

Renewing the Christian Imaginary through Space: Art and Architecture

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I work in a secular university. There, I cannot out 'Revd' as one of my titles. I cannot evangelise directly through my teaching – even though I may be teaching theology proper. And yet, I do see teaching as part of my ministry as a priest. I am lucky in one sense because I do teach either close reading of individual theological texts – Augustine and Gregory Nazianzus, Boethius and Julian of Norwich – which are themselves texts that predate the separation of affective and devotional writing from theology. To read Dante, whom I teach every year, is to be drawn into a journey that convinces its readers as true, despite being an imaginative construct. I also use religious art a great deal to explain theological ideas, and to draw the students into encounter with the real. Too often I have to use powerpoint or rely on postcards – which I prefer because the student holds them in his or her hand – but when I can bring an actual sculpture or icon, the class takes on a quite different quality of engagement. It has an aura – not least because in an age of mechanical reproduction the real has, oddly, the shock of the novel – but because the trace of its making is so clear. In a sense the original artwork, outside of the gallery or museum setting, where it is normalised, has something of the uncanny. I remember students faced with an embroidered Coptic priest's head-covering handling it gingerly, as if it might go off.

They were right to do so in a sense, because a religious item, whether clothing or image is a holy thing. It is not really art as such, if we mean by that the painting as a self-sufficient object, produced for aesthetic appreciation. The earliest Christian frescoes, in the catacombs of Rome and early church at Meggido, show the passage from death to new life, with an aim of instruction and ecstatic recognition. There is always an evident 'ana', leading the viewer



through the image to the truth embodied by Jonah and the whale, or Noah and the dove. You can see this factor clearly in the most common image from the burial sites, the orante figure. This figure represents the soul in Paradise, and with arms cradling the space between, is a very vivid example of a work leading beyond itself. Byzantine mosaics, with their haunting eyes and icons similarly are deliberately constructed to open the way to heaven: they are doors or gateways to the divine realm.

You can see this very clearly in this icon of the Virgin orans, opening her arms in prayer to reveal the child Jesus.



Despite her slight Beryl Cook appearance – some have also compared her to the TV gardener, Charlie Dimmock – David Wynne’s statue of Mary for Ely Lady Chapel is a traditional orante figure. Unlike a traditional Christian image for prayer and the window to the divine, however, she is not open to the viewer. She challenges us, her foot over the edge



eyes are closed in ecstatic prayer, self-involved. Iconographically, she has the traditional

tropes of the slight bulge of the pregnant Madonna of Piero della Francesca and the closed girdle of virginity. Her robe is the bright blue of Martin Travers 1930 ecclesiastical furnishings and the Mothers’ Union. But the union of formal and unreal features such as her gilded hair combined with the realist buxom bosom gives a disquieting combination of signals and makes her difficult to read.



Encountering her unexpectedly as one turns in to the great quietly spare ruin of the Lady Chapel is quite startling, especially as she is so remote and high up

and so tiny in the fan vaulted forest. She lacks any angels, any motherly Elizabeth. We have to find a way to find a rhythm to read the space and her place in it, just as Joseph had to do in Matthew’s gospel, and most movingly in the recent television adaptation of The Nativity story. She makes the space seem bigger: she actually, despite her Blackpool brashness, helps to create the sense of an inhabited space: indeed, a pregnant space. So in a characteristically challenging contemporary way, Mary at Ely too is an ‘ana’ figure. Children or adults without much knowledge of her story can be led through her purely physical presence and complicated persona to some understanding of the reality of her situation and to her significance as the Mother of the Lord: here she again can become God-bearer for us.

In modernity, placement – knowing who you are and where you belong in the village, city or cosmos – has given way to empty, abstract space, completely neutral. Placement by contrast is relational, and no space is quite empty but full of mediatory presence. Gerard Manley Hopkins expresses this sense of space in his poem, 'The blessed Virgin Mary Compared to the Air We Breathe', where he writes of:

*Wild air, world-mothering air,
Nestling me everywhere,
That each eyelash or hair
Girdles; goes home betwixt
Snowflake; that's fairly mixed
With, riddles, and is rife
With every least thing's life.*

The statue of Mary allows us to see the air, the space itself as meaningful. One can also get children to copy the position of the Virgin, and to experience through mimesis the religious nature of her gestures. When you lift your arms as high as she does, it is as if you are calling the universe towards you – an embodied 'yes' to God and the real. Trying to do this with a foot's balance resting forwards with your eyes closed is actually quite scary and contributes to the sense of giving yourself to God in action quite powerfully.

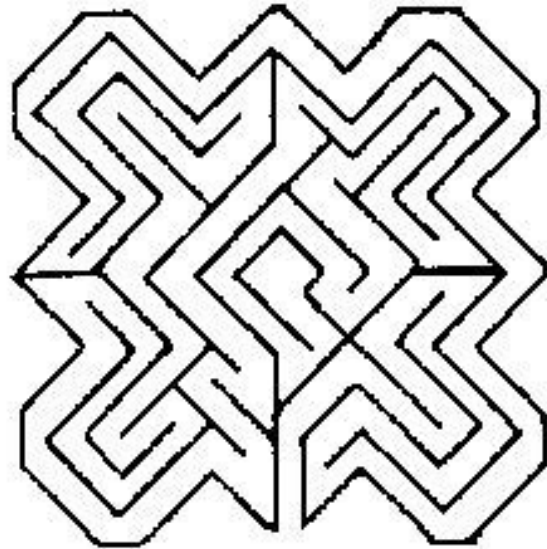
Our cathedrals are all places of pilgrimage for many people, and always have been. Their architecture in many cases is designed to lead to a shrine – of which more in a moment – but any cathedral space is designed for the mini-pilgrimage of procession, with space in side aisles to go round the building. Educational visits are often shaped around the concept of pilgrimage, with the children at Southwell arriving on foot behind banners in imitation of medieval pilgrims. What we tend to do, however, is to individualise such an experience by aligning it to the child or adults own 'spiritual journey'.

As we saw, Ely has two works of art pertaining to this theme: the nineteenth-century labyrinth on the floor of the West Tower, and the Way of Life sculpture by Jonathan Clarke on the wall next to it. Mazes are more popular than ever today, with Maize versions a summer attraction and labyrinths for meditation a feature of Christian and new age spiritual practice. The maze embodies a postmodern conception of the embeddedness of the subject as well as a sense that



whatever we do has no ultimately negative results, since there are no wrong directions or dead ends. Children's puzzle mazes, however, do work on the principle of wrong directions, although even here, I have noticed a tendency in recent examples to offer a range of starting points and also of endings, so that each path has a way through. Historically, the multicursal maze dates only from the fifteenth century, although it was an image used in this way by Christian theological writers long before this.

There is a lovely little video on the Ely Cathedral site, which shows people spinning in its labyrinth as a way of questioning which way are we going, and I do not want to criticise such a personal and open usage. But the medieval maze was much more powerful and Christological an image than this. It imitated, of course, the labyrinth built by



Daedalus for the Minotaur, the half man, half beast offspring of the Queen and a bull. Theseus used the wool given by Ariadne to penetrate the centre and kill the Minotaur, who devoured Athenian young people. In Christian thought Christ was a kind of reverse minotaur, his two natures making him able to save us from death and Satan, who becomes the minotaur devouring and imprisoning souls. On Holy Saturday in French cathedrals Craig Wright has shown how the maze became the site of Hell for the harrowing by Christ and debate with Satan, extant in many miracle plays. On Easter Sunday, the maze was then the site for a choral dance by the clergy, who danced and leaped around it following the Dean. At Auxerre, he threw a ball as well for the clergy to catch. Now the labyrinth became a blessed Paradisal space. The round dance of Easter was a common practice in Britain too, surviving in the form of church clipping in a few parishes today. Breton chain dances, with small, shuffling steps in complex interweavings imitate, I believe, the style of dancing possible in a labyrinth.

In following the labyrinth then with rosary in hand, the medieval Christian was following Christ. He was not outside but within and one followed in rosary prayers the joyful, sorrowful or glorious mysteries of his life. Life was complex, and one could not predict which way it would go but it was always the way Christ had gone. It was also full, with people before and behind you in the maze, showing you the way to go.



The maze dance was in Greek and Roman practice a cosmic dance, and it is highly likely that this was the medieval conception as well, as is illustrated by Dante's dance of the intellectuals, who encompass all forms of human knowledge of the world in his *Paradiso*. This is Fra Angelico's version. The sketches of Honnecourt from 1230 also show the labyrinth in relation to the natural world, although, as part of the sketchbook by an architect, it shows also the way in which it became an image for architecture itself, 'Daedelus, old artificer', as James Joyce's artist addresses him. The circles are often tenfold, mirroring the medieval world of seven spheres, the fixed stars, primum mobile and then the empyrean, or in fourfold segments for the four continents.

To dance the maze with children is to learn then to experience space in a new way, as meaningful chains of connection and inter-relation. The carol, 'Tomorrow will be my dancing day' is completely apposite and indeed, takes on a new significance as actually teaching the theology of the maze quite simply. For example, the verses:

*Then down to hell I took my way
For my true love's deliverance,
And rose again on the third day,
Up to my true love and the dance.*

*Then up to heaven I did ascend,
Where now I dwell in sure substance
On the right hand of God, that man
May come unto the general dance.*

Children often learn *Lord of the Dance* at school but without any relation to this choral theology.

I said that cathedrals can include everything and make everything work for worship. But they do include problematic images, such as grandiose tombs to the powerful that in the eighteenth century, for example, speak more of human pride than religious devotion. Controversial works of art can be used in dialogue with other works or spaces, as I have put the 'way of life' over against the labyrinth. To open up the question of what this image says to the visiting child or adult, is to model the way in which we too, believers as we are, search

for truth in a mystery that no image can fully catch. We want to present the cathedral as a place where the deepest questions can be asked, and where there is no end or limit to our pursuit of God.

Ely is lucky in having a shrine, even if Etheldreda's bones do not rest in it. The fact of the cathedral's presence here at all is due to her amazing faith and ability. My own children, who went to primary school in Cambridge, went on pilgrimage to Ely to venerate the image and the hand at the Catholic Church nearby, and were brought up on her story. There is another wonderful short film about her on the website, and she is the perfect patron to have today. She was a strong, able woman, a princess, abbess of a double monastery of men and women, promoter of learning and even her miracles are quite ecological, such as the flowering staff. This is reflected in her modern statue, by Philip Turner, which shows a regal



figure, gazing ahead, holding her famous staff that budded, her stony figure and its stone plinth making her appear hieratic and absorbed, again a figure of 'ana' whose gaze leads one beyond. The setting with prayer table and candle basin encourages prayer and devotion. Her strength is comforting, and the statue has enough detail to render her approachable – especially the hand on her cloak, suggesting someone ready for action, yet resting for a moment.

This statue is asking for story-telling. Etheldreda is the origin of the city and cathedral. For local children she is their spiritual ancestress, and an inspiration for everyone. She thus allows us to bridge the education/formation divide, just as Alban for St Alban's Abbey is able to do. It seems no accident that these two towns mount great outdoor celebrations and processions with giant puppets because in both cases we have founders and emblems of England itself, thoroughly local, and yet universal in significance. I gather Etheldreda arrives by boat and is processed from the riverside to the cathedral.





We should all find some way to take our celebrations outside, to show that the holiness of a church is not a way of separating from the profane, but of revealing the holiness of all God's world. We did this in a very small way at Southwell recently when we ended the animal blessing service on St Francis' Day by flinging open the huge west doors to bless the wild creatures of air and soil - a small gesture yet one which had a vivid effect on the congregation, who had to reverse completely their direction of attention. Modern cathedrals

are less open than medieval ones, where the detail of carving is as profuse outside as in. Benedict commends Gaudi's Barcelona cathedral because he does this too, with a profusion of biblical stories outside, for all to read.

At the same time he brought the sacred images outside so as to place before people the mystery of God revealed in the birth, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this way, he brilliantly helped to build our human consciousness, anchored in the world yet open to God, enlightened and sanctified by Christ. In this he accomplished one of the most important tasks of our times: overcoming the division between human consciousness and Christian consciousness, between living in this temporal world and being open to eternal life, between the beauty of things and God as beauty. Antoni Gaudí did this not with words but with stones, lines, planes, and points .

We are fond of sending children round on animal hunts to find details but do we tell them the gospel reason for this outward generosity? In so doing we take them beyond the object and set it in its metaphysical home. All space is placed – all is full of God's presence and enjoys his love.



Defamiliarization: We should never in our aim to make children feel at home in our churches, do anything to prevent the space doing its evangelistic work, of evoking the religious sense. We need to orchestrate the art and portable elements of our building to create

space as generous and meaningful. In a stupendous space like Ely Cathedral you don't have to do much: it is so huge that you cannot really do any harm. In a smaller building like Southwell the computer screen used for Time Travelling song lyrics has quite a catastrophic effect on the experience of the space, which offsets the beauty of substituting giant mats for the usual chairs.

Similarly, we should never allow our art installations or exhibitions become like those in any secular gallery, in which the art becomes aesthetic in a self-enclosed sense. Our placing, usage and signing should enable the viewer to relate art and building, and see the paintings or other artworks as engines of the religious sense, by their strong sense of presence forcing us farther into the real. In a cathedral art and architecture are not really separated, but the art is taken into a community of faces, glass and stone that gives us the world: a world created, marked with the human hand, unalienated, in which we can play, as wisdom played before God at the beginning of creation.