

Sacramental Sensibility and the ‘Embodiment of God’

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I follow the conference theme, by considering how ‘rituals and sacraments’ may function as ‘material expressions of a spiritual reality’ and even as ‘embodiments of God’. I begin by noting some of the ways in which human beings can be attuned in bodily terms to place-relative ‘existential meanings’. I then extend this case, and relate it to the religious domain, by examining the nature of sacred sites and the role of religious concepts in aesthetic experience. I also consider what sense we might make of the idea that transcendent ‘meanings’ may be not only imaged in the sensory appearances, but encountered in them. Overall, the paper seeks to identify some of the ways in which bodily demeanour and habits of perception, and in general sensitivity to materially embedded existential meanings, are integral to the religious life.

KEYWORDS

rituals, sacraments, places, meaning

INTRODUCTION

In this session of the conference, we have been invited to examine the idea that 'rituals and sacraments' may function as 'material expressions of a spiritual reality' and even as 'embodiments of God'. We have also been given an opportunity to consider what a treatment of these issues might imply for our understanding of 'magic', and in concluding I shall touch on that question too.

I would like to approach these themes by turning, first of all, to the question of how 'existential meanings' may be presented to a person in their bodily interaction with a material context. Assuming that we do encounter such meanings in this sort of way, then we might suppose that ultimate, or religiously important, existential meanings may be presented to us similarly, that is, via an appropriate bodily engagement with a relevant material context. And if all of this is so, then, so I shall argue, we have one way of elaborating upon the thought that 'spiritual realities' may be 'embodied', and encountered through 'ritual' and in general via an appropriate bodily engagement with material forms.

My remarks will throughout have a rather programmatic character, since my object here is to offer an invitation to conversational exchange, rather than to construct a perspective which is hedged about by qualifications for the sake of pre-empting objections!

THE UNDERSTANDING OF PLACE-RELATIVE EXISTENTIAL MEANINGS

In recent years, philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition in particular have been much occupied by the thought that our understanding of God might be likened to the kind of understanding which derives from scientific enquiry, or the kind of understanding which is rooted in our everyday experience of the sensory world. Such strategies are well known and there is no need to document them here. While undoubtedly of interest, these approaches do pose a number of difficulties, it seems to me, in regard to their conception of the mode and also the object of religious understanding. For example, they may lead us to think of religious understanding as basically theoretical and inferential (if we pattern religious understanding on scientific understanding) or as straightforwardly observational. So neither approach looks like a very promising starting point if our concern is (as ours is here) with the question of how religious understanding may be realised in bodily

and ritual terms. Of course, the body is integral to sensory experience, and in its way it is also integral to scientific forms of enquiry, but sense experience and scientific enquiry do not look much like ritual forms of engagement with the world, above all because they do not require the same sort of attunement of the whole body – an attunement in which all of the senses are implicated – to a value-saturated context. Moreover, if we take scientific understanding, or sensory observation, as a starting point for our reflections upon the nature of religious understanding, then there will presumably be some pressure to think of God's reality by analogy with the reality of particular objects – assuming that we take scientific theorising to have as its goal the identification of fundamental entities which are not themselves observable but postulated to explain the data of observation, and to the extent that everyday observation of the world concerns, as philosophers are wont to say, 'tables and chairs'. But it is of course a commonplace of theological enquiry that the conception of God as some kind of 'thing', whatever its attractions may be in abstractly philosophical terms, is religiously problematic. So on this count too, we have some reason to consider whether other ways of apprehending the world may present a more promising route into the question of how religious understanding is to be conceived.

I would like to suggest that we can make some headway with these questions by turning to our appreciation of place-relative existential meanings. (Certainly, place-relative meanings are not 'things', and their identification is standardly a matter neither of theorisation nor of 'just looking'.) This kind of understanding is so basic to our capacity to orient ourselves in the world that it is easily overlooked from a theoretical point of view. It is perhaps for this reason that in the history of philosophy (and by contrast with the kind of understanding that is grounded in simple sense observation, or in scientific theory construction), understanding of 'place' often seems to drop out of view, despite its fundamental role in our practical dealings with other people and the material world in general. To take just one example, in his discussion of the nature of virtue, Aristotle famously remarks that the person of good character is able to regulate their feelings appropriately; and he adds that this is a matter of 'having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way'.¹ But if we take a particular example of the regulation of feeling, say the feeling of gratitude, it is evident that it matters not only that this feeling should be

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II; I am following Terence Irwin's translation, reproduced in Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Ethical Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford 2007), 678.

had at the right time, in relation to the right thing, and so on for the remainder of the items on Aristotle's list, but also that it should be had, and expressed, in the right place. A person could in some abstract sense have the feeling at the right time, and so on, but there would be little merit in that if the feeling were had or expressed at the wrong place. We might prefer to say then that time-relative rightness, and rightness measured against these other dimensions of appraisal, cannot really be disentangled from rightness with respect to place: rightness in temporal terms is in effect rightness in temporal terms relative to rightness in respect of place.

It may also be that we are apt to overlook the significance of rightness in respect of place when we are operating in a theoretical mode because very often achieving this sort of rightness is a rather untheoretical and even unreflective sort of matter. Whether I am in a lecture theatre, or standing at a bus stop, or entering a church, or whatever it might be, I am all the while calibrating my bodily movements to the space in which I am located. And this is not just a matter of making those bodily adjustments which are necessary to negotiate the space from a physical point of view, as when I raise my foot in the way required to surmount the dais at the front of the lecture theatre. It is also and more fundamentally a matter of my calibrating my bodily movements so that they are fitted for this particular space in existential terms. And this sort of calibration is necessary because the action which is constituted by a given stretch of bodily movement will vary with place. To put the point briefly, waving my hands will count as one sort of action, with one kind of existential significance, when I am looking towards a friend who is departing on a train, and another when I am standing on the Kop and Liverpool have scored a goal, and another when I am drifting out to sea, and so on. But typically this regulation of bodily movement in relation to context is not rehearsed reflectively: if I wish to say farewell to my friend as she leaves on the train, I do not work backwards from the thought that my action should be one of bidding farewell, to a consideration of the gestures which relative to this particular material context might carry that sort of significance, to the performance of the relevant gesture. Instead, in normal circumstances, I just wave.

So all of us are all of the time calibrating our bodily movements to spatial context, in recognition of the 'existential meanings' which are embedded in these contexts, and the sense which attaches to various stretches of bodily behaviour given those meanings. There is no achievement more basic to our capacity to function as agents in society than this. And again, when we en-

gage in this sort of calibration of bodily response to context, we are guided often enough by a kind of intelligence in the body – rather than the body being directed by a set of instructions which are the product of some process of ratiocination. When I walk into a room of people, I adjust my bodily movements to the space taking into account its dimensions, the apparent mood of the group, the disposition of people and objects in the space, and so on, without any of these considerations becoming, in the normal case, the object of focal awareness. The capacity to orient oneself in these terms is more akin, then, to the capacity to ride a bike than it is to the capacity to rehearse a mathematical or scientific proof, or to determine whether the object at the other side of the room is a bookcase or a cupboard simply by looking. But by contrast with the bike-riding case, this is not just an achievement of physical dexterity: what is required is a capacity to bring one's body into appropriate alignment with the existential demands of the context, and not only with its demands considered from an abstractly physical point of view.

So in this thoroughly familiar (even if, from a theoretical point of view, sometimes rather opaque) sort of way, we are all of us used to recognising existential meanings as they are embodied in particular material contexts; and we are all of us used to adjusting our bodily movements to these meanings, and to being guided by the body's own 'intelligence' in these matters. If all of this is so, then we have, I think, the beginnings of an account of how a sacramental appreciation of the material world might work. Let's see if we can move a little closer towards such an account by considering next the case of 'sacred sites'.

THE EMBODIMENT OF EXISTENTIAL MEANINGS AT THE 'SACRED SITE'

The phenomenological literature on 'sacred space' suggests that such places are marked by a number of features which recur across cultures. For instance, the sacred site is often deemed to have a 'microcosmic' significance. (That is, the existential meaning which is embedded in the site is thought to represent or embody in miniature the significance of reality as such.) And whether because of its remoteness or because of its intrinsic physical character, the sacred site also poses, typically, a degree of challenge to the body. And lastly, such places are often associated with religiously important events. These events may have occurred at the site; or it may be that while the site is not itself the locus of some such event, it houses objects such as relics which

once played an integral role in the unfolding of events of religious importance.² These accounts ground the sacred significance of a site in rather different features, and these features need not co-vary. For instance, in so far as it is the sensory qualities of a place which mark it out as religiously significant, then a further place which replicates those qualities will, to that extent, share the same religious significance. But in so far as the religious significance of a place is relative to its history, then even a perfect replica of the place will fail to reproduce in full its religious import, in so far as the replica has in relevant respects a different past. These various dimensions of a site's religious import are also capable of interaction. Most obviously, a place's sensory qualities or history may be deemed religiously significant because the place is conceived in microcosmic terms, so that these qualities, or this history, are taken to bear not simply some localised importance, but an ultimate or divine significance.

These truths concerning sacred sites have a counterpart in our dealings with everyday, secular spaces. Here we seem to be responsive to these same varieties of existential meaning in ways which require acknowledgement, once again, in the form of an appropriate bodily response. For example, a place may acquire a particular existential significance on account of its history, and that significance may call for acknowledgement in bodily terms. It is for this reason that we can be drawn intelligibly into debates about what sort of building, for what sort of purpose, it would be appropriate to erect at the site of the 9/11 attacks – and so on for many other, more everyday kinds of example. So a site can in some respects store up the significance of what has happened there, so that this significance exercises an enduring claim upon us, in so far as it invites, or requires, a certain kind of bodily response when we are located at the site in the present. And we might suppose that the same kind of connection is at work when the significance of a sacred site is grounded in its history.

Similarly, we can also encounter microcosmic meanings in our experience of secular spaces. The places of childhood often bear this sort of significance. I recently returned to some of the places of my own childhood in Liverpool. And standing again where that child once stood, and assuming at that place, so far as I could, his perspective on things, I found myself review-

² For an account of broadly this kind, see for example Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, Volume Two, Hermeneutical Calisthenics (Cambridge MA 2000), and Thomas Barrie, *Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture* (Boston MA 1996).

ing later episodes in my life story from the vantage point of his aspirations and sense of the world's significance. In this way, the place was able to assume for me a microcosmic significance, by providing a window on to the sense of my life as a whole. Of course, it would be possible in principle to take up such a stance on my life anywhere, simply by rehearsing the relevant thoughts. But if we revert to the idea that behaviour can be more or less consonant with the history of a place, then we might say that at the places of childhood, it's not just that we can think certain microcosmically significant thoughts (thoughts which we could in principle think anywhere), but also that we can acknowledge the microcosmic meaning of the place in our enacted responses, by virtue of what we do in bodily terms when located at the site, and also by virtue of what we think when we are there. Minimally, we might suppose that it is fitting that I should think microcosmic thoughts about the meaning of my life when located at the places of my childhood (especially if I have been away from them for some considerable time), and the failure to act in this way would signify a kind of unresponsiveness or blindness to meanings which make some genuine claim on me. So there is some sense in the idea that we can not only think about but also encounter, or be claimed by, a microcosmic meaning when located at the relevant place. And when the relevant microcosmic meaning is particularly encompassing, when it concerns the significance of reality in general, then we may suppose that it is fundamentally religious in character.

The case of sacred sites also reveals something of the variety of preconditions which are relevant to the recognition of place-relative existential meanings. It is notable that the approach to a sacred site often poses a degree of challenge to the body: because of its inaccessibility, the site may require the believer to undertake a long and relatively arduous journey; or because of its use of threshold walls or other such structures, the believer may be required to submit to various bodily disciplines as a condition of penetrating to the inner precincts of the site. The recurrence of such features of spatial organisation across traditions suggests that an appropriate attunement of the body is integral to the believer's capacity to apprehend the existential import of the sacred site aright. To put the point briefly, we might say that the structure of many sacred sites suggests that their existential import cannot be grasped in straightforwardly observational terms, just by turning up and looking around, let alone by constructing some sort of inference from the data of observation. Rather, to grasp, or be grasped by, the import of the site, the believer must first take on the relevant bodily and existential condition –

broadly, one of heightened seriousness about the meaning of the site, and heightened attentiveness to that meaning as it is presented in the sensory qualities of the site. The physical challenges posed by the site ensure that such seriousness is presupposed and at the same time cultivated: given these challenges, only the person who is already serious about the prospective meaning of the site will persevere in their resolve to reach the site; and in negotiating the physical demands of the space, such a person will be required to take on a correlative bodily state, and to enter thereby into a condition of focused awareness and heightened seriousness.

Given the need for this sort of preparation of the body, we would expect the believer to be addressed in bodily terms upon arrival at the site. And this is what we do find, in so far as the significance of the site is communicated through its imposing scale, its use of intense light or equally of visual obscurity, and so on for other visual features of the site and for other sensory modalities. The recurrence of such qualities across traditions suggests that to some extent the import of the sacred site is communicated directly in theory- or tradition-independent terms, by virtue simply of its brute impact upon the senses. If we had to generalise, we might say that, in many cases anyway, the site works, at least in part, by imposing a degree of strain upon the senses, so leading the person to an intensified bodily awareness of the space, and in turn to a condition of rapt absorption in the place and its import.³

So the recognition of the existential meaning of the sacred site is realised, in some measure, in the body's responsiveness to its sensory qualities; and given the structure of such sites and their surroundings, we should suppose that this sort of bodily responsiveness cannot always be counted on as a matter of course, but has instead to be cultivated, by the adoption of the requisite physical discipline. We might suppose, once again, that the same sorts of connection hold in secular contexts. To take an everyday kind of example, suppose that the light of the low trajectory winter sun, as it streams towards me from the periphery of my visual field, irradiates the long grasses in the meadow in which I am standing, so that the silhouettes of their bobbing heads are brought into sharp relief and wrapped in a warm glow. All of us (I think I can say) will have been gripped at some time or other by the sensory qualities of some such scene, in a relatively theory-independent way, and reduced thereby to a condition of quietened, rapt attention. Sacred sites seem, in some cases, to aim at inducing a similar sort of bodily response, in so far as

³ I expand on these matters in the discussion of conversion experience below.

they invite the believer into a state of heightened sensory awareness, in which certain material things become compellingly present. But of course, it would be all too easy for me to pass by this scene of sun-lit grasses without further thought, observing in some sense the sensory qualities of the scene, but without being engaged by them. For engagement, and fuller apprehension of these qualities we need, as well as mere observation, the requisite focused attunement of the body, and a quietening of the mind's absorption in other, competing concerns. And the sacred site, in its own way, ensures that these same conditions are realised.

THE ROLE OF CONCEPTS IN THE RECOGNITION OF MATERIALLY EMBEDDED MEANINGS

In everyday contexts, a person's recognition of materially embodied values can also depend of course upon their capacity to deploy appropriate concepts. Let's think about this case next. Once the difference between a swift and a swallow and a martin has been explained to me, then my experience of these swooping forms becomes newly focused and newly informed. And we might suppose similarly that while the significance of sacred sites is to some extent communicated in theory-independent terms, the apprehension of their import can also depend upon the capacity to read them in terms of a relevant doctrinal scheme. And this scheme may work not simply by allowing the believer to provide doctrinally informed comment upon a given experience of the site, but also by entering into that experience, so that the phenomenology of the experience is shaped accordingly. Roger Scruton provides an example of this possibility when he notes how the experience of a Gothic church can be inhabited, or structured from within, by the thought that such churches were intended to present an image of the heavenly city. When our experience is guided by such a thought, he notes, it is possible to apprehend a Gothic church not as a single thing subdivided into various components, but as a composite entity, assembled from parts (by analogy with the way in which a city is a composite entity, assembled from the various buildings and other structures of which it is comprised). So the conceptual distinction between thinking of the church as a composite entity and thinking of it as a single entity subdivided has, Scruton is suggesting, a phenomenological

counterpart. And the person who is acquainted with this conceptual distinction can, in principle, organise their experience accordingly.⁴

It is notable that when the experience of a Gothic church is inhabited in this way by the thought of the heavenly city, then the building as experienced can function as an image of the heavenly city: the building so experienced will share the structure of a city, and will therefore be able to image a city. This possibility suggests a further way in which religious meanings may be materially mediated: when it penetrates or inhabits an experience in this sort of way, a religious thought can be embodied in the sensory appearances, rather than serving simply as commentary upon them. And in such cases, the content of the thought will then be imaged by the appearances, so that it is possible to be addressed by and reckon with the thought through one's engagement with the relevant material forms.

Of course, the example of the Gothic church is a relatively easy case: here one spatially extended thing (the church) is taken to image another spatially extended thing (the heavenly city) once the appearance of the first thing has been organised appropriately. And there is no great mystery about how this is possible. As anyone who has had to entertain small children on a car journey will know, it is possible to take cloud shapes as images of just about any material object you might care to mention: here, the thought of a given object, as named by the child, is inscribed in the appearance of the cloud so as to produce a relevant perceptual gestalt, with the result that the cloud's appearance now images the object. This sort of example works straightforwardly because here we are configuring the appearance of one spatially extended thing by reference to the structure of another spatially extended thing. But we might suppose in addition that abstract thoughts, and not only thoughts of spatially extended things, can be inscribed in the sensory appearances.

Strikingly, many reports of conversion experience seem to suggest something of this kind. If we turn to William James's classic treatment of these matters in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, we find converts reporting that, post-conversion, it is not simply that they feel a new intimacy with God, or that they have come to some deepened doctrinal insight, but rather that the sensory world in general has now taken on a new appearance for them, so that it seems to be in some way glorified, or newly 'real'. And some converts say of their post-conversion condition that the sensory world is now able to

⁴ Scruton develops this example in his book *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton NJ 1979), 74-75.

image the divine nature. For example, Jonathan Edwards, who is not noted for levity in his use of theological language, remarks of his own conversion experience that: 'The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature...'⁵ The experience which Edwards reports here is like Scruton's example of experiencing a Gothic church in so far as, in each case, the appearance of some relevant stretch of the material world is taken to image something else – only here it is the divine nature which is said to be imaged in the appearance of the sensory world in general, rather than the heavenly city being imaged in the appearance of a Gothic church. How is it possible, we might wonder, for the sensory world to image the divine nature in this way? I'll allude just briefly to three possibilities.

First of all, following the drift of Scruton's example, we might suppose that the thought of the divine nature can enter into the appearance of the sensory world, with the result that the sensory world now presents an image of the divine nature. In Scruton's example, the thought of the heavenly city is able to enter into the appearance of the Gothic church because city and church share certain qualities. Notably, they share the property of spatial organisation; and accordingly, the appearance of the church can conform to the thought of the heavenly city once the organisation of the church, as it is presented in the relevant perceptual gestalt, is isomorphic with the organisation of the heavenly city. Taking up Edwards's remarks, we might suppose similarly that the qualities of 'calmness', 'sweetness' and 'glory' can be found in the world and also, in some suitably adjusted sense, in the divine nature. And in turn, we might suppose therefore that the thought of the divine nature can inform the appearance of the sensory world in so far as these qualities (of calmness and sweetness and glory) assume the requisite prominence in our experience of the sensory world.

We might suppose, secondly, that it is not only the organisation of the perceptual field that is relevant here but also its 'hue'. If I discover that the meat which I am chewing derives from Shuttlescock, the pet rabbit, it is not only that the taste of the meat will now assume new salience in my experience of the world. Its intrinsic phenomenal feel will also change, as it comes to be experienced as revolting. Here 'hue' and salience work together to

⁵ Edwards's remarks are cited by James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London 1911), 248–249.

communicate the existential import of this stuff. Edwards is clearly talking about a change in the ‘appearance’ of the sensory world, so he has in mind, I take it, some transformation in the sensory phenomena, and not simply some new assessment of the significance of a given body of sensory appearances. And perhaps this transformation can be understood in terms of the ideas of salience and also of hue: relevant features of the world (such as its ‘calmness’) may now be newly salient, and also the world may come to seem (not revolting but) newly meaningful, or it may be presented with a new intensity, where this quality of meaningfulness or intensity is given directly in the vividness of the sensory appearances. (Compare the experience of the person who has fallen in love, and the associated transformation in the appearance of the sensory world in general which is often reported in such cases.)

Edwards also talks of ‘glory’ in nature. Perhaps this possibility can be understood in some measure by reference to the sort of heightened awareness of the natural world which I mentioned before, where the salience of the grasses in my perceptual field and their ‘hue’ are both potentially relevant to the experience of the scene as compellingly present. I take it that something of broadly this kind is also what Hopkins has in mind when he writes that: ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God / It will flame out like shining from shook foil.’ (These are of course the opening lines of his poem ‘God’s Grandeur’.) In this sort of way, we might argue that the thought of God’s nature can enter into the appearance of the sensory world not so much because of some isomorphism of spatial structure which unites that nature and the relevant perceptual gestalt, but because certain qualities which we might also associate with the divine nature can become newly prominent in the sensory appearances, and because the sensory world can undergo a correlative shift in ‘hue’.

So here are two ways (relative to the ideas of salience and hue) in which we might understand how it is possible for the sensory world to image the divine nature. A further, related approach to this question might draw on the thought, commonly expressed in reports of conversion experience, that the sensory world post-conversion is somehow newly ‘real’.⁶ Perhaps this intensification in its reality is to be understood simply in terms of its appearing newly glorified in the sense we have just explored. But we might also try to understand this case by analogy with our experience of everyday sensory things when the practical possibilities which they afford are taken to be somehow

⁶ Compare the experience of religious melancholiacs who find that reality is in some fashion ‘unreal’. See James, *Varieties*, 151.

truncated. Matthew Ratcliffe takes up this case in this thought experiment: 'Consider experiencing a table without co-included possibilities like seeing it from another angle, moving it or sitting on a chair in front of it. Without the possibilities of its being accessed from different perspectives, or acted upon, it would appear strangely distant, intangible and incomplete.'⁷ Here, the table comes to seem in some measure unreal (or intangible and incomplete) when some of the practical possibilities which we would normally associate with it fall away. And in a ready sense, the table in that case is indeed less real (than it would have been if it had the normal range of potentialities for a table), in so far as it is not so capable now of contributing causally to the further unfolding of the world. In a similar vein, perhaps we can understand the convert's experience of the sensory world as newly real as a matter of their coming to a new assessment of the causal potentialities of the sensory world, where this newly intensified sense of its reality is registered directly in experience, just as the diminution in the reality of the table in Ratcliffe's example (in the understanding of the subject of the experience) is registered directly in experience. And how might religious conversion involve a new assessment of the sensory world's causal potentialities? Well, minimally, perhaps the convert has a new sense of God's activity in the sensory world, and a new sense therefore of how the sensory world is caught up into a divinely ordained *telos*.

This account suggests a third way in which we might understand the idea that the world can image God. When it is experienced as newly real, perhaps the sensory world can then image God in so far as God is supremely real, or *ipsum esse subsistens*. Here it is not so much that a given concept (such as the concept of the divine nature) comes to inhabit the appearance of the sensory world in so far as certain features of the world acquire a correlative salience or hue; it is, rather, that our experience of the sensory world is now set within a new assessment of its possibilities, and that its appearance in general is transformed for this reason. This way of putting the matter suggests that the new assessment of the sensory world's possibilities comes first, and then a consequent change in its appearance. (And this is the ordering of things which is suggested by Ratcliffe's example.) But we might also suppose that it is possible to move in the other direction: in Ratcliffe's terms, a change

⁷ Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford 2008), 156. Although he does not use the expression 'unreal' in this passage, Ratcliffe associates the example he is developing here with the case where a thing is experienced as 'unreal'. See for example the passage which he quotes on the following page.

in the appearance of the table may issue in the thought that its causal possibilities have been in some way truncated.

If we can make some sense of the idea that the divine nature may be imaged by the sensory appearances in these various ways, then we might suppose that a similar kind of account can be developed for the believer's experience of the sacred site. Here too, the sensory appearances undergo a transformation, with the result that certain material objects become compellingly present; and here too, the believer may suppose that the sensory appearances now provide a window onto the divine nature.

In the first section of this paper, we considered the idea that existential meanings can be embodied in material contexts, and can be identified and appropriately acknowledged in the responses of the body. We have now extended this discussion by considering the role of sacred sites, of conversion experience, and of certain kinds of thought-infused 'seeing', in mediating religious meanings. In these ways, we can make sense of the idea that not only 'secular' meanings but also religiously germane existential meanings can be embedded in material contexts, and can be apprehended and acknowledged in the requisite habits of seeing and responses of the body. So we have now identified a number of ways in which we might elaborate upon the idea that there can be 'material expressions of a spiritual reality' which can be encountered and engaged in bodily terms. But this account is still some way removed from the thought that these 'expressions' can be taken in relevant circumstances as 'embodiments of God'. Let's consider this possibility rather more directly.

SENSORY EXPERIENCE AND THE EMBODIMENT OF GOD

In my discussion of Jonathan Edwards's conversion experience, I concentrated on his suggestion that, following his conversion, the divine nature was in some fashion imaged in the appearance of the sensory world. But Edwards is interested in more than simply the idea that the sensory world can, under appropriate conditions, image the divine nature. As we have seen, he remarks that 'God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature...' And although he does not make this point explicitly here, I take it that the divine nature's capacity to appear in these terms is, for Edwards, a consequence of the fact that this same nature sustains the world in being, so that

its character is in some fashion impressed upon the sensory world. So the imaging relation with which Edwards is concerned derives from the fact that the thing imaged (namely, the divine nature) is causally present in the image. On this point, his example differs from the case where a Gothic church images the heavenly city. We would be reluctant to say, I think, that the heavenly city is present in the Gothic church when the church serves as an image of the city. But on Edwards's account, it makes good sense to say both that the divine nature is imaged in the sensory world, and that the divine nature is present in the sensory world as that which appears or is made manifest there.

There is perhaps a rough analogy here with the case where I press a piece of cloth to my face so that it reveals the lineaments of my face. In this case, the cloth images my face. A second piece of cloth which has just by chance fallen into the relevant shape would also present an image of my face. But we would not wish to say in this second case that my face 'appears' in the cloth, or that my face is present in the cloth. But these ways of speaking seem to be perfectly in order in the first case, assuming that there is here not only an imaging relation, but also a relation of causal sustaining. Suppose that there is a third piece of cloth which owes its shape to being pressed to my face, but which does not, even so, image my face. (Perhaps it has been pressed to my face in a somewhat haphazard way.) Of this cloth too, we would be reluctant to say, I think, that my face appears in the cloth. But if we can affirm both that the cloth owes its shape right now to the impress of my face right now, and that it thereby images my face, then we have some reason to use Edwards's kind of language, and to say that my face 'appears' there. So here we have one way of developing the thought that it is not simply that the divine nature (or some associated reality) may be imaged by the material world, but also that the divine nature can appear in, or be bodied forth in, or 'embodied in', the material world in so far as that nature is imaged by the material world and is here and now the source of that imaging relation.

Let me consider briefly one further way of elaborating upon the thought that God can be embodied in the sensory world. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited prisoners that 'as often as you have done this to one of these my lowliest brothers and sisters, you have done it to me'.⁸ Some commentators have wanted to take this passage at its word, and to suppose that when we treat such people decently, it's not just that we treat people who are in the relevant respect *like*

⁸ Matthew 25: 40. I have based this translation on the English rendering of the text given in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, tr. J. E. Crouch (Minneapolis MN 2005), 264.

Jesus with decency, but that we treat *him* decently. To take one example, Gregory of Nyssa supposes that since Christ and other human beings share a single nature, a person who fails in their regard for another human being will thereby fail in their regard for Christ, and for all who can be counted as human.⁹ We might put this point by saying, for example, that to insult (gratuitously) a given human being is to insult human nature, and thereby to insult each and every human being. On this account, it is not only afflicted human beings (those who are hungry and so on) who are drawn into the relevant moral relation to Christ, but all of us in so far as we share a single nature. It is not difficult to multiply examples of this stronger reading of our text, which takes it to mean more than simply ‘like me’, from across the Christian tradition, though no doubt it remains a minority view.¹⁰ Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that this reading is warranted. In that case, we have another perspective on the thought that God can be embodied in the material world. Of course, Christians in general have wanted to say that the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. But on this reading of Matthew’s text, we can also say that in our dealings with other human beings in general (and perhaps especially in our dealings with afflicted human beings), we encounter Christ himself, and therefore God, in so far as Christ is both human and divine. And in this extended sense, we may say that God is embodied not only in Christ, but in humankind in general. Let’s see if we can press this thought a little further.

We can distinguish the case where I experience another human being as a person who is embodied from the case where I experience them as a body while bracketing out or perhaps even suppressing any thought of their personal significance.¹¹ We might take pornographic experience, in so far as it brackets out the personhood of the other, to illustrate the second of these

⁹ See for instance Gregory’s comment: ‘In condemning the sickness that preys upon the body of this man, you fail to consider whether you might be, in the process condemning yourself and all nature. For you yourself belong to the common nature of all. Treat all therefore as one common reality.’ The passage appears in Gregory’s sermon ‘On the Saying, “Whoever Has Done It to One of These Has Done It to Me”’ and is reproduced in Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford 2001), 201. I am grateful to Morwenna Ludlow for this reference.

¹⁰ A well-known medieval example of the same sort of view can be found in the story of Martin of Tours. Having given half his tunic to a beggar, Martin had a dream in which Christ said that it was he who had received the tunic. See Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 272. See too Sarah Coakley’s discussion of Gregory of Nazianzus’s reading of the same passage from Matthew: ‘The Identity of the Risen Jesus: Finding Jesus Christ in the Poor’, in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (eds), *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids MI 2008), 301–319.

¹¹ As Roger Scruton comments, we can distinguish between ‘an interest in a person’s body and an interest in a person *as embodied*’: Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford 2009), 47.

kinds of experience. Such an experience is evidently very different morally and phenomenologically from one which is infused by the recognition of the person as a person. So while as a matter of fact, it is a person whom I encounter in my experience of another human being, this truth may not be manifest to me directly in the sensory appearances. Similarly, we might suppose (following Gregory's reading of our text) that while it is in fact Christ whom I encounter in my dealings with another human being, it is a further matter for that person's identification with Christ to be presented to me in the sensory appearances. But to the extent that this truth about their relation to Christ can be rendered in the person's appearance, then we may say not only that God can be encountered in another human being, by virtue of the incarnation, but also that God can be presented to me as God, or as Christ, in the appearance of the person. On this second perspective, God is embodied in the sensory order in a particularly radical sense, in so far as the fact of divine embodiment is itself manifest in the sensory appearances.

What would it take for Christ to be presented in the appearance of another person? I am not going to pursue this question at any length here, but by analogy with the case of the convert who takes the divine nature to be presented in the sensory appearances, we might suppose that this Christ-relative construal of another human being's identity can be rendered in the appearances in some measure in so far as the person and their needs become appropriately salient in my perceptual field, and in so far as relevant portions of this field take on an appropriate hue. And perhaps my sense of the person's Christ-relative identity may even mean that they appear to me as more fully real, in so far as this conception of their identity also involves a new and extended assessment of their causal potentialities.

SACRAMENTAL SENSIBILITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD

In concluding, let me try to draw out some of the implications of the picture we have been exploring for the following themes: the idea of a sacramental sensibility; a conception of the sacraments and 'ritual' more narrowly defined; and the question of how we should think of 'magic'.

I have been arguing that just as in familiar, non-religious cases, we can identify and acknowledge existential values through our enacted relationship to particular material contexts, so we can identify and acknowledge religious values through our relationship to places with relevant histories, sensory

qualities and microcosmic significance. In both the secular and the religious case, the relevant values will sometimes be apprehended directly in the responses of the body, as when the sensory qualities of a sacred site have a relatively brute or theory-independent impact on the body, and communicate some religious meaning thereby. These values can also be given due acknowledgement in the responses of the body, as when our bodily demeanour at a site is calibrated to what we know of its history. The history of a site may not be identified directly in bodily terms, but the value which attaches to the site in virtue of that history can be acknowledged in our bodily demeanour, when we are present at the place; and in some cases our appreciation of what kind of bodily demeanour would be most congruent with this history may depend upon an intelligence ‘in the body’, rather than upon any process of ratiocination. For the more metaphysically adventurous, this sort of account can be supplemented by supposing that in sustaining the world, God impresses something of the divine nature upon the world, or by supposing that by virtue of the incarnation, it is Christ whom we encounter in our relations with other people. And we might add that these truths too can be acknowledged and reckoned with not only in abstractly doctrinal terms, but in the sensory appearances, in so far as the appearances display the right kind of salience or hue, or manifest the right degree of ‘reality’.

If we understand the idea of a sacramental sensibility in these terms, then we can make some sense of the thought that a person’s religious or spiritual life may be realised not simply in what they think in some relatively abstract sort of way, but also in their bodily demeanour, and in the sensory phenomenology of their experience, in so far as bodily demeanour and phenomenology both constitute ways in which we can recognise and appropriately acknowledge ‘material expressions of a spiritual reality’. And in this way, we can also make sense of the idea that ‘spiritual practice’ is integral to a sacramental sensibility, to the extent that this sort of bodily and experiential sensitivity is likely to depend in some measure upon the person’s participation in relevant bodily disciplines, upon their acquisition and careful deployment of the requisite concepts, and in general upon a training of their powers of attention.

I have been talking of how religiously significant existential values may be embedded in particular material contexts, and speaking of a ‘sacramental sensibility’ in this regard. But what of the sacraments more narrowly construed? Thomas Aquinas writes that the sacraments:

touch the body and so produce upon it the sort of effects which are connatural to them as physical entities. But in the very act of doing so they may also operate as instruments, producing effects upon the soul in the power of God. For instance the water of baptism, by the very fact of washing the body of its own connatural power, washes the soul too in virtue of being an instrument of the divine power.¹²

On this view, in baptism, for example, God does not suspend or displace the powers which are 'connatural' to water, but instead uses those powers so as to bring about an effect that is beyond their unaided reach. So on this perspective, water achieves in baptism a kind of heightened reality, in so far as it now participates in a more encompassing, divinely ordained network of causes. (By contrast, if the powers which are connatural to water were to be suspended or displaced in baptism, then there would be a sense in which, in the sacramental context, its reality would have been diminished.) So in baptism, and in the other sacraments, the material order takes on a new and heightened significance. And the account we have been developing suggests that this sort of truth, here as elsewhere, can be registered and appropriately acknowledged not only in discursive terms, as it is in Aquinas's text, but also in our bodily demeanour and in thought-infused experience. So we should expect baptism and the other sacraments to be surrounded by relevant forms of bodily and conceptual preparation. And this is, we might suppose, part of the point of 'ritual' in this context. The stylised gestures and forms of words which we associate with baptism and the other sacraments do not serve simply to instruct us in abstractly conceptual terms of what the sacrament signifies. They also help to inform us perceptually, so that in our experience of the sacramental scene, and in our registering of its significance in bodily terms, the sacrament is fittingly received. Although I shall not develop the point here, we might add that the history of the sacraments (and perhaps especially of the Eucharist) also calls for acknowledgement in the form of relevant gestures and habits of seeing.

Aquinas's doctrine of 'connaturality' (as he develops it here, in relation to the sacraments) points towards a broadly sacramental picture of reality as a whole: God acts we might say by setting material things within a larger, God-directed teleology, which does not subvert the natural tendencies of those things, but draws out those tendencies into a more encompassing set of possibilities. This is we might say the nature of divine love: we are invited

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a. 62. 1, ad 2, in *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 56, *The Sacraments*, tr. D. Bourke (Blackfriars 1975).

hereby into a new set of potentialities which calls for the completion or fulfilment or perfection (and not the displacement or annihilation) of the potentialities which are ours by nature. And in so far as material things in general have that sort of significance (and not only the sort of significance that we recognise when they are understood from a purely secular point of view), then we should expect there to be a form of life and experience (consisting in the relevant kinds of bodily demeanour and habits of perception) in which these truths are fittingly identified and acknowledged.

Lastly, what should we make of magic in that case? Well, the term 'magic' admits of course of many meanings. But if when we think of magic, our focus is upon the capacity of words and gestures to effect some transformation in the material world, then perhaps we should allow that there is a sense in which we can speak of, for example, a 'Christian magic'. This 'magic' invites us to engage in certain practices of intellectual and bodily formation, and to enter thereby a correlative perceptual world – one which is characterised by its own patterns of salience, and by its own 'colouring' and sense of reality. And we might add that this sort of magic is especially remarkable – for here we are concerned not with a change in some narrowly delimited sphere of experience, but with a transformation of the world as a whole.