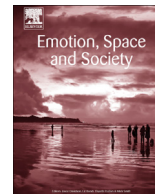




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Spiritual landscapes of Pentecostal worship, belief, and embodiment in a therapeutic community: New critical perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers new theoretical and empirical insights into the emotional and spiritual geographies of religion in therapeutic landscapes designated for marginal and vulnerable populations. Drawing on original empirical work conducted in a Pentecostal Christian therapeutic community in the UK working in the area of addiction and rehabilitation, this paper investigates the spiritual landscapes of Pentecostal worship, and considers the emotional, spiritual and therapeutic sensibilities residents attach to, and experience during, practices of worship and prayer. By examining the complex intersections between belief, embodiment and performativity of religious practice, I illustrate how the distinct patterning of worship space can differently open out, and close down, capacities and affective atmospheres of the divine. Attention is given to the different ways in which the residents experienced this worship space, and the extent to which their presence therein created a range of therapeutic – and anti-therapeutic – experiences. Drawing on these narratives, this paper argues how the contingent configuration of care/control might be seen as both constraining and empowering for residents, underlining the importance for geographers of religion to ground conceptualisations of the staging and performance of spiritual landscapes in the divergent sensibilities and ethics of engagement individuals bring to these sites.

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1. Introduction

Matt, 35, pastor and ex-heroin user, 30/05/10

And I would sit – like you have to come to devotions and the rest of it, but I would just sit at the back of the meetings, of the Wednesday nights, the Friday nights, Sunday mornings – all the time sat at the back, arms folded thinking I know better than all you lot. I would just pass my time, and then the time will come and I'm going to leave. But one day, and this was the real pivotal turning point in my life, I was sat in a meeting and someone led worship – don't know who it was – someone preached – I don't know who preached because I wasn't listening – but there was an altar call and people were getting prayed for, and I wasn't interested in it at all, I was just sat in this chair. And, all I can describe [of] it is a feeling which I now know as the presence of God came on my [pause], dropped on, I can't really describe it, understand it. It was like if someone placed a sheet, a cotton sheet, it started on the top of my head, and it flopped down over my body. And I just broke into tears, I was just sat in the back, crying ...

Matt recounts one of his early experiences as a resident in Hebron, a network of semi-monastic Christian communities working in the areas of addiction and rehabilitation in the UK.¹ His account foregrounds the structured nature of the Hebron environment, for instance, the mandatory requirement for residents to participate in religious meetings; but also draws attention to the emotional and spiritual geographies that co-produce lived experience in Hebron. He describes the presence of a profound and inexplicable *something* that dropped onto his body ('a cotton sheet'); something/someone materially absent but deeply powerful and viscerally felt; a sensation that came to be known as 'the presence of God'. How should we as geographers begin to understand the complex social, emotional and spiritual geographies that co-constitute therapeutic/regulatory spaces of recovery?

Drawing on two month residential ethnography conducted in a Hebron community, this paper investigates the staging and

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¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the organisation and its staff and residents.

performance of 'spiritual landscapes' of Pentecostal worship (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009), and specifically considers the emotional and spiritual sensibilities residents attach to, and experience during, practices of worship and prayer. Taking up Kong's (2010) call for geographers of religion to move beyond the study of so-called 'officially' sacred sites, and address the 'sensuous ways in which the sacred is experienced and reproduced' across different sites of religious (and non-religious) practice (p 757); this paper seeks to make two contributions. First, it offers a conceptualisation of the performativity of religious practice, embodiment and belief as it is constructed, negotiated and experienced by residents in a Pentecostal Christian therapeutic community. By examining the complex entanglement of a particular set of discursive practices (Pentecostal Christianity, its staging and participatory 'manners'), forms of embodiment (prayer, singing, music), alongside the different sensibilities and ethics of engagement individuals brought to the event-space of worship, this paper illustrates the ways in which the distinct patterning of worship space can differently open out, and close down, capacities and affective atmospheres of the divine. Second, the paper considers the different ways in which residents experienced this worship space, and the extent to which their presence therein created particular therapeutic possibilities (Kearns and Gesler, 1998; Conradson, 2005; Williams, 2010; Foley, 2011), with regard to, for example, immediate somatic experiences felt during worship (euphoria, release, rest, peace, reflection) and through generating new, or reaffirming existing, transformations in self-identity and religious belief. However, I also draw attention to the limits of such therapeutic possibilities, and illustrate the ways in which the contingent configuration of care/control within the community might be seen as both constraining and empowering for residents.

The paper is structured in four parts. The opening section provides a conceptual discussion on spiritual landscapes and the embodied performance of religious practice, with particular regard to Pentecostalism. This is followed by a methodological and background discussion of life inside a Hebron community. The first of two analytical sections focuses on the staging and performativity of worship and details the ways in which Hebron works to create a particular 'worship space' with a distinct affective atmosphere. The second analytical section considers the variegated experiences of worship among different residents, highlighting narratives that position worship as a site of therapeutic potential, alongside other residents' accounts whose experience of worship-space might be better described as 'anti-therapeutic' (Dunkley, 2009).

2. Therapeutic and spiritual landscapes

In recent years geographic scholarship on therapeutic spaces has utilised non-representational and post-phenomenological approaches to attend to the significance landscape, affect and embodiment play in constituting emotional and spiritual experience (Conradson, 2005; Williams, 2010; Foley, 2011; Maddrell, 2013a, 2013b; Perriam, 2015). Geography's 'emotional turn' (Bondi, 2005) has also been developed by feminist geographers of religion (Hopkins, 2009; Vincett 2013) to emphasise the emotional geographies of religious space and identity, and bring more critical understandings of how 'different groups of men and women with different markers of social difference – race, class, age, disability, sexuality, locality – experience their religion and their use of religious space' (Hopkins, 2009: 12; see also Taylor et al., 2014).

Such a move has opened up new avenues to explore the emotional and performative aspects of religious practice and experience (Kong, 2001; Game 2001; Metcalfe 2001; Hetherington 2003; Slater, 2004; Buttner, 2006; Holloway, 2006; Finlayson, 2012; Sanderson, 2012). Within this, an emerging literature has

started to examine the therapeutic significance of sacred space (Foley, 2011; Williams, 2010; Perriam, 2015), including but not limited to: geographies of pilgrimage (Rose, 2010; Slater, 2004; Maddrell and della Dora, 2013); memorial artefacts and spaces (Maddrell, 2013b); Holy Wells (Foley, 2013; Scriven, 2014); retreat (Conradson, 2007; Perriam, 2015); contemporary Christian music (Lindenbaum, 2012); and houses of worship (Finlayson, 2012). Worship, according to MacDonald (2002: 69), broadly refers to a 'human response to a belief in the greatness of God', and he argues the geographic importance of unravelling the profoundly spatial experience of worship across a variety of different religious, historical and political contexts. Worship practices can include 'formal' practices of liturgy, singing and prayer but also a much more everyday sensibility towards God that does not need special occasions/events/spaces (Mills, 2012). In this paper, I focus on a particular subset of worship spaces that characterise charismatic evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity, which have an overt emphasis on visceral 'feelings and demonstrations of God's power over thought and contemplation, and encourages the loss or yielding of self to God, which is manifest or represented in various somatic forms' (Wachholtz and Pearce, 2010: 209). Elements of Pentecostal worship praxis – including ecstatic somatic experiences of glossolalia (speaking in tongues), dancing, singing, miracles, divine healing and being 'slain in the Spirit' – have received renewed academic attention (Brahinsky, 2012; Krause, 2014) since the rising prominence of global Pentecostalism (Hopkins et al., 2013).

Geographical scholarship on Pentecostal worship spaces and praxis remain marginal. More broadly, geographic writings on worship spaces to date have largely concerned the symbolic and social ordering of space (MacDonald, 2002), while others have noted the politics of position, representation, ownership, and exclusion (Kong, 2001; Woods, 2013). Such an approach can overlook the agency of religious subjectivities, in terms of the different meanings, embodied experiences and negotiations actors bring to religious space, and risks presenting the view of congregations as mere ciphers for religious codes and architectures. More recently, however, the reconceptualisation of religious practice (Holloway, 2006, 2013; Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009) has offered more vitalist accounts of the performativity of worship spaces in ways that shift attention to the intuitive, sensual and visceral nature of religious experience. This way, analysis focuses on contextualising the interaction between the non-representational and the representational, the embodied practices of being in the world, ways of seeing/feeling, and (un)authorised codes of belief (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009).

2.1. Spiritual landscapes and the performativity of worship

Through the concept of spiritual landscapes, Dewsbury and Cloke (2009: 696) offer an analytical lens through which to understand the 'co-constituting sets of relations between bodily existence, felt practice and faith in things that are immanent but not yet manifest'. Building on the post-phenomenological work of Rose and Wiley (2006: 475), spiritual landscapes concern the tension between absence and presence – the performance, creation and perception of *something* unseen but profoundly felt. The spiritual – the excessive, ineffable, ghostly presence, or haunting – is not confined to religious experience; but rather the spiritual, denotes the non-material virtual world, which Dewsbury and Cloke (2009) argue, is constitutive of a mixture of representative and non-representative registers. Through this, spiritual landscapes foreground the different ways otherworldly senses of spirit are staged and allowed to act through certain performances and architectures of potential, and highlight how spiritual presences 'produce actual

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