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Geography and religion: trends and prospects

by Lily Kong

In ancient and modern times alike, theology and geography have often been closely related studies because they meet at crucial points of human curiosity. If we seek after the nature of God, we must consider the nature of man and the earth, and if we look at the earth, questions of divine purpose in its creation and of the role of mankind on it inevitably arise (Glacken, 1967: 35).

That geography and religion can and do meet to form a valuable focus of inquiry has not always been immediately apparent. While the study of religions has engaged the attention of a large and ever-widening circle of scholars, research has tended to proceed under the varied rubrics of sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, and certainly, theology. Classics that have had significant impact on the development of 'religious thought' have emerged from the pens of scholars professing several diverse disciplines. For instance, Weber (1904-1905), Durkheim (1976), Otto (1950), and Eliade (1959) represent but a sample of the multifarious writings that have shaped much of the thinking of students of religion. These diverse sources amply illustrate, *inter alia*, the potential for multi-disciplinary work.

Given such diversity of interests and perspectives, what contributions have geographers made in the field of religion? This paper reviews geographical research in this direction, focusing primarily on efforts in the Anglophone world. The bulk of it covers the main themes in religiogeographical research, but it is not exhaustive; nor is it purely an annotated bibliography. Rather, it is the aim here to tease out from the apparent diffusion of themes, the main preoccupations of geographers thus far, and to evaluate the significance of these works to date.

This review will be divided into three sections. The first will provide a historical background to the relationship between geography and religion, bringing it up to developmental trends in the twentieth century. This will be followed by a quick review of the debates on the relationship between the geographer and the *Religionswissenschaftler*.¹ A survey of available research on various religiogeographical themes will then follow. Treatment of these themes reflects in large part cultural geographical concerns as a whole. In the first section, the focus will be on

¹ *Religionswissenschaft* is translated as either the 'history of religions' or 'comparative study of religions', although neither is a satisfactory equivalent of the German term (Buttner, 1974: 165).

research that reflects traditional cultural geography, which assumes a superorganic culture in focusing on religion's impact on the landscape. In the second section, writings which parallel the 'new' cultural geography (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987) in dealing variously with notions of conflict and symbolism will be dealt with. The third section on religious ecology reflects broader conservation concerns and current interests in 'green issues'.

I Historical development

Time and again, geographers have harked back to geography's ancient Greek roots to illustrate that the relationship between religion and geography is not newly invented and that both have in fact enjoyed a special relationship since ancient times. Isaac (1965: 2-5) and Gay (1971: 1), for example, pointed to how Greek geographers, in their concern with cosmological models, world diagrams and maps, reflected a world view much shaped by religion. Anaximander, the first known Greek mapmaker, is said to have seen the world as the manifestation of a religious principle, namely the inviolability of spatial order, and his diagrammatical efforts to show mathematical proportion in the cosmos and the world map were deemed to be more a 'religious' pursuit than a 'scientific' one. Such concerns linking geography and cosmology in the mind of the religious person lay at the heart of early geography, and in that sense a geography that incorporated religious ideas was evident from the earliest times. However, in an attempt to introduce precision in the definition of the field, Isaac (1965) asserted that such a geography does not constitute a 'geography of religion', but belongs instead to the realm of 'religious geography'. This religious geography was what Stump (1986) classified under the rubric of geosophy, the study of geographical knowledge.

If geography and religion were related since Greek times and yet such a relationship did not constitute a 'geography of religion', this provides but a glimpse of the many varied ways in which geography and religion have come to be linked, and the concomitant and bewildering nomenclature that has been applied to each link in turn. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, work relating the two focused primarily on what Isaac (1965: 10) termed ecclesiastical geography, involving primarily the mapping of the spatial advance of Christianity in the world. Such work was propelled by the desire to disseminate the Christian faith and gained much impetus from the support of Christian churches. During the mid-seventeenth century, a related form of ecclesiastical geography emerged, which attempted to describe the spheres of influence of other religions. Ostensibly this appeared to liberate geography from purely Christian influence and to give it a more neutral position through paying attention for the first time to other religions as well (Buttner, 1980: 92). In reality, however, the underlying aim was to determine which religions Christian missionaries found in what part of the world and how missions progressed among them. The underlying impetus

for geographical work still stemmed largely from Christian interests, and relatedly from colonial advances.

Apart from ecclesiastical geography, 'biblical geography' also developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Reflecting the variety of labels, Isaac (1965: 8) termed this the 'historical geography of biblical times'. It involved attempts to identify places and names in the bible and to determine their locations, which illustrated once again the powerful influence of the Christian church.

In the late seventeenth century yet another link between religion and geography emerged, a link which became particularly strong in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nature was seen as a divinely created order for the well-being of all life. Scholars adopting the physicotheological stance ardently defended the idea that in living nature and on all the Earth, evidence could be found of the wisdom of God (Glacken, 1959; 1967; Buttner, 1980: 94-95). Whether it was in the distribution of climates, or the production of plants and animals in different zones, or the distribution of landforms, lakes and streams, it was argued that the Earth and its geography was too advantageous to life and too well reasoned to be accepted as fortuitous circumstances (Glacken, 1959). Such, indeed, was the geography of the time that theological explanations of the earth as a habitable planet provided the only plausible explanations in the eyes of some.

Alongside this physicotheological school, another body of thought was also developing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the influence of Montesquieu and Voltaire. This school explored the influence of the environment on religion. Geographers adopted a highly environmentally deterministic approach when they sought to explain the essential nature of various religions in terms of their geographical environments. This trend continued well into the twentieth century.

II Geography of religion: developments in the twentieth century

No less than in the preceding periods, the twentieth century has been a period of change, though influences from earlier years also prevail in several ways. Continuing from previous work, ecclesiastical geography remains part of contemporary study, differing only in that progressively more sophisticated methods of mapping are being employed (Isaac, 1965: 11, 13). Some of the most definitive studies in this respect have been documented by Gay (1971: 4-15).

The environmentally deterministic trend continued also. Ellen Semple (1911) argued, for instance, that the imagery and symbolism of a religion was affected by its place of birth: to the Eskimos, hell was a place of darkness, storm and intense cold; to the Jews, on the other hand, hell was a place of eternal fire. Ellsworth Huntington (1945) similarly suggested that objects of worship were frequently determined by geographical factors; for example, the rain god was one of the most important deities in India because rain there was uncertain. An

offshoot of this strictly environmentalistic outlook emerged in Hultkrantz's (1966) ecological approach to religion, in which he tries to show the 'indirect and complicated' way in which environment influenced religion. He argued for example, that the environment provides materials for religious actions and religious conceptions; rites, beliefs and myths make use of the natural setting in different ways – spirits take the form of important animals in a society; nature in the afterworld is often thought to show the same picture as nature in the living world, with perhaps the obliteration of some traits, and so forth.

The most significant change probably occurred in the 1920s when Max Weber's influence caused a major turning point by inverting the earlier environmentally deterministic doctrine. Instead of examining the influence of environment on religion, the call was to study religion's influence on social and economic structures. This represented a position diametrically opposed to that of the era immediately preceding, and was taken up strongly after the second world war. It was in just such a spirit that many studies dealing with religion as a motivational force in environmental and landscape change emerged, examples of which can still be found in present-day writings (see for instance, Curtis, 1980; Laatsch and Calkins, 1986).

Such an idealist stand highlighting the motivational role of religion in environmental and landscape change has dominated much of research over the last two decades. Many of the attempts to delineate the field bear witness to this approach. Isaac's (1959-60) succinct definition is one such example: 'the geography of religion is the study of the part played by the religious motive in man's transformation of the landscape'. The task of a geography of religion is, in his view, '. . . to separate the specifically religious from the social, economic and ethnic matrix in which it is embedded, and to determine its relative weight in relation to other forces in transforming the landscape' (Isaac, 1961-62: 12).

While the above approach is still adopted, it is also true that the study of the one-way relationships which characterized the last two eras is attracting criticism from some quarters. Specifically, geographers of religion are being exhorted to pay attention to the reciprocity in the network of relations. Such an exhortation has its roots in the realization that relations between religion and the environment are dialectical and that to study unidirectional relationships alone (whichever the direction) would be unrealistic. The writings of several geographers reflect this realization, for example, Fickeler (1962), Sopher (1967), Buttner (1974; 1980), and Levine (1986).

In short, the development of the geography of religion in this century can be characterized as undergoing a thesis-antithesis-synthesis cycle. In the primary state of development, the focus was on a one-sided presentation of religion as determined by its environment; environmental explanations were sought, appropriately or otherwise, to aid the understanding of the origin of religions and religious practices. In the second stage of antithesis, the geography of religion moved to a one-sided study of the moulding influence of religion on its environment, to the point of shaping the settlement and landscape. The

geographer in this instance, begins with the landscape and its related anthropo-geographical facts (such as settlement, transportation routes and population) and seeks to understand the underlying forces. If he/she determines that these form-giving forces are religious in nature, he/she then becomes a geographer of religion (Buttner, 1974: 169). This emphasis on the landscape as altered by people may be likened to the more possibilistic stance of the Vidalian school of geography and, particularly, Sauer's school of cultural geography, in which the landscape is the primary object of research. This antithetical stand, most clearly stated in Isaac's (1959-60) definition of the field quoted earlier, still underlies much of the work done.

As calls for a focus on the reciprocal aspects of relationships become louder, the field has clearly entered a third stage of development – synthesis. Whether this call will bear fruit remains to be seen, although it appears quite certain that the seeds have been cast in the right direction.

In addition to the call for a synthetic approach that focuses on the reciprocal network of relations between religion and environment, the last decade has also witnessed development along several other fronts. The first reflects an increasingly social geographical orientation, as opposed to the clearly cultural geographical slant earlier. The focus, as Buttner (1980) highlights, is the religious group or community as the intermediary force between religion and the environment. Forces moulding landscapes in this instance do not emanate from religion itself, but every relationship between religion and environment functions through the religious body, or *Religionskorper* (Buttner, 1980: 96). The community, its spatial structure, the activities to which it gives rise, its mental attitudes, the associated occupational and social structure, leisure behaviour, processes of change and so forth then become the prime concern of research.

The second development had its beginnings in the 1960s when there was a process of worldwide secularization. Buttner (1980: 100, 104) called for the incorporation of this widespread process of secularization into the geography of religion to prevent it from becoming a 'geography of relics', 'restricted to the study of those ever-shrinking areas in which religion still has a formative effect on the environment'. In this manner, the geography of religion may develop into a 'geography of spiritual attitudes' instead. Like Buttner, Isaac (1959-60: 17) too recognized that with increasing secularization, religion's impact on the landscape would become minimal when compared to the historic past when it played an important role in the patterning of the landscape. However, instead of calling for the study of this very secularization process, he appeared content to study the past landscapes and to see the geography of religion as an essentially 'ethnological and historical study'. In both cases, the authors failed to anticipate the growth of religious fundamentalism in recent years, for example, in Iran, and the revival of religion in the communist USSR and eastern Europe. These places offer the student of religion unique case studies where worldwide trends have pointed to secularization.

The current situation is that geographers have inherited their predecessors' self-

made problem of delineating the precise boundaries of a 'geography of religion', to be distinguished from 'religious geography', 'ecclesiastical geography' and 'biblical geography'. Given this, a 'lack of coherence' (Sopher, 1981: 510) in a field that is characterized by 'disarray' (Tuan, 1976: 271) is not surprising. Sopher (1981: 510), probably one of those most closely associated with the geography of religion in the Anglophone world, indicated that 'a decade and more of modest increase in the volume of geographic writing on religions and religious institutions has not brought consensus on the nature of the pertinent field or even agreement whether there can be such a field at all'. It seems a great pity that one of the doyens of the field, having contributed tremendously to its development, should question its validity on the basis of an apparent lack of consensus on its boundaries.

III On the relationship between the geographer and the *Religionswissenschaftler*

Another debated question is whether the geographer of religion should also be trained in *Religionswissenschaft*; should the geographer be interested in religious writings, in addition to having a concern with geographical works? Isaac (1961-62: 17) suggested that it is necessary to go beyond the 'mere classifications of types of effects [which] does not touch the heart of the problem' and was convinced that 'the key to a methodology for a geography of religion lies in the study of religion itself'. Similarly, Licate (1967: 18) points out that geographers must become aware of religion and its effects through training in other branches of religious studies: then and only then can geographers provide valuable insights. Buttner (1980: 105; 107) clearly supports such a stand, with his assertion that geographers are in danger of taking a 'wrong approach' if they leave the methods and findings of other related religious disciplines unconsidered. While he is ready to concede that the geographer's focus of research should lie on the purely geographical side, he nevertheless recommends that the geographer of religion should have at least studied *Religionswissenschaft* as a subsidiary subject. In this, he cites the history of geography for support, pointing out that the geographer's 'special research' must always be placed in a wider perspective; otherwise insight cannot be gained into the whole context, and research remains a patchwork. In as much as the economic geographer should have knowledge of economics, the geographer of religion should have studied *Religionswissenschaft*.

In contrast, Troll (cited in Buttner, 1980: 96) supported a definite separation between the geography of religion and *Religionswissenschaft*. In his view, geographers of religion should apply themselves as geographers only to the purely geographical side of the subject and concentrate on investigating the extent to which forces moulding the environment emanate from religion. The *Religionswissenschaftler*, on the other hand, could be left to explore the incorporation of the environment into the notional fabric of religion. Schwind (cited in Sopher, 1981: 511) is of this camp, too, asserting strongly that geographers who work

along the lines suggested by Buttner may find themselves in 'an interdisciplinary limbo'.

Levine (1986: 431) adopts an intermediate stance, suggesting caution to a geographer approaching *Religionswissenschaft*.

Whereas it seems reasonable that the study of religion *per se* would lead to a greater understanding, it is unclear what level of analysis of the religion in question and the individual religious experience is appropriate for the geographer. Whereas a discussion of elements of religion in general and of particular religions is necessary, and whereas the deepness of the psychological impact of religion should be appreciated, the primary focus of the geography of religion lies not in the study of the individual religious experience, but, rather, centres on religion in an instituted social form.

This view is reminiscent of Wagner and Mikesell's (1962: 5) assertion that 'the cultural geographer is not concerned with explaining the *inner workings* of culture' (my emphasis).

In a similar vein, Sopher (1981: 513) asserts that a geographer will be able to make 'effective and innovative geographic contributions to the study of religion' by 'penetrating deep into the thought and ways of a religious system', but points out also that 'overlap with the work of the *Religionswissenschaftler* is sometimes pronounced . . . and there may be a danger that geographers will seek to duplicate it'. His cautionary stand on the danger of duplication is undoubtedly valid, and yet his evaluation of the potential contribution by the geographer, which 'lies in being a geographer — able to interpret landscape, to analyse ecological process and to conceptualize systems of spatial interaction', seems decidedly and unnecessarily narrow, reflecting the more general concern with what 'rightfully' constitutes geography. In thus defining the questions that geographers can 'legitimately' ask, he eliminates from their research agenda other pertinent and crucial themes, such as imagery and symbolism, value and meaning, conflict and compromise. This is particularly curious, given that religion is one aspect of life that does give itself especially well to symbolism and meaning. Only when the geographer of religion begins to allow that themes such as these should be fruitfully investigated will it become evident that the debate on whether the geographer should also be interested in religious writings is redundant.

IV Empirical research: a *tour d'horizon*

While some essays of integration and reviews have been written (for example, Isaac, 1965; Gay, 1971; Bhatt, 1977; Buttner, 1980; Sopher, 1981; and Levine, 1986), each has covered only a selection of the themes that have engaged geographers of religion. To date, no attempt has been made to synthesize the many varied themes, to allow for an eventual evaluation of research trends. In this section, existing empirical research is discussed in three parts. The first, which includes the majority of work to date, focuses on writings which reflect traditional cultural geographical interests, that is, religion's impact on the landscape. The

second includes writings which reflect current concerns in the 'new' cultural geography and deal variously with notions of conflict and symbolism. At the same time, instead of attempting to isolate the religious from the social, economic and ethnic matrix in which it is embedded as Isaac (1961-62: 12) argued, this second category of writings seeks to emphasize the links between these various elements. The third category includes revived debates about environment and conservation discussed within religious frameworks and adds to the broader interest in 'green' issues today.

1 The Berkeley school of cultural geography: influences on the study of religious geography

By far the vast majority of research linking geography and religion has reflected 'traditional' cultural geographical interests in that religion is treated as a superorganic construct which influences the cultural landscape. The processes through which these influences are effected are not studied while the focus remains chiefly on the form of the impacted landscape. In this respect, studies have focused on a variety of themes. First, geographers have studied spatial patterns arising from religious influences. These include, for example, the study of the spatial diffusion and expansion and the territorial demise of religious groups. Many of these studies have been highly descriptive and stand as collations of geographical and historical facts (see, for example, Crowley, 1978; Heatwole, 1986; Landing, 1982). However, a minority have attempted some analytical insights into corresponding social and political conditions. Doeppers (1977), for example, has mapped the changes in Filipino adherence to the Philippine Independent Church, linking the initial increase in adherence and the subsequent decline to political conditions in the country.

Apart from studies of the spatial growth and decline of religions, geographers have also mapped the distribution of religious groups over space at particular points in time (see, for example, Shortridge, 1978; Stump, 1981; and Heatwole, 1985). Once again, these studies have had a strongly idiographic bent, including little more than descriptions of distribution patterns. As such, they are reminiscent of the work carried out in what was earlier identified as ecclesiastical geography. One exceptional study is Hershkowitz's (1987) attempt to construct a conceptual framework for the study of religiously based residential segregation. Using the Jewish population of Jerusalem as a case study, she examines the distribution of the religiously heterogeneous Jewish population and concludes that the residential pattern in Jerusalem is a function of religiousness or religiosity: the distribution of the ultra-orthodox is distinct from that of the nonextreme orthodox and the completely secular section of the population.

Related to these studies of spatial distributions of religion are a distinct group of writings that use religion as the criterion for defining culture regions. While they may contribute to an understanding of the 'overall character and diversity of [a country's] culture' (Shortridge, 1976: 420), many studies yet again make

little conceptual contribution to the field and differ only in the criterion used for delineating such religious regions. In fact, many of the criteria used pose problems. Yet few writers deal with these problems, thus neglecting the very important question of how valid the delineations may be. For example, Shortridge (1976; 1977) has attempted delimitation on the basis of, *inter alia*, religious intensity or commitment and degree of conservatism. Yet, the question of how these can ever be ascertained remains open and unanswered.

Apart from all the above themes which deal with the spatial distribution of religious population in one way or another, a second major theme which reflects traditional cultural geographical perspectives is the study of the impact of religion on the physical form of the landscape. One focus of interest is the cemetery, which has been studied in two major ways. The first treats cemeteries as 'space-utilising phenomena' (Price, 1966: 201) and traditional concerns are covered, such as factors influencing location, their urban land value, and the demand they impose on space (see, for example, Pattison, 1955; Hardwick *et al.*, 1971; Darden, 1972; Martin, 1978). The second category of studies has focused on cemeteries as cultural features which reflect, like other cultural phenomena, cultural and historical values. For example, Jackson (1967-68) points out how the cemetery in the USA reflects the changes in cultural values over time. From a 'monument' commemorating the individual, Jackson argues that the grave itself has lost its early significance, and it is the setting that now inspires emotion and offers 'a kind of luxuriating in a solemn and picturesque environment'. Such changes in cultural values can be fruitfully employed, as Howett (1977) argues, for with such changes, the single-use approach to cemetery design can be abandoned in favour of the multiple-use approach, with urban cemeteries playing a role in providing open space, as a sanctuary for wildlife, or in the provision of human recreation space.

Apart from cemeteries, there has also been an interest in describing the sacred structures of particular groups, illustrating the unique imprint that each group leaves on the landscape. These have focused on the sacred structures both of world religions, such as Buddhism (Tanaka, 1984) and Hinduism (Biswas, 1984), and of folk religions (Curtis, 1980; and Laatsch and Calkins, 1986). Although such descriptions have been characteristic of geographer's interests in sacred structures, an increasing volume of literature is emerging that deals with the changing meanings of these places, the conflicts in which they are embroiled, and their symbolic values.

2 *The 'new' cultural geography: parallels in religious geography*

While traditional cultural geography assumed a unitary culture, there is today a greater awareness within the field that there is in fact a plurality of cultures in any one society, and that often, there is a dominant and a subordinate culture each with conflicting interests. In the religious context, this view lends itself to abundant opportunities for research, which have not, however, been fully

explored. Shilhav's (1983) paper is exceptional in that it addresses the question of (potential) conflict between religious and secular agents in the demands on land. In an increasingly urban age when land uses other than the religious acquire significance, this potential conflict is great. Shilhav deals with it by studying the symbolic and functional locational requirements in the siting of synagogues, and opens the way for comparative studies between societies with different spiritual and ideological traditions.

The religious and the political are also drawn together in symbolic terms, as in Lewandowski's (1984) study of Madras. She illustrates admirably how the state, through cultural and religious symbolism, attains political ends. Specifically, she shows how, through Hinduism and its symbols, the state created a functioning urban landscape, while contributing to its own political legitimation. For example, in the renaming of places and the erection of statues in the city, folk and religious heroes were represented, replacing the earlier colonial influence. This is a theme that has similarly been treated by Duncan (1985) in the context of Kandy, Sri Lanka. Another example is Harvey's (1979) paper on 'Monument and myth'. Focusing on the Basilica of the Sacre-Coeur, Harvey argues that in as much as the Basilica evoked political responses at the time of its construction, it was for many years also seen as a provocation to civil war, and still stands today as a political symbol.

This increasing interest in the political symbolism of religious places reflects the more general interest in the symbolic meanings of places. Although it has been billed as part of the 'new' cultural geography, these interests are not so much revolutionary 'new' ideas as a focused expansion of past, more peripheral research. This is borne out in the fact that some writings in past decades already reflected this focus. Deffontaines' (1953) paper on 'The place of believing' is a case in point. He examined the symbolic meanings of houses in religious terms by providing evidence from a variety of cultures to show the influence of religions on the shape, orientation, dimension and degree of compactness of houses. Specifically, he illustrates, for example, the importance of doors and windows for particular religious groups, an importance that stems from the fact that they act as planes of contact with evil spirits.

Wheatley's (1971) *The pivot of the four quarters* also deals with the symbolic meanings of places, in this instance, the religious underpinnings of cities. He examined the cosmomagical symbolism of the Chinese city, and the parallel between the macrocosmos (the universe) and the microcosmos (the city), suggesting that the city's symbolic role underpinned its functional unity.

In more recent times, geographers interested in religion have also examined the symbolic meanings of churches in changing cultural and social situations. Two examples are Foster's (1981; 1983) papers which deal with rural churches in Minnesota and Manitoba which have ceased to be used for regular worship services because of the declining rural church population. Because their religious role had ceased to be important, it was suggested that they be used for secular purposes instead. This, however, sparked controversy, a fact which Foster (1983)

suggests is due to the significance of rural churches as places of personal attachment for many families, as well as their role in local history.

While the study of pilgrimages has proved popular amongst geographers, the study of their symbolic significance is a recent addition to the array of descriptive efforts (see, for example, Rutter, 1929; King, 1972; Shair, 1981a; 1981b). Among those which stand exceptional amidst the array are Nolan's (1986) and Tanaka's (1981) writings. Nolan (1986) seeks to establish the roots of nature symbolism in Christian pilgrimages. Her thesis fundamentally is that the Christian involvement of animals and plants in revelations of sacred places, as well as the relationship between natural features and the sanctity of Christian pilgrimage sites, are rooted in pagan nature veneration. Tanaka (1981), in turn, fuses the spatial and symbolic perspectives in studying the process of Buddhist pilgrimages. He discusses how the number of sacred sites, the pattern of movement, and the sequential order in the movement from site to site are all inherently symbolic.

3 *Religious ecology*

One final, major strand of research is that of 'religious ecology', variously termed 'environmental ethics' and 'environmental theology'. Within this rubric, research has progressed in two main areas: the first has sometimes been labelled the 'Lynn White debate'; the second has focused on the impact of religious thought on plant and animal ecology.

Lynn White's (1967) 'The historical roots of our ecologic crisis' sparked a debate that involved the question of what caused the increasing environmental degradation that was evident on planet earth. White's thesis was that degradation was the result of Christian thought in which God gave humans dominion over the earth. To prevent further damage to the environment, White posited two options for humankind. One was to improve Christianity by adopting the view of St Francis of Assisi, widely regarded as the patron saint of ecology; the other was to abandon Christianity altogether, and replace it with a nonwestern religion, such as Zen Buddhism. White's work drew comments from a great variety of scholars, including geographers, historians, scientists, theologians, philosophers, ecologists and others, both in support of and against his fundamental thesis and his attendant suggestions. Some accepted White's basic proposition that Christianity was to blame, but argued that nonwestern religions, which were generally more in harmony with nature, have not in practice been more successful in preventing environmental crises. The recommendation was that Christianity be improved by placing emphasis on biblical passages that were more compatible with modern ecological and environmental attitudes (see Cobb, 1972). Toynebee (1972) was in agreement in so far as he attributed environmental crises to monotheistic religions, which in his view, removed the constraints on human greed. The remedy would be to revert to pantheism and the religions of the east. However, there were yet others (for example, Passmore, 1974) who rejected not only eastern religion, but western religion as well.

There were, on the other hand, also those who spoke in defence of Christianity. Glacken (1967) and Dubos (1969; 1972), for example, have argued that biblical passages have shown concern for nature, contrary to White's reading. Doughty (1981) too pointed out the obvious, yet little regarded, fact that western Christian thought is simply too rich and complex to be characterized as hostile toward nature. Furthermore, Doughty argues, holding a particular attitude does not amount to acting in a manner consistent with that attitude.

The 'Lynn White debate' has come a long way since White's paper was first published. Hargrove (1986), in a stocktaking effort, successfully synthesized and analysed the major trends that have emerged. In particular, his assessment of current situations is pertinent. He argues that it would be useful and necessary to 'get beyond worrying about the illusory threat to western civilization posed by Eastern thought to the real threat to human civilization as a whole posed by the environmental crisis'. It would indeed be sensible if the focus of debate shifted away from an obsession with blame and replacement, and highlighted the practical exigencies of the situation instead.

The second category of works in this broad theme of religious ecology has focused on the impact of religious thought on plant and animal ecology, and this has developed along two main fronts. First, many have considered the influence of religion on attitudes towards animal life. Indian religious ideas, in particular, have attracted much attention, with a particular focus on the 'sacred cow controversy' (see Harris, 1966; Simoons, 1979). There have also been more general considerations of the impact of religious ideas on wildlife, as for example in Dunbar (1970) and Sopher (1980). Secondly, researchers have examined the question of the religious influence on the domestication of plants and animals and their diffusion (Isaac, 1962; Sopher, 1964; and Heiser, 1973). The central tenet of such works is that in many instances domestication did not result purely from economic reasons, but was instead also closely associated with religious ceremonies and divinities.

V Overview

The interface between geography and religion yields an immensely large and varied set of questions, many of which have yet to be explored. Certainly, the above attempt to synthesize some of the empirical work illustrates the multiplicity of themes that have already been addressed, but when reduced to fundamentals, the apparent diffusion of concerns there is clearly held together by one important motif. This common focus is the interest in religion's motivational role in landscape change, a traditional cultural geographical interest. The setting, it would appear, becomes a palimpsest for the actions of a superorganic culture, which is taken to be static and often consensual. As long as that has remained the principal question, geographers of religion have not ventured into other potentially fruitful spheres. In part, this is the result of geographers' attempts to

keep to what is considered a clearly defined and acceptable domain – in this context that which their Berkeley forbears carved out. The reluctance to venture into what are considered tangential areas and the tendency to stop short at perceived boundaries may have unnecessarily limited the type of questions that geographers could be asking, and this appears to have more than a grain of truth in the context of research on religion in geography.

In the same way that cultural geography is faced with the dichotomy between high (élite/dominant) and low (popular/subordinate) culture (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987), geographers of religion may also draw parallels with the wider discipline. Cultural geographers have been accused of focusing all too often on the former at the expense of the latter (Burgess and Gold, 1985). Similarly, geographers of religion have been caught up overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, with formalized systems of religions, particularly institutionalized, canonical religions of the text. Perhaps this is a bias stemming from western Christian influences and perspectives, but whatever the cause, there is no doubt that insufficient attention has been paid to folk religions, cults, myths, and the personal religious experience. Geographers like Sopher (1967) and Levine (1986) have asserted categorically that geography cannot and must not deal with the personal religious experience, but the personal religious experience with place is at least one avenue that can and should be explored. This too has its parallels in broader cultural geographical trends which seek after environmental experience and sense of place.

There are hints of a change, however, opening up possibilities of further research along several fronts. Among other questions that merit attention, there is certainly a need to try and understand the *processes* through which specific environmental objects, landscapes and buildings are invested with meaning of a religious kind. How and why do some environmental objects and landscape features become caught up in rich symbolic systems while others do not? How does the 'spiritual' come to be expressed and conveyed, particularly in an area of human life where words are presumably an inadequate way of expressing feeling? How do the political and the cultural interact to give rise to consensus over the allocation of meaning to particular places? Is there not then a need for the analysis of power relations? And, as Jackson (1988) highlights, 'in virtually every arena of social life, the spatial strategies by which subordinate groups seek to contest their domination remain to be investigated'. The study of a 'geography of resistance' that results can and must surely be transposed into the context of religion. Furthermore, geographers might also consider the reciprocal relationships between religion and environment (including society), for while religion's impact on the landscape has been plentifully investigated, the reverse has not been true. Even within the existing corpus of works that deal with religion's impact on the environment, geographers have paid little attention to how religions influence societal relationships. The functionalist's understanding of religion as having a manifest function (of explaining that which is outside humankind and mysterious to it) as well as a latent one (as a socially cohesive

force) has been neglected by geographers and merits attention.

These questions are but a cross-section of many more that can be asked, but they bear the abundant potential of drawing the geography of religion firmly into the folds of cultural geography, not merely through the traditional Berkeleyian perspectives, but also through the 'new' cultural geographical concerns which treat culture as dynamic, contested, and as an ongoing process of conflict; which are bound up with the related interests in symbolism, semiotics and discourse analysis; and which increasingly reflect a social and geographical orientation in the focus on community studies. Just as the criticisms of 'traditional' cultural geography may be levied at the geography of religion, it is equally true that the ideas and developments in the 'new' cultural geography may be profitably considered in the geography of religion. Seen in this light, the definitional questions and the attempts to impose precise boundaries on the geography of religion evidently become peripheral, if not redundant. While it might not be desirable for the work of geographers, *Religionswissenschaftler*, anthropologists and sociologists to be duplicatory, it should be equally obvious that there is more room for geographical exploration than has thus far been attempted.

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VI References

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