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Region as a Theological Category: Preliminary Recognition

REGION JAKO KATEGORIA TEOLOGICZNA. ROZPOZNANIE WSTĘPNE

Streszczenie

Interdyscyplinarność współczesnych badań nad regionem każe postawić pytanie o teologiczny status regionu. Odpowiedź na to pytanie mieści się w obszarze teologii miejsca. Punktem odniesienia dla tej teologii jest status miejsca zarówno w Starym Testamencie, w Nowym Testamencie, jak też w życiu pierwotnego Kościoła. W Starym Testamencie takimi miejscami teologicznie naznaczonymi są Eden, Kanaan jako Ziemia Obiecana czy Świątynia Jerozolimska. Wszystkie one związane są ze szczególną obecnością i interwencją Boga. Wyjątkowe znaczenie ma ogród Eden, który można uznać za pramiejsce, prototyp miejsca świętego. Działalność Jezusa dokonuje relatywizacji szczególnego znaczenia miejsca świętego. Jezus neguje istnienie świątyni, dowartościowuje wiarę obcych, a więc pochodzących spoza Izraela, oraz zapowiada Królestwo Boże, które „nie jest z tego świata”, a więc jego realizacja dokona się w relacjach, a nie w miejscach. Starożytne chrześcijaństwo żyje w napięciu pomiędzy *paroikein* a *katoikein*, pomiędzy przebywaniem na ziemi jak na obczyźnie a byciem zdomowionym. Z drugiej strony szybko rozwija się koncepcja „miejsc świętych” (*loca sacra*), które mają jednak znaczenie funkcjonalne i nie wskazują na rzeczywiste przebywanie Boga w przestrzeni geograficznej. Jeśli miejsce to „przestrzeń opowiedziana” (*storied place*), to region w znaczeniu teologicznym można określić jako miejsce, które zostało wyodrębnione z przestrzeni za pośrednictwem narracji o sakralnym charakterze.

Słowa kluczowe: region, miejsce, teologia miejsca, chrześcijaństwo

Introduction

In the word *From the Editor* to the materials from the 1st National Congress of Regional Priests entitled *Regionalism – Culture – Church* regionalism has been defined as: “the state of social awareness of a community inhabiting a specific territory, and denoting a person’s attitude towards a ‘small homeland’ understood in many different ways.”¹ The materials were published in 1998, and the congress took place a year earlier.² The discussion of regionalist priests at that time focused on the issue of the relationship between the “small homeland” and the “Europe of Homelands” and was filled with concern about “preserving and consolidating national identity and national culture.”³

In the same word, *From the Editors*, attention is drawn to the connections between the region, regional culture and the Church or Christianity as a specific content that permeates culture:

Throughout the entire process of history, the enormous influence of the Catholic Church is visible. Christian truths of faith and norms of conduct inspired the content and form of most of the products of national culture known today. Sacredness gave culture depth and dynamics, motivating people to sometimes make extraordinary efforts and great spiritual flights... This connection of sacredness with history and culture, present in the entire process of development of Polish society, is particularly visible in local and regional environments. In “small homelands” there is an obvious consonance of sacredness, old folk culture, important values of national culture and newly emerging products of local and regional creativity. [...] If today we eliminated sacred elements from folk, local and regional culture, it would be illegible, poor and soulless...⁴

These statements seem quite obvious today. Christianity has influenced many individual cultures, the culture of the region and the country, including the culture of Europe and Poland. Today there is no need to prove it. The question that will interest us in this paper is not so much about content relationships, the material impact of religion and the Church on the region, but about the deeper relationships that exist between man and the region, a geographical place on the Earth, the specific space that man inhabits. Due to the adopted research perspective, which is theological reflection, the belief in the existence of a personal God of those who inhabit this place and the relationship of God to this place should be considered

1 *Od Redakcji*, in: A. Kociszewski, A.J. Omelaniuk, W. Pilarczyk (eds.), *Regionalizm – Kultura – Kościół*, Ciechanów 1998, p. 5.

2 Niepokalanów, 25–27.06.1997.

3 *Od Redakcji...*, p. 5.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 6.

an important factor defining the mentioned relationship. “We implement faith in the reality of this world and the places in which we find ourselves. Life comes from the earth and we cannot help but live an earth-based life and faith. Land, place and faith go hand in hand,” says Cornelius J.P. Niemandt, South African theologian.⁵

Does such a relationship between faith and place exist? How important is faith for building a relationship with a place? What factors determine the “theological coordinates” of the region? If “a place is not just a piece of land, it is an undeniable fact of our existence in relationship with the entire creation,”⁶ then in the theological sense is a place determined by the relationship to and with God? Can the region be treated as a specifically understood “holy land,” a sacred macrospace that also has (above all?) spiritual significance? These are questions specific to the theology of place, which – following Niemandt – we can define as “the recognition of the theological significance of specific geographical places.”⁷

The term “regional theology” does not exist in Polish or foreign theological literature. However, there is the term *theology of place* (French: *théologie du lieu*, German: *Theologie des Ortes*), which has not yet become established in Polish theology.⁸ Next to it, there is also the *theology of space*.⁹ “Place” – most often as a “sacred place” or “sacred space” – is the subject of interest in geography,¹⁰ cultural¹¹ and religious studies,¹² or canon law, but in theological reflection it most

5 C.J.P. Niemandt, *Rooted in Christ, Grounded in Neighbourhoods – A Theology of Place*, “Verbum et Ecclesia” 40 (2019), n. 1; <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1997> [accessed: 25.07.2023].

6 J.A. Craft, *Making a Place on Earth: Participation in Creation and Redemption Through Place-making and the Arts*, (PhD dissertation) University of St. Andrews 2013, p. 23.

7 C.J.P. Niemandt, *Rooted in Christ...*

8 The Google search engine does not know any independent term “place theology.” There are comparisons such as “theology of the place of worship” or “theology of the holy place.”

9 In the literature on the subject, these terms are sometimes treated interchangeably, but some theologians emphasize the difference between both perspectives. See E.M. Conradie, *Towards a Theology of Place in the South African Context: Some Reflections from the Perspective of Eco-theology*, “Religion and Theology” 16 (2014), p. 8; <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973109X449967> [accessed: 27.07.2023].

10 See: L. Przybylska, *Pojęcie przestrzeni sakralnej*, in: B. Domański, S. Skiba (eds.), *Geografia i sacrum: profesorowi Antoniemu Jackowskiemu w 70. rocznicę urodzin*, Kraków 2005, Vol. II, pp. 381–387.

11 See: J. Bramorski, *Antropologiczny wymiar symboliki przestrzeni sakralnej w ujęciu Mircei Eliadego*, “Forum Teologiczne” 3 (2002), pp. 153–162; D. Mach, *Miejsce sacrum w religii i kulturze*, “Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis” 68 (2009), pp. 201–209.

12 See: T. Syczewski, *Miejsca święte według Kodeksu Prawa Kanonicznego z 1983 roku i obowiązującego prawaodawstwa Kościoła łacińskiego*, Lublin 2019.

often appears in a liturgical or pastoral context (e.g. a sanctuary as a holy place¹³). However, there is still a lack of fundamental theological reflection on the place as such, i.e. a geographically marked point in space in relation to God.

1. Paradise as a primeval place

The starting point for searching for answers to the questions asked must be the text of the Bible, which is a testimony of how a man of faith experiences a place, and more broadly – his own region, land, country.¹⁴ It should be noted at the outset that there were no theologically neutral places for the biblical man. As Anglican theologian Craig G. Bartholomew notes, “A place is never fully a place without God as a co-inhabitant. Place is always, in one way or another, a theological concept.”¹⁵ In other words, each place was subject to theological evaluation and was marked by a religious (spiritual) function – positively or negatively. This is visible from the very first pages of the Bible, where a paradise appears, which can be interpreted as a primeval place constituting a point of reference for all later theologically marked places. The specificity of this place is the fact that – unlike in relation to places understood only in the sense of a fragment of an actually existing designated physical space – its “geographicity” is conventional and secondary. This does not mean, however, that this place was not originally designated in space. When talking about paradise, it should be noted that “as part of creation, God created a specific place.”¹⁶ The work of creation and salvation begins in a place.

In the Hebrew Bible, paradise has its geographical name – Eden. It is described as a garden and was located “in the East” (Genesis 2:8), most likely on the Persian Gulf, in the area of historical Mesopotamia. This location allows us to associate Eden with Dilmun from the Sumerian myth, i.e. with an idyllic land whose happy inhabitants were unknown to old age, disease and death.¹⁷ The name itself is derived

13 See: A. Żądło, *Teologia i duszpasterska funkcja sanktuarium. Zagadnienia wybrane*, “Studia Pastoralne” 14 (2018), pp. 365–392; M. Ostrowski, *Teologia sanktuariów – świętych miejsc pielgrzymkowych*, “Roczniki Teologiczne” 62 (2015) 6, pp. 83–95; B. Nadolski (prep.), *Leksykon liturgii*, Poznań 2006, [password:] *Sanktuarium*, pp. 1451–1452; S.C. Napiórkowski, W. Przygoda, *Sanktuarium*, in: R. Kamiński (ed.), *Leksykon teologii pastoralnej*, Lublin 2006, pp. 769–772.

14 In this text, the categories of place, region or land will be used interchangeably depending on the context.

15 C.G. Bartholomew, *Where All Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 31.

16 C.J.P. Niemandt, *Rooted in Christ...*

17 See: J.S. Kselman, *Eden*, trans. M. Wojciechowski, in: P.J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Encyklopedia biblijna*, Warszawa 1999, p. 236.

either from the Hebrew word *eden* meaning ‘luxury, pleasure, delight’ or from the Sumerian *edin* – ‘plain, steppe.’¹⁸

The description of the Garden of Eden anchors subsequent narratives in specific places. It all started somewhere in a specific place – a place with clear boundaries, space and content – a geographical reality. This place is described as a garden. A grounded place. It borders rivers, but it also has its own purpose. The Garden of Eden is not an unlimited thing, but a definite place.¹⁹

As a theological land, Eden is first the place where the first humans were placed (Genesis 2:8, 15), and then a metaphor for God’s restoration of the land of Israel after his return from exile: “And they will say, ‘This desolate land has become like the garden of Eden; and the cities that were desolate, destroyed and overthrown became fortified and populated’” (Ez 36:35; cf. Is 51:3, where the synonym of Eden is the parallel “garden of the Lord”). The image of the garden returns once again when the prophet Ezekiel announces the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which a new spring is to flow from. The trees that will grow by the stream resemble the trees of paradise, “whose leaves do not wither, whose fruits do not wear out” (Ez 47:12).²⁰

In all places in the Bible, Eden means an extremely rich and fertile area, abundant in water sources and vegetation (Is 51:3; Ez 31:9, 16, 18; 36:35), which is contrasted with the desert. In this way, the inspired author indicates that the Garden of Eden should be perceived as a land of happiness and delight, as a symbol of optimal living conditions.²¹

It is also worth noting that the location “in the East” also has theological significance, because the East in the mentality of the inhabitants of that region at that time was not only the side of the world appropriate for sunrises, but also a symbol of emerging life. Eden therefore means a privileged land, remaining under God’s special care and marked by His presence.²²

The historicity and geography of paradise were debated until the late Middle Ages. Supporters of the spiritual interpretation of the existence of paradise included Philo of Alexandria, Origen, Saint Ephrem, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. The historicity of paradise and its literal location in the east were supported by authors

18 Ibidem; P.Cz. Bosak, *Leksykon wszystkich miejsc biblijnych*, Kraków 2016, p. 260.

19 C.J.P. Niemandt, *Rooted in Christ...*

20 See: J.S. Kselman, *Eden...*, p. 236.

21 A.M. Wajda, *Biblia o raju, pokusie i grzechu pierworodnym*, “Studia Teologii Dogmatycznej” 7 (2021), p. 183.

22 See ibidem, p. 184.

such as Saint Theophilus of Antioch, Saint Irenaeus, Saint Hippolytus, Epiphanius, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Saint John of Damascus, as well as Saint Augustine, who had a great influence on later theological thought regarding paradise, as well as Saint Bede the Venerable, Count Maurus, Honorius of Autun, Peter the Lombard, as well as Saint Thomas Aquinas. For them, Eden was a veritable garden, with real trees bearing edible fruit and real rivers flowing with water.²³ However, it was a special place, “where fire did not burn, water did not drown, wild animals devoured, thorns did not prick, where one did not suffocate for lack of air,” as Saint Isidore of Seville assured.²⁴

The issue of the geographical location of paradise will return in modern thought with the abandonment of fantastic concepts of locating paradise in space, somewhere near the Moon or on some distant land separated by an ocean from the known ecumene, or identifying it with the entire earth. At the end of the 17th century, it was recognized that paradise as a “historical reality” existed somewhere, but – as Jean Delumeau says – “it was wiped off the face of the earth.”²⁵ Now all that was left was to identify the region where it could be located. Of the many possible locations, the location of paradise in Armenia, Mesopotamia or the Holy Land was most popular. For our considerations about the region, the question about the size of paradise may also be interesting. Identifying it with the whole earth – as indicated by the four rivers of paradise (Genesis 2:10)²⁶ – obviously solved this problem, but assuming some geographical location of paradise raised the question about the area it occupied. Those answering this question divided into two camps. Some argued that paradise was a small region, others that it was rather a large kingdom that could contain all the landscapes known at that time, including mountains, hills, valleys and plains.²⁷

2. Canaan as the Promised Land

For Old Testament Israel, the first theologically marked geographical region was Canaan, whose borders include modern Israel and Lebanon, and where, at the dawn of the history of the Chosen People, the patriarchs – after all, coming from a nomadic culture, not a settled one – found their place of permanent residence. Canaan – understood by the Hebrews as the Land Promised by God – lies

23 J. Delumeau, *Historia rajy. Ogród rozkoszy*, trans. E. Bąkowska, Warszawa 1996, pp. 7–24.

24 Św. Izydor z Sewilli, *De Ordine creaturarum*, I, Chap. X, 7–11, *Patrologia Latina* 111, col. 334.

25 J. Delumeau, *Historia rajy...*, p. 145.

26 G. von Rad, *Teologia Starego Testamentu*, trans. B. Widła, Warszawa 1986, p. 611.

27 J. Delumeau, *Historia rajy...*, pp. 140–163.

between Babylon, a strange and dangerous land from which Yahweh brings Abraham (Genesis 11:31-12:1), and Egypt, a land full of temptations and a place of slavery from which God will free later his offspring (Exodus 13:9nn).²⁸

Abraham's exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans is significant for the theology of the region. According to the command received from God, Abraham is to leave the fertile areas of Mesopotamia for an unknown country, which will only be shown to him. This situation was described very well by John Paul II in his *Roman Triptych*: "There was a time / when people / did not stop wandering. Surrounded by herds, they went where the harvest called them: / where the earth, like a fertile mother / was able to feed animals / there and people pitched tents and started to live."²⁹ The agricultural value of a given region – as a rational criterion – seems at this stage to be the only logical condition for choosing a place of settlement for people whose lives depend on natural conditions. Abraham's abandonment of Ur is associated with the relativization of this criterion in favor of a supernatural criterion: "Go out from your country, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Abraham does not yet know anything about the economic value of the country to which he is to go. However, he knows its supernatural value: this region was designated by God as the inheritance promised to his descendants (Genesis 26:3).

Canaan, which Abraham reaches, will remain for him and for his posterity the "Promised Land" or "Holy Land"³⁰ (see Gen 12:5-7; Gen 17:8). This awareness of the heritage of the division made by God, the awareness of taking possession of the land that the Chosen People received, will of course also translate into specific geographical reference points that will confirm the connection of the land with God, those places where the living God revealed himself to Israel: the Oaks of Mamre (Gen 18), springs (Gen 26:15), altars (Gen 12:7). Some of these places will even bear the name of God (Hebrew: el): Bethel ('house of God', Gen 28: 17), Penuel ('face of God', Gen 32: 31), to emphasize their special status.³¹

The second Old Testament point of reference is, of course, the entry of the Israelites into Canaan after escaping from Egypt. The promise, which was repeatedly given to the patriarchs, kept Israel in captivity in Egypt alive the hope of entering the land where the Hebrews were to settle forever. God gives this land to his people

28 G. Becquet, *Ziemia*, in: X. Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Słownik teologii biblijnej*, trans. and prep. K. Romaniuk, Poznań 1990, p. 1130.

29 Jan Paweł II, *Tryptyk rzymski*, Kraków 2003, p. 31.

30 These are modern terms essentially absent from the Hebrew Bible. See: G. Becquet, *Ziemia...*, p. 1373.

31 *Ibidem*, pp. 1130–1131.

without their effort: “I gave you a land for which you did not labor, and cities for which you did not build, and in them you lived. The vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant are giving you food today” (Joshua 24:13). Moreover, it is a fertile land rich in vegetation and food, completely different from the surrounding deserts.³² We can therefore say that the supernatural value is now confirmed in natural values. “Thus the land and its goods will be a constant reminder to the people of God’s love and faithfulness to the covenant. Whoever owns the earth also owns God. For Yahweh is no longer merely the God of the desert: Canaan has become his dwelling place.”³³

Two more elements are important in the theological interpretation of Canaan. First of all, Israel is not strictly the owner of this country. If Canaan became Israel’s inheritance, it was only because Yahweh gave it a lease of the land, which resulted in the prohibition of selling the land, but also Israel’s status as an immigrant: “It is not lawful to sell the land forever, for the land belongs to Me and you ‘You are strangers and sojourners with me’” (Leviticus 25:23). Secondly, Canaan is not the intended inheritance: “the successive disappointments of hopes that are too material, denied by the course of events, will raise the level of Israel’s expectations to such an extent that it will begin to long for the true inheritance, for the one that – alone – can satisfy the heart of man.”³⁴ It may have seemed to Israel at first that Canaan was – as Gerhard von Rad writes – an “earthly paradise”³⁵ because in every respect it was the basis of the state of salvation of God’s people. Over time, however, he realizes that the inheritance promised by God goes beyond the earth, beyond a geographically defined place, because its ultimate meaning is spiritual.³⁶

3. Jesus: between locality and universality

To the theology of a place (region), the coming of Jesus and His teaching introduces a certain ambivalence related to the *aporia* between the locality and the universality of His mission. The starting point, however, is the statement that when the Son of God

32 “For the LORD your God will bring you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and springs that gush out in the valley and above, a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olives and oil and honey; to a land where you will be satisfied with bread without need, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones contain iron, and from its mountains comes copper” (Deuteronomy 8:7-9).

33 G. Becquet, *Ziemia...*, p. 1131.

34 *Ibidem*.

35 G. von Rad, *Teologia Starego Testamentu...*, p. 181.

36 F. Dreyfus, P. Grelot, *Dziedzictwo*, in: X. Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Słownik teologii biblijnej...*, pp. 244–245.

comes into the world, he “takes place” because the incarnation has a real physical and, consequently, geographical dimension. “Thus, the mystery of the Incarnation – as John Paul II notes – transforms the universal experience of ‘sacred space’: on the one hand, it gives it new dimensions, and on the other, it shows its meaning in new categories. The reference to space is, after all, contained in the Word’s “taking flesh” (cf. Jn 1:14). In Jesus of Nazareth, God assumed features typical of human nature, including the inevitable belonging of man to a specific nation and a specific country. [...] The physical concreteness of the earth and its geographical coordinates form one whole with the reality of the human body assumed by the Word.”³⁷

In this way, Jesus shares the universal human experience of life in a specific space. The incarnation unquestionably connects Jesus to place. Jesus is a member of the Chosen People, he is born in Judea, he is a Judean by birth, although due to his residence in Nazareth he will be called a Nazarene and, consequently, a Galilean.³⁸ Even after leaving Nazareth, Galilee will continue to be the place of Jesus’ main activity. Much of His public activity will be concentrated around the north-eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in Capernaum, which will be called the city of Jesus (Mt 9:1). “[B]y being fully human, He is attached to the land of Israel with every cell of His being.”³⁹ Both His conception, birth, public activity, and death – all single events in His life always take place in a specific geographical place.

After the death of Jesus, immediately in the times of early Christianity, there will be a secondary sacralization of Palestine, which will henceforth be called not only the “Promised Land” of the Jews, but also the “Holy Land” of the Christians. “The Gospel is firmly set in a particular corner of our world, in the same Holy Land that God gave to Israel. It is also there, in Jerusalem, in the capital of this Earth, that the cross of Christ will grow. [...] In this way, the Holy Land will forever remain the geographical center from which salvation will flow to embrace all humanity.”⁴⁰ The holiness of this land results from the fact that various places located on it – as John Paul II wrote – “were witnesses of God’s interventions up to the greatest of them, that is, until the mystery of the Incarnation and the Pasch of Christ.”⁴¹ This land has been “marked by God’s action”⁴² and is full of “God’s ‘footprints’”

37 Jan Paweł II, *List o pielgrzymowaniu do miejsc związanych z historią zbawienia*, 3.

38 According to tradition, Jesus was called a Galilean by the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate a moment before his death: “Galilae, vicisti!” (O Galilean, you have conquered!). W. Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury*, Warszawa 1993, [password:] *Julian Apostata*, p. 444.

39 G. Becquet, *Ziemia...*, p. 1133.

40 Ibidem, p. 1134.

41 Jan Paweł II, *List o pielgrzymowaniu...*, 2.

42 Ibidem, 10.

that can be seen “on the stones, mountains and waters that formed the scenery of the earthly life of the Son of God.”⁴³

The geographical and theological status of Jerusalem and Palestine may be an interesting contribution to the discussion about the relationship between the center and the periphery.⁴⁴ From the political point of view of the contemporary world, Palestine was a peripheral region of the Roman Empire. Some say that for Pontius Pilate it was a place of exile.⁴⁵ This peripheral nature, marked pejoratively, also appears in relation to individual towns in Palestine itself, an example of which is Nazareth. For Nathanael asked Philip, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46). In Jesus’ time, Nazareth was an insignificant agricultural village with no more than two thousand inhabitants. “No wonder people skeptical about Jesus’ mission contemptuously accused Him of being from Nazareth.”⁴⁶ Therefore, it is not only peripherality in relation to Rome, but also a negative marking of individual places or regions of Palestine itself, which is not alien to the biblical text, and therefore to the Jewish consciousness of that time.

In the biblical theology of the region, the opposition between periphery and center is determined not so much by geography as by theology. Yes, Palestine is a periphery compared to Rome, which was the political center of the world at that time. For Jews, however, the center is somewhere completely different, in Jerusalem, where the Temple is. “Because ancient Israel, even in the monarchical period, was not a secular state, the temple played an integral role in the organization, law, and administration of society as a whole.”⁴⁷ More than a civil capital, however, Jerusalem was in biblical times a holy city, a religious center, a Jewish *caput mundi*, because there was the “house of Yahweh,” “the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8). As John Paul II notes, “gradually, the sacred space ‘concentrates’ in the Jerusalem temple, where the God of Israel desires to be worshiped and, in a sense, encountered.”⁴⁸

43 Ibidem.

44 I mention this because of the topicality of the issue of the relationship between the center and the periphery in interdisciplinary research on regionalism. See: M. Mikołajczak, *Ramiona Antajosa. Z historii i teorii regionalizmu literackiego w Polsce*, Kraków 2012.

45 “The position [Pilate] held was not the most desirable. It was an institution worthy of a junior officer. More experience was given to Syria or Egypt. It was also a challenge because Judea was a new province and constantly causing problems.” A. Wroe, *Poncjusz Pilat*, trans. J. Mikos, Warszawa 2015, p. 82.

46 P. Lampe, *Nazaret*, trans. T. Mieszkowski, in: P.J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Encyklopedia biblijna*, Warszawa 1999, p. 822.

47 C.L. Meyers, *Świątynia*, trans. A. Gocłowska, in: P.J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Encyklopedia biblijna*, Warszawa 1999, p. 1209.

48 Jan Paweł II, *List o pielgrzymowaniu...*, 2.

Despite vicissitudes, the symbolic importance of Jerusalem persisted throughout Israel's history. After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 during the first Jewish uprising (66–73 CE) and after the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem, awareness of the importance of this place is expressed in the specific location of the synagogues, which enables prayers towards Jerusalem. In this sense, Judaism – unlike Christianity, which is a cosmic religion, constantly directed *ad orientem* – remains a geographical religion because it is linked to the “sacred direction” of the place where the Jerusalem Temple was located. The prayer addressed to Jerusalem expresses the eschatological hope for the return of the Messiah, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the regathering of the Chosen People from the diaspora.⁴⁹

With the coming of Jesus and His teaching, a tendency to relativize the sacredness of selected places is also revealed. First, Jesus invalidates the religious center, which is the temple in Jerusalem: “Destroy this temple” (John 2:19) – he provokes the Jews. As John Paul II says, “in the New Testament [...] the ‘concentration’ of sacred space reaches its culmination in Christ, who is now, as a Person, the new ‘temple’ (cf. Jn 2:21), inhabited by the ‘fullness of the Godhead’ (cf. Col 2:9).”⁵⁰ And in a conversation with the Samaritan woman, who recalls that their fathers “worshipped God on this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where God must be worshiped” (John 4:20), Jesus declares: “Believe me, woman, that the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem worship the Father” (John 4:21). Thus, the cult of God ceases to have a local character and becomes exclusively spiritual.

Secondly, Jesus appreciates the faith of strangers, such as the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42), the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), and the Roman centurion (Mt 8:5-13), in the case of the latter mentioning at the same time that he encountered so much faith in Israel (cf. Mt 8:10). Faith goes beyond the borders of the region and is no longer closely linked to the nation and the country inhabiting it. Moreover, Jesus announces that “They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and will sit down at table in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). Therefore, the Kingdom of God will be inhabited not only by the locals, but also by strangers, visitors, people from outside the chosen nation and from outside the Holy Land.

Thirdly, the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus “is not of this world” (John 18:36), and therefore the category of place is no longer appropriate to describe it.

49 See: U.M. Lang, *Turning Towards the Lord. Orientation in Liturgical Prayer*, San Francisco 2004, pp. 36–37.

50 Jan Paweł II, *List o pielgrzymowaniu...*, 3.

Moreover, Jesus warns against those who will announce that the Kingdom of God in its future implementation will be limited to a specific place or identified with it.⁵¹ The Kingdom of God is revealed not so much in places but in relationships. “Places are the seat of relationship or the place of meeting and action in the interaction between God and the world.”⁵²

4. Foreign land

From the point of view of the ancient Church, the well-known and much commented fragment of an anonymous letter to Diognetus from the end of the 2nd century can be considered as an expression of the theology of the region at that time – or rather the Christian awareness of the place: Christians

live in Greek and barbarian cities, according to local customs in clothes, food, way of life, and yet by their very behavior they manifest these strange and almost unbelievable laws that govern them. They live each in their own country, but like strangers. They undertake all responsibilities like citizens and bear all burdens like foreigners. Every foreign land is their homeland and every homeland is a foreign land.⁵³

One could say that this ancient perspective on the relationship of a believer (Christian) to the place where he lives *de facto* invalidates any region, any specific geographical space as its own, privileged, theologically marked place. If every land is foreign, then none can be “tamed.” Christianity is not an ethnic religion associated with a specific space, but a revealed way of being of a universalistic nature. You have to live “as you like,” among Christians or among barbarians, which means that there is no such thing as a privileged character of a given space. In other words: the only sacred microspace is man, therefore any place can become his homeland, because he himself is the holy land, the promised land or a temple, according to the words of St. Paul: “The temple of God is holy, and you are holy” (1 Cor 3:17).

51 “Asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he said in reply, ‘The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, “Look, here it is,” or, “There it is.” For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.’ Then he said to his disciples, ‘The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. There will be those who will say to you, “Look, there he is,” [or] “Look, here he is.” Do not go off, do not run in pursuit.’” (Lk 17:20-23).

52 J. Inge, *Towards a Theology of Place*, “Modern Believing” 40 (1999) 1, p. 46; <https://doi.org/10.3828/MB.40.1.42> [accessed: 25.07.23], pp. 42–50.

53 *Do Diogneta*, 5, in: M. Starowieyski (prep.), *Pierwsi świadkowie. Wybór najstarszych pism chrześcijańskich*, trans. A. Świderkówna, Kraków 1988, p. 362.

This approach to place results from the assumption that the vocation of a believer on earth is only *paroikein*, that is, to live in the manner of a stranger and a stranger. In the text entitled *Church and the Kingdom* Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher, writes: “The verb *paroikein* – to be in the city as a foreigner – signifies the way in which every Christian inhabits the world and, consequently, the way in which he experiences messianic time.”⁵⁴ Agamben’s thesis is obvious: Christians must inhabit this world as foreigners, as strangers, because “time is short” (1 Cor 7:29). Unfortunately – as the Italian philosopher writes – unable to wait for the Parousia, i.e. the second presence of the Lord, the community of the first Christians “changed their way of thinking, which resulted in the stabilization of the institutional and legal organization of the Church. As a result, the Church stopped *paroikein*, living on earth as if in a foreign land, and began *katoikein*, living here like a citizen, and therefore – began to function like other earthly institutions.”⁵⁵ This temptation is to change the *status quo* here on earth from *parokia* to *oikos* – from living away from home to home, from abroad to homeland.

Abandoning *paroikein* in favor of *katoiken* obviously has far-reaching consequences. *Loca sacra* appear, which from late antiquity begin to mark the European landscape covered with a map of specific religious references, places that define individual regions by the presence of saints, legends related to their activities, springs from which water with supernatural properties gushes out, places marked by the presence of manifesting Mary, the rivers from which her figures are fished out, the fields from which her images are pulled up, the places of martyrdom of the first witnesses of faith, *translatio* of their relics, sanctuaries dedicated to *armorum Christi*, calvary, and finally temples where heaven connects with earth.

In the process of sacralizing one’s region, references were made to supernatural or historical events of a religious nature, such as the mission or death of a saint, miraculous events related to the place, but also specific religious adaptations, folk and apocryphal adaptations of the religious message to the conditions of the region. In this way, a conventional locality with a supernatural character is created.

54 G. Agamben, *Kościół i królestwo*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 2013, no. 12.

55 Ibidem. In this context, it is also important to understand the messianic time. Well, G. Agamben claims that the “messianic time” is not identical with the “eschatological time.” The former can be described as the “time of the end” and the latter as the “end of time.” Christianity loses its character when it ceases to experience the messianic time. G. Agamben, *Czas, który zostaje. Komentarz do Listu do Rzymian*, trans. S. Królak, Warszawa 2009, p. 80.

5. A place of sacred narrative

The original, natural theology of place arises from a binary vision of the world forming an opposition: sacred – pagan, one’s own – other people’s (other people’s gods), one’s own – foreign, sacred and subject to the power of the *profane*. Sacrality as a differentiating category is appropriate only for a binary, dichotomous world, falling apart into two – more or less antagonistic, or at least opposed to each other – spheres. As Marek Jedliński notes, “for a person characterized by a religious image of the world [...] space cannot be homogeneous,”⁵⁶ there must be a space excluded from the scope of the laws governing the visible world. This principle applies not only to the micro scale, i.e. the place, but also to the macro scale, or the intermediate scale: national, regional, close. Jedliński believes that we can talk about “a certain permanent disposition of people to create a binary image of the world, the constitutive feature of which would be the designation of strangeness and their boundaries.”⁵⁷ “For a religious person, there is [...] a sacred space and it remains,” as Jedliński states.⁵⁸ For Gerardus van der Leeuw, “a sacred space is a place that becomes a home because the action of power is repeated in it, either by itself or by people. It is a place of worship, regardless of whether the place of residence is a house or a temple.”⁵⁹

The question arises to what extent the Christian theology of place fits into the natural way of ordering reality, and to what extent it goes beyond it. In order to properly understand the special property of the holy place in the understanding of Catholic theology, John Paul II uses the analogy that exists between space and time. According to him, a holy place (sacred space) is related to space as such, as *kairos* is to *chronos*, and therefore special time is to continuous time. In a letter devoted to the issue of pilgrimages to holy places, John Paul II wrote:

just as the rhythm of time can be determined by *kairos* – special moments of grace – so too space can store signs of God’s extraordinary saving interventions. This intuition is

56 M. Jedliński, *Przeżywanie obcości – podział binarny i jego konsekwencje*, in: M. Jedliński, K. Witczak (eds.), *Obcości. Szkice z filozofii i literatury*, Bydgoszcz 2017, p. 67.

57 Ibidem, p. 73.

58 Ibidem, p. 66.

59 G. van der Leeuw, *Fenomenologia religii*, trans. J. Prokopiuk, Warszawa 1978, p. 439. Such binary thinking about place is characterized by the saturation of holiness in the center and at the borders (*axis mundi*), the domination of natural borders (mountains, river, stone) over artificially determined ones, the inviolability of borders (natural and supernatural protection), the rituality necessary to cross them, the perception own territory in terms of space, and the foreign territory as chaos (evil, demonic, unknown) or the domination of the symbolic properties of the place over the physical features. M. Jedliński, *Przeżywanie obcości...*, pp. 47–90.

present in all religions, which not only build temples, but also create sacred spaces where the encounter with the divine reality can become a deeper experience than what is usually available in the vast expanses of space.⁶⁰

It should be concluded that the Christian theology of place does not differ fundamentally from the theology derived from natural religions. What differentiates them is the specificity of the story associated with a given place. As John Inge notes, *loca sacra* are those places that are connected with sacred stories, places – directly or indirectly – related to divine revelation.⁶¹

Assuming that there is no timeless space or timeless time, Walter Brueggemann created the concept of storied places. Places matter because of the history contained in these spaces. Stories, in turn, have authority because they take place in a given place. The power of narrative also explains the difference between space and place.⁶² A place is a space filled with meaning because of the narratives associated with a particular space. “Places are told spaces,” says Beiden Lane.⁶³

Therefore, a place has theological significance because of the narrative associated with it and the stories these places have told and continue to tell. In a sense, stories transform an empty space into a vibrant place. In the case of the theological understanding of the region, it can be said that it will be a place told through sacred history, sacred narrative. It has been this way since the beginning of the biblical story. As Ernst M. Conradie notes, creation, the continuation of creation, history, human culture and sin, God’s providence, redemption in history, the Church and mission, and eschatological fulfillment – all have a reference to place.⁶⁴ However, a certain reservation should be formulated here, which was expressed very well by John Paul II:

All this does not mean, of course – as the history of the Church proves – that Christians cannot have places of worship; however, it should be remembered that they are of an exclusively functional nature, related to the cult and fraternal life of the community, and we should also be aware that God’s presence, by its nature, cannot be limited to any specific place, as it permeates all places, and its fullest expression and the source of radiation is Christ.⁶⁵

60 Jan Paweł II, *List o pielgrzymowaniu...*, 2.

61 J. Inge, *Towards a Theology of Place...*, p. 47.

62 W. Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, London 1978, p. 187.

63 B. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, Mahwah, NJ 1988, p. 11.

64 E.M. Conradie, *Towards a Theology of Place...*, p. 4.

65 Jan Paweł II, *List o pielgrzymowaniu...*, 3.

In the understanding of Catholic theology, the sacredness of a place would be not so much ontological, but functional. It is not the actual seat of God (deity, *numinosum*), which would consequently be limited to space and conditioned by it,⁶⁶ but a point of special reference to God, a place of experiencing the relationship with God primarily through worship. A holy place is characterized by relational, iconic, and not material sacredness.

The Church – which is universal by nature – reveals a constant tension within itself: what is universal must become specific *in loco*; the universality of the Church is realized locally. As rightly noted by Fr. Henryk Skorowski, one of the most distinguished regionalist priests, “it is the ethnic, national and regional community that brings to the Church people and communities of people, its personality, language, history, tradition, experience, and therefore broadly understood regionalism.”⁶⁷ There is no doubt that the Church (every Church, not only the Catholic Church) acquires regional features, reveals itself in a place, in a specific space, using its geographical, cultural, linguistic coordinates, etc. It cannot be otherwise, because it grows both from Judeo-Christian theology of creation, as well as from the incarnational paradigm of Christianity. God creates the world as a place, and Jesus incarnates – and thus takes up space with his body – a man of a specific nationality or ethnicity, operating in a specific region of the world.

The Church repeats this model, incarnating in a region, regionalizing itself in a given place, but at the same time it cannot get rid of or forget about the need to *paroikein*, to transcend the place, region, space, to be next to it. The regional presence of the Church cannot invalidate what is in its nature: an origin “out of this world.” It seems that this tension is irreversible, because a believer has a body, and it – *ex natura rei* – needs a place.

Translated by Magdalena Rejman-Zientek

66 “The sacred landscape includes sacred space, which is defined as the part of the Earth’s surface recognized by humans as the seat of God or deities.” A. Jackowski, I. Sołjan, *Środowisko przyrodnicze a sacrum*, “Peregrinus Cracoviensis” 12 (2001), p. 31.

67 H. Skorowski, *Regionalizm w Kościele, Kościół w regionie*, in: *Regionalizm w Kościele, Kościół w regionie. Materiały II Ogólnopolskiego Zjazdu Księży Regionalistów, Gietrzwałd 24–26 września 1999 r.*, Ciechanów 2001, p. 38.

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REGION AS A THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY: PRELIMINARY RECOGNITION

Summary

The interdisciplinarity of contemporary research on regions raises questions about the theological status of the region, the answers to which lie in the theology of place. The point of reference for this theology is the status of place in both the Old Testament and the New Testament and the life of the early Church. In the Old Testament, such theologically marked places are Eden, Canaan (the Promised Land), and the Jerusalem Temple. All of them are related to the special presence and intervention of God. The Garden of Eden is particularly important as it can be considered a *primaeval* place, a prototype of a holy place. Jesus' activity relativises the special importance of the holy place. Indeed, Jesus denies the existence of the temple and values the faith of strangers, i.e., those from outside of Israel, and announces the Kingdom of God, which is "not of this world," so its implementation will occur in relationships and not in places. Ancient Christianity lives in the tension between *paroikein* and *katoikein*, between being on earth, as if in a foreign land, and being at home. On the other hand, the concept of "holy places" (*loca sacra*) is developing rapidly, but they have a functional meaning and do not indicate God's actual presence in geographical space. If a place is a *storied place*, then a region in the theological sense can be defined as a place separated from space through a narrative of a sacred nature.

Keywords: region, place, theology of place, Christianity

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