

Faith and Place: An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology, by Mark R. Wynn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 265. H/b £50.00.*

In various forms, the ‘scandal of particularity’ has often been supposed to beset religious belief. Why should the eternal creator of the universe have a preference for a particular tribe on an insignificant planet revolving round a very average star? Why should he manifest himself as a human being in an unprepossessing town in a remote corner of the early Roman empire? In Catholic Christianity, with its traditional emphasis on relics and pilgrimage sites, the problem has seemed to many people to be particularly acute: why should an omnibenevolent creator dispense favours specifically to those who travel to Lourdes or to Santiago de Compostela?

An uncompromisingly ‘metaphysical’ answer offered by the hard-line traditionalist believer would be that God miraculously exercises his power precisely by intervening, or by being present in an especially immediate way, in particular locations. At the other end of the spectrum would be a psychological or pragmatic answer of the kind that might be offered by theologians of a more ‘progressive’ stripe: it just so happens that some places put people in a beneficial frame of mind, perhaps because of their natural beauty, or moving architecture, or historical associations. But the latter view might seem to smack of reductionism— the attempt to purge theology of reference to anything not readily explicable in natural terms; while the former position could leave one wondering at the theological coherence of the idea that the activity of an omnipresent, omnipotent God is ‘localised’ in this way.

Mark Wynn, in his thoughtful and thought-provoking study, tries to steer a middle course between these two extremes. To explain how particular places can be religiously significant, we neither have to venture into the murky realms of metaphysical speculation about God’s mode of intervention in the natural world, nor do we have to reduce the value of a sacred space to no more than its subjective effects in the minds of those who visit it. How might such an intermediate strategy work? In the case of pilgrimage, rather than grounding its meaning in miraculous or supernatural events on the one hand, or just in the interior life of the believer on the other, Wynn suggests that we need to take note of the *physicality* of the practice: it is the ‘relations of physical continuity and proximity that explain the sense of pilgrimage practice’ (p. 152).

These features certainly seem important in many religious contexts. A highly successful exhibition at the British Museum in Summer of 2011 explored what the curators described as ‘the spiritual and artistic significance of Christian relics and reliquaries in medieval Europe’. The ‘artistic’ element was clear enough: many of the reliquaries are extraordinarily beautiful, their craftsmanship exquisite. But the ‘spiritual’ significance, for many of those visiting the exhibition, surely had something to do with the ‘physical continuity and proximity’ underlined by Wynn. You are now, at this moment, standing in front of the very casket that contains the remains of the revered man or woman who so many centuries ago suffered and died for their faith. Mere superstition, or (its even more degenerate cousin) mere touristic gawping? No doubt there can be elements of both, but it would take a very cynical critic, faced with the extraordinary devotion manifested in these lovingly wrought works of art, to suppose this to be the whole story.

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The point has application beyond the purely religious sphere. Wynn points out at the start of the book that in visiting the grave of a loved one ‘it matters to us ... that we should be physically alongside the remains of the dead person.’ And in a moving early chapter, tracing out some crucial episodes in his own friendship with the poet Edmund Spenser, who died in 2007, he discusses, more broadly, how the development of human relationships is often rooted in a shared sensibility for place— a sensibility which, in turn, is closely bound up with ‘bodily movement and affectively informed perception’ (pp. 42-43). Part of Wynn’s agenda here is to counter, or at least supplement, the highly abstract and intellectualistic framework within which much philosophy, especially the philosophy of religion, is typically carried on. When friends revisit a favourite place where they have often walked and talked together, the place itself may have a distinctive character, a *genius loci*, which allows them to interact and converse in a distinctive way, and to ‘affirm ... their commitment to certain values, by means of embodied interaction with the [place], rather than by way of explicit articulation’ (pp. 28-29). This is an argument that needs a specific personal narrative, such as Wynn provides, to make it vivid, and his case for such an ‘embodied epistemology’, as he terms it, is presented with great skill and feeling. Wynn does not mention Thomas Hardy’s poetry, but anyone who has responded to masterpieces like ‘At Castle Boterel’ (1913) will understand something of what is meant. The poet’s grasp of the significance of his relationship with his former love is intimately bound up with his knowledge of the place where they once alighted from the pony cart, their physical orientation as they climbed the steep hill together, flanked by the ‘primeval rocks’ that have witnessed so much of ‘the transitory in Earth’s long order’, and which now see the poet revisit the scene in old age, knowing that he will ‘traverse old love’s domain never again.’

But what are the lessons for theology? Here Wynn’s argument is more complex. He proposes that knowledge of place is analogous to knowledge of God, and, more ambitiously, that ‘knowledge of the *genius* of the place which is the world is, at least in part, constitutive of knowledge of God’ (p. 69). The movement of thought, if I understand it rightly, is from particular to general: a specific location can acquire religious significance when it stands, microcosmically, for the nature of things as a whole. Or as Wynn puts it, a particular *genius loci* may ‘in some way epitomise the genius of the locus which is the world — for ... knowledge of the *genius mundi* is knowledge of God’ (pp. 69-70). So a place can have special religious significance in so far as it ‘epitomises or bodies forth in miniature some fundamental truth concerning the nature of things in general’. In such cases, as John Paul II argued in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (in the rather different context of discussing the Incarnation), ‘the whole lies hidden in the part’ (cf. Wynn, p. 45).

Suppose we concede that a particular place may have significance in the (corporeally mediated and affectively conditioned) way that Wynn describes; and further, that it may seem to epitomise something about the nature of the world in general. A potential problem for Wynn could be that this ‘something’ might be a general feature of the world that is unrelated to, or even contradictory of, a religious interpretation of reality. Hardy’s vision of the climb at Castle Boterel, for example, seems to lead to a picture of the world as relentless, inexorable, and wholly indifferent to the transitory doings of humans, whose hopes and fears and loves, however momentous to the individual subjects, are but a tiny dot on the primeval landscape formed long before humans came on the scene, and destined to endure long after we have disappeared.

There can be, in Hardy's and many other non-theistic outlooks, a certain kind of humanly mediated significance in individual places, and a certain kind of impersonal structure displayed in nature as a whole, but there is no overarching pattern of meaning that unites them. Wynn allows that for some people 'the world will not bear the sort of unity of meaning that is implied in the idea of a *genius mundi*' (p. 67); and there seems to be an implicit concession here that 'the believer's perspective on the nature of things', which supposes that 'the world displays a unity of meaning', is but one possible perspective. To put the worry in more explicitly theological terms, Wynn shows sympathy for Archbishop Rowan Williams's idea that the concept of God functions not so much to refer to an entity alongside other entities, but rather as a kind of interpretative 'grid' for discerning the significance of everything else (p. 69). This is in many ways an illuminating idea, but it leaves it unclear how Wynn's *genius loci-genius mundi* project generates the religious *epistemology* promised in the book's subtitle — at least if 'epistemology' is being used in the normal sense concerned with knowledge claims and their justification. If there are many possible grids, why should one of them enjoy the accolade of providing 'knowledge'?

That these complex questions are raised by Wynn's argument is in one way a tribute to its subtlety and scope. On any showing this is a highly rewarding study, and its range is far wider than can be indicated in a short notice. To give but one example, there is a fascinating chapter discussing the work of Bachelard, LeFebvre and Bordieu, which does much to fill out Wynn's account of knowledge of place. The results emerging here and in many other parts of the book offer us a psychologically much richer understanding of the various dimensions of human knowledge than is often found in the philosophical literature; and to this extent it perhaps points the way towards a strategy for dealing with the more standard epistemic and justificatory questions that confront advocates of a theistic worldview. At the very least, Wynn succeeds, in his acute investigations of our knowledge of place, in providing a powerful analogue for the way in which the religious believer might conceive of knowledge of God.

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