The Reformation of Place: Religion, Space and Power

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Losing one's place

In a remarkable analysis of religious life in sixteenth century Lyon, Natalie Zemon Davis analysed Protestantism and Catholicism as two different spatial languages through which the territory of the city was interpreted and performed.[1] Catholic ceremonial, organised around the liturgical year but also in the build-up to the four fortnight-long fairs held in the town every year, was sensitive to the natural features of Lyon, especially the hill of Fourvière that dominated the town, and the two rivers: the "feminine", slow-moving Saône, and the "masculine", forceful, and often dangerous Rhône. These features were the continuous focus of festivals and ceremonies throughout the liturgical year. For example, at Pentecost, processions would pass the Chapel of the Holy Ghost at the end of the bridge over the Rhône, marking the importance of that river to the life of the city, and asking for protection from its unruliness. Nearby, young men would dress up as horses – *chevaux fous* – and dance through the streets that led from the end of the peninsula where the two very different rivers "embraced". On holy days such as Corpus Christi, processions with banners, bells, candles and torches would also move between different key sacred sites in the city, symbolically overcoming the division between different communities represented by the Saône, and thus giving the city identity and protection.

The Calvinist Huguenots had a very different orientation to urban space. As Davis puts it, "[t]he streets through which the dark-clad Calvinists marched singing their Psalms were not sacred routes, but avenues for the expression of the believer's faith, a message of communion to other Christians and of reproof to the canon-counts. That the sacred could be enclosed in a thing — in a host, in a bone, in a building, in a piece of land — was a notion smacking of idolatry." The Calvinist crowds thus performed the city in a very different way: they "purged the Catholic holy places ... opening urban space and making it more uniform and available for exchange, traffic and human communication." They smashed crosses at crossroads, built public squares on top of old cemeteries, and set up shops in old chapels. The Calvinists recognised that places were not all the same: for example, places could be consecrated to prayer or other holy usage, or they could be polluted by licentiousness. Yet such characteristics were seen as accidental rather than essential features of the places in which they were encountered, and their sacral landscape did not exhibit the dramatic highs and lows of spiritual intensity of that of the Catholics. Instead, the environment was "held together by a middling tension, by listening and by watchfulness."[2]

This dramatic contrast lends credence to the idea that the Reformation may have played a key role in the constitution of the modern experience of space: in the displacement of what Henri Lefebvre called *absolute space* in favour of *abstract space*.[3] Absolute space is complex and discontinuous; it is made up of different kinds of "place" with radically different qualitative properties: enclosures and openings, interiors and exteriors, public and intimate places, places of joy and of desolation.[4] Furthermore, incommensurable bonds between

[1] Davis.
[2] Davis, 58-59.
[3] Lefebvre.
[4] Bachelard.

people, places, symbols, supernatural realities, memory and custom serve to fragment absolute space into sites that have to be known through practices of naming and storytelling rather than those of surveying and measuring. By contrast, abstract space is merely a container for objects and activities; it is a space made suitable for practices of comparison, exchange and movement; it is the space of modern science, of bureaucratic rationalism, of market relations. Abstract space is a kind of space in which "place" – *topos* – is no longer primary and fundamental, but is at best a ghostly, secondary epiphenomenon caused by the arrangement of objects in space. The Reformation, Davis's account suggests, helped to lay the ground for the modern experience of abstract space, by breaking with what I will call the "archaic" experience of certain places and objects as having intrinsic connections to sacral power. And, as capitalism and modern technology spread around the world from their origins on the North Atlantic rim, it could be argued that they took with them not just a Protestant ethic of work, but a Protestant experience of space.

The link between abstract space and the erosion of a sense of place has become particularly apparent in the most recent phase of modernity, commencing in the late twentieth century, dominated as it has been by the globalisation of capitalism and increasing mobility of people and commodities. Manuel Castells[5] argues that in this "network society" there is clash between two spatial logics, between the subordinated *space of place*, of historically rooted human experiences,[6] and the dominant *space of flows*, a space made suitable for and constituted by the mobility of people, things and information.[7] This mobility (both real and virtual) is conditioned by, and in turn reproduces, a logic of abstract space: each given locality is tending to become not a unique place, with its own associations and meanings for those dwelling or even visiting there, but a particular combination of abstract characteristics that mark it out as similar or different to other places. The multiple mobilities of "liquid modernity" have thus produced a mindset for which places are collections of abstract characteristics in a mobile world, ever easier to be visited, appreciated and compared, but not known from within.[8] People are increasingly seeing and experiencing the world from afar, "at home" only in movement and in comparison.[9]

Even Europe, with its dense mosaic of languages and cultures, has been increasingly subjected to the logic of abstract space; Jensen and Richardson argue that the contemporary neoliberal approach to European integration is now one that tries to construct European space as a *monotopia* – "an organised, ordered and totalised space of zero-friction and seamless logistic flows" of goods, services, capital, labour and technologies across the Union.[10] This has given rise to a proliferation of what Marc Augé calls 'non-places', which, while taking up quantitative space, lack the kind of qualities we think of as making places.[11] Thus it could be argued that the Reformation helped to create the cultural conditions not only for capitalism (Weber) and modern science (Merton), but also for lay-bys, lorry parks, shopping malls and airport terminals.[12]

In this paper I want to reflect on the role of the Reformation in the transformation of our experience of place. Firstly I want to broaden this initial claim that the Reformation helped to effect a shift from absolute to abstract space, or from place to space, by situating this development within the *longue durée* of western religious history. In doing this I draw on

[5] Castells.
[6] Tuan.
[7] Urry.
[8] Bauman.
[9] Szerszynski and Urry.
[10] Jensen and Richardson, 3.
[11] Augé.
[12] Weber, 1985; Merton.

the analysis that I developed in *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*, which explored how our modern ideas of nature and technology are shaped by western religious history.[13] In this book, I drew on the work of Max Weber, Robert Bellah, Jürgen Habermas and Marcel Gauchet to develop an account of how the western experience of the world has passed along a highly distinctive and contingent historical trajectory through the last two millennia – a succession of "orderings of the sacred" which together I term the "long arc of monotheism". In the next section I will draw on this analysis to help understand the transformation of the experience of place.

But secondly, I suggest that it is too simplistic to decry the Reformation in this regard and lament the loss of absolute space. As Davis herself argues, the Calvinists of sixteenth century Lyon were engaged not in a disenchantment of the world, but in a redefinition of its relationship to the holy. I will suggest that the reshaping of the experience of place in Western history is part of a cultural struggle between monotheism and what I call "archaic religion", in which spiritual power is seen as attached to specific people, things and objects. I will argue that the Reformation promised a final overcoming of archaic religion, and the possibility of a new experience of space and place. The hypermodern dissolution of space into shopping malls, gated communities and global flows of commodities may have been facilitated by the Protestant spatial logic, but it was not necessitated by it. Thirdly, I will thus argue for the possibility of a distinctive (post)Christian mode of placing, one which offers liberation from a bondage to place without thereby condemning the world and its inhabitants to placelessness.

Place in western religion

The branching path that Western religion has taken over the last two or three millennia is extraordinary complex and resists schematic analysis – especially by any schema that attempts to present it as an almost inevitable teleological unfolding, as evolutionary social theorists such as Habermas might claim. However, it is possible to discern a broad pattern. In tracing this path, we will pass through the unified sacro-natural cosmos of the primal and archaic sacred, the transcendental dualism of the monotheistic and Protestant sacred, and the immanent sacred of the modern and postmodern sacred (see Figure 1). The transition between these stages are generally not abrupt, but gradual and often highly conflictual; at any one place and time different orderings of the sacred might be clashing with one another. Nevertheless, overall, the West underwent a passage into and out of monotheism, with a momentous effect on western thought in general, and on the experience of place in particular, because of the way that the divine was separated from nature and place, purified, and then recombined with it. In one sense, the decline of monotheism in the West returns us to the unified cosmos of the primal sacred; but in another it leaves us in a very different landscape from the one in which we started.

<table>
<tr><td>PRIMAL</td><td>ARCHAIC</td><td>MONOTHEISTIC</td><td>PROTESTANT</td><td>MODERN</td><td>POSTMODERN</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">monistic</td><td colspan="2">dualistic</td><td colspan="2">immanent</td></tr>
<tr><td>multiple space</td><td colspan="2">absolute space</td><td colspan="2">abstract space</td><td>multiple space</td></tr>
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Figure 1.

[13] Szerszynski, 2005.

The story of the long arc of monotheism starts with what I call the ***primal sacred***, typical of hunter-gatherer societies, in which there is no clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural. The world is not understood as the unified creation of a transcendent and unique creator God, but as the ongoing interplay of multiple, this-worldly agencies. In this sacral ordering, mythical narrative is not seen as referring to a separate, heavenly realm but is woven into the empirical details of the physical world. Particular features of the landscape might be seen as having particular spiritual significance, but every natural feature is experienced as related to the actions of mythical beings. However, these beings are not seen as controlling the world, nor are they worshipped as "gods"; instead, they are approached through identification and the "acting out" of primal myths, or through mundane forms of social interaction. The purpose of such rituals is to secure the reproduction of life within this world, rather than to escape it or to live according to laws originating from outside it.[14]

However, as the rise of agriculture brings a relative distancing from the natural world and new forms of social organisation based on the concentration of power, a rather different, ***archaic sacred*** emerges, for example in the "pagan" cultures that preceded the emergence and spread of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle East and Europe Like primal religion, archaic religion is similarly monistic in its experience of the world as a unified "natural-divine cosmos", and is similarly concerned with securing existence in this world rather than with other-worldly salvation.[15] But with the development of priests and other intermediaries between humans and spiritual power there is a relative shift from magic – the *ad hoc*, circumstantial meeting of needs and crises – to religion "proper" – a systematic regulation of relations with gods and other supernatural beings.[16] Importantly for present purposes, sacred, natural and worldly hierarchies are seen as continuous – resulting, for example, in African ideas of divine kingship, where an individual is seen as encapsulating sacred order and power. A common characteristic of the archaic sacred is thus the marking out of certain places, people or objects as having a privileged relationship with the sacred, and other things as relatively profane. The *genius loci* of Roman religion belongs properly in this ordering of the sacred, in which specific parts of nature are protected by tutelary spirits that have to be propitiated.[17]

With the birth of "axial" or "world" religions such as Judaism and Christianity, the supernatural powers of ancient divinities are gathered together into the idea of the numinous, monotheistic God, and expelled from the empirical world into a supernal reality. Western religion thereby progressively leaves the monistic cosmos of the primal and archaic orderings of the sacred for a dualistic ***monotheistic sacred***. In this ordering of the sacred – that inhabited by the Catholics of Lyon described by Davis – religion continues to operate through the material and the bodily in ways that echo primal and archaic religion, but the sacred is ordered around a new dualism of the natural and the supernatural. The individual starts to undergo a process of becoming more clearly separated from his or her environment, as experience is increasingly organised around vertical relations of dependency on and obligation to priest, saint and God, rather than around horizontal relations with the natural, social and supernatural worlds.[18] Yet, in medieval Christianity, as in archaic religion, supernatural realities are still mapped on to physical features. Relics and places of worship are scattered everywhere – in chapels, springs, fountains, woods, as well as great urban centres – a sacred topography which organises worship, pilgrimage and site-specific rituals.[19]

[14] Bellah.
[15] Bellah.
[16] Weber, 1965.
[17] Hughes.
[18] Brown.
[19] Muchembled.

However, the meanings of these features are apprehended in a different way than they would be in primal and archaic religion – as pointing to external, higher realities.[20] Natural objects, and not just words, are seen as *referring* – to other objects and events in nature and history, but finally to moral and spiritual truths as laid out in scripture. This semiotic subordination of the natural to the supernatural world – the reading of nature and place as "about" spiritual truths – both reinforces and expresses the move away from the monism of the primal and archaic sacred: the highest values are those associated not with the cyclic, homeostatic maintenance of *this* world but with the anticipation of the *next*.

The emergence of the ***Protestant sacred*** sees a radicalisation of this division between the natural and supernatural, as the Reformation strips away the institutional and supernatural hierarchies that both constituted and spanned the gulf between the transcendent divine and the world. The divine is thus removed from this world in a more absolute sense – becomes more infinite, unconditioned and unknowable – and with seemingly paradoxical consequences. The gulf between creator and creation is made at once infinite and infinitesimal, absolute and vanishingly small; at the same time as the Reformation amplifies the gulf between the empirical and transcendent worlds, the latter is also brought close to each individual and to the natural world. As Weber argued, the very idea of what it is to serve God is transformed: no longer is it conceived primarily in terms of devotional or ascetic acts to be carried out at specific places and times of heightened spiritual significance, or as the responsibility solely of the cloistered few.[21] Instead, the duty to God is experienced as an inner orientation, one towards a divine command that has to be acted out in all areas of profane life. This formulation allows the centred self of the monotheistic sacred to operate *outside* world-denying practices and sacred spaces, amidst the complexities of social life. The unmediated relation with the divine meant that religious action is now "conceived to be identical with the whole of life", and the world to be an arena in which to work out the divine command.[22] As we saw with the Huguenots of Davis's Lyon, the spatial correlate of this is a shift from a complex, discontinuous "absolute" space to a unified, homogeneous "abstract" space. The conception of the natural world, too, is transformed by this shift, in ways that favour the rise of modern science; matter comes to be seen as wholly passive, and space as continuous and homogenous, so that the laws that God has impressed on matter can operate identically at all points in the universe.[23]

With the emergence of what I call the ***modern sacred,*** the transcendent axis is pulled into the very empirical world that was constituted by its ejection, producing a new immanentist ordering of the sacred, grasped through Enlightenment reason or Romantic sensibility. Being and order, instead of being seen as deriving from a supernatural source external to empirical reality, are increasingly seen as *properties of that reality itself*. The world thereby comes to be seen as profane in a newly radical sense – not just as being less sacred than its divine source and reference point, but as having no relation to the sacred at all. The transcendent axis, now introjected into the material world as an immanent ordering principle, still operates in a hidden way to maintain the idea of a single truth and abstract space. But with the emergence of the modern sacred, we see the demise of that crucial world-relation that emerged with the axial religions and the monotheistic sacred: the sense that this world points towards the next one either by symbolising transcendent truths or preparing the faithful for eternal life. Instead, there is a focus on the endless reproduction of immanent life-processes within *this* world.

[20] Harrison.
[21] Weber, 1930.
[22] Bellah, 36-39.
[23] Funkenstein; Harrison.

Finally, in the ***postmodern sacred*** – which does not supplant but in various ways coexists with the modern experience of space – we see a more thoroughgoing collapse of the organizing dualism of the monotheistic and Protestant sacred, and the emergence of a multiple reality, one filled with and constituted by different cosmologies, worldviews and experiences of place grounded not in organised religion but in subjective experience.[24] With the dropping of the doctrinal certainties and Puritan character ideals of early-modern religion, religious action thus becomes in a sense even more demanding than it was within the Protestant sacred, with a growing imperative for each individual to work out their own spiritual meanings, whether inside or outside the structures of organized religion.[25] Under these conditions it is the "aesthetic community" that is the paradigm form of sociality – a community that "has no other foundation to rest on but widely shared agreement, explicit or tacit (that is) woven entirely from the friable threads of subjective judgements."[26] Space is experienced in multiple ways that are contingent on the membership of these elective, affectual tribes.[27] This ordering of the sacred is encountered in the contemporary, heterotopic city with its multiple, overlain spatial orders of meaning – its numerous competing spirits of space kept alive by the city's varied inhabitants and visitors.

In what kind of place does this journey leave us? The rise and fall of "absolute" space seems to have deposited us in a postmodern experience of space that shares features with the monistic cosmos of the primal sacred in which our story started – the world, once again, is experienced as neither dependent on an external sacred reality, nor organised according to a single logic of sacrality and power. Yet the journey through the long arc of monotheism also transforms human experience. This passage initially abstracts space, making it possible to experience the world as a unified domain whose operation is capable of being grasped as a whole rather than a collection of independent agencies and sources of power, and as a homogenous space without centres of sacral power. But then, with the rise of a postmodern register a further dimension is added to the experience of space: this abstraction *itself* is abstracted, so that even the experience of existing in the shared, abstract space of modernity is dimmed, and instead people increasingly feel themselves as inhabiting private worlds of meaning. So, while contemporary experience is "*after* monotheism", in that is no longer characterised by a belief in the radical, ongoing dependency of the being and becoming of the world on a transcendent creator God, it is also "after *monotheism"* – transformed by the passage through monotheism into something quite different. And a crucial element of that difference is the abstraction of space and loss of the intense sense of place typically experienced by members of pre-modern societies.

Place and power

There are many reasons one might lament this loss of place. One reason is *cultural and spiritual*: that the dilution of place represents an impoverishing of human experience. If there were no places, how – and where – could *Dasein*, being-in-the-world, "take place"?[28] This, I take it, is one of the key insights of Tim Ingold's work on space and dwelling, in which the modern experience of space is contrasted with the perception of the environment characteristic of indigenous peoples and found wanting.[29] According to this view, the dweller in abstract space is in a state of privation, alienated from their environment, no longer capable of the participatory relationship with the world that is seen as a primary dimension of

[24] Cf. Heelas; Roof.
[25] Bellah.
[26] Bauman.
[27] Hetherington; Maffesoli.
[28] Heidegger.
[29] Ingold.

authentic human being-in-the-world. But another reason to lament the abstraction of space is *political*. Historically, the abstraction of space has been a key element in the strengthening of the power of the centralised state and of disembedded market relations. The modern state requires and reinforces the abstraction of space across its territory, unifying it through a single system of relationships and duties, and a single logic of representation which makes the territory and what happens in it "legible" to disciplinary state power. Markets, too, operate dependent on space being abstracted and "striated" through mechanisms of reification, standardisation, quantification and motility.[30] This move from absolute to abstract space generally has the effect of tipping the balance of power away from the local and the situational and towards more distant, abstract and often unforgiving forms of power.[31] Even the postmodern individual can serve to strengthen the disembedding power of markets, by taking the form of the consumer whose subjective experience and preferences cannot be gainsaid.[32]

However, I want to argue that it is not so clear that the contrast between absolute and abstract space is a simple one between good "place" and bad "space". The geographer Doreen Massey[33] argues that that overly stark contrasts between space and place, such as those made by Tuan[34] and Castells[35], makes place too rooted, and thereby too resistant to reflexivity and to progressive social dynamics. According to this view, an element of abstraction in the experience of space is to be welcomed, ethically and politically. In terms of the language that I am using in this chapter, one might say that a strong sense of place is linked to the archaic sacred, and that the tension between absolute and abstract space in Western history is thus implicated in a wider spiritual struggle over the nature of social, natural and divine power.

From a Protestant point of view, the Reformation is a more systematic working-through of a key move made by the arrival of Christianity. Marcel Gauchet's analysis of the development of Western religion can help us to think through this argument, if we extend his analysis from the domain of social relations to that of space and power.[36] Gauchet suggests that in the West the notion of political rule had been initially constituted in the context of what we are calling the archaic sacred, by the making of explicit connections between specific empirical people, objects and places and divine power. In many ways, the incarnational logic of Christianity seems to continue that particular disposition of the sacred; God was born in a particular man, at a particular place, at a particular time. However, as Gauchet argues, Christianity brings about a radical departure from the "organic interlocking of the Natural and the Supernatural" that is characteristic of the archaic sacred.[37] Unlike the warrior Messiahs predicted by many Jewish cults, Jesus is an "inverted Messiah", in whom divine power is identified not with the highest – the sovereign – but with the lowest – the weak and excluded. In contrast to the divine kingship of the archaic sacred, this performed not a continuity but a *radical gulf* between heaven and Earth.[38] After Christ, Gauchet suggests, no one person – and, we can add, no one place – could claim uniquely to inhabit the fulcrum between the natural and the supernatural.

Whereas a traditional messiah would have preached war, and thus reaffirmed the primacy of the collective, Christ preaches love and peace, constituting an interiority to human

[30] Deleuze and Guattari,
[31] Porter; Scott.
[32] Keat et al.
[33] Massey.
[34] Tuan.
[35] Castells.
[36] Gauchet
[37] Gauchet, 143.
[38] Gauchet, 118-124.

experience which permitted individuals a new distance from the social bond. Similarly, the infinite distance of the Christian God and the refusal of the demonstrations of magical power that were characteristic of the archaic sacred led to new forms of collective being, where distanced individuals were gathered together into a salvation community distinct from political power, paradigmatically represented by the notion of "Church". Because the Incarnation had taken a form which broke with the sacral continuities of archaic religion, a yawning gap had opened up between divine and earthly truth. This separation of sacred and earthly authority meant that individuals were thrown back on themselves to make sense of sacral truths in terms of their own inner understanding. The Church at once symbolized and promised to fill that gap, but in a way such that "what legitimated the Church's existence – the human understanding's uncertainty about revealed truth – simultaneously justifies challenging its authority."[39] Thus the breaking of the connection between divine and earthly rule gave the individual the right to withdraw assent from worldly power, helping constitute the individual as a centre of consciousness and judgement in their own right, developments which lead up to concepts of individual conscience central to modern democracy. The spatial correlate of this social transformation – of the shift from an understanding of "virtue" as an external and objective power to that of an internal and subjective conscience – is the displacement of absolute by abstract space: the separation of power and significance from particular locations, and the rise of a new experience of space in which the moral individual is centre-stage.

Yet, even in the modern world, spatial politics is still partly shaped by the archaic sacred. There are many examples of space being organised materially and semiotically in a way that privileges certain sites over others, and subordinates the individual to a prescribed spatial ordering of value. For example, it is not only imperial cities like Beijing and Paris that are laid out to concentrate symbolic power. Even the apparent placelessness of contemporary global finance is organised in ways that favour centres such as Wall Street and the City of London; by contrast, the transport infrastructures of developing world spaces such as Africa and Latin America are laid out as "open veins", designed for extraction.[40] Aesthetic representations of nature and landscape are frequently used to invoke ideas of nation in a revival of modes of sacralisation characteristic of the archaic sacred.[41] The collective awestruck moments experienced by Americans in the face of "their" nature and technology seem to mark out the American nation as having a privileged connection to the universal destiny of humankind.[42]

And even environmental thought, so often critical of existing structures of social power, can draw on archaic modes of spatial ordering. The ideology of conservation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was conditioned by a colonialism which itself had roots in the archaic sacred's notions of continuity between earthly hierarchies and divine power, as evidenced in its singling out of particular landscapes, wildlife habitats and species for concern and protection. Even the contemporary concern for global nature can be understood as a reinstatement of the archaic sacred at the level of the world itself: where once tutelary spirits watched over particular forests or particular species, now it is nature as a whole which is sacralised. For the critics of the technological domination of nature, nature is guided and guarded by its own immanent teleology, sometimes personified as Gaia.[43] For the proponents of global environmental management, by contrast, the environment is under the protection of the abstract ruler of democratic society, who shapes and optimizes it for his own interests,

[39] Gauchet, 137.
[40] Galeano.
[41] Hays; Lowerson.
[42] Nye.
[43] Lovelock.

interests rendered sublime and universal through the language of technical reason.[44] In both, the sacrality of nature brooks no argument; the ritual demands of the tutelary god of nature are absolute and non-negotiable.

Ultimately, even the placelessness of modern experience can be seen as an archaic sacralisation of abstract space itself, one which produces either a blasé indifference to place – a modern version of Stoic apathy – or a subordination to a global imperative that represents a recapture of human freedom. It appears that the emancipatory potential of monotheism to break the archaic equation between sacred and profane power and thereby opening up a new space of freedom for human being-in-the-world has been far from fully realised. Without the transcendent axis, without the idea of a divinity beyond the empirical world, nature would likely have remained conceived as a cyclical realm of violence seen as symbolically underwriting a conservative social order, rather than as capable of peaceable coexistence with a human social order constituted though relations of gift and speech – what Klaus Eder calls the "bloodless" tradition within Western culture, a tradition which refuses the symbols of earthly social power that are grounded in the totemism of the archaic sacred.[45] Yet in the modern experience of place we can see that even the abstraction of space itself has become subordinated to the logic of the archaic sacred, thereby frustrating the emancipatory power of this move. What we need in order to prevent this thwarting, I want to suggest, is to reform reformed space.

The reformation of the reformation of place

How can we escape archaic relations between space and power without being recaptured by the sacralisation of abstract space and consigned to the placelessness of much modern experience? I have recently suggested that clues to such an escape can be found in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, who, while not directly talking about space, shows us how reformed space can *itself* be reformed.[46] In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard uses the life of Socrates to illustrate the idea that the life of "immediacy", simply living within the moral horizon of one's own culture is inconsistent with the genuinely ethical life.[47] For Kierkegaard, Socrates' ironic self-distancing from the culture into which he had happened to be born, and indeed from the concrete details of his own life, was the awakening of subjectivity itself, without which there can be no genuine moral responsibility. This applies to the archaic sacred and place: to be able to distance oneself from a place, to understand its contingency, to be able to compare and contrast it with other places, is the awakening of a spatial subjectivity which is also necessary for justice and responsibility.

However, as Andrew Collins points out, a simple negation of concrete existence, a severing of private meaning from the shared, emplaced world of culture, can by itself only offer a *negative* freedom, not a positive form of life.[48] Kierkegaard himself recognised this; in *Either/Or* he carries out a caustically perceptive critique of the blasé Romantic aesthete in his depiction of the character "A" – egotistical, bored and incapable of engagement.[49] He argues that the very inadequacy of A's existence is connected to the fact that the ironic attitude is not fully carried through. Similarly, with the liberation of the modern individual from absolute space, the archaic sacred is reinstated at the level of abstract space itself, and rendered immune from critique. The Romantic aesthete is not free but captured by his or her own alienation from the public world, by an ironic attitude that becomes a new immediacy, a new

[44] Arendt.
[45] Eder; Cf. Hamilton.
[46] Szerszynski, 2007.
[47] Kierkegaard, 1989.
[48] Collins.
[49] Kierkegaard, 1992b.

and equally constraining horizon of thought. Similarly, the dweller in abstract modern placelessness is not free from the intertwining of worldly and supernatural power, but is recaptured at a higher level by the sacralisation of abstract space itself.

In his later *Concluding Unscientific postscript*, Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Climacus, suggested a way out of this trap.[50] For Climacus' ironist, the ironic distancing from immediacy is only a transitional stage to the fully ethical life of responsible choice. Climacus' ironist identifies *neither* with the finite, empirical self of his immediate, conditioned existence, *nor* with the infinite, unconditioned ironic self of pure choice, but with the contradiction between the two. From the vantage point of his unconditioned, ironic distance, he thus regards his conditioned, finite existence not as a set of constraints to be rejected, but as "a home in which he chooses to dwell."[51] The ironist does not abandon, but *returns* to his finite, worldly existence, and takes *responsibility* for it. As John Evan Seery rather similarly puts it, the spirit of irony requires one "to return to the finite world of politics, to act in and for such a world, even in the face of knowledge that puts the world and that activity into perspective."[52]

As we have seen above, the reformation of spatial relations involves a self-distancing from the shared world of place, one which can seem to lead inexorably to the placeless experience of modern life – of space as a mere objective container, or as a mere subjective phantasm. Yet if the modern distancing from place is followed by the return gesture of re-entering the world with a new sense of reflexivity towards and responsibility for the attachment one feels for one's place, the meaning and significance of the shared living space of human existence does not have to be eroded. On the contrary, it is only through the ironic negation of received meanings that space and place can be re-formed as a fit dwelling place for ethical freedom and responsibility. If we can learn to experience space as consisting of places that are neither unique nor equivalent, that neither define us nor leave us indifferent; if we can recognise that the post-Reformation distancing from place should make it possible to relate to places not less but *more* fully; then we will know a spirit of place that is at once grounded and open to the wider spaces of justice – a spirit of place that is our own.

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[51] Collins.
[52] Seery, 139.

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