviated to RB) is available in many modern editions. References here are to Fry, 1981.) And this, of course, was the initial appeal of Christianity to its first practitioners, who called it *The Way* (of life). This remains the appeal of monastic culture for those who visit it as guests: the monastery functions as a sacred space, a sanctuary, where the tidal currents of their hearts, set swirling by crowded, noisy, busy lives, may find harbour. Paradoxically, perhaps, by stepping away from the regular trappings of everyday life, visitors find – like those viewing the “Seeing Salvation” exhibition – an enhanced sense of their own value and the value of others, a greater reverence towards their lives, and an awareness of something which goes beyond themselves.

The Monastery as Sacred Space

But a monastery is not, first and foremost, a guest house. If it is a sacred space for guests, it is so only because it is much more fundamentally a sacred space for the monks who inhabit it. A monastic community needs an environment which promotes and protects not simply geographical distance from society, but more importantly a cultural space for the distinctive monastic way of being, a space which allows the heart to breathe.

Four qualities of the monastic environment may be highlighted. When taken together, they constitute sacred space, a specifically monastic culture. These are: the monastic environment as (i) a purposive space which encourages recollection, (ii) a space ordered around regular routine, promoting a pattern or rhythm to the day and the week, (iii) a reflective, thoughtful space which foregrounds reading, the primary mode of Christian storytelling, and (iv) a space which summons isolated individuals into fellowship, and thereby sustains community. In each case we shall see that the distinctive quality of the monastic space is the self-conscious alignment of physical environment with interior aspiration. When this synchronisation is striven towards, the full beauty of the monastic culture manifests itself as sacred space where we can “see salvation”.

Purposive Space and Purity of Heart

Look carefully around the apse of an ancient English cathedral and the chances are that you will find a small doorway discreetly placed alongside the choir, from which a well-worn stone staircase leads directly up to what used to be the common dormitory of a monastery. For centuries, monks worshipped in the choirs of these awe-inspiring buildings, and this was the “night stair”, specifically placed to speed the monk’s journey from his bed to the night office of vigils. Like the fireman’s pole, the night stair was the quickest way from the dormitory above to the church below; a clear sign, we might say, of a purposive use of space! The night stair is a symbol from England’s monastic past of the careful shaping of monastic buildings to monastic values.

The eastern monastic traditions, stemming from the teachings of the Buddha, stress the need for awareness, or “mindfulness”. It is less well known in western society that the Christian monastic tradition cherishes a remarkably similar virtue, sometimes called “purity of heart” (see Luckman & Kulzer, 1999). This is in reality a singleness of focus, a disciplined recollection or awareness of God as the central reality of life. The first step towards this ideal is a mindful presence to ourselves and to others in each moment of our day. If, with the architect Le Corbusier, we were to say that a house is a machine for living in, the sacred space of a monastery is first and foremost a machine for focussing in, a place of awareness and recollection, an environment to promote and sustain purity of heart.

The *Rule of St Benedict* requires that the tools and goods of the monastery be treated with the same reverence as the sacred vessels of the altar (RB 31:10), thereby pointing towards this reality. The monk is altogether to shun forgetfulness (RB 4:48): which certainly involves arriving for things on time (hence the provision of details like the night stair), but more importantly requires that our steady, focussed awareness be centred upon God. All dimensions of the monastic environment tend to promote this virtue of awareness of the things of God, and thus, for example, monastic buildings are always oriented around an Abbey Church, the crucial symbol of that awareness.

As in many historic religious traditions, an awareness of death as a reality is encouraged in Christian monasteries rather than hidden, and many monasteries enjoy the privilege (no longer common in a society which tries to pretend that death does not happen, or at least not to us) of incorporating a cemetery for the deceased members of the community. A church and a graveyard – two powerful symbols of the boundaries set to our human independence and two signposts pointing towards the central

realities of human living as understood within monastic culture.

The monastery as a whole is thus a scripted space, a purposive environment, within which everything is ordered to this one end: that in everything God may be glorified. Everything is structured towards this – times, places, patterns of living. The sanctuary of the monastery creates a space which constantly invites its inhabitants to return their attention to that which is at the centre of all things.

Rhythm of Life and Rhythm of Space

Such a patterning in our ways of using time and space has come to be regarded with suspicion in the modern world. The word “routine” has become a synonym for “depersonalized”, “mechanical” or “thoughtless”. Exploiting this fact, the Voluntary Service Overseas organisation advertises on the London tube with posters asking commuters: “Will you remember today for the rest of your life?” – contrasting the routine monotony of the day in the office with the heightened drama of a one-off decision to offer support to VSO as a volunteer. It is a perfectly valid strategy: the daily round can be precisely “one damn thing after another”, routine can trivialise or dehumanise, producing a numbness and internal freezing which is the very opposite of life giving.

But the reverse can also be the case: more than anything else, human flourishing – especially in our crowded 21st century – is promoted by regular practices, recurrent events and established, familiar places, which establish a foundational sense of coherence to life. From these we derive our sense of who we are, making sense of our world and learning how it is possible to enjoy a degree of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Where such a patterning underpins and permeates the day and the week there is a framework holding together even the busiest and most troubled day.

The *Rule of St Benedict* established a tradition of monastic building in which everything necessary for the orderly life of a self-sufficient community was to be found readily to hand within the space of the monastery (RB 66:6–7). Furthermore, the practices of monastic communities founded upon the Rule exhibit a sense of orderly, routinised, living. A monastery refectory is planned so that every monk has his specific place; a choir is similarly ordered. Thoughtfully constructed spaces for work, for sleeping, for reading, and for praying characterise the architecture of monastic communities. Above all, the relationship between these spaces has been considered. There

is a rhythm to the patterning of spaces, just as there is a rhythm to the patterning of the day. To live within such a space is to be invited to reorder one's interior landscape to resemble the graceful rhythm of the monastery's environment. A harmony between inner and outer structures is the aim.

Public monastic prayer exhibits just such a rhythmic ordering, and is the model for interior prayer. The singing of psalms in church is cumulative, a rhythm arranged around certain times of day, week by week, with a structure of months and seasons, special times and ordinary times. There is a regular pattern, an iteration and reiteration which allows participants to be caught up completely into what they know so well that sound can be like silence. This is the experience of routine as a stream of life whose living waters can transport us to places we cannot achieve by our own striving.

And, like monastic praying, monastic living exhibits the same structures of patterned repetitions: times of work, and of rest; times of sharing and times of silence; times to eat and times to fast; times to pray together, and alone. A monastic space will derive the particular pattern of its buildings from the shaping of this rhythmic life, so that nothing seems left to chance. In this way, monastic buildings should be transparently carriers of purpose, shaped to function so that everything that is required to sustain the life of the community is easily to be found close at hand, while nothing that is present can draw the monk away from the focussed awareness to which he aspires.

Reflective Space and *Lectio Divina*

I have noted that a central dimension of the purposive space of the monastery is the orientation of all activities towards the Abbey Church, the symbol of the patterning of all monastic living around our engagement with God in prayer, public and private. Another such orientation of monastic space involves the role of reading, and especially sacred reading. Contemporary Christians have become more aware than was the case twenty years ago of the monastic tradition of *lectio divina*, holy reading, the prayerful exploration of the scriptures. Such reading goes beyond the simply distracting reading of thrillers or informational reading of guide books, to become transformational reading, in which – to adapt a memorable phrase of Rowan Williams – we do not so much interrogate the data on the page before us as recognise that the data interrogates us (Williams, 1979: 1).

In his classic study of medieval monastic culture, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, Benedictine scholar Jean Leclercq beautifully evokes the actual practices associated with meditative reading of scripture

as a “repeated mastication of the divine words” (Leclercq, 1961: 90), a deeply physical, embodied act of individual spiritual striving. As Michael Casey points out, this way of “chewing the text” is one we moderns have to re-learn as our information-driven society has taught us not to value practices which lead us to slow down, to activate our imaginations, and to enter the cave of the heart. “*Lectio Divina* is a technique of prayer and a guide to living. It is a means of descending to the level of the heart and of finding God” (Casey, 1995: vi).

A monastic culture thus requires the deliberate cultivation and promotion of slow, reflective reading of scripture, and the space of the monastery will be ordered in such a fashion as to make this fact obvious. At the centre of the life of the community stands an open Gospel book (perhaps a community might have the privilege of a beautifully hand-crafted edition), enthroned on a thoughtfully fashioned *Ambo* or formal public reading-desk. The recent exhibition of sacred texts at the British Library (North & North, 2007) gave some degree of insight into the vital role of the physical text in the Christian tradition (and, indeed, in Hebrew and Arabic tradition also). This is especially true in the monasteries. Reader’s desks are also found in the monastery’s refectory, and in the Chapter House where the community meets in formal assembly. The environment acts as a permanent public statement about the central role the reading of the text is to play in the life of each monk.

Because reading is a seamless activity in which the whole of what we do has an impact upon each part, monks tend to develop considerable reading resources, libraries, book collections, so that the reading of scripture finds its context in a wide programme of sacred and secular reading, sometimes in scholarship, and – in many cases – writing. As Casey notes: “the practice of solid reading gives the community a certain *gravitas*” (Casey, 2003: 39). The physical environment of the monastery will be geared to support this activity, with spaces both formal and informal, indoor and outdoor so arranged that reading is central to the life of the community and is clearly seen as such.

Community Space and Christian *Koinonia*

Finally, no monastery is complete without a shared space for eating, a shared space for relaxing together, and a shared space for formal discussion, learning together and decision making. This also is about more than simple practical convenience. It is one more example of the striving for congruence

of interior and exterior in monastic living.

“New Testament authors expressed the essence of Christianity in one word. It is the Greek word *koinonia* usually translated as ‘fellowship’ . . . Fellowship with Christ leading to a fellowship with the Father, and fellowship with one another in Christ: there you have Christianity in one word.” (Panikulam, 1979: 1). Monastic authors are clear that our way of living is founded upon this New Testament ideal: the sharing of a Christocentric life with others. From very early times, the term *koinonia* was employed as the technical term for “monastery”, and St Pachomius, the third-century founder of monastic communities in Egypt, is remembered as teaching that “this *koinonia* . . . is the model for everyone who wishes to gather souls together for God’s sake in order to help them become perfect” (Fry, 1981: 25).

The *Rule of St Benedict* views the *koinonia* as a dynamic process of incorporation into Christ, which takes places among the brethren: “No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead what he judges better for someone else . . . Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life” (RB 72: 7, 11–12).

In secular society, “home” is pre-eminently the space where one can “be oneself”, as the home furnishing stores delight in endlessly reminding us: “It’s all about *you*”. But in a monastery, what the secular individual might expect to find in his or her own kitchen, dining room, living room and study, in a monastery is found in shared, communal spaces. This means that a monk does not, in the secular sense, have a “home”: the environment of the monastery is not a place to “be oneself”, but precisely a space in which one is constantly called towards the other, so that one can be transformed ever more fully into the image of Christ. The monk, in one sense, is called not to be himself but to become someone else.

The environment of the monastery is so designed as to invite the isolated individual to step into the nexus of relationships which is *koinonia*, fellowship or community, not simply in the social sense, but in the New Testament sense of a network of Christocentric relationships. Monks journey to God not as single travellers, but as a unified pilgrimage band.

Conclusion

These four elements go to make up the distinctive monastic way of organising space, which promotes and sustains a monastic culture. Its purpose is the Gospel purpose: to offer life in its fullest.

Every day, we breathe many of thousands of times and usually we do so

without having consciously to advert to the process. It is one of those curious features of our bodily consciousness, however, that when something goes wrong and we do become aware of our breathing, we find we are having deliberately to choose to breathe and to remember to keep on doing so. We find ourselves taking breathing lessons! Luckily, for most of us, if this happens the process does not take long to return to automatic.

The function of the monastery is, perhaps, not too different. It draws our attention to practices which make us more human, which give us fuller life, but with which we have in some sense lost touch. Eventually, having been relearned, they can become internalised and natural, as they are intended to be. But at first they require the provision of external reminders, an environment that shapes us in particular ways, patterns of living which keep us aware of something which (did we but know it) was supposed to be automatic.

If the sacred space of the monastery is well-formed, the monk and the guest alike should be able to discern, in the monastic environment, a way of “Seeing Salvation,” – and, having discovered it in one place, begin to find it everywhere.

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