Sacred Geography: a conceptual work in progress

by Anthony Thorley

A couple of years ago in the course of an email exchange with a North American academic I was asked 'What exactly is Sacred Geography?' I had to pause and take stock but in replying one thing became clear to me, Sacred Geography if nothing else, was a conceptual work in progress. This editorial is not the place to share the definitional challenge and detail of my own enquiries into that fundamental question, but it is useful to explore a number of important themes which clarify and enlarge our understanding of the subject.

If we start with early modern history we find the term first used in the nineteenth century by Thomas Tucker Smiley in 1824.[1] He wrote a 12 page pamphlet to explain to students of the Bible the relationship between the scriptures, their Biblical place-names and their geography. As the geography of the Holy Land, this was most simply: Sacred Geography. A more extended and detailed account of the same was published by Elijah Porter Barrows in 1872.[2] However Barrows' text, although championing the term Sacred Geography, made no attempt to explain or elaborate it further than a plain adjectival use of the word sacred.

A similar adjectival use can be found in early writings in what in Britain is termed 'Earth Mysteries'.[3] For example in 1937, Renee Guenon, the French esotericist writing about the complex zodiacal effigies of the Glastonbury landscape zodiac stated: 'But in these very confusions there may be found certain rational thoughts, and not wholly without interest from the viewpoint

[1] Smiley, Thomas T, *Sacred Geography, or, A Description of the Places mentioned in the Old and New Testaments: intended to promote a knowledge of the Holy Scriptures: adapted to the use of Schools and private families*, (Philadelphia: Clarke and Raser, 1824).

[2] Barrows, Elijah P, *Sacred Geography, and Antiquities*, (New York: American Tract Society, 1872).

[3] See for example, Stout, Adam, *What's Real and What is not: Reflections upon Archaeology and Earth Mysteries in Britain*. (Frome: Runetree Press, 2006).

of what is termed "sacred geography"...'[4] A year later, Dr J Heinsch, a German town planner, presented a paper to the 1938 International Congress of Geography, titled: *Principles of Prehistoric Sacred Geography*, describing the alleged value to modern town planning of fitting in with alignments identified as being between ancient sites.[5]

It is an important intellectual development to move from an adjectival use of 'Sacred' with 'Geography' to the exploration of the term Sacred Geography as a conceptual idea. There are two clearly identifiable conceptual streams we can follow here and both derive from religious and spiritual traditions which are acknowledged as being intimately related to geography and landscape. Neither of these streams is exclusive and deeper enquiry reveals many more similar sources of 'land based spirituality', but each repays close attention.[6]

Anthropological studies of Native North American Indian cultures soon exposed how those cultures intimately related to the specific lands where people lived and died, and as early as 1908 there were published papers describing Indian 'Ethnogeography'.[7] As Deward Walker puts it, 'In addition to being vital to ritual practice, sacred geography in Native North America is a source of religious meaning in group identity and group cohesion. Sacred sites in Native North America are invested through ritual with complex layers of religious meaning.'[8] Most significantly, the classic Durkheimian distinction between sacred and profane, in which the sacred is designated as forbidden and set aside does not apply here. Rather, the sacred 'is an embedded, intrinsic attribute lying behind the external, empirical aspect of all things...'[9] So rather

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[4] Guenon, M Renee, ' Etudes Traditionelles: The Land of the Sun' Review appended in Maltwood K E, *Air View Supplement to a Guide to Glastonbury's Temple of the Stars*, (London: John M Watkins, 1937).

[5] Heinsch, J, *Principles of Prehistoric Sacred Geography,* Trans. Michael Behrend, (Glastonbury: Zodiac House, 1975).

[6] See for example, Carmichael, David L, Hubert, Jane, Reeves, Brian and Schanche, Audhild, Eds., *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places,*(London: Routledge, 1994).

[7] Harrington, John P, 'The Ethnogeography of the Tewa Indians', in *Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1907-1908,* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1908).

[8] Walker, Deward, 'Sacred Geography in Native North America', in Taylor, Bron, Ed. *Enclyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 1448-1451. (Hereafter, Walker, Sacred Geography).

[9] Walker, Sacred Geography, p.1449.

than using ritual to create sacred space, North American Indians more often use ceremonies, visions and dream-states to access 'an embedded sacredness in nature and to locate geographical points that permit direct access to it in order to experience it on a local level'.[10] The geographical location and timing of ritual is therefore emphasised as being vital to its effectiveness, thus placing sacred geography centre stage in Native Indian spiritual culture. Coeval to this land-based spiritual tradition and its dialogical richness is the prominence played by interaction with animistic forces emanating from inert and living forms, what Irving Hallowell has so eloquently termed: 'Persons other than human' leading beyond human singularity and so creating 'a larger cosmic society'.[11]

The second great religious and spiritual tradition which has spawned a natural sense of Sacred Geography, is India and its related subcontinent, especially through Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies. The idea of a Cosmic Centre, or Sacred Mountain connecting heaven and earth, a concept so central to Eliade's basic thinking, leads to the emanation of sacred power from that source through the flow of water from glacial springs to become mighty sacred rivers like the Ganges.[12] The key Sanskrit word *tirtha*, means confluence, and every confluence is a sacred place, a form of crossing point between the earthly and the heavenly. Moreover, the confluences go beyond physical geography to create a virtual geography of interconnectedness which binds all India together and facilitates the rich tradition of religious pilgrimage between key sacred sites in the landscape.[13] As Diana L Eck has so clearly put it, 'In this wider network of pilgrimage, nothing...stands alone, but rather everything is part of a living, storied, and intricately connected landscape.'[14] Moreover, there is an

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[10] Walker, Sacred Geography, p.1449.

[11] Hallowell, A Irving, *The Ojibwa of Berens River, Manitoba: Ethnography into History*, Brown, Jennifer S H , Ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992), pp.67-68.

[12] Lehman, F K, 'Introduction: The Concept of "Sacred Geography", Its Origin and Scope', in Lukens-Bull, Ronald A, Ed., *Sacred Places and Modern Landscapes: Sacred Geography and Social-Religious Transformations in South and Southeast Asia,* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 2003), pp. xv-xvii. (Hereafter, Lehman, Sacred Places); Eliade, Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion,* (San Diego: Harcourt and Brace, 1957).

[13] Eck, Diana L, *India: A Sacred Geography*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012), pp.1-3. (Hereafter, Eck, India); Lehman, Sacred Places, p. xvi.

[14] Eck, India, p.2.

acknowledged dual dynamic between the influence and authority of the Gods in their mountain fastness feeding down, like the rivers, to the simplest village shrines and holy sites, and those same shrines and local cultic centres feeding back up to strengthen and ultimately nourish and enable the gods themselves. This dual spiritual flow, institutionalised and paralleled in the material interplay of palace-based kingship and village serfdom, is again another part of a profound sacred geography.[15]

Modern academics studying Indian culture cannot therefore avoid the importance of this sacred geographical totality and have sought to define it for better academic discourse. F K Lehman defines it as 'a conceptual system in which certain places are of central ritual importance because it is there that one accesses cosmic currents of ritual purity and power.'[16] More recently, Catherine Allerton has sought to define what she calls Spiritual Landscape. 'This concept is meant to draw attention both to the ways in which people imagine spirit forces and energies to emerge from or be connected to places, *and* to the attitudes that people may have to the 'hidden' or mysterious realms lying beyond, behind or immanent within the visible earth.'[17] What is perhaps surprising about these definitions is how much they acknowledge the importance of spiritual forces and the numinous, ideas pioneered by Otto's classic work of 1924.[18]

What therefore can we learn from Sacred Geography as we have taught it on our MA module? The module was founded by pagan scholar of the study of religions, Michael York. York told me how he sought to better understand the night sky 'but in the process I discovered a lovely culture of central Californian Indians, and I learned through them the magical-sacred nuance of landscape – islands, rocks, mountains etc.' Later, he studied in India and 'India itself allowed a more magnified perspective on spiritual practice and its connections

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[15] Marriott, McKim, 'Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization' in Marriot, McKim Ed., *Village India, Studies in the Little Community,* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1955),pp. 213-214; Askew, Marc, 'Transformations and Continuities: Sacralization, Place and Memory in Contemporary Bangkok', in Lukens-Bull, Ronald A, Ed., *Sacred Places and Modern Landscapes,*(Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University,2003), pp.61-67.

[16] Lehman, Sacred Places, p. xvi.

[17] Allerton, Catherine, 'Introduction; Spiritual Landscapes of Southeast Asia', *Anthropological Forum,*2009, 19 (3), pp. 235-251.

[18] Otto, Rudolf, 'The Idea of the Holy' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924).

with the terrestrial contours of *tirtha*: rivers, trees, rocks, springs and wells as well as temples and shrines'.[19] So it appears as if our founding father became directly influenced by both central traditions of Sacred Geography that we have already considered. York established the course around 2002, and, as evidenced by the current selection of papers, and other distinguished Sacred Geography student papers published in Spica, it has been a popular and expanding influence in our MA ever since.

The variety of material that is creatively considered by our students points to the need for a simple definition of Sacred Geography which allows for expressions of sacred and secular activities which are nonetheless deeply felt and contribute to cultural, and, dare I say it, spiritual enrichment. Such a simple definition might be: Sacred Geography is the study of qualities of the sacred and related cultural activities found in certain places and expressed in a spatial context. But if I was allowed to be more adventurous in my conceptual journey and taking my cue from Hallowell's seminal idea of a Cosmic Society, I would say that Sacred Geography is part of the important post-enlightenment academic rediscovery of an animistic worldview relevant to Western Culture.

[19] York, Michael, Pers. Comm. Email to the author dated, 2.9.2016.