

# The Fourth Dimension. Christian Spiritual Experience and the Relationship with Space

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*Abstract* – In the age that has known *Flatland*, the movement of the Flat Earth Society, to whom the third dimension looks already excessive, seems to be gradually losing the memory of introspection that had characterized Christian spirituality from the beginnings. This field of knowledge, while not attaching any importance to the physical extent that allows us to consider the volumes of things, had offered human existence a further dimension, intimate but real and tangible. Precisely because the human body is elected to be the seat of experience, just as one would for the observation of a constellation in a distant galaxy or of an infinitesimal physical particle, the laboratory in which the experiment takes place needs the appropriate instruments and its structure acquires absolute importance. For this reason, some mystics have sought the means appropriate to their personality to pursue the objective. They have sometimes enclosed themselves amid small spaces, walled themselves up alive, withdrawn into a cave or a forest to experiment in solitary places, far from human society, the search for the spiritual dimension. Others, however, have preferred to display their spiritual quest for all to see, hoisting themselves up on a column, stylites for example, or using the various forms of asceticism as a means of persuasive communication, see manipulation, with the aim more of appearing than of being. This paper proposes a semiotic investigation of the four spatial dimensions convened by some representative examples from the history of Christian spirituality and the perspectives more or less in keeping with the evangelical message they are supposed to be inspired by.

Keywords: Christian spirituality – space – mysticism – religious imagery

## 1. The Spaces of Experience

This overview focuses on the identification of the space inherent in the exercise of Christian spirituality understood both as an inner dimension, motivated by experience, as well as the concrete setting where experience itself takes place. Regarding the first occurrence, which calls into question the human compound as the site of spirituality, we will observe how spiritual practices have been described in some samples taken from the witnesses of modern mystics. Since spatial configurations specific to the spiritual experience are mentioned in the historical sources, it is as-

sumed that the place designated for the exercise of spirituality is of particular importance in view of the outcome sought. Our analysis will start dealing with this aspect.

### 1.1 *Early Christianity*

When persecution against Christians ceased, a need was felt on the part of the Church for a moral equivalent for war; this the Church found in monasticism. About 305 the solitary life begun in the Egyptian desert firstly organized by Saint Antony, who is reckoned as the founder of Christian monachism. Through his efforts and those of his disciples, great colonies of monks arose, the most famous of which were at Nitria and Scete<sup>1</sup>. In this context the monk lived truer to the meaning of his name: *monos*, alone. Indeed, they lived in cells grouped round a central church, where services were held on Saturday and Sunday, devotions otherwise being said in the individual cells. The main feature of this type of monasticism was its voluntary character: each monk lived his own life, and the monastery had a number of solitary lives lived in common rather than a true common life that started later with coenobitism founded by Pachomius at Tabennisi sometime in the years 315-320.

The voluntaristic character and competition in the harshness of asceticism that each anchorite imposed upon himself was completely uncontrollable, but nevertheless unfolded under close scrutiny. Now, since the harshness with which the body was treated was considered meritorious, any new ascetic form invented for the purpose of subduing the body and psyche to the pre-eminence of spiritual experience was considered directly proportional to a person's holiness as long as it was not too extravagant or bloody. Indeed, although the monasticism inaugurated by the desert fathers was intended as a replacement for the martyrdom suffered by Christians during the persecutions of the first centuries, it did not consist in the exercise of a sterile self-damage. This is why it was renamed «white martyrdom», precisely because it did not consist in the shedding of blood. In spite of the fact that overseers supervised the various ascetic forms, a certain number of anchorites, less subject to vigilant control, underwent excesses of asceticism aimed at violently subjugating the body to the primacy of the spirit. Their excess has always been condemned, but the exhibitionism that characterised it has not been completely eradicated and numerous examples of self-harming ascetics have been recorded and saints can also be found among them.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. S. Headley, *Du desert au Paradis*, Paris, Cerf, 2018.

The monk's choice of place to live mirrored the ascetic program he proposed. Escape from human consortium could take the form of choosing a cave as a place to live. This is the case of Macarius of Egypt:

«Here is another example of his asceticism. He made in the course of time a tunnel running under the ground from his cell for half a stade and finished it off at the end with a cave. And if ever a crowd of people troubled him, he would leave his cell secretly and go away to the cave and no one would find him»<sup>2</sup>.

But also that of Dorotheus «a Theban ascetic who was spending the sixtieth year in his cave»<sup>3</sup> and that of «a certain Solomon, a man of very mild disposition and restrained and possessing the gift of endurance. He used to say that he had been fifty years in the cave. He provided for himself by the work of his hands and had learned by heart all the Holy Scriptures»<sup>4</sup>. Many other monks who lived in the Egyptian desert chose to realize their asceticism through life in a cave, a site that involves an important biblical reference: that of Elijah, who witnesses Yahweh's passage in front of the cave in which he hid<sup>5</sup>.

Others chose a tomb, like Alexandra: «who, having left the city and shut herself up in a tomb, received the necessaries of life through an opening, seeing neither women nor men face to face for ten years»<sup>6</sup>. Sisinnius instead,

«after dwelling with Elpidius six or seven years, finally he shut himself up in a tomb and continued for three years in a tomb, praying constantly, sitting down neither by night nor day, neither lying down nor walking out. He was counted worthy of a gift (of power) over demons»<sup>7</sup>.

Symeon the Stylite<sup>8</sup> shows incomparable creativity in his choice of places and ascetic means. He first chose to live in a cistern in the middle of the desert, then settled on a pillar, designating it as a place for fasting<sup>9</sup>. Later,

«after procuring an iron chain of twenty cubits, nailing one end to a great rock and fixing the other to his right foot, so that not even if he wished could he go outside these limits,

<sup>2</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, ed. and trans. by J. Wortley, Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 2015, p. 76; Girolamo, *Vite degli eremiti Paolo, Ilarione e Malco*, Roma, Città nuova, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 164.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 19, 9-14.

<sup>6</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> Theodoret of Cyrhus, *Life of Saint Symeon the Stylite*, ch. 6, <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2017/09/life-of-saint-symeon-stylite-theodoret.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 9.

he lived all the time inside, thinking of heaven and compelling himself to contemplate what lies above the heavens – for the iron chain did not hinder the flight of his thought»<sup>10</sup>.

In this context, the space of life could be invested with sacred and, above all, effective powers, because of the role attributed to them. In the scanty biographies Palladius reports in the *Storia Lausiaca*, for example, one observes the effectiveness of the inside-outside spatial dynamic. Life within the chosen place is often a guarantee of security and divine protection even if it turns into the theatre of the struggle against the evil one. Leaving it meant exposing oneself to the attack of the devil and the temptations of the world, seen as agents external to man and of man's separation from God. In fact, although the ascetic's chosen place was the place of ordinary combat against the evil, this fight was carried out under divine protection supposed to be effective exclusively within the perimeter of his ordinary life. The interior of the cell is the guarantor of the monk's fidelity to God, a sort of matrix, the motor of spiritual progression. Leaving the cell is an indication of digression, diversion from the essential, yielding to temptation. An anecdote from the life of Nathanaël from the *Lausiaca History* confirms this tendency:

«Among other things, ... he seemed to feel a distaste for his first cell and went off and built another nearer a village. So, when he had completed the cell and occupied it, three or four months after the demon came by night, holding a whip of ox-hide like the executioners, and having the appearance of a ragged soldier, and began cracking his whip. Then the blessed Nathanael answered and said: 'Who are you who do such things in ray dwelling?' The demon answered: 'I am he who drove you from that cell. I have come to chase you out of this too'. Knowing that he was the victim of an illusion, he returned again to the first cell, and in a period of thirty-seven years in all did not cross the threshold, having a quarrel with the demon who showed him such wonders, trying to force him out, as it is impossible to relate»<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. Monasticism

In the course of time, the protective role of the cell was transmitted to the space of the monastic cloister to the point of making it forbidden to cross its threshold, under penalty of punishment. The severity of the sanction derives from the fact that the Benedictine rule implies a vow of stability, i.e., a commitment to live for the rest of one's existence in the space delimited by enclosure:

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, p. 71.

«But if anyone shall have thus presumed, let him be subjected to the punishment prescribed by rule. Similarly let it be done to him also who shall have presumed to leave the monastery enclosure, or to go anywhere at all, or to do anything whatsoever, however small, without the abbot's orders»<sup>12</sup>.

It is interesting to point out how, in the course of time and because of the rise of coenobitism, individual creativity as a penance idiolect with respect to spatial asceticism is diminished in favor of order and spatial security predetermined by a religious rule of life within a monastery which envisages tiny, uncomfortable serial cells for each monk. Thus, modifying the place of life, the spot of monastic penance is converted from the faith, expressed in facing the danger of a reckless life in the wilderness into the patience in enduring the neighbor living in the adjoining cell.

### 3. Space as a Sign

In light of more recent evolution in the field of Christian spirituality, we can see that Antiquity exalted spatial asceticism by privileging the choice of cramped and difficult-to-access places for the exercise of corporal penance.

The exit from the spatial rigor of the monastic cell with an opening to the social space is realized in the turning introduced by the preaching orders in the 12th century, Franciscans and Dominicans<sup>13</sup>. They inaugurated an open space for religious life as they were itinerant. This openness to the world as a place of asceticism is declined in various ways in the course of modernity until it leads to a spirituality less centered on the confines of the human body, such as the one inaugurated recently by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin with the topic of the Mass on the World<sup>14</sup>, which elects infinite spaces as the seat of a cosmic spiritual experience.

Analyzing this overview of austere spatial forms inherent to early Christian anachoretic or monastic life, we note that a specific spatial semiotics emerges and contributes to the making of a culture in which objects and practices take on a particular meaning and create a specific geometry. Here, objects, places, and forms deserve the expression plane of spatial codes invented by a closed society within the religious semiosphere of post-persecution Christianity. If we must take up Wittgenstein's statements regarding

<sup>12</sup> *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by C. White, London, Penguin Classics, 2008, ch. 67.

<sup>13</sup> J.-C. Guy, *La vie religieuse, mémoire évangélique de l'Eglise*, Paris, Le Centurion, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. P.T. de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, New York, Harper and Row, 1961.

life forms in the *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>15</sup>, we can say that the monastic spatial language generates the life form itself, which harbors and allows it to exist as a reaction to the ordinary life forms in human society. That is to say, the place itself generates the corresponding form of life and the various options attached correspond to the creation of a new private social/religious code composed of various syntagms related and at the same time opposite to the society habits and historical periods in which it appears.

The current presence of monastic perspectives as well as the opening to the whole world as a place of spiritual experience, proposed by the theologian Teilhard de Chardin, allow us to observe how opposing tendencies can now coexist and offer their prerogatives to people who refer to one or another spirituality in a world that already announced itself as multi-religious at the end of the second millennium. The openness to the world since the modern era had in fact allowed Christian religious life to move out of the closed setting of monastic life focused on the primacy of prayer to concretize other aspects of the Gospel message in the proximity of people in need. In semiotic terms, this transformation could be defined as the overlapping of the Christian spirituality range with the entire earthly, or even cosmic, semiosphere, fact that entails a phenomenal enrichment of perspectives for the development of an appropriate spirituality.

We can therefore affirm that the monastic living space, whatever form it is shaped in, becomes an instrument with a performative function since, through divine or demonic influence, it makes the monk do something he had not planned to do but who suffers passively.

The voluntaristic character and competition in the harshness of asceticism, the escape from human consortium, the conferring of effective powers to the living space represent the «identification beliefs» (*croyances d'identifications*) typical of the period following the Christian persecutions, which, added to the common «regime of beliefs» (*régime de croyances*) relating to the Christian religion, provide what Fontanille<sup>16</sup> claims as necessary conditions for identifying a semiotic object, that is to say, the form in which spiritual experience is expressed in a specific form of life or in a specific theological perspective.

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<sup>15</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York, Macmillan, 1953, ch. 19.

<sup>16</sup> J. Fontanille, *Formes de vie*, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015, p. 30.

#### 4. The Fourth Dimension

Regarding the hypothesis of a «fourth dimension» inherent in the human compound and revealed by spiritual experience, let us examine a series of testimonies taken from the biographies of some mystics. The account of Theresa of Avila's spiritual experience is spread through all her works. Here are a couple of examples:

«I was at prayer one day when suddenly, without knowing how, I found myself, as I thought, plunged right into hell. ... The entrance, I thought, resembled a very long, narrow passage, like a furnace, very low, dark and closely confined; the ground seemed to be full of water which looked like filthy, evil-smelling mud ...»<sup>17</sup>.

The *Memoriale*, a biography of Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), bears witness to the ecstasies that made her famous. Here is an account of this testifying to an experience similar to that of Theresa of Avila:

«While I was thinking, suddenly my soul was ravished and in the first ecstasy was placed at a table without beginning and without end. I, however, was not led to see the table, but what was on it, and I contemplated an unspeakable fullness of which I can say no more than that it was All Good»<sup>18</sup>.

We observe that the fruition of the inner space created by the vision mentioned by the two mystics is not accessible at will but that one is transported into it or one finds oneself without knowing how in this unknown place. The etymology of the term ecstasy is in fact derived from ἐξίστημι «putting out» and «coming out of oneself». This movement shifts the attention of the mystic towards an elsewhere, a spatial dimension towards which he cannot go alone but can only be transported by being into a condition of passivity.

The situation relates to an oneiric dimension and is settled in such a way. The difference with the dreamlike condition is that the attention of the mystic is constant and necessary: they consciously attends and is transported into the space designated by the vision. The structure of the described space come precisely from the imagery that the mystic has stored up throughout his life. In fact, here is how the kabbala specialist Gershom Scholem defines this phenomenon:

«Why then does a Christian mystic always have Christian visions and not those of a Buddhist? Why does a Buddhist see the figures of his own pantheon and not, for example,

<sup>17</sup> Theresa of Avila, *Life*, ed. by A. Peers, New York, Doubleday, 1960, p. 181.

<sup>18</sup> Angela da Foligno, *Memoriale*, ed. and with an Introduction by E. Menestò, Spoleto, CISAM, 2015, p. 34.

that of Jesus or the Madonna? Why does a Kabbalist meet the prophet Elijah on his path to enlightenment, and not a figure from a world alien to him? The answer is, of course, that the expression of their experiences is immediately transformed into the traditional symbols of their own world, even when the objects of that experience are basically the same, and not really very different, as many explorers of mysticism, particularly on the Catholic side, readily admit»<sup>19</sup>.

In fact, John of the Cross specifies how the individual imagery elaborates precise images taken from religious tradition and stored in his memory, under the impulse of mystical experience.

«All the conceptions and forms which come through the five corporeal senses and become fixed in the soul by the natural way can also come to it by the supernatural way and be communicated to it without the help of any external sense. Indeed, this sense of imagination, together with memory, is like a kind of archive or reservoir for the understanding, in which all intelligible forms and images are received. Like a mirror, it keeps them within itself. Having received them through the five senses, or, as we say, through the supernatural way, and thus representing them to the understanding, the understanding then considers and judges them. Its power goes further: it can still compose and form other images similar to those which are supplied to it there. It must therefore be known that, just as the five external senses naturally propose and represent the images and forms of objects to the internal senses, so God can, we repeat, supernaturally and without the help of the external senses, represent the same images or forms, and much more beautiful and perfect ones»<sup>20</sup>.

We can first observe the spatial dimensions that the mystical experience seemed to induce by stating that the narrowness of the space predetermined for the practice of Christian spirituality following its most ancient tradition is inversely proportional to the psycho-physical «fourth dimension» that the mystic experiences and constructs through personal imagery during the exercise of his spirituality.

The deprivation of external stimuli brought about by the ascetic option of the mystic forcing himself into a cramped space, is motivated by an introspective search aimed at directing his need to relate exclusively to the divine sphere. Now, the goal sought is to focus one's attention exclusively on inner movements and to refine, not to say deviate, one's perception from that which the five senses provide for physical survival in order to develop an inner perception of both psychic and spiritual order. This operation has been described with great precision by Carmelite spirituality (John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila, Teresa of the Child Jesus and Elizabeth of the Trinity, for instance), which distinguishes the night of the soul and the night of the spirit as two phases of adaptation that initiation into Christian spirituality entails.

<sup>19</sup> G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, New York, Schocken, 1996, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, ed. by D. Lewis, London, Baker, 1922, p. 324.



With regard to the semiotic glance to be laid on the phenomena, an above-mentioned sentence by Gerhom Scholem draws our attention: «the expression of their experiences is immediately transformed into the traditional symbols of their own world»<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, as de Saussure would say and Louis Hjelmslev<sup>22</sup> pointed out of the mental activity inherent in language, the plane of expression of mystical experience described in the previous quotations can be considered as composed in the disordered reservoir of images stored in the conscience as a 'matter' of expression. Those lie creating a kind of paradigmatic order of available images until the spiritual experience activates them and, choosing some of them, gives them a 'form' creating a visual syntagm that outlines the vision. As for the meaning to be attached to these forms, unlike a sentence formulated in any conventional language, it is up to the mystic who receives the vision to 'reread' the personal spatial experience and attribute a sense to what has been communicated to him.

The typical progression of the spiritual experience was effectively described by Theresa of Avila using the metaphor of the «Interior Castle»<sup>23</sup>. And indeed, just as with the Theatres of Memory that are shaped at approximately the same time and that furnish the mental space to be discovered by the Renaissance man, Theresa describes the discovery of the different spiritual rooms and progressively more and more effaced the closer they are to the seat of the divine presence. Our aim is not to describe the prerogatives of spiritual asceticism, but to investigate the spaces that affect the experience of the divine sphere. We can therefore conclude our investigation by stating that if the mystic undergoes an operation of deprivation of external stimuli, at first the spiritual experience draws on his personal imagination to express, as a dream would, the inner space in which he has chosen to move. A rich universe of perceptions and inner places, thus, offers itself for his enjoyment in one of the early stages of introspection, the night of the soul, as if to reward him for his harsh renunciations. But the traditional Christian inner trajectory, while presenting a clear vectorial dimension that points toward the inner space by foregoing the enjoyment of a physical aspect of ordinary life, is much more demanding and will eventually deprive him even of these points of

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<sup>21</sup> G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot et Rivages, 1916, p. 181; L. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Baltimore, Indiana University Publications in Anthropology and Linguistics, 1943, pp. 43-36.

<sup>23</sup> Theresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle, or The Mansions*, ed. by B. Zimmerman, Gastonia NC, TAN Books, 1997.

38 | reference to allow him to enjoy the presence of the divine sphere in the most inaccessible point of human interiority. This experience, the mystics teach<sup>24</sup>, touches the boundary between space-time and discovers a dimension whose qualities are impossible to describe coming back from spiritual experience to the human reality<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> M.-E. de l'Enfant Jésus, *Je veux voir Dieu*, Toulouse, Éditions du Carmel, 1949.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians, 12, 2: «I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – still in the body? I do not know; or out of the body? I do not know: God knows – was caught up right into the third heaven».