

*How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places*¹

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This paper tries to elucidate the way in which the early Christian reluctance to accord holiness to places was overcome in the course of the fourth century. Noting the contrast between the pre-Constantinian and later fourth-century attitudes, it allows for extraneous considerations such as imperial patronage and encouragement of pilgrimage, but seeks the religious roots of this shift in Christian attitudes. The view that the example of Jerusalem and the influence of the Jerusalem liturgy encouraged devotion to sacred places elsewhere is dismissed as inadequate to explain the growth of the cult of holy places and pilgrimage to them. The paper suggests that the new post-Constantinian forms of devotion to the martyrs were an important preparation for the emergence of the idea of holy places. The cult gave place a new significance; it met a felt need to make present in post-Constantinian conditions the past of the persecuted Church. Christianity could not envisage places as intrinsically holy, only derivatively, as the sites of historical events of sacred significance.

An Egyptian sage, sorrowfully foreseeing the time when the ancient cults would be forgotten and their sites deserted, prophesied: "At that time this holiest of lands, the site of shrines and temples, will be filled with the sepulchres of dead men."² Augustine quoted this prophecy in the course of his polemical *Cook's tour of pagan religion* in his *City of God*. "What he [Egyptian Hermes] seems to be lamenting," Augustine says, "is that the memorials of our martyrs would supersede their shrines and their tem-

1. This paper is based on various earlier versions given at seminars and lectures at the Universities of Cambridge, Chicago, the Catholic University of America, and at the Conference on "Ancient History at a Modern University" in Sydney, July 1993. This last version is to be published in the proceedings of the conference, whose editors I wish to thank for permission to make use of the paper here.

2. *Asclepius*, 24 (ed. Nock & Festugière, 2.327); quoted by Augustine, *civ.* 8.26.

ples." Augustine was, of course, wise after the event. He was writing in the second decade of the fifth century; what the Egyptian sage had been afraid of had, in large measure, come to pass. But for this to have come about a huge intellectual and spiritual barrier had needed to be surmounted. What I want to try to elucidate is the way this barrier was overcome.

An earlier generation of scholars of religion would not have seen a problem here. Mircea Eliade, to take the best known example, could see holy places wherever he looked on the rich map of religions: "Every krotophany and hierophany whatsoever transforms the place where it occurs: hitherto profane, it is thenceforward a sacred area."³ Holy places, Eliade thought, are "centres": centres of religious cosmology, centres of the world, and, derivatively, places where the centre is ritually re-enacted: "Every temple or palace, and by extension, every sacred town or royal residence is assimilated to a 'sacred mountain' ['where heaven and earth meet'] and thus becomes a centre."⁴ He took it as self-evident that all religions possessed such places. This assumption caused him to mis-describe observed facts,⁵ as well as to overlook the fact that Christianity originally had no holy places and for some three centuries continued to have none. An approach more historical than Eliade's is needed if we are to come to grips with this paradox.

Robert Wilken's fine new book on the holiness of the land "called holy"⁶ has brought home to us the laborious and tortuous nature of the road which led to the gradual crystallisation of a Christian concept of a "holy land." Although not primarily concerned with the emergence in Christianity of a concept of holy places, his book naturally does touch on this subject. A "Holy Land" could scarcely have come into being had there not already been a scattering of places in the land which were reckoned to be holy. But there is still a need to consider the emergence of the idea, and the resistance to it, of a holy place.

Eusebius thought holy places were what Jews and pagans had; Christians, he thought, knew better. A formidably thorough recent study⁷ has

3. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. R. Sheed (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 367; cf. Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, tr. W. R. Trask (1954; New York: Harper, 1959), 12.

4. Eliade, *Patterns*, 375.

5. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1-23.

6. R. L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992).

7. P. W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

documented Eusebius's extreme reluctance to countenance any talk of "holy places." Moses had promised a holy land to the Jews; Jesus promised to his followers a "much greater land, truly holy and beloved of God, not located in Judaea."⁸ In Eusebius's view, place had been important to Jews and pagans; a spiritual religion such as Christianity had no room for physical holy places. If there is a holy city now, it can only be the heavenly Jerusalem.⁹ Eusebius could not quite keep up this theological conservatism in the face of Constantine's enthusiasm for the holiness of the holy places in Palestine which he adorned with his grand churches; indeed "more than any other early Christian thinker," Wilken writes, "Eusebius was able to adapt his thinking to the new things that happened in his day."¹⁰ Eusebius belonged to an older Christian tradition. In its first centuries Christianity was a religion highly inhospitable to the idea of "holy places"; by the end of the fourth century it had become highly receptive. A measure of the shift in the extent to which these were accepted is furnished by the striking difference in attitude between Eusebius of Caesarea and, in the next generation, Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem in the middle decades of the century, embraced the new fashion with enthusiasm: "others merely hear," he told his catechumens; "we see and touch."¹¹ To him Jerusalem was a holy city not just as "a place in which God had occasionally been involved in the past: it was a place with a special quality in the present."¹²

Eusebius had good reasons for being apprehensive about a neighbouring see in his own province. Jerusalem was a minor suffragan see under his metropolitan jurisdiction; through the lavish favours of the emperor Constantine and the vast programme of building, it was beginning to look a dangerous rival which could upstage Caesarea. So Eusebius had ample grounds for denying its claims to holiness; but neither the actions of the first Christian emperor nor ecclesiastical rivalries will by themselves explain the extraordinary sea-change we can detect between him and Cyril within a generation. If Eusebius, late in life, could accommodate himself to the novelties that the emperor's religious convictions ushered into his world, many Christians of the fourth century remained reserved, remem-

8. *Dem. ev.* 3.2.10.

9. *Dem. ev.* 4.12.4; 10.8.64; cf. Walker, *Holy City*, 69.

10. *The Land*, 81. Wilken (see especially pp. 88–91 and n. 27) convincingly modifies the view put forward by Walker (pp. 108–116) that Eusebius's assent to the emperor's views was as grudging and as minimising in its intent as was his use of the emperor's vocabulary.

11. *Catech.* 13.22.

12. Walker, *Holy City*, 329.

bering that faith comes not by sight or by touch, but by hearing (Rom 10.17). Thus Gregory of Nyssa, in the later fourth century, feeling it necessary to excuse a visit to Jerusalem as necessitated by official business, explained that he had believed in all the great things that had happened there long before his visit. "So praise the Lord, you who fear Him, in whatever place you are: for no travelling around will bring you nearer to Him."¹³ He had no need to see and touch. And even Jerome, as ardent a Jerusalem-dweller as any, could, on occasion, voice similar sentiments.

It was not only the holy places of Palestine over whose holiness there were mixed feelings. Because of Vigilantius's attack on the cult of relics and holy places in Palestine around 400,¹⁴ even Jerome had to admit that the means now used to honour God were those that had until not long ago been used for honouring the gods, that martyrs were honoured in ways that had been those of idolatry.¹⁵ Ambrose's famous translation of the relics in Milan in 386 and their subsequent cult could still arouse suspicion, and needed defence.¹⁶ The general change of mood is reflected in Augustine's own personal evolution between the years 401 and 422. Reluctant, at first, to countenance the cult of relics, and feeling his way towards an idea of nature subject to its own laws, he allowed little room for miracles in his own times. In his later years, however, he was ready to see daily miracles wrought by the relics of Saint Stephen, recently discovered and brought to Africa, and to make use of them in his pastoral work among his congregations; and he came to accept the prevalent belief in the everyday occurrence of miracles: "the world itself is God's greatest miracle,"¹⁷ he wrote, thus dissolving the idea, barely embryonic, of a nature subject to its own natural laws in the freedom of the divine will. And even when the notion of "holy places" gradually got a foothold in Christian devotion, resistance to taking over pagan holy places lingered: the inhibitions which led the Christians of Gaza to raze the local temple of Baal before building their church on its stones reused in its pavement took almost two centuries to overcome. The principle laid down by Gregory the Great in his famous instruction to his missionaries on the reuse of pagan English sanctuaries gave enlightened recognition to what became widespread practice.¹⁸

13. *Ep.* 2 (PG 46.1013C); cf. Eusebius, *dem. ev.* 1.6.65.

14. See my brief discussion in *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 148–49.

15. *C. Vigilant.* 7 (PL 23.361).

16. *Ps.-Jerome, ep.* 6.11 (PL 30.92).

17. *Civ.* 10.12. See my *The End*, 149.

18. See my brief remarks, with references, in *The End*, 154–55.

Such were the hesitations that accompanied the emergence of the cult; but the tide had turned, and turned decisively. Not until the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation would the cult of relics and the idea of pilgrimage to holy places be once again subjected to the suspicion and disapproval they had to overcome in the fourth century.¹⁹ The suspicion and the disapproval are hardly surprising: the cults were not only a novelty, but they cut across the grain of ideas that had been deeply embedded in the consciousness of Christians of an earlier age. We have had some fine studies of the “complicated story” of the fundamental differences and continuities between Christian and earlier, “pagan,” religions;²⁰ what, however, still needs elucidating is the remarkable *volte-face* among Christians on this matter.

It is clear from all the evidence at our disposal that popular enthusiasm ran well ahead of informed clerical opinion on this matter. Despite the reservations of churchmen and thinkers, the cult of the holy places and pilgrimages to them caught on very rapidly.²¹ It is easy to understand this in the context of the decades immediately following Constantine’s victory over Licinius in 324 which brought him into control of the Eastern provinces. This inaugurated his building activities there, very soon to be followed by much-publicised devotional tourism undertaken by members of the imperial family itself. It can now hardly be open to doubt that here we have a genuine Constantinian revolution. As the most recent and most thorough critical examination of the evidence concludes, “There is no evidence at all that Jewish-Christians, or any other kind of Christians, venerated sites as sacred before the beginning of the fourth century,” and that claims made for a continuous Christian or Jewish-Christian cult make sense of the evidence only on a highly questionable set of presuppositions.²² What began in the 320s and 330s was something quite new. Constantine’s building activities, and initiatives by other Christians such

19. On the debates over the letter, including those between the Magdeburg Centuriators, *IVa cent. eccles. hist.* (Basel 1560, cols. 930ff) and Baronius (*Annales*, s.a. 386) see P. Maraval, “Une querelle sur les pèlerinages autour d’un texte patristique (Grégoire de Nysse, Lettre 2),” *RHPbR* 66 (1986): 131–46.

20. Especially Sabine MacCormack, “*Loca sancta*: The Organization of Sacred Topography on Late Antiquity,” in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. R. Ousterhout (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990): 7–40. I owe much to this study, even though it seems to me to fall short in the particular respect I seek to correct in this paper.

21. Eusebius allows us to infer that Christian pilgrimage began very soon, even before he was writing: e.g., *dem. ev.* 1.1.2; 7.2.14 (Bethlehem); 6.18.23 (Mount of Olives); *onomast.* 74.16–18 (Gethsemane).

22. This is the conclusion of the very cogent arguments of Joan E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). The quotation is from her own summary, 295.

as those of the Jewish convert, Joseph of Tiberias (reported by Epiphanius²³), who wished to build churches in Jewish strongholds in the 330s, were part of the campaign against paganism and Judaism. Christianity would supersede and efface the existing pagan, Jewish, or Samaritan cults in places which had a biblical association. Such places could be “restored” to Christians, who were in imperial eyes their rightful owners.

Was it then simply the imperial initiative, followed almost overnight by popular enthusiasm for the cult of the holy places and for pilgrimage to them, that explains the origin of Christian holy places? That this was in large measure the case can hardly be doubted. It was certainly not a change in Christian views about places: these views seem to have been far more hostile, and remained, to say the least, ambivalent for a considerable time. When scholars have tried to explain this shift—as a few have, though only too rarely—they have usually started from Jerusalem and the other “holy places” in what later became known as “the holy land”; other holy places elsewhere are then seen as having come into being by analogy, imitation, or through influence from Jerusalem. I want to reverse this order. I shall argue that in fact what came first were new feelings associated with other holy places, notably, the burials of martyrs, which brought about the change; that it was not primarily a change of attitude to place so much as to history that was at the bottom of it; and that the attitudes towards holy places in general changed slowly, lagging behind the new cultic practices which had already begun in Jerusalem. The very rapid coalescence of the new cults with the ancient practices of venerating and visiting the burial places of the martyrs should incline us to reflect on the affinity of the two cults, or rather, the cult of two classes of holy place. Could it be that the old practice, long accepted among Christians, came to warrant the new, and suspect practice? and even, soon, to reinforce it, as the affinity between the two came to be more distinctly perceived? I want to explore an affirmative answer to these questions.

The history of place in Christianity is by no means simple. History—understood as narrative of temporal events—had been a fundamental datum of Christian belief from the start: belief in Christ necessarily comprehended, as its very basis, the acts of God, in the earthly life of the incarnate Lord, done in place and time. All the early community’s eschatological hopes were founded on this historical faith. Scholarly interest in the biblical revelation led naturally to an interest in biblical places, just as it encouraged chronological awareness. Eusebius’s gazetteer to the

23. *Pan.* XXX.11.9–10. On him, see Taylor, 56–57, 227–28, 276, 288–89, 293, 338–40.

Bible, the *Onomasticon*, was a complement of his chronological enquiries: as Dennis Groh has concluded in an important study, “in the *Onomasticon* Eusebius is doing spatially (and alphabetically) what he has already done chronologically in the *Chronicon* and what he will go on to do narratively in the *History* It is not a religious Palestine of pious Christians that Eusebius envisions but a Christian continuity with the biblical world expressed in contemporary Roman *space* and nomenclature”²⁴ Catherine Delano Smith²⁵ has traced a whole tradition of cartography which has its origins in his interest in mapping. This sort of interest in place and topography belongs to the realm of exegetical and historical studies—shared, as far as the shadowy information we have allows us to conjecture, by a few early scholar-travellers;²⁶ it does not belong to the history of Christian devotion or pilgrimage. A by-product of the scholarly tasks, this emergence of a Scriptural topography had as little to do with any Christian cult of the holy places as Eusebius’s interest in the martyrs mentioned in the *Ecclesiastical history* had to do with any cult of martyrs and their relics. Both reflect a need for the construction of a spatial and temporal understanding of a Judaeo-Christian history within the spatial and temporal coordinates of the Roman world.²⁷ But the emergence of the idea of a “holy place,” that is to say, a place as an object of devotion, of pilgrimage, one sanctified by ritual, that is a different matter altogether.

That the prevailing mood underwent a profound change in the course of the fourth century is not open to doubt. Christians could not entirely forget St Paul’s warning that spaces could not be inherently holy: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in shrines made by man” (Acts 17.24), he had said; they themselves were the temple of the living God (2 Cor. 6.16).

24. “The *Onomasticon* of Eusebius and the Rise of Christian Palestine,” *StPatr* 18 (1985): 23–31. See also T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 110.

25. See especially “Geography or Christianity? Maps of the Holy Land before A.D. 1000,” *JThS* n.s. 42 (1991): 143–152, and “Maps as Art and Science: Maps in Sixteenth Century Bibles,” *Imago Mundi* 42 (1990): 65–83. The maps of the division of Judaea into tribal allotments are mentioned in the *Onomasticon*, 2.8–9.

26. On the nature of the early interest shown in Jerusalem and Palestine, see P. Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d’Orient* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 23–28. It is clear that pilgrimage in the proper sense began only in the fourth century, though well before Constantine’s building programme got under way, as is clear from the evidence of Eusebius, see above, n. 21.

27. For an exceptionally illuminating study of these, see C. Nicolet, *L’inventaire du monde* (Paris: Fayard, 1988); cf. N. Purcell, “Maps, Lists, Money, Order and Power,” *JRS* 80 (1990): 178–82.

Their churches were not temples of a divinity, only gathering places for his worshippers. "As this building," Augustine said, preaching at the dedication of a church, "was made for the purpose of congregating us bodily, so that building which is ourselves, is built spiritually for God."²⁸ It was the community that was holy, not the church that housed it. The building had a sacredness only derivatively. "These temples of wood or stone are built so that in them the living temples of God may be congregated and gathered into one temple of God."²⁹ Bishops and theologians would continue to remind their readers and hearers that God is wholly everywhere all at once (*totus ubique simul*), that His majesty could not be enclosed in any building or place, that he is worshipped more suitably in our innermost hearts and minds than in any place set aside.³⁰ But new ways of speech were making their appearance in media which reflect more directly the instinctive habits of imagination: we have inscriptions that speak of "the house of God," "the hall of Christ," and the like; and visual imagery represented the saint in his shrine just as age-old representations showed the dead in his tomb.³¹ Before long "*locus sanctus* narratives" would come to adorn churches.³²

The gulf which separates the two kinds of discourse has been very suitably characterised in terms of a fundamental dichotomy between "locative" and "utopian" orientations in religion.³³ It would be a simplification to describe early Christianity as entirely non-locative, or "utopian," in the vocabulary of the Chicago scholar Jonathan Z. Smith; to do so would be to play down the tension between a variety of features present within the earliest Christian traditions. All the same, there is a clear shift in

28. Augustine, *sermo* 337.2. This is a frequent theme: e.g. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 3; 32; Tertullian, *de corona*, 9.2.

29. Caesarius of Arles, *sermo* 229.2.

30. E.g., Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 32.2; Augustine, *In Ioh. ev. tr.* X.1. The notion is, of course, a commonplace of earlier apologetic: cf. e.g. *acta Iust.* Rec. B., 3 (Musurillo, 48); Justin, *dial.* 127.2; Theophilus of Antioch, *ad Autol.* II.3.

31. See MacCormack, "The Organization of Sacred Topography" on the iconography. Not all the references given on p. 15, notes 42–43, are to the point; but the Index to Diehl's *ICLV* under "domus", "aedes", "aula", referring to churches furnishes plenty of examples.

32. Cf. H. L. Kessler, "Pictorial Narrative and Church Mission in Sixth-Century Gaul," in *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. H. L. Kessler & M. S. Simpson (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1985): 75–91, at 84.

33. Jonathan Z. Smith's distinction is elaborated in several of his essays: *Map is Not Territory* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 88–103 (esp. 101); 104–128; 172–189; For its widest bearings, see now his *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 121–22. See also Rowan Williams, "Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?" in *The Making of Orthodoxy*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 1–23 (especially 6, 9–10).

the fourth century towards the “locative” pole on this grid. How are we to account for it?

A good starting point is to be clear about what we mean by a “holy place.” In line with most anthropologists, as well as with the author of the “locative”/“utopian” classification, we may adopt the principle that “ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest.” It “is not an expression of or a response to ‘the Sacred’; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual.”³⁴ Places thus become sacred through the interest focused on them in ritual. The secret, according to Smith, of the wholesale christianisation of Roman topography from the fourth century on, is to be found in Jerusalem. For it was in Jerusalem that Christian ritual first came to sacralise a place. Here “Constantine created, for the first time, a Christian ‘Holy Land,’ laid palimpsest-like over the old, and interacting with it in complex ways, having for its central foci a series of imperial-dynastic churches.”³⁵ Here alone, not in Constantinople or anywhere else, could the emperor create an urban space which would be articulated within the topography of the Scriptural narratives: “In Jerusalem, story, ritual, and place could be one.”³⁶

Constantine, so the argument runs, created the conditions for the sacralisation of the “holy places” by his foundation of the great memorial buildings in Palestine. Ritual processions came quickly to develop around these buildings and related sites, which brought the physical places and the narratives of the corresponding biblical events into close relation. This created a wholly new set of ritual relationships in which place and time, site and commemorated event, were closely integrated; instead of the customary “continuous reading” of the Scriptures, specific passages came to be attached to specific sites and the events associated with them: readings *apta diei et loco*,³⁷ as the late fourth-century pilgrim to the Holy Places would keep remarking. There you have a fully fledged “holy place.” “Story and text, liturgical action, and a unique place are brought together

34. *To Take Place*, 103; 105. See also *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 54: “A sacred place is a place of clarification (a focusing lens) where men and gods had to be transparent to each other.”

35. *To Take Place*, 79. Eusebius, incidentally, reveals the opposition of some conservative—probably pagan rather than “utopian”—critics: “. . . those who in the blindness of their souls are ignorant of matters divine hold the deed [of founding the church of the Holy Sepulchre] a joke and frankly ridiculous, believing that for so great a sovereign to bother himself with memorials to human corpses and tombs is unfitting and demeaning.” *Or. de laud. Const.* 11.3 (trans. H. Drake).

36. *To Take Place*, 86.

37. *Pereg. Egeriae* 47.5.

in relations of equivalence What is important about this development," Smith concluded, "is that it brought about the overlaying of a temporal system and a spatial system."³⁸ And once you've got one holy place, the idea of holy places could spread, and holy places multiply.

This, we are told, is exactly what happened. The physical relationship between place and event that could be commemorated in the appropriate readings was, of course, unrepeatable elsewhere; but of the central importance of the Jerusalem liturgy in shaping the wider Church's worship there is no doubt.³⁹ Jerusalem set the pattern for other churches; especially, it seems, in the matter of adopting prescribed sets of readings from the Scriptures. Specific passages came to be substituted for the older custom of continuous readings from the Scriptures. (It deserves to be noted, however, that the traditional *lectio continua* had often been modified, both on the greater festivals and on the anniversaries of martyrs, by the choice of readings more appropriate to the particular occasion; so the novelty is not all that radical.) Jerusalem ritual thus transformed the Church's traditional practice. And, as Dom Gregory Dix powerfully argued, the new stress on historical events bound to place and time changed the older eschatologically oriented, ahistorical worship and non-locative religiosity into a more profoundly place-bound piety; first in Palestine, then elsewhere.

The impetus to enhanced importance being attached to places, on this argument, came from what was happening in and around Jerusalem. But there are several difficulties with this argument:

(i) The spread of a Jerusalem-style lectionary, with the readings related to Jerusalem told in the biblical stories, could certainly have produced an enhanced sense *in other places* of the significance of places in the Holy Land; but it is hard to see how such readings could enhance the sense of the holiness of these *other* places, the places where the stories were being read. Smith himself seems to be pointing to this in suggesting that the cutting of the link between the city of Jerusalem and the events commemorated in the readings is what made the exportation of the new practice possible: "It is through structures of temporality, as ritualized, that the divisiveness and

38. *To Take Place*, 89, 92.

39. Since Gregory Dix's classic work, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (London: Dacre Press, 1945) the most important on the influence of Jerusalem is Anton Baumstark, *Comparative Liturgy*, tr. F. L. Cross (London: Mowbray, 1958); on the lectionary, J. A. Jungmann, *Missarum sollemnia* (Wien: Herder, 1948), 483–562; for Jerusalem, R. Zerk, *Die Schriflesung im Kathedraffizium Jerusalems*, Liturgiewiss. Quellen u. Forsch., 48 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1968), referred to by Smith.

particularity of space are overcome.”⁴⁰ The link between the narrative record and the event commemorated survived, but the link with the place of the event was broken. One would have thought this would *deprive* places of any special significance, rather than make them holy.

(ii) The argument that the new practices at Jerusalem and the emphasis they threw on spatially and temporally defined events gave a new orientation to the earlier eschatological nature of worship seems well supported by the evidence. But we must be clear as to the exact meaning of this statement. What this change may well have done was to re-orientate devotion, as Dix thought: “the idea of historical commemoration,” he wrote, [was] “virtually an invention of the fourth century . . .”; and, referring to the celebration of martyrs’ anniversaries, whose “birthdays,” as they had been known in early days, were now their “depositions,” he summed up the change thus: “the earthly, not the heavenly, event is now the object of the liturgical celebration; time and history, not eternity, have become the primary interest of the calendar.”⁴¹ “Christian ritual, once brought into contact in the fourth century with the *loca sancta* of Palestine, turned from the vertical dimension of the associative to the linear dimension of the syntagmatic, to an emphasis on narrative and temporal relations.”⁴² What Smith is here referring to is the growing emphasis on the historical narrative at the expense of the eschatological significance of the central events of the redemption history. Local history was combined with what Dom Gregory Dix in his classic discussion⁴³ called “the old non-historical cycle” of celebrations, that is to say, the cycle of Sundays and the great seasonal festivals.

Now this may be, indeed is, quite true; but this is not to say that earlier Christian worship had not been historical in nature, only that the eschatological significance of the commemorated events was at the focus of worship. But it was events which had always been taken to be historical—and events, as Eusebius, Melito and others had always known, spatially and temporally defined—that were celebrated on Sundays, at Easter, and the other great festivals. The change in the fourth century was not from eschatology to history, but from the eschatological meaning of the historical narratives to their topographical associations.

(iii) But the chief difficulty is the fact that the argument does not answer but rather restates our question: for to say that these sites came to be

40. *To Take Place*, 94–5.

41. Dix, *The Shape*, 28.

42. Smith, *To Take Place*, 88.

43. *The Shape*, 347.

surrounded by ritual is simply to say that they became holy. What we want to know is why, how was it possible that any place should become holy? How could the ancient objections so lose their power? To be sure, emperors had begun to build, decorate and endow grand churches for favoured bishops and their congregations. Large public spaces in the cities of the Empire now became available for the open display of Christian ritual and worship and encouraged display and ceremony;⁴⁴ but such things hardly seem enough to account for the change in Christian attitudes. Emperors usually found Christian devotional practice more resistant to their influence even than were their beliefs. The growth of ritual around sacred sites that took place in the later fourth century seems to require more explanation than the mere availability of ritual space. The dynamics of religious change are generally more complicated than is suggested by a simple story of mere betrayal of principles held earlier, or perhaps one told in terms of corruption by power, or by wealth; certainly so in the present case.

What I want to suggest is that we need to give the first importance to the "local," the cult of the martyrs, in bringing about the transformation we are concerned with; and with it, to the notion of sacred time. Christian sacred time did not emerge as a by-product of the creation of the holy places of Jerusalem and Palestine. Rather, I think, the reverse was the case: Christian sacred space and topography were the product of an already fully-fledged sense of Christian sacred time. The great contribution of the fourth century was to intensify a long established system of Christian sacred time; and one of the consequences—very indirectly—was the emergence of holy places and of a sacred Christian topography. I will now sketch how I think this came about.

The first stage was what Dom Gregory Dix called the wholesale "sanctification of time." I have argued elsewhere⁴⁵ that the new conditions of a Christianity favoured by emperors, fashionable, prestigious and likely to confer worldly advantage, required a huge spiritual adjustment from its adherents. They needed to be able to see themselves as the true descendants of the persecuted Church and the rightful heirs of the martyrs; and it was just this that had become so difficult. Among the many expressions of this

44. This has been stressed especially for the development of the stationar liturgies in Jerusalem, Rome and Constantinople by J. F. Baldwin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development and Meaning of Stational Liturgy*, *OrChrAn* 228 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987). E.g. "The new factor in the fourth century . . . was the freedom that Christians now had to worship in a truly public fashion." (265).

45. See *The End*. The next paragraph is in part borrowed from pp. 90–95.

need I here quote only one, one of the earliest, written on the morrow of the revolution that had transformed, almost overnight, the persecuted Church into a triumphant, and soon to be dominant, élite:

We, although not held worthy to have struggled [*agonizasthai*] unto death and to have shed our blood for God, yet, being the sons of those who have suffered thus and distinguished [*semmunomenoi*] by our fathers' virtues, pray for mercy through them.⁴⁶

To bridge this generation gap, Eusebius and his contemporaries and successors had to convince themselves that, essentially, nothing had changed and that their Church was still the Church of the martyrs. No radical break could be allowed to divide the triumphant Church of the fourth and later centuries from its persecuted predecessor. The past had to be kept alive in the Church's mind, and not only alive, but renewed in the novel conditions of its existence. And it was the cult of the martyrs that more than anything else enabled them to bridge this hiatus. Through this means they were able to annex their lost past; they could affirm the identity of their Church with the Church of the martyrs. In their presence, they could experience the exultation of the martyr:

No oppressor's sword has been drawn against us; we have free access to God's altars; no savage enemy lies in wait for us . . . no torturer has attacked us . . . no blood is shed now, no persecutor pursues us; yet we are filled with the joy of triumph . . .⁴⁷

—this is how at the end of the fourth century a bishop in the remote North of Gaul could lead his congregation in welcoming the relics of martyrs brought from Italy. The past was reclaimed; the gulf between it and the present abolished.

The way to this "sanctification of time" was neither short nor simple. The new importance of the martyrs was crucial. It is hardly necessary to document here the cult of the martyrs, its ubiquity and the huge momentum given it in the fourth century. Christian worship had always had a temporal dimension. It always gave central significance to the past: in the first place the biblical past, in the second place the past of the persecuted Church. The events of the Lord's incarnation, earthly life, death and resurrection had been central in the development of the annual cycle of worship from the earliest times to which Christian worship can be traced. But the fourth century experienced a powerful, new need for a sense of its continu-

46. Eusebius, *comm. in Ps.* 78.11 (PG 23.949A).

47. Victricius of Rouen, *De laude sanct.* 1.

ity with the persecuted Church. This is what is dramatically displayed in the swamping of the liturgical calendar with martyrs' festivals and the development of their liturgy.

Thus Christians of the post-Constantinian era defined their identity, their sense of being the heirs of their persecuted ancestors, in historical terms. But this indirectly contributed to giving place a new importance as well as to historical time. Place was irretrievably involved in celebrating a martyr's "birthday" or "deposition." The cult of the martyrs retained much of the "domestic character of primitive Christian worship."⁴⁸ In its origins it had been in the nature of a private, family commemoration; and even when it had begun, before the middle of the fourth century, to spread from the martyr's own church to other churches, the martyr always retained his link with his own church. The celebration of a martyr commemorated a person in a local event, the martyr dying *here*, in his witness to the Lord. In that commemoration Jesus was honoured as the Lord "not only of universal history but of homely local history as well."⁴⁹

The veneration of martyrs thus served to assure the Christians of a local church of its continuity with its own heroic, persecuted, past, and the universal Church of its continuity with the age of the martyrs. In meeting this huge need of fourth-century Christians, however, it also gave a new importance to place. And two further elaborations of the cult served only to enhance and extend this new sanctification of places: the veneration of martyrs' relics, and the integration of this with the normal worship of urban communities in their churches. The commemoration of the martyr had been tied, originally, to a physical place, that of the burial; and the annual celebration of the anniversary, in however simple or intimate a manner, was a place-bound ritual. In this sense the tomb could always count as a "holy place." Like the tomb, relics linked the martyr's commemoration to physical places; but they made possible the multiplication of such places, liberating the possible holiness of places from the immovability of the tomb. The annual walk to the cemetery and the commemoration there would be replaced by a network of urban churches and the regular cycle of their liturgy. The presence of relics turned the churches into "holy places" housing the saint, in a sense they could not be while they housed only the worshipping congregation. A network of "holy places" thus came into being, in which suburban burials, urban churches, and the more remote destinations of pilgrimage came to define a whole sacred topography of the Roman, and now also Christian, world. Places became

48. Dix, *The Shape*, 348.

49. *Ibid.*, 333.

accepted as sacred through their association with God's action made visible in the world, either in His saving work in the land of Palestine, or through the presence, anywhere, of those who bore their witness to Him. The sacredness of space was a reflex, a projection on the ground, of the sacredness of time. A new sacred topography came gradually to organise the Christian perception of space and to overlay the old, pre-Christian meanings.

Christian holy places thus stood in sharp contrast with pagan places redolent of their "fearful dread."⁵⁰ "Originally the [pagan] holiness had been impersonal and inherent in the place, in nature";⁵¹ and, we are told, "in pagan Greek the word 'holy' applied to places, but not to people," even though "canny men" would often make use of "uncanny places."⁵² In this sense, Christianity was—and, perhaps, is, or ought to be—deeply hostile to allowing any place to become holy.

Christianity, when it finally endowed itself with holy places, did so almost inadvertently, certainly indirectly, as a consequence of identifying itself with a historical past. A scheme of sacred time had long been an essential part of Christian religiosity, faith and worship. It became very much more elaborate, and its hold on Christian minds much more thorough, in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries, for reasons that the conditions of post-Constantinian Christianity allow us to comprehend. A sense of sacred space, and of a sacred Christian topography, was, however, a late arrival on the Christian scene, and one in large measure produced by the enhanced sense of the past, and the need to experience it as present. Places became sacred as the past became localised in the present. It was always the past that really mattered, and it was the impact of past human action that gave places their significance: "You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid."

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50. *religio . . . dira loci*: Virgil, *Aen.* 8.347–54.

51. MacCormack, "The organization of sacred topography", 10. For a sophisticated account of the passage from pagan places of healing (especially at springs) to healing by Christian saints and, eventually, by their relics, see now Aline Rousselle, *Croire et guérir* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

52. R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1986), 253, 204–05. Cf. for instance, J. Helgeland, "Time and Space: Christian and Roman," *ANRW* 2.23.2 (1980): 1285–1305: "As in prophetic and Christian religion the leitmotif was time, so in Roman religion it was space . . ." Somewhat overestimating the speed of the process, however, he goes on to add: "The ink of the New Testament scarcely dried before the shift from time to space had started" (1292).