Varieties of Religious Conversion
in the Middle Ages

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The Conversion of the Physical World
The Creation of a Christian Landscape

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"My Kingdom is not of this world." Christ's disavowal to Pilate evokes cognitive dissonance in anyone who has ever traveled through a traditional European landscape where Christian territory is proclaimed by steepled churches, imposing religious houses, monumental crosses, ornate cemeteries, votive plaques, and even crosses with plastic flowers marking the sites of traffic accidents. In the Middle Ages such omnipresent tropaeal established hegemony. This is apparent, for example, in the account of Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem, written by the Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233), which climaxes with a symbolic reversal: "When the Muslims entered the city... some of them climbed to the top of the cupola [of the Dome of the Rock] to take down the cross. When they reached the top a great cry went up from the city and from outside the walls, the Muslims crying the Allâh akbar in their joy, the Franks groaning in consternation and grief. So loud and piercing was the cry that the earth shook."

Although religious conversion is normally thought of as a personal process involving a reorientation of soul, it also transforms the surrounding world. Conversion of large numbers of people requires conversion of their cult centers. It may lead to the reinterpretation of geography itself. Historians of religion describe natural "heirophanies," revelations of the divine through numinous natural features. Because religious traditions mediate these perceptions, changes in belief require interpretive changes. Thus an understanding of Christian conversion in the Middle Ages would not be complete without a look at Christian landscape. How was it created? In what ways did it develop? How was it important to medieval religion? A brief survey of Christian religious geography may help to correct such common beliefs as that it appeared late, suddenly, or only in the context of the initial evangelizing of a region. Sacred space in the medieval Latin West continued to develop as internal and external frontiers were converted into Christian territory.
Christianity always had sacred geography. This assertion contradicts scholars such as Robert Markus, who champions Christianity's "indifference to place" and maintains that it occupied "a spatial universe spiritually largely undifferentiated" until it gradually created a new sacred geography through the cult of the martyrs.\(^3\) In fact, Christianity began as a Jewish heresy, part of a tradition that saw God acting in history, preserving a special land for a special people, centering his sacrificial cult on a single temple. Although local Jewish religious life was based on synagogues, people also worshipped at the tombs of patriarchs, prophets, and would-be messiahs.\(^4\) Christ, who was said to have fulfilled and transcended this old order, inevitably created new sacred space by his earthly presence. The Mount of Calvary, for example, was symbolically transfigured to such an extent that even Hadrian's superimposition of a temple to the Capitoline Venus could not reclaim it.\(^5\) Informed traditions about Christ's tomb circulated in the second century.\(^6\) An elaborate Christian sacred geography in the Holy Land emerged just as soon as Christian pilgrimage became publicly acceptable.\(^7\)

Like Judaism, Christianity had its sacred tombs. One wall underlying the memoria for Peter in Rome has been claimed to be as early as about 90 AD, although the evidence of mid-second-century construction is clearer.\(^8\) Avoidance of such burial honors may underlie the request to the Romans made by Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 107), who asked them to pray that the wild beasts "may become a sepulchre for me; let them leave not the smallest scrap of my flesh" so that "there is no trace of my body for the world to see."\(^9\) It was allegedly the Jews who attempted to secure the destruction of the body of Polycarp (d. ca. 155), but they were unable to stop the Christians of Smyrna from gathering his bones, laying them to rest "in a spot suitable for the purpose," and assembling there regularly to celebrate the day of his martyrdom.\(^10\) It is hard to resist the conclusion that these early geographical elements represent an ongoing tradition appropriated from Judaism.\(^11\) The tombs of martyrs would have become more prominent after the middle of the third century, once more general persecutions had mass-produced them. Nevertheless, the resulting geography was somewhat arbitrary: the persecutors, not the Christians, determined the places where the martyrs were executed (normally the larger cities where officials were empowered to judge capital crimes); the burial customs of antiquity required that their tombs be located outside city walls, at some distance from largely urban early Christian communities.\(^12\)

Another sort of sacred geography centered on churches. Like the Jews, Christians clustered into their own neighborhoods. Their meeting places, such as the "upper room" (Acts 1:13), were Christian forums where a new type of assembly (ecclesia) replaced the old loyalties of the citizen assem-
blies of the poleis. In such assembly rooms, wandering apostles and prophets gradually became less important than bishops, geographically defined overseers whose cathedrae on raised platforms in front of congregations clearly marked ecclesiastical power. Since the geography of the churches differed from the geography of the martyrs, there could be tension between them, as is hinted at, for example, in Origen’s description of the Alexandrian Church. He describes how during the Severan persecution (shortly after 200), Christians living and martyred could assemble together spiritually but not physically:

That was when one really was a believer, when one used to go to martyrdom with courage in the Church, when returning from the cemeteries whither we had accompanied the bodies of the martyrs, we came back to our meetings, and the whole church would be assembled there, unbreakable. Then the catechumens were catechized in the midst of the martyrdoms, and in turn the catechumens overcame tortures and confessed the living God without fear.¹³

With Constantine’s triumphs came churches fit for an emperor, including some basilicas with incomes like those of small provinces. Equally important, however, was the merging of sacred geographies. In the post-Constantinian Church, imperial support overcame any popular reluctance about mingling the living and the dead and made feasible the translations of holy bodies into urban churches.¹⁴ Translations allowed persecuting cities to showcase their treasuries of relics in places other than suburban sanctuaries. They allowed newer cities such as Constantinople to achieve higher status by importing the remains of saints on a massive scale. They enabled bishops to enhance their own power through the cult of relics.¹⁵ The sacred geographies did not always merge successfully: the network of rural shrines to the martyrs in Donatist northern Africa resisted elite attempts to impose order.¹⁶ In the eastern countryside, especially in Egypt and Syria, holy men emerged as successors of the martyrs and established their cells and pillars as new decentralized loci of the sacred.¹⁷ In the West, however, the usual effect of translations of the saints was to create coherent patterns of sacred geography, a process codified by canon laws requiring that every altar contain relics.¹⁸ This shift strengthened ecclesiastical organization. Without it, Christian cult in the West might have been privatized like almost all other parts of the public sphere; with it churches retained some independence, since each had a heavenly owner, the saint “residing” in the altar, whom potential oppressors would often hesitate to make angry.

The system of churches backed by relics was spread in many ways. Powerful men established private churches on great estates. Bishops counter-
balanced them with strong baptismal churches. These initiatives provided a basis for a fully articulated parish structure, even though in some regions it was not complete until the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{19} Interrelated systems of churches were carefully and deliberately established by missionary efforts, some of which are described in other chapters of this volume. Translations of saints reinforced bonds between old and new Christian regions.\textsuperscript{20} The great monasteries favored by the Carolingians and rejuvenated by the monastic reforms of the tenth and eleventh centuries did much to enhance the cult of relics and popular pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{21}

Beneath and beyond the sacred grid of saints and their churches existed a sacred geography based upon nature. Christians did not start with a \textit{tabula rasa}. The religious geography of the ancient Mediterranean and Transalpine worlds had been powerful. According to Robin Lane Fox, \textquote{Prophetic places were as abundant as ever in the Imperial period. . . . From Gaul to Palmyra, gods and heroes gave guidance . . . at their shrines and sacred springs. . . . Wherever there was water, indeed, there was a possible source of prophecy. . . . Uncanny places were everywhere.\textquoteright}\textsuperscript{22} Celtic and Germanic religion also relied heavily on groves, caves, mountains, and other numinous sites.\textsuperscript{23} Mountain peaks had sacred resonances.\textsuperscript{24} Fountains were major sites for worship—and for miracles.\textsuperscript{25} Forests were awesome.\textsuperscript{26} When these natural features occurred together, their power was enhanced.

From the beginning, Christians saw non-Christian sacred space as potentially or actually demonic. In Mark’s Gospel, Christ proclaims, \textquote{The Kingdom of God is at hand\textquoteright} and then exorcizes a possessed man, commanding the unclean spirit who had cried out, \textquote{Jesus of Nazareth, Art thou come to destroy us?} to \textquote{Speak no more and go} (Mark 1:21–26). Mark describes sixteen more exorcisms. As territory is reclaimed from the spirits of evil, the Kingdom of God becomes immanent. Little wonder then that the desert fathers fought monstrous demons who looked suspiciously like Egyptian gods.\textsuperscript{27} In eastern Rome, rioting Christians destroyed temples, dismaying the pagan Libanius, who held that shrines were \textquote{the very soul of the countryside.\textquoteright}\textsuperscript{28} Sts. Martin of Tours, Benedict, and Boniface chopped down sacred trees in the West; John of Ephesus did so in the East. In fact, the destruction of sacred groves became so common in the Carolingian world that synods legislated the appropriate procedures.\textsuperscript{29} As Christianity expanded, demonic territory contracted. According to Walafrid Strabo, when St. Gall built his hermit hut at Lake Constance, the fleeing demons moaned that they would soon have no place left to them on earth.\textsuperscript{30}

Unless wilderness springs, wells, forests, and mountains were specifically claimed for Christ, their pagan resonances remained. The canons of local councils and the penitentials, all the way up through the time of
Burchard of Worms in the early eleventh century, repeat injunctions against going “to temples, to fountains, to trees, or to cells”; they forbid leaving offerings, candles, “little houses,” etc. Bishop Atto of Vercelli (d. 964) had to admonish even his priests against visiting groves and springs. The chronicler Rodulfus Glaber (d. ca. 1047) made no secret of his own belief in the demons who inhabited such places. Miracle stories tell how people encountered evil spirits associated with certain plants or geographical features.

Pagan geography had to be converted into Christian geography. Here I would take issue with Robert Markus’s thesis that there was “no simple substitution of a Christian for a pagan religious topography”; that “between the two lies a slow attrition of Christian belief in the unholliness of pagan holy places, and the emergence, only slightly faster, of a readiness to envisage the possibility of holiness attached to particular spots.” Although a reductionist identification of the cults of saints with those of pagan gods oversimplifies, Christian sacred geography was linked to older sanctities. In the fourth and fifth centuries, “countershrrines” had begun to arise on or near old pagan sites. In central Italy, temple sites were converted into the two greatest monasteries, Farfa and Monte Cassino. The most famous instruction on such recycling is the letter sent by Pope Gregory I to Abbot Melitus:

The idol temples of that race [the English people] should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God.

Gregory goes on to encourage the missionaries to substitute picnics for sacrificial meals, so that people can continue their old habits but “with changed hearts.” Adam of Bremen in the eleventh century described churches established in Scandinavian sacred groves. The extent of this process is suggested in recent work by Mary and Sidney Nolan, who attempted to catalogue all the major current western European pilgrimage sites: most are associated with features that have some aura of traditional natural sanctity, especially mountains and water sources.

The conversion of temples and awesome natural sites was not completed during the first phases of missionary activity. In his profile of medieval Rome, Richard Krautheimer shows that even in the very center of western
Christendom, it was well into the 600s before Christians routinely dared
to turn pagan temples into churches.\footnote{1} The Tiber island with its healing
fountain of Aesclepius was not fully converted to Christian use until around
the turn of the millennium when Otto III constructed the church of San
Bartolomeo.\footnote{2} Although in France the vast majority of the more than six
thousand sacred springs that have been identified are now dedicated to
saints, most of these Christian dedications are apparently Carolingian or
later.\footnote{3} To convert the landscape completely took centuries.

One way to see the process in action is to study geographical references
in hagiography. *Lives, miracles*, and other texts provide a series of snap-
shots witnessing cultic developments over time. A few examples taken from
them illustrate how sacred geography expanded:

Bishop Germanus of Auxerre (d. 450), who, his biographer Constantius
specifies, had no hermitage (“he . . . inhabited the desert while dwelling in
the world”), had acquired one before Auxerre’s *Gesta Episcoporum* was
written in the ninth century.\footnote{44}

The young Wandregisilus (d. ca. 668) retreated to a hermitage known to
the author of the *Gesta Abbatum Fontanelliensium*, in a section written
prior to 830, only as “quodam in loco” but which the so-called *Vita Se-
cunda*, written just a few years later, identified as Saint-Ursanne.\footnote{55}

In the *Life* of Gerald of Aurillac (d. 909) written by Abbot Odo of Cluny
(d. 942), Gerald was a monkish count not associated with any special geo-
 graphical sites. However, once the monastery that Gerald had attempted to
found during his lifetime finally prospered, amassed property, and needed
his sacrality, he came to be honored at the hill where he is said to have
died; at three fountains where he allegedly worked miracles; and even at a
tree, the “*arbre de Saint Géraud*.”\footnote{46}

In the first surviving *Life* of the seventh-century hermit Rodingus, writ-
ten by Richard of Saint-Vannes (d. 1046), he is said to have dwelt in an
unknown “place of horror and vast solitude” about a half a mile from the
monastery; in the closely related but slightly later second *Life*, the hermit-
age is located and is announced as available for tours.\footnote{47}

In the hagiography associated with the seventh-century hermit Bavo of
Ghent, no hermitage site is specified until the fourth edition of the *Life*, ca.
1100, when he became a forest dweller in a hollow tree, a place of popular
veneration “where now Mass is frequently offered.”\footnote{48}

In most of the above examples, hermits could Christianize wilderness
by dwelling within it. It may be more than coincidence that the wave of
popularity of hermit saints in tenth-eleventh-century Italy and late ele-
venth–early twelfth-century northern Europe correlates with expanding popu-
lation moving into former wilderness areas. In central and southern Italy,
for example, the era of encastellation seems to have witnessed a new wave of cave christenings. This is a region where cave sanctuaries such as those at Subiaco, Monte Tancia, and Monte Gargano had been important foci of early medieval spirituality. Now, however, Dominic of Sora (d. 1032), who founded a dozen monasteries in the high Appennines, took up eremitical residence in three different caves, which, except for two sites that claimed his relics, became his most important cult centers (his monasteries without relics or caves relatively quickly disappeared). 49 Amicus of Monte Cassino (d. ca. 1045) lived on Monte Torano in a cave that was later opened up for tours. 50 The Christianization of forests also seems to have accelerated in the eleventh century. Forest sites in Italy were donated to Romuald of Ravenna and Dominic of Sora. The forest of Craon between Brittany and Normandy was filled with hermits. The Cistercians happily acquired such “deserts.” Also impressive are the oak trees in which hermit saints such as Bavo of Ghent or Gerardus of Falkenburg (12th century) were supposed to have lived. Oaks, pines, beeches and other trees of the ancient forests appear in sacral contexts. For example, it was while sitting on an oak log that Columbanus (and many imitators) had prophetic visions. 51

Awesome places were Christianized not only to neutralize their pagan associations but also to appropriate their power. Romuald of Ravenna (d. ca. 1027), out hunting before he became a hermit, exclaimed, “O how well hermits would be able to dwell in the recesses of the woods, how nicely they could meditate here away from all the disturbances of secular strife.” 52 St. Bruno (d. 1101), after founding the Carthusian order, abandoned it for a Calabrian hermitage, about which he rhapsodized, “Where can I find the words to describe its charms, its healthy climate, or the wide and beautiful plain that stretches into the mountains where there are green pastures and meadows filled with flowers?” 53 Bernard of Clairvaux, in his letter to Henry Murdoch, exhorted, “Believe me, you will find more in forests than in books. The trees and the rocks will teach you what you cannot hear from teachers.” 54 Places relevatory for the ancient world were relevatory for Christians too—so long as they could be presented in a Christian context and carefully surrounded by Christian symbols.

This rapid survey of Christian geography has thus far, for the sake of convenience, treated churches, shrines, relics, caves, and so forth as though they had meaning in themselves. In reality, sacred space requires audience interaction—human beings to comprehend, explain, and animate it. A space can only be numinous to someone. Interrelated churches, relics, and natural sites had to be manifested by and through people.

Geographical foci usually made crowds part of the pageant. Churches drew multitudes on their saints’ days. 55 Even the most inaccessible, awe-
some natural sites could attract annual crowds. Relics brought pilgrims. All participants became symbols themselves, part of the entourage of the saints. Since Late Antiquity such symbolic roles had been easy for the clergy, who had clerical garments, tonsures, and other distinctives. Although in his Rule Benedict seems to have envisioned simple monks dressed in modest local costume, even his monks had become rather elegant by Carolingian times. Reformers worked to put penitents, pilgrims, and hermits into recognizable uniforms. Simple lay people could wear special “church clothes,” although it is unclear how far down the social ladder this would be customary or even possible. They could carry at least carry scarves, banners, medals, and staffs for pilgrimages and other special occasions. Guilds and confraternities used their insignia in festival roles.

Processions expanded sacred space outward. Christian processions had many precedents, including Christ’s entry into Jerusalem with hosannas and palm branches. From Late Antiquity onward, individual cities such as Jerusalem, Rome, and Constantinople developed elaborate annual liturgical parades. Translations of relics came to be choreographed like imperial adventus ceremonies. Statue reliquaries, which began to appear in the late Carolingian period, became popular in the last half of the tenth century and in the eleventh. These “majesties,” which were excellent for processions, proliferated just when the proponents of the Peace of God movement began bringing collections of relics to regional meetings. Processional activity was associated with all ecclesiastical rites that could be carried on out of doors, including blessings, penitential rituals, exorcisms, and ordeals. In the later Middle Ages, the great Corpus Christi parades show that these traditions could still be adapted to new forms of piety.

Processions brought monastic sacred space into the world. At Saint-Riquier in the ninth century, and at Cluny in the tenth, monks traveled from one church to another during certain offices. Although detailed liturgical information is lacking for the vast majority of houses, it seems reasonable to suppose that similar processions graced megamasteries such as ninth-century Farfa, which contained six churches in its monastic precincts, or ninth-century San Vincenzo al Volturno, which had eight. Monks sang psalms on their way to formalized, sometimes pro forma, manual labors. Those traveling on business might sing the monastic hours on the way, either on foot or on horseback. Traveling Cluniac monks were even supposed to stop at the appropriate hours, prostrate themselves, and ritually beg pardon.

Western medieval church architecture also extended the sphere of the sacred outward. Suffice it to note that bell towers are a western innovation, appearing early at St. Martin’s and St. Peter’s, and soon becoming
widespread. In Italy dozens of older churches had added campaniles during the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. Both Romanesque and Gothic architecture tried for extraordinary height effects, including elaborate entrances and bell towers, the only functions of which were to dominate the world visually and audially. Monumental crosses, rural shrines, and other structures proclaimed Christian territory.

The Christianization of landscape has significance far beyond medieval Europe. Lionel Rothkrug has drawn attention to the role of sacred geography in the Reformation—to the way German regions with many shrines and saints, such as Bavaria, remained loyal to the traditional church, while less favored regions rejected it. Eamon Duffy emphasizes the dynamic role that ecclesiastical furniture, imagery, and ceremony played in the piety of England’s “old religion.” Terrence Ranger’s study of the creation of a Christian landscape in twentieth-century Zimbabwe deals with these patterns from a contemporary anthropological standpoint. Cross-cultural comparative studies show promise. Perhaps there are more edifying ways to view the Church than to see it as a body firmly rooted in the earth, extending itself outward like a patch of crabgrass on a lawn. But the message the Church conveyed was not always sophisticated. Medieval people expressed ideas concretely in gestures, images, and physical structures. In churches, shrines, and sacred places, western European churchmen made the kingdom of God immanent to their congregations—and to themselves.

NOTES


5. David Golan, “Hadrian’s Decision to Supplant ‘Jerusalem’ by ‘Aelia Capi-


22. Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (New York: Knopf, 1987), 204–7. For further development of these ideas, see Sabine MacCormack, "Loca Sancta: The Organization of Sacred Topography in Late Antiquity," in Ousterhout, Blessings of Pilgrimage, 7–40.


25. Aline Rousselle, Croire et Guérir: La foi en Gaule dans l’Antiquité tardive (Paris: Librarie Arthème Fayard, 1990), 31–49, 181–86, solidly surveys pagan Gallo-Roman fountain lore. The flood of pertinent material, too extensive to cite here, is not always so critically analyzed or analyzable.


34. For example, note the demon who inhabited the thermal baths at Aachen before Pepin III and Charlemagne developed the place, who is mentioned in Notker the Stammerer, Charlemagne 15, trans. Lewis Thorpe in Two Lives of Charlemagne (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 160–61, or the demons in the Vienne who had to be banished by St. Martial, who are described in his vita 15, ed. Laurentius Surius, De Probatis Sanctorum Vitis, 4th ed., 12 vols. (Cologne, 1618), 6:369.


43. Jean Hubert, “Sources sacrées et sources saintes” (1967), reprint Arts et vie sociale de la fin du Moyen Age: Études d’archéologie et d’histoire. Recueil offert à


49. John Howe, Church Reform and Social Change in Eleventh-Century Italy: Dominic of Sora and His Patrons (forthcoming, University of Pennsylvania Press).


52. Peter Damian, Vita Romualdi 1, ed. Giovanni Tabacco, Fonti per la storia d'Italia 94 (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo, 1957), 14.


65. Examples of public psalming include the hermits Marinus (fl. 10th century) and Bruno of Querfurt (d. 1009) in Peter Damian, Vita Romualdi 4 and 27, pp. 20–21 and 57; Odo of Cluny in John of Salerno, Vita Odonis 2.5, ed. ASOSB


