

Spatial Theography

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"Bien des métaphysiques demanderaient
une cartographie".
Gaston Bachelard

As pointed out in my earlier paper on English for Theological Purposes (RLFE 1, 1994), descriptive theology ("theography") frequently resorts to metaphorical modes of meaning. Among these metaphors, the spatial language of localization and orientation plays an important role to delineate tentative insights into the relationship between the human and the divine.

These spatial metaphors are presumably based on the universal human experience of interaction between the body and its environment. It is dangerous, however, to postulate universal agreement on meanings associated with spatial dimensions and directions, especially in the diachronic and diacultural situation of the Scriptures. Biblical and doctrinal theography offer two different views of space (an "experiential" and a "rational" one) which are not necessarily incompatible, but which reflect two different perspectives with different corollaries.

Measurement of metaphorical meanings associated with different theographic utterances (van Noppen, 1979) shows that certain spatial dimensions may have lost some of their popular appeal and suggestive power (at least to a hypothetical 'secularized' audience), but the substitution of alternative spatial imagery does not allow to retrieve or replace allegedly 'lost' dimensions of meaning.

"Where is God?": in human theography, the issue appears as one of fundamental importance. In biblical contexts, the query is an expression of doubt or a challenge thrown at the believer by the heathen (Job 35: 10, Psalm 42: 3 and 10, 79: 10, 115: 2). Although the question is, in one sense, a category-mistake, it highlights the apparent need for a representation which renders the divine as real and manifest in the human situation, i.e. as known and met at certain places.

Of course, the "places" assigned to the divine may tell us more about human feelings and experience than they do about God, for here as elsewhere, spatial models hold a pre-eminent place among the categories used to define and refer to the human existential situation. The *language of space* offers a concrete metaphorical anchorage for the expression of mental experiences and intellectual conceptions, and thus enables humans to "situate" themselves with regard to reality by means of those relations and coordinates with which they orient and locate themselves in the sphere of physical experience. The loci and dimensions are invested with mental values, and the respective "positions" of God and Humans come to define the relationship postulated between them. The theolinguist can, then, carry out a *topo-analysis* inasmuch as the human attempt at structuring his religious experience is reflected in spatial language, and notably in the lexical manifestations of the intersection between the cognitive metaphor MIND is BODY¹ or MENTAL is PHYSICAL and the basic "anthropomorphic" projection GOD is SPATIAL.

This topo-analysis or "cartography" may opt for different approaches: thus one might decide to investigate the metaphorical meaning of particular loci, dimensions, orientations or polarisations, or choose to address the cognitive import of, say, static vs. dynamic representations², or seek to assess how particular categories of experience and thought are mediated by varying descriptions – not unlike the way in which Michael Reddy (in a paper that was to inspire Lakoff and Johnson) showed how the "conduit" metaphor for language fostered a conception of linguistic interaction altogether different from that projected by the "tool-maker paradigm"³ –, i.e. how (although this is a rather obvious observation which can be boiled down to an interactive view of metaphor) two different metaphors may each highlight and soft-pedal very different aspects of the same referent. It is somewhat more surprising to observe that one and the same category – for example, the presumably pre-axiomatic, universal spatial metaphors of verticality – may give rise to different systems of implication according to the underlying conception of space, and that thus, metaphoric representation may be *partial* in two senses of the word, i.e. not only *selective* but also *biased*. But the surprise is considerably abated when one comes to think of the fact that, especially in religious language, our spatial metaphors (as well as a number of others – think of the present-day feminist response to the Bible's androcentric representations) have come a long distance through space, time and culture, and may, like so many other linguistic resources, have taken on different values conditioned by changes in our world-view; but that (not least due to the conservative nature of much religious expression) antiquated conceptions may have survived alongside present-day developments (e.g. in cosmology), just as archaic lexical and syntactic phenomena (the "thees" and "thous") co-exist in the religious register with modern linguistic forms. Hence, it may be short-sighted to postulate an unchanging value for a given category, even if at the outset, a set of interrelated and interdependent metaphors seem to add up to a coherent system rooted in a familiar cognitive process like, say, the assimilation between mental and physical activity based on the universal human experience of corporeal existence or on a hypothetical common experience of space underlying our linguistic habits⁴.

Anthropologists readily oppose a "secular" and a "religious" conception of space. The modern, presumably scientific conception views the universe as an undifferentiated Euclidian medium, isotropic, impersonal and totally homogeneous⁵: a space which may still be "explored" in quantitative terms, i.e. beyond the bounds of what can be reached through the means of present-day technology, but which no longer offers any "mystery" to be "discovered"; whereas in the primitive, pre-scientific conception, the cosmos is a discontinuous *espace vécu*, a "quality space" whose elements, loci, dimensions, and directions are fraught with affective charges (in general discourse) or spiritual values (in religion). The "centre" of the cosmos may vary from one culture to another; and places and orientations may thus be felt to stand for different significates.

It is important, in this perspective, to distinguish between the intellectual *notion* and the affective *experience* of space. Even in the language of everyday secular existence, our metaphors seem to be based on an underlying oriented, discontinuous view of space⁶: thus we speak of important things as central, and of secondary concerns as peripheral; of a significant experience as profound, and of one that leaves little impression as superficial; of ambition as climbing the social ladder, and of failure as a downfall; we speak of getting nowhere, of toeing the party line or following a line of thought, of straying off the point or reaching a dead end – as if mental activity were physical movement in a space where certain directions (upwards, inward, forward) are endowed with desirable values.

Similarly, in a religious world-view, we find traces of a heterogeneous structure: in the Bible, and more particularly in the Old Testament⁷, the world is "vectorialised" around centres of divine self-revelation: space is the locus of theophanies. On earth, the loci of theophany are qualitatively different from the rest of the human environment, and require a particular form of behaviour: humans must take off their shoes, keep away, or build an altar (Genesis 12: 7, 28: 16-19, Exodus 3: 5). There are even "degrees" in the sacredness of space: in the known world, the Holy Land is the sacred abode of God's chosen people; within the Holy Land, Jerusalem is the Holy City; within Jerusalem, the Temple is more sacred than the other places, and within the Temple, the Holy of Holies.

However, even in the Old Testament there appears a line of reasoning closer to the "modern scientific" view, and which counterbalances the "religious" experience of space described by e.g. Mircea Eliade. The Temple in Jerusalem is the visible sign of divine presence (IKings 8: 10), but at the same time it raises the issue of the divine abode: "Will God indeed dwell on earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?" (IKings 8: 27, Jeremiah 7: 3-7). There is a clear tension between the metaphor which postulates divine omnipresence and the metaphors which localise God "in" a particular spot⁸: the representation of the divine at a particular locus of the universe is here a metaphor for the election of the Chosen People, and the point of contact between God and the world mediates God's presence to the rest of space, i.e. to all of humanity. But this presence is not to be taken for granted: it becomes a reality for Man only in and through the activity of worship; and thus, God's presence comes to be conditioned by human behaviour. The New Testament strengthens this view: the real temple of God is Man (ICor. 3: 16), and as a consequence, no place on earth can claim exclusive rights to divine presence. If the human heart is the only real temple, then no point in space can be called sacred. Every place in the universe becomes a potential centre, and the cosmos becomes homogeneous in all its dimensions. These two conceptions in turn interact with the "finite container" view of space into which God "enters" through incarnation without leaving his specific mode of existence – a projection which, despite appearances, does not postulate any separation between heaven and earth, but a union achieved in Christ⁹.

In traditional Christian theography, however, the space in which the divine is represented is clearly oriented or vectorialised, notably in its vertical dimension. The dimension "up" which gives rise to images of height and heaven, ascension and descent, derives its pre-eminent value from the fundamental human experience of the body's erect position, from the difficulty experienced in elevating the body from the earth's horizontal surface, from the awe inspired by observation of the celestial vault, or even, according to some anthropologists, from the conception of the universe as a celestial tent or canopy. These metaphors of verticality constitute powerful and practically irreplaceable means to signify what is sublime, wonderful, worthy of

admiration, and hence what is moral, spiritual or transcendent; thus they provide an appropriate frame for human aspirations towards self-transcendence. It is not surprising, then, that throughout a vast number of cultures and religions, the loci situated at a distance upwards from the surface of the earth should be regarded as the abode of supreme and divine beings.

In the Christian scheme of thought, the metaphorical location of God in the heavenly regions is congruent with more general categories of religious expression inasmuch as it bears similar connotations of divine glory, majesty, holiness, otherness and transcendence; but it differs from other religions in that it posits no equation between God and heaven and is not dependent on any deification of the sky¹⁰; nor is the dwelling of God in heaven regarded as a natural presence: it remains a metaphor. Heaven may be used as an image of transcendence, but the heavens themselves are transient: they "roll up like a scroll" and "will pass away" (Isa. 34: 4, Psalm 102: 26). As pointed out already, God's presence is not limited or guaranteed by particular loci – no matter how essential these may be to the communication of his nature and attributes. But even as "mere" metaphors based on the analogy between positional and essential superiority, the categories of height and heaven may entail different theographies according to the frame of presuppositions within which they are interpreted.

When human discourse seeks to "chart" an extra-linguistic referent, i.e. seeks to provide it with a mental and/or linguistic representation, it employs a "projection," not unlike the way in which cartographers resort to Mercator's or the orthogonal projection; and just as different projections result in different maps, the perception (and *a fortiori* the description) of an outside "reality" may be warped by different systems of representation.

The spatial language which localises the divine in the celestial regions has been indicted for introducing a "supernatural" projection – notably by Bishop Robinson in his theological bestseller *Honest to God* (1963). The problem here is not so much that the spatial propositions are taken literally (as by Yuri Gagarin, who returned from his cosmic foray saying that he had seen no God in heaven), but that even as a metaphor, the category distorts the reality it is there

to communicate. For a number of theologians¹¹, representation of the divine in heaven is an "extrapolation" which relegates God to a marginal position "out there," and projects a separation between two worlds, between "heaven" and "earth." This criticism, however, seems to wrest the metaphor of verticality out of its original cultural and historical context to invest it with structural associations altogether foreign to the Bible's theological schema: it is correct to say that biblical theology expresses the ontological difference between God and Man in terms of distance, and transcendence in terms of height; but the biblical corpus does not allow one to develop a two-world cosmology¹².

It is in situations like these that the linguist feels impelled to come to the aid of the theologian, and to contribute his insight to diagnose the breach in communication, administer the proper antidote and avoid any undesirable secondary effects. Here as elsewhere¹³, a delineation in terms of the misunderstanding or misapplication of metaphor logic may throw an altogether useful light on the types of misunderstanding involved.

In this particular case, the confusion between a form of transcendence which maintains unity between God and Man on the one hand and a supranaturalist representation which suggests a break between them on the other, apparently results from two different readings of the vehicle of verticality, which may be used as a metaphor to both representations of the divine: while as pointed out above, the biblical schema seeks to differentiate Man and God but posits a fundamental unity between them, realised in Jesus Christ, the "supranaturalist" reading of the same metaphor focuses on the concept of distance (which is only one relevant feature in the total semantic structure of the metaphor) and interprets it as an image of separation, i.e. as the projection of a relationship of indifference.

This reading, however, simultaneously commits three interpretive fallacies: the *mimetic fallacy*, which views height in geometrical terms of distance rather than in spiritual terms of difference; the *reductionist fallacy*, which entirely bases its interpretation of the divine on this static, geometrical schema, and ignores other metaphors which speak of proximity and unity; and finally, the *fallacy of context negation*, which interprets a culturally conditioned metaphor

in terms of presumed present-day associations and ignores its role and function within the biblical framework which gave rise to it.

Spatial metaphors may be based on presumably universal human experiences; but this does not entail that one can postulate unchanging, self-evident meanings for them, elucidate them in terms of present-day common-language associations, or treat them as "open-ended" images which one is free to interpret ad libitum. There is a fundamental, but uncomfortable form of intellectual honesty which demands that one should not project onto a text meanings and intentions which were not in the author's mind or message in the first place. But retracing an author's original intention may require long and laborious hermeneutic detours, and one may without difficulty imagine a situation in which metaphors coined at a precise point of space and time require so much study or qualification that they eventually lose their meaning or their appeal, and thus give rise to the very interpretation errors we have just denounced. While an isolated individual's error will restrict its effects only to its author, errors committed –and widely published– by someone enjoying public status and authority, like Bishop Robinson, may have widespread and disastrous results.

Professor Robinson considered himself as the epitomy of a hypothetical "Modern Man," whom he invested with his own confusions. On behalf of this abstraction, Robinson advocated recourse to the category of "depth" as a corrective to the traditional, presumably obsolete imagery of height. The transition from one complex projection, "up and out" to another, "down and in" is a beautiful case of theolo-fiction; but as a matter of academic curiosity, it may be worthwhile to try and investigate the impact of a shift in spatial language which is bound to radically upset the system of metaphorical, geometrical, physical and even elemental associations: the heights of heaven are replaced by profound abysses, and the spiritual connotations of sky symbolism by the tangible intimacy of the earth's depths.

We may attempt first to assess the potential value of the alternative imagery, and subsequently try to evaluate its reception by the public.

The imagery of *depth* is ambivalent in more than one respect: in the structural mode of meaning, it partakes of the dimension "below" which contrasts with the heavens "above" and which is thus associated with the earthly sphere of human existence; but when distance is measured downwards from the earth's surface, depth may come to refer to the underworld. On the other hand, it derives a positive value from architectural associations, in which a firm substratum constitutes a reliable support, and from organic connotations of the earth as deep source of nourishment. In the textural associations of the downward orientation, we note a similar contrast: on the one hand, the qualitative connotations of *height* may be inverted, and depth may be fraught with negative value judgments; on the other hand, *depth* and *ground* imagery seeks truth value beneath the level of superficial, trivial and often deceptive appearances, and charges the downward and inward direction with positive associations of intensity and ultimacy beyond the grasp of humans, of interiority and immanence.

In Bishop Robinson's "pop" theology, *depth* holds a pre-eminent place as the alternative to the allegedly alienating imagery of height and heaven. Robinson borrows the metaphor from Paul Tillich, whose own use of *Grund* can be traced back, in turn, to Schelling, Heidegger and Boehme, but Robinson fails to give the terms the full scope of theographic meaning which they enjoy for these German authors¹⁴, and the alternative projection, for all its wealth of associations, misfires: not only do *depth* and *ground* take on impersonal and static overtones, but in addition, they lead to an unintended immanentist or even self-deifying reading: "If what I address [in prayer] is the depth of myself," says one reader, "then I am talking to myself. (...) If Jones starts worshipping the God within Jones, he cannot but end up worshipping – Jones."

In 1979, I developed an *ad hoc* socio-semantic survey attempting to indicate whether, and to what extent, Robinson was right in assuming that "height" metaphors had lost their appeal as a theographic category, and whether the meanings presumably lost could be usefully retrieved by recourse to "depth" imagery. With this aim in mind, I subjected to a varied public a series of statements representing different realisations of the metaphors involved, and measured (in what could be called a form of *Metapher-rezeptions-forschung*)

the deviance which these statements caused with regard to the global image of God which the informants had previously charted on a scale of theological meanings¹⁵. While a detailed description and breakdown of the responses to all the statements would take us well beyond what can be dealt with within the bounds of this journal, the indications provided by the informants can be conveniently summarised to highlight the "cash-value" which some realisations of spatial language may enjoy in a theological context.

1. "There is no being out there at all. The skies are empty": The first statement, borrowed from Robinson himself, was subjected to the informants' judgment to measure the impact of a form of metaphorical iconoclasm which might strip the image of the divine of its localisation in the celestial regions. Even though at the literal level, the representation given here might be held to convey the rather obvious point that God is not "a" perceptible being physically located in empirical space, it appears to have a certain shock-value as a metaphor: it seems to deprive the divine of its existence, of its personality and of all the positive evaluations (concern, presence, relevance, reality) which might be associated with it. The pattern of semantic association appears to be almost the symmetrical opposite of the image of God originally charted. Informants comment that the perspective of an empty sky is frightening, and that predicating non-spatiality of God amounts to implying His non-existence.

2. "God the Son came down to earth. From 'out there' there entered into the human scene one who was not 'of it' and yet who lived completely within it."

3. "In prayer, they lift their hearts to their ascended and triumphant Lord": These statements represent the traditional imagery in all its polyvalence, inasmuch as they combine the positive connotations of verticality with the category of personality, which projects the divine as accessible. The results charted by the respondents stay very close to the original conception of God, although with a slight loss of immanence and a marked gain in 'reality'. This might suggest that the "mythological" representations are not so much of an obstacle to correct theological understanding as Robinson suggested, and that christological images of "incarnation" aptly convey the proximity, presence and concern of God which he believed were jeopardised by this very imagery.

4. "God is the supreme being, the Grand Architect, who exists somewhere out beyond the world." 5. "God is very much a separate being, standing over against the world": Here, the respondents are confronted with a Robinsonian caricature of transcendence: the locus of the divine is not invested with associations of height and glory, but fraught with connotations of separation, distance and unconcern. The public responds as expected: transcendence is stressed to the point where other aspects (proximity, personality, reality) of divinity are sacrificed. One might then say that in a way, Robinson was right in suggesting that too "supranaturalist" a projection might prove harmful to an image of God which underlies religious practice and worship. It should be pointed out, however, that this representation is the result of Robinsonian, *not* Biblical, theography; and that the advocated "displacement" of God from the heights to the depths, therefore, finds little justification. But as a matter of academic interest, we may pursue the matter a little further and measure the possible impact of "depth" imagery on the popular image of God.

6. "God is not 'out there', an Other beyond the skies, but the Ground of our very being"; 7. "We must give the name 'God' to the ground of our being, the deepest reality within us": Statement 6 marks the transition from *height* to *depth* imagery, and, according to Robinson, from Bultmann to Tillich. The projection triggers off an increase on the axes of "positive" qualities (presence, concern, reality and attractiveness) but on the other hand, a marked trend towards similarity and interiority, resulting in an "immanentist" reading. Statement 7 consolidates this tendency, and causes a loss in transcendence to the point where the reading becomes pantheistic, i.e. negates the difference between God and creation, and even assimilates the two.

Basing ourselves on these indications, we may conclude that spatial metaphors profoundly affect our perception of the reality represented; that these metaphors partake of universal categories of perception and imagery, but that one must not posit a universal interpretation of their value; that height and depth metaphors have altogether different systems of potential associations, and that while both may contribute precious insights to theographic description, they cannot be substituted for each other.

Another precious indication is that the biblical use of spatial language, albeit "mythological," conveys the appropriate theological insights within a cultural framework where knowledge of the imagery is fostered and maintained¹⁶, but that interpretation of the same metaphors in a different, present-day perspective may lose the meaning originally intended.

In the hypothetical case where it would prove necessary to substitute one form of imagery for another, it would not be wise to recast everything in terms of a radically different dimension, lest one should introduce altogether foreign and irrelevant connotations. A more welcome solution might lie in recourse to a *multi-model discourse*, in which different categories of imagery complement each other, even if they contradict each other at the *signifiant* level (e.g. localisation and omnipresence). In the case of theography, the *signifié* is so vast and multifarious that it will not be satisfactorily encompassed by a single category of imagery.

REFERENCES

- 1 Johnson, M. L.: *The Body of the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*. Chicago U.P., 1987.
- 2 van Noppen, J.-P.: *Spatial Theography*. Ann Arbor, UMI, 1980, pp. 74-252 proposes a glossary of spatial terms in theographic use (5,795 tokens / 426 types). The various syntactic patterns in which the metaphor is cast are described on pp. 306-24.
- 3 Reddy, M.: "The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language," in Ortony, A. (ed.): *Metaphor and Thought*. C.U.P., 1979, pp. 284-324.
- 4 It should be remembered, however, that B.L. Whorf pointed out how the Hopi thought world has no imaginary space, cf. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 19 (1953) n° 2.
- 5 It is to be noted that the more modern Einsteinian conception of space-time apparently has some difficulty finding its way into popular imagination, save perhaps in the form of the 'paradox of the twins', which is naively pictured as a form of time-travel.
- 6 Georges Matoré has performed a topo-analysis of spatial and geometrical metaphors in a corpus of present-day literary and journalistic texts, cf. *L'Espace Humain*, 2nd. ed. Paris: Nizet, 1976. Cf. also E.T. Hall: "The Language of Space," in *The Hidden Dimension*, N.Y., Doubleday, 1966 and, of course, G. Lakoff & M.L. Johnson: *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago U.P., 1980.
- 7 Cf. J. Chopineau, "Space in the Bible", in *Student World* LIX (1966) n° 4, pp. 358-66.

- 8 Cf. J.-P. van Noppen: "In als theographische Metapher," in: *Erinnern, um Neues zu sagen. Die Bedeutung der Metapher für die religiöse Sprache*. Frankfurt/Main, Athenäum Verlag, 1988, pp. 200-217.
- 9 Cf. T.F. Torrance: *Space, Time, and Incarnation*. London, SCM Press, 1969.
- 10 Cf. Smart, N.: "The Concept of Heaven," in: Vesey, G.N.A.: *Talk of God*, London 1969, p. 228; Kittel, G. (ed.): *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, p. 377; Chopineau, *art. cit.*, p. 362.
- 11 esp. J.A.T. Robinson in *Honest to God*, London: SCM Press, 1963, pp. 14-16, 27, 41; for Robinson's sources (Bultmann, Feuerbach) and other theologians adhering to this view, cf. van Noppen *op. cit.* 1980, pp. 28-33, 345.
- 12 Cf. Kittel, G. (ed.): *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. I, p. 377 and s.v. *αὐτὸ, ἀνωτέρων, εἰς, οὐρανοῦς*. Chopineau (*art. cit.*: 362) points out that despite its dual lexical structure, the noun phrase "heaven and earth" is not to be understood as the expression of the existence of two entities, but as a phrasal term for "the whole universe"; cf. also James Barr: *The Semantics of Biblical Language* 1961: 206-61, and *Biblical Words for Time* 1962:160 sq.).
- 13 Cf. J.-P. van Noppen: "A Metaphorological Delineation of Theographic Expression, Interpretation and Errors of Interpretation", in: *Communication and Cognition* (Ghent, Belgium) XVI (1983) n° 4, pp. 439-464; "Metapher und Religion," in: *Erinnern, um Neues zu sagen. Die Bedeutung der Metapher für die religiöse Sprache*. Frankfurt/Main, Athenäum Verlag, 1988, pp. 7-51.
- 14 Cf. J.P. van Noppen: "Espace, Ciel et Terre: Les métaphores qui forment et déforment" paper read at the conference La forza delle immagini: per una metaforologia politica III: I quattro elementi e le loro metafore. Verbania (Italie), october 1993.
- 15 Tillich, P.: *Systematic Theology*. Chicago U.P., 1951-63. Nisbet one-vol. ed., 1968, pp. 70, 122, 173, 198, 207-10, 261, 273. Cf. also *The Shaking of the Foundations* (1949). Penguin ed. 1962, pp. 59-70. Also J. Dunphy: *Paul Tillich et le symbolisme religieux*. Paris: Delarge, 1977, pp. 150 sq.
- 16 The full procedure is described in "A Method for the Evaluation of Recipient Response", in: *Technical Papers for the Bible Translator* (Aberdeen) 30 (1979) n° 3, pp. 301-318. The method for measurement of metaphorical meaning by means of semantic association has been considerably improved by G. Steen in his doctoral dissertation *Metaphor in Literary Reception* (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 1992).
- 17 Outside such a religious framework, meanings may evolve towards a more 'secular' reading, cf. Armin Ader's survey in *Linguistica Biblica* 35 (1975), p. 80-83.