



Holy Places and Religious Language in New Religious Movements

Alastair Lockhart

Abstract

The idea of sacred sites or holy ground has been an important aspect of a number of major world religions. While the concept has received longstanding scholarly attention in connection with the traditional Abrahamic faiths, the ways in which late-modern and contemporary movements have developed the idea has been little studied. This paper reviews the ways in which twentieth-century new religions adopted and developed the idea of holy place. Three movements form the core case studies: The Panacea Society, a breakaway Anglican group based in Bedford in England, which came to believe their garden was the site of Eden; the American Theosophical Society, which founded a utopian community in California understood as the site of the emergence of a new spiritual age; and Jamaican Rastafari who came to regard a territory south of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia as salvific. Common themes emerging from the case studies include the ways in which ideas about holy ground (1) draw on available theological motifs, (2) express emerging theological principles, and (3) are catalysed by stress or challenge. Finally, the discussion reflects on the role of holy ground in these movements in the light of classic and contemporary understandings of place and religious imagination.

Keywords

Rastafari, Theosophy, Panacea, sacred territory, holy ground

Introduction

The origins of this paper lie in my research on the Panacea Society – a distinctive religious group that formed around the time of the Great War and set up a headquarters in Bedford in the United Kingdom in the 1920s. The history and evolution of the Society will be discussed in a little more detail below, however it is helpful to be aware of one of their particular activities, which is in some ways is the starting point for this project. This is their creation of a system of healing

that eventually attracted thousands of applicants from all over the world. Applicants to the healing were sent a piece of linen that had been breathed over by the group's leader, and they were asked to write in regularly to update the Society on their progress in healing. What is important about the Panacea Society, from the point-of-view of research in late modern and contemporary religion, is that a large number of letters from healing users were retained by the Society, are still preserved by the secular charitable trust that now manages the Society's archives and buildings (the Society ceased functioning as a religious group in 2012),¹ and many of the letters discuss personal and individual thinking about a breadth of religious and spiritual topics. As such, the letters provide a rare insight into ordinary people's views about religious and spiritual matters from a range of different countries and across the twentieth century.² While the letters enable us to investigate the ways in which individuals constellated their religious thinking from their cultural milieu and from their personal histories, alongside the letters archive the Trust also preserves an institutional archive which provides a rich insight into the history and evolution of this somewhat transient late-modern religious form – the history of which is presented in Jane Shaw's *Octavia, Daughter of God*.³ What is evident from both these archives (the healing archive and the institutional archive) is the ways in which the Society was linked to a great diversity of innovating currents in the global religious ecosystem of the twentieth-century, it is one of those currents that I would like to discuss in this paper.

I recently completed my book on the Panacea Society's healing,⁴ though the Society and healing remain an important research interest; the material I want to present here is an evolution out of that project. In looking at holy places, using the concept as a central overlapping reference point, and the Panacea Society as a starting point, I am developing an approach that seeks to interrogate the theological ideas of less established and less well-known religious groups. To that extent, the approach I am presenting here is rather speculative. This project is at an early stage, and in my conclusion I draw out the core common tropes in the religious processes at play in the case studies: the ways in which they draw on a wide range of available theological motifs, the ways in which holy ground becomes an expression of theological principles, the role of stress or challenge in coalescing the idea in particular instances. I set the case studies discussed in

¹ Panacea Charitable Trust, 14 Albany Road, Bedford.

² Alastair Lockhart, *Personal Religion and Spiritual Healing: The Panacea Society in the Twentieth Century* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2019).

³ Jane Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: The Story of a Female Messiah and her Followers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011).

⁴ Lockhart, *Personal Religion*.

the framework of Mircea Eliade's classic account of the relationship between religion and place,⁵ and link them to contemporary work on, in Mary Farrell Bednarowski's words, the "theological imagination" and the "creative human capacity . . . to formulate meaning systems, models of the universe, by which men and women are able to orient and interpret their lives".⁶

One of the things for which the Panacea Society is famous is their reported belief that their back garden was the original site of the Garden of Eden. One of my current posts is as an Academic Director at the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements – the Centre is funded by the secular charitable trust that was formed when the last Panacean died in 2012. Amongst the activities of the Centre is presenting talks to groups of members of the public about apocalypticism and millenarianism, and about the Panacea Society and their beliefs. Much the best attended public talk I have given was one about the Garden of Eden and the question of whether or not the Society "really" did believe that their back garden in Bedford was the Garden of Eden. The notion appears on the Society's Wikipedia page, and it is one of those particular beliefs that people always find intriguing and even a bit amusing – there is something incongruous about it.⁷ I would like to leave aside the question of just what it is about the idea that the Garden of Eden was in Bedford that is so intriguing and perhaps a bit of an oddity, though I think it does tell us something about public understandings of religion and theology, because I think when we look closely at the notion, and the theological and spiritual impulse that seeks to make the claim, it is in fact a striking instance of religious innovation that does a large amount of theological work. Not least is the fact that it links together ancient stories spanning millennia of religious belief marked by the authority of the oldest possible antiquity, and a late-modern religious group with beliefs that many people find challenging or idiosyncratic. I think, theologically, the intrigued contemporary response to the claim about the Garden of Eden tells us something about today's common sense understandings of the notion of transcendence, especially against the context of scholars examining the proposition that we live in a disenchanting age. The idea touches on a theological lightning rod: that stuff and matter can be thought of as inhered with divine valence. A notion, it has been argued, that has increasingly lost its potency and its believability as modernity has gone on and

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*. Willard R. Trask (trans.) (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959).

⁶ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 1.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panacea_Society

postmodernity has (perhaps) proliferated. Charles Taylor touches on this point in *A Secular Age* when he discusses the “widespread loss of meaning” manifested in “in the massive movement of people as tourists towards the still undamaged sites of earlier civilizations, with their temples, mosques, and cathedrals”.⁸ But Taylor is talking about something particular: the decline of a world of enchantment (what he calls “the world of spirits and meaningful causal forces, of wood sprites and relics”) that is, an experience of a palpable physical form of something beyond ordinary experience which is easily “localizable”.⁹ This is contrasted with an evolution towards a religious life “which is more ‘in the mind,’ where the link with God passes more through our . . . interpretations—for instance, of our political identity as religiously defined, or of God as the authority and moral source underpinning our ethical life.”¹⁰ The former is, Taylor says, “what we sense, and often regret the passing of, when we contemplate the mediaeval cathedral”.¹¹ But the passing of that is not, he warns, to be equated with the passing of religion. In this paper, I don’t wish to enter the niceties of Taylor’s distinction, but I do want to dwell on that theme: the question of understandings of the inherence of the divine in the physical, and not only the physical, but in land and territory. I will be looking at three religious groups that established themselves in the twentieth century, that subscribed to theological and doctrinal systems that are studied only on the margins of theological discourse, if they are studied at all, but they all do that intriguing and curiously challenging thing (challenging for religious people as much as non-religious) which is to identify the sacred in a patch of land. In doing this, I approach the theme of the conference somewhat tangentially: of course, ritual and image are very much present in the groups and the processes I will be talking about, but when it comes to *words* (or the Word) I am looking to novel attempts to discern the expression of the divine in ground and landscape. In effect, I am asking about the ways that these modern groups have attempted an exegesis of territory, of the ground beneath their feet.

The Panacea Society

The Panacea Society was established at the end of the Great War by a group of women interested in modern prophecy, and in particular in the work of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 552.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 554.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

prophetess Joanna Southcott (1750-1814). The general impression one has of the early members is that they were from a particular well-to-do stratum of the British middle class, brought up to somewhat Victorian values as much as they were Edwardian. The core membership throughout the Society's existence were women, and a distinctive feminist (or proto-feminist) theology and understanding of religious experience informed their approach to religion. They reflected a particular period of religious innovation in Britain with origins in conventional Anglicanism or mainstream dissenting traditions and open to and experimenting with spiritualism, theosophy, vegetarianism and other movements that we now regard as somewhere in the vanguard of 'new age' forms of expression. The core personality in the group was Mabel Barltrop (1866-1934), a curate's widow born in 1866. Barltrop had discovered the writings of Joanna Southcott just before the start of the Great War and had been rapidly convinced of her authenticity and began to campaign for her greater recognition.¹²

Joanna Southcott had been writing during the Napoleonic war, at a time when Britain seemed to stand alone against a French army that had effectively overrun Europe. Southcott's writings reflect an atmosphere of anxiety and expectation – indeed expectation that a new cosmic millennium was about to be born. Between 1801 and her death in 1814, Southcott published around sixty-five pamphlets and several books: James Hopkins has estimated that she published 108,000 copies of her works during her lifetime and suggests she was one of the most popular writers of her time.¹³ The sealing of boxes seems to have been one of Southcott's methods of establishing her authenticity: at first, she had published prophecies made years before to show how they had, in due course, been fulfilled. The sealing of writings, with instructions that they should not be opened until some future time, seems to have been a development of that method. One last box, famous from the Panacea Society's own newspaper campaigns calling on bishops of the Church of England to open it (and even appearing in a *Monty Python* sketch, 'The Epsom Furniture Race', in the 1970s), the contents of which are still unknown (the box remains unopened), was freighted with eschatological valence. It came with the instruction that a gathering of Church of England

¹² See, Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*.

¹³ J. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1982). Cited by S. Bowerbank, 'Southcott, Joanna (1750-1814), Prophet and Writer' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Accessed 15 Feb 2019: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-26050>

bishops should open it, and the expectation that it would be associated with some tremendous end-times event.

As well as her famous box, Southcott was known for her proclamation in 1814, when she was 64-years-old, that she was pregnant with a Messiah-child referred to in the Book of Revelation. At the time it caused a popular clamour, and medical reports suggest that the doctors who attended her did, on balance, believe she showed the signs of pregnancy. However, nearly a year into the pregnancy, Southcott died. She was kept for three days in the expectation that she might return to life, however she did not rise again, and the autopsy did not find evidence of a foetus. While the failure of the appearance of the Messiah does seem to have disillusioned some members, the expectation was soon reinterpreted to mean either (1) that the mantle of Messiah would pass to one of her followers who would take over leadership of the group (and new leaders did emerge with greater or lesser messianic associations) or (2) that the child had been born but “was snatched up to God and to his throne” – as Revelation chapter 12 suggests – awaiting the right moment to return to Earth. The, perhaps surprising, twist is that the group of women Mabel Barltrop was in correspondence with after 1918 eventually discerned that the child was not male, as the Book of Revelation seemed to assert. Rather it was female, and it was Mabel Barltrop.

Following her identification as the Messiah, Barltrop took on the name “Octavia” and turned her terraced house in central Bedford into the headquarters for her Southcottian religious group. In her history of the Society, Jane Shaw describes how, over time, members came to live in Bedford to be near Octavia, some bought houses and gradually these were incorporated into a unified campus (with outlying houses) of grand and domestic Victorian buildings immediately adjacent to the site of the old Bedford Castle. In time, the walls between the gardens of the central building were broken down, creating a large central garden that became the heart of the Society’s small community.¹⁴ Over the course of about seven years (from around 1919), the Society made a journey from a single terraced house (Octavia’s, number 12 Albany Road) to a large campus with six houses (including two large grand mansions), with a garden and chapel and other buildings. The Society believed they were creating in miniature a new Jerusalem: ‘with its houses and gardens and its “little sanctuary” or little temple, its Apostles and Prophets and its offices and officials and its organization, its laws and regulations’.¹⁵

¹⁴ See, Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*.

¹⁵ R.J. Fox, *How We Built Jerusalem in England’s Green and Pleasant Land: Part I* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1931), p. 552.

The Garden

The garden of the Panacea Society was of fundamental importance to their way of life and their identity – perhaps only the chapel, amongst the elements of their physical environment, was more important in this regard. The epitome of an ideal day for a member of the Panacea Society would involve a garden party on a sunny summer's day with croquet, tennis, and afternoon tea taken at tables dressed with pressed linen tablecloths and the members dressed in their best summer fete clothes. In the heyday of the Society, garden parties were an annual event, with the games and entertainment including a potato race, clock golf, country dancing, tennis, darts, putting and badminton.¹⁶ The Society saw the pleasure and harmony of the party to be a sign of the impending arrival of the Kingdom.¹⁷ Octavia wrote in an official account:

... we have advanced from such a small affair, to the beautiful gardens in which we have just been having tea under the shade of the wonderful tree Yggdrasil. Most of us have been taught that we must not enjoy ourselves too much; but now we are beginning to find that God wills us to enjoy His gifts as much as we can.¹⁸

So, how did the Society come to move beyond a kind of benign association between the pleasures of companionship and garden parties to a more realistic sense of their garden as *the* Garden of Eden? There seem to be two key steps at play.

The first is a feminine interpretation of scripture, perhaps a proto-feminist interpretation at the core of the Society's doctrine. Joanna Southcott had identified the special role of women in her writings: just as Satan has persuaded the first woman to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden (so in some sense Woman was eschatologically responsible for the Fall of humanity), she taught that a woman would have to be the mechanism by which the Fall would be reversed.¹⁹ And, of course, for the Panacea Society, that woman had been born: she was Octavia. That gave a kind of theological impetus to the idea. But it had to be practically implemented, and that seems to have occurred with a threat to the institution of the Society. This occurred when the Society found one particular man, Edgar Peissart, who had come to live with the community in Bedford, to be an agent of the devil. Peissart had come to the community in 1922 – a charismatic and plausible

¹⁶ Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*, p. 118.

¹⁷ R.J. Fox, *How We Built Jerusalem in England's Green and Pleasant Land: Part II* (Bedford: The Garden Press, 1934), p. 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8, cited by Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*, p. 118.

¹⁹ Lockhart, *Personal Religion*, p. 18.

individual he quickly came to have a prominent position in the hierarchy. He believed himself to be a messiah-figure (though he did not publicise the fact to the Society at first) and he had been a member of and ejected from a number of Southcottian communities in the USA before coming to Bedford.²⁰ In time, he aroused the suspicions of the community, and it became apparent that he was intending to take over the leadership – for a time Octavia had recognized him as a male messiah counterpart to her as female messiah. He also formed sexual relationships with members of the group, where they were meant to be largely celibate.²¹ Peissart was exposed and cast out of the community following a trial that took place in the Garden Room – and that practical act, with Peissart regarded as a satanic force, was seen as a physical form of exorcism that sanitised their sacred territory.²² It was understood as a recapitulation of the casting out of Satan from the Garden of Eden the Society regarded as reported in Genesis. Through this process, the room in which the trial and exorcism took place, the Garden Room, came to be seen as the exact centre of the Garden of Eden and was regarded as the “Holy of Holies”.²³

The Garden Room was subsequently used for a ritual known as the “Casting of Controls” (from 1923) which was designed to achieve the elimination of the controls Satan had over human individuals (which caused “physical sin and disease”) and the restoration of free will.²⁴ In effect, the room was the scene of exorcisms; members in Bedford and nearby came individually to be exorcised and exorcisms were carried out in the room on individuals located some distance away,²⁵ but following the ritual to a precise schedule.²⁶ Through this process, the Society began to collapse the distinction between their everyday mundane garden, and the otherwise transcendent and abstract Garden of the biblical Eden. They developed the idea that the land on which the exorcism took place was a fragment of the earth that had never been accessible to the influence of Satan – in effect it was a reserved territory from which Satan had been cast out. In the words of the Society, “the Lord retained a pied-a-terre or foothold”.²⁷

²⁰ Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God*, pp. 124-30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-8.

²² R.J. Fox, *The Sufferings and Acts of Shiloh-Jerusalem (A Sequel to “The Finding of Shiloh”)* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1927), p. 334.

²³ Fox, *Sufferings and Acts*, 381-2. See also, ‘Secrets are only told to those who can profit by them’, 15 November 1923, item 165 in *The Writings of the Holy Ghost* 1(5), pp. 114-5, and ‘Here the work began and here it will end’, 15 August 1925, item 227 in *The Writings of the Holy Ghost* 1(7), p. 157.

²⁴ Fox, *Sufferings and Acts*, p. 340.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

Theosophy

The Panacea Society was one actor in a diverse ecosystem of religious innovation and invention in Britain during its heyday in the interwar period. While the group did not have the profile of larger movements like Christian Science, Spiritualism and Theosophy, it shared common themes with these movements and many of its members had come through previous commitments to one of these rivals.²⁸ Theosophy in particular seems to have been a fertile source of new membership, and Octavia appears to have written to the Theosophical Society to suggest they should distribute the Panacea healing.²⁹ The tenets of Theosophy are fairly well known in general terms. Even those without knowledge of its principles and beliefs are aware (perhaps unconsciously) of the language of spirituality and spiritual evolution the movement coined. In some respects, it set up the modern vocabulary of new age types of religion that are familiar today. Joy Dixon has described the ways in which, though it had no formal dogmas, it developed a set of teachings presented as the “divine wisdom and esoteric truths of all religions, philosophies, and scientific systems”, “an ancient wisdom . . . preserved in the great spiritual traditions of the East”. Theosophy, over time generated a “kind of generic ‘eastern mysticism,’ one that has had a significant impact on modern New Age movements, many of which have borrowed their terminology and basic concepts from theosophical teachings”. There was just one principle members were required to subscribe to: “a commitment ‘to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color.’”³⁰ *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, published by the Theosophical Publishing House in 1938, said that the Society had been founded by a “group of Superhuman Men, Teachers, Masters, [and] Adepts” under whose guidance the Society was a “pioneer in the promotion of the progress of humanity towards its goal of Universal Brotherhood; the realisation of the Unity of the Eternal Self in all things; and the unfolding of the divine qualities in human nature”.³¹ In more everyday terms, the origins of the Society had been in the 1870s when Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), a Russian living in New York,

²⁸ Alastair Lockhart, ‘Religious and Spiritual Mobility in Britain: The Panacea Society and Other Movements in the Twentieth Century’ in *Contemporary British History* 29(2) (2015), pp. 155-178.

²⁹ Fox, *How We Built Jerusalem Part I*, p. 45. The offer was not taken up.

³⁰ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 4, 3-4.

³¹ Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1938), pp. 1, 5.

embarked on a spiritual quest with a few friends, drawing on various esoteric strands to formulate a new spiritual framework.³²

While there appears to be an interesting story to be told about the spiritual interpretation of India, a site of special holiness by the Theosophical Society, and especially the Himalayas, which were regarded as the place where ascended masters could be encountered in physical form, the approach in this paper will be more focussed. While India was regarded by Theosophists the world over as a place of spiritual importance, the American Society – which split from Blavatsky in the 1890s – came to understand their particular community outside San Diego as the physical centre of a New Age.

By 1897, the American Society was led by Katherine Tingley (1847-1929), a well-to-do middle-class philanthropist, who shared much socially and culturally with the founders of the Panacea Society, though the two do not seem to have had any practical links. It is clear that the period of the American split from the main stem of Theosophy was institutionally contentious – Tim Rudbøg describes Tingley's take over as “near-revolutionary”.³³ It culminated with Tingley's elevation to a place of supreme authority over the movement in the USA: she was declared “leader for life and official head of all departments”.³⁴ Immediately after taking over, Tingley began a unique experiment in Theosophical practice: she moved the headquarters in 1900 to a promontory jutting into the Pacific Ocean near San Diego called Point Loma and attempted to establish a utopian Theosophical community.³⁵ There is a parallel to be drawn with the Panacea Society and the challenges represented by the intrusion of Edgar Piessart (discussed above), and the leadership crisis the American Theosophical Society experienced in the 1890s. There was also a sanctifying act in the American Theosophical story to parallel the exorcism of the Panaceans, though the Theosophists sanctified their ground with sacred stones. In preparing the site at Loma, Tingley and a few of her senior followers went on a “crusade”; they travelled the world collecting stones that they believed to have ancient sacred significance, and transported these to California where they were incorporated into the cornerstone of one of the new community's central buildings.³⁶

³² See, James A. Santucci, ‘Theosophy’ in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein eds. *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 231-246.

³³ Tim Rudbøg, ‘Point Loma, Theosophy, and Katherine Tingley’ in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein eds. *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013), pp. 51-72. p. 55.

³⁴ Rudbøg, ‘Point Loma, Theosophy’, p. 58.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁶ W.M. Ashcraft, *The Dawn of the New Cycle: Point Loma Theosophists and American Culture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), pp. 48-9.

Tingley's movement saw the time they lived in as, in Michael Ashcraft's words, "pregnant with new, unfolding possibilities of cosmic magnitude".³⁷ They had a vast cyclic notion of cosmic time: The largest cycle is 311,040,000,000,000 years long, which is followed by a pause of the same length, before the process starts again. With a multitude of smaller cycles within which life forms evolve from a divine spiritual state, to a gross earthly state, and then back to an ethereal spiritual state.³⁸ Under an elaborate interpretive scheme, the Theosophists had calculated that the low point for human evolution was a 5,000 year period that would end around 1897 or 1898, and a new cycle of hundreds of thousands of years would begin at that point. In effect, from the end of the nineteenth-century humanity would begin a long and painful turn in spiritual evolution.³⁹ Thus, the laying of the sacred cornerstone, the establishment of Lomaland, represented the physical centre of a social, cultural, spiritual transition that would continue for an unimaginable period of time, and see humanity ascend to divinity. The Theosophists of Lomaland regarded themselves as midwives to this process.

What should also be noted is that as Tingley and her closest associates travelled the world to gather stones they were also engaged in a process of consolidating Tingley's authority over the Society. The crusade enabled her to visit and seek members around the world, the association with the physical antiquity and mystical power of the stones would authorise her new institution, and whilst on her journey she encountered a mystical, ascended Master, who she referred to as Blavatsky's mystical teacher and who, she reported, imparted lost wisdom to her and, in effect, endowed her with the highest spiritual power.⁴⁰

On their return to the United States, the magical cornerstone was ritually laid by Tingley and her companions, with the inscription:

CORNER STONE
S.R.L.M.A.
LAID FEBRUARY 23RD, 1897,
BY THE
FOUNDRESS KATHERINE A. TINGLEY.
UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD
NEW CYCLE. YEAR ONE.⁴¹

With a mix of pragmatism and cosmology, the laying of the cornerstone "constituted a powerful proclamation of the unique sense of

³⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁸ James A. Santucci, 'The Notion of Race in Theosophy' in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11(3), 2008, pp. 37-63.

³⁹ Ashcraft, *Dawn of the New Cycle*, pp. 44-5.

⁴⁰ Rudbøg, 'Point Loma, Theosophy', pp. 56-7.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 57-8.

identity and distinct mission of the new society; it was the anchoring of the *axis mundi* in the society's sacred space, it imitated the new future cycle of the American Theosophical Society's sacred time and", Rudbog says, "probably secured Tingley's immediate presidency."⁴²

Following Tingley's death in 1929, when there were 250 individuals (adults and children) at Point Loma, and with the depredations of the Great Depression, the community at Lomaland began to decline, to about 180 residents by 1931. In 1942, when the local area was being heavily used by the US military for training purposes, the land was sold and the Society moved the headquarters elsewhere and gave up on the utopian project.⁴³

Rastafari

While there is some considerable overlap socio-culturally between the Panacea Society and the American Theosophical Society (despite being on opposite sides of the Atlantic they were broadly well-off, middle class, educated) – the third group discussed here, Rastafari, while it overlaps with the other movements chronologically is distinctly different in those respects. The religion emerged in Jamaica in the early twentieth-century in the poorest parts of society, amongst destitute and disenfranchised descendants of slaves.⁴⁴ Rather unexpectedly perhaps, the Panacea Society had a considerable following in Jamaica. Nearly a third of all applicants to the Society's healing during the twentieth-century wrote from addresses in Jamaica - more than 30,000 individuals.⁴⁵

While the philosophy of the Rastafari movement developed over generations, it was really in the 1930s, especially under the inspiration of Leonard Percival Howell (1898-1981), who was born in 1898 into a working family in Jamaica, that it took on its formalised structure as the religion of Rastafari. Howell seems to have travelled to work in Panama and the USA, and he may have served in the British West Indies Regiment in the First World War. In the 1920s he spent some time in New York where he met Robert Athlyi Rogers, the author

⁴² Ibid., p. 58.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 68-9.

⁴⁴ The movement is often referred to as "Rastafarianism", however, following Jahlani Niaah's recommendation, this paper follows the convention of referring to "Rastafari". Jahlani Niaah, 'Back to Ethiopia: back to Africa movements from the West Indies since 1930' in Kwesi Kwaa Prah eds., *Back to Africa: Volume II: The Ideology and Practice of the African Returnee Phenomenon from the Caribbean and North America to Africa*. pp. 437-462. (Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, 2012) p. 437.

⁴⁵ Lockhart, *Personal Religion*, pp. 12, 64, 70-77.

of the *Holy Piby*, known as the “black man’s bible”.⁴⁶ W. Gabriele Selassie I has described the book as “seek[ing] to provide a mythological and biblical foundation for the benefit of the black race”.⁴⁷ Rogers was a renowned preacher, who presented a spiritualized vision of black nationalism. And, while in the United States, Howell was involved in groups connected to Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), leader of UNIA (the Universal Negro Improvement Association), the first high profile black nationalist movement.⁴⁸

There had been predictions and prophecies about a saviour figure appearing in Africa in black nationalist circles for some time, although Garvey was notably areligious and had an at least ambiguous relationship with the notion – at least in its spiritual form.⁴⁹ Rogers’ *Holy Piby* for example envisioned:

a Shepherd is anointed, yea, as a shepherd gathers his sheep so shall he gather unto God, the generation of Ethiopia even from the end of the earth and lead them high, a nation among nations . . .

When the mighty angel had finished speaking to the heavenly host he then turned to the earth and said: “Children of Ethiopia, stand,” and there flashed upon the earth a great multitude of Negroes knowing not from whence they came; then shouted instantly the whole heavenly host, “Behold, behold Ethiopia has triumphed.”⁵⁰

The return to Ethiopia is presented as a mission to restore the nation, to build it up to the status of a world power, a correlate, perhaps, of the trading power of the British Empire. The people must work towards:

the up building of Ethiopia and her generations.

Then shall the nations of the earth respect thee and thy commodities shall be for their gold and their commodities for thy gold, but there shall be none to fool thee neither shall ye be their slave.

For thy emblem shall rank among their emblems; thy ships among their ships, and thy men-of-war among their men-of-war; great shall be thy name among the nations.⁵¹

Howell’s return to Jamaica in 1930 coincided with the coronation of the Crown Prince Ras Tafari (1892-1975) as Haile Selassie Emperor

⁴⁶ The book is difficult to source, this study has worked from Robert Athlyi Rogers, *The Holy Piby: The Blackman’s Bible* [no place, no date - volume acquired in 2019, original dated 1924] (isbn: 1453814760).

⁴⁷ W. Gabriel Selassie, ‘Introduction’, in Leonard Percival Howell, *The Promised Key* (Los Angeles: Orunmilla, 2015), p. 11.

⁴⁸ Selassie, ‘Introduction’, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁹ Selassie, ‘Introduction’, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Rogers, *Holy Piby*, pp. 18-19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

of Ethiopia. The elaborate and lavish coronation ceremony for an African emperor was the transformational point for Howell, who preached the divinity of Haile Selassie and that the coronation was the fulfilment of the Book of Revelation chapter 5: “behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” – among Selassie’s titles was “Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah”.⁵²

The coronation of Haile Selassie, then, functioned as a fulcrum moment for religious forms of black nationalism in Jamaica – and it is the moment when the land of Ethiopia developed from a kind of sensed specialness, to a theorized sacredness. Jalani Niaah has traced the idea of sacred Africa back to the sixteenth-century and a reaction to slavery and forced migration.⁵³ Noel Erskine has drawn attention to the special importance of land for slaves and, especially, for emancipated slaves in Jamaica. He describes its religious significance as inherited from African ancestral religion:

[t]he land belonged to the ancestors, and to have land on which to bury the dead was of first importance for Jamaicans . . . Land was an ontological necessity for black Jamaica. In a profound sense, not to have land is not to be. Emancipation meant leaving the cottage provided by the master, the land to rear animals and grow a crop, and, most important, the space to bury the dead.⁵⁴

Within black nationalist circles, scriptural references to Ethiopia and to black skin were examined in the light of a positive and proud black self-awareness fostered by Garveyite movements.⁵⁵ There are numerous references of this type – see Giulia Bonacci’s book *Exodus!* for its valuable analysis of black nationalist interpretations of scripture (and many other aspects of the movement).⁵⁶

By the mid-1930s, Howell was preaching mass repatriation to Africa for black Jamaicans. And in 1935, while in prison in Jamaica, he wrote the *Promised Key* as a prophetic text of black supremacy. The book continues many of the themes already encountered in the *Holy Piby*, presenting Ethiopia as a land of black continuity “populated by Black People whose attitude towards this so called Western civilization has not changed within the last six thousand years” and at the core of the text is the idea that “the Anglo-Saxon

⁵² Selassie, ‘Introduction’, pp. 13-14.

⁵³ Niaah, ‘Back to Ethiopia’, p. 437.

⁵⁴ Noel Leo Erskine, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: Florida University Press, 2005), p. 19.

⁵⁵ Giulia Bonacci, *Exodus! Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia*, Antoinette Tidjani Alou (trans.), (Kingston Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2015 [2010]), pp. 42ff.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

white people . . . showed us no mercy therefore evil shall come upon them”.⁵⁷ In *The Promised Key*, black people are presented as a parallel biblical religion, alongside “Adam and Eve and Abraham and Isaac and the Anglo Saxon Slave Owners” but as guardians of the Tree of Life rather than the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁵⁸

Finally, there is the radical practical factor that the Ethiopian government had invited diaspora Africans to travel to Ethiopia. It appears that in 1922, an invitation had been sent from Ethiopia to the United Negro Improvement Association, inviting its members to “come home”, and, in 1927, Ras Tafari had sent out a call for workers from the diaspora to travel to Ethiopia.⁵⁹ For a period after his coronation, Selassie was kept out of Ethiopia by Italian forces (1935-1941) until he was reinstated by British forces during the war. (He was ultimately deposed by a Marxist coup in 1974 and died a year later.) During the Italian occupation a number of black people in other countries had attempted to volunteer to fight for the Ethiopian cause, but they were blocked from doing so by the British and American governments. Following the conflict, a number had travelled to Ethiopia to help with the rebuilding and as a thank you for that contribution, Selassie offered a land concession at Shashemene for diaspora Africans.⁶⁰ In 1966, Selassie travelled to Jamaica in person and confirmed the offer.⁶¹

We can see, then, in Rastafari doctrine a complex network of social, cultural and historical factors coalescing in the formation of a vision of Ethiopia as a sacred land: the central trauma of slavery and its cultural legacy, the precarious socio-economic predicament of many Jamaicans, strands of African religious affiliation tied to concepts of land, biblical representations of black people and Ethiopia, the rise of black nationalism in the 1920s, and then the coronation of Haile Selassie and its extraordinary impression as a moment of transformation. In the background of the emergence of Rastafari theology is the identification of the enslavement of black people in recent history with the biblical account of the Israelites in Egypt, and their post-emancipation location outside Africa, interpreted in terms of the

⁵⁷ Leonard Percival Howell, *The Promised Key* (Los Angeles: Orunmilla, 2015), pp. 23, 27.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 38.

⁵⁹ Robert Hill, ‘Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions in Early Rastafarian Religion in Jamaica’ in *Jamaica Journal* 16(1) (1983). Cited by Niaah, ‘Back to Ethiopia’, p. 438.

⁶⁰ Bonacci *Exodus! Heirs and Pioneers*, p. 127.

⁶¹ T.H. Gabriel, ‘Foreword’ in N. Garrick, *A Rasta’s Pilgrimage: Ethiopian Faces and Places* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1998), p. 5.

Jewish exile in Babylon.⁶² So, in Rastafari discourse, Zion is Africa, the “land of origin and the promised land”, and Babylon “symbolises the Western world and its administrations”.⁶³ The offer of a land concession south of Addis Abbaba made this material.

It is a striking aspect of the presentation of Ethiopia in the academic literature on the concept of holy ground in Rastafari that only a limited amount of attention has been given to the fact of actual migration to Ethiopia.⁶⁴ There has been no major migration from Jamaica or any other diaspora-African nations to Ethiopia, but a steady trickle does seem to have taken place over the decades after the Second World War. Today, there are, according to Jalani Niaah, around five hundred Rastafari settlers in Ethiopia, either in Addis Ababa or in Shashemene. About half of these are of Jamaican origin, while the others have come from other Caribbean nations or elsewhere.⁶⁵ It appears to be the case that a spiritualized concept of Ethiopia – the trope of understanding one’s location spiritually, wherever it might be, as Ethiopia, of making your world liberated territory – is for practical reasons the dominant one in Rastafari discourse. Nonetheless, from a study of religions perspective, the fact of the reality of ground made holy, of territory inhered with the sacred, is a pressing one.

Understanding Holy Ground

In his study of 1959, “Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual”, Mircea Eliade discusses the relationship between space or place and religion, and it is difficult to look at this question without having Eliade in mind to some extent. Talking about the viewpoint of *homo religiosus*, Eliade describes a distinct difference between how the religious person views the world and how a non-religious person sees it: the religious person “experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others”, while for the non-religious “space is homogeneous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass . . . no orientation is given by virtue of its inherent structure”.⁶⁶ For *homo religiosus*, then, the sacred aspect provides a core of reality that enables the relative

⁶² Jeremiah 39-43; 2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36; Ezra; Daniel 1-6; 1 Esdras 3:1-5:6; Lamentations.

⁶³ Bonacci, *Exodus! Heirs and Pioneers*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁵ Jahlani Niaah, ‘The Rastafari Presence in Ethiopia: A Contemporary Perspective’ in Rex Nettleford (ed.) *Rastafari in the New Millennium: A Rastafari Reader* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), pp. 66-88. p. 83.

⁶⁶ Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 20, 22.

understanding of all other (putatively non-religious) space. Eliade's account is really about the definition of holy ground in archaic human societies, he refers to modern examples only as rather pale imitations. The effect of this is that in Eliade's account, the irruptions of the sacred are unmoored and the focus on archaic societies makes them appear detached from the realities of living in complex contemporary worlds. In the contemporary examples discussed in this paper, what becomes apparent is – not only that the process of ascribing sanctity to holy ground has continued and, no doubt, continues, but that those processes:

1. draw on a wide range of available theological motifs,
2. that the ground or territory is itself taken as an expression of theological principles and practical religious experience, and
3. occur in relation to periods of stress or challenge, social or institutional.

In all the examples I have looked at here, physical land is turned to at times of instability. When the Panacean leadership was challenged, they developed a theology of the sacredness of their physical space; when Tingley was working to establish her unique authority over the Theosophical Society in the USA, she gathered stones from sacred sites and inscribed her name on a foundation stone of the site of the dawning new millennium; and Ethiopia represented a physical (and spiritual) solution to the deep historical tragedy of the slave trade inflicted on African people taken from their homelands.

We can see in these case studies processes of improvisation that have been noted in relation to the formation of apocalyptic thinking in new and innovating religions. My colleague in Cambridge, Tim Jenkins, has linked this to religious improvisation: response to “political, demographic, economic, technological” change and “the collapse of previously secure categories”.⁶⁷ What Eliade is invoking in large part is the relationship between religious imagination and place (in this case, place is functioning as a religious symbol in Eliade's terms), although it is mainly implicit and only referred to explicitly once or twice in *The Sacred and the Profane*.⁶⁸ Eliade's *homo religious* activates a practical metaphysics through imagining a place as the centre of the universe, as the territory of the gods,

⁶⁷ Timothy Jenkins, *Of Flying Saucers and Social Scientists: A Re-Reading of When Prophecy Fails and of Cognitive Dissonance* (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), p. 19.

⁶⁸ See Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 75-6, 144-8.

as the interactive point between the abode of deities and the homes of humans. The imaginative act “awaken[s] individual experience and transmutes it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world” and the individual “can attain to the highest spirituality” because, Eliade says, “by understanding the symbol, *he succeeds in living in the universal.*”⁶⁹ Although, in Eliade’s account, this is not really possible for modern humans, because they have become so detached from the transcendent, though he does note a special place for Christianity in doing this. Whether Eliade is correct about the mechanics that he identifies, it is certainly the case that these processes have been happening for the groups that I have looked at who were active in the twentieth-century. The role of imagination has been discussed in a similar way by some recent theorists of new religious movements, but often the concomitant role of place as symbol is somewhat allusive. The extreme form of this approach to religion is found in recent studies of “invented religions”, religions, in the words of Carole Cusack, “that announce their invented status” and that often emerge as critiques of established religions, consumer society or materialism, and revel in parody, protest and humour. Well-known examples include Jediism and Matrixism based on the films.⁷⁰ In her study of *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America* (1989), as a more moderate example, Mary Farrell Bednarowski discusses the “theological imagination” as “a creative human capacity . . . to formulate meaning systems, models of the universe, by which men and women are able to orient and interpret their lives”.⁷¹ She does not express it with the ontological strength of Eliade. For him, the sacred reality is experienced as the really real, the rest of experience is relatively chaotic and unreal. Nonetheless the imagination in Bednarowski’s account of nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ new religions in America performs a similar function. In Noel Erskine’s study of Rastafari theology, he refers to the “joining of the biblical with the concrete historical” in the Rastafarian identification of Ethiopia with Zion.⁷² In many respects, this is the theme of this paper: the joining of the biblical or mystical revelation with a concrete place. This process is mediated, at least in part, by imagination and by the “play” of mind. In doing this, all these movements are engaged in a process of exegesis of, not only

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 212.

⁷⁰ Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*. (Farnham UK: Ashgate Publishing; Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), pp. 1, 3.

⁷¹ Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination*, p. 1.

⁷² Erskine, *From Garvey to Marley*, p. 140.

their texts but also of their immediate context, the ground beneath their feet, and the physical geography around them.

Alastair Lockhart
Hughes Hall
Cambridge
CB1 2EW

ASL21@cam.ac.uk