

Pilgrimage and Place: The Reciprocal Relationship of Topographical Context and Religious Image at Medjugorje

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Summary

The article suggests that there exists a general principle of symbolic reciprocity between the topographical context or configuration of the earth, and the religious image present at pilgrimage sites. That is to say, the religious image in its symbolism reflects and amplifies the topographical context and vice versa.

Section one expositis the notion of power of place, or loric power, and contrasts it with sacred power. Section two sets forth the principle of symbolic reciprocity between place and image, loric and sacred power. Section three demonstrates this by an examination of the relationship of layout and image at the site of a recent and ongoing pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia.

Résumé

L'article suggère qu'il existe un principe général de réciprocité entre le contexte topographique ou la configuration de la terre et l'image religieuse trouvée sur des lieux de pèlerinage. En d'autres termes, le symbolisme de l'image religieuse est reflet et amplification du contexte topographique et réciproquement.

La première partie de l'article expose la notion de pouvoir inhérent à un lieu ("loric power") et lui oppose celle de pouvoir sacré. La seconde partie avance le principe de réciprocité symbolique entre lieu et image, entre pouvoir du lieu et pouvoir sacré. La troisième démontre ce principe en examinant la relation entre aménagement et image caractérisant le récent lieu de pèlerinage à la Vierge de Medjugorje, Yougoslavie.

1. The Notion of Placehood and the Loric

Within the past thirty years some major new symbols have been taking on increasing importance within the western world view. One of the most important and interesting of these renewed symbols is the complex of earth, fertility and the feminine in general. We recall, for example, in the United States, the introduction of free love through the "flower children" of the sixties, the "back to the land" movement in the same country and period, the arising of the environmental movement throughout the western world, and the explosion of feminism on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the academy there was renewed interest in sacred space within the history of religions, in the importance of built space and its harmonious relationship to surround-

ings in architecture, and in the power of place in geography. Very often, however, the categories of space, place and sacred were used indiscriminately and without a clear understanding of their relationship to one another. The greatest amount of confusion seemed to lie in the identification of the power of place and sacred space, often dubbed "sacred place".

It was Mircea Eliade who popularized the notion of sacred space as well as sacred places through his book, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, first published in 1958. In it he had a chapter entitled "Sacred Places: Temple, Place, 'Centre of the World'". He also included in that chapter a section called "The 'Construction' of the Sacred Space". Eliade stresses the fact that "... the place is never chosen by man; it is merely discovered by him" (Eliade, 1958, 369). Yet the place itself in its sacred nature always points to some divine and paradigmatic phenomenon which is repeated in it. It is this repetition of the sacred archetype that sacralizes the space. Eliade writes,

"In fact the idea of a sacred place involves the notion of repeating the primeval hierophany which consecrated the place by marking it out..." (Eliade, 1958, 368).

Thus, for Eliade, sacred space is involved in placehood, but always points beyond the place to a sacred referent beyond the place, in *illo tempore*, which is repeated in the place, thus sacralizing it. In addition, within the same chapter, Eliade links the creation of sacred space with the notion of the 'center'. Accordingly, all sacred places take on the role of a centre. The centre is the point that connects the three cosmic zones of heaven, atmosphere and earth, and in its role as *omphalos*, is the place from which the world was created (Eliade, 1958, 377). Two conclusions can be drawn from these reflections: first, the place does not have any intrinsic sacrality, and second, sacred places always contribute to the establishment of world.

To further clarify Eliade's notion of sacred space, (often for him sacred place) we could conclude that the place is only sacred by virtue of its symbolic value. In other words, the place always gains its sacrality from some referent to which it points and in which it participates by means of some form of resemblance. As such, the sacred place transcends itself and in doing so creates world. Even in cosmic religions in which the sacred is manifest primarily through nature and not history, the symbolic and world creative aspects of sacred space are primary. Thus, the Ganges is a sacred river because of its source in the god Shiva's hair and not because of the intrinsic sacrality of rivers or of this particular river. Shiva is a central god in Hinduism and is involved in both world creation and destruction.

In the case of historical religions such as Christianity, things are much clearer. Space is sacred because of what happened there. For example, there are thousands of sacred springs in Ireland, many previously revered by Celtic tribes prior to the coming of Christianity. Now the springs, or holy wells, are sacred because of some association with a Christian saint, and very often, as in the case of St. Patrick, because of some activity that the saint conducted at the well. These saints are part of the Christian world and, in many cases, universally venerated.

More recent studies in the power of space are interested in the actual power of the earth herself and not in what happened there or the mythic or world creating associations of the place. Yet there remains an indiscriminate use of the terms power of place and sacred space and a failure to articulate their difference. I will cite several examples from a recent volume entitled *The Power of Place* which illustrate this dilemma.

The lead article in this anthology edited by James A. Swan and written by J. Donald Hughes, attempts to set the definitional tone for the volume and is titled "Spirit of Place in the Western World." The first sentence of the article, and thus of the volume itself reads,

"Spirit of place is the power that is manifested in sacred space." (Swan ed., 1991, 15)

Thus the notion of spirit of place is identified with sacred space, and carries with it the notions of centre and world creation identified by Eliade. Yet later in the article Hughes stresses the spirit of place as related to the actual topography of the place and not dependent upon mythic or historical themes:

"The sacred structures of the local people were oriented with reference to land forms... What the landforms represented on a visible symbolic level was the indwelling spirit of the place" (Swan ed., 1991, 18).

Still later Hughes in describing the power of place in Christianity suggests that "The places associated with his (Jesus') life became sacred and were occupied by churches" (Swan, 1991, 21). Here no association is made with the intrinsic power of place and the emphasis is on world and history.

Elinor Gadon in her contribution to the volume makes a clear distinction between two senses of earth power, but still terms both of them sacred space. She emphasizes the importance of the intrinsic power of the earth when she states that "Mountains, hills, rivers and caves are often said to possess sacred powers..." (Swan, 1991, 82) and later "... the great attraction of many sacred places is tied to the geography of that place" (Swan, 1991, 83). Further on in the article she extends the notion of place to that of world, but still claims the title of sacred place, an apparent contradiction. To this end she sites examples in India where the entire subcontinent i.e. the world, is personified as a goddess (Swan, 1991, 85).

Clearly, my concern is to make a meaningful distinction between power of place and the power of world. I have chosen to name these two forms of numinous power the loric, or that power that emanates from the place, and the sacred, or the form of power that creates world.

Although the sacred may be expressed through the earth and cosmic phenomena, as well as in historical events, it always points beyond itself to some universal referent in which it participates. In short, we would identify sacred space with the notions of Eliade described earlier. Eliade, we recall, did allude to the intrinsic power of earth and place, but always insisted that the sacred eclipses, but does not negate, this power by the compelling universalizing power of worldhood.

What then of the power of place? In the same volume I have been mentioning, I contributed an article on the holy wells of Ireland and in that article attempt to describe another form of power generated from place. This is the power of the loric and is identified with the actual configuration of the earth as it creates unique nooks and crannies, or places, on its surface. Several characteristics distinguish loric power from that of the sacred. Common with sacred space, loric space or place generates a centre or point of intensification of power from which the power flows. Unlike the sacred whose power flows out from the centre to the boundaries of the world universalizing all in its path, the loric power flows out from the centre and back upon itself. Whereas sacred power is centrifugal in its dynamic, loric power is centripetal. Whereas sacred power

creates a world that is uniform in essence, the loric maintains a place that is distinct and unique. The loric is not symbolic, does not point beyond itself to universal mythic or historical referents. The loric is saturated with intimacy, the intimacy of family secrets, the traditions of a local festival, or the feeling of power and presence in a particular valley.

Within any given religious tradition, there is always a mixture of the sacred and the loric. In most traditions the sacred predominates, however, we do find cases, such as Celtic Ireland, in which the loric is the most prominent form of power. Archaeological and textual sources agree that there was no central religious or civic power that was able to unify Ireland into a world until well after the coming of St. Patrick in the fifth century. Although there was a general consciousness of the existence of Ireland as a whole, as well as ritual sites of particular importance and some gods and goddesses of a universal character, primary allegiance was given to the small sub-provincial land unit called the *tuath*. There were approximately one hundred and fifty such small holdings in Ireland which were distinguished by their topographic configuration and natural boundaries. These unique areas were imbued with the power of place and this power was manifested in a goddess or god of the place who had a special relationship to the people who lived in the place. It was necessary to be born in the place in order to have this special relationship to the power.

Survivals of this loric power still exist in Ireland today. In the course of our fieldwork on holy wells in Ireland, we came on a small spit of land in southwest Ireland called Kerry head. This small piece of land was inhabited by one family, the Corodins, who also had a holy well on their land. The well was a healing well but was only effective on Corodins and only on blood members of the family, that is, those who were born there. The head of the family, Michael Corodin, was acknowledged patriarch and retains the function of the clan or sub-clan chieftain of Celtic Ireland.

This spirit of place is a form of loric power and does not point beyond itself to a world in which it participates. It is completely self sufficient and grounded in intimacy. Simply put, the loric in its form as power of place is not sacred, does not build a world. The quality of the loric is certainly numinous along with the sacred, but its dynamic and function are very different.

2. The Reciprocity of Place and Image at Pilgrimage Sites

All pilgrimage sites, even those of historical religions whose power is given by the appearances in actual history of divine beings rather than by the power inherent in the cosmos, are enlivened by the power of place, that is by the loric. Pilgrimage sites, unlike relics and holy statues, are not portable, they are grounded and influenced by the power of place.

Ireland's Croagh Patrick, a large coastal mountain jutting up from the plains of County Mayo, was a site of pilgrimage long before the historical events of Patrick. It was the position of the mountain hard by Clew bay and arising from the plain that gave the Reek its power. In other words, it was the unique topographical features in conjunction with weather and light factors that formed the basis of the power of the place. After the coming of Patrick, the events that occurred there formed an overlay to the loric power and added to that power the universalizing dimension of the sacred in the form of the Christian mythos.

One could say, then, that the "unconscious" power of every pilgrimage site is the power of the place, and most often this power is expressed through the unique topography, weather and light of the place. We might even look at the uniqueness of the topography as an image in itself. Thus the configuration of a place takes on a form and feeling-tone that is manifest in the imagination of the pilgrim. The sense or the feeling that one experiences within a particular place is often reflected in the imagination of the experience and sometimes this image is actually sculpted or materialized by an artist. This image is the spirit of the place, the *deus loci*.

Often, when there is an actual image that arises from the imagination of the pilgrim and his relationship to the power of place, this image is in the initial form of an apparition or spirit-vision. It is then that the spirit-vision "speaks the place", or gives a message to the experience. This message may be very abstract and appear to have no connection to the place of its occurrence. We feel, however, that there always remains a vestige of continuity between the power of the place, the image that arises from that power in relation to an experience, and the message which that image may convey.

Let us look at an example of a pilgrimage site in a highly developed religion in an effort to amplify this point. One of the most important pilgrimage sites in Buddhism is the site of the Buddha's enlightenment located near the town of Bodhgaya. Prior to the advent of Buddhism one of the major manifestations of loric space in India was that of the *caitya* or grove of trees. Often the *caitya* was a single tree (Basham, 1954, 262). These groves were abodes for earth spirits and genii, in other words, spirits of the place. These spirits were worshipped there by local people. We can conjecture that Gautama retired to just such a place, vowing never to leave until freedom from suffering had been gained.

This freedom from suffering was the spirit of the place, the peace present in the sacred grove or tree. It was also the message of the Buddha and first arose in the imagination of Buddhist pilgrims in the form of a tree itself. Not before the Christian era do we find the well known anthropomorphic rendering of this "*deus loci*" in the image of the seated Buddha (Basham, 1954, 263).

3. Medjugorje as Modern Instance of Reciprocity Between Image and Place

The site of the present apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the village of Medjugorje, in former Yugoslavia, presents us with a contemporary instance of the symbolic reciprocity between image and place. Let us begin with a description of the "place" and its concurrent symbolism.

The village of Medjugorje is situated amidst a generally barren landscape approximately forty miles inland from Dubrovnik on the Adriatic coast. While the narrow strip of land along the coast is steep and often rocky, it is under heavy cultivation for small fruits and vegetables. As one travels inland from this narrow strip, and away from the rivers that flow into the Adriatic, the landscape becomes very dry and covered, with certain exceptions, by scrub growth. The village of Medjugorje, therefore, with its fertile plain surrounded by low mountains, is an agricultural oasis amid this barrenness. The name Medjugorje means between the hills, and viewed from above the complex of villages (Medjugorje is the central village of three small villages), it lies on a small plain between two mountains or high hills connected by a low ridge. The hills are in the shape of a horseshoe and are named Podbrdo and Krizevac. The village of

Medjugorje is situated at the open end of the horseshoe while the other two hamlets lie at the base of these two small mountains. There is a small river that runs into the plain between the hills. The plain itself is a very fertile area under intense cultivation, mostly in grapes for the making of wine.

It would be difficult not to notice the feminine symbolism that is displayed by this topographic configuration. Certainly, we are presented with a container or vessel in the formation of the hills as they enclose, with only one opening, the fertility of the plain within. Erich Neumann in his well known work on the feminine archetype, *The Great Mother*, devotes a chapter to the central symbolism of the feminine. The very first sentence of the chapter states that "This central symbol is the vessel" (Neumann, 1954, 39). He goes on to say that

"The basic symbolic equation woman = body = vessel corresponds to what is perhaps mankind's - man's as well as woman's - most elementary experience of the feminine" (Neumann, 1954, 39).

What we see here in Medjugorje, then, is the archaic correlation between the earth and the body of the great goddess, and in particular, the major vessel on her body that contains the fertility of life giving forces, the vagina and womb. Within the enclosure of the "womb" we find the fertile plain yielding the fruits of life.

This symbolism is amplified as we look carefully at the built environment as it is juxtaposed with the natural topography. Central to this built environment is the Roman Catholic church of St. James which is situated just at the opening to the "vagina", positioned as a child just about to emerge from the womb. Behind the church, running up to the mountains, are the grapes, pressed to make the blood of the god about to be born through the church.

The events occurring on the two hills further amplify and carry on this symbolism. Krizvac is by far the highest of the hills. On the top of this hill is a thirty foot cement cross made possible by the women of the villages who carried on their backs up this very steep hill, the cement to build the cross. The cross was built in 1933 to commemorate the nineteen-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Christ.

Across the valley lies Podbrdo, a low lying hill, demure and reclining. It was at the base of this hill, and then on it, that the Blessed Virgin is reported to have appeared to six young people on June 24, 1981. Thus, human events in the valley established a hill of the lord in Krizevac and a hill of the lady in Podbrdo. The meaning and relationship of the two hills presents us topographically with a second symbolic constellation, that of a *hieros gamos*, or divine marriage, from which is to issue the birth of a new "child". The image that arises from the encounter of the villagers with the events on the hills and in the valley of Medjugorje is that of Our Lady Queen of Peace. It is she who is to lead both the village and the world into the birth of a new era of peace. The fact that at the present time Medjugorje is an oasis of peace amidst a desert of war that surrounds it, is perhaps part of this message, and of the general symbolism of this complex.

Contained within the image which reflects the topographical symbolism is both the icon and its symbolism, and the message given by the icon. Thus in the case of Medjugorje what emerges as image is an icon of the Virgin Mary as well as a series of messages which began in June of 1981 and are still in progress.

Let us first look at the icon. All of the visionaries reportedly see the Blessed Virgin and have described her in consort so that an icon could be produced by an artist. The image is very simple, but also very unusual within the complex of images of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin is dressed in a simple gown of grey, full length, on which the sleeve cuffs and collar are embroidered in red and gold. She wears a white veil and there are nine stars around her head as well as a glow of light emanating from her head. She has black hair.

What is so striking about this particular image of the Virgin Mary is the colour of the gown. Popular images, as well as those of Lourdes and Fatima, most always show the Virgin dressed in light blue or white. Our lady of Guadalupe wears a reddish gown, but nowhere is there pictured a grey one. Utilizing a basic hermeneutical rule within the interpretation of religious material, namely that anomalies present us with symbolic data, we now examine the symbolism of the colours of the gown.

The colour grey happens to be a mixed colour, that is, it is the result of combining the three primary colours. Thus it is a colour whose dynamic is integration, in this case the integration of black and white. The alchemical interpretive scheme is most helpful at this point. Within it black is the colour of the *prima materia* and symbolizes putrefaction, fermentation and the earth in general. It is associated with the feminine and the mother in particular. White, its opposite, connotes purification, ascension and the celestial regions in general. It is associated with the masculine and the father. The alchemical process moves from black (raw potential and container of all possibilities) to white (purification) to red (forging and molding) to gold (the glory of the immutable state). When applied to the colours of the gown, we see that the gown symbolizes integration or union of opposites in the grey colour, but also the final state of glory in the gold that appears at the openings in the gown, the cuffs and collar.

Now, how does this correlate to the messages given by the Virgin? Early in the history of this apparition, in October of 1981, the Virgin revealed herself as the Queen of Peace. Further, Fr. René Laurentin, a prominent Catholic mariologist, reduces the many messages to a few essentials which include faith, prayer, fasting, conversion and peace or reconciliation. He suggests that these elements constitute a process, similar to the alchemical one just cited, that lead to peace and reconciliation, thus the title, Queen of Peace. (Laurentin, 1988, 34-40). The colours in the gown reflect just this process via the integrative colour grey which "reconciles" the opposites of black and white, and the red and gold at the borders and openings of the garment symbolizing the final child of this reconciliation, immutable peace.

Finally, we see on the topographic scale that the motif of *hieros gamos* symbolized by the two mountains is reflective of the black or earth and feminine, and the white or the sky and masculine, who unite into grey and give birth to the "prince of peace" symbolized by the church as gold with its location at the border or opening of the horseshoe of mountains.

4. Some Concluding Comments

Plato in his dialogue, *The Laws*, comments that *nomos*, or human culture, must be in harmony with *topos*, or the geographical context of the place (Swan, 1991, 20). Might we suggest that the pilgrimage site at Medjugorje, in addition to being of great importance to a particular religious community and tradition, is an illustration of the

process of conversion called for in the messages of Our Lady at that site, a conversion in which Plato's maxim has been realized.

Interpreted from the perspective of the history and phenomenology of religion, the apparition becomes a manifestation of sacred, world-building power and place in which the *deus loci* takes the image of the Christian Virgin Mary. This image is a symbolic reflection of the place and its spirit, and its message is that of conversion and peace, a peace brought about by the alignment of *nomos* and *topos*.

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