

**Mark R. Wynn, *Faith and Place. An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology*  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)**

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Mark Wynn's book (currently senior lecturer at Exeter University, UK) represents an original attempt to bring forward for discussion some of the classic paradigms of both theology and philosophy. The title itself is a surprising one (*Faith and Place. An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology*) and clearly specifies the theme set for research: the re-evaluation of the signification that 'the Place' has, and a new discussion about what *location*, as a phenomenological 'gesture' in relation with the religious experience, is.

The original place that Wynn's paper occupies in the bibliography of the philosophy of religion is secured: usually, the common debates are done about the de-location and the deconstruction of the space, as a specific reaction to the world of a certain religious attitude. Moreover, theology either overlooks the problem of *res extensa* as belonging to sublunary and transient, or handles it, as shown by the author, from the point of view of the divine attribute of the omnipresence. Therefore, either space is accidental, or formally created, and therefore locating a thing, phenomenon and, moreover, identifying the places as such, receives a decisive secondarity from the point of view of the theological reflection or of the religious experience. This type of metaphysical attitude is questioned by Wynn. From the point of view of the religious attitude as such, space receives signification and even an essential signification. It becomes *different*, it includes qualitative delimitations and, thus, it allows for the 'places' invested with meaning to occur. The experience of pilgrimage is suggestive, next to the religious gesture of space consecration, carefully and

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highly informed, among others, by Mircea Eliade. The very connection between the religious feeling and the characteristics of places with which it is connected—with the peace, or, on the contrary, with the tumult of world—may also be invoked. Finally, the scriptural meaning of ‘the high place’ or of the wilderness proves how spatiality is certainly not accidental in the context of religious experience. The information provided by the sociology, history or anthropology of religion are not however decisive for Wynn. The originality of the research lays in its phenomenological approach (actually quite rarely called as such) and in the attempt to re-enroll the religious experience in the specific ground of the inter-subjectivity, of the ‘world of life,’ where spatiality and location, as differentiated attitudes, significant in relation to space, become decisive.

An initial intention of the book is, therefore, to re-discuss the theological reflection regarding the divine omnipresence starting from the concrete experience of the religious man, the one rooted in a complex feeling of space and in an essential logic of location: “I am interested to see how the doctrine of divine omnipresence might be set within some larger theoretical framework which gives proper recognition (one that is neither psychologically reductionist nor metaphysically overbearing) to the place-relative character of religious belief and practice.” (pp. 4-5.) Wynn’s intention is not without precedent in the history of philosophy of religion. It witnesses an important moment through the writings of Hegel who, in an entirely different context, of course, also observed the need to double the theological reflection with the one regarding the concrete ways of religiosity, the only ones where the concept of divine being may ‘realize’ itself. Wynn’s phenomenological perspective resets the issue in entirely different frames and the intention to follow this issue starting from the signification which the religious man gives to the space and to the gesture of location is an original one.

The book’s second dimension is the epistemological approach of this issue. This time as well, the approach is an original one, although the sources named by the author are multiple. Wynn starts from the classical scenarios of analytical epistemology of religion—Richard Swinburne or William Alston. They act, most of the times, through the identification of some secular analogies of religious knowledge, whether scientific or perceptual. It is insufficient, argues Wynn. In fact, between the religious knowledge and the practical one there is a relation closer than the simple analogy. One of the possible connections may be obtained through ‘the knowledge of place’—

representing “an embodied, practical and, very often, theoretically inarticulate responsiveness to a given region of space.” (p. 8.) Two structural elements of the knowledge of place indicate the *personal* way of religious knowledge: the practical character and the super-individual, non-ostensive status of the object. Wynn’s presupposition is clearly expressed: religious knowledge is not a strictly intellectual one, it does not represent an exemplary form of *theory*, but it is both a cognitive positioning, as well as affective and practical, of the subject in relation to the divine being. This presupposition is not the only one in the history of philosophy. Augustine had already drawn attention on the fact that faith is uncertain, in the absence of the reference to the other Pauline virtues, hope and love. Faith, shows the Bishop of Hippo, does not imply a simple intellectual adherence, but a conversion of the soul in his reporting to the Boundlessness. The same (but this time from a phenomenological perspective, not theological-exegetical) is also for Wynn, the religious knowledge: a knowledge that belongs to the concrete, historical self, integrated in the world of life. Spatiality and the reference of the subject to the qualitative difference of places are structural elements of this world and, thus, they maintain an essential relation with religious knowledge. Wynn’s thesis from 2009 continues, in fact, a series of previous researches, mentioned by the author: *God and Goodness: A Natural Theological Perspective* (1999) and *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding* (2005). The analogy invoked by Wynn, between *knowledge of place* and *religious knowledge*, has more than a rhetoric role. The two of them do not meet only under the structural aspect, but, in a fundamental manner, inside the life’s world, as concrete reports of subject not to objects as such, but to horizons and visibility conditions of objects.

The book’s chapters describe this original scenario, of the connection between location and religious experience. The two mentioned routes are followed: on the one hand, the relation between the concept of divine being and the concept of ‘place’ (Place) and, on the other hand, the structural connections between the two types of knowledge. The author also sketches, in the last chapters of the book, a series of considerations regarding a possible analysis of some cultural dimensions as a bridge between the two elements which face each other constantly in the book (for example, the aesthetic dimension, seen as a way of representation and identification of place, on the one hand, and as form of revelation, on the other hand).

The second chapter of the book is indeed interesting, taking the phenomenon of friendship as a model for the description of structure and of the signification of spatial knowledge (*knowledge of place*): “we have seen how the relationship of friends to a place may enable them to share various thoughts which it would be difficult to articulate in abstraction from the place. I have also noted that when friends reckon noninstrumentally with the character of a place, then their relationship to the place can come to assume, in some respects, the guise of a friendship.” (p. 43.) Friendship, claims Wynn with literary and biographical arguments, implies the emotional and inter-subjective investment of reality. As such, it formally corresponds to the exercise of location, above defined. First of all, it sends to a concrete, integrated (*bodily*) way, of ‘response’ given to a place. Secondly, by means of the mechanism of emotional investment mentioned before, places become microcosms, they have the capacity to complete meanings that surpass them and represent *Totalities*. Thus becomes possible, as well, the integration of space into the religious experience. Both the consecration as religious act and the connection between *knowledge of place* and *religious knowledge* in the context of life’s world are based on the capacity of the *place* to function as a microcosm. The individual, daily or exceptional experience may thus, to the extent that it refers to a place, metaphysically open itself. Pilgrimage is the paradigmatic example in this case: “By means of the pilgrimage journey, the believer is able: (i) to encounter the significance of certain people or places (where this ‘encounter’ depends upon the believer placing themselves in a relevant relation of physical proximity); (ii) to achieve an embodied rather than purely mental or description-relative directedness to God; and (iii) to enact microcosmically, and so participate in, the Christian story—rather than simply professing that story in words.” (p. 172.)

In this context, the theological consequence of Wynn’s discourse becomes interesting. Namely, the analogy between the concept of space and the one of divine being does not explain only how it is possible for a place to obtain religious relevance. And vice versa, it finds a certain way of the divine, where this one can express cosmically and may be ‘recognized’ in different spatial situations. An entire series of issues is opened—and this is one of the important merits of the text submitted to debate: the problem of idolatry, for example, bears a philosophical translation starting from the concept of microcosm, the same as the abstract concept of divine being is, by means of the reinstatement of religious knowledge in life’s world, opened

towards an universe of significations and towards possible concrete representations. Wynn's choice is, therefore, to look at the religious experience not from the point of view of the divine omnipresence, but investigate the ways in which the qualitative differentiation of *places* inside this experience is established.

The sources of the discourse that I briefly presented here are multiple. First of all, it is about personal experience, about the friendship of the British poet Edmund Cusick. The approach is an interesting one and a phenomenological one. The 'daily,' the cotidianity, is for Wynn a source of significance and, at the same time, a methodological 'guide.' Cusick's poetic work counts as well as source for Wynn's reflection: "For Cusick of course, divine meanings are relative not just to bodily movements, but to places. His religious quest is, then, a search for the meanings which are inscribed in particular microcosmically significant places. And as his poetry reveals, these meanings may in turn be given in the storied identity of a place, or in the mode of bodily appropriation which it affords." (p. 248.) There are also mentioned theological sources, such as the paper of Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (1923), from which Wynn keeps in mind the way in which theological knowledge is primarily oriented towards action and has an ethical relevance. Historical artifacts or significant places are essentially connected to religious experience. Susan White, David Brown and John Inge are also mentioned. Sometimes, the statements seem bold, from the point of view of theology as such ("the meaning of the world is God," p. 249). But, many times, they can be explained through an implicit philosophical reference in the text. The third 'source' of the text is the phenomenological one, visible especially through the way in which the two types of experience, the one of location and the religious one, are debated. Gerardus Van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade are quoted next to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The phenomenological perspective is not assumed; it rather offers a language than a method. The book's intention, however, is not one of managing a philosophical analysis, but of formulating a series of reflections in a concrete manner, by crossing several theoretical discourses with the analysis of daily situations. And these reflections regard an interesting theme: recovering the categories of externality from the point of view of the religious experience, traditionally concentrated on the phenomenon of interiority. Abundant in examples and analogies, the text suggests, as mentioned, several openings and applications,

both in the field of esthetics or, broadly, of the philosophy of culture, as well as in the field of a 'hermeneutics' of the spatial dimension of the cotidianity.

Finally, the subtitle of the book sends, as well, to another direction of reading that may be developed. It is about identifying those ways of knowledge which cannot enter the abstract scheme of the relation subject-object. The religious knowledge or the one of place (*knowledge of place*) are epistemic ways deeply rooted in the world of life and in a series of non-theoretical relations, which describe horizons of the experience and not objects of it. Wynn's attempt of understanding the attribute of the divine omnipresence starting from the differentiated religious experience is crucial in this respect.