

GEOGRAPHIES OF THE SACRED AND POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES

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INTRODUCTION

We are gathered here these few days, according to the conference title, to contemplate "The Spirit of Place: Source of the Sacred." Contemplation of this kind, I suggest, must take account of the figure of Mircea Eliade. Eliade's work, I am sure, is familiar to practically everyone here. Romanian by birth, collector of insects, novelist, and most famously, itinerant student and interpreter of the sacred traditions of humankind, Eliade is, for better or for worse, the godfather of that field of scholarship in the western academy which usually goes under the name of History of Religions or Comparative Religion.¹

Many of us cannot dissociate the phrase "sacred space" from the name of Eliade. But in talk of sacred space on occasions such as this, it has become almost *de rigueur* to knock Eliade. I do not want to knock Eliade. Rather, I want to invoke the spirit of the man – at least to begin with. As an instructor at the University of Chicago's Divinity School, Eliade sought for three decades to awaken a generation of scholars and students of religion to the mysterious potentialities of life, even among the city of Chicago's clamour and concrete. In the midst of Babylon, he saw traces of Eden and the possibility of a New Jerusalem, a possibility predicated not on doctrines of a messiah's second coming or dire predictions of apocalypse, but on our maintaining some ritual sense of the sanctity of life and its cycles. We owe to Eliade a lexicon for expressing this sanctity. We are all familiar with phrases like "sacred time" and "sacred space"; in certain circles, we might even venture the more learned talk of *homo religiosus*, *in illo tempore*, *axis mundi* and so forth. Put another way, like Sir James Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Rudolph Otto's *Idea of the Holy* and other seminal texts in the comparative study of

religions, Eliade's work reminds us modern, secular westerners that we too are creatures who, almost despite ourselves, continue to look upon and appreciate our world as simultaneously seen and unseen, as at once material and mysterious.

My title this afternoon – "Geographies of the Sacred in Post-Colonial Literatures" – needs to be located in this context. But as I said just now, Eliade may be considered the godfather of the western comparative study of religion "for better or for worse." This hesitancy, of course, has to do with the fact that we *can* find fault with both the man and with the way in which he conceived of and executed his intellectual agenda. Doubtless, for example, his methodological opposition of the sacred and the profane recapitulates ancient western dualisms; doubtless, too, his practical and theoretical excursions into Indian yoga and elsewhere sometimes smack of orientalism; and his sexual and other personal excursions into those same places betray, perhaps unavoidably, another species of European colonialism.

Most of all, however, for all its wealth of historical and textual exempla, Eliade's phenomenological method tends to talk of sacred space, sacred time, *homo religiosus* and so forth in essentialist terms, devoid of the diurnal ambiguities of economic, social and political relations in which all individual spiritual experience and institutional religious life are inevitably implicated. Ethical issues arise out of these entanglements, and moral decisions rooted in personal and public religious experience always entail economic, social and political considerations. This concern for the ethical in our contemplation of sacred space has encouraged my enthusiasm for a particular body of contemporary literature – what has variously been called Commonwealth Literatures, the New Literatures in English, Third-World Literatures, Post-Colonial Literatures, and so forth. These writings frequently explore the very real economic, social and political relations defining and determining lands and landscapes as now sacred, now desacralised, now resacralised.

But I have jumped ahead. My title, "Geographies of the Sacred and Post-Colonial Literatures," addresses the question: "What is it to talk meaningfully about the representation of sacred space in post-colonial

literatures?" And my answer is: "Such talk is not meaningful without some ethical understanding of sacred space and place." In turn, this position involves what may best be described as a methodological three-ring circus; it implicates three distinct fields of interdisciplinary activity: geography and religion; religion and literature; and geography and literature. I would like, therefore, to say something about the first and second of these areas of scholarly activity – geography and religion; and religion and literature – stressing their apparent coalescence around an ethical understanding of space and place. Then I will focus on two novels – *Fire on the Mountain* by the Indo-Anglian writer, Anita Desai, and *Sweet Water-Stolen Land* by the Aboriginal Australian, Philip McLaren – as case studies of the geography of the sacred in post-colonial literatures. In other words, I am positing post-colonial literatures as sites for a descriptive or narrative ethics of space and place.

GEOGRAPHY AND RELIGION²

As Erich Isaac has pointed out, geography and religion go way back. The world maps of ancient Greek geographers like Anaximander reflect a cosmological view as much religious in inspiration as scientific.³ Similarly, we have all seen those medieval European Christian maps which, interpreting biblical phrasing at once literally and anagogically, orient the entire world around Jerusalem. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christian ecclesiastics tried to identify the physical locations of biblical places on the one hand, and to chart the territorial advances of Christianity and its spatial relations to other religions on the other.⁴ As Lily Kong has noted, various species of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalists reasoned that the distribution of climates, plants, animals, landforms, lakes and streams testified to a divinely created natural order.⁵ Today, as Janel Curry-Roper has shown, certain Christian millennialist sects "teach that the possibility of ecological and social improvement is limited in the present age, though Christians are to attempt to heal the earth's wounds to show evidence of a future renewed earth."⁶

These examples, however, are forms of religious geography. To speak of religious geography is not the same as speaking about the interdisciplinary study of geography and religion.⁷ Certainly, the scholarly analysis and understanding of religious geography, from Anaximander's maps to contemporary Christian millennialists, falls within the parameters of the interdisciplinary study of geography and religion. But the latter is a fairly recent phenomenon in the western academy. Such scholarship falls within the purview of cultural geography, itself a species of human – as opposed to physical – geography. "Cultural geography," writes Denis Cosgrove, "focuses on the impact of human culture, both material and non-material, upon the natural environment and the human organisation of space."⁸

Broadly speaking, as a species of cultural geography, the interdisciplinary study of geography and religion has adopted three approaches to its material. In the first instance, a number of scholars focus on ways in which environment determines the self-understanding of religion. Compromised by a kind of epistemological determinism, this approach has nonetheless resulted in valuable contributions to our appreciation of relations between the geographical and the religious. While Innu or Inuit communities in the Canadian subarctic, for example, envision the netherworld as a place of darkness, storms and intense cold, the middle eastern desert cultures which produced the Bible and the Qur'an contrast the fires of hell with the fecundity of paradise. In another vein, Aké Hultkrantz has shown how environment conditions Native North American religious rituals, beliefs and myths.⁹ Economically important animals assume totemic identity; traditionally, Plains Indians revered the buffalo for the gifts of its meat, its skin and its horns. The mysteries of liminality also engender totemic status; Eastern Woodlands peoples revere the beaver, for instance, not only for the gift of its meat and pelt, but also for the uncanny ability to survive in the different environments of land and water.

If such scholars see the environment as determining religious belief and practice, others turn things around to argue religion's effects upon the

environment. In this regard, Isaac assumes the "religious motive in man's [sic] transformation of the landscape," and identifies four areas of interest for geographers of religion: "the effect of religion on cultural landscapes or regions"; "religious structures, their locations, sites and orientations and designs"; "demographic issues such as the distribution of religious groups"; and "theoretical arguments which seek to define the concerns of the geography of religion."¹⁰ Examples of such interests vary widely. I have already alluded to early ecclesiastical efforts to map the spatial diffusion of Christianity. Making use of more sophisticated methods of mapping, modern cultural geographers have extended such efforts to chart the diffusion and distribution of the world's religions. In another vein, Lynn White and other ecological thinkers have identified God's gift of dominion over the earth, as well as Protestant Christianity's historical association with capitalist economics, with the degradation of the natural environment.

But the influence of Carl Sauer and the Berkeley School of cultural geography figures importantly here, too. Writing in 1925, Sauer advances a programmatic view of cultural geography: "[t]he cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area the medium, the cultural landscape the result."¹¹ This geography sees religion as a significant cultural influence upon the shape and character of particular landscapes. Though often criticised as too strongly positivistic and little more than descriptive taxonomy, examples of this sort of work abound. In a useful paper on the geography of religion, for instance, Gregory J. Levine identifies studies on "whole religious complexes and their implications, the spatial distribution of religious groups in several countries, the diffusion of religious groups, the practice of pilgrimage, the domestication of plants and animals for religious purposes, the acquisition of minerals for religious reasons, the cemetery as cultural artifact, and the practice of food avoidance."¹²

As James Duncan has argued, however, the Berkeley School's methodology and epistemology seem to endow the idea of culture with the "ontological status and causative power" of a "superorganism."¹³ Peter Jackson explains: "[p]ut simply," he writes, "the superorganic approach

adopts the view that culture is an entity at a higher level than the individual, that it is governed by a logic of its own, and that it actively constrains human behaviour."¹⁴ In recent years, therefore, the so-called "new" cultural geography has theorised culture "as an ongoing process of conflict" defined by "related interests in symbolism, semiotics and discourse analysis."¹⁵ The third trend in the interdisciplinary study of geography and religion identified by Kong, this new cultural geography thus extends the theoretical engagement with questions of the economic, social and political value of space and place. In the 1960s, Paul Fickeler's stress on the role of religious ethics in shaping the landscape portends this new approach, as does the work of Yi-Fu Tuan.¹⁶ Tuan's celebrated monograph, *Topophilia*, echoes Gaston Bachelard's *La poétique de l'espace* in its analysis of environmental perception, attitudes and values. For Tuan, topophilia "couples sentiment with place," and his essay on sacred space explores religious motivation as a factor in the design of landscape and the appreciation of space.¹⁷

In particular, however, the Marxian ideas of Raymond Williams and Anthony Giddens have influenced the new cultural geography, especially the latter's understanding of social and cultural "structuration" as the interplay between human agency and the institutional structures of economics and politics.¹⁸ More dialectical in approach, recent studies in geography and religion thus refuse to reduce either environmental or religious considerations to the influence of the other. Land and landscape become symbol-laden arenas in which human actors play out different religious cultures and their competing value systems. Again, examples abound, some historical, some contemporary. David Harvey's landmark paper, "Monument and Myth," analyses the political symbolism of the Basilica of Sacre-Coeur in Paris.¹⁹ Also, reflecting the influences of social and political science, Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht have analyzed the ways in which Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups vie for control of Jerusalem's sacred Temple Mount.²⁰ Others have brought similar methods to the analysis of conflicting Shinto, Buddhist and other sectarian claims on the sacred space of Japan's Mount Fuji.

In such instances, the geographer of religion tries to interpret "the processes through which specific environmental objects, landscapes and buildings are invested with meaning of a religious kind."²¹ Interviewed for his views on geography, Michel Foucault captured the spirit of this latest trend:

Once knowledge can be analyzed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power.²²

Echoing Foucault, Allan Pred has demanded that cultural geographers examine the communicative processes and concomitant power relations entailed in the production and reproduction of space and place.²³ This association of power and knowledge recognises that culture is not unitary, but plural. In turn, cultural plurality means that vying religious ideologies play themselves out on local, regional, national and international landscapes. In Peter Jackson's words, however, "the spatial strategies by which subordinate groups seek to contest their domination remain to be investigated."²⁴ The economic, social and political realities of post-colonial cultures constitute important sites of such geographies of resistance.²⁵ Such issues are essentially issues of value.²⁶ As sites of a narrative or descriptive ethics of space and place, post-colonial writings, I am suggesting, offer numerous opportunities for such investigations.

RELIGION AND POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES

Just as speaking of religious geography and geography and religion differ, so speaking of interdisciplinary studies in religion and literature is not the same as speaking of religious literature. Many ancient literary classics, of course, entail religious dimensions, whether we are talking about the *Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*; the Greek *Iliad*; the Hebrew and Christian *Bibles*; the *Qur'an*; the Hindu *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; the Chinese *Journey to the West*; the Japanese *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*; and so forth. What is more, every literary history includes within it a tradition of religious

literature. Simply take the Christian writings of English literature: medieval mystery plays; the sixteenth-century devotional writings of George Herbert, Thomas Traherne and Henry Vaughan; John Milton's epics; John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; the satirical writings of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope; William Blake's verse visions and William Wordsworth's *Holy Sonnets*; the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot and David Jones; the novels of Charles Kingsley, Iris Murdoch and William Golding; and so forth.

Certainly, the teaching and scholarly interpretation of religious literature falls within the parameters of interdisciplinary studies in religion and literature. In these instances, from the biblical Psalms to the novels of Iris Murdoch, religion inspires literary creativity. But as a formal aspect of the western academic curriculum, interdisciplinary studies in religion and literature are more or less contemporary in origin. Most commentators trace this kind of scholarly work to T.S. Eliot's 1935 essay, "Religion and Literature," which argues that "literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint."²⁷ But to recall something of the broader history of such studies is to discover three overlapping areas of scholarly engagement.

As David A. Hesla noted some years ago, a certain solipsism of matter and method characterised both theological and literary studies in the pre- and immediate post-war years. In the former case, Hesla associates this solipsism with the neo-orthodox ecclesiology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner; and in the latter case, with the ahistorical formalism of New Critical and Neo-Aristotelian approaches to the interpretation of literature. In the 1950s and '60s, therefore, scholars in religion and literature began working at counteracting and overcoming these trends.²⁸ As we shall see, some recent work on post-colonial literatures testifies to this ongoing agenda, most notably, I think, in two collections of essays: *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice*, edited by Susan VanZanten Gallagher, and my own *And the Birds Began to Sing: Religion and Literature in Post-Colonial Cultures*.²⁹

In the 1960s, several North American universities launched postgraduate degree programmes under such rubrics as "Literature and Theology" or "Christianity and Literature." The "twin goals" of such programmes were to demonstrate "that literature has theological and religious significance and of protesting against a narrow and precious literary criticism."³⁰ The name of Nathan A. Scott Jr. is inseparable from this enterprise, especially in books like *The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature*, where he urges "a vigorous Christian criticism [involving a] search after something like a theology of the imagination."³¹ Strongly influenced by Paul Tillich's dialogical method of theologising, Scott advances a mutually critical correlation between modern literary problematics and existential reformulations of the Christian *kerygma*. The dramatisation of human infirmities in the novels of Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, actually bear negative witness to a kind of anonymous Christian doctrine of sin and redemption. This dialogue continues today in some work on religion and post-colonial literatures. In *And the Birds Began to Sing*, Joost Daalder approaches the poetry of R.A.K. Mason in this way, generalizing Mason's imaginative reworking of Christian images in terms of such themes as worldly suffering and the human desire for harmonious community.³²

At the same time, however, the same Scott has decried the "outrageous arrogance" of efforts to draw "a Christian map of the modern mind."³³ Such arrogance risks ignoring epistemological and ontological claims to meaning, truth and value associated with the processes of secularisation on the one hand, and on the other hand, with religious traditions other than the Christian. It is precisely to meet such challenges that scholars in religion and literature have pursued studies in two other areas of engagement. In the first instance, in secularised times the close association between things theological and things literary raises what Theodore Ziolkowski has called "the critic's dilemma."³⁴ In a secular age, the religious elements of a text may be interpreted "seriously or parodistically, devoutly or critically."³⁵ Ziolkowski's own study of modern "fictional transfigurations of Jesus" exemplifies a critic attempting to work through

this dilemma; such transfigurations include "the Christian socialist Jesus," "the mythic Jesus," the Marxist "Comrade Jesus," and parodistic narratives starring not Jesus at all, but Judas.³⁶ Among studies in religion and post-colonial literatures, Norman Cary's essay, "Comrade Jesus: Postcolonial Literature and the Story of Jesus," which appears in Gallagher's collection of essays, examines the Christ motif in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Grain of Wheat*, Augusto Roa Bastos's *Son of Man*, Roger Mais's *Brother Man*, and Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of Gebelaawi*.³⁷

By the mid- to late 1970s, however, scholars in religion and literature had begun to develop a third range of interests. In Hesla's words, the "intellectual colonialism" of Western studies in religion and literature began to crumble "under the impact of the work being done by historians and sociologists of religion, and by cultural and symbolic anthropologists."³⁸ Although differing in approaches to and in their understandings of "the nature, function, structure, or meaning of religion," scholars in these disciplines nonetheless shared the conviction that "the word [religion] cannot be used as a synonym for 'Christianity'."³⁹ This insight advanced the "de-christianizing" of studies in religion and literature that began with the recognition of the critic's dilemma posed by secularisation.⁴⁰ As Mary Gerhart has confirmed, this "de-christianizing" agenda in the study of religion and literature has resulted in a body of scholarship exploring "the bridge between literature and the history of religions."⁴¹

Not surprisingly, Gerhart's observation resonates strongly with students of things religious and things literary in post-colonial cultures. Different post-colonial writers implicate various religious myths and symbols, rituals and values, and heroes and histories for a variety of different reasons. In some cases, authors draw upon iconic materials from religious traditions other than Christianity for critical contrast and comparison. William Closson James, for example, has demonstrated how access to Native American spirituality enables Euro-American women in Margaret Atwood's and Marian Engel's novels to explore avenues of self-discovery free from the patriarchal traditions of their own culture and society. Conversely, as it were, Priscilla Walton has shown how the Native

Canadian writer, Thomas King, re-reads Christian creation stories; King at once relativises absolutist Western claims to epistemological and ontological authority and demands that we open our eyes to the alternative visions of Native Canadians.

Other scholars have identified more overtly syncretistic religious visions permeating post-colonial fiction. Patrick Holland, for example, explores the ways in which Keri Hulme's *the bone people* draws upon Maori, Christian and New Age iconographies; Hulme thus mediates the communal identities posed by Maori traditions of extended kinship and Christian traditions of the nuclear family. And Ashton Nichols discusses the often paradoxical interaction between Christian and tribal traditions in Chinua Achebe's novels; a Christian convert anathematises the python as an Igbo tribal totem, for example, only to resurrect the snake as the symbol of Satan incarnate. In yet another move, some post-colonial writings transport us further still from the ritual practices of European Christianity into religious worlds imagined in terms almost wholly other than the Christian. For example, Patrick Taylor finds revitalised West African ancestor ceremonies in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and George Lamming's *Season of Adventure*. Elsewhere, Brinda Bose's essay on Bharati Mukherjee's fiction identifies the Hindu goddesses Durga and Kali as sources of strength for Indian women in North America. Mukherjee's writings also seem to advance the intriguing notion of Hindu reincarnation as a metaphor for the changes of identity such emigration involves.

For all their differences of matter and method, these studies of post-colonial writings exemplify contemporary interdisciplinary work in literature and the history of religions. As these writings almost all make clear, however, European colonial and imperial hegemony begins with the invasive appropriation of physical land and material resources. Just as importantly for our purposes, post-colonial literatures also identify Christianity as all too often the religious and ethical handmaiden of this offensive process. Either explicitly, as the self-appointed ideology of British expansionism, or implicitly, as one hegemonic practice among many imported discourses of domination imposed upon an invaded cultural

landscape, Christian churches and Christian missionaries frequently helped to justify European hegemony. Furthermore, as post-colonial literatures also reveal, even where Christianity has consciously sided with the oppressed other, the colonial and imperial mandate has frequently prompted settler "cousins" to redefine their Christian values; has invariably entangled Native "subjects" in a painful refashioning of the inherited values infusing traditional ways of life; and has more often than not perpetuated the hierarchies of economic, social and political inequality implicated in the very differentiation of "cousins" from "subjects."⁴² In other words, themes of divine dispensation, dispossession and repossession – of the sacralisation, desacralisation and reclamation of land and landscape – permeate post-colonial literatures.

This observation brings me to Wesley A. Kort's agenda for new directions in the interdisciplinary study of religion and literature. Citing Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Kort writes of a "radical democratic politics" in which "the contingency of every authority is recognised, and the potential for opening society, redressing wrongs, and constructing new personal and group identities are correspondingly increased."⁴³ He concludes:

One of the functions or effects of narrative discourse is to make us aware of place and environment, and by so doing narrative can confirm us in our feeling at home in our places, justify our place, or provoke uneasiness about the places in which we find ourselves. The narrativisation of place and the role of place in narrative are indispensable, then, both to the nature of narrative as a recognisable and recurring kind of discourse and to its moral functions. At this ethical level "Religion and Literature" work can, among other things, expose the pretensions to place involved in our narratives, can question our proprietary postures, and counter claims of possession with contrary narratives.⁴⁴

By stressing the geographical over against the historical, the spatial over against the temporal, Kort intends to shift the emphasis of studies in religion and literature towards "critical practices of *dislodgement*," without which, he argues "narratives become fortified places, abiding cities."⁴⁵ But note the way in which he identifies this shift in emphasis with "the moral functions" of discourse.⁴⁶ For Kort, then, the narrativizing of space and place will help to redefine the ethical character of contemporary studies in

religion and literature. Post-colonial literatures, I have argued, work as sites of ethical reading and writing.

GEOGRAPHY, RELIGION, POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES:
TWO CASE STUDIES

Interdisciplinary studies in geography and religion, then, raise issues of value in our understanding of space and place. At the same time, interdisciplinary studies in religion and literature have begun to consider the narrativising of space and place as an essential aspect of ethical reading and writing. And both fields of study have come to recognise the culturally constructed nature of the sacred, and therefore of any ethics implied by a religious ideology. Post-colonial literatures, I am suggesting, offer significant resources for discussions of the meaning, truth and value of space and place in the context of the economic, social and political relations defining European colonialism and its legacy. These literatures are part of the local, regional and national processes by which these issues of vast historical movement and spatial scale are represented and evaluated. Two case studies will help, I hope, to validate this assertion.

First, I would like to enter the sacred geography of Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountain*.⁴⁷ Written in English, the novel tells the story of the Indian widow, Nanda Kaul. As mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, Nanda seems to have fulfilled the karmic requirements of a Hindu woman's *dharma*. As Shantha Krishnaswany explains, "[t]he Hindu social code concurs in this view in upholding motherhood as the most sacred function of the woman and regards feminine ambition external to the family as diseased."⁴⁸ A sort of female *samnyasin*, Nanda has retired to Kasauli, a village in the Himalayan foothills. Reflecting the old woman's spiritual *in medias res* – detached from worldly cares, but not yet released from the karmic cycle of *samsara* – her home, Carignano, sits neither on the peak nor in the plain:

[the windows] facing north opened out onto the blue waves of the Himalayas flowing out and up to the line of ice and snow sketched upon the sky, while those facing south

looked down the plunging cliff to the plain stretching out, flat and sere, to the blurred horizon.⁴⁹

Then Nanda's great-granddaughter, Raka, appears. The free-spirited child begins to coax the old woman out of herself. But this process abruptly ends when shock over the rape and murder of an old schoolfriend forces Nanda to face the truth. She has been lying to Raka. The colourful stories of her past are all lies: "All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication."⁵⁰ The novel closes ambiguously. Raka has set the forest ablaze, and Desai does not tell us whether or not Nanda survives the conflagration.

Now various scholars have read *Fire on the Mountain* in terms of western interpretive frameworks. Usha Pathania draws on the existential psychology of Abraham Maslow. Padmanabhan Nair and Paul Premila treat the novel as an existential quest for self-knowledge. K.J. Phillips compares the story to classical Greek tragedy, Nanda's deficient maternal instincts being the flaw of character which leads to violence and death. In their own way, these readings are useful. But I suggest we read *Fire on the Mountain* from a post-colonial Hindu perspective, specifically in terms of Hindu sacred geography.

Several geographical motifs offer interpretive clues. First, the history of Nanda's house, Carignano, embodies India's colonial past. Built by one Colonel MacDougall and later occupied by the pastor of Kasauli's only church, the house recalls the sword and the cross of empire. But with Nanda's post-colonial purchase of Carignano, writes Desai, "the little town has gone native."⁵¹ Secondly, a chemical factory, the Pasteur Institute, scars the landscape below the house. But Desai's description of western capitalism's self-sustaining cycle is almost samsaric: researchers make serums from dead animals for people bitten by rabid dogs; the corpses of the dead animals are dumped in ravines; jackals scavenge off the corpses, contract rabies, and bite domestic dogs; the dogs bite more people, who need the serum made from dead animals; and so on. In the ravines below the mountains, this cycle of worldly travail testifies to post-colonial India's complicity with economic neo-colonialism.⁵²

The mountains, of course, are the most important aspect of the novel's Hindu sacred geography. The name of Nanda Kaul provides us with our first access to these mountains. One of the titles of the Nehru family, "Kaul" betokens a line of Kashmiri pundits. Born into the *brahmin* caste, Nanda stands at the threshold of spiritual release from the karmic cycle of rebirth, of *moksha*. Of course, a woman is not normally expected to aspire to the spiritual peak of *samadhi*, which releases the soul from the body. But Nanda Kaul has retreated into a life of detachment. To strengthen Nanda's spiritual status as *samnyasin*, Desai the Hindu feminist recasts the four stages of the Hindu life-cycle in generational terms. In great-grandmother Nanda Kaul, *Fire on the Mountain* seems to offer us a woman who has fulfilled the sacred obligations of student, householder and forest-dweller. "Discharge me, she groaned. I've discharged all my duties. Discharge."⁵³

But the name "Nanda" itself takes us directly into Hindu sacred geography. Edwin Bernbaum reveals why:

In addition to the paradise she shares with Shiva on [Mount] Kailas, Parvati, the mountain daughter of Himalaya, has her abode on a number of other mountains, where she appears in various forms – some beautiful, some terrifying. As Nanda Devi, the "Goddess of Bliss," she dwells in beauty on the lovely peak of that name in the Himalayas northeast of Delhi, not far from the Nepalese border. The highest mountain in India outside the principality of Sikkim, Nanda Devi soars in alluring curves of rock ... above a ring of snow peaks that form a sanctuary protecting the goddess from all but her most determined admirers. The names of these peaks reflect their relationship to the deity they serve: Nanda Ghunti, "Nanda's Veil"; Nanda Kot, "Nanda's Fortress"; Nanda Khat, "Nanda's Bed."⁵⁴

Bernbaum goes on to describe various Hindu myths associated with Nanda Devi. The gorge of Rishi Ganga, a source of the sacred River Ganges, offers the only access to this ring of peaks. The gorge is named after seven sages now embodied in the heavens as the constellation we in the west variously call the Plough, the Great Bear, and so forth.⁵⁵ Another myth describes floods once covering the world. Like the biblical Noah, a sage called Manu built a great boat for his family and the remnants of all living creatures. Vishnu, the Preserver, took the form of a fish and towed the boat to the top of Nanda Devi. Manu, his family and the creatures survived to repopulate the earth.⁵⁶

Taken together, the cluster of Hindu myths thus defining the sacred geography of *Fire on the Mountain* invests the novel with a profoundly religious ethos. Like the mountain, the deity Nanda Devi usually presents a benevolent maternal demeanour. Sometimes, however, she takes the form of the warrior goddess, Durga, who commandeered “the power of all the gods, including Vishnu and Shiva, in order to slay a buffalo demon who was threatening the world.”⁵⁷ Sometimes, in other words, mothers must get violent to protect their offspring. This ambiguity of character, I suggest, provides the parameters within which we should understand Nanda Kaul at the close of *Fire on the Mountain*. From a western standpoint, the novel seems to end in tragic apocalypse; from a Hindu standpoint, yes, Nanda’s life has been wasted, but the final insight into the truth signifies redemption.

Let me elaborate. We do not need to make the “western” choice between Nanda’s survival or her death amidst the engulfing flames. Within the context of Hindu sacred geography, Nanda both dies and survives. As *samnyasin*, Nanda dies. Ironically, however, though she enters the Himalayan foothills as a false *samnyasin*, Nanda leaves them as a true one. Though her life has been a lie, she finally comes to admit this awful truth to herself. This admission constitutes real spiritual release, or *samadhi*. Thus possessed of the truth, Nanda survives – indeed, transcends merely human survival. Desai’s naming her character Nanda embodies the goddess in her. Of course, the deities are subject to the laws of *karma* and *samsara*, too. But shedding herself of the lies which constitute this bodily life, Nanda is who she ought to be: the goddess come home to her mountain palace. In Hindu feminist terms, Desai draws upon the sacred geography of Nanda Devi to illustrate women’s desire for a life which transcends the traditional *dharma* of wife and mother.⁵⁸

If my reading of the Hindu sacred geography of *Fire on the Mountain* focuses on issues of personal identity, my second case-study raises issues of communal identity. Philip McLaren’s *Sweet Water-Stolen Land* brings us home to post-colonial Australia, specifically to the question: What kind of Australia ought we to be building?⁵⁹ A post-modern blend of the historical and the fictional, *Sweet Water-Stolen Land* is set against the brutal backdrop

of the Myall Creek Massacre of Aboriginal men, women and children, in 1838. But McLaren moves these events ahead thirty years to the period of most aggressive Christian missionizing among the Aboriginals. This move permits him to introduce the figure of George Fife Angas. Angas's South Australian Company underwrote the colony of South Australia, and Angas personally bankrolled the first German Lutheran missionaries to the Aboriginals.⁶⁰ According to historian John Harris, Lutheran missionaries "each wore a silver medallion bearing a plough and an altar, with an ox between and the words inscribed on it 'Ready for either'."⁶¹ Spiritual guns for hire, Angas's Lutheran missionaries thus spearheaded British colonial efforts to Christianise the Aboriginal Australian landscape.

Sweet Water-Stolen Land explores the tension between these visions of Australian sacred geography by contrasting the fortunes of two families. Both families have come to the Warrumbungle Mountains, near Coonabarabran, New South Wales. On one side of Coonabarabran, German Lutherans, Karl and Gudrun Maresch, set up the Neuberg Mission, in the foothills of Mount Baraba; like the Bavarian village of Karl's boyhood, the mission is "methodical in its layout."⁶² On the other side of Coonabarabran, the Kamilaroi Aboriginals, Ginny and Wollumbuy, and their two sons, set up camp within the protective aura of "Old Belougerie, a massive sacred rock spire."⁶³ In this contrast of religious landscapes lies the history of encounter between the coloniser and the colonised.

McLaren complicates this picture with the introduction of Douglas Langton, an English painter with a Romantic sensibility for the beauty and sublimity of nature. Gudrun and Langton are immediately attracted to one another, an attraction soon consummated on a painting excursion past Coonabarabran to the sacred Belougerie. Meanwhile, the police have forced Ginny and Wollumbuy from their campsite because the place has been sold to settlers at government auction. As Gudrun and Langton invoke a Romantic love of nature to draw closer to one another at the sacred Belougerie, Ginny and Wollumbuy are robbed of the lands from which their people have gleaned a livelihood for thousands of years. Langton wonders whether his artistic skills really are "a gift from God" and ponders "[w]hat a

brilliant find for his art was this huge, dry, evergreen, unpainted, antipodean island";⁶⁴ Wollumbuy is confined within Karl's "mission-prison," seduced by "this science of food growing," because "[i]t gave him the sort of power that was usually reserved for the shaman."⁶⁵ These geographical contrasts mark conflicting European and Aboriginal views of community and spiritual values.

At this point, *Sweet Water-Stolen Land* takes on the character of a thriller. Helen and Brian Lumsden, a young settler couple, are found horribly murdered, the latest in a series of thirty or so such killings. Another sequence of events reveals that the missionary is the murderer. Threatened by her husband, Gudrun recognises in the Aboriginal *shaman*, Manduk, a figure she can trust, a figure "with a well-developed sense of place, a centre."⁶⁶ Manduk knows that Karl is the murderer, and when Gudrun seeks refuge in the bush with him, he explains to her that the Aboriginal artifacts found at all the murder scenes are not weapons of death but sacred sticks, spears for hunting small animals, and cooking utensils. Admitting she had once loved the missionary, Gudrun tries to explain his motivations to Manduk: "His mission is his dream. He couldn't sit idle, he could not fail his church."⁶⁷ But this weak rationalisation, ironically couched in oneiric rhetoric reminiscent of Aboriginal sacred Dreamtime, only enrages Manduk. The *shaman* determines to rid the land of the pollution now infecting it.

In a surreal scene, Manduk rings the Neuberg Mission in a purifying bushfire, as Karl is preparing a Sunday sermon. Clearly insane now, the missionary mounts the pulpit and quotes Proverbs 9:13. The verses speak of a foolish woman calling from her doorway to passers-by; they end:

And as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.
But he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell."⁶⁸

The missionary likens Australia to the foolish woman, and the life of European immigrants to life in hell. "Her land is so pure," he says, "We have eaten her bread in secret and her stolen water is ... so sweet."⁶⁹ The missionary's last words are, "Sweet water... Stolen land."⁷⁰ Fleeing the

Neuberg Mission, Manduk makes his escape to the sanctuary of Aboriginal sacred space. "After several hours," McLaren writes, "he lay exhausted on a flat part at the top of Belougerie Spire."⁷¹

Sweet Water-Stolen Land thus closes on a note at once admonitory and reassuring. The governing images of the mission station as prison camp and the sacred spire of Warrumbungle Belougerie implicate alternative views of community. Manduk's purge serves to remind us that European Christianity does not have a monopoly on justice, but Gudrun's survival expresses hope for the future. Freed of the missionary, Gudrun will continue her efforts to mediate between Europeans and Aboriginals with Langton, who will pursue on canvas his vision of the Australian landscape's grandeur. Ginny, left a widow by the Myall Creek Massacre, meets and marries a congenial Irish immigrant, Eugene Griffin. Strengthened by her suffering and supported by Eugene, she will continue her efforts to mediate between Aboriginals and Europeans. Towards the end of the novel, all four meet at a gathering of the Kamilaroi clans. The police arrive. All expect trouble. Instead, Ginny negotiates between the policemen and the tribal elders, and both sides sit down to parlay "in the dust" of the land they now share.⁷² In its broadest reach, *Sweet Water-Stolen Land* embodies a brave vision of a post-colonial Australia, of a shared land of interracial harmony and respect.

CONCLUSION

In their manifesto, our hosts, the Centre for Studies in Religion, Literature and the Arts, sum up their aims thus: "Our nation, at this point in its history, is in need of integrative ways of experiencing the world that can deepen the processes of reconciliation and open to the widest community a sense of the sacredness of the created world and its inhabitants."⁷³ I take this spirit of reconciliation and community to intend forms of ethical praxis. As I indicated at the start, for all its wealth of historical and textual exempla, Eliade's phenomenological method tends to talk of sacred space, sacred time, *homo religiosus* and so forth in essentialist terms, devoid of the diurnal

ambiguities of economic, social and political relations in which all individual spiritual experience and institutional religious life are inevitably implicated. Ethical issues arise out of these entanglements, and moral decisions rooted in personal and public religious experience always entail economic, social and political considerations.

This concern for the ethical in our contemplation of sacred space has encouraged my enthusiasm for post-colonial literatures. These writings frequently explore the very real economic, social and political relations defining and determining lands and landscapes as now sacred, now desacralised, now resacralised. Themes of divine dispensation, dispossession and reclamation preoccupy post-colonial literatures. Here, too, symbols, myths and motifs at once geographical and religious constantly engage us: creation; exile; pilgrimage; apocalypse; sacred mountains, rivers and groves; sacred and profane cities; totemic and taboo animals; sacred geometry and colour; the sacred cycle of the seasons; and so forth.

Often, titles seem to speak for themselves: from Canada, Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, or Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*; from the Caribbean, Wilson Harris's *Carnival* trilogy, or Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*; from India, R.K. Narayan's Malgudi novels, or Adam Zameenzad's *The Thirteenth House*; from Australia, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* or Mudrooroo's *Dr. Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*; from New Zealand, Janet Frame's *The Angel at My Table*, or Keri Hulme's *The Wendeater*; from the Africas, Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*, or Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, or T. Obinkaram Echewa's *The Land's Lord*; and so on. These and other post-colonial writings demand of any Eliadean sense of sacred space a corresponding sense of ethical responsibility to those places we occupy, as well as to those human and divine beings who once occupied the space we now occupy, who are reasserting the right to share that space once more, or who might even be taking militant or mystical steps to reclaim it as their own.

As I have tried to show in my case studies, entering the sacred geographies of post-colonial literatures offers one way of maintaining an

ethical dimension to contemporary reading and writing. In the simplest terms, my reading of Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* entails the ethics of personal identity; the novel raises and answers the question: What sort of person ought today's Hindu woman to be?⁷⁴ My reading of McLaren's *Fire on the Mountain*, on the other hand, raises and answers the question: What sort of community ought today's Australia to be?⁷⁵ As instances of narrative or descriptive ethics, these novels expose us to the precariousness of our own sacred contexts, the historical accident of our own sacred locations, and hence to a heightened awareness of the relativity of all locatedness, whether human or divine. Post-colonial writings thus offer concrete opportunities for us to discover in ourselves and in our neighbours that simultaneous presence of the seen and the unseen, of the material and the mysterious, which animates Eliade's sense of sacred space.

REFERENCES

1. For details of Eliade's various interests, see Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography*, 2 vols. trans Mac Linscott Ricketts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1988). As an aside, I might mention that our colleagues at Harvard University speak of the Comparative History of Religions, thanks to the methodological sophistications of the Canadian scholar, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who is himself not a figure to be trifled with. But that's another story.
2. These reflections on interdisciplinary studies in geography and religion draw extensively upon Lily Kong, "Geography and Religion: Trends and Prospects," *Progress in Human Geography* 14 (1990), 355-71.
3. Erich Isaac, "Religious Geography and the Geography of Religion," in *Man and the Earth* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1965), pp. 2-5.
4. Isaac, "Religious Geography," pp. 8-10.
5. In Kong's words, such rationalists considered that "the earth and its geography was too advantageous to life and too well reasoned to be accepted as fortuitous circumstances" (Kong, "Geography and Religion," 357).
6. Janel M. Curry-Roper, "Contemporary Christian Eschatologies and Their Relation to Environmental Stewardship," *Professional Geographer* 42 (1990), 157.
7. Isaac, "Religious Geography."
8. Denis Cosgrove, "Cultural Geography," in R.J. Johnston, ed., *The Dictionary of Human Geography: Second Edition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 86.
9. Aké Hultzrantz, "An Ecological Approach to Religion," *Ethnos* 31 (1966), 131-50.
10. Erich Isaac, "Religion, Landscape and Space," *Landscape* 10 (1959), 14; and Gregory J. Levine, "On the Geography of Religion," *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers, New Series* 11 (1986), 430.
11. Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of the Landscape," in J. Leighly, ed., *Land and Life: Selections from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 343.
12. Levine, "Geography of Religion," 431. On cemeteries in the United States, for example, see J.B. Jackson, who shows how changing cemetery landscapes at once reflect and express changing social and cultural values; monumental grave architecture celebrating heroic individualism has yielded to an emphasis on inspirational settings. In turn, this change in sensibility encourages religious and civil authorities to permit the use of cemeteries not just for burials, but for recreation areas and even wildlife sanctuaries amidst the urban sprawl (J.B. Jackson, "From Monument to Place," *Landscape* 17 [1967-68], 22-26).

13. James Duncan, "The Superorganic in American Cultural Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70 (1980), 181.
14. Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 18.
15. Kong, "Geography and Religion," 368.
16. Paul Fickeler, "Fundamental Questions in the Geography of Religions," in M. Mickesell and P. Wagner, eds., *Readings in Cultural Geography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 94-117.
17. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 34; and "Sacred Space: Exploration of an Idea," in K.W. Butzer, ed., *Dimensions of Human Geography: Essays on Some Familiar and Neglected Themes* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Geography Research Paper No. 186), pp. 84-99.
18. Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981) and *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976); and Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
19. David Harvey, "Monument and Myth," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69 (1979), 362-81.
20. Roger Friedland and Richard D. Hecht, "The Politics of Sacred Place: Jerusalem's Temple Mount/al-haram al-sharif," in Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds., *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. 21-62.
21. Kong, "Geography and Religion," 367.
22. Michel Foucault, "Questions on Geography," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 62-77.
23. Allan Pred, *Making Histories and Constructing Human Geographies: The Local Transformation of Practice, Power Relations, and Consciousness* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).
24. Peter Jackson, "Social Geography: Social Struggles and Spatial Strategies," *Progress in Human Geography* 12 (1988), 263-69. Compare feminist Gillian Rose's observation that not many cultural geographers have busied themselves with studies of the underdog (Gillian Rose, "The Cultural Politics of Place: Local Representation and Oppositional Discourse in Two Films," *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers, New Series* 19 [1994], 46-60).
25. By showing how renaming streets for local folk heroes and traditional gods reclaims sacred space from British colonial influence, for instance, James Duncan's study of Kandy, Sri Lanka, exemplifies this kind of geography of resistance (James Duncan, "Individual Action and Political Power: A Structuration Perspective," in R. J. Johnston, ed., *The Future of Geography* [London: Methuen, 1985]).
26. In a recent article on "giving moral form to the geographical imagination," James D. Proctor has asserted that "[v]alues ... have been noted for some time as much a part of geography as facts" (James D. Proctor, "Ethics in Geography: Giving Moral Form to the Geographical Imagination," *Area* 30 [1998], 8).
27. T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Essays Ancient and Modern* (Faber & Faber: London, 1936), p. 93.
28. David H. Hesla, "Religion and Literature: The Second Stage," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (1978), 186.

29. Jamie S. Scott, ed., *And the Birds Began to Sing: Religion and Literature in Post-Colonial Cultures* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi BV, 1996); and Susan VanZanten Gallagher, ed., *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994). Both collections draw variously upon cultural studies, post-colonial and literary theory, colonial and church mission history, anthropology and ethnography of religion, liberation theology, and related cognate disciplines and methodologies. Concentrating upon the legacy of the British colonial and imperial project, my own volume contains papers on new literatures in English from Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific, the Africas, the Caribbean and India, while Gallagher's includes essays on literatures writing back to colonial histories in Central and Latin America, the United States, the Middle East and the Africas.
30. Hesla, "Religion and Literature," 188.
31. Nathan A. Scott, *The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 210. See also, *The New Orpheus: Essays towards a Christian Poetic* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), where Scott advocates "a reconciliation between the modern arts and the church" (p. 167).
32. As Scott has put it, the Christian God speaks not only through scripture and the sacraments, "but also in all those intellectual and cultural forms which, as they arise out of man's [sic] deepest encounter with his world and his own humanity, are stamped by a self-authenticating genuineness and relevance" (Nathan A. Scott, *Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968], p. 13). Trevor James's paper on J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* adopts this approach, too. James construes the pervasive presence of torture in this South African novel as a violation of the Christian doctrine of *imago dei*; such offenses deny the human reality of the other (Trevor James, "Locating the Sacred: J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," in Scott, ed., *And the Birds Began to Sing*, pp. 141-50).
33. Scott, *The Broken Center*, p. 199.
34. Theodore Ziolkowski, "Religion and Literature in a Secular Age: The Critic's Dilemma," *The Journal of Religion* 59 (1979), 18-34.
35. Ziolkowski, "Critic's Dilemma," 33.
36. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
37. Norman R. Cary, "Comrade Jesus: Postcolonial Literature and the Story of Christ," in Susan VanZanten Gallagher, ed., *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 169-82. Compare the methodology of Oliver Lovesey's essay, which explores Ngugi's use of Bunyanesque allegory to infuse nationalist Mau Mau narratives of independence with a sense of biblical prophecy (Oliver Lovesey, "The Post-Colonial 'Crisis of Representation' and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Religious Allegory," in Scott, ed., *And the Bird Began to Sing*, pp. 181-90).
38. Hesla, "Religion and Literature," 189.
39. *ibid.*
40. *ibid.*, 190.
41. Mary Gerhart, "Dialogical Fields in Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (1994), 1000.
42. Arun Mukherjee, "Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Post-Modernism?" *World Literature Written in English* 30 (1990), 2.
43. Wesley A. Kort, "'Religion and Literature' in Postmodernist Contexts," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990): 577. Kort cites Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1987).
44. Kort, "Religion and Literature," 582.
45. *Ibid.*, 584 (emphasis in the original).
46. Compare Jasper's observation that today studies in religion and literature must be predicated upon the conviction, articulated at once more explicitly and less self-assuredly than hitherto, "that our fundamental questions whether within or outside the Christian tradition are *theological*" (Jasper, "Study of Literature and Theology," 10; emphasis in the original).

47. Desai's biography makes her a suitable candidate for our consideration. Her father was Bengali, her mother German. Set in modern, urban India, her novels *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody* were shortlisted for the English Booker Prize. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, Desai serves on the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi. A writer of international repute, she is the married mother of four children. Influenced by British colonial and South Asian traditions, she now divides her time between Massachusetts and New Delhi. In other words, Desai's Indo-Anglian identity exemplifies the sort of biographical hybridity we have come to associate with the term "post-colonial." *Fire on the Mountain* reflects these various influences.
48. Shanta Krishnaswamy, *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English* (Ashish Publishing House: New Delhi, 1984), p. 251.
49. Anita Desai, *Fire on the Mountain* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 4.
50. *ibid.*, p. 145.
51. *ibid.*, p. 10.
52. In another vein, as a neo-colonial instance of the Protestant spirit of capitalism, the factory threatens the communal values of Hindu tradition in the novel, a perspective which introduces the ironical prospect of Christianity acting as a secularizing force in the Hindu religious environment.
53. Desai, *Fire on the Mountain*, p. 30.
54. Edwin Bernbaum, *Sacred Mountains of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 15.
55. *ibid.*, p. 15.
56. *ibid.*, p. 17.
57. *ibid.*, p. 15.
58. Even construed in Hindu terms, however, Desai's feminism poses problems. A Sikh rapes and murders Ila Das because the old woman has been trying to prevent him from marrying off his twelve-year-old daughter. A Hindu priest supports the marriage. Referring to this priest, Chelva Kanaganayakam identifies an ambivalence towards the religious in Desai's novels (Chelva Kanaganayakam, "Widows, Priests and Erring Householders," in Scott, ed., *And the Birds Began to Sing*, p. 274). My reading of the novel's sacred geography, however, suggests a more positive, if revisionary use of Hindu religious iconography. As Hindu feminist, Desai exposes the complicity of the Hindu religious establishment in the hegemonic structures of indigenous patriarchy and exogenous colonialism. The power of Nanda Devi transcends this establishment. Raka, whose name means "moon," embodies the extension of this desire into a possible reincarnation of those qualities of life Nanda Kaul is unable to achieve in her present life, despite her being of the *brahmin* caste. But the sacrifice of Ila Das, whose name means "servant," on the altar of Nanda Kaul's self-transcendence merely seems to recapitulate caste hierarchy among women.
59. Like Desai, Philip McLaren embodies the sort of hybrid biography we have come to associate with the post-colonial. Born in Sydney, he is a descendant of the Kamilaroi Aboriginals from the Warrumbungle Mountain region of New South Wales, Australia. His fiction is fiercely revisionist of Aboriginal Australian history, but McLaren has worked for international corporations in television and advertising. Once part of a design team for a Royal Command Performance for Queen Elizabeth II at the Sydney Opera House, McLaren reveals in *Sweet Water-Stolen Land* that the Aboriginal heroine, Ginny Griffin, was in fact his great-great-grandmother (*Sweet Water-Stolen Land* [St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993], p. viii).
60. Citing Angas, McLaren describes how the Lutherans established "missions to 'enable Aborigines to come to where they might worship God and at the same time bind them to the missions as tenant farmers for a mandatory thirty years'" (*Sweet Water-Stolen Land*, p. 6 [emphasis in the original]).
61. John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1994), p. 109.
62. McLaren, *Sweet Water-Stolen Land*, p. 7.
63. *ibid.*, p. 3.
64. *ibid.*, pp. 59, 90.

65. *ibid.*, pp. 82, 72. Gudrun later reiterates this image of the mission: "We are custodians of a British prison camp," she tells Karl, "Yes, that is what we are" (*ibid.*, p. 149).
66. *ibid.*, p. 162.
67. *ibid.*, p. 170.
68. *ibid.*, p. 195.
69. *ibid.*
70. *ibid.*
71. *ibid.*, p. 196.
72. *ibid.*, p. 193.
73. See the website: <http://www.acu.edu.au/rla/index.htm>.
74. In Benita Parry's words, Desai's biography of Nanda Kaul articulates "the role of the native as historical subject and combatant, possessor of an-other knowledge and producer of alternative traditions" (Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review* 9 [1987], p. 34).
75. In Arun Mukherjee's words, McLaren's novel instantiates issues of "institutional exploitation, caste and class domination, and economic and political neo-colonialism, issues which cannot be resolved at the individual level through a personal growth in maturity" (Arun Mukherjee, *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays on Literary Criticism and Cultural Imperialism* [Toronto: Williams-Wallace Publishers, 1988], p. 15).