

Rome: Multiversal City

The material and the immaterial in religious tourism

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The modern tourist industry in the West is organised conceptually around a secular agenda; and yet much tourism is associated with religion. Donald Horne was one of the first to argue in *The Great Museum* that the modern tourist is a direct descendant of the medieval pilgrim. (Horne, 1984) Pilgrims were the first mass tourists, and sightseeing and souvenir collecting the material dimension of their spiritual quest. But the tourist industry and tourism studies assume that there is a huge difference between mediaeval pilgrimage and modern tourism. Modern tourism parallels mediaeval pilgrimage as the shadow parallels the substance. In the Middle Ages travel for purposes of pilgrimage involved genuine religious belief; but the modern or postmodern) age is a post-religious era, so such beliefs are no longer tenable by the educated. Wherever we see in the contemporary world structures of experience and patterns of behaviour that seem to suggest religion, we should see them as secularised extrapolations or projections of a vanished mediaeval belief-system.

The interpretative models used in tourism studies are based on secular, rational, atheistic, materialist categories. It is assumed that people do not believe; or that belief has little to do with material existence. And yet of course people do believe, and what they believe does have profound implications for material culture. The global tourist industry conducts members of all the great world faiths to holy sites across the world: to Mecca, to Kyoto, to Jerusalem, to Santiago da Compostella, to Lourdes, to Rome. Many go for manifestly religious reasons. But this clear evidence simply runs in parallel to the enlightenment paradigms that rule the industry and its academic superstructure. We separate the beliefs of the participants from the materiality of their experience, and propose that what they are doing is really no different objectively what other tourists do. This is just one branch of tourism, religious tourism, which sits alongside adventure tourism, ecotourism, cultural and heritage tourism, etc. Tourist agencies instinctively believe that these travellers are moving through a material environment which remains unaffected by their peculiar idiosyncratic habit of belief. But there's no need to tell them that.

Swatos and Tomasi interrogate this dualism, and ask if it possible to get beyond these binary oppositions between religious pilgrimage and modern tourism, the sacred and the secular, the material and the immaterial. Are these things really qualitatively different, with the tourist engaged in a quest for pleasure, self-realization and authenticity of experience, while the pilgrim is looking for illumination, physical or spiritual healing, or the breath of the divine? Is it possible to reverse the traditional secular analysis and suggest that perhaps the pilgrimage experience can provide a model for tourism, instead of the other way round?

To pursue this question involves thinking about place and the sacred, and in this discussion paper I propose to consider (from a Christian perspective) the case of Rome. The leading contemporary Christian writers on this topic (e.g. Brown, 2004; Sheldrake, 2001; Inge, 2003) agree that for religion (and for intellectual culture in general) 'place' is a highly problematical category. The Western scientific tradition has thoroughly subordinated place to space and time. Science, philosophy, theology (even, according to Inge, geography!) conspire to render place a 'contingent category' (Harvey, 1991), an accidental factor of human existence. The Christian Middle Ages in the west defined God as unlimited, bound (despite the Incarnation) to no particular place, and humanity as attached to no 'abiding city'. In a secular age modern Christian theology has persisted in that long flight from particularity.

In the last three centuries the Enlightenment, the ascendancy of the natural and social sciences, and modernity have promoted a universalism that leads not only to the neglect but to the 'devaluation' (Foucault 1980: 70) or 'suppression' (Casey 1997: ix) of place. 'Progress' proceeds through time and into space, leaving place behind. Increasing mobility renders place relative and temporary. The advent of electronic media has in some sense annihilated place, converting (as some thinkers have argued) what was formerly public into something increasingly private. Anthony Giddens argued that while in pre-modern societies, local activities shaped space into place, modernity 'tears space away from place' by creating relationships with absent others. Place becomes increasingly 'phantasmagoric', as social relationships become communities of absent others, diasporic, without locality (Giddens, 1990: 18). Some theories of globalisation aspire to make the world a homogenous 'village' in which place would be a uniform constant, or as Northcott puts it 'a depthless and decentred

world in which the human identification with locality, place and neighbourhood is often fractured and undermined' (Northcott, 1995: 122). Each particular place is continually 'reassigned in relation to new global realities' (Inge, 2003: 12).

It is difficult in this environment to make the notion of 'sacred place' mean anything at all. It may be possible within modern paradigms to conceptualise the quality of holiness as residing in an abstract deity or spirit, or as evident in particular holy people. But believers and non-believers alike have problems in defining how holiness might be said to reside in a specific place. If the numinous is itself elusive, it is that much harder to pin the divine down to a category as fluid and fragile as 'place'.

This problem appears at its most intractable in the city. Initially a shelter from nature and the hand of war, later a concentration of economic power, the city presents the spectacle of human life at its most utilitarian and non-spiritual. Modern cities are built by and for people, and operate according to a predominantly secular agenda. The popular notion of sacred place gravitates immediately towards natural landscape, antiquity and mysticism: Stonehenge, Lindisfarne, Iona. Sacredness does not seem to be thought of as naturally present (despite the plurality of religious buildings) among tower blocks, road networks, shopping malls. As Sheldrake admits, 'it is incongruous to think of our built environments as having a sacred quality' (Sheldrake, 2001: 155) at all. Where the city features in religious symbolism, it is likely always to be another city than the one we dwell in: Rome, Jerusalem or Mekkah; a city of the past, or a site of pilgrimage, or a city displaced into fantasy like the Jerusalem of *Revelation* or Augustine's *Civitas Dei*.

Yet as Casey (1997: 10) puts it 'to be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place'. If 'nothing we do is unplaced', and if we 'do' religion, then there must be, somewhere in the city, a place for the sacred. Over half the world's population live in cities, and cities are almost wholly secular inventions, built for material needs. We can readily accept places such as Ayer's Rock, or Mount Olympus, or Stonehenge, or Glastonbury, as 'sacred' places. But people have difficulty in defining any part of the built environment in which we live, the modern city, as intrinsically 'sacred'.

Rome contains the only truly Holy City left in the world (as distinct from other cities whose holy places lie within a secular urban environment), the Vatican. It is not a city in the ordinary sense, though it has the political status of a sovereign state. But the Holy City co-exists with another city, Rome, which displays excesses of both sacredness and secularity. Rome is a great bustling international capital, yet full of holy places; built and used for trading, and money-making, and shopping, and consumer display, and rushing about on secular business; yet also oozing sacredness from every worn and weather-beaten brick and stone.

Experientially Rome is less like a city and more like a multiverse, a collection of many worlds or parallel universes simultaneously existing in space and time. This concept has often been imagined, but is now regarded as at least a plausible scientific hypothesis. Quantum physics suggests that every possible outcome of any event really happens and exists in a separate world. Rome the multiverse is not only overwhelmingly confusing and disorientating to be in, but offers experiences that notoriously elude recollection. One can never repeat precisely any previous experience of the city.

Take the example of the tour buses of Rome, double-decker buses ferrying tourists around the city. There are different coloured buses for different tours. Thus the red ones are *Rome Tours*, secular sightseeing of the modern city. There are yellow ones labelled *Christian Rome*, which take passengers round the major Christian sites. Then there are green ones called *Archaeobus*, which tour the ruins of classical Rome. The strangest thing about these buses is that *they all go around the same places*.

These tours, itineraries, pilgrimages, occupy the same space and even the same time. But each is functioning inside a separate universe. Each tour constructs by commentary and indexation a discrete signifying system. What the tourist perceives in this choreographed movement around a very small area depends on the particular dimension he or she chosen to move within. The dimensions co-exist in place and time. But they are as distinct as if you were in quite a different place and quite a different time.

The reason why this is possible is not just that Rome continues to hold great religious significance as the world centre of Roman Catholicism. It is also that Rome has a social history going back about 1100 years; that many different religions have vested their notions of sacredness in the city; and that so much material survives from those different beliefs and practices. In Rome this kind of sacred geology is open to the observer's eye, especially round the Forum area. Rome is a great monument of syncretism. Instead of destroying the evidence of previous faiths, the city has absorbed them, so they stand side-by-side in a peaceful or a tense co-existence.

Prominent among the more recently-inaugurated tourist itineraries of Rome are 'Dan Brown tours': there is a *Da Vinci Code* tour, and another based on his novel *Angels and Demons*, which is actually set in Rome. The *Angels and Demons* tour takes you round various sites which in the novel are alleged to have been put there by the mysterious Illuminati, a secret sect of anti-Christian scientists and philosophers, which included people like Galileo and Gianlorenzo Bernini, whose architecture of course almost defines Rome. One of the key incidents of the novel, the assassination of a cardinal, is set in St Peter's Square. It occurs in the middle of the piazza, the focal point of the great square's architectural configuration. As the *Angels and Demons* tour is obliged to point out, the religious symbol that stands at that point, the very centre of this holy place, is an Egyptian obelisk, which probably stood in the Temple of the Sun in Heliopolis some 20 centuries before the birth of Christ. Today it is surmounted by a hollow cross, said to contain relics of the True Cross. It is now by adoption a Christian monument, but it remains an object originally sacred to a pagan sun-god.

Around 40 AD Caligula transported the obelisk to Rome, and erected it in the Caligula Circus, later called the Vatican Circus, where St Peter's now stands. In the 16th century Pope Sixtus V directed the obelisk to be re-erected at the centre of the colonnaded square, in front of the 'new' Basilica of St. Peter. So this pillar, sacred to the Egyptian sun-god, later the witness to violence and atrocity in the Roman Circus, including the martyrdom of Christians, according to legend the martyrdom of St Peter himself - stands in the very centre of St. Peter's Square.

It is at least worthy of comment that what we find on this spot is not a cross per se, but a cross on top of a pillar designed for sun-worship. But this is by no means

surprising, when we consider that the Christians of the 4th century chose as the date to celebrate the birth of Christ the Roman festival of *Sol Invictus*, the unconquered sun. At the dedication of Constantinople in 330 the chariot of the sun-god was set up in the market square together with the cross. On a Christian tomb in the Vatican Necropolis there is an image of Christ riding the chariot of Helios, and wearing the radiant sun-god's crown. A photograph of St Peter's square taken from above reveals its design set out in the shape of a wheel with eight spokes, a figure common to many representations of the sun as a divinity in ancient Egypt and elsewhere.

Now for Catholics, Roman or Anglican, all this shows how Rome, the Eternal City, has managed to incorporate all its past, and shape it into a great monument that speaks the name of God in Christ. For some non-Catholic Christians it is evidence that the Roman Church is a great apostasy, more pagan than Christian. The syncretism of the Vatican is a favourite target of abuse on American Christian fundamentalist websites.

But this raises serious questions about how sacredness of place survives in a complex history like that of Rome. If a faith is the one true faith, then for its adherents all these other religions of the past are delusions that have been superseded. If the sun is not a divinity that could be worshipped, why retain a material object that seems to suggest it is? Or, if we consider all faiths to be more or less approximate attempts to define an ultimate truth which is indefinable (and any kind of ecumenism has to assume that) then surely sacredness can be created by people practising other forms of belief and worship. The sacredness of St Peter's perhaps draws on those rituals and beliefs and prayers of the distant past. In London's Brick Lane there is a mosque which started life as a Huguenot Church, then became a Methodist Church, then a synagogue, and is now the Greater London Mosque. Has each faith in turn dispelled the sacredness of the previous occupants? Or is there something sacred that survives there, in that place, in different tongues and different prayers?

Hence religious tourism, a replication of, not a substitute for, mediaeval pilgrimage, can still happen in a wholly authentic way for the believer, even though he or she is surrounded by people experiencing the city in quite different ways. The city embraces them all, secular and sacred, pilgrim and tourist, and allows space for their continuing co-existence.

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