

A Meditation On Sacred Space

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Introduction

To best appreciate the phenomenon of sacred space we need to be receptive to its dynamism. However, to begin to understand this fundamental principle there is need to be receptive to the idea that all space is sacred. Nevertheless, to arrive at this conclusion presupposes that the polarity of the **sacred and profane** is not the only way to perceive reality. That the dichotomy of **sacred and profane** became the norm is in large part due to how space, and by extension the cosmos, was understood and used. Perceived as inherently **neutral** or inherently **evil** space had no ontological relationship with the divine and uncreated. Consequently, space could be recklessly abused or it could become the existential prison (tomb) from which the human spirit yearned to escape.

One of the ways the dichotomy of **sacred and profane** is overcome is in the setting aside and/or consecration of a specific space for the purpose of worship. The cultic or liturgical **reclamation and recognition** of a delineated area for the purpose of worship simultaneously **removes** the designated space from its surroundings but at the same time becomes an archetype for its surroundings. Revealed within this microcosm, space is neither inherently neutral nor evil. Within this microcosm of delineated space all space is unveiled as inherently sacred being the venue where human beings encounter and commune with not only one another but where they also encounter and commune with the divine and transcendent.

Given these fundamentals we have the opportunity to see that space is neither static nor is it bound to the dimensions of length, width, depth and time. The dynamism of space is revealed in its **elasticity**, which extends beyond the **created and temporal** into the **uncreated and eternal**.

In order to elaborate on the dynamism of sacred space, I am dividing this paper into three parts. 1) The Creation And Collapse Of Sacred Space: 2) Sacred Space And Redemption and 3) The Eternal Expansion Or Evolution Of Sacred Space.

I. The Creation And Collapse Of Sacred Space

Following the accounts of creation in the book of Genesis we can detect two primary aspects of space. First, space, as a created phenomenon allows for differentiation and particularity. From an **interpersonal** perspective, space provides for the differentiation and particularity of **persons** including the tri-personal God. Space is the context in which “I” encounter the “other” and the “other” encounters “me.” Encountering the **other** is one of the underlying principles that accounts for the holy or sacred character of space.

Emerging within this encounter of unique and differentiated persons there develops a **dynamic of persons** from which is forged a relationship that leads to either an **intercommunion** of persons or a polarity of persons. In either case, space enables each person to exercise his or her

freedom to draw near to the other or to withdraw from the other. More will be said about this later.

Because God is the creator of space, it, together with time provide the context in which the intercommunion of persons reflect the interpersonal relationships of the Trinitarian God. God as **triune and tri-personal (hypostatic)** provides not only the realities of space and time but also the super-spatial and super-temporal model for how created space and time are utilized by human beings.

Using the language of the Greek Fathers, we can say that space is the context of interpersonal relationships – space is the context for **περιχώρησις**. For our purposes, **περιχώρησις** is a word or concept that attempts to describe each person – uncreated and created – as being the **context or space** for the other. Therefore, in addition to space being a delineated area in which unique persons interact and commune with each other, it also takes on a **personal** manifestation. In other terms, each unique and particular person is a unique and personal space for the reception of the other. The Gospel of St. John helps to illustrate this interpersonal and interpenetrating relationship of **personal space**. Christ, on behalf of his disciples, prays to his Father “that they may all be one; even as you Father, are in me, and I in you that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and that they may become perfectly one...” (17:21-23)

Space exists for the differentiation, encounter and intercommunion of persons. This intercommunion of persons, both divine and human, reveals that space is **exterior and interior**. **Exterior** space allows each person to discover and abide in the **interior space** of the other. The inter relationship of persons/the interpenetration of persons involves an exterior and interior spatial dynamic.

Accompanying the exterior and interior dimensions of space, there are also the dimensions of the **corporeal and incorporeal**. “In the beginning,” says Genesis 1:1, “God created the heavens and the earth.” The words heaven and earth correspond to incorporeal and corporeal space. The human person occupies and manifests corporeal space that can be delineated - which can be measured. At the same time there is **incorporeal space** where the bodiless or angelic persons exist. These immaterial beings are circumscribable and possess their own interior space.

Corporeal and incorporeal space co-exist. Together they show that space has flexible contours. Hence, space is not just limited to what is perceptible by the senses. Space extends beyond the material, measurable and sensible embracing the immaterial yet containable.

Space is a dynamic and multi-dimensional phenomenon that is given by God for the intercommunion of both created and uncreated persons. Yet, our experience teaches us that space provides the context in which the communion of persons is broken. The collapse or fallen characteristic of space is attributed to sin. Sin as the breaking of communion of persons in all its manifestations renders space as the context in which persons become polarized from each other and the entire creation. This distortion of space reveals another dynamic – that of interpersonal domination and destruction which trace their origin to a turning away from God. One of the most

poignant illustrations in the Old Testament revealing humanity's break with God is described in two antithetical uses of space.

In the early chapters of Genesis, space is where God and humanity commune with each other. Space and all that it contains are intended to be used by man and woman to establish a relationship of ceaseless and progressive intimacy. With the turning away from God, space and all that it contains are used to flee from the divine presence. "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife **hid** themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden." (3:8)

II. Sacred Space and Redemption

Within the divine/human synergy of liturgical worship the dynamism of sacred space shows itself as having two complementary or inter-related qualities. On the one hand, as has already been mentioned, sacred or liturgical space is archetypal of all space since it exists as the context in which the human person together with all of creation is drawn into the **interior and uncreated space** of God just as God is drawn into the **interior and created space** of his creation. On the other hand, sacred space as liturgical space is opened to **eternity** which points to the relationship space and person have with time.

Like space and person, time is created. But just as space and person have their fulfillment in the transcendent, the same applies to time. From a liturgical/theological perspective, when the Church as the community of worshipping persons gathers to celebrate the Liturgy, particularly the Eucharist, it weaves itself together with space and time into the fabric of eternity. Space, person and time intersect with the eternal, infinite and divine. This is revealed quite powerfully in the anaphora prayer of St. John Chrysostom where space, person and time culminate in **eschatology**. In celebrating the Liturgy as the New Covenant of the Lord, the community remembers "all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand, and the Second and Glorious coming..."

Sacred space binds the **present with the past and future**. The interaction of space, person and time form an **anamnesis** – a (re)membering/a re-connecting of the present with the past and future in which a communion of persons is forged in the New and Eternal Covenant of the Savior. Consequently, sacred space joins the community of worshipping persons to a multi-temporal i.e. past, present and future, and ultimately eternal context.

III. The Eternal Expansion or Evolution of Sacred Space

Sacred space, when properly used as the context for the interpenetration of created and uncreated, makes known the universal dynamism of creation which antinomically speaking, **eternally moves** in the **eternal rest** of God. This ever moving stability (ἀεικίνητος στάσις) of sacred space together with the ever moving stability of the human person adds to the often heated discussions on evolution. Within our discussion of sacred space and liturgical worship, evolution is a natural characteristic of creation. God creates, not out of necessity but out of love, so that he might grow within the creation so that creation might eternally grow within him. Put another

way, the expansion of sacred space into the eternal and infinite is dependent upon the eternally developing synergy of God and humanity. As humanity grows in the kinetic/stability of divinity so too does the rest of creation grow and expand.

In commenting on Genesis 1:2, “Increase and multiply,” Fr. Marc-Antoine Costa de Beauregard of the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of Western and Southern Europe offers this interesting observation: “The word increase (ἀυξάνω) here prophetically proposed to the human being by God, designates not only a numerical increase or expansion of the human species. It indicates above all the development of the human being as such – man is called to become more human, to reach human plenitude”¹

The expansion of the new humanity in Christ corresponds to the expansion of the new creation. “Behold, I make all things new.” (Rev.21). The never ending expansion of sacred space is eternally accomplished in the liturgical act of humanity offering itself with all of creation back to God. In this context everyone and everything regains their proper identity for everyone and everything are being brought back to God. In this liturgical symphony of person, space and time creation is being transformed into an epiphany of God’s kingdom. All of creation becomes sacrament i.e. the means of direct, intimate, personal and eternally expanding union and communion with God.

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¹ « Le Cosmos et La Croix », in Tradition and Modernity – Essays Honoring Dumitri Staniloae, Center for Romanian Studies, 2002, p155. Insights and ideas of Pere Marc Antoine’s article have been the inspiration for this meditation. Cf. also Ephesians 4:13, “...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood to the standard of the stature of the fullness of Christ.)