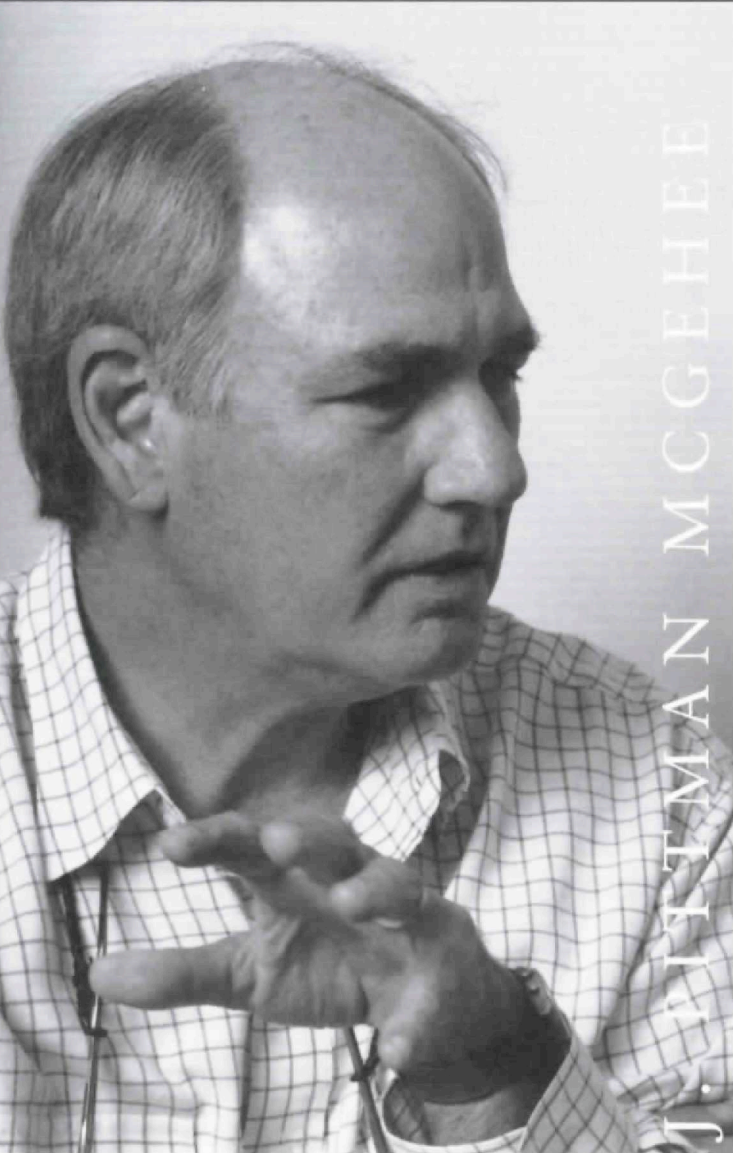


LOOKING FOR

A priest and a novelist ask each other, what makes a place sacred?



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What makes a building religious? What distinguishes a church, a temple, or a mosque from any other structure? What, in short, separates the secular from the sacred? A century or so ago, that might have been an easy question. But as we bid farewell to one millennium and welcome another, few questions are easy anymore. To try to answer this one, *Cite* asked novelist Paula J. Webb to sit down with priest and psychoanalyst J. Pittman McGehee and wrestle with the nature of sacred places. • McGehee served for 11 years as the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Houston and now practices as a Jungian analyst through Broadacres Center. He is also a professor of analytic psychology at the University of Houston, a regular lecturer at the C. G. Jung Educational Center, a frequent speaker in the fields of psychology and religion, and a published poet. • Webb, an essayist as well as a novelist, teaches writing workshops through the Writers Collaborative. Her novel *Domestic Life* was published in 1992. She's currently at work on a second, as well as a collection of short stories entitled *All I Know*. • Both McGehee and Webb are Episcopalians, longtime Houstonians, and filled with ideas about the definition, form, and function of what is and what might be a sacred place.

Paula J. Webb: About this God thing, Pittman, you're for it, right?

J. Pittman McGehee: Well, I used to carry around this quotation from Jung in my billfold. It came from a letter, in which he said, "My *raison d'être* consists in coming to terms with that indefinable being we call God." So, I'm a wrestler with that concept as much as anything.

PW: In the way that you celebrate your faith, what role does place play? I mean, where do you go, and what do you do?

PM: Well, this is very complicated. Traditionally, there are four ways that people experience God. One of them's in nature, and the second one is through creativity — people have an experience of what they name God through art, through literature, through what we call creativity. The third is through ritual process, and the last one is through other people, through love.

Now, under the experience of God through ritual process, there are objective and subjective understandings of sacred space. It's the *temenos* idea, which comes from the healing tradition. The idea was to draw a circle, and that was the *temenos*, and inside that circle, it was sacred. Inside that *temenos* healing and incubation and change could happen, and really that's our earliest understanding of sacred space. So we have this consensus reality that the intention of this space is to point toward the fact that mystery is available to be experienced in this place.

Then you come into what is called a sacramental principle, which means that we set aside one thing to represent another. It's like bread. We say that this bread is set aside to symbolize the incarnation of God, that God is in the human experience, and we say that this bread represents that.

Now in this sacramental principle, we don't believe that anything that's set apart for something is an exclusive arena for it. In other words, this bread is the representation of the incarnation of God, but that doesn't mean that this is the only place that this happens.

So one of the things that sacred space would say to me is that it is not an exclusive space. Christ Church Cathedral downtown is only there to represent that mystery is in the world.

PW: To remind us that the doors are open?

PM: Yes, and the space does always have

to, it seems to me, have the purpose of pointing beyond itself.

PW: So imagine that you are an architect who has gotten this incredible commission to build a sacred space. There is no budget. Just whatever you want. Tell me what that might be like. What makes it work?

PM: Well, I'd first try to discern the soul of the people. How do they project their soul?

PW: But what if they were you?

PM: What if they were me? Well, it would be a house with a lot of room to do everything from art to drama to music. A lot of open space, not predetermined space. What you'll see in most churches is predetermined. That is, we're going to walk up here to communion, and then we're going to file around, and the choir's going to sit here. I'd rather have an undefined space where we could be dynamic and change as we do our worship. I'd do like they do on college campuses: wait and see where the students walk, and then build the sidewalks.

And I'd build a space to see if I could capture something of the mystery. I'm an Anglican and mystery's big, and I'm a postmodern person, so I don't want a lot of definition. I'd want a lot of openness and a lot of inclusiveness. I'd think about intentional space but not defined space.

PW: But isn't defined space important to a lot of people?

PM: Well, sure. You go to a Protestant church and you'll find the pulpit right in the middle of the church. Well, that says what that church is, what the soul of the people is there. It's the word, the preaching. The liturgy is basically the spoken word. It's a rational kind of religion, everybody proof-texting things, wanting to prove God.

With other liturgical traditions such as Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism or Anglicanism, the altar is the center, and the pulpit is over on the side because the sermon is really just one piece of the drama. The real drama is inside the sanctuary at the Eucharist.

So you see, the definition's right there. We define space as mysterious and Eucharistic, or as word. So between sacrament and word, you can look at the architecture and see what that community emphasizes.

G O D ' S H O U S E

The other thing that we find in contemporary Christianity, particularly American Christianity, is that it's less about mystery and more about entertainment. These big megachurches in Houston are theaters. They're not sacred, and they haven't been designed to capture the mystery. They're called auditoriums. They're not called sanctuaries.

PW: And what are those places like?

PM: It's just like going to Jones Hall. It's theater seats, where the audience is passive. It's staged for media, TV. It's really a stage with an audience, it's not a congregation, but that's what the soul of those people seem to desire. They want to be entertained.

PW: And sacred spaces aren't for entertaining?

PM: Well, you've got this sort of consensus reality about what objective sacred space is. It involves an understanding of the intent or soul of the people, and it needs to contain symbols, the symbols of the people, whether it's a star and crescent, or whether it's light, or whether it's crosses, or whatever.

But subjectively, I find I bring my own sort of sacredness with me. It's portable, and I can worship or find some meaning in a lot of different kinds of spaces, like at a Rolling Stones concert or a Rockets game or fishing down at Port O'Connor.

Now I do think place has some influence. I personally am going to be more likely to have enthusiasm — which means "God within" — in, say, Chartres rather than a place with an electric organ and shag carpeting.

PW: So how do you court or woo or put yourself in the path of a real spiritual experience?

PM: I think the Buddhists are really so far ahead of Western Christianity in their idea of living mindfully, which means the ability to see the sacred in the mundane, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the miraculous in the everyday. They say that you can experience God or the numinous in chopping wood and hauling water. That's living mindfully, so if I have been taught by sacred space that the sacred is available, then I don't just go to sacred spaces looking for it. That's what the sacred place teaches me, that sacredness finally is inside me, therefore portable.

Jesus kept saying things like "those

who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear." Well, that's that kind of consciousness we're talking about. I can see a lot of space as sacred, but I can't expect to have a numinous experience in every sacred place. You can't control that.

PW: Do you think it's easier if you're by yourself?

PM: I think there's a difference, but I don't think it's easier. In times of transition, loss, change of one kind or another, a lot of people will seek out a sacred space as a symbol of the availability of some new energy, something to help them make a decision. I think that's an individual process.

At the same time, when Jesus said that "where two or three are gathered together, I will be in the midst of them," the idea was that much of our experience is born out of community. Generally in Christianity, the tradition is that the priest has to have the community there, which means one other person, in order to celebrate the Eucharist.

PW: Built structures tend to be communal structures rather than individual havens. There are people who go out and build their own chapels in the woods, but you could argue pretty soundly that the great sacred buildings were designed for communal activities.

PM: But remember also that in the great cathedrals are a plethora of chapels, small spaces within the large space for more individualized experiences. Go to any of the great cathedrals, and you'll find all these side chapels. It's so awe inspiring in there, and you might want an individual experience, and that's made available.

PW: But what does that say about so many people being drawn these days to these Astrodome-like kinds of religious experience?

PM: That it's exciting, and one of the things that we mistake for numinosity is excitement. There's such hunger for the spiritual now, that people have it confused with excitement.

You know, even if we could come up with a list of objective criteria for what sacred space is, I don't think we would capture the idea of sacred space. It's a combination always of objective and subjective stuff. It's like art, and certainly it depends on what you bring to it, like your personality, your socio-economic level,

your educational stuff. There are a lot of factors.

Some people go to those great cathedrals, like Saint Paul's in London, and they go totally as tourists. They don't make any differentiation between that and the big palace they went to, or Shakespeare's home. Now I go to Saint Paul's and have Evensong, and I'm elevated to some celestial place. For me, it's a real sacred place, but for others it's a kind of historic monument. I think if a space is really sacred, it has to be alive, it has to be dynamic. That's why I was saying I wouldn't want so much definition in the space, so it could stay alive.

PW: When I talk to people about their sacred experiences, they often mention events at the beach or on mountains. What's that all about?

PM: I think nature is just closer to the source in a way. One of the earliest God images is what we call animism, which is that we project soul into objects. Trees have souls. Rocks have souls. That's animism.

One thing that is interesting is that in nature there are no straight lines. It's only in the artifact that you see that. Nature is of the authentic, its own imperfection, and it doesn't purport to be perfect. You know the tradition of the great cathedrals where the narthex is always off center with the altar? That's just the architect's witness to the fact that there is no perfect building.

For most of us most of the time, experiences that are moving and transformative are unconscious. From the choice of spouses, to the clothes we wear, there's a lot more going on than conscious choice. In the same way, in worship or in sacred spaces, probably most of the communication goes directly to the unconscious. That's why people keep coming back and don't know why. Why does somebody leave church and say they just feel better? Well, there is stuff going on there. The non-rational experience may be the experience that draws us back, not the rational experience. Most of my true religious experiences, I cannot articulate. They

PAULA J. WEBB



sound really paltry when I try to describe them. That's why I shut my mouth. I mean, when we begin to talk about what makes space sacred, it may be a non-rational thing that we can't word.

PW: Yeah, but sometimes a space works, and sometimes it doesn't.

PM: Well, there is this idea that if the community has said for a long period of time that a space is sacred, then we begin to believe it. People begin to project into the

space. I project into it my own sacredness, and it comes back to me.

PW: In even the most primitive cultures, there is an impetus, a desire to build a sacred spot, to designate a particular space as sacred ...

PM: It's a very natural impulse.

PW: What about in Houston? What and where are our spaces?

PW: But if you think about people who want to build things that allow and encourage the sacred, what's on the checklist? And where does the checklist come from?

PM: I think that comes from the idea that Jung had of archetypes. That maybe there's just certain sort of archetypal things that get brought out and appear to be checklists, but they actually are images of things that are deep in the collective unconscious. And one of those images has

to be maternal. The church is the womb. It's the mother, and a sacred space architecturally has to have some expression of that. It has to be a container. It contains numinosity, it contains community, it's a place of nurture, of transition, of transformation, of creativity. We also have to have a phallus. Steeples, what are those about? Yeah, they point toward God, but they also really have that father thing.

PW: So you're saying that if someone is trying to create a sacred space, they cannot make it simply by personal expression?

PM: Yes. In addition to being about the community's soul, it's about the unconscious of the community, which is where the archetypal strata is.

PW: What about the megaplex entertainment churches? Where do they fit into this?

PM: You know the writer Annie Dillard's work? She says instead of having signs up on churches that say, "Enter, rest, and pray," we ought to put up signs that say, "Enter at your own risk." Meaning, you see, that a lot of these places are not risky. They want to eliminate the possibility for any autonomy. They want the mind of the collective.

PW: But isn't there something to be said about these megachurches growing up at a time when community in other types of ways is disappearing? It used to be that the church was a part of a community, an element of a community, and then the community dispersed. These megachurches are not a part of the community, they're the entire community.

PM: Well, they want to be so. They want cradle to grave.

PW: You not only go to church there, but you have your recreation there, your schools. It's your whole world, and there's something comfortable in that. It's a small town in one contained place, and it provides you with people who share a faith that you share, maybe a religious faith or maybe simply a faith in a way of living. I see that to some degree this is answering a need, and most religion works when it answers a need, right?

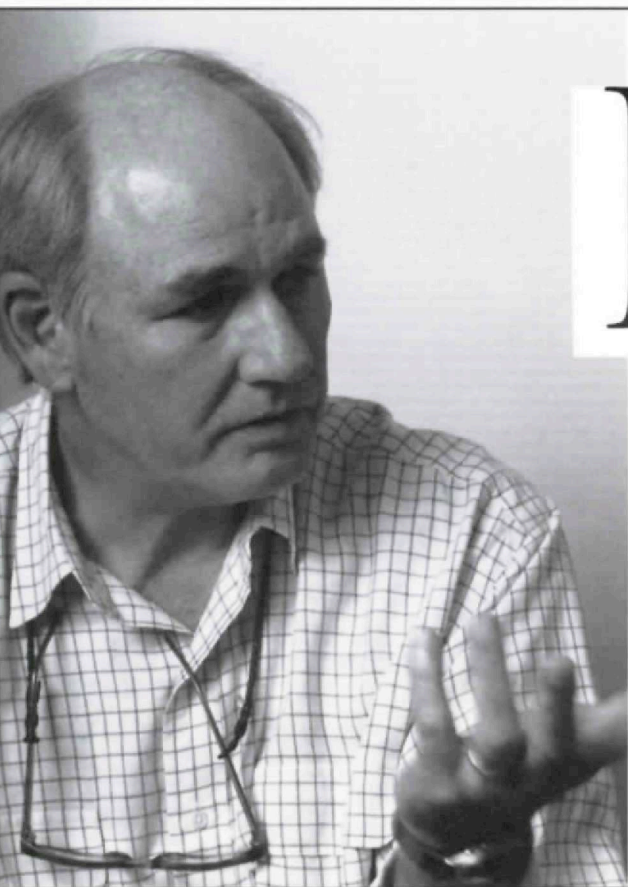
PM: Mystery, I think, is important to this conversation, because we still have this kind of modern view that mystery is that which has not yet been discovered. That's the science idea, and the religion idea is that it's undiscoverable. It's not going to be discovered. Paul Tillich defines mystery as reason driven beyond itself, and he says we experience that subjectively as ecstasy and objectively as miracle. I think that if you're going to talk about sacred space as I define it, as I'm interested in it, there has to be a context that gives possibility for the experience of mystery. And one of the things I'm trying to say about the mega church is that it really doesn't provide a lot of opportunity for mystery.

There's a think tank that does studies on church work, and they've arrived at the idea that the less religious a place is, the more popular it is. So you'll notice that these mega complexes don't define themselves; they leave themselves in a kind of ambiguity. They don't put crosses up, because they want people to come in for other reasons. They don't want to be controversial, they want to make people comfortable.

PW: Okay, so say you're on the freeway and you need to go someplace to think about things. One of the functions of a sacred place is a place to go to. Where are you going to go?

PM: You know, the old cathedrals were actually shopping malls. People had stalls in there, and that was part of why they had all the bells. They'd ring the bells and that meant that everybody should get quiet, because this is the moment of the consecration. There was theater in there, everything was in the cathedral, but that was when the community was small and geographically defined.

PW: It was the biggest building in town. It was the place that people came to from the outlying villages.



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space their own subjective sacredness. It attracts that. It's like a lightning rod.

PW: Time is a defining factor?

PM: It has to survive. That would be one of the criterion it seems to me, that it's got some stability and longevity to it.

There is this Jungian term called *participacion mystique*, which is actually a term from anthropologist Levy-Bruhl. He said there is this energy or numinous stuff that is in each of us, and there are certain objects that will attract the projection of this. We do it with the Eucharist. We do it with rabbit's feet. It's a primitive sense — and primitive to me is not a pejorative term; it's a purer form, not unsophisticated, but undefiled — that this is sacred

PM: It's just so subjective. I think it would be presumptuous of me to say what a sacred place would be for anyone else. I think the new Chapel of Saint Basil at the University of Saint Thomas will become a sacred space, but I think that it still has to be tried and tested and lived in. Similarly, I predict, the Menil Byzantine will become a sacred space for this community, just as the Rothko Chapel has. The Rothko Chapel has passed the test of time.

PW: I do think there is something about walking into Christ Church Cathedral where you really are hit in the face with the fact that it's been around for more than a century.

PM: I think a sacred space has to earn its attraction.

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OR FIND SOME
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KINDS OF SPACES,
LIKE AT A ROLLING
STONES CONCERT.

PM: We don't really have that kind of sociology anymore.

PW: Your original idea was to build a rec house...

PM: I don't like that reference. I said an undefined space.

PW: Okay.

PM: Look at the great cathedrals. Saint Paul's in London is basically undefined space. They have cathedral chairs. You take the chairs out, and you can do a whole lot of things. I'm talking about pews when I talk about undefined space. When you get pews in a church, you're going to do one thing, which is to sit passively. You do get up to go to the altar, but you can't do anything else ...

PW: But you know, when you go to older churches and see those folding chairs, they look so impermanent.

PM: It's a tradeoff. But if I were to start from scratch, I would not put anything permanent in. It may appear to be permanent, but it wouldn't be. Like the altar would not be attached to anything, or you could move the pulpit, everything would be ...

PW: Moved to the center? The circle thing?

PM: Well, of course. But I mean practically, if you wanted to have someone come in and do African dances, you might want to get the pulpit out of the way. I'd want the space more flexible.

Let me make one other point. It's about the future of sacred spaces, which I'm very concerned about for a couple of reasons. One is that there is a new phenomenon in the world called narcissism. I mean, it's on everybody's lips now. Christopher Lasch wrote an important book called *The Culture of Narcissism* that says consciousness and ego are a dynamic, evolving part of the human psyche, and the primitives — once again not a pejorative term, but a descriptive, and maybe even an enviable, term — always saw themselves as a part of something greater than themselves. Their idea was that "I belong to the tribe, and I give myself to the tribe, and my job is to serve the tribe." I think even in rural America there was much more of that sense of "I belong to the church" or "I belong to something bigger than myself that I

give myself to."

That's dying, because instant gratification is one of the definitions of narcissism. So nobody's going to wait for a sacred space. In a culture of narcissism, I worry about the future of sacred spaces because nobody's willing to give themselves to the creation of one. It will all be temporary things, all shopping centers and Jack in the Boxes.

You know the great story of the glazier working in Lincoln Cathedral? Maybe it's apocryphal, but this guy yells up to the glazier, "You know, nobody will ever see that piece of glass up there," and the glazier says, "God will."

That's a kind of sentimental story, but the point is, the glazier wasn't working for himself, and he wasn't working for even his community. He was working for something bigger than himself. Who does that these days? I mean, who has the vocation to create sacred space?

PW: If you define yourself as a singular person, not hooked up in a constant sort of way, your spiritual experiences are singular. I think I trust the individual's experience over the community's. That's what I do for a living, try and write about the individual experience butted up against the community standard.

PM: But one thing doesn't necessarily preclude the other. There's always that paradoxical relationship between the two. I think there is an objective sacred space and a subjective sacred space. Still, too often it's this contrived idea. There's this labyrinth in the basement of Chartres, and you can trace it on canvas, and put in some parking lot. And then you can ask people to walk the labyrinth. Now, under the autonomy of God, you can have an experience with God wherever God chooses to mysteriously place God's self. So it can happen on a canvas labyrinth in a parking lot. But I think that's unlikely. It's too contrived. It's the idea that just because this was a sacred space at Chartres, we can put it on a canvas, and haul it around the country, and put it in parking lots, and have people walk the labyrinth, and that's a great experience. Give me a break. Context is a lot, isn't it?

PW: I wonder how we need to participate in controlling sacred places. If they're important to us, how do we keep them together without screwing them up? My own experience with traditional churches or art institutions or whatever, is that the energy that starts the whole idea, the idea of wanting to do something really fabulous and original, dies a pretty fast death, because early on the bureaucrats take over and want to putty all the windows shut. I'm interested in keeping things open, in encouraging individual ideas and development, and in my experience

PW: It's more than just the repetitive?

PM: Repetitive and ritual are similar, but they're not the same. A guy working on an assembly line is doing repetitive stuff, but that doesn't mean that that's ritual. For it to be ritual, it has to have a conscious meaning to you. Now I don't attach that much meaning to every morning, but I see my bathroom as a sanctuary in a way, where I do things that are very meaningful to me, daily private ritual processes of elimination, cleansing, adornment, meditation. So all I'm saying is

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that's hard to do within any sort of community group.

PM: I don't know, but to me the problem is still about this narcissism.

PW: We haven't talked as much about ritualistic behavior as I wanted to.

PM: We talk about ritual process when we talk about going to church on Sunday, or doing baptisms, but we have ritual process in our limbic systems, you know? The whole jet lag thing is about interrupting our ritual processes. The sacred places where we experience God aren't at all limited to formal religious ritual. They're about our rituals, and where the rituals are done, we tend to consider sacred.

changing consciousness about our daily rituals may be sacred too. The places we do them, therefore, can be sacred space.

In our beds, where we sleep, make love, die. Those are sacred spaces too. Our houses are sacred, you know?

PW: Well, even I can amen to that. ■