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Elizabeth McAlister

Wesleyan University, emcalister@wesleyan.edu

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Globalization and the Religious Production of Space

ELIZABETH McALISTER

INTRODUCTION

This forum asks, essentially, “How shall we think about and talk about studying religion and place?”¹ This might seem to be a concrete and straightforward topic—one might think of Muslims and Mecca, or Mormons and Utah, or Rastas and Ethiopia. One might think, a bit more symbolically, of Moses and Mt. Sinai, the Cuban-Yoruba deity Yemaja and the ocean, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the nation of Mexico. The easy way to think of these terms is to say that religions “have” territories, and make “sacred” spaces. The association of place with religion tends to be positive; there are agreed-upon sacred places, which are by definition morally good to religious insiders and often regarded so by respectful outsiders.

Such simple ideas must be examined critically, obviously, since the scholar more properly must ask, “What insight can be derived from relating theory about religion to theory about place,” or better yet, “from theorizing religion and place together?” There is much that needs clarifying, and the definitions of our terms are contested. The study of religion and place taken together has happened differently in various fields, including human geography, religious studies, sociology, and anthropology, not to mention theology. There is historically, in these fields, a tension between first- and second-order levels of thought, between insider language and academic language. What is religion? Is it that which is held sacred, is it an inner and private feeling? Is it a socially constructed order, using superhuman beings to make meaning out of chaos? What is place? Is place physical space, or is it location occupied and made meaningful? And what is the purpose of studying these concepts together? Is it to better adjudicate legal rights between groups and their sacred spaces? Is it to understand and act in a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1993) informed directly by religion? I will suggest that studying religion and place has (at least) two main uses. First, to point to the ways that power works through the various levels, realms, and conceptions of space, in and through religious processes, especially amidst the religious conflict and violence of the contemporary, globalizing world. Second, studying religion and place makes plain and occasions the rethinking of the (Western) modernist bias in much study of religion, and of space.

RECENT THOUGHT IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES ON PLACE

Recent thought in religious studies on “place” is instructive, and still can be extended. As Sam Gill so usefully spells out in his essay, “Territory,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998), attending theoretically to issues of space has been crucial and even central to religious studies. Gill argues that the academic study of religion itself emerged out of the shift from theologically based to territorially based understandings of religion. He charts a brief history of the field, which at first was dominated by theology—thought about a monotheistic, high God. This dominance gradually gave way to another phase focused on “World Religions.” Under this

Elizabeth McAlister is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT 06459-0029. E-mail: emcalister@wesleyan.edu

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rubric, the study of religion is more comparative, and is often concerned with comparing systems of religious thought in terms of classifications in space and time. Gill points out that although world religions transcend national boundaries, they continued to be identified in terms of regional categories: Asian, Middle-Eastern, etc. (Gill 1998).

Gill cites Mircea Eliade as the most influential thinker to refocus the study of religion toward territory. It is Eliade's framework that gained currency when religious studies came into being as a field, after the 1960s Supreme Court cases of *Engel v. Schempp* invited public institutions to teach *about* religion, and not *teach religion*. Eliade worked comparatively, arguing that religious difference was a result of diverse instantiations of "the sacred" that erupted into the seen world in "hierophanies," thereby creating "sacred space." (Similarly, "sacred time" is the "beginning time" when these sacred forces burst forth, and ritual is usually an effort to recover the greater perfection of the beginning.) In this way, "the study of religion was thus the study of territorial distinctions made significant by sacred events, "the center" (or "the sacred center") in spatial terms and "the beginning" in temporal terms" (Gill 1998:304).

Eliade's theory of sacred space has now been roundly critiqued, most particularly by Jonathan Z. Smith, as being essentializing and ultimately resting on a Western theological template. Recent thinkers—for example, J. Z. Smith, David Chidester, Sam Gill, and Karen McCarthy Brown—follow Peter Berger's social constructionist lead, and understand religion as a creative mode of cultural meaning-making initiated by humans, not beings from an unseen world (as did Eliade). Such current religion scholars critique the Eliadian school's modernist perspective toward spatiality, which posited a universally existing, natural dualism between "sacred" and "profane" space. J. Z. Smith would characterize Eliade's view as representing a native, "first-order category" and not the "second-order" level of thought that is the proper intellectual ground of scholarship (see Brown 1991; Gill 1998; Smith 1998; Chidester 2003; Deal and Beal 2004).

Instead, current scholars' thinking begins with a premise from philosopher Henri Lefebvre, whose book *The Production of Space* (1991) parses out any given local space in a tripartite synthesis of physical, mental, and social spaces that operate simultaneously. According to this approach, there is no way to talk about space outside human perception of it, and there is never any neutral or merely physical space. Space is always a part of material culture, always social, always produced (Lefebvre 1991).

Seen this way, "place" and "space" as well as "territory" are all "second-order categories," that is, they create the terms they attempt to describe (Deal and Beal 2004). For that matter, as J. Z. Smith reiterates in his work, the term "religion" is also necessarily a second-order category:

Religion is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and, therefore, is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology. (Smith 1998:281)

GLOBALIZATION AND RELIGION

Scholars studying religion and place in the contemporary moment face several important processes that are in motion in the world around us. Most important is the process that is generically termed "globalization." A term now both celebrated and decried, it describes a series of changes that are at once economic, technological, political, and cultural, and involve both multinational forces and local actors in various arenas. For those studying contemporary religions, key issues are the role of religion in the increased velocity of populations' movement through space, in technological change, including electronic communication across space, and in transnationalism between places. These issues all have attendant problems of migration, displacement, diaspora, and exile, as well as conflict and violence (see Appadurai 1990; Tweed 1997; Levitt 2001; Vasquez and Marquardt 2003).

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes of the disjointed flows that are set in motion with increased globalization: “ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes” (1990: 6). I think it is also helpful to think of “religioscapes” as the subjective religious maps—and attendant theologies—of immigrant, or diasporic, or transnational communities who are also in global flow and flux.

Current scholarship argues that the nature of the nation-state is changing, and that for many groups, other vectors of power—ethnicity and religion—are cross-cutting and competing more effectively than before with national ones. Yet this is likely to be missed by mainstream (Western) commentators because, often, religious conceptions of place fall outside political and legal ones, “outside, and above the sources of ‘normal’ [or secular] forms of moral authority” (Wellman and Tokuno 2004:294). For plenty of groups, religious “truths” regarding place are more salient than state, legal, commercial, or secular ones, and this can lead to slow burning tensions or violent conflict. Such cases abound. Just think of the tensions in Jerusalem over control and proper use of the city, or of the periodic sightings of the Virgin Mary worldwide, or of indigenous groups’ needs to preserve burial grounds. Often, actors’ religious identities are in some conflict with their national identities, and with their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

But is religion always separate from *secular* national identity? It is important also to theorize the links between national secular identities rooted in “place” and religion. What of civil religion and other forms of national religion? Civil religious places abound in the United States and elsewhere. Think of the birthplaces of national leaders, of battlegrounds, and war monuments. The last decade has seen the rise of a series of memorials for honored victims—for U.S. terrorism sites such as Ground Zero and Oklahoma City. Here, people set out to construct “sacred space,” and transform the moral valence of places from “bad” to “good.” But always landscapes have multiple and contested meanings. Janet Jacobs writes, in the 2004 Forum of this journal, of European memorials of the Holocaust, and of the tensions that play out when contemporary Polish families go on outings to play among the ruins of the death camp of Treblinka (Jacobs 2004). So many meanings inhere in this place, which for Polish neighbors is an open park in which to bring the children for fresh air, and for Jewish visitors is a place of horrors transformed into a religious site, an important Jewish graveyard.

We can even take a further step back from civil and national religion to a more abstract, moral construction of place. What “moral geographies” are at work in the places we study, and for the groups we try to understand? “Michael Shapiro uses this term to describe the cultural and political practices that work together to mark not only states but also regions, cultural groupings, and ethnic or racial territories” (McAlister 2001:4, citing Shapiro 1994). For Shapiro, who writes in broad cultural terms and about international law, moral geographies “‘consist of a set of silent ethical assertions,’ that mark connection and separation,” and that shape politics and culture. Certainly, these geographies, in the West, grow now through a kind of capillary action, such that, for example, international groups are portrayed a certain way in the mainstream media, and in a similar way when they migrate to the United States. Certain immigrant neighborhoods and school systems come to have a particular “moral” valence, like the heavily Muslim communities of Detroit, the “Little Haiti” area of Miami, or Chicano East Los Angeles. The populace in these places are viewed both as neighborhood residents and also, somehow, as moral representatives of other national groups. It is worth thinking about how identities are formed with regard to religion and place, both from outside forces like foreign policy, the press, and the school systems, and from subjective forces of self-naming and self-understandings.

Shapiro traces the history of spatialized moral systems, citing comparisons between medieval and modern subjectivities and spatial structures.

Whereas the modern person in liberal democratic societies has “an ‘individuality’” which likes to regard itself as completely autonomous and imagines itself as having sovereign rights vis a vis society, in medieval society

a person's worth was derived from his or her place in the universal hierarchy with God at the apex. (Shapiro 1994:488; Gurevich 1985:295, cited in Shapiro 1994:488)

The vertical, we might add Christian, model is not necessarily far away, even in secular states, for some groups, as I will attempt to sketch below.

CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL CONTESTS OVER TERRITORY: THE CASE OF EVANGELICAL SPIRITUAL WARFARE

My own fieldwork centers on Haiti and its diaspora. A population caught up in a crisis of globalization, Haitians are citizens of a dysfunctional nation-state, who must now lead transnational lives, dependent on remittances from family—which means they are embedded in networks that span home and abroad (United States, Canada, other Caribbean countries, etc.). Haitians are also the inheritors of an oral religious tradition, variously called “Vodou,” “Afro-Haitian religion,” and, for insiders, “serving the spirits.”

Briefly put, this system posits a remote Creator God, beside which exist a pantheon of deities called “*lwa*,” or “spirits,” inherited through family lines. Most spirits are associated with places; they both “come from Africa,” and they live in trees and rivers, in cemeteries, or at crossroads. They are thought to protect family members, but need to be paid for their protection. The cosmology of Vodou consists of various worlds separated by water. The family spirits live in one world, called Ginen, a mythic Africa, while people live “on the Earth.” Vodou practices are oral and not scripture-based, and multiheaded in social organization. Despite its creolization with Catholic saints, Vodou never embraced the millennialism of biblical scripture, but rather understands time as cyclical, and space as being potentially infused with spiritual energies (McAlister 2002).

But the landscape is mapped quite differently for another group, and tensions are on the rise in Haiti. While Catholicism has uneasily shared the religious terrain in Haiti, the new wave of evangelical Protestantism that has been gaining ground since the 1970s is announcing a “spiritual war” against Vodou. For Pentecostals, territories can be ruled by “principalities and powers” invested with theological, spiritual significance. The spirits of Vodou are demonic entities that possess and control their priests, and the general of this diabolical army is Satan himself. Real spiritual warfare is imagined to be in action invisibly on a spiritual and moral plane. A battle between good and evil is actually in progress and can be assessed through fortunes and misfortunes in the material world. The battle can be over a single soul, or over an entire territory. In Haiti, the battle is understood to be over the soul of the nation.

Since the 1970s, many U.S. evangelical parachurch groups, such as AD2000, the Joshua Project, and others, have produced a cognitive global mapping not only of what they call “people groups,” but also of territories. This mapping goes beyond—or is a crude enchantment of—“moral geography” as Shapiro uses the term. Contemporary Pentecostal discourse maps space into unambiguous theological geographies: territories are either Christian, or they are demonic.

These evangelical mission-oriented groups have mapped the globe into Christian-reached and unreached territories, and have concluded that “successful church planting in the Pacific, Africa and Latin America has largely reduced the world’s prime evangelistic real estate to a swath of territory from 10 degree to 40 degree north latitude, running through Northern Africa and Asia known as the 10/40 Window” (Wagner 1993:30).²

The reason that spiritual light cannot grow in these regions is that their ancient peoples transacted pacts with un-Christian powers, usually territorial spirits and deities associated with rocks, trees, and rivers. Although Haiti is not technically within the 10/40 Window, it is, for many, a serious case of recalcitrant demon entrenchment, since Afro-Haitian religion is predominant there.

Militaristic discourse and spatial imagery characterize this theology, as “prayer teams” of “prayer warriors” come together for a given “prophetic prayer action” on the “spiritual battlefield.” Like critical academic thought, which strives to speak about a subject outside its own terms, spiritual mapping is “an attempt to see territory as it really is, not as it appears to be” (Wagner 1993:14). Spiritual discerners are not looking, as social scientists are, for unseen *social* forces of “power,” or “social structures of domination.” Rather, the unseen forces relevant to this Christianity are spiritual manifestations of good or evil.

As in many part of Africa and Latin America, Haitian pastors—tutored by American evangelicals in spiritual warfare techniques—launch “crusade” ceremonies that aim to exorcise the land itself from demonic entrenchment. One series of crusades is particularly charged because it takes place at a location recently named a national historic landmark: Bwa Kayiman, the site where Haitian history books teach that in 1791 the slaves of colonial Saint Domingue staged a religious ritual and vowed to fight for freedom. Their effort sparked the Haitian Revolution and led to the independence of Haiti in 1804. According to the Pentecostals, the enslaved religious leader, Boukman Dutty, who had invoked the Vodou spirits for help, had made a “pact with the devil” and dedicated Haiti to Satan. It was this unholy alliance that had been responsible for Haiti’s subsequent 200 years of misery. The pastors intended to exorcise the Vodou spirits who still governed the site, and “win” the space “for Jesus.”

Although Haiti’s downward economic and political spiral has only accelerated, American evangelical crusaders are now focusing on Haiti, and have staged several enormous revival spectacles in the national soccer stadium there. Their discourse centers on “breaking the blood pact” and “winning Haiti for Jesus.” They form alliances with local Haitian pastors, and both groups are able to forge meaningful and satisfying narratives in the process.

For Haitian evangelicals, conversion allows a move from a condition of material degradation to a condition of perceived exaltation, even in the face of material poverty. It also becomes possible to remap Haiti on various levels. By undoing the Haitian contract with Satan, Haitian Christians can view themselves in a Christian new global order. Replacing the sense of living on an island in the sea, populated with spiritual forces and charged energies, Haiti can now be a righteous nation standing before God. Haitians can be part of God’s people thirsting to enter the New Jerusalem. At the moment of the rapture, or again at Armageddon, Haitians can enter God’s Kingdom.

Becoming actors in this universal story makes it possible for Haitians to forge connections with Pentecostal networks in other places, both nationally and internationally. For Haitians who migrate to the United States, the Pentecostal imagery makes them citizens of a universal nation, of God’s Kingdom. Christianity invites them to long to return to “Jerusalem”—thus displacing the image of Haiti as nostalgic homeland. Although most first-generation migrants in diaspora long to return to Haiti, Pentecostalism offers them a way to displace the desire to return to a place where many—because of political violence or illegal immigration status—cannot return. Evangelical conversion allows for territorial detachment, for a loosening of nationalist and even familial bonds with Haiti (see also Robbins 2006; Richman 2000).

There are also benefits for American evangelicals fighting on the spiritual battleground in Haiti. U.S. evangelicals come from the stability and prosperity of America, and in teaching spiritual warfare and entrepreneurial pasturing strategies, they are spreading blessings that God has already bestowed in America. They follow and exaggerate classic American civil religious mythmaking, in which America is chosen by God for a special destiny, and it is this destiny to carry out God’s will on earth and spread American democratic and capitalistic values to the rest of the world. (Cherry 1998)

But, just as the United States is chosen by God as “God’s New Israel,” American civil religious narrative necessarily frames other nations in relation to this chosenness. Unprosperous nations, non-Christian nations, except Israel, nondemocratic nations, unfree nations, and the corollary, noncapitalist nations, are, in some sense, God’s unchosen nations. For many, I think that Haiti

has occupied a particular place in their American civil religious mythmaking as a backward, ungovernable kind of “least favored nation.” In this scheme, it is America’s duty to help Haiti “advance,” “develop,” and “democratize.”

In analyzing these events unfolding in Haiti—transnational evangelical crusades and spiritual warfare over national territory—religion and place come into focus as central points of tension, of political conflict. I think it was Foucault who reminds us that “[t]erritory is not just a geographical term, but it’s first of all a juridico-political one: it refers to an area controlled by a certain kind of power” (Shapiro 1994:479). Yet these tensions, like so many others, are also conflict over meaning, over ontological mapping, over the national narrative, and over competing systems of ethics and morality.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is fruitful to study religion in terms of place, and also in terms of temporal process. For one thing, to do this is to necessarily locate the study of religion outside of scriptures or texts, and to therefore study history, context, and practice. To study religion and place, space, territory, maps, or globalization means to join “the spatial turn” in critical studies that would shift thinking “from text to territory” (Soja 1989; Tweed 1997; Vasquez and Marquardt 2003). It means studying religion as it is lived and practiced, not as it is written down (Orsi 1999).

Here are several questions that will help approach the contemporary study of religion and place amidst the present challenges presented by globalization:

- What are the *various* meanings of any given place? What are the religious conceptions, ontologies, genealogies of any given place, and what are their histories? What tensions over time, or between which groups, create fault lines of meaning or politics? As global processes accelerate, what meanings come into conflict as borders are redrawn and as populations move across borders?
- What is the relationship between religion and the movement of populations through space that has accelerated through globalization? What is the role of religion in effecting movement, whether through pilgrimage, relocation, migration, or displacement? How do religious actors make movement through space meaningful? In turn, how does movement change religious thought and practice? How does moving to a different place affect group identity—religious, but also ethnic or national identity?
- What is the “moral geography” at work in any given place, even if the place is not a designated “sacred space” for an official religion? What are the “good” and “bad” parts of the landscape, and what countries and which people are subject to which sets of rights and privileges? How do globalizing processes (increased movement, advances in technology, capital penetration, etc.) change or nuance moral geographies? What landscapes are transformed from “bad” to “good,” or at least from great violence to hallowed (like the Holocaust memorials, or Ground Zero)? How does one understand pilgrimages places such as Elvis Presley’s Graceland that are “secular” and yet centrally meaningful for so many fans?
- In cases of large immigrant populations becoming incorporated into host countries, what role does religion play in the relative ease or difficulty of acceptance and incorporation? What are the religious processes at work in the host society, and what among the migrants? How and where do host societies map immigrants morally onto the national body? How and where do immigrants morally place themselves, and the host nation, in their own cognitive maps?
- What roles do place and religion play in political action? In violence? Why and how do the various forces toward or away from attachment to territory stimulate religious actors to action? What role does religion play in the dynamics of territorial attachment and detachment (Robbins 2006)?

These questions are by no means exhaustive, but I hope they may spark some ideas about how to approach the intersections of religion and place in the contemporary climate.

NOTES

1. This is the locution used, in terms of religion, by Sullivan (1994).
2. See the *Time* magazine article on the subject, June 30, 2003. A search on the Google search engine revealed 819,000 “hits” on the phrase “10/40 Window”; it has become a widespread concept among many evangelical Christian missionaries.

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