**John Rodwell and Peter Manley Scott (eds), *At Home in the Future: Place & Belonging in a Changing Europe***

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Christian ethical (or any theological) thinking is never ‘done’ neutrally. We bring our own personal, professional and ideological agendas, narratives, and the limitations of our vision to the task of judgement and often into our conclusions. Reviewers must deal with blind spots and preconceptions in order to do justice to evaluating texts. The task must ask about the lens through which the book is read.

Three particular concerns and memories were at the forefront of my thinking as I digested this text for review. Coincidently they are all discussed, with varying degrees of detail, in this book. The first was the ongoing dialogue and political contestation about the UK’s exit from the European Union (Brexit). The second was the 20th anniversary of the death of Princess Diana being covered extensively by the media during July and August 2017. The third, more personal, was an impending visit home to visit my parents who live in a small mining village in County Durham. This place, once dominated by the buildings and machinery of the coal industry, is now landscaped by woodland without any trace of the former East Hetton collieries’ buildings and machinery (1896 – 1980) that were such an integral part of my sense of this place as my home village.

Set within the context of social change and a renegotiation of identities in a twenty-first century world where many of our loyalties are calling into question any shared sense of belonging and place, the organising question that unites these essays is this , ‘How and where might we feel at home?’ This theme is addressed by contributors with varied professional backgrounds in landscape architecture, sociology, theology, ecology, art, philosophy, religious studies and social anthropology. Stimulated by two gatherings in the University of Manchester, the essays are understandably diverse and inevitably uneven. It should be noted that only one of the writers is a woman which given the importance of gender and the politics of inclusivity must surely have shaped some of the quality of engagement and reflection?

The book, of eleven chapters with an introduction and postscript, is organised into three sections. The three themes are: ‘At Home or Ill at Ease’; ‘Forgetting and Remembering’; and ‘Separation and Connectedness’.

In the first section, Korner (School of architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture in Kassel University in Germany) explores the concept of Heimat, defined as being expressive of the location where an individual or community is at home and on familiar ground (p. 3). Eidson, a social anthropologist (Halle), takes the town of Boppard in the Rhine valley to discuss how individuals contribute to places through social and cultural work. In an economy dominated by tourism and commuting to work, the place of voluntary association, he argues, performs an important role in our struggle for inclusion, participation and recognition. Thompson, (a landscape architect and town planner at Newcastle University) is concerned to explore how robust the notion of *genius loci* (often translated as the spirit of the place; p. 51),might be as a focus for our resistance to the effects of globalisation on local cultures, landscapes and building tradition. This is one of the strongest essays in the book. Finally, in this section, acknowledging the widespread experiences of mobility and homelessness, Bergmann (Trondheim University) explores what it might mean to ‘make oneself at home’. We are asked to consider, ‘How do we cope with the interrelationship between the familiar and the strange – are they in opposition and what is the potential for them to be reconciled?’ (p. 68).

In the second section (‘Forgetting and Remembering’), Gough (an artist from Melbourne Australia) discusses how the outward appearance of cemeteries and other places of burial matter greatly to those who value the resting place of their loved one as places of respectful calm and repose. Rodwell (Manchester University) draws on his research from a mining area of South Yorkshire to explore how post-industrial landscapes have been experiencing the process of regeneration. This evoked particular memories of my own upbringing in a mining village. Many areas of the English Midlands and North have faced decline of traditional industry and a movement from a post-industrial landscape into new technology-driven and retail-dominated scenarios. These changes pose significant questions about continuity, memory and our human capacity for change. Sheldrake (Cambridge) opens up a dialectical relationship between environments and our human narratives. The Universal Church, he argues offers an inclusive, continuing and metaphysical framework, within which the Eucharist opens up the challenge of how believers can exist appropriately in a world of particular places, in the here and now.

In the final section (Separation and Connectedness), Selman from (Sheffield University) demonstrates that damage to landscapes is a serious disconnection of physical system, visual continuity and human attachment. This damage matters because it manifests itself in a loss of functionality. Such destruction of dependencies, Selman argues, may also lead to moral dereliction. This will also have a spiritual dimension that entails a loss of potential for connecting the ordinary and extraordinary, the secular and the sacred. Vicenzotti, (researching the theory and history of landscape architecture and planning at The Swedish University) discusses the relationship between continuity and progressiveness in our search for a ‘societal utopia’ (p. 143). We are reminded of the constant need for negotiation and renegotiation in our growth and adaptation to change. Scott (Manchester University), in a very stimulating essay, questions our loyalty to place in a purgative theological light. He asks whether our belonging on earth can ultimately be established only by reference to others and to God. We should consider, he argues, the possibility that relationship to place is essentially un-given, and that even loyalties are negotiated in competition with the memories of others. Measuring our critical distance from places involves conceding that they do not ultimately depend for significance on our own particular occupation. Finally, Szerszynski invites us to consider the role of the Reformation in transforming our experience of space within a longer frame of Western religious history so that we can reappraise its claim to effect a shift from absolute to abstract space. In this shift, he argues, we are helped by Kierkegaard’s concept of irony. Might it be possible, as we grasp an ironic negation of received meanings, that we reform belonging so as to find our place within ethical freedom and social responsibility?

In this stimulating and richly textured set of reflections, we note the commitment to and wisdom that emerges from interdisciplinary reflection. The quality of theological reflection is strong and integrated as the essays address many of the key questions around place, space and home. In particular, we should note the significance of a change in the way home and place are socially constructed. There is an intentional movement away from the culture of individualism, materialism, subjectivity and a kind of pleasure-seeking consumerism that dominates postmodern notions of place and home. In this discourse a moral dimension asks us to consider, not only a reformation of belonging, but also whether we might relate our social constructions of home to notions of stability and sustainability. Thompson (pp. 51-63) explores scenarios of change – including human migration and traumatic economic change. *Genius loci* becomes something relational rather than something constant or absolute. We should face the consequences of development and modernisation and their effects on our potential for human flourishing. This may be politically radical as we are challenged to consider whether, in order to sustain such flourishing, we need to define boundaries and possibly to nurture hospitality in place and space, especially to the refugee or asylum seeker. Fixity, absolutism and preservation within this approach to home need to be challenged in the way we see, narrate and respond. An essential ingredient of the spirit of a place seeks to refine and challenge accepted definition of place as beautiful, protected, undisturbed or boundaried. A number of writers indicate the necessity for any historical perspective to learn the lessons of what happens to marginalised and dispossessed people when home is protected defended or isolated. The place of Christian ethics is to offer us a framework of values and thinking that empowers us to look at and define the distinctive character of home and what values we choose for it to communicate.

Within this shifting and countercultural understanding of ‘home’ we might ask whether human migration is a threat to the notion that the spirit and security of a place is portable. What happens when cultures meet and find themselves in conflict with each other? How far do we protect our own space by demonising or excluding those who do not share our own sense of space? The politics of cultural supremacy remains a challenge across Europe and is highlighted in many of our political discourses post the English (and Welsh) Brexit vote. It remains to be seen whether we can establish an identity and sense of being ‘at home’ within our more open, mobile and diverse society.

Within a spiritual and theological framework, any consideration of the nature of home should take some cognizance of the reality that life is provisional, subjective and unpredictable. We have to make the best possible outcome where we are placed and live with our discontents and frustrations. Any concept of home should embrace the reality that contemporary living and modernity have brought radical change. From this perspective, we are all in a sense homeless. The designing and building of places for homecoming is, perhaps, part of dealing with our deep unease. Yet, as Sheldrake reminds us, ‘Christians live proleptically... The Eucharist is a point of transitus - where there is an intersection of here and elsewhere, and of the past, present and future. To celebrate the Eucharist entails the risk of radically reshaping where we stand.’ (p. 110).

Within this theology of place home can only be home where justice reigns.