

Gethsemani: A 'Thin' Place

Frederick Smock

Travellers today speak of 'thin' places, where the distance between heaven and earth evaporates and we are able to glimpse the divine, or the transcendent. An old Celtic saying goes, 'Heaven and earth are only three feet apart'. But in thin places, that distance is even shorter.

The religious scholar Mircea Eliade wrote in *The Sacred and the Profane*, 'some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.' And an Apache proverb holds that

'wisdom sits in places.' So, how to find it—a thin place?

It will not be found at Disneyworld, or Trump Tower, where the things of this world are too much with us. It may, most often, be found by accident. I have found my spirits lifted in many a various place: sitting in a bar in Copenhagen when the light at 5p.m. turns blue; skiing the Continental Divide in Colorado, where we were literally and figuratively closer to the stars; looking at a beautifully subtle

Agnes Martin painting in the Hirschorn Museum in Washington D.C.

A thin place can certainly be an identifiably sacred place, yet perhaps not all of them, nor for all people. I find the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris to be squat and unlovely. (This is an aesthetic comment, not a spiritual one.) The gothic St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City holds, for me, all the warmth and uplift of a burial vault. And yet, I have felt transformative magic in other sacred places: spending a blessedly quiet New Year's eve with my fiancée at the St. Meinrad abbey in southern Indiana; watching the children's choir sing at St. Aldate's in Oxford; and, yes, retreating to the Abbey at Gethsemani, in central Kentucky, for a weekend.

The services at Gethsemani are quite lovely, but I prefer walking the footpath that leads to the fire tower. The path rises at it goes

along, and surprises as it does: here a bench, there a statue, here a flowering crocus. The stillness in the air at Gethsemani is its transcendence. The silence, too.

Gethsemani is beautifully haunted by the spirit of Thomas Merton as well, of course. A knowledge of his writings, and of his exuberant persona, only enliven the place. If my understanding of him is imperfect, or incomplete, that does not diminish my experience there. When will my understanding be perfect, or complete? Never.

I walk the paths he walked. I breathe the air he breathed. And the distance between us gets shorter.

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