Mobilizing cathedral metaphors: The case of 'sacred space, common ground'

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Abstract

A range of metaphors has been mobilized to enliven the discourse of cathedral scholarship. Such imaginative terms can also stimulate theory and empirical investigation around the function of iconic cathedral buildings. Against the background of the emerging field of Cathedral Studies, this article reflects on a relatively new metaphor: 'sacred space, common ground'. The study takes inspiration from the adventures of Lewis Carroll's Alice; and the reflection on the metaphor is conducted through the lens of 'the Looking-glass room'. It is shown that the new metaphor highlights rich opportunities for mission yet also inherent tensions in two faces of cathedral life. The article concludes by offering suggestions for future empirical research within Cathedral Studies.

KEYWORDS cathedrals, Cathedral Studies, common ground, metaphor, sacred space

Introduction

> *"In another moment, Alice was through the glass and … into the Looking-glass room….*
> *She began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room*
> *was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible.*
> *For instance, the pictures on the wall next the fire seemed to be all alive'.*
> (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-glass*, Chapter I)

Metaphors abound in cathedral life. This article reflects on a new cathedral metaphor; and the reflection is conducted from the illuminating perspective of the 'Looking-glass room'. The aim is to make 'sacred space, common ground' come 'all alive', in Lewis Carroll's words. The study follows in the wake of a reflection (Muskett, 2015) on the famous 'shop-windows of the Church of England' metaphor applied to cathedrals, which suggested that they function as a mechanism within vicarious religion (Davie, 2007), enabling the passive majority to become acquainted with the forms of religion performed by the active minority (through, for example, their physical dominance of the landscape and city skylines, appearances in the news media and on TV, as exhibitors of the creative arts, and as arenas for performance).

The four words of the metaphor 'sacred space, common ground' create an elegant formula. They are effective also in reverse order (best, perhaps, with the preposition 'in' interposed). The formula surfaces in contexts ranging from a headline on a political blog (Cooper, 2009) to the description of a research project examining the intersection between culture and architecture (Past and Present Media, 2016). The metaphor is relatively recent on the cathedral scene. It can be found within the Dean's welcome message to virtual visitors to the Gloucester Cathedral website: 'Gloucester Cathedral stands for the glory of God in Jesus Christ and for the good of all people. Do join us here in this special place which is both "sacred space and common ground"' (Gloucester Cathedral, 2015). In addition, Canon Lynda Barley (2015) has related how the values of Truro Cathedral have been focused on the headline 'Sacred Space, Common Ground'; and the Dean of Christ Church (Percy, 2015) has

introduced an article about Oxford's cathedral with the words 'Cathedrals are sacred spaces and common ground'. If disconnected, the dyads 'sacred space' and 'common ground' may seem 'quite common and uninteresting' from the perspective of the normative room; but, viewed in conjunction, from the Looking-glass room, they become redolent with meaning and thought-provoking.

Cathedral Studies

The reflection on metaphors is carried out against the backcloth of the emergent field of Cathedral Studies, which draws on a range of theories and scientific approaches developed and tested within the established fields of the scientific study of religion (e.g., the sociology of religion) and empirical theology, and seeks to adopt rigorous methods to evaluate the impact of cathedrals as key points of growth in the Church of England (Francis, 2015).

The literature in the field has been traced back to the landmark report, *Heritage and Renewal*, where the commissioners remarked that the purpose of cathedrals had received little prior appraisal (Archbishop's Commission on Cathedrals, 1994: 4). Ten years or so ago, Anglican cathedrals began to be heralded as a key 'success story' (Inge, 2006: 31) within a Church experiencing ongoing declines in overall attendance. In particular, midweek attendances in cathedrals grew by 268% between 2001 and 2013; so, adding data for midweek services to the Sunday figures more than doubles cathedral attendance levels (Barley, 2012). Yet, until fairly recently, this narrative of cathedral success received insufficient scholarly attention as compared, say, with other thriving communities in the contemporary religious context (Davie, 2012).

The scholarly tide began to turn in several ways. First, with *Spiritual Capital*, the report on the present and future of English cathedrals (Theos and The Grubb Institute, 2012). Second, with a specific strand of investigation within the Church of England's Church

Growth Programme (Holmes and Kautzer, 2013). Third, with contributions on the purpose and potential of our cathedrals by two U.S. cathedral deans (Hall, 2014; Shaw, 2013). Fourth, with Grace Davie's acknowledgement of the greater prominence of cathedrals (albeit within a market in religion) in the second edition of her landmark *Religion in Britain* (Davie, 2015: 137-140). Fifth, with *Anglican Cathedrals in Modern Life. The Science of Cathedral Studies* (Francis, 2015), presenting ten empirical studies on aspects of cathedral life, the findings of which serve as a barometer for the development of cathedral ministry and mission. Sixth, with a special issue of *Theology* in 2015, focusing upon the public role of Anglican cathedrals, featuring articles on Blackburn, Canterbury, Coventry and Truro Cathedrals.

Mobilizing cathedral metaphors

Metaphor is an attempt to understand one element of experience in terms of another; it frames our understanding in a distinctive way, but is far more than a tool for embellishing discourse (Morgan, 2006). 'A device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish' is how Lakoff and Johnson suggested most people regard metaphor – 'a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003: 3). So, is this a characteristic of language that you may be able to get along perfectly well without? Apparently not. For, according to Lakoff and Johnson's classic study, metaphor is a fundamental mechanism of the mind, structuring our most basic understanding of our experience. They likened the ability to comprehend experience through metaphor to a sense such as sight, touch or hearing.

In a recent theological reflection on metaphor as applied to disability and illness, it was argued that 'we live as storied people, unable to live without the descriptive powers of metaphoric explanation' (Howell, 2015: 144). In cathedral life, such figurative language is a potent device enabling an interlocutor to access 'the story beyond the story' of cathedrals by

seizing and representing their essential character: ‘in the hands of a master the figure of speech provides a most efficacious tool, allowing the essential “look” and “feel” of the thing to be communicated to the audience and to provoke new reflections on meaning’ (Murray, 2014: 108, 109).

Here are some well-known examples of cathedral metaphors. The cathedrals’ depiction as ‘shop-windows of the Church of England’ (Archbishops’ Commission on Cathedrals, 1994) highlights their role in showcasing the best of the Church of England’s wares (architecture, liturgy, music, preaching, etc.). The eponymous ‘flagships of the spirit’ (Platten and Lewis, 1998a) adopted the nautical symbolism of the Church and church architecture, loaded with meaning (Murray, 2014). It echoed the evocative words of Pope Paul VI who visited nine English cathedrals in 1934 and described them as ‘veritable ships of the spirit where matter not only has a use but a meaning’ (cited by Archbishops’ Commission on Cathedrals, 1994: 200). ‘Flagships of the spirit’ also calls to mind W.H. Auden’s lines ‘Cathedrals / luxury liners laden with souls / Holding to the east their hulls of stone’ (Platten, 2013) and watery epithets attached to Norwich, Lincoln, York and Durham (Platten and Lewis, 1998a: xii). As ‘sacred theatres’, cathedrals have the ability to ‘catch people off guard and fill them with a sense of awe … [and prompt] them to ask the big questions concerning the meaning of life’ (Rylands, 2006: 129). The ‘religious railway stations’ motif recalls that cathedrals provide a concourse for people with many different destinations in mind, where anonymity may be welcome (Rylands, 2006: 129). Describing cathedrals as ‘laboratories of the spirit’ highlights their role as places where experimentation and exploration are safe, without the fear of stigma associated with the label ‘Christian’, which Rylands argued is not necessarily pinned automatically on those who attend cathedrals (Rylands, 2006: 129). Depicting the cathedrals as ‘enormous magnets for all sorts of people’ (Platten, 2012) spotlights their capacity to exploit connections between the civic, cultural and spiritual

(Hansard, 2012: 337), and people, place and God (Platten and Lewis, 1998b), a three-fold relationship elaborated by Inge (2003). And finally, 'beacons of the Christian faith' (Theos and the Grubb Institute, 2012) implies that cathedrals resemble fires lit on a prominent site to carry a signal.

While the mobilization of such figurative language enlivens the discourse of cathedral scholarship, metaphors can also inform the science of Cathedral Studies and give impetus to theorizing and empirical investigation around the function of cathedral buildings. An inert display of the best of the Church of England might imply quiescence, but the rich imagery of the 'shop-window' metaphor informed the refining and modelling of Davie's (2007) vicarious religion (Muskett, 2015; see also Davie, 2015). The theory calls attention to the vital part these buildings play in the mission of the Church (Archbishops' Commission on Cathedrals, 1994; Shaw, 2013). A starting point was Rowe's (2010) observation that cathedrals are particularly well-placed to perform the 'prior work' of Morisy's foundational domain of mission, whose ministry of 'awakening' responds to secularization, recognizes the low level of religious literacy in Britain, assists people to recognize their sense of God and encourages them to become acquainted with the divine (Morisy, 2004: 151-181). Another example is a study inspired by the 'flagships' and 'magnets' metaphors. Data from the religion question posed in the 2011 Census revealed that the cathedrals and other big church buildings tend to be set in seas of relative unbelief, with a smaller proportion of inhabitants ticking the Christian box than farther away. Yet, statistical analysis demonstrates a 'proximity effect' of these big church buildings, in so far as wards closest to them returned more Christian affiliates than expected after controlling for social demography (Village and Muskett, 2016). Naturally, that finding raises intriguing questions; and the reasons for the effect need to be explored.

This brief excursion through seven terms has demonstrated that it can be illuminating to climb through the Looking-glass and reflect on the significance of metaphors mobilized to shed light on the special function of the mother churches of the dioceses. However, such figures of speech are not unproblematic. Popular use of prosaic language in metaphors can lead to misrepresentation, as Barua (2011) demonstrated in relation to public conservation literacy. In highlighting our inability to live without the descriptive power of metaphor, Howell conceded that at times we are 'unable to live with the consequences' (Howell, 2015: 144); and he drew attention to Sontag's observation that diseases like tuberculosis and cancer have been 'spectacularly … encumbered by the trappings of metaphor' (Sontag, 1979: 5). For his part, Morgan drew attention to the manner in which metaphors can sometimes be attractive and compelling, yet other times biased or incomplete, and with a capacity to distort or mislead. Moreover, he argued that 'in highlighting certain interpretations [metaphor] tends to force others into a background role'; and that metaphor 'uses evocative images to create what may be described as "constructive falsehoods" which, if taken literally, or to an extreme, become absurd' (Morgan, 2006: 4).

Of course, even the blind man whose fingers rode on the hand of a friend drawing a cathedral in Raymond Carver's (2009) short story 'Cathedral' would recognize instinctively that a cathedral is not literally a shop-window, ship, theatre, railway station, laboratory, magnet, or beacon. While we do not take such cathedral metaphors to such an extreme that they become absurd, the figurative language can nonetheless have unintended consequences. For example, the 'shop-windows' metaphor and the description of cathedrals as 'religious supermarkets' (Beeson, 2004) anticipated the notion of consumerism in organized religion to which Davie (2007, 2015) drew attention. Second, the 'flagships' metaphor, capturing the notion of a lead ship in a fleet of vessels, flying a distinguished flag, risked accusations of elitism. Platten and Lewis attempted to make a case for not employing the metaphor in a

narrow sense, and they avoided restricting the symbolic power of flagship cathedrals to Anglicanism: 'often, with flags flying, they are symbols of the loyalty of people to their city, county or region, and are seen as significant by people of any Christian Church or none' (Platten and Lewis, 1998a: xxii). On this basis they argued that, as flagships of the spirit rather than of the Church of England, cathedral buildings 'have an essential part to play in nurturing the religious life of the nation' (xvii). Third, the assertion of *Spiritual Capital* (Theos and the Grubb Institute, 2012) that cathedrals are 'beacons of faith' earned a rebuke from the Editor of the *Church Times*, who argued that 'it would be a poor parish church that could not lay claim' to the attribute (Church Times, 2012). Yet, the identity of the parish church has changed (Percy, 2004); and cathedrals have a distinct calling in the Church because they stand 'on the border of the religious and secular worlds in a way that many parishes churches are no longer able to do' (Lewis, 1996: 28).

Sacred space and common ground: Definitions

> *When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather scornful tone,*
> *"it means just what I choose it to mean−neither more nor less"*
> *"The question is," said Alice,*
> *"whether you* can *make words mean so many different things."*
> (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-glass*, Chapter VI)

Against that background, attention now turns to the new cathedral metaphor, 'sacred space, common ground'. The semantic effort in exploring the meaning represented by the component parts −that is, 'sacred space' and 'common ground'− is a necessary starting point to divine latent meaning carried by the phrases in conjunction and in context. Common ground will be considered first, since it is the more straightforward of the two elements. It is, however, not easy to eschew Humpty Dumpty philosophy in relation to the more polysemous 'sacred space'.

Common ground

To ‘common ground’ are attached both abstract and concrete meanings. The abstract concept of ‘common ground’ is employed by a number of literary and political thinkers ‘to describe a theoretical space where different ideas and cultures meet, overlap, and co-operate’ (Elsabbagh, 2012: 153). In linguistics, the technical notion of common ground (abbreviated as CG) has been described as ‘the mutually recognized shared information in a situation in which an act of trying to communicate takes place’ (Stalnaker, 2002: 704). CG is taken for granted. Scholars distinguish between two basic types of CG. For example, Allan (2013) describes CG as universal or restricted, whereas Clark uses the terms communal (‘information based on the cultural communities a person is believed to belong to’) or personal (‘information based on personal acquaintance … lacking in strangers and greatest for intimates’) (Clark, 1996: 121). CG is ‘dynamic and typically accretes’ in the course of a conversation. A particular interest for those who study language lies in ‘how common ground gets staked out and exploited’ (Clark, 1996: 121).

The concrete definition of common ground relates more specifically to common *land*: ground that is in someone’s ownership, but which other people can use in specific ways. Traditional rights for ‘commoners’ include allowing livestock to graze. The right to roam allows the public to use common land for walking, sightseeing, bird watching, picnicking, climbing; but not to camp or hold a festival without the owner’s permission (see https://www.gov.uk/common-land-village-greens). When considered in that concrete way then, common ground would be an area open to all people for leisure pursuits, or in the traditional sense to support their existence. The phrase has democratic and emancipatory connotations.

We find the phrase ‘common ground’ applied to cathedrals by Christopher Lewis (then Dean of St Albans) in a chapter within *Flagships of the Spirit*, where he argued that

cathedrals have many different stakeholders, many different groups with an interest. He wrote:

> Cathedrals are nothing if they are not accessible holy places in which all kinds of people feel that they belong…. It is tempting for cathedrals to use their power over people in order only to associate with the most biddable or exalted, and thus to avoid collisions between different groups. But to succumb to that temptation is to lose their central role. (Lewis, 1998: 153)

He prefaced that assertion with the following analogy: 'On common ground, grazing rights are difficult to define and it is undesirable that they should be too tightly controlled. There is no such thing as a trespasser' (Lewis, 1998: 153).

Sacred space

Arriving at 'a clear definition of sacred space which gains universal agreement is an almost impossible task … it could be an intimate bedroom or lofty cathedral, a high mountain or a deep canyon' (Vosko, 2016: 42). Certain sacred spaces may be 'agreed-upon' by religious insiders and respected by outsiders (McAlister, 2005); yet, the adjective 'sacred' may apply equally to a site 'that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious' (Sheldrake, 2001: 1). Examples of such sacralization would be temporary roadside shrines that memorialize victims of traffic collisions and help to make sense of inexplicable loss (Collins and Opie, 2010) and sites of terror such as Ground Zero (Jacobs, 2004).

Since around the turn of the millennium, there has been a conspicuous increase in the provision of sacred space within British public institutions. A prime example was the 'Prayer Space' of the Millennium Dome which became sacralized not only on account of the prayer requests written in a book there but also 'by the efforts of those who read them and those who offered them for prayer' (Gilliat-Ray, 2005: 368). This analysis chimed with White's (1995)

view that the space of church buildings is sacred because of the actions of the community that assembles there. However, Sheehy criticized White (and not only her, but also *Flagships of the Spirit* and Inge, 2003) for giving insufficient attention to the consequences of the doctrine of the incarnation:

> The particular conveys the universal, and what is universal is particular. This appears to be a principle of God's working with us. It is expressed in the incarnation … [and it] is because of this principle that at its best the Christian faith has been able to overcome the polarity between the material and the spiritual, the profane and the sacred. (Sheehy, 2007: 16)

A brief sweep of church history reveals that the dividing lines between the sacred and profane have indeed been blurred:

> In the early Church … churches were used for living and sleeping, eating and drinking, for meetings and for legal proceedings. This conjunction continued in the Middle Ages. Churches were used for the distribution of poor relief, for the playing of games, for acting, teaching, dancing. (Tavinor, 2007: 37).

But the Gothic Revival of the nineteenth century introduced a marked distinction between the sacred and the secular within sacred spaces, typified by the building of church halls outside the liturgical area from the end of that century (Tavinor, 2007: 40).

There seems no doubt that cathedrals are sacred space. A cathedral is regarded as 'a place endowed with a particular aura of holiness', wrote Platten (1998). In his view, not only are cathedrals sacred space, but distinctive sacred space: 'This notion of being a notable sacred space has from earliest times marked off cathedrals from secular buildings, and even from other churches' (Platten, 1998: 124).

Sacred space, common ground: The metaphor

"I meant by 'impenetrability' that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next,
as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life."
"That's a great deal to make one word mean," Alice said in a thoughtful tone.
"When I make a word do a lot of work like that," said Humpty Dumpty,
"I always pay it extra."
(Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Chapter VII)

We have seen from the foregoing that each of the notions of 'sacred space' and 'common ground' has been applied separately to cathedrals. In a whimsical manner, we might now wonder whether credit accrues to the words 'sacred space' and 'common ground' for added value on account of their meaning when in conjunction and applied to a cathedral. To see whether there is added value, let us first explore how the metaphor combining the descriptors has been elucidated in the two recent articles by residentiary cathedral clergy.

On the one hand, Percy emphasized the calling to be welcoming and hospitable, to offer an opportunity for prayer and contemplation in an oasis that contrasts with the busyness of the outside world. In this explication, there is reference also to mission intentionality.

> Cathedrals are sacred spaces and common ground. Cathedrals stand as signs of God's love and grace in the midst of a distracted world. They provide serious spaces and places for prayer and contemplation in a busy world. Cathedrals meet, greet and minister to every visitor, and enable every casual wanderer to take those first steps to becoming an intentional, seeking pilgrim. (Percy, 2015).

This description chimes with survey data reported in *Spiritual Capital* which suggested that cathedrals are seen locally and nationally as both sacred (offering God even to those who do not believe) and also as reaching out to the general public and welcoming to those of all faiths and none (Theos and The Grubb Institute, 2012: 25).

On the other hand, Barley related how the values of Truro Cathedral have been focused on the headline 'Sacred Space, Common Ground' as it sought to establish itself as 'a place where people of all backgrounds can come together to experience sacred space in their

lives' (Barley, 2015: 409). The beauty of the architecture and quiet atmosphere prompt reflection and prayer; and the cathedral promotes a strong ministry of hospitality in the city. She observed that 'the implications of being a spiritual and community utility are embraced by [the] cathedral as a vocational calling with generosity of heart' (Barley, 2015: 411). In that explication, the metaphor is symbolic of being an hospitable public enterprise, oriented to the spiritual and to the wider community at one and the same time.

When Barley wrote of Truro Cathedral embracing the implications of this dual perspective with grace, she articulated the underlying tension between the two faces of a cathedral. In her words, the 'spectrum of potential audiences challenges all cathedrals across England' (Barley, 2015: 409). Such a tension can be especially evident when cathedrals exploit their common ground and are entrepreneurial, staging rock concerts or hosting large-scale events such as wedding fayres and corporate dinners, or hiring out their vast space to other users. The word 'multiplex' has been used of religious buildings that operate in this manner (Vosko, 2016: 43). Although there is a potential conflict of interest if space for regular cathedral activities is temporarily unavailable, such events do present another way of attracting a new public into cathedral buildings, as the Dean of Lichfield (Chair of the Association of English Cathedrals) recently explained:

> We've been experimenting with things like festive food fayres, we've had a gala dinner and special black tie events… In the medieval period, the nave was very much the people's place. You might well have had your market here. You might well have had feasts on saints days here in the nave of the cathedral. So, in a way we're just reviving a tradition. (Dorber, 2016).

It was noted earlier that, within the field of linguistics, the basis of one type of common ground is personal acquaintance. As Wharton observed in her treatise concerning buildings as architectural agents, 'places, like people, are usually more engaging and less

dangerous the better we know them' (Wharton, 2015: xiii). It follows that when popular, large-scale events render cathedrals more conspicuous common ground, they help to familiarize the community with the prosaic sacred space. In such a way, the daily worship of God is not divorced from the temporal: it flows from and to all other ministries and actions happening in congregations and the larger community (Vosko, 2016: 43). It is in this manner that the sacred space transforms into common ground and there is consonance.

Concluding remarks

Against the background of the emergent field of Cathedral Studies and the increasing use of metaphor to enliven cathedral scholarship, this article set out to reflect on the new expression 'sacred space, common ground'. The study took inspiration from the adventures of Lewis Carroll's Alice; and the reflection was conducted through the lens of the Looking-glass room, to make the metaphor come alive. The notion of common ground was relatively straightforward; but it was less easy to eschew Humpty Dumpty's theory of meaning when pondering definitions of sacred space. We can conclude that Humpty Dumpty might well pay extra to the words 'sacred space, common ground' on account of the amount of work they perform together as a thought-provoking metaphor, highlighting rich opportunities for mission yet also inherent tensions in the two faces of cathedral life. In the light of this, possible avenues for empirical research would include further case studies of individual cathedrals, to see how in practice the implications of being a spiritual and community utility may be embraced and held in tension. Such research would build on Barley's (2015) analysis of Truro's vocational calling.

At the close of his theological reflection on metaphor, Howell concluded that 'the task of the church is to create new metaphors to describe timeless principles' (Howell, 2015: 152). Here, in the present article, is an example of such a new metaphor; and the analysis has

demonstrated how novel metaphorical language applied to cathedrals can communicate a timeless reality. Being attentive to fresh metaphors that emerge in the field of Cathedral Studies may illuminate further our understanding of the function of iconic cathedral buildings. Interestingly, in *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag suggested that the language regarding cancer would evolve in due course, and the use of metaphor diminish along with our understanding of the disease (Sontag, 1979: 86). When the field of Cathedral Studies has matured and our understanding of modern cathedral life has deepened still further, will the use of metaphor in cathedral scholarship also diminish? Yet, if the use of metaphor in this context were to diminish, perhaps cathedral descriptions would become a little less rich.

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