

# CULTURAL LANDSCAPES (I) The Politics of Holy Places

JERUSALEM is history's metaphor for territorial conflicts over Holy Places.

The struggle to possess the city has inflamed Middle Eastern politics for millennia. Ownership of the land beneath the city has been treated as inseparable from the institutions of world religions that preached love, but indulged in war.

Sustainable peace will not come until the land question has been abstracted from the politics of Holy Places. For while ownership of the land is linked to the integrity of faith, dishonest politicians will use Holy Places as camouflage for their real intentions: grabbing natural resources.

★ In Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosovic provoked a virulent nationalism by exploiting Serbian monasteries in Kosovo. He wanted the gold, silver and coal mines of the Trepca region. Under the cover of NATO bombing, Milosovic forces waged a 42-day battle with the KLA to control the mines. No-one knows how many people died.

A general solution is needed that neutralises the aspects of land that provoke conflicts.

★ In Israel, Prime Minister Ehud Barak says he is determined to reach a peace with Palestinians. He will honour the land-for-security Wye accord. Palestinians will receive full or partial control of 40% of the Israeli-held West Bank. And Israel will now move constructively towards final status negotiations over the future of Jerusalem, refugees, water, borders and the Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

But these negotiations are within the terms of the old paradigm of property rights:

★ sovereign nation-states exercise absolute control over territory; and

★ rights of property in land are free from obligations to society.

A new paradigm is required.

*Land & Liberty* opens the debate on The Politics of Holy Places to elucidate solutions that combine respect for people's religious faiths with the equal right of access to the land on which everyone relies for life.

*Land & Liberty* Autumn 1999

A religious people's sense of Holy Place is often associated with their deepest identity. Whether as a sacred shrine, mountain or city, the association between God and place stirs the deepest passions. It is therefore only human that Holy Place tends to find political representation as territory. But too often this degrades worship into discrimination, terror and killing.

The problem becomes acute when more than one tradition claims the same sacred place. In the name of God, love is driven out. Sanctity is profaned.

But is sacred space necessarily exclusive of diverse traditions? Allow me to offer an example that suggests it need not be so; that spiritual space can be saved from territorial politics.

At the end of the Gulf War the British Government called upon church leaders to organise national services of "thanksgiving". "Do not be shy," said the commander of the British forces on the BBC's Nine O'clock News on the last day of February 1991. "Ring your church bells."

But 100,000 Iraqi conscripts were dead. The mainstream church leaders of Scotland kept their bells silent. The British government was told that this was not an occasion for "thanksgiving."

An interfaith conference was held on the holy Isle of Iona. From this a joint Moslem-Christian communiqué resulted in the decision that national interfaith services of "reconciliation" would take place. One would be in Edinburgh's St Giles Cathedral and the other in Glasgow Mosque.

But a problem arose with the Edinburgh event. The timing was going to clash with the Moslems' evening call to prayer. They would be unable to attend.

But Dr Bashir Maan, the spokesperson for Glasgow Mosque, remembered something from the Hadith. This is the oral tradition of Islam. Seemingly Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) had allowed visiting Christians to use his mosque for their worship. Might it be conceivable, he wondered, for us likewise to do something in this spirit?

Scotland's Christian leaders responded warmly. They would even allow Moslem worship to be conducted in front of the altar at St Giles Cathedral as part of the service. So Christians watched as Moslems prayed in their church. Our silence felt respectful to the point of inner participation.

The following week, on 25 October 1991, Imam Tufail Hussain Shah addressed Christians at prayer in the community hall of the Glasgow Mosque. He said,

"So let us not allow differences in theology to be used by any person to bring fear or hatred among us! Rather, let us see these differences as challenges to our limited understanding, jewels to be contemplated and perhaps learned from in

friendship. Above all, let them not be sharpened by secular leaders into Jihad, crusade, or any other type of holy war.

"We joined that night, and again now in this Mosque, to worship the same God, God as was known to the early Jews as Yahweh. God as revealed in the Christian tradition through Jesus Christ. God who we Muslims know by the Arabic word, Allah... We share a common commitment to love, justice, charity, mercy, piety and peace. Building these qualities in our hearts perhaps matters more to God than cleverness in arguing about religion. I believe it is God, Allah, who has brought us together. Let us try to stay together and work for peace not only in the Gulf and Middle East, but throughout this planet, this Universe of God."


Some years later I was telling this story whilst lecturing in Edinburgh University. The son of a Nigerian imam came up to me afterwards. "You know," he told me, "we read all about that in our newspaper in Nigeria." He explained that at the time Moslems and Christians were killing each other in his country. His father and his colleagues were so astonished to hear that Scottish Christians


could talk with Moslems that they decided to initiate the same approach with the Christian leaders in their area. The killings did not entirely stop, but they had greatly reduced.

Scriptural discernment often yields a basis for interfaith sharing. For example, Surah V:48 of the

Koran states that the Koran confirms rather than overturns, "whatever Scripture was before it, and is a watcher over it." Religious diversity was created by God. As Akbar, the great Mogul emperor of India (1542-1605) showed, such concepts as "the sphere of Islam" can be expressed by creating a culture that affirms interfaith toleration, mutual learning and profound respect.

Similarly, for Christians, Jesus replaces a static notion of "holy places" or "holy land" with an understanding of incarnation. Here concepts of space are incorporated into the "Body of Christ." In John's gospel, for example, it is He, not Jacob's well, that is the source of life-giving water (4:7-15); He, not the Pool of Bethesda, that offers healing (5:2-9). The whole of the creation is thereby rendered holy on account of the synonymy of life and incarnation (John 1:1-9, cf. Proverbs 8:22-36).

Moslems and adherents to non-Christian faiths are all part of God's creation. Their sharing of Christian holy places is therefore no different than their sharing of this earth. The Bible tells us (Leviticus 25:23), the Koran tells us (Surah XX:53), and sacred texts from many other faiths all tell us that ultimately this does not belong to any human political construction of territory. It belongs to its creator, God, alone. That is what we honour in respecting Holy Place. 

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## ALASTAIR MCINTOSH explains how to transcend the conflicts caused by sacred sites