Reflections on Religion and Place: Rural Churches and American Religion

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This essay is grounded in my on-going ruminations about religion and rurality. These reflections have at least three distinct sources. First, I have been involved in a research project over the last several years, working with six ethnographers on a study of rural churches in six townships in Missouri.[1] Second, I have been challenged by the call from some sociological theorists and social geographers for sociologists to situate our analyses in "place and time." Third, my experiences growing up in the thinly populated landscape and "Big Sky" of Montana present a reference point for thinking about religion in rural places with the challenges of distance from the center as well as unique opportunities for grace.

There is a continuous thread in American culture that locates the sacred in nature. Implicit in the works of many essayists, poets, and explicitly religious writers is the idea that access to nature is a route to experiencing the divine, and that the closer to nature one is, the greater the possibility for closeness to God. In Catherine Albanese's *Nature Religion in America* (1990) she traces reflections on nature as a core religious symbol starting with the Algonkian Indians, then moving to the writings of significant historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir. She also examines how their theologies diffused through popular cultural movements for health and healing in the 19th and 20th centuries. Albanese takes religion to be concerned with how people orient themselves in the world in reference to both ordinary powers—those that are products of human culture—and extraordinary powers. Her argument is that in the United States, nature has often been used as a central religious symbol, one that points to and stands for those extraordinary powers: "what the group owns as objective realities—standing in judgment on its project and practice, but also inviting its members across an invisible line to a place of transcendence" (1990:7). As Albanese reveals it to us, nature religion is an inconsistent, even contradictory, but nevertheless persistent presence in American religious life.

Albanese's book shows how nature has been read as a central religious symbol, and provoked different kinds of moral and spiritual responses. In a rich and complex chapter on the Transcendentalists, which I cannot really go into here, Albanese begins by asking a question that is relevant for our time: How is it that in times of change, when traditional faith is unraveling, people figure out what to keep and how to theologize in a new era (1990:80)? She suggests that on the North American continent that work was done in part by working through conflicting views of nature. The view that is most important for us to follow here is the belief that first, nature is the really real, the embodiment or revelation of God, and that second, living in harmony with nature is the broad highway to virtuous living and union with Divinity (1990:82). While the first fuels certain kinds of environmentalist stances and provides a reason for saving the wilderness, it is the second part that allows the move from "nature" to "rural." In popular culture this move can bestow a special symbolic status on rural churches. Due to their spatial location, close to nature, and perhaps far from urban areas, rural churches can be seen as carriers of something purer and closer to God than what, according to these accounts, can be found in the symbolically, if not actually, struggling urban churches, or the trendy but potentially vacuous suburban churches, both of which must compete with the many attractions of urban life.

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Our team of researchers sought to problematize that reading of the rural church. At the same time, as researchers on the Rural Church Project, we were drawn to these tiny churches and their courageous laypeople. Originally charged with the task of determining some criteria of viability based on the model that a viable church is a growing church, we defiantly collected stories of declining but still viable churches. One member of the larger project valorized these congregations with his idea of the "Faithful Remnant" congregations, where members remained faithful to their denominations and to each other, despite declining numbers.[2] We also learned about institutional practices and traditions that kept some of the congregations going. I talked to the Roman Catholic Bishop of a mostly rural diocese along the Missouri River about his difficulties in staffing tiny churches. One of his concerns in closing churches was what to do with the cemeteries: congregations can be merged, buildings can be closed, but what is to be done with the cemeteries, he asked. I learned about the "Memorial Days" when the former residents come back to their communities of birth—and their churches—for a day-long commemorative event—a tradition particularly strong among rural African-American churches. I learned that in some cases the children of church mothers and fathers leave their memberships in the tiny rural congregations when they leave to earn their bread and live their lives in other places.

In one of our research sites a single, half-time student pastor served three small Methodist congregations all within five miles of each other. In the northwest corner of the state, agriculture predominates in Benton Township, with corn and soybean fields a part of the landscape. But it is also a part of the state that has had a population decline of nearly 50 percent since 1960. This reflects the decline in independent family farming, with young people leaving the area to make their livings elsewhere. Of the 400 people who live in town, 40 percent commute outside for work. We placed this township in the decline/decline cell on our matrix—declining population in both the community and the congregations we were studying. But when we visited the congregations the decline was uneven, and experienced in different ways in each place. In two of the three congregations it was accompanied by strengths that reflected the particular circumstances of the congregation and its environment.

One of the churches in the pastor's three-point charge is the only building left of what was once a functioning rural community with its own grocery store, hardware store, gas station, and homes. The classic white building, with its curved wooden pews that could seat 200, hosts a service with an average attendance of six people. Even so, the members of the congregation are dead set against combining their church with one of the others in the area, where they say they would feel like outsiders. In the neighboring town, the congregation numbers in the 40s with an average attendance of about 15 people. But this congregation is in the process of building a new church, following relocation after a flood. There was great debate as to the appropriate size of the new building. Some wanted the church to be built in relation to the current membership, thus a smaller building. The others wanted the new church to accommodate the pews and stained glass windows of the old church, thus creating a need for a larger church. In the end, the congregation voted for the larger building, a design that allows for incorporating 23 of the old stained glass windows. The rest were sold at a Harvest Sale to raise money for the construction project. Significantly, this new and childless church has a nursery room, suggesting the vision of the congregation. They chose to build the new church on a rise in a wheat field donated by a church member, so that the church will be visible from the highway. The third church is an open country church that was never associated with a town. Driving down curving county roads, negotiating the hills and turns, and then turning onto gravel road, then parking, and noting the adjacent cemetery, I was stuck by the beauty of the Missouri countryside. Since 1970, the average worship attendance at this church has dropped from 50 to about 20, but the pastor considers it a strong church, with not much need of her guidance to support the ongoing traditions of Bible studies and potlucks. The success of this church is the family ties, with most congregants linked by ties of blood and marriage. Members have shared all the significant phases of their lives together, including, now, growing old. There is no consideration of merger at Heath Chapel.[3]

Visiting the research sites with team members, I found myself drawn into the special sacredness of these places with their simple buildings, the family cemeteries, and picturesqueness of the landscape. I admire the faith and the courage of the congregation members who choose not to "commute" for communion. Like Kathleen Norris, who wrote evocatively of her encounters with the sacred in a small town on the high northern plain in her best-selling spiritual memoir, *Dakota* (2001), I found myself appreciating the ways the sacred could be found in these places.

Norris calls her memoir "a spiritual geography." She begins her text by reflecting on the unique characteristics of place, but then she moves to connect them to feelings and experiences that are explicitly religious. In her writing we see both of the ideas referred to earlier, that God is present in nature, and that living in harmony with nature can bring humans closer to God. Drawing on these nature religion motifs she writes, for example, of the special way that time is experienced. She describes Dakota as a place where "distractions are at a minimum and you must rely on your own resources, only to find yourself utterly dependent on forces beyond your control; where time stands still as it does in the liturgy" (2001:18). And, "for both farmer and monk, time is not defined by human agency, but by the natural rhythms of day and night and of the seasons" (2001:18). Similar themes are expressed in the following discussion of climate and sky: "The severe climate forces us to see that no one can control this land. The largeness of land and sky is humbling, putting humankind into proper perspective" (2001:128).

Norris links these experiences of the sacred to the desire to be linked to other people both in the present and with a tradition, a past, a linkage that she sees as important but problematic:

> I suspect that when modern Americans ask "what is sacred?" they are really asking, "what place is mine" What community do I belong to? I think this in part explains the appeal of Native American Religions, and also the appearance of guidebooks to monastic retreat houses. We are seeking the tribal, anything with strong communal values and traditions. But too often we are trying to do it on our own, as individuals. That is the tradition of middle class America; a belief in individual accomplishment so strong that it favors exploitation over stewardship, mobility over stability. . ." (2001:129)

In her writing about her move to Dakota, she describes her experiences of the land and sky, but also of the social institutions, the Benedictine Monks, and her grandmother's Presbyterian church, which she joins, as occurring in a particular place. Transcendence is not abstract—rather, it has a local root.

Rural life is grounded in the experience of place. Understanding the significance of place is imperative for understanding why the three Methodist churches in Benton Township have not merged. For us as researchers, the call to attend to place also calls us to the local and particular. But the danger of looking at the place-basedness of rural churches is that of lapsing into nostalgia.

The dominant image of the rural church in the media, and in most people's minds, is of the simple white building with a steeple, the heart of the community, the heart of a vanishing America of two-parent families and family farms. Described thus as a declining institution, it is implicitly embedded in economic and demographic change, and it has a moral consequence, the loss of a sacred and a place-based way of life. In this mythic image, the declining rural church was the heart of what was good and true about the United States, and we may be losing it forever. The irony of course is that the nostalgic image of the rural country church past prevents us from seeing what are really there—both the challenges and possibilities.

As the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (1992, 1996) notes, nostalgia is often the attempt to place oneself in time and place within late capitalism. Stewart suggests that nostalgia is constituted differently depending on where one stands in relation to the object of nostalgia. For outsiders, nostalgia can be an act of appropriation, "a schizophrenic exhilaration of a pure present that reads images for their own sake." Stewart suggests that for insiders, nostalgia may be something different, "a painful homesickness" (1992:253–54). In the case of rural churches, however, the boundary between insiders and outsiders may be blurred. Many urban people have grown up,

or have parents who grew up, in rural areas and have attended those churches themselves. Furthermore, since the 1970s, many rural areas have experienced population growth. In our sites, some of the growth comes from retirees, some from people who live on transfer payments, some from people who want to live in the country, but commute to jobs in urban areas. The people moving into rural areas appropriate some aspects of rural life, but not others. These new people are unlikely to make their living in agriculture, the economic base of the mythic church. The new people may appreciate the beauty, the calm of rural places, perhaps celebrate the sacredness of a "return to nature," but as sociologists we need to think about who is "returning," what is changing, and what is staying the same. These are issues of time.

While recognizing the significance of place, as sociologists it is important to set place in time. And when we look at rural sacred spaces, we need to understand that there is no "pure place" and to see the constructed element in people's responses to these "evocative" spaces. For me, it is especially important to think about the particularness of place, of these rural places, without entering into nostalgia. Sociologists such as Giddens (1984) and Friedland and Boden (1994) have argued that sociologists need to look at place and time together. This is a call to change what we do as sociologists.

One example of how to do this is Ruth Frankenberg's chapter on religion and place from *Living Spirit, Living Practice* (2004). Although not about rural religion, it is important for this essay because she shows how attention to place helps us to see how "otherworldly" experiences are embedded in the particular of "there and then" and "here and now." Her chapter focuses on narratives of eight individuals who are practicing Buddhism or Islam in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. The stories are necessarily stories of migration: stories of the migration of people, and stories of the migration of traditions. For many of the people the tradition was encountered in childhood, in places and times where the religion was the majority religion; yet in their current practice, now, in the Bay Area that is no longer true. For most of the narrators, both interpretability and practice rested on making sense of both then and now and here and there.

Similarly, we find expressions of particular spiritual experiences in these rural churches to be linked not only to the land, buildings, cemeteries, and skies, but, like Norris, to the communities we found there. Spirituality is linked to the histories of particular groups of people who settled, made lives, and did church in those places. In the living churches (as opposed to the mythic church) we found doing church to be something negotiated by pastors, with more or less help from denominations, the old timers—sometimes with a past in agriculture—and the newcomers. Many of the congregational stories were stories that were significantly shaped by place: communities that experienced decline with the decline of lead mining, communities that grew with the rise of tourism, changes that occurred with the construction of a dam that changed an agricultural area into a recreation area that no one thinks of as rural any more. A whole town moved to escape a flooding river, presenting hard choices for already struggling congregations. These stories came together with those about population changes and encounters with new groups of people, cultural traditions, new problems We visited declining churches where well-thumbed Cokesbury hymnals were still in use, contrary to the denomination's intentions. We saw a drum kit, visible, but not yet integrated into the Sunday service at one First Baptist church. We watched a female Pentecostal minister struggle with issues of divorce, a personal and religious issue made more difficult because of her life-long residence in the area and small size of the congregation. We met the Spanish-speaking Costa Rican pastor hired by the Methodist church to minister to Hispanic migrants brought into work at a new corporate hog processing plant. In these churches, too, interpretability and practice depend on making sense of the then and now and the here and there.

Notes

1. "Strategies of Well-Being: The Viability of the Rural Church in a Changing Landscape," a project funded by the Lilly Endowment, was the fourth panel of a study of congregations in a sample of 99 Missouri townships that had been rural

when the original sample was drawn in 1950. The most recent panel, conducted from 1998 to 2000, added ethnographic case studies of six of the townships, selected on the basis of socioeconomic characteristics.

2. The term is from John Bennett, Director of the Missouri School of Religion–Center for Rural Ministry, in Jefferson City, Missouri.
3. I am indebted to Robin Albee and Karen Bradley for details of this description.

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