GOD MEETS GAIA IN AUSTIN, TEXAS: A CASE STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTALISM AS IMPLICIT RELIGION*

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Most research on the relationship between religion and environmentalism has been concerned with the effects of formal religious participation on individual ecological attitudes. This case study examines another fascinating aspect of the religion-ecology connection by revealing the implicitly religious character of grassroots environmentalism. Drawing on insights from Mircea Eliade's theory of sacred space, we call attention to a series of striking similarities between classical modes of religious experience on the one hand, and the sacralization of a prized natural resource located in Austin, Texas on the other. Using interview data collected from forty-five environmentalists and ecologically-minded individuals in Austin, we argue that this city's most prominent natural resource (Barton Springs) is construed by these individuals in terms that can be interpreted as (1) nodal space that provides individuals with access to ultimate reality, (2) integrative space which binds them to the local Austin community, and (3) demarcative space that furnishes Austin with a distinctive character in opposition to surrounding locales. We conclude by offering suggestions for future research and by delineating the implications of our findings.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social researchers have examined various facets of the relationship between religion and environmentalism. In general, studies within this research literature have attempted to describe or compare the environmental views embraced by various groups of religious adherents (among more recent studies, see Greeley, 1993; Guth, Green, Kellstedt, and Smidt, 1995; Kanagy and Nelson, 1995; Woodrum and Hoban, 1994). Most previous social scientific examinations of the religion-environmentalism connection, then, have largely restricted themselves to assessing the effects of formal religiosity (e.g., theological convictions, denominational membership) on individual ecological attitudes. Meanwhile, another fascinating aspect of the religion-environmentalism relationship — i.e., the implicitly religious character of environmentalism — has received little or no scholarly attention. This oversight is rather surprising, given the recent "spiritualization" of the environment and ecological issues that has been ushered in by a growing coterie of popular eco-theologians, deep ecologists, and ecological feminists (e.g., Fox, 1991; McFague, 1993; Starhawk, 1989; see Oelschlaeger, 1994, as well as assorted selections in Birch, Eakin, and McDaniel, 1990; Gottlieb, 1996).

One of the most striking examples of this burgeoning mode of eco-spirituality is found among proponents of the "Gaia hypothesis." First formulated by

British atmospheric scientist James Lovelock and American microbiologist Lynn Margulis, the Gaia hypothesis construes the earth to be a living organism and posits that all natural life (including human beings, animal species, and virtually all facets of the natural environment itself) are bound tightly together in a matrix of interdependent relationships (see Joseph, 1990, for a more thorough discussion). In recent years, an increasing number of this theory's proponents have interjected religious imagery into the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 1988: ch. 9; Ruether, 1992; see Joseph, 1990; Oelschlaeger, 1994), with Lovelock himself even arguing:

> *Thinking of the earth as alive makes it seem, on happy days, in the right places, as if the whole planet were celebrating a sacred ceremony. Being on the earth brings that same special feeling of comfort that attaches to the celebration of any religion when it is seemly and when one is fit to receive. It need not suspend the critical faculty, nor can it prevent one from singing the wrong hymn or the right one out of tune (as quoted in Joseph, 1990:70-71).*

Given the apparent lack of a research literature on this particular expression of ecological sentiment, this study represents a preliminary investigation of the implicitly religious character of environmentalism.[1] To this end, we call attention to a series of striking similarities between classical modes of religious experience on the one hand, and motivations for contemporary environmentalism and ecology-mindedness on the other. Researchers of implicit religions have long argued that seemingly "secular" phenomena and social processes, upon closer examination, often evince a distinctly quasi-religious character (see Cavalcanti and Chalfant, 1994; Chalfant, 1992; Davie, 1990; Swatos, 1990, as examples of recent empirical studies; and Nesti, 1990b; Bailey, 1983, 1990a, for theoretical treatments; see Bailey, 1990b, for a review of related studies and concepts). Nesti (1990a:419-420) argues that implicit religions are comprised of "the numerous paths of existentialism within the culture and dimensions of daily life, with specific intentionality and therefore specific dimensions of ultimate meaning." From this perspective, an implicit religion may be described as "quasi-religious" in character, because it is a non-traditional, extra-institutional, highly personalized confrontation with issues of ultimate concern. Our investigation of ecological sentiment as an implicit religion focuses on one particular case of this broader quasi-religious phenomenon, namely, the grassroots sacralization of urban space among environmentalists in Austin, Texas. Drawing on insights from Mircea Eliade's seminal treatise, *The Sacred and the Profane* (1961), our analysis highlights the ways in which local environmental activists and ecology-minded residents of Austin imbue their perceptions of a prized natural spring and adjoining recreational area with quasi-religious imagery.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SACRED SPACE: ELIADE REVISITED

Like numerous other classical scholars of religion (e.g., Berger, 1967; Douglas, 1966; Durkheim, 1915; Otto, 1970), Mircea Eliade acknowledged the

pivotal role which religion plays in the sacralization of the cosmos. Among this group of scholars, however, Eliade (1961) advances perhaps the most thorough treatment of cultural processes of sacralization, i.e., the means whereby phenomena are imbued with sacred qualities.[2] Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* clearly articulates the (tauto)logical and empirical difficulties associated with defining "the sacred" merely as "the opposite of the profane," and instead aims "to present the phenomenon of the sacred in all its complexity" (Eliade, 1961:10). Thus, whereas Durkheim focused most pointedly on the communal sacralization of totemic objects (typically animals), Eliade (1961: chs. 1, 3) extends this line of analysis by examining how environmental spaces and landscape features themselves can become the objects of group sacralization.

According to Eliade, communities perceive sacred spaces to provide a direct passageway from the secular, mundane, everyday world of existence (the profane) to a more transcendent, ultimate reality (the sacred)(see, e.g., Eliade, 1961:20-24ff). Following Durkheim, Eliade argues that such conceptualizations of the transcendent are cultural constructions (Eliade, 1961:15, 22, 29). It is precisely because the community defines a particular locale as sacred that its individual members genuinely believe that this sacred space provides for them a window to ultimate reality and an intimate connection with the community at large.

However, not just any physical locale can serve effectively as a sacred space which binds the individual to the community and links both to a transcendent reality. Eliade (1961:38-42) emphasizes that socially defined sacred spaces are quite often characterized by a striking feature that represents a radical disjuncture from the secular world of everyday existence. In many cases, these sacred spaces are founded upon outstanding natural landmarks such as mountains, valleys, rivers, and natural springs. As we will elaborate in greater detail below, natural resources which combine land and water are deemed especially important because the latter has historically been thought to provide the means for individual purification and group sanctification (see Eliade, 1961:129-136).

In short, sacred landmarks may be described as nodal spaces. On the one hand, they represent the cosmogony or worldview of the group which uses them, and on the other hand such spaces define the relationship of the community to the larger universe. As such, these spaces exhibit both identity-building (Eliade, 1961:36-47ff) and identity-distinguishing (Eliade, 1961:47-54) aspects. Thus, in addition to providing local inhabitants with *nodal* access to what is perceived as transcendent or ultimate reality, we would argue (following Eliade) that sacred space is *communal* (i.e., enabling residents to feel integrated into the community in which they live) and *demarcative* (i.e., providing the residents' locale with a unique identity in contrast to surrounding communities).

Should contemporary scholars of religion be surprised by the apparent persistence of sacralized natural objects in the modern urbanized world, or by the enduring implicitly religious character of contemporary environmentalism? No, suggests Eliade. He hints that the transformation of traditionally religious symbols into contemporary quasi-religious imagery is to be expected. He maintains that, despite the modern tendency to desacralize nature, there remain many thoroughly "modern" individuals for whom —

> *nature still exhibits a charm, a mystery, a majesty in which it is possible to decipher traces of ancient religious values. No modern man, however irreligious, is entirely insensible to the charms of nature. We refer not only to the esthetic, recreational, or hygienic values attributed to nature, but also to a confused and almost indefinable feeling, in which, however, it is possible to recognize the memory of a debased religious experience (Eliade, 1961:151-152).*

In the analysis that follows, we describe how Eliade's theoretical insights illuminate the construction of sacred space among environmental activists and ecology-minded men and women of Austin, Texas. Before analyzing the interview data, however, we contextualize our study with a brief overview of Austin's environmental features and recent developments in local politics.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: LANDSCAPE AND POLITICS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL CITY

Austin, the capital of Texas and home of the state's largest university, is a growing city of more than five hundred thousand inhabitants. An abundance of water and, more specifically, the presence of various natural springs, are among Austin's most unique environmental features. Running through the center of Austin is the Colorado River. This river serves as a source of drinking water and local recreational activity, and is adjoined in the city's central park by a formation of natural springs which supplies that area with twenty-six million gallons of water per day. The most prominent of these is Barton Springs, which draws water from the western portion of the city (the "Hill Country") and has provided Austinites with a natural swimming facility since the late 1800s. In the 1920s, the city built a dam less than a mile below the springs. This dam created a pool upstream, which presently serves as a spring-fed swimming area and center of recreational activity for many Austinites.

The spring-fed pool, which features a year-round water temperature of sixty-eight degrees, recently became the focal point of a local political movement opposed to urban development of land nearby the aquifer. Local environmental groups and concerned citizens rallied around the Save Our Springs (S.O.S.) campaign. This campaign and the factors which precipitated the mobilization of local environmental activists are not the subject of the present analysis. Yet, an appreciation of these political developments is necessary to understand the context in which the implicitly religious sentiment of local activists and other residents is situated.

As previously noted, the water from Barton Springs emerges from an aquifer underneath the Hill Country to the west. In the 1970s, a city master plan drawn up by city staff, citizens, neighborhood organizations, and development groups specified the creeks, the lake, and the aquifer as environmental zones to be protected by limiting development on areas that might pollute or degrade these natural resources (City of Austin, 1980). Despite the edicts of this master plan, these protected zones were subsequently purchased by various real estate developers for the purposes of land speculation. And as Austin's population grew rapidly during the course of the 1980's, developers began large-scale suburban

development in these protected zones, which local environmentalists perceived to be a threat to the water quality of both the aquifer itself and the creeks and springs which it fed (most notably, Barton Creek, Barton Springs, and the Barton Springs pool).

In 1990, a large suburban development to be situated near Barton Creek and on top of the adjacent aquifer was proposed by a regional subsidiary of a large, multinational corporation. This development proposal was rejected by the city council after the largest public meeting in the city's history, attended by over 900 concerned citizens and local environmentalists. Yet, despite this initial rejection, the following year witnessed the election of several new city council members who instituted a less stringent water quality ordinance than its more restrictive predecessor. The newer, less stringent ordinance imposed fewer pollution restrictions on the development project than had originally been required. These events, along with the forced closing of the Barton Springs Pool for a period of time due to bacterial contamination, energized local environmental and neighborhood groups who contended that these occurrences were closely related.

These groups soon formed a coalition called Save Our Springs (S.O.S.). Subsequently, S.O.S. mobilized citizens opposed to real estate development in the zones previously deemed environmentally sensitive, and were able to pass a more stringent water quality ordinance through an overwhelmingly popular city-wide referendum. Debate about the meaning of Barton Springs to individuals and to the Austin community was quite heated during this period of political ferment and continues to be a salient issue for many residents. A series of more recent city elections attest to the depth and persistence of these sentiments, as council members or political candidates perceived as critical of or ambivalent about such preservationist efforts were ultimately defeated by a slate of candidates who explicitly supported a pro-environmentalist agenda. Having provided the historical and political background for our study, we now proceed to overview our data collection procedures and to analyze the implicitly religious character of environmental activism in Austin.

METHODS

Data for this study were collected via two waves of in-depth interviews with local environmental activists and ecology-minded Austinites from 1994 to 1996. All interviews were conducted after the passage of the voter referendum described above. The first wave of interviews consisted of a sample of thirty present and past leaders of local environmental groups in Austin, Texas. These respondents have held leadership positions in local environmental groups that comprised the S.O.S. Coalition, and all of them expressed opposition to large-scale urban development in the environmentally protected zones of Barton Springs and Barton Creek. Among other related topics, these interviews explored the leaders' perceptions about the importance of Barton Springs to Austin.

After this first wave of interviews was conducted, a second wave of fifteen additional respondents was culled via a snowball sampling technique. Leader-respondents were asked if they were aware of other ecologically-minded individuals who might be willing to participate in a study which examined

individuals' perceptions of Barton Springs.[3] In order to solicit their participation, this wave of prospective respondents was informed, in a general sense, about the overall aim of the study (e.g., we wished to speak to them about the significance of Barton Springs to them personally and to the Austin community at large). It is important to note that our sampling strategy was purposive and selective in nature rather than being governed by concerns about randomness or representativeness. Rather than attempting to analyze an expansive range of perceptions about Barton Springs, it is our desire to focus on the specific *processes* whereby this urban space has become sacralized in the minds of these residents; therefore, this sample is purposefully comprised of individuals who evince a profound and, in many respects, a "spiritual" connection to the Springs.

Turning to the demographic characteristics of our sample, we interviewed forty-five individuals overall, including twenty-four men and twenty-one women ranging in age from approximately thirty to sixty years old. With the exception of two Hispanic individuals, our sample is predominantly white. Collectively, our respondents might be best described as middle and upper-middle class. These individuals are generally quite well-educated. Nearly all our respondents had either attended several years of college or, as was most often the case, held one or more academic degrees. With only one exception, all of our respondents are currently employed, typically in white-collar occupations.

The observations of our interviewees were collected using a semi-structured interview format. Interviews typically began with background questions about the respondents' participation in the S.O.S. referendum and their level of personal familiarity with the Springs. As the interview progressed, we inquired more specifically about the significance of the Springs to the respondents themselves, Austinites in general, and the overall character of the city of Austin. Where relevant, open-ended questions were combined with follow-up probes designed to explore more fully the character and depth of respondents' perceptions of Barton Springs. Upon the completion of data collection, we then employed an emergent themes technique to analyze the transcribed interview data. This technique was guided somewhat by the theoretical concerns explicated earlier in this study, and entailed flagging, coding, and comparing respondents' references to the series of issues we initially set out to investigate.

THE SACRALIZATION OF URBAN SPACE: THE CASE OF AUSTIN'S BARTON SPRINGS

How do Austin environmental activists and ecologically conscious individuals view Barton Springs? Drawing upon Eliade's theoretical insights about sacred space, we now explicate the various themes which tap our respondents' views of this natural landmark. Our analysis detects three interrelated perceptions of the Springs, which we discuss in the following terms: (1) *nodal space* that is thought to provide access to transcendent reality; (2) *integrative space* that is thought to link these individuals to the broader Austin community; and (3) *demarcative space* that is perceived to define the character of Austin over and against the contrasting identities ascribed to surrounding communities.[4]

Theophany, Hierophany, and the Nodal Character of Sacred Space

As noted above, Eliade suggests that sacred space is typically marked by some striking physical feature which serves as a boundary or "break" between mundane, everyday existence on the one hand and an absolute or transcendent reality on the other. Eliade uses the terms "theophany" and "hierophany" to describe this process in more detail. According to Eliade, a "theophany" is a point of transition or "between-ness" which occurs when an individual passes from profane space (mundane reality) to sacred space (absolute reality) (Eliade, 1961:24-29). This sense of transition is typically followed by a "hierophany" — i.e., a feeling of direct (and often physical) connection with transcendent reality (Eliade, 1961:20-24). In Eliade's own terms, a theophany consists of features which serve as "symbols and vehicles of passage from one space to another" (Eliade, 1961:25) while a hierophany is a "primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world" (Eliade, 1961:21).

A Passageway to Transcendent Reality: Barton Springs as Nodal Space

Many respondents in this study refer to Barton Springs and its surrounding greenbelts in ways that are strikingly similar to (though more colloquial than) Eliade's conceptualizations. Several respondents seem to perceive the greenbelt area that provides a boundary between urban life and the natural Springs in terms which highlight its transitional character. A local filmmaker describes the Springs and adjoining area as "an oasis in a field of an urban environment." A local artist and environmentalist who frequents Barton Springs clarifies the significance of this transition by contrasting everyday life with excursions to the Springs:

> *I think that we live in a world [where] everything is action. And even in our practicing religions, very few of them call for [what in] Buddhism and Hinduism is silence ... I often go to Barton Springs for that. For silence and reflection. We don't have those ideas in our society ... Nature is such a gigantic force of energy. It pulls you into a place.*

Another respondent offers a similar description in highlighting the transitional break from an everyday routine which the Springs provide for him. He believes that this natural aspect of Barton Springs separates the frantic, "rootless" urban area from a "grounded" and "positive" existence in nature.

> *It's hard for me to say what's objectively in the pool, or what the pool "objectively" is. I don't really know. It's whatever it is for whomever. But the total immersion in it, it's almost a death, almost a giving up ...*
> [INTERVIEWER: Death from what?...]
> *... I think all of the noise in our lives, all the conflicting pressures, values, messages, coming from all different sources, coming from our regular lives, when we are working, relating to people out in the city itself, can tend to cloud me. Others perhaps thrive on it, or at least they think they do. I believe people who think they thrive merely in a city setting are rootless and in a danger of a certain kind of social insanity. So at the*

same time that being down here is grounding and a thorough immersion in something positive, it's also a death, a certain social death. It's a certain way to be subjective and be isolated ... [from] the social forces.

These quotes illustrate the theophanic character of Barton Springs and its adjoining Creek. For the individuals above as well for the majority of our respondents, Barton Springs represents a distinct disjuncture between a natural, peaceful world on the one hand and a more frenetic urban environ created by human hands on the other.

It is important to note that these theophanic characterizations of the pool seem to be a direct result of the respondents' hierophanic (transcendent) experiences in this sacralized space. Many of our respondents' connections with what they describe as ultimate reality seem to be fostered by their physical contact with the Springs themselves. Barton Springs is not only a natural or, for that matter, a "neutral" landmark which these individuals admire from afar. Instead, the Springs are a recreational area in which respondents immerse themselves, literally, by swimming in the spring-fed pool. Not surprisingly, then, many individuals describe swimming in the brisk water of Barton Springs as an empirical bonding between physical, human activity on the one hand and a spiritualized, ultimate reality on the other. In this highly tactile sense, then, Barton Springs and the spring-fed pool it sustains seem to be hierophanic.

Many of these same individuals maintain that this resource enables them to gain direct access to a very different state of being. Several individuals simply describe this altered state as a communion with "nature," and many have a difficult time explaining in precise terms the contours of the seemingly transcendent reality to which they gain access via their use of the Springs and the Creek. When asked to describe why Barton Springs is so special to him, one respondent offered the following reply:

I am a church-going person, but I use this place as a lot of people use their church altar. To reconnect, focus, get peace, get strength, get comfort, whatever ... I do go to church, and I'm very happy with my church, but that does not happen to me there ... But I come here, and it's an altar ... It is my altar. It is my spiritual altar.

A publisher who has used the pool for most of her adult life recounts this connection in similarly heart-felt — yet strikingly diffuse and vague — terms:

Barton Springs connects me with the spirit, the life of the planet. It's my way of touching a holy point. I'm touching that whirling, spinning [pause]. There's a pattern, there's an interconnected matrix of some kind that is alive, and we are part of that, and we get to understand. We need to know it at different levels. And one way I know it is through Barton Springs.

The apparent vagueness of such responses should not be taken to represent ambiguous feelings about the Springs. These individuals simply find it difficult to put their sense of direct spiritual connection into discernible terms; not unlike many religious believers, their ritual experiences are ineffable, i.e., not readily communicable in everyday language.

Among the respondents who are more easily able to explain the nature of such hierophanic experiences at the Springs are those for whom this resource signifies a temporal or historical transcendence. These respondents stress the fact that the Springs have existed for centuries and that this natural resource has been used by countless other individuals over the course of that time. This transcendent historical connection evokes for some of these respondents a "timeless" or "unchanging" quality which the Springs embody. When asked of his attraction to Barton Springs and its adjoining creek, a leader of a local environmental group provided this reply: "I can feel like no time has passed between me and the beginning of this creek. That sense of timelessness. This creek has all the memories where you can go back to the beginning of her origin, still feel the ... seclusion, the sanctuary of it."

In sum, many of our respondents maintain that Barton Springs provides them with direct access to ultimate reality (generically described as "nature") and transcendental temporality (generally understood as "timelessness"). A pervasive theme in such accounts of Barton Springs' hierophanic qualities is the connection between the individual and the sacred. However, numerous respondents (indeed, many of the same respondents) do not feel that the Springs benefits only individuals. At the same time, they argue that Barton Springs provides them with connections to the community outside of themselves. It is to this issue that we turn next.

The Integrative Nature of Sacred Space: Linking Individuals to the Community

Recall that Eliade, following Durkheim (1915) before him, maintains that sacred space is not simply interaction between the individual and his/her notion of transcendent reality. Rather, sacred spaces are constructed, and given force, as symbolic representations of the *community* that defines them as such. Hierophanies, then, have a social component. Access to transcendent or ultimate reality via sacred space contributes to the sacralization of the community which houses that space. Eliade notes that the sacred space — and, by extension, its surrounding community — is perceived as the *axis mundi* or "center of the world": "... [T]he world (that is, *our world*) is a universe within which the sacred has already manifested itself ... [The] settlement [of residents in a particular locale] implies a vital decision that involves the existence of the *entire community*" (Eliade, 1961:32-34, emphasis added). According to Eliade, then, the power of sacred space lies not only in the fact that individuals can access absolute reality through it, but also in the way it sacralizes the local community in which that space is situated. The community becomes, to its residents at least, the center of the world.

A Sense of Belonging: Barton Springs as Integrative Space

Barton Springs and its adjoining creek are indeed the *axis mundi* for many of the Austinites we interviewed. Constructions of the Springs as integrative space seemed to take three forms. First, as described above, the Springs are physically located in the center of Austin. This fact was noted explicitly by several of the

individuals we interviewed. In this respect, the Springs seem to serve as the center of our respondents' "world" — i.e., their local environ — in this burgeoning Texas metropolis.

Perhaps more notable than the Springs' central geographical location, however, is its second community-building aspect — namely, the *symbolic centrality* of Barton Springs to the Austin community and its residents. On the one hand, some respondents define the communal connections obtained via the Springs quite broadly. Many of these individuals describe the pool as integral to their sense of connection to the larger community which they identify as Austin. For example, one S.O.S. organizer noted that for her "Barton Springs is a symbol of community ... Folks get sustenance, a sense of well being, from feeling a sense of place, of having a tie to a place .... If we destroy these things, we [i.e., Austinites] as a society are doomed. So, it is self-preservation and protecting a sense of connection: a family issue, a citizenship issue." Others who highlight the Springs' symbolic centrality to Austin once again point to the historical significance of this enduring resource. As mentioned previously, Barton Springs pool and Barton Creek are consistently identified by respondents as symbolic space that ties the current generation to previous generations. In this way, the Springs represent the community's continuity through time, and symbolize the unfolding evolution of a city rich in history. When asked to comment on the significance of the Springs to the Austin community, a long-time Austinite and recent addition to the ranks of local environmental activists offered this historical perspective: "[Barton Springs has] historical importance. It's been around. The historical significance has to be important." Our respondent then elaborated upon this sentiment through the following story:

> *An aborigine in Australia took a city dweller up on a hill overlooking Sydney. He looks at the huge city, and asks, "What do you see?" "Well, a town, the skyscrapers," replies the man. But then the aborigine describes [to the man] the land before Sydney was built on it ... [Aboriginal peoples] hand down those features of the natural environment from generation to generation. It is how they identify their land, even though the city is on it now.*

Shifting once again the present context of Austin and its various creeks and waterways, this respondent concludes:

> *This [story of the aborigine and the man] sort of applies to Waller Creek [another central city creek in Austin that is, however, commercially developed]. I couldn't describe Waller Creek to my daughter because they paved it over. It's not part of the community anymore ... We don't have an oral history of Waller or Shoal Creeks, so they pave those over with ease.*

On the other hand, a large number of our respondents define the communal significance of the Springs more narrowly than those individuals cited previously. These individuals maintain that the Springs and Creek are sacred not only because of their broad symbolic or historical importance to the community at large, but because the communal use of these resources promotes a sense of intimacy and comradery among their closest friends. One respondent asserted that her friendship circle was defined largely by her and her peers' communal use of the Springs:

I've got my friends who used to go down to the Creek, and those people have those [friends]. So there are all these interlocking social circles, this network of friends and acquaintances and lovers and so forth ... and so that is always going to strengthen somebody's bond with the place. I fell in love on Barton Creek ... You fall in love and you go in the bushes and screw. And people eat mushrooms on the Creek. It's all those kinds of primal connections.

Third and finally, Barton Springs and its adjoining creek are not only symbolic points of reference for the Austin community (however broadly or narrowly defined), but literally foster a sense of group cohesion among those residents who use them. This natural resource is, first and foremost, aquatic. As noted previously, Eliade attaches great significance to the symbolic power of water and ritual nudity in his historical studies of various religions: "The 'old man' dies through immersion in water, and gives birth to a new regenerated being" (Eliade, 1961:132-33). Such a spiritual rebirth, Eliade contends, has on some occasions entailed ritual nudity:

Baptismal nudity too bears a meaning that is at once ritual and metaphysical. It is abandoning "the old garment of corruption and sin, which the baptized person takes off ..."; but it is also a return to primitive innocence ... Paradise implies the absence of garments, that is, the absence of attrition, wear (archetypal image of time). All ritual nudity implies an atemporal model, a paradisal image (Eliade, 1961:134).

In a remarkably similar fashion, Barton Springs acts as a social "leveler" for the wide variety of individuals in the community who use this resource. Many of our respondents call attention to the nature of much of the recreation that takes place there — namely, swimming. In their view, the recreational use of Barton Springs and Creek is "natural" and inherently egalitarian because status markers such as jewelry and everyday clothing are removed upon entry into this sacralized space. A relatively new resident to Austin describes how this occurs:

Barton Springs is ... what community is supposed to be. You take off the clothes, strip to the essentials of a human being. The place inspires a true community ... Barton Springs is a big park in the middle of town where everyone from the community comes together to talk. There's nothing like it anywhere else I have ever lived. This place represents all that is good about Austin. [Local events that are held there] are ways to relate and celebrate what this place means through time. It is building community ties to this sense of place.

Respondents who express such views also point out that other stratifying symbols commonly used to differentiate between various social groups in everyday life become irrelevant given the *joint use* of this *communal resource* by so many Austinites. One respondent claims forthrightly that the significance of the Springs to Austin lies in "the diversity of its clients. Go any Sunday afternoon and you have a good mix of race, class, ethnicity. In my mind that defines it. Everyone is using it."

Thus, the central location, symbolic importance, and physical use of Barton Springs create for these activists a sense of community. These activists reveal,

albeit via diverse claims and colloquial terminology, that the Springs are nevertheless pivotal in fostering feelings of group cohesion. This communalist spirit is construed as broader than and, in many ways, superseding the narrow, circumscribed interests of individual Austinites.

A Bounded Identity: Sacred Space and the Demarcation of Community Boundaries

As demonstrated above, group cohesion or the binding together of cultural "insiders" is one function of sacred space. Closely related to (but conceptually distinct from) this process is the demarcating function of sacred space and the communal identity it provides. Even as sacred space binds together the insiders who cherish it, it identifies "outsiders" as those who do not share these convictions. Eliade (1961:29) argues: "One characteristic of traditional societies is the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it." He adds that sacred space enables communities to highlight —

> *the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. The former is the world (more precisely, our world), the cosmos; everything outside it is no longer a cosmos but a sort of "other world," a foreign, chaotic space, peopled by ghosts, demons, "foreigners" ... The world (that is, our world) is a universe within which the sacred has already manifested itself ... The sacred [space] reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it founds the world in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world ... An unknown, foreign, and unoccupied territory (which often means "unoccupied by our people") still shares in the fluid and larval modality of chaos (Eliade, 1961:29-31).*

Thus, sacred space can literally demarcate the physical boundaries around a community by highlighting the contrast between its members and the "foreign" territory which surrounds their locale. In light of this process, Eliade notes that sacred space symbolically identifies the "insider" members of the community from non-members, foreigners, or "outsiders":

> *Since "our world" is a cosmos, any attack from without threatens to turn it into chaos. And as "our world" was founded by imitating the paradigmatic work of the gods, the cosmogeny, so the enemies who attack it are assimilated to the enemies of the gods ... "Our" enemies belong to the powers of chaos.* ***Any destruction of a city is equivalent to a retrogression to chaos. Any victory over the attackers reiterates the paradigmatic victory of the gods over the dragon (that is, over chaos)*** *(Eliade, 1961:47-48, emphasis in original).*

Shoring Up the Boundaries: Barton Springs as Demarcative Space

Barton Springs, construed as sacred space by the Austin residents in our sample, clearly serves this demarcative purpose for numerous individuals who frequent the pool and creek. One organizer of Austin's S.O.S. campaign explains

this process in the following manner. "This open space [Barton Springs] defines a community; it literally draws boundaries around a space so that you can get a sense of community. The nicest communities have some natural environmental boundary that draw this line." Another respondent offers a strikingly similar appraisal: "The struggle [to protect the Springs against development] really is a symbolic struggle to retain a sense of self that is [part of] a unique community that can have a quality of life and the environment." The insider-outsider implication of the sacralization of Barton Springs was most noteworthy during and soon after the Save Our Springs campaign to mobilize grassroots support for a more stringent water quality ordinance. One organizer of the S.O.S. Coalition explains how the group strategically used Barton Springs to reinforce this insider-outsider dichotomy:

> *I guess one reason [for the success of S.O.S.] was the message was so simple. The political pros drilled that in. [They said], "Keep it simple and uniform. [Leading corporate developers] bad, Barton Springs good." We tried to focus on Barton Springs as a symbol, and [on the fact] that the water is a common resource ... [that is necessary for] the health of the community... You don't mess with the [community's] water.*

According to several of our respondents, Barton Springs also serves to distinguish Austin from other Texas cities which lack the former's distinctive character. Many respondents suggest that the Springs are, in fact, the "soul" of Austin which provides this central Texas city with its own unique identity. Explains one ecologically conscious Austinite: "I think places inherently have some type of spirit or soul." In the same breath, this respondent contrasts Austin with what she describes as the large metropolitan "concrete jungles" (i.e., Dallas and Houston) that are present elsewhere in Texas: "If that city's got soul, there's some life there. We could be another Dallas or Houston if we want to be, but I don't want to be!"

In short, then, the sacralization of Barton Springs is manifested not only in the communal identity it provides, but in the boundaries beyond which outsiders who may be hostile to this identity can be readily identified. As a quasi-religious locale, the Springs bind Austinites together even while they simultaneously serve to identify various stripes of "foreigners," including seemingly hostile real estate developers and residents in other Texas cities who are portrayed as less ecologically conscious than Austinites.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have sought to illuminate how a coterie of environmental activists and ecologically minded individuals in Austin, Texas have sacralized a natural landmark (Barton Springs) which was until recently under the threat of commercial development. By drawing upon Mircea Eliade's tripartite conceptualization of sacred space, we demonstrated how these residents construe Barton Springs as an implicitly religious symbol that simultaneously acts as (1) *nodal space* that provides direct access to a supernatural reality, (2) *integrative space* that binds together the residents of Austin with a common identity, and (3)

demarcative space which defines the character of Austin in opposition to various types of "outsiders" (e.g., land speculators and other prominent cities in Texas). Given the programmatic nature of our study, the most obvious course of action for future inquiries is to examine the extent to which the Eliadean processes of urban space sacralization may be manifested in metropolitan areas apart from Austin or outside of Texas and the United States.

In the final analysis, our study offers two important implications for current debates in the sociology of religion.[5] First, our inquiry suggests that prognoses positing the imminent demise of religion, broadly defined, in the modern world may be premature. While a systematic appraisal of current debates over secularization is clearly beyond the purview of this paper (see Warner, 1993), our findings seem to support the view that manifestations of "religiosity" are not absent in modernity, but rather include the reinvention of spirituality via implicit religious forms (see Crippen, 1988, 1992; Chalfant, 1992; Davie, 1990; Nesti, 1990b). In addition to highlighting the most obviously "religious" characteristic of the sacralization of urban space (i.e., a perceived connection with transcendent reality), our study suggests that "sacred" landmarks facilitate the identity construction of the quasi-religious "faithful" (in this case, ecologically-minded Austinites), often by counterposing these in-group values to the desacralized convictions putatively embraced by outsiders who do not share the "faith" (most notably, land speculators and commercial developers).

Second, this paper calls into question scholarly observations that portray contemporary manifestations of American spirituality as highly individualistic and largely privatized (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985). Our analyses of the implicit religious sentiment of ecologically minded Austinites demonstrates that indeed some of our respondents invoke individualistic rhetoric to explain their spiritual attraction to Austin's Barton Springs. However, alongside such conceptualizations — and often expressed within the same interview — are metaphors which describe these sacralized Springs as a truly communal resource. This melding of individualistic and communalistic sentiments into implicitly religious convictions is strikingly consistent with Roof's (1993) study of baby boomer culture. Roof's research poses a challenge to prevailing perceptions that boomers (and late twentieth-century American spirituality, more generally) are preoccupied almost solely with matters of personal concern ("private troubles," in Millsian terms). Rather, Roof demonstrates that many of his research subjects' convictions are better described as a "pastiche-style spirituality" which (among its other interesting features) affirms both the individual and the community in which he/she is situated (Roof, 1993:245-250).

In light of such evidence, our study suggests that some previous characterizations of implicit religion as highly or almost exclusively personalistic deserve some reconsideration (e.g., Davie, 1990; see Cavalcanti and Chalfant, 1994, for a related critique). Rather than focusing almost exclusively on the privatized character of implicit religions (i.e., "believing without belonging"), researchers might begin to explore how the very notion of "belonging" itself can be redefined in a quasi-religions context. Our case study reveals how a sense of belonging is closely bound up with the sacralization of urban space, and demonstrates that implicitly religious, non-institutional forms of "belonging" may be refashioned and sus-

tained on several different levels. Among our respondents, Barton Springs reinforced in-group relationships at both the micro-level (e.g., friendship networks, romantic relationships) and the macro-level (e.g., the Austin community at large). This manifestation of implicit religion therefore seems to hold within itself a distinctly *social* component layered over its more individualistic elements. This conclusion is strikingly consistent with Cavalcanti and Chalfant's (1994) insights distilled from their recent study of American converts to Russian Orthodoxy. They call attention to the interplay between collective life on the one hand and more private manifestations of implicit religion on the other, concluding: "Without collective life, one is left with disconnected, aimless individuals. Even implicit religion needs the corroboration of the outside social world to be sustained over time" (Cavalcanti and Chalfant, 1994:445). The Austin "faithful" who share in common their implicitly religious convictions about Barton Springs would hardly disagree.

NOTES

*Conversations with Christopher Ellison, Joseph Forman, and Lester Kurtz provided valuable insights during the course of conducting this research. The insightful comments offered by D. Paul Johnson and the anonymous reviewers on an earlier version of this manuscript are also gratefully acknowledged. Nevertheless, the authors are solely responsible for the analyses contained herein. Please direct all correspondence to John P. Bartkowski, Department of Sociology, 336 Burdine Hall, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712-1088; e-mail: bart@prc.utexas.edu.

1. Several caveats bear mentioning concerning terminological and conceptual issues. First, for stylistic convenience, we use the terms "implicit religion" and "quasi-religion" interchangeably. Second, we do not contend that all facets of ecological concern or all environmental organizations are inherently quasi-religious. We recognize that environmental activism can manifest itself in myriad ways, including both implicitly religious expressions and highly areligious forms (e.g., scientific conservationism). In this paper, our focus is upon the former phenomenon, specifically as manifested in the sacralization of urban space. This is not to say that quasi-religious expressions of environmentalism are restricted solely to processes involving the sacralization of space. To the contrary, our analysis simply focuses upon spatial sacralization as one of the more intriguing and subtle expressions of what seems to be a broader, implicitly religious phenomenon.
2. For conceptual clarity and theoretical consistency, we draw upon Eliade's notions of spatial sacralization. It is important to note, however, the growth of a broader interdisciplinary literature that examines the symbolic significance of spatial features (environmental and otherwise) within or across a variety of cultural and historical contexts (see, e.g., Albanese, 1990; Firey, 1945, 1947; Kelley and Francis, 1994; Graber, 1976; Lane, 1988; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991). A review of this diverse literature is beyond the purview of our investigation.
3. For the purposes of this study and our sampling design, "ecologically-minded" or "ecologically conscious" Austin residents are those individuals in the second wave of interviews who are not necessarily registered as activists in local environmentalist organizations. Despite their lack of *formal* participation in these groups, ecologically-minded individuals in our sample supported the Save Our Springs campaign in various fashions (e.g., financial support, volunteer labor, voting). And, perhaps most importantly, each of these individuals frequently uses Barton Springs.
4. Based on our reading of Eliade (1961), we use the terms "nodal," "integrative," and "demarcative" to refer to the distinct processes which together comprise the sacralization of space. Thus, although Eliade himself does not use these terms, they serve as a shorthand reference in our analysis to distinguish between different aspects of his multifaceted concept. Also, it bears mentioning that our respondents themselves did not use these terms in describing the personal or communal significance of the Springs. Still, our

analysis of interview transcripts reveals a remarkable degree of thematic congruence between these sociological terms on the one hand, and our respondents' perceptions of the Springs on the other.

5. The design of our study did not include questions about our respondents' institutional religious affiliation or theological orientation, traditionally defined. We are therefore unable to explore the relationship between our respondents' denominational affiliations or theological orientations on the one hand, and their implicitly religious environmentalist convictions on the other. Clearly, this relationship should be investigated in future qualitative or triangulated studies, especially in light of growing evidence that theologically liberal Christians are more predisposed toward pro-ecological ideals than their evangelical counterparts (e.g., Guth et al., 1995).

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