

INTRODUCTION PART II

SACRED GEOGRAPHY: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE OTHER

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A significant current running through the field of sacred geography – as it is conceived and taught at the Sophia Centre – is an emphasis on the human experience of interaction with what is variously referred to as ‘the other’, the ‘non-human’, and the ‘other-than-human’. These are ideas that will be unpacked and re-entangled in the following pages to provide some further conceptual context for the chapters that follow.

Social Construction and Hierophany

As Brady has already explained, there are, broadly speaking, two dominant approaches to understanding the nature of the sacred in the academic study of spirituality and religion. The sociological perspective suggests that the sacred is something that is socially constructed. In other words, that it is essentially human-made – manifested and maintained by human activity alone, and not by anything ‘supernatural’. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the originator of this approach, for example, suggested that the sacred is created by human societies through a conceptual separation of the profane (the everyday world of mundane matter and experience), from those things held to be somehow special by any particular human social group. Once this distinction is established in the form of culture, the special or sacred character of objects or places is reinforced through collective rituals and taboos, which alter human behaviour around the object or place, further differentiating it from its surroundings.¹ Taken in its extreme form, then, the Durkheimian position suggests that there is nothing that is inherently sacred in itself, rather objects, places and people are *made sacred* by human beings and the things that they do in their vicinity. This is essentially the dominant perspective in most of the social sciences, and might be understood as a form of social and cultural constructivism.

On the other hand, for those who believe – or experience – a place to be sacred, its sanctity is often understood as something that *actually exists* in the world, so that it is not so much created or projected by human beings as experienced by them in particular places, pre-existing any kind of social construction or cultural elaboration. This is the view that the sacred is an ontologically distinct reality, and is clearly expressed in the writings of the controversial Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who argued in favour of understanding the sacred through the lens of what he termed *hierophany* – as a ‘manifestation of the sacred’, or an eruption of ‘the other’. He explains:

When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world.²

The idea here is that there is something external to human beings in the very fabric of the world that we can encounter and experience directly, and which bursts through the profane reality of the natural world from a ‘supernatural’ origin. In his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Eliade also discusses the concept of Kratophany, literally defined as ‘an emanation of power’.³ Notions of power, place and the sacred are often intimately connected. This sacred power dwells, or perhaps even pools in particular locations, seeping through cracks in reality, and awaiting human interaction.

Haunted Places and the Numinous

The German theologian Rudolf Otto’s (1869–1937) perspective provides a sort of compromise between the two strong positions of Durkheimian social construction of the sacred and Eliadean ontological hierophany. He argued that there is a distinct kind of feeling-response that human beings experience when we encounter what he called the ‘wholly other’, which – like Eliade’s notion of hierophany – may erupt through the mundane fabric of the everyday world into human experience. He called this feeling response the *numinous*, and suggested that it might arise when we move into particular places where the ‘wholly other’ seeps through. These locations might be understood as ‘thin places’, to use the terminology of Celtic Spirituality, which are places where there is thought to be a ‘thinness of the boundary between this world and the spiritual world’.⁴ The experience of the numinous may then go on to serve as the basis for further social and cultural elaboration (social construction in the Durkheimian sense).

In addition to the possibility of an external supernatural reality seeping through into the natural world, Otto also suggests that there might be an ‘implicit meaning’ in place that can be ‘rendered explicit’ through human engagement. He explains:

It is already the beginning of this explicative process [...] when a [person] says: ‘*It is not quite right here*’; ‘*It is uncanny*’ [...] ‘*This place is haunted*’ [...] Here we have the obscure basis of meaning and idea rising into greater clarity and beginning to make itself explicit as the notion [...] of a transcendent Something, a real operative entity of a numinous kind, which later [...] assumes concrete form as a ‘*numen loci*,’ a daemon, an ‘*El*,’ a Baal, or the like.⁵

This ‘implicit meaning’ might be understood to suggest that, like the deep ecologist Arne Naess’ (1912–2009) notion of ‘intrinsic value, the place itself – the matter and substance of the environment – has an inherent sacred quality of its own (i.e., not dependent on an external supernatural source), that may be unpacked by human observation’.⁶ The hierophantic experience comes first – experienced through the body’s innate numinous feeling-response – and is followed by the proliferation of stories, rituals, taboos and further cultural elaborations that personify the intrinsic, or implicit, sense of place.⁷ As Otto suggests, the idea that particular places are haunted by ancestors, spirits, or other entities may be rooted in numinous experiences had by people in particular locations, transmitted in the form of what folklorists call *memorates* (stories told and believed to be true), that are later incorporated into cultural and religious traditions.⁸ Indeed, the parapsychologists Neil Dagnall and colleagues have suggested that hauntings are one of the ‘oldest problems in environmental psychology’, raising important questions about the different ways that people experience, relate to and interpret their surrounding environments.⁹

Sacred geography research is therefore especially concerned with the different ways in which a sense of the – - and the numinous – is manifested in particular places through a combination of human (psychological, social and cultural) and non-human (other, extra-human) factors.

Extraordinary Experience

The twentieth century philosopher and scholar of mysticism Walter T. Stace (1886–1967) identified nature mysticism as one of the two fundamental forms of mystical experience more generally. He suggested that nature-mystical experiences be referred to as ‘extrovertive’ – as distinct from much more interior

forms of ‘introvertive’ mystical experiences, which are usually occasioned by dedicated meditation, prayer, or other forms of contemplative and ritual practice. Extrovertive experiences, by contrast, are often spontaneously triggered by the *external* physical environment, frequently inducing in the experiencer a sense of the underlying unity of the natural world, which is revealed through a transfiguration of the surrounding environment:

The extrovertive mystic with his physical senses continues to perceive the same world of trees and hills and tables and chairs as the rest of us. But he sees these objects transfigured in such manner that the Unity shines through them [...] the extroversive experience is sensory-intellectual in so far as it still perceives physical objects but is nonsensuous and nonintellectual in so far as it perceives them as ‘all one’.¹⁰

In addition to feelings of unity, connection and oneness, mystical experiences in nature may also take the form of a ‘sudden flash’ of animistic insight – that is, of a highly *personal* natural world. The scholar of religion Graham Harvey defines animism as a recognition that ‘the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human’.¹¹ Animism implies a personal cosmos consisting of multiple perspectives – a world of many different points of view, some of which are human and most of which are not (see discussion below). The following experience – taken from the archives of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre – took place in April 1917, during the traumatic events of the First World War, while the author was serving in the British army in France. The account gives a particularly vivid impression of what it might be like to undergo a spontaneous extrovertive mystical experience in which an animated and personalised cosmos is seemingly revealed:

While spending an afternoon hour alone in my hilltop wood, a mood of depression had come down. We were due to move in a few days [...] After supper in the mess I felt restless. I wondered if the full moon shining down from a cloudless sky had anything to do with my mood. A walk by the canal might make it easier to sleep. I walked eastward for about two miles along the towpath and then turned about. The nearer I drew to the village, the more alive the surroundings seemed to become. It was as if something which had been dormant when I was in the wood were coming alive. I must have drifted into an exalted state. The moon, when I looked up at it, seemed to have become personalised

and observant, as if it were aware of my presence on the towpath. A sweet scent pervaded the air. Early shoots were breaking from the sticky buds of the balsam poplars which bordered the canal; their pleasant resinous odour conveyed good-will. The slowly moving waters of the canal, which was winding its unhurried way from the battlefields to the sea, acquired a 'numen' which endorsed the intimations of the burgeoning trees. The river conveyed that it had seen me before in other places and knew something about me. It was now concerned with my return to the village [...] A feeling that I was being absorbed into the living surroundings gained in intensity and was working up to a climax. Something was going to happen. Then it happened. The experience lasted, I should say, about thirty seconds and seemed to come out of the sky in which were resounding majestic harmonies. The thought, 'that is the music of the spheres' was immediately followed by a glimpse of luminous bodies – meteors or stars – circulating in predestined courses emitting both light and music.¹²

In the above experience a personal conversation is initiated between the experiencer and the river, the moon and the trees, who all take on relatable characteristics. It is not an experience of simple mystical oneness, but rather implies a world that consists of a plurality of non-human points of view. These many beings seem to contribute to the mounting intensity of the experience, culminating with a symphonic mystical harmonising of the diverse voices of nature into a whole conceived as 'the music of the spheres'. It is not so much a picture of oneness as a picture of profound multiplicity and deep interconnection. The study of sacred geography, then, is about listening to this music, and acknowledging the presence of the multiple harmonising voices of the non-human world.

Non-Human Animal Consciousness

Remarkably, it was not until 2012 that the consciousness of non-human animals was formally recognised by the scientific community. This recognition was marked by the publication of what has come to be called *The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness*. The declaration summarises evidence for consciousness in a range of non-human animals – notably in African Grey Parrots, which are said to evidence 'near human-like levels of consciousness'. The paper concludes that:

The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates

that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.¹³

In addition to consciousness in non-human animals, there have been a number of studies in recent years that also suggest the prevalence of *culture*, defined as socially learned behaviours, in a wide variety of non-human species – amongst primates and other mammals, as well as widely divergent species such as fish and cephalopods.¹⁴ With this recognition of non-human cultures comes the realisation that the concept of ‘folklore’ might extend far beyond the anthrosphere. Writing in 1989, and drawing on his own experience of playing rule-based games with his pet dogs, the folklorist Jay Mechling sought to expand the boundaries of folkloristic research into the sphere of the non-human, explaining that out of ‘all the criteria generally used by folklorists to decide if they are in the presence of communication worthy of being called “folklore,” I see no persuasive reasons why non-human animals cannot be included in “the folk.” It is only a fiat, by speciesism, that folklorists define folklore as a unique possession of human animals’.¹⁵ Once these perspectives are taken into consideration, landscapes, and the rich biodiverse ecosystems that constitute them, clearly represent much more than just physical spaces, occupied by non-conscious objects – they are, in fact, vast, active, living intelligence systems, full of non-human cultural knowledge. Biodiversity, therefore, is also *psychodiversity*.

While it has taken mainstream western science until the twenty-first century to recognise and acknowledge the subjective cognitive worlds of non-human animals, many non-western and indigenous perspectives have incorporated non-human consciousness into their worldviews for thousands of years.

Indigenous Perspectives

Although it is difficult to speak of indigenous cultures in generalised terms, as there are so many diverse living traditions on every continent, there are nevertheless some characteristic cross-cultural hallmarks that give a sense of the differences in perspective between indigenous and western scientific worldviews. For example, in many indigenous worldviews the category of personhood is understood to extend far beyond the human, while in the dominant western view personhood applies only to human beings. In indigenous traditions,

animals, plants, rocks, features of the landscape, or landscapes as a whole, may be acknowledged as living and active in ways that the dominant materialist-scientific worldview is yet to recognise.¹⁶ In many indigenous traditions such non-humans may even be seen as the ancestors of human communities - as 'kin'.¹⁷ Potowotomi biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer refers to this as the principle of 'animacy', denoting an indigenous understanding of the world as 'full of unseen energies that animate everything'.¹⁸

'Animism' is by now a popular and widely used term. It derives from the Latin word *anima*, meaning 'soul' and was first employed as a scholarly category by the founding anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917). Tylor used it to refer to the widespread, cross-cultural 'belief in spiritual beings'. His analysis of the ethnographic literature of the time had led him to understand animism as the very earliest expression of religious thought, from which all later branches of religion have ultimately stemmed. Tylor further reasoned that animism was essentially erroneous, with origins in the misinterpretation of dreams and other altered states of consciousness. He reasoned that:

When the sleeper awakens from a dream, he believes he has really somehow been away, or that other people have come to him. As it is well known by experience that men's bodies do not go on these excursions, the natural explanation is that every man's living self or soul is his phantom or image, which can go out of his body and see and be seen itself in dreams [...]¹⁹

Influenced by Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) evolutionary model, Tylor's anthropology was closely wedded to a form of social evolutionism known as *developmentalism* that was particularly popular during the latter half of the nineteenth century.²⁰ This view saw animism as a 'primitive' mentality, superseded by scientific rationalism, which if found in the present day was said to be a 'survival' from a pre-rational past. Embedded in the early conceptualisation of animism, then, were a range of colonial and Euro-centric biases and assumptions, which were actively used as a point of differentiation between the European, rationalist colonial worldview and the many indigenous worldviews found in the colonised territories. Professor of African Studies Harry Olúðaré Garuba (1958–2020), explained that:

[...] animist understandings of the natural and social world functioned within discourses of colonial modernity as the aberration, the past-in-the-present, to be disciplined so as to create civilised worlds and

subjects [...] In other words, animism has functioned as the metaphoric receptacle for everything that is a negation of the modern.²¹

Over the last two decades or so, however, animism as an etic category has been re-conceptualised in the academy as a feature of worldviews centred around notions of ‘personhood’, ‘relationship’ and ‘reciprocity’. As already noted, Graham Harvey has influentially – and usefully – re-defined animists as ‘people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others’.o He goes on to explain that:

Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons. Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable). Animism [...] is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons [...]²²

Relationships – rather than notions of rationality, cultural survivals and ‘primitive mentality’ – are now understood as central components of animistic cosmologies, constituting what have come to be referred to as ‘relational ontologies’.²³ As Robin Wall Kimmerer explains, in order to live sustainably from an indigenous perspective it is necessary to live in good relationships with the other-than-human persons that make up the ecosystems that sustain us:

In such cultures, people have a responsibility not only to be grateful for the gifts provided by Mother Earth, they are also responsible for playing a positive and active role in the well-being of the land. They are called not to be passive consumers, but to sustain the land that sustains them.²⁴

The founder of ecopsychology Theodore Roszak (1933–2011) has suggested that animism’s emphasis on the formation of ‘right relationships’ with other-than-human and non-human persons might have ‘a proven ecological utility’, in that ‘it disciplines the relationship of humans to their environment, imposing an ethical restraint upon exploitation and abuse’.²⁵ Animistic worldviews encourage us to participate in an ‘intersubjective cosmos’, in which we must take seriously the perspectives of other-than-human persons²⁶ Anthropologist

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has highlighted another important element of animist relational ontologies, which he has labelled ‘perspectivism’. He explains that in Amerindian cosmological models the world is often thought to be ‘inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view’. He elaborates:

Typically [...] humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans and animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators) [...] By the same token animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics as a form of culture [...] they see their food as human food [...] they see their bodily attributes as body decorations or cultural instruments, they see their social system as organised in the same way as human institutions are [...] ²⁷

From an animist, relational and perspectivist point-of-view, then, we are living in a world of many minds, in which it should come as little surprise that plants, animals, landscapes and other non-humans possess interior subjectivities.

Other-than-Human Persons and Ultraterrestrials

The concept of ‘other-than-human personhood’ was first employed in an academic sense by the anthropologist Alfred Irving Hallowell (1892–1974) in the context of his research into Ojibwa cosmology and ontology, where animacy and personhood – as in many other indigenous traditions around the world – are fundamental properties of the cosmos, extending far beyond the human sphere.²⁸ Kenneth Morrison explains that for the Ojibwa:

[...] ‘other-than-human persons’ share with human beings powerful abilities, including intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, the ability to discern right from wrong, and also the ability to speak, and therefore to influence other persons. In Ojibwa thought, persons are not defined by human physical shape, and so the Ojibwa do not project anthropomorphic attributes onto the world.²⁹

While the term non-human is frequently taken to include the biological lifeforms, geological processes, and other physical factors that constitute the

living planet around us, the concept of the ‘other-than-human’ also expands out to consider what might be referred to as ‘meta-empirical’, ‘spiritual’, ‘daimonic’, or ‘paranormal’ forms of life and consciousness.³⁰ This would include spirits and modalities of mind beyond what we can easily categorise, but no less a part of the natural world than sparrows and blue whales.³¹ This is the sense in which one of the founders of psychical research, the Cambridge classicist F.W.H. Myers (1843–1901), first coined the term ‘supernormal’ (which later mutated into ‘paranormal’). Myers intended to shift the dialogue around ‘psychical phenomena’ into the realm of the natural. He explained how the ‘word supernatural is open to grave objections’ because ‘it assumes that there is something outside nature. Now there is no reason to suppose that the psychical phenomena with which we deal are less a part of nature [...] they are above the norm [...] rather than outside [...] nature’.³² Other-than-human persons, then, may be more paranormal than supernatural – that is, *part of the natural world*, rather than separate from it.

It is interesting to note that pioneering paranormal researchers such as Charles Fort (1874–1932) and John Keel (1930–2009) – who followed in Myers’ footsteps by spending their lives and careers investigating the anomalous – eventually came to consider the possibility that there might be a greater intelligence underlying the many diverse manifestations of paranormal phenomena that they documented.³³ John Keel wrote, for example, that:

It is quite possible – even probable – that the Earth is really a living organism, and that it in turn is a part of an even larger organism, that whole constellations are alive, transmitting and receiving energy to and from other celestial energy sources. Up and down the energy scale the whole macrocosm is functioning on levels of reality that will always be totally beyond our comprehension. We are a part of it all, just as the microbe swimming on the microscope slide is unknowingly a part of our dismal reality, and, like the microbe, we lack the perceptive equipment necessary to view the larger whole. Even if we could view it, we could not understand it.³⁴

Keel’s idea essentially represents a sort of paranormal Gaia-hypothesis, taking James Lovelock’s (1919–2022) Gaia concept in directions he likely never imagined.³⁵ Keel also coined another useful concept for considering the psychodiversity of our living planet – the notion of the *ultraterrestrial*. The idea emerged in response to the dominant view in UFOlogy that UFOs/UAPs are *extra-terrestrial* in origin – coming from another planet in physical outer space.³⁶

Keel pointed out that many of the stranger UFO encounters that he investigated did not seem to support this hypothesis, suggesting instead that UFOs and their occupants (along with other paranormal entities), actually originate from the earth – *ultra* rather than *extra*- terrestrial – and have likely been here much longer than human-kind, existing on different frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum. Keel explains:

At this moment you are surrounded by all kinds of energy, much of it manmade, vibrating on every frequency from the ultra high frequencies [to] the very low frequencies [...] There are other forms of energy tied in as well [forms of energy] on such high frequencies they cannot be detected with even the most sophisticated scientific instruments [...] If you could peer into this super spectrum, you would undoubtedly see some frightening things - strange shapes and eerie ghostlike forms moving through a sea of electrical energy like fish in some alien sea.³⁷

These ‘strange shapes and eerie ghostlike forms’ are the *ultraterrestrials* – paranormal beings native to the Earth, existing on all manner of different frequencies, but no less indigenous or alien to the planet than human beings. For Keel, then, the cosmos was very much alive – overflowing with life, in fact. This is what Keel referred to as *Our Haunted Planet*.³⁸ There are resonances here with what agroecology researcher Julia Wright has called ‘subtle ecologies’, which she characterises as ecological models in which ‘a non-material dimension [is understood to exist alongside materially based ecological] systems’.³⁹ Sensitivity to, and awareness of, these frequently invisible ecosystems is often deeply ingrained in indigenous cosmologies, and becoming aware of them in their natural habitats through participation is a primary objective of sacred geography research.⁴⁰

Conclusions

As part of the pedagogical approach to sacred geography in the Sophia Centre we encourage students to enter into conversations with the external world of landscapes, places and their non-human inhabitants. Such experiences of interaction suggest that geographical landscapes, their features and places, are alive – filled to the brim with varied forms of life and mind, with whom it is possible to engage in meaningful and respectful communication. Nevertheless, these external landscapes – and the non-human minds that inhabit them – are still experienced through the body’s sensory apparatus and cultural frames of reference which mould and influence the way we perceive the world around

us. This represents the Durkheimian element of human social construction of the sacred. Crucially, however, the landscape, and indeed the world, cannot be reduced to these human perspectives – it is *very much more* than a projection – representative of Otto and Eliade’s positions on the nature of the sacred. To this extent, the scholar of the environment Adrian Ivakhiv has suggested that ‘orchestration’ rather than ‘construction’ might provide a better metaphor for understanding this relationship, as it acknowledges ‘an active, agential more-than-human world’ that often resists the ‘orchestral scores laid out and performed in their midst’.⁴¹ Indigenous cosmologies have long recognised the personal nature of the world and the need to engage it in dialogue, and have established ceremonial and respectful modes of interaction between the human and non-human. As Paul Devereux explains, the view that the world is somehow ‘alive, enchanted, sentient and capable of communicating with us’ is the ‘essence of all sacred geographies, regardless of specific cultural beliefs and differences’.⁴² Anthony Thorley adds that ‘Sacred Geography is part of the important post-enlightenment academic rediscovery of an animistic worldview relevant to Western Culture’.⁴³

Notes

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