

## EXPLORING SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPES (Mike Pears and Paul Cloke)

### INTRODUCTION

We (Mike and Paul) are intrigued by the resonances that occur between the conceptions of invisible/spiritual spaces in theology and intangible/affective atmospheres in human geography and our aim in this paper is to enquire whether in an exploration of these resonances we might find that ethnographic methodologies, particularly in terms of sensory walking, might furnish a way for both disciplines to more fruitfully investigate such spaces.

Spiritual, intangible, or virtual spaces are differently conceived within Theology and Human Geography. We will structure our discussion by presenting a brief overview from each perspective and in so doing attempt an initial framing of what we mean by 'spiritual landscapes' and then move on to see how sensory walking might be employed as one significant way of apprehending spiritual landscapes.

### BACKGROUND

For me (Mike) walking has always been an instinctive part of my life in the city and for over 30 years the habit of walking in the city has been motivated by an intuitive sense of need to be in some way earthed or connected to urban spaces. Walking, especially in the vast estates of North Peckham and Elephant and Castle in the 1980s and 1990s was essential for the discovery of hidden corners, unseen places and for opening up the potential of chance/Spirit-led encounters with people. Interwoven with the instinct to be earthed was the faith conviction that the kingdom of God was somehow to be found on the streets rather than in the church building.

With benefit of hindsight this walking can now perhaps be identified as having three particular manners. The first style of walking is the simple practice of regular 'foot slogging'. It was in part a necessary mode of moving around in estates which were based on above-ground platform designs and high-rise blocks, but also an intentional way of engaging with an area that was treated as a no-go zone by many (including postmen, taxi drivers etc); it was a prophetic (or out-of-place) activity that enabled a sense of connection with the place

itself by countering its violent reputation through being vulnerably present and opening up possibilities for humanising encounters with neighbours and residents.

Second, the practice of regular 'prayer walking' included praying in small groups around the neighbourhood, praying with people on the street and doorstep, and organised worship on the streets - notably as part of the March for Jesus Movement. And third, the practice of 'spiritual mapping' which sought to discern spiritual powers and their connections to the physical structures and urban geographies through the combined use of prayerful walking and historical research.<sup>1</sup> Examples of this included discerning ancient 'gateways' to the city, historic boundaries between communities, the founding spiritual principles around which cities were structured and the ways in which the spirituality of organisations and corporations affected the life of the city.

These approaches were intriguing in that they imagined a direct correspondence between the physical and the spiritual in urban environments with the idea that to engage in the spiritual would have a corresponding affect in the physical. It would be a misrepresentation of the spiritual mapping movement not to point out that at times it verged on the bizarre, lacking credibility in both its theology and methodology and this may be in part the reason that, despite its potential, the movement tailed off (at least in the UK) through the early 1990s.

In 2000 Paul and I met and out of our friendship found a shared interest in ideas about the spirituality of urban environments. Paul explains that Geographers are currently fascinated by the idea that being 'human' in particular places involves both the visible / tangible and the virtual / intangible, and accounts of affective powers that are literally ineffable since they cannot be named. Theology, at least in some quarters, has names for these seemingly ghostly presences and absences and it seems vital that these kinds of spiritual landscapes should form an integral focus in the understanding of places in which and about which theology is invoked.

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<sup>1</sup> Popular books in this field included: C Peter Wagner, *Territorial Spirits* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny, 2012); Ed Silvoso, *Prayer Evangelism* (Ventura CA: Regal, 2000); Cindy Jacobs, *Possessing the Gates of the Enemy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); George Otis, *The Last of the Giants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

Amongst the things that provoked conversation was our reading of Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat's *Colossians re:mixed* which stretched our imagination about how urban environments could be represented in Biblical terms.<sup>2</sup> In presenting a paper about spiritual landscapes and non-representational theory Paul sought to explore how this representation of Colossae might relate to the practices of sensory ethnography, witnessing and psychogeographic engagement in the *here and now*. He writes that bringing together serious historical study and serious biblical exegesis with imaginative and discerning narrative of the emotional topography of living in amongst empire, Walsh and Keesmaat use a witnessing of cultural and political landscapes in the contemporary world to impregnate their descriptions of historic Colossae with an embodied sense of being in the world, and a distinct sense of the moods, atmosphere, emotional grasp and visceral responses that pertained in that world. Their account, their re-witnessing of the city of Colossae, has played a very significant role in my capacity to think about the spiritual landscapes that are evident in that context. In effect, they are my hermeneutic guides in this speculative venture. They refer to Colossians as "a subversive tract for subversive living"<sup>3</sup> that insists on an alternative imagination and distinct cultural discernment. My hope is that the discernment of affective spiritual landscapes in Colossae can add a little to the subversion of fixed, bounded and lifeless representations that eschew the emotional performance of place and the mundane everyday practices help shape that city.

Given the shared areas of interest around spiritual landscapes, the questions we have are about how these interests might be further explored from our different perspectives and what are the points in each of our disciplines that usefully and fruitfully speak to the other? There is a point of creative tension here which is reflected in the following discussion. Theology tends to take the existence of the invisible for granted and comes to the investigation of space with certain theories of spiritual space already formed. In coming to an ethnographic exploration of spaces with a theological mind-set makes it difficult to divest

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2 Walsh B and Keesmaat S, *Colossians re:mixed: subverting the empire* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

3 Walsh and Keesmaat op cit p.9.

oneself of preconceived ideas about what one is sensing. By contrast the emphasis from those in human geography who are exploring non-representational ideas of space are finding affects that fall outside their current frameworks of understanding. Thus human geographers (at least in Mike's experience!) challenge theologians to approach the exploration of spaces with a more open, pre-conscious stance.

## IN THEOLOGY

For me (Mike) the impetus behind studying place and space has been to gain a deeper insight of the urban environment, including in particular the various manifestations of power which might be experienced in these environments. There are three specific strands which represent some progress in theology in understanding urban environments

### **Trinitarian Mapping of Space**

A significant figure in exploring space theologically in relation to urban and built environments is Tim Gorringer.<sup>4</sup> His essential thesis is that the spatiality of the Godhead leads to a relational construction of space. He develops a Trinitarian mapping of space by drawing on Barth's notion of 'God as relational event'<sup>5</sup> and Moltmann's concept of perichoretic space.<sup>6</sup> This argument has particular bearing on our own ideas about spiritual landscapes in that it describes both the visible and the non-visible and more specifically that God is present in and acting through both these realms. He identifies three ways in which God is spatially present and active:<sup>7</sup>

Imagination, order, and justice are then the keywords of a Trinitarian theology of space and the built environment in which the relational event which grounds all reality, God, seeks correspondence.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Tim Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

5 Gorringer, p.48.

6 Gorringer, p.45-46.

7 Gorringer, 47-48.

8 Gorringer, p.49.

God is present in these realms of the visible and non-visible not as 'sole ruler of the universe' in some kind of dictatorial mode<sup>9</sup> but is known relationally as an inspirer and negotiator of hopeful visions; as one who loves in freedom that order might be co-constituted; and takes on flesh to teach peace. Thus for Gorringe, the discernment of the spirits and whether they are of God (1Jn4:1-6) is vital for understanding the urban landscape, applying equally well to the unseen-spiritual realm as to the tangible built environment.<sup>10</sup>

### **The 'interiority' of Space**

Where Gorringe bases his work on the spatiality of the Trinity (and thus sees God relationally and redemptively present in places) Walter Wink bases his work on an extensive survey of the Biblical language of the powers and sees God's presence in place through engagement with these powers.<sup>11</sup> The powers are encountered simultaneously through the 'exteriority' and 'interiority' of structures and institutions but Wink draws attention to the importance of the interiority as something that should not be underestimated.

Wink argues that the "principalities and powers are the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power".<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the tangible outer aspects of power the inner is the invisible essence<sup>13</sup> or spirituality or a system or corporate structure:

The spiritual aspect of the Power is not simply a 'personification' of institutional qualities that would exist whether they were personified or not. On the contrary, the spirituality of an institution exists as a real aspect of the institution even when it is

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9 Gorringe, p.49.

10 Gorringe. p.48.

11 Wink, Walter. *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

— . *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

— . *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

12 Wink, *Naming* p.5.

13 Wink, *Engaging* p.7.

not perceived as such. Institutions have an actual spiritual ethos, and we neglect this aspect of institutional life at our peril.<sup>14</sup>

For Wink, the New Testament language of the powers was the way of expressing what was 'felt' or 'intuited' and though existing in the realm of the invisible these powers were able project influence into the material, social and representational aspects of everyday life.<sup>15</sup>

### **Space in Biblical Narratives**

Since Wink's trilogy, the final part of which was published in 1992, some of the more recent work on the language of powers has been presented through fresh readings of spatiality within Biblical narrative; especially in the representation of power in places and of new spaces associated with the presence of Jesus, the coming of the kingdom and the presence of the Spirit.

Perhaps the most studied text in this respect is the Gospel of Mark. It is difficult to read the gospel without getting drawn into its sensory appeal. Through descriptions of wilderness, storms at sea, the place of the tombs, caves (as places of birth and burial), roads, etc., Mark evokes a sense of cosmological otherworldliness which plays a central part in the development of his plot.<sup>16</sup>

In his extensive study of Mark's understanding of geography and space Eric Stewart draws on modern critical theories of space to argue that Mark employs the stock geographical representations of his day to present Jesus as challenging the spatial power of Jewish and Roman authority and also to show that the "kingdom of God exists spatially in the area around Jesus in which a new community 'gathers'".<sup>17</sup>

Take for example the way in which the portrayal of the synagogue shows how the invisible-spiritual is integral to Mark's representation of space. Synagogues are significant places in

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<sup>14</sup> Wink, *Engaging* p.6.

<sup>15</sup> Wink, *Engaging* p.7; see Gorringer pp.243-244.

<sup>16</sup> Bonnie B Thurston, *The Spiritual Landscape of Mark*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008; John K. Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew*. Edinburgh : T&T Clark, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Eric C Stewart, *Gathered Around Jesus: An Alternative Spatial Practice in the Gospel of Mark*. Cambridge: Clark, 2009, p.224.

Mark's narrative and that "unclean spirits are located in the synagogue is an important element of Mark's presentation of these institutions".<sup>18</sup> In Jewish culture synagogues represented the 'locus of a community's order' but Mark challenges this idea "suggesting instead that they display negative elements of peripheral territories. They are not centres of purity, but rather the haunts of ... 'unclean' spirits".<sup>19</sup>

The synagogue in Mark has a particular spirituality where, to put it in Wink's terms, the 'inner' spiritual aspect is exposed by Jesus as being contrary to accepted norms portrayed through its 'outer' institutional aspect. The inner aspect evoked is associated with the demonic disorder and chaos of uncivilized wilderness. As in the rest of Mark's narratives these elements of space are both spiritual and locative - that is they associate particular kinds of locations (such as synagogues) with particular spiritual characteristics. The surprise in Mark's telling of the story is the way in which he subverts the association of these two aspects so that the inner spiritualities of civilized 'pure' spaces are exposed as unclean - the same uncleanness associated with the demons who reside in wilderness spaces - as we see in the repeated exorcisms Jesus performed within the Synagogues themselves (1:39).<sup>20</sup> Conversely, the space around Jesus himself is presented as the new 'authentic' place of purity--the new space of the Kingdom of God in which people gather (Stewart 219).

Whilst these different approaches present various notions about how spaces - or more specifically unseen spaces - might be conceived of theologically, they also open up ideas about how God and other unseen essences are potentially present and active within the sphere of everyday life. Furthermore they indicate that such presences might be felt, sensed or discerned and open up the possibility of some sort of sensory register which might suggest ways of being attentive to or attuned to unseen spiritual presences and absences. It is in relation to exploring the sensory aspects of places that approaches being developed within human geography become very interesting.

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18 Stewart, pp.191-192.

19 Stewart p.193.

20 Stewart pp.192-195.

## FROM HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

Human geographers (notably Ben Anderson of Durham University) have explored the concept of affect to discuss a range of qualitatively different ways in which the feeling of existence is organised.<sup>21</sup> A significant element of the felt quality of existence occurs below the threshold of conscious reflection and deliberation (hence the “non-representational” tag). Yet the collective affective experience of particular places and spaces can bring into being a characteristic “atmosphere” – a structure of feeling that infuses the landscape and impacts upon the lived present of in-place experience. These ‘affective atmospheres’, then, elicit feeling and emotion which both complete and surpass the materiality and aesthetics of the places concerned. Over time they can result in a collective consciousness that impinges on individual consciousness.

Human geographers have used these ideas to address a wide range of emotional and affective landscapes – from the uncanny nature of memorials, and the emotional performance of dance and music, to the affective atmospheres of neoliberal governance and the inculcation of hope after disaster. I (Paul) have just been doing some writing about how transitional art, theatre and community gardening have been connected to a new hopeful vibe (affective atmosphere) in the ruined city centre of Christchurch. None of these applications are “spiritual” per se, and are (at least on the surface) difficult to connect to ‘faithful’ recognition or intervention. Others (eg psychogeographical ‘readings’ of place) are more open to particular ‘faithful perspectives’.

These ideas can be used to address how ‘spiritual’ presences and absences affect the structure of feeling in particular places and conjure up particular affective atmospheres that can be influential in the cultural imagination and political-economic practices of the city.

It is also possible to recognise some of the encounters that underlie these affective topographies as spiritual in nature, evoking the immanent sensation of something more

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21 Anderson B (2006) “transcending without transcendence”: Utopianism and an ethos of hope. Antipode, 38, 691-710; Anderson B (2009) Affective atmospheres. Emotion, Space and Society, 2, 77-81; Anderson B (2014) Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions, Aldershot, Ashgate; Anderson B (2016) Neoliberal affects. Progress in Human Geography, DOI: 10.1177/0309132515613167.

going on than meets the eye.<sup>22</sup> Suggesting the need for an interpretative technology that exceeds that which is simply tangible and known about, the idea of *spiritual landscapes* has been developed in order that understandings of local places can take the unseen spiritual world just as seriously as existing foci on the material landscapes of society, economy, politics and culture. The argument here is that faith, belief and religion can illuminate the notion of being and becoming in the world, reflecting an inhabitation or dwelling in different spiritual registers that goes alongside more representational registers of understanding what it is to inhabit or dwell in a place.

As such, both 'landscape' and 'spiritual' are constructs of dwelling that require further explanation:

"By 'landscapes' we refer to embodied practices of being in the world, including ways of seeing but extending beyond sight to both a sense of being that includes all senses, and an openness to being affected. By 'spiritual' we refer to that part of the virtual in which faith forms a part of the move beyond rationality and of the possibility of other-worldly dispositions. Even for the most sceptical, the spiritual can suggest a form of performative presencing of some sense of spirit."<sup>23</sup>

In this way, the spiritual is not necessarily just about religion, and can be made manifest in at least three ways. First, people engage in particular practices because they believe in some form of the spiritual – this could involve engagements in prayer or contemplation, visits to places that are affective of some sense of spiritual evocation, or pondering on the aesthetic and affective connections in artwork or music. In such ways, places can become sacralized in one form or another.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, a belief in the spiritual mean that certain things happen that would not have done so otherwise; that is, certain affects are produced that lead to very real experiences that are attributed to the spiritual realm. In this way, the spiritual can be a constitutive force that supplements understandings of places. Thirdly, it can be postulated that the spiritual simply exists in and amongst the multiple contexts and

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22 Dewsbury J-D and Cloke P (2009) *Spiritual landscapes: existence, performance and immanence. Social and cultural geography*, 10, 695-711.

23 Dewsbury and Cloke op cit p. 696.

24 See, Kong L (2001) *Mapping new geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity. Progress in human geography*, 25, 211-233.

practices of embodied life. Taking these three ideas of the spiritual together, it follows that the spiritual can be regarded as:

“something constitutive of everyday life; cutting at that space between absence and presence, and manifesting itself at the immediate, and therefore non-metaphysical, level of the body.”<sup>25</sup>

This is, then, the performance of believing that works both at and upon the relationship between the experience of space and of embodiment.<sup>26</sup> Spiritual landscapes thus become a tension between presences and absences and between the performance and creation of the present. The material-exteriority is most obviously present, and the spiritual-interiority is often seemingly absent, but the ghostly presence of that unseen spiritual is nevertheless influential in how we make sense of our dwelling places and how we continue to develop them through our actions.

## SENSORY WALKING

The Spiritual Mapping movement of the 1980s both inspired vision and provided practical tools for many to explore the spiritual atmospheres of their own cities. Developments in theology and human geography suggest that these aspirations are perhaps not as far-fetched as they once seemed. However their relevance depends on finding new ways of exploring such phenomena.

In human geography, J-D Dewsbury<sup>27</sup> has advocated *witnessing* as a means of attending to differences that script the folded mix of emotions, desires and intuitions in the aura and spirit of places and events. Seeking always to negotiate the connections between what we see and what we know, he challenges us to practice the belief that the intelligible comes from the sensible; in other words to start to form understandings from the orientation point of the body, to look at things in unusual ways, to have the courage to present rather than

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25 Dewsbury and Cloke op cit p. 697.

26 See Rose M (2006) Gathering dreams of ‘presence’: a project for the cultural landscape. *Environment and planning d: society and space*, 24, 537-554; Rose M and Wylie J (2006) Animating landscape. *Environment and planning d: society and space*, 24, 475-479.

27 Dewsbury J-D (2003) Witnessing space: knowledge without contemplation. *Environment and planning a*, 35, 1907-1932.

represent, to respond to the power that places have to move us. Witnessing, therefore, requires descriptive experimentation with 'just' presenting manifestations, moments, performances and so on in ways that will communicate their own meaning about the affective relationships of the world as displayed in unseen and unintended aspects of everyday life. It is about becoming accustomed to the immaterial and the spiritual in our thinking, citing the invisible energies that affect our being and becoming, witnessing what is felt, engaging in a wilder form of empiricism that feels before it contemplates.

For some, the witnessing of non-representational worlds finds expression in certain forms of *psychogeography*, and associated methodologies of walking. Mervyn Coverley<sup>28</sup> explains that a focus on the connections between psychology and geography has taken myriad historical forms, some fuelled by political radicalism and others more interested in playful provocation. However, in general psychogeography has involved a search for new ways of apprehending urban places by championing the mysteries that lie beneath and within what are often seen as the banal experiences of urban life. These mysterious and unknowable characteristics of urban life are most often encountered by practices of walking and wandering in amongst the city, purposefully drifting in order that the vibe or sense of the place will reveal itself. In this way, walking also seems to offer a fruitful passageway into the practice of witnessing.<sup>29</sup>

An excellent example of how these psychogeographies can be sensitised to spiritual landscapes, is John Davies'<sup>30</sup> narrative of walking coast-to-coast across the north of England, following the route of the M62 motorway. As part of his journeying, Davies notes, for example, ghostly presences and absences presenting themselves in different guises,

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28 Coverley M (2006) *Psychogeography*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials.

29 Wylie J (2005) A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path. *Transactions IBG*, 30, 234-247.

30 Davies J (2007) *Walking the M62* Accessed at (<http://www.johndavies.org>)

“be they the ghosts of communities no longer physically present in particular places but still active, “dead roads” which had been cut off by the building of the M62 across them, (or) the “spirits of place” which I tried at times to describe in my diary entries.”<sup>31</sup>

It is clear here that there is a deliberate spiritual element to his journey, with the author leaning heavily on his faith in “a God who came to earth, who *incarnated* himself in the ordinary life of the common people”.<sup>32</sup> Psychogeography for Davies, then is a reading of everyday place and displacement in terms of a sacramental understanding of engaging with God in and through everyday experiences, conversations and events, both in terms of loss and suffering, and in terms of the presence of a powerful spirit of grace. As he puts it:

My fantasy is that once you have learned to ‘read the everyday’ then you are well equipped to start seeing the signs of ‘heaven in the ordinary’ in the previously unpromising places where people interact... and in the events which engage them there...<sup>33</sup>

In this example from John Davies we can begin to see how psychogeographical surveying can address the spiritual interiorities of places and landscapes, noting the contours of presence and absence, but also being alerted to the tiny hints of incarnational grace that blossom in amongst other geographies of power, exclusion and marginalisation.

In our own more recent experiences<sup>34</sup> urban walking has suggested a wide variety of types of sensory spaces where participants bear witness to vibes and feelings. These spaces may be associated with larger areas such as estates or parks; border-lines and in-between spaces;<sup>35</sup> or micro- or fleeting- spaces associated with encounters between individuals or small groups of people.<sup>36</sup> These atmospheres were witnessed for example in the testimony of a troubled young person in a late night encounter at the house of a Christian grandmother: he observed “there is no evil in this place”; in the sense of sadness felt by

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31 Davies op cit p.13.

32 Davies op cit p.9.

33 Davies op cit p. 10.

34 ‘Exploring Spiritual Landscapes’ was a series of eleven walks between September and October of 2012 in Bristol. 40 people attended with some joining up to 4 walks.

35 Luccarelli, Mark and Sigurd Bergmann, Spaces in-between: Cultural and Political Perspectives on Environmental Discourse (Leiden: Rodopi, 2015).

walkers and residents around the end of a city shopping street; or the haunting, almost spiritual, sense of void in the early hours of the morning in a shopping mall; or the 'hopeful vibes' already mentioned by Paul as people participated creative initiatives in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our conversation is ongoing and our conclusions are tentative and provisional and will most likely raise different questions (and objections) from audiences of human geographers as well as those from a wide range of theological perspectives. In relation to ecclesiology and ethnography we want to draw attention to the idea that exploring spiritual landscapes might complement other approaches which seek to get under the skin of places and that sensory walking could offer an accessible methodology whereby Christian communities might become more attuned to the spiritual interiorities of their own contexts.

One potentially fruitful area of consideration is of the kinds of circumstances in which Spiritual Landscapes (positive and negative) become detected as atmospheres. Different types of approach emerge strongly from each discipline, but their interaction invites pertinent questions.

Theology suggests that distinctive spiritual atmospheres should be discernible in all places, reflecting the mix of presence/absence of Jesus Space. For the Christian community, discerning Spiritual Landscapes should be an integral part (if not an essential pre-requisite) for mission.

Human geography suggests that Spiritual Landscapes are discernible in particular places and circumstances, and that other kinds of affective atmospheres and vibes may well overwhelm any particular spiritual affect in other places. Thus for social science, discernment of spiritual landscapes is an identification of where spiritual hope / oppression has become apparent in

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36 Sensory spaces might more traditionally be associated with religious sites, holy places and pilgrim routes that convey atmospheres of calm, stillness and set-apartness (Inge, pp.91-121; Sheldrake, pp.90-94). Sites associated with utopias may also be included in religious sites (Sheldrake, pp.94-106). Sensory spaces might be thought of in terms of a city (Gorringe p.258, Wink, *Unmasking*, pp.43-50) a nation (Wink, *Unmasking*, pp.87-107) or institutional and social spaces (Wink, *Engaging*, pp.65-85).

the experience of residents and observers - that is not everywhere, but in places where affect causes emotional responses.

The difference seems to be in the character of the absences and presences. The first rests on a certainty of transformative potential in the spiritual sphere regardless of contemporary configurations of presence and absence. The second acknowledges (however grudgingly) that the becoming-tangible of spiritual interiorities (positive and negative, present and absent) can be important in some places.

For the Christian community these differences invite particular questions about our approach to exploring spiritual landscapes: a question about our attendance to the witness of atmospheres from people of other faith orientations as a more open approach to discernment; openness to the possibility that the experience of spiritual atmospheres may fall outside of (and indeed challenge) current theological explanations of spiritual landscapes - that is an openness to access the counter-expected, the non-representational, the atmospheric, the vibe.