

To: Fr. Louis Ha

“Understanding the Sacred”: Sacred Space

Assignment: 3 April, 2024

What if – through the open door?

I have been pondering a hint, an invitation that I hear echo during this course: while human beings build tents, walls and boundaries to define a space – home, citadel, country or Church – that they call sacred, and that protects them from dangers, enemies and chaos, it is also possible to imagine a door, open it and step out.... In this assignment I wish to explore the forces that push and pull as one stands at such a liminal space. How might a person, a community or even humanity choose? And what happens then?

In a piece titled “Crossing the threshold,” an architect muses about lessons to impart to fresh graduates about to enter his firm: “while it is somewhat simpler to design the threshold of an outward-opening door, most entrance doors are inward-opening for reasons of welcome and protection, and this makes things much more difficult.”¹ Would it be easier to venture out if more doors were designed to open outward, compared with doors that open inward? The latter invites one to come in, possess or stay put, for what is known or familiar comforts one with a sense of security.

I plan to give a report of two works, first, “Industrialisation of Rivers: A sacred and profane approach” which is an ecological and anthropological study by Neha Singh and Dr. Neeraj Mishra.² The paper gives as background the Hindu religion in India which holds every river sacred as the manifestation of a god. According to *Rig Veda* (Hindu sacred hymns), life is made possible on earth when Indra, the god of rain, defeated Vrtra, the demon of chaos, and released holy waters to earth. River Ganga is said to spring from heaven. A great festival honouring river Ganges, named Kumbh Mela, celebrates the fresh abundance of life. The story goes that gods and demons were fighting over the Kumbh (pitcher) filled with nectar. The gods won and drank the nectar of immortality. During this battle for the Kumbh, four drops of nectar fell on four places: Allahabad, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujjain. These are the four cities in India where the festival is still celebrated today every 12 years.

¹ <https://www.raisearchitects.com/articles/threshold>

² “Industrialisation of Rivers: A sacred and profane approach” in SOCRATES, Vol. 5 No. 2 (2017), 38-56.
DOI: 10.5958/2347-6869.2017.00013.9

River Kshipra that flows in the city of Ujjain carries the “nectar of immortality”; Hindus believe a holy dip in the river during Kumbh Mela can free a soul from the cycle of re-birth.

But changes have been happening. The researchers point out that “the rise of industries and the spread of capitalism made the sacred applicable in the society through two trends: first, it involves **gradual secularisation of contemporary institutional religion**; second, it involves **gradual sacralisation of the secular**” (49, my emphasis).

What that means is that the river becomes an object of consumption, a resource to be exploited, and the sacred becomes attached not to natural things like rivers, but to material things like money and profit.

In Hong Kong we see a similar clash of values or metanarratives from conservation of wetlands and country parks for the common good to a narrowly defined development based on market and economic growth. To borrow from the paper’s analysis, “traditional sacred [or wild] places began to be threatened by enclosure (privatization) and state usurpation....[The combination of] the omnipresent nature of the modern state with unchecked forces of private enterprise and laissez-faire markets, promises to encourage development as the only way to meet pressing social-environmental challenges” (40). Meanwhile society is further divided: the accumulation of capital by a fortunate few thanks to expanding private sector and public-private partnerships, while ordinary people are left with little space or say regarding the common good.

As the world changes on the outside, ordinary people can choose to ignore, stay put, or join in the fun ride of consumption. But if there is a lesson from Kshipra river, it is that shutting the door, closing our ears and eyes to the world, carries devastating results both for the people and the river.

The development of industrial societies surpassed local and national boundaries, and in this process, they decentred and questioned all antecedent forms of identity, accessibility, power, and authority, both religious and non-religious (39).

Kshipra river is reported to be perennial up to 1980, but gradually the river has become dry during the non-monsoon season primarily due to overexploitation of groundwater... As the industries took over the city, the population increased ...Because of depletion of groundwater for irrigation purposes, the acute shortage of drinking has also been reported in many places. The drinking water requirement is met by transporting water. ... a very costly arrangement (NWM, 2011).

Ujjain suffers from water scarcity in both rural and urban areas. The increasing population, industries, and festivals like Kumbh Mela have increased the demand of water (Kumar et al., 2015). Therefore even though scientific advancement has made water available for holy dip during the festival, the focus is not the river and its revival but space allocation, crass commercialization, unchecked competition and crowd control (Bhatt, 2015) (45).

The authors conclude that the protection of vital resources cannot be ensured through market logic. The misunderstanding that because the river is holy, nothing we do or give to it would harm it also needs to be corrected. To preserve natural resources, and to recover the sacred actually require a recovery of the commons. One needs to step outside the sacred to the *pro-fanum*.

Next I turn to *I and Thou* by Martin Buber, which I read *very* slowly. Some have described it as a poem.³ It's a challenging book, but for me it is also liberating! In meandering text Buber lays out two ways of holding the world -- *I-Thou* and *I-It* -- not in a sequential order, and though different, the two are not necessarily antagonistic either. Buber invokes the image of the butterfly:

The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly--except that situations do not always follow one another, in clear succession, but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusedly entangled (17-18).

He uses the example of the tree to describe how the presence and vitality of *Thou* is changed to *It*:

But whenever the sentence "I see the tree" is so uttered that it no longer tells of a relation between the man—I—and the tree—*Thou*—but establishes the perception of the tree as an object by the human consciousness, the barrier between subject and object has been set up. The primary word *I-It*, the word of separation, has been spoken (22).

In contrast the other primary word *I-Thou* is spoken in mutual relation: "Love does not cling to the I in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its "content," its object; but love is between *I* and *Thou*." He goes on:

³ *I and Thou* by Martin Buber. Trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937.

Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*. In this lies the likeness ... of all who love, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blessedly protected man, whose life is rounded in that of a loved being, to him who is all his life nailed to the cross of the world, and who ventures to bring himself to the dreadful point — to love all men (15).

Here the Jewish thinker cites Jesus' radical love on the cross as one example, likely an extreme example of *I-Thou* relation.

In the context of our study "Understanding Sacred" from a Catholic perspective, it is important to note that for Buber "spiritual life" is not something to be parceled out, abstracted or purified from everyday life, away from the world. The world is not evil; rather, it can be transformed.

For the spirit is never independently effective in life in itself alone, but in relation to the world: possessing power that permeates the world of *It*, transforming it. The spirit is truly "in its own realm" if it can confront the world that is unlocked to it, give itself to this world, and in its relation with it, save both itself and the world. (50-51)

"To look away from the world, or to stare at it, does not help a man to reach God; but he who sees the world in Him stands in His presence."

Man can do justice to the relation with God in which he has come to share only if he realizes God anew in the world according to his strength and to the measure of each day. In this lies the only authentic assurance of continuity (114).

I will try to explain why I find Buber's text liberating. Buber says that all revelation is summons and sending (even the quiet, everyday kind that we are sometimes aware of).

The door, it seems to me, is the threshold where we can hear the summons, as well as refuse or accept the sending.

If I open the door, it is not as a servant sent on an errand [at times it may even seem like a fool's errand]; we are not sent like Jonah to convert the enemies, so there is no need to flee to the other end. We do not need to subjugate the self or the other. We are not called to convert people we meet according to a set of creeds or dogma.

I recall Karl Rahner's dynamic interpretation of the incarnation as a self-communicating God who initiates with love. So do we go to bed or stay by the door waiting, alert, like creatures "craning our necks" (15)?

"Creation happens to us, burns into us, changes us, we tremble and swoon, we submit. Creation – we participate in it, we encounter the creator, offer ourselves to him, helpers and companions" ().

Drawing from Buber, to step outside the door is to journey in love with *Thou* --

These are the two basic privileges of the world of *It*. They move man to look on the world of *It* as the world in which he has to live, and in which it is comfortable to live, as the world, indeed, which offers him all manner of incitements and excitements, activity and knowledge. In this chronicle of solid benefits the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-trying context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security (34).

We may boldly imagine – the journey with *Thou* is also a journey of salvation:

It is the way. In each new aeon fate becomes more oppressive, turning more shattering. And the theophany becomes ever nearer, increasingly near to the sphere that lies between beings, to the Kingdom that is hidden in our midst, there between us. History is a mysterious approach. Every spiral of its way leads us both into profounder perversion and more fundamental turning. But the event that from the side of the world is called turning is called from God's side salvation (119, 120).

****Sharing**

I have a friend who is a philosopher, an agnostic, perhaps even an atheist, with whom I share freely and deeply. Last Sunday I shared with her not about this class, but an article about a hospital specializing in elder care, where people go to heal, not to die.⁴ The hospital was founded by a nurse who formerly worked at Ruttonjee hospital where she had transformed a geriatric ward into a caring space where the

⁴ Big Silver Community page (護士開院舍 | 好返就回家)

https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02EUQGz9aEDww91nV2KYJsm7zRMHnfByDf6x1MbZPdxt44FYskhp98bKwF9xAEtkg6l&id=100066392454925&mibextid=Nif5oz

needs of elders are anticipated and met (e.g., instead of a central nursing station, nurses are scattered to different locations on the ward, so their desks are near to patients) and where elderly patients are treated with respect and appropriate care, so many do recover.

My friend was so moved, she thanked me with these words: “what a gift for the Easter Sunday.” It strikes me Sacred Space can be as concrete and specific as the hospital in Kwai Chung, down to the hospital beds that can be lowered to 8 inches above ground, so there is no need to tie up the elderly in bed to prevent them from falling. The sacred is devoting *all* her creativity, energy and material resources to something close to her heart, to care for a group often written off. To my friend who is a non-believer, that is the meaning of Easter rising!