

# Regionalisation and the Theology of Space

Philip A. Mellor

Concepts of space have been the subject of a great deal of debate in a number of areas of contemporary social theory. The work of the sociologists Erving Goffman and, more recently, Anthony Giddens have been particularly important and influential components of many of these debates. In theological discussions of space, however, many of the insights offered by the social sciences have yet to be assimilated. In the following discussion I shall suggest that there are a number of valuable elements in Goffman's theories which might fruitfully be incorporated into theological reflection. Initially, however, I shall consider the approaches to the religious significance of space by Mathew Fox and Robin Green which are, I believe, indicative of major flaws in much contemporary Christian discussion of the subject. After discussing some limitations in these approaches, I shall briefly sketch out the basic lines of Goffman's and Giddens' arguments, and offer a few suggestions relating to how these theories might be of relevance to theology. Specifically, I shall draw attention to the importance of what Giddens refers to as the *regionalisation* of social life which is, I suggest, particularly relevant to the study of religious activity.

## The Deconstruction of Sacred Space

The orthodoxy of some areas of the theology of the American Dominican Mathew Fox has been called into question by both his own religious order and the Vatican. However, regardless of the historical or theological justifications for some of his opinions, he is clearly mining a popular vein for many people when he talks of replacing the 'fall/redemption tradition' which has dominated Christianity with his 'creation spirituality', a spirituality centred around an affirmative openness to the 'divine blessing' of the cosmos. Original sin, evil and even the crucifixion do not take centre stage in Fox's theology, since he prefers to emphasise the 'original blessing' of creation, and its essential goodness, together with the all-encompassing significance of the

incarnation.<sup>1</sup> It is, perhaps, the one-sidedness of Fox's theology which has been the cause of the many criticisms of it from both evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholic traditionalists, though he clearly understands himself as responding to a more prevalent onesidedness in Christian theology. Nevertheless, it is the extremity of Fox's emphasis on the goodness of creation which makes his discussion of the religious significance of space problematic. Few modern Christian theologians would question the goodness of creation, but the majority would also make some attempt to reconcile this concept with the reality of evil, death and the significance of suffering of which the Cross is a sign. The aspects of Christian theology which Fox terms the 'fall/redemption tradition' cannot be dismissed in toto as the alien imports of world-hating gnostics. A more orthodox position than that of Fox would make an attempt to find a meaningful balance between the two positions. In fact, von Balthasar has commented that twin poles of the incarnation and the crucifixion stand at the heart of Christian theology and life;<sup>2</sup> in other words, that it is precisely in the difficulty of reconciling these two things that much of the heart of the Christian message can be found.

For theologians such as Mathew Fox, however, the darker or even the more mundane aspects of human life are not really incorporated into a coherent theological framework, and this affects the interpretation of the concept of space. For Fox, spiritual awakening means 'a new and charged experience of sacred space.'<sup>3</sup> This new experience involves responding to the 'Now' of 'realised eschatology'; that is, recognising that Christ is not in the future, the past or located in any one particular space or institutional site, but is in everything. Through exploring the depths of this 'Now' we enter into divine space where traditional patterns of time and geography are meaningless.<sup>4</sup> A similar position has recently been proposed by Robin Green. Green bases his interpretation of 'sacred space' on a particular understanding of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. Jesus' actions have often been interpreted as a confrontation with those who have insulted God through engaging in exchange and bartering in the Temple; in other words, in confronting such people Jesus is attempting to restore a sense of sacred space. This would appear to be the interpretation of a majority of Biblical scholars.<sup>5</sup> Green, however, takes an entirely different view. He argues that Jesus does not purge the Temple to create a purified sacred space, but to enable marginalised groups to enter it where previously they were excluded. He defines sacred space as space controlled by those who exercise power and authority in the world. The Jewish Temple is therefore understood as 'a way of defining political and spiritual power and authority', and thus a means of 'marginalising people'.<sup>6</sup> For Green, Jesus' approach to

sacred space is 'iconoclastic', confrontational and destructive: since sacred space is divisive and inherently marginalising, Jesus encourages us to go beyond it, to recognise no boundaries, to stand together in what Fox would call the eternal 'Now' of God's presence in the whole of creation.

It should be noted that having rejected the more traditional view of the significance of sacred space, Green then appears to offer a new, more positive vision of the concept. Sacred space becomes a battleground on which we struggle against the tendency to marginalise and divide, attempting to be totally 'open and vulnerable to each other.'<sup>7</sup> As Green sees it we will continually fail to do this, creating personal and institutional spaces apart from other people, but Christ will continually 'break and enter' into these spaces reminding us of the necessity of openness. In fact, this 'new' understanding of sacred space is merely an elaboration of Green's more general rejection of the significance of space. Any specific form of sacred space is unacceptable to him because it seems to presuppose some form of divisiveness, so the only way he can rehabilitate the idea of sacred space is to say that if we understand Christ's actions correctly sacred space is everywhere. Like Fox, he is urging us to see beyond human conceptualisations of space, and their various social manifestations, in favour of a divine space which permeates everything and excludes no one. Yet a contradiction is apparent here: although Christ is supposed to be present everywhere, it seems that he is not to be found in the human, social structures we ordinarily inhabit, but in a separate 'spiritual' reality above and beyond them. There are ecclesiological implications in such a position: any form of exclusivism or even, ultimately, any claim for the uniqueness of the Christian message and the Church is regarded as unacceptable. Lurking behind much of Green's discussion is the association of the Church with the all-too-human erection of boundaries, and thus of a spiritual 'apartheid system.'<sup>8</sup> For Green a Church which establishes any sort of boundaries is failing in its mission, and becomes liable to the same iconoclastic, destructiveness which Christ is understood to have directed towards the Jewish temple.

It is beyond the scope of this present discussion to consider the Biblical criticism pertinent to Green's interpretation of Temple cleansing narratives, except to say that I believe that although there is perhaps a certain amount of justification for Green's argument, we should have to choose our evidence very selectively to support a conclusion such as he offers. However, on a more general level, there is a glaring philosophical flaw in both Fox's and Green's positions: although they both, finally, talk about sacred space as religiously

meaningful they have effectively deprived the concept of any meaning by their hostility to the specific, to the particular. Despite Green's attempt to talk of a space apart from any division or particularity, I suggest that it is such things which make space intelligible. For Green and Fox, everything and nothing is sacred space: if a toilet is as sacred as an altar, and if Christ is present amongst those who define themselves as atheists in the same way that he is understood to be amongst Christians, then is God everywhere or nowhere? Space as a category is expanded to the point of meaninglessness. The association of any concept of 'boundaries' with an 'apartheid system' is not only emotive, it is misleading. As I shall suggest in relation to the work of Goffman and Giddens, the organisation of space is a fundamentally social activity which is essential in the construction of human identities. Green argues that the Church's obsession with 'sacral activity' has hindered its engagement with the world, but we could argue the opposing view: to seriously engage with the world the Church must be sensitive to the significance of the organisation of space which is so important to social life. It is Green's position which is the anti-social one, since it wilfully ignores such significance.

## The Construction of Social Space

The elucidation of the way in which social life is made up of different types of spatial organisation owes a great deal to the sociologist Erving Goffman. One of his most important works is *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which he discusses the different types of encounters, roles and forms of spatial organisation which make up day-to-day social life. A particularly relevant chapter deals with what he terms *regions* and *region behaviour*. He defines a region as 'any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception.'<sup>9</sup> These barriers need not be physical, though they often are. However, of particular note in regard to these regions is that individuals behave in different ways in different regions. In fact, the ability to be able to gauge the type of region one finds oneself in, and to adjust one's behaviour accordingly, is a basic social skill. A failure to achieve this makes an individual anti-social in the eyes of his/her peers, and can have drastic social consequences. In a study of the social situation of mental patients, Goffman considers the patterns which govern the social treatment of individuals who cannot cope with these social rules and spatial sensitivities which we take for granted.<sup>10</sup> A major distinction between different types of regions is that between *front regions* and *back regions*, or 'on-stage' and 'backstage'

areas. The altar of a church, for example, is clearly a front region, in that only certain forms of fairly formal, often ritualised, respectful behaviour is appropriate. The presbytery or vicarage is more usually a back region, an area where a priest can relax and perhaps behave in ways which might be inappropriate in a more public context.

Nevertheless, if we explore further the example of the presbytery as a site for regionalised activity, certain complexities become evident. With the arrival of parishioners, for instance, what is normally a back region could quickly become a front region, and the priest would have to modify his behaviour accordingly, assuming a role his parishioners would expect of him. 'Team performances' are often called for as well: in an Anglican context, a priest's wife has traditionally been expected to participate in her husband's performances to some extent, fulfilling certain social roles within a parish and often having to undergo an interview before her husband obtained a particular position. Such team performances are increasingly difficult where a priest's wife has her own career, values her independence from her husband in a more general way, and may even have no Christian beliefs. Here it is apparent that general social changes in the terms of the lifestyle and career options available to women can cause new difficulties for ordained husbands. A partner who loudly professed atheism, for example, or who was never seen in church, or who viewed the frequent visits of parishioners to the vicarage as an invasion of her privacy, would to some extent undermine the priest's performance. In the interests of supporting the priest's performance the wife might agree to restrict certain of her views to 'safe' back regions, but in doing so would obviously be placing significant constraints upon her own personal freedom. The creation and maintenance of an acceptable balance between public roles and private relationships would obviously be difficult in such circumstances, and would require a certain amount of sensitivity, personal effort, and a careful monitoring of various social encounters. Nevertheless, such difficulties are not unique to such situations: the coordination of a number of performances appropriate to different types of regions is for Goffman an essential component of social life. To ignore such forms, or to be unable to master them, is to render social interaction problematic. The more we consider the variety of social encounters we habitually engage in, the more it will become apparent that all of us are continually active in our assimilation and deployment of a vast array of social rules, codes and resources.

If we consider the approaches of Fox and Green to the concept of space in the light of Goffman's analysis, then they appear hopelessly insensitive to the social significance of space. Green is aware of the fact

that the coordination of space tends to produce marginalisation, in the sense that all barriers exclude as well as include, but his subsequent desire to remove all barriers in the hope of ending marginalisation is, I suggest, indulgent and idealistic. Christian theology which ignores the rules and resources which characterise social life is in danger of becoming a merely 'spiritual', personal thing, however much it might talk of 'a deeper engagement with the world.'<sup>11</sup> To wish away forms of life that appear to be fundamental to social interaction is to propose an extraordinarily unworldly theology. A more appropriate response would be to work within such forms if Christianity is to be regarded as meaningful in contemporary society. A more balanced reading of the various cleansing of the Temples narratives to which Green refers shows that Jesus appears to practice such an approach: while, as Green argues, he opposes the unjust marginalisation suffered by some groups he also proceeds to marginalise others. This seems to be the overwhelming impression one gains from reading these texts. The continuing significance of the Temple as a sacred space is demonstrated by the fact that a whole new group of people is dramatically excluded. In Goffman's terms, Jesus does not remove all barriers to participation in such space, but uses his authority to clarify what types of region behaviour and groups of participants are appropriate to the region. As a human being living in a particular culture he works within the broad social patterns which are meaningful to him, even though his authority and his vision allows him to transform or even subvert them when appropriate. I suggest that since this spatial structuring of social life seems to be so central to all societies, then a Christ who did not work within such social forms would not be a convincingly human figure at all, but some sort of otherworldly figure only apparently involved in human social life.

As noted above, one of the most influential of contemporary sociologists in the study of the significance of space is Anthony Giddens. To a large extent, Giddens' work in this area has been a development of the pioneering studies of Goffman. Giddens highlights three aspects of spatiality which he considers to be particularly important for understanding our participation in social life. First, he notes the 'co-presence' of other people in the social settings where interaction occurs; second, following Goffman, he observes that all social activity is regionalised; and third, he draws our attention to the spatiality of the body.<sup>12</sup> All these are constraints upon the individual, but should not be conceived of in exclusively negative terms: although they constrain, they also enable in the sense that they provide the 'field of conduct' upon which individuals trace out their various life-paths, and

within which they make significant choices and draw upon the various social rules and resources available to them. Thus, there is nothing socially determinist about conceiving of social life in this way. Giddens' three aspects of spatiality merely draw attention to some important facts about social existence, in the light of which we have to recognise that our bodily existence and our interaction with other people take place within socially-defined regions. All three elements are dependent on each other. To ignore the regionalisation of social activity would, for example, be to underestimate the significance of our bodies: in the Biblical Temple narratives the physical exclusion of certain groups (and the undesirable presence of others) are only meaningful because the Temple is a religiously significant region. To seek the destruction of all such boundaries might prevent exclusion, but it would also prevent inclusion since there would be no region left for individuals to be included in. If we applied this destruction of sacred space to social space, then social life would become meaningless, if not impossible. To be 'co-present' with other people, we have to be situated somewhere specific: I can only converse with another person if we are present in each other's space, whether it is a physical presence or presence through telecommunications media. Yet, we still cannot communicate if we do not share common linguistic, social and cultural knowledges and abilities: cross-cultural communication therefore depends on the creation of new rules, codes, structures and resources which can help us be present to each other. The 'inclusiveness' which Green desires is ill-served by a wilful ignorance of the prevalence and necessity of the structuring of space which characterises social life.

## Constructing a Theology of Space

To return, finally, to some more general indications of the significance space has in Christianity, it is worthwhile considering other aspects of Jesus' behaviour in the Gospels. His attitude to the desert is worth noting. Jacques Le Goff has referred to the ambivalence in the New Testament references to the desert,<sup>13</sup> but what is common about all of them is that the desert is understood as a region where particularly significant encounters and actions can take place. Thus, Jesus is led into the desert to be tempted by Satan (Mathew 4:1), but it is also a place where Jesus sought refuge (Mark 1:35, 45).<sup>14</sup> The subsequent significance of the desert for many of the early Church Fathers, the medieval tension between wilderness and city, and the Celtic penchant for establishing monasteries on remote islands, are all indicative of what

282



Le Goff terms the 'constant interplay between geography and symbolism.'<sup>15</sup> However, more than this they are representative of a basic awareness that spatial differentiation is socially and religiously meaningful. While it would be theologically correct to emphasise that Jesus manifested an intimate relationship with God the Father at all times, it is also clear that this intimacy is expressed particularly clearly within certain significant regions, such as the Temple, the desert and, of course, the Garden of Gethsemane. This latter example is of note as a very specific example of Jesus' consciousness of the significance of regions. As von Balthasar comments, not all the disciples are allowed to follow Jesus all the way into the Garden, the scene of his agonised prayer that 'the hour might pass from him', a fact which von Balthasar sees as having theological and ecclesiological implications:

'The gospel says that Jesus interrupted this struggle several times in order to seek sympathy, support and help from his disciples, the representatives of the visible church, arranged by the Lord himself at certain distances: eight disciples left further back, three brought nearer to him, apparently to take part.'<sup>16</sup>

Mark, for example, states clearly that Peter, James and John were located much closer to Jesus than the others, though even they appear to remain at a certain distance from him since he 'went away and prayed' (Mark 14:32–42). Von Balthasar sees a distinction between priesthood and laity signified here and, one might infer from other elements of this prominent Roman Catholic theologian's work, a sign of the relative authority of various churches. However, regardless of the interpretations we might place upon Christ's actions (and von Balthasar's would obviously be contentious), what cannot be denied is that the Garden becomes a religiously significant region and that the spatial distribution of the disciples within it also has religious significance. The three aspects of spatiality delineated by Giddens are all relevant here. First, Giddens' emphasis on the importance of our bodies for the organisation of space is significant. It is the disciples' *bodies* which are spatially distributed allowing Christ (or the Gospel writers) to make a theological point. Second, the fact that only the disciples are co-present with Christ at this important time is also clearly suggestive of the special role these disciples will have after Christ's death. Third, as already mentioned, all this activity takes place within the specific region of the Garden. This regionalisation of Christ's final hours of freedom provides a 'bracket' within which Christ's actions take on a particularly significant hue: just as with the temptations of Christ in the desert, here too aspects of Christ's mission to the world are made all the more memorable and



bolder to us through their location within the boundaries of a particular region, separated from the social context as a whole.

To conclude this very brief introduction to the subject, I suggest that deeper theological engagement with various representations and explorations of spatiality can be stimulated by the work of sociologists such as Goffman and Giddens. These two writers have done a great deal to convince the social sciences that even the smallest or most routine acts of day-to-day life have great significance, an insight pregnant with theological implications for the contemporary Christian. It is encouraging that Giddens has included a useful chapter on 'Social Interaction and Everyday Life' in his popular new textbook aimed at both 'A' level and higher education students, though it is regrettable that these insights have not been integrated into his chapter dealing with the sociology of religion.<sup>17</sup> The task of assessing the significance of such theories for religion is therefore left to theologians at present, and this has been merely an introductory sketch. The possibilities of such a task being taken up by liturgical scholars is particularly intriguing, though there are other possibilities. The training of priests for pastoral work might benefit from attention to problems associated with region behaviour, while on a grander scale the dichotomy between 'sacral activity' and 'engagement with the world' could finally be deconstructed. In the light of the above discussion I suggest that the investigation of such issues would be an extremely worthwhile and illuminating task, which would not only draw our attention to the limitations in many of the discussions of space so far, but also to the possibilities which are opened up for assessing the interaction between Christianity and social life in an intriguing new way.

- 1 Fox — *Original Blessing*, Bear and Company, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1983.
- 2 *The Von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1984, p. 156.
- 3 Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- 4 *ibid.* p. 107.
- 5 See *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. R.E. Brown S.S., J.A. Fitzmyer S.J., R.E. Murphy O.Carm., publ. Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1968, Vol.II, p. 47.
- 6 Green — 'Sacred Space', *The Way Supplement*, Spirituality and Liturgy, Number 67, Spring 1990, pp. 26–27.
- 7 *ibid.* pp. 28–29.
- 8 *ibid.* p. 31.
- 9 E. Goffman — *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin, London, 1969, p. 92.
- 10 E. Goffman — *Asylums*, Penguin, London, 1980.
- 11 Green, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
- 12 A. Giddens — *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*, Polity Press, 1987, pp. 145–146.
- 13 J. Le Goff — *The Medieval Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, London, 1988, p.48.
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 *ibid.* p. 52.
- 16 Von Balthasar, *op. cit.*, pp. 147–148.
- 17 A. Giddens — *Sociology*, Polity Press, 1990.