MAKING SENSE OF SACRED SPACE IN THE CITY?

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For some years now I have been trying to develop ‘a theology of everyday life’.1 As a feminist systematic theologian I am convinced that in our contemporary situation we need a style or form of theological reflection that is firmly rooted in everyday life and practice, rather than exclusively in the theoretical traditions, ideas and views that accompany these practices (Haardt 2002; 2004; Isasi-Diaz 1996; Pilario 2005). To carry out this program and to overcome purely abstract models of reflection we have to start in concrete places, thus honouring the insight that all knowledge is embodied in gender and context. For that reason I have earlier looked at ‘everyday practices’, exploring the theological relevance of food and eating and of gardening, for example, and followed the activities of a Catholic women’s organization, looking for the religious dimensions in their social work (see Haardt 2002). All this and my interest in contemporary reflections on ‘the divine’ have brought me to explore further what I have thus far called ‘a sense of presence’ or ‘a sense of wonder’, i.e. a kind of sensibility that, according to the French cultural theorist and historian Michel de Certeau, ‘allow[es] people to stay alive’, and which can be found only by looking at the actual places where people live their lives from day to day (Certeau, Giard and Mayol 1998). De Certeau used the by now famous and often quoted image of standing on top of the World Trade Centre, surveying the city from above and getting the bird’s eye view that shows the city as a well-organized, structured whole. This view is the perspective of the city cartographers, and he contrasted this with the experiences of those who live in the city and walk the streets—the diverse, fragmented city life unseen by the cartographers (Certeau 1984: 91–3).2

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1 I am fully aware of the problematic character of the phrase ‘everyday life’. I use it here as a ‘shorthand for voices from “below”: women, children, migrants and so on’ (Highmore 2002: 1) and as such it is intended as a critical term, making visible the invisible and a challenge to use new ways of thinking and new ways of perceiving.

2 As stated, this quote is famous and is often used, also in spatial and urban theory. Massey, however, points out the ironic fact that de Certeau, in trying to overcome
In this approach everyday life is the centre and starting point for theological reflection. The quest for actual places and the methodological questions of where and how to find as well as describe them as a theologian has recently led me to those geographers and cultural theorists for whom place and space are central in their thinking. Feminism, with its emphasis on everyday life, also emphasized the importance of ‘place’ and ‘space’. Here we only have to think of Adriane Rich’s famous article ‘Notes towards a Politics of Location’ (1986), or Mary Daly’s relentless insistence on the importance of Women’s Space (2006). But this had not led feminists in religious studies to spatial or geographical theory until very recently. For me, the discovery of a different and, in a sense, ‘new’ discipline was a kind of revelation—‘making space for place’ seemed to open up a new and promising means of theological reflection (Haardt 2006). And it was via spatial theory that the city came into focus. Before going into the theory, let me start with some ‘lived experiences’ of the city.

At this moment there are about 300,000 foreign domestic workers living and working in Hong Kong, half of whom come from the Philippines. These women experience various kinds of oppression due to differences in physical, social and human geography, as well as in political and religio-cultural beliefs and practices. These differences are tied up with racial, ethnic and gender identities in Hong Kong as well as in the Philippines. Gemma Cruz, in her wonderful study of the theological implications of migration exemplified by this group of Filipina domestic helpers, describes the different but nevertheless interwoven strategies of submission, accommodation and resistance to which these women resort in order to deal with their situation as foreign domestic workers. These strategies are political, economic and religio-cultural, and public as well as private in nature (Cruz 2006).

The distinction commonly applied between submission and resistance does not adequately characterize the specific situation and the often intelligent and creative strategies used by this group of domestic workers. These women often choose a third way, i.e. accommodation—neither accepting the oppression nor contesting it. Within these three modes religion is an important part of this struggle. For these women oppositions such as theory-praxis, elite-popular, mastery-resistance, space-time in his move from summit to street actually reinstates what he aims to overcome (see Massey 2005).