

## CHALICES AND HAMMERS: THE MONASTIC TRANSCENDENCE OF THE SACRED-PROFANE DICHOTOMY

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The electronic buzzer sounded and shortly after, the Guest-Master arrived to take me through to the private monastic enclosure. Though it was not my first visit to Pluscarden Abbey in Moray, it was my first time entering this part of the Benedictine monastery. Behind the heavy wooden door stretched a stone hallway, the south cloister, lined with book-shelves on both sides with windows opening into the central garden on one. Wooden beams reached across the ceiling from wall to wall, the calm silence broken only by the shuffling of our feet. As we passed through a second doorway, I imitated him in dipping my forefinger in a small vessel of Holy Water and made the sign of the Cross. I then took my seat in silence as the prayers and readings began. As a Roman Catholic, these motions are not foreign to me. However, this time I was neither in church nor was I praying. I had in fact entered the dining hall of the monastery where I was to join the monks for supper. I would later learn that all their meals are eaten in this fashion and that the refectory, dining hall, is for the monks a place where the body, mind and soul are nourished. What for me was a daily routine that rested primarily outside of or separate to my spiritual life, is wholly integrated into theirs.

I went to the monastery with the intention of understanding the experiences of these men who had devoted themselves to lives separate from the outside world as they passed in and out of different spaces: the sacred and the profane, of prayer and of work. However, that was based on the assumption that they lived these same separations and dichotomies of life. As it turned out, this was not the case. Both within and without the

monastery, the monks are encouraged to see, acknowledge and keep in mind the creations and presence of God in all objects, actions and places. Therefore it was difficult for the monks with whom I met to speak in terms of a profane space existing separately and externally to a sacred one. This is most evidently at odds with the works of Eliade and Durkheim who, among others, both view the division of the sacred and profane realms as a central characteristic of religion (*cf.* Eliade, 1957; Durkheim, 1912).



Image 1: Author's photograph of the central garden with the East and South Cloisters in view.

### **The Sacred and the Profane**

Historian and philosopher, Mircea Eliade, wrote that for the religious individual space is not homogenous and is instead divided into that which is sacred and that which is not (1957: 20). He posited that religious or sacred space was organised around a central focus point – the divine – while profane space was disordered and unregulated (*ibid.*). This separation was also addressed by Durkheim who identified in religion a common thread; that religions are based on the classification of things into the realms of either the sacred or

the profane ([1912] 2001; 36). Durkheim defines the sacred as that which is protected and isolated, while the profane is that which is distanced and protected against by religious structures (*ibid*: 40). While Durkheim's definitions of both realms are centred somewhat on the sacred, Norbeck sharpens this in reference to the profane. The sacred, he writes, consists of those things that transcend the objects, thoughts, and events of the ordinary, profane, everyday world (Norbeck, 1961: 11). This sacred-profane dichotomy, it is argued, is characteristic of the religious phenomenon in that it "assumes a binary division of the known and knowable universe into two genera that include all that exists but radically exclude each other" (Durkheim, [1912] 2001: 40). The two opposing realms encompass their respective spaces, objects, specific words and even times (*ibid.*). The religious individual can therefore never completely devote himself to one without withdrawing completely from the other.

In monasticism, Durkheim sees an artificially organised setting, apart from the 'natural in which most men live the life of their times' (*ibid*: 39). Monastic separation is therefore the isolation of the religious man from profanity, short of mystic asceticism, which seeks to sever all ties of man from the profane (*ibid.*). According to Durkheim, the physical and social separation in situations such as monastic life, addresses the mental rejection of the 'mingling' or 'contact' (*ibid.*) between the two realms. Should the profane be able to communicate and/or interact with the sacred, Durkheim believed the latter would be deprived of its purpose (*ibid.*). However, liminal thresholds, such as doorways in regard to sacred buildings, exist to function as frontiers that demarcate the two worlds. Yet with the accompanying rites of entry, they mediate an individual's transition between them (Eliade, 1957: 25). Nevertheless, though permeable, the division between the opposing realms of

the sacred and the profane still persists in the grand theoretical account of religious spatiality.

### **The Monastic Perspective**

Being somewhat familiar with the theoretical standpoint discussed above, I began my conversations with the monks based on that premise. Almost immediately, I was told that amongst the monastic community such a dichotomy is not perceived to exist. In regard to space, objects and individuals, monastic life seeks to acknowledge an innate sacredness in all of God's creation. By extension, monastic life aims to make all activities (and therefore the spaces in which they occur) sacred; be it prayer or labour. The monks are encouraged to treat the tools of work, such as a hammer, as equally as they would the sacred vessels of the altar, such as a chalice. In this integrated life, all forms of work including the secular are undertaken with the aim of praising God. Despite refuting the existence of separate sacred and profane realms, the monks do nevertheless acknowledge the valid distinction of worldly values and sacred values. Though I was told that the former should be taken as being different but not specifically anti-sacral. These worldly values, though not necessarily wrong or profane, may however be distracting. Therefore, monastic communities provide an element of separation from the distractions of the outside world and create an environment in which the monks may learn to focus their lives on sacred values.

Though the monks have trained themselves to live their lives with God and with the sacred at the forefront of their minds, there are moments and places where the universally-present sacred is less explicitly found. Within the monastery, all elements are carefully managed, organised and maintained in order to remind individuals of the presence of God. The contrast between the explicitly sacred and the implicitly sacred are distracting to the

monk. Thus, within the explicitly sacred space of the monastery, stumbling blocks are deliberately removed and the monks protect their absence in the same way that surgeons protect operating theatres from contamination. Some measures of protection take form in the restrictions placed on the use of technological interfaces (i.e. phones, computers and the internet) and levels of communication with the non-monastic world. Others apply to visitors present at the monastery, as there are areas to which entry is only permitted when accompanied by a monk and in other cases, not at all. However, these restrictions on visitors are not overly extensive as the monks are obliged to extend their hospitality to all who seek it as they are encouraged to see the presence of God in all people. Therefore, aside from the private monastic enclosure, visitors have free roam of the guesthouse, the monastery grounds, church, chapels, parlours and gardens.



Image 2: Author's photograph of the guesthouse built against the West Cloister of the Abbey.



Image 3: Author's photograph of one of the entrances to the private monastic enclosure.

### **Transcending the Profane distractions of Implicitly Sacred Space**

The Benedictine brothers of Pluscarden Abbey take three main vows of Stability, Obedience and Conversion of Life. The vow of stability is a vow to remain within the same geographical location of the community for their whole lives with exceptions made only under the vow of obedience. Under obedience to the Abbot, a monk may be required to leave the monastery precinct to transport goods to and from the marketplace, to give seminars and talks, to engage in fundraising, as well as potentially establishing a new monastery. In addition to these, there may be other personal exceptions as decided upon by the Abbot. These excursions involve leaving behind the explicitly sacred, distraction-free space of the monastery into areas that are more implicitly sacred, thus requiring specific preparations to be undertaken by the monk in question.

Should a monk be sent on a journey, they are required to first 'commend themselves to the prayers of all the Brothers and the Abbot [and] on the very day they come back (...) seek the prayers of all for [any] transgressions' (St. Benedict, [c.540] 2011:217). These commendations to prayer occur both prior to their departure and upon their return as the experience of leaving the monastery is considered one that may potentially distract the monk's mind away from the monastic life and community. In the vein of maintaining monastic purity, the monks are also discouraged from speaking excessively about their travels upon their return to their community. Distinctions in journey prayers are made based upon the destination of the brother to be sent on the journey. For those whose destination is monastic such as another monastery, a basic prayer and blessing are carried out. Should the destination be secular, the community's full Journey Prayers are said. Again, this distinction is based upon the premise that a monastic destination is more explicitly sacred than a secular (ie. non-monastic) destination.

The preparations for travel do not, however, consist solely of prayers. There are also physical and mental preparations for the journey that mark the beginning of a spatial transition. These are distracting to the mind of the monk even before his departure. Prior to their journeys into public places such as the marketplace, monks change out of their distinct, white Valliscaulian habits into traditionally more inconspicuous grey monastic smocks in order to draw less attention to themselves. They are also often aware several days beforehand of an upcoming journey as travelling is one of the duties laid out on a rota for set periods of time. The monks, through bringing the sacred into seemingly functional, profane tasks, deal with the distractions of these preparations. The monks may, through building familiarity in certain forms of work, begin to function mechanically thus freeing

their minds to focus on prayer as an involuntary 'muscle' of sorts. In developing this 'involuntary muscle' of constant prayer, the monks are able to overcome some distractions such as those posed by travel preparations. In the post-preparation phase, the monk may find himself in an unfamiliar setting where functioning mechanically and the involuntary muscle of constant prayer are made more difficult. Therefore, he is then encouraged to avoid acting automatically in his tasks, instead making conscious choices to offer up his work in service to God.

Aside from bringing the sacred into less explicitly sacred tasks, in their journeys the monks also strive to transcend seemingly profane spaces, such as airports, by bringing the sacred into them. The monks make the conscious decision to bring, through their actions, an explicit sacredness into a space where most would not find it. However, that is not to say that they begin preaching aloud or reading scripture in the middle of the terminal, instead they choose to treat strangers like Christ by living the values of loving those around them through interaction, conversation and compassion; bringing a degree of humanity into a place where people are processed and, to an extent, dehumanised. Should interaction not be possible, they propose that the individual may still be able to bring the sacred into that space by maintaining a religious mind-set instead of allowing worldly distractions to take hold. Thus, the space is made more sacred in the same way that holy places of worship are made sacred by the services performed within them (Lindsay, 1625 cited in Spicer, 2005: 91). Through these methods, the monks are able to address the distractions of the worldly environment outside the monastery, bringing with them the sacred and – at least for themselves, if not for those they come into contact with – transcend the profane.



## **Indicators, Reminders and *Habitus* in Explicitly Sacred Spaces**

The Church grants great reverence for and importance to Saints and Holy Persons as individuals who provide 'practical assistance' through prayer from Heaven (Bowen, 2002: 247). Saints also provide a form of moral guidance to religious individuals who seek inspiration from learning about the lives of saints (*ibid.*). As a result of this importance, relics of Saints – which may be anything from the remains of the Saint, primary relics, to fragments of their belongings, secondary relics, – join other items such as crucifixes as powerful reminders and indicators of explicitly sacred spaces. In the monastery, there are very few rooms or spaces that do not have at least one crucifix upon either the walls or doors. Religious paintings and sculptures also abound. These holy items or representations of the sacred do not make the space in which they are present, especially sacred in and of themselves. Instead these, along with architectural features such as vaulted ceilings and the like, are intentionally and designedly utilised to foster awareness of God by creating a particular physical environment. This physical environment then, facilitates a state of being within a sacred space.

However, the effect of these physical indicators and reminders are highly dependent on the individual who is experiencing the space. Crucifixes, relics, altars and vaulted ceilings such as those present in the monastery do not communicate the same message to all individuals. Their interpretations are a learned knowledge, what Marcel Mauss terms 'social *habitus*' ([1950] 1979: 101). These learned behaviours determine whether individuals are sub-consciously aware or otherwise of how they are to conduct themselves in a particular space or situation (*ibid.*). Though often unrecognised, these are not as innate as one might think. Stimuli such as crucifixes do not act as objective triggers, instead only acting in their

intended way upon those who have been conditioned to recognise them (Bordieu, [1980] 1990: 53). For example, a hypothetical individual who has had no contact with Christianity whatsoever may, upon entering a church for the first time, interpret the sight of a man nailed by his hands and feet to a cross only as a brutal, violent form of torture while the same sight holds more meaning for Christians as an image of love and the ultimate sacrifice. One of the monks told me of a group of Benedictine nuns in China who ran a hospital. Upon their rise to power, the Communist authorities banned all religious items, representations and symbols in the hospital. At the time, the nuns possessed a reproduction of Rembrandt's 'Prodigal Son'. When they were questioned about what it depicted, the nuns described it as a famous Dutch painting of a master, his servants and his son; a description readily accepted by the officers. However, for the nuns the 'Prodigal Son' was more than a painting, it was an image depicting a parable from scripture about a father's love, mercy and redemption.

Physical reminders and indicators though useful, are intended to be transcended. Monks do not enter a room and immediately begin looking for a crucifix or reliquary. Instead they and other religious individuals learn to understand where they are and what the purpose of the space is. Stimuli initiate a different frame of mind or state of being and in moments of distraction, aid the return to focus on that which is sacred.



Image 4: Author's photograph of the altar in the church with the North transept aisle in the background.

## Conclusion

If asked to identify the more sacred object between a hammer and a chalice, it is safe to say most are likely to gesture towards the latter. The hammer is generally known to be a tool of labour, while the chalice with its goblet-like appearance is likely to draw on religious imagery of the Holy Grail. However, the monks of Pluscarden Abbey and, I presume, most individuals belonging to other religious orders, do not perceive a world in which objects, space and individuals are separated into the sacred and the profane. Instead, they strive to transcend this dichotomy and hold all things as sacred creations of God. All of their actions, be they prayer or work, are regarded as equally serving the will of God as is indicated by the motto of the Benedictine monastic order, *Ora et Labora* (Latin: Prayer and Work).

Though the efforts to isolate and separate monastic life may seem to be indicative of a dichotomous classification of the world, it is in fact based on a different set of distinctions that are not completely separate, that of worldly and sacred values and of an explicit and

implicit sacredness. These distinctions, unlike the sacred-profane dichotomy, are neither opposing nor mutually exclusive. In the coexistence of these elements, the religious individual may encounter or discover varying levels of the sacred in the world. The monks, through their lives and dedication to the monastic order, train themselves to focus solely on living by sacred values. Yet they do not find worldly values necessarily anti-sacral, but merely distracting.

In their interactions with the world beyond the monastic precinct, the monks employ several methods of maintaining a focus upon the sacred aspects of life. They also seek to bring the sacred into spaces where it is less explicitly found and they encourage others to do the same. These efforts also extend into the work done by the monks as they serve God through all their activities, praying constantly. Furthermore, the environment in which they reside is a space of explicit sacredness where conscious efforts have been made not only to remove distractions and preserve the inner monastic environment but also to physically remind people of the presence of God.

When I inquired about his opinions on the theory of a sacred-profane dichotomy, the monk with whom I was conversing at the time responded that he believed if there ever was such a dichotomy, it no longer exists. He referred to the ripping of the curtain in the temple upon Jesus' death. This curtain set apart the most sacred part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, from the more public areas. The High Priest himself could only pass beyond it on one specific day every year. In the symbolic destruction of this division, Jesus' death mended the rift between the sacred and the profane, unifying two realms into one that transcends separation and division.

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