



SACRED SPACES IN MATTHEAN CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Sacred spaces shape religious identity and communal practices in both Matthean Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR), serving as dynamic sites of power, meaning, and collective memory. In Matthew's Gospel, spaces like the Temple, wilderness, and synagogues function as arenas of divine encounter and ideological contestation, where Jesus redefines sacredness in opposition to religious authorities. The Temple represents religious and political authority, the wilderness signifies testing and revelation, and synagogues act as centres for teaching and doctrinal conflict. In contrast, ATR situates sacred spaces within natural landscapes such as groves and shrines, anchoring ancestral veneration, cultural continuity, and social cohesion in a worldview that perceives the divine as immanent in nature. Using Crossan's socio-historical criticism and Mbiti's cultural criticism, this study examines how these spaces are constructed, contested, and transformed within their socio-religious contexts. The analysis reveals that while both traditions use sacred spaces for communal rituals, their conceptual foundations diverge—Matthean sacredness is often institutionalised, whereas ATR emphasizes organic, natural sacredness. By highlighting these similarities and differences, this study fosters interreligious dialogue and a deeper understanding of how sacred spaces function across traditions. It further calls for research into how colonialism and globalization have reshaped these spaces, arguing that sacred sites are not static but evolve as expressions of cultural negotiation and spiritual resilience.

Keywords: Sacred space, religious identity, Matthean Christianity, African Traditional Religion (ATR), socio-religious context

Introduction

Sacred spaces have historically served as intersections of the divine and human, shaping religious experiences while mirroring socio-political dynamics (Eliade 1959; Smith



1987). This study compares Matthean Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) to explore how sacred spaces operate as sites of meaning-making, power negotiation, and cultural continuity. While Jesus' actions in the Jerusalem Temple (Matt 21:12-17) may seem distant from Akan sacred groves, both illustrate how religious groups shape and contest sacred space (Crossan 1991; Mbiti 1990).

This comparison bridges the gap between biblical studies and African religious anthropology (Olupona 2011). Although the Temple's role in Second Temple Judaism has been well-studied (Sanders 1992) and African land rituals documented (Oduyoye 1995), few studies examine how both traditions sacralise space in structurally similar ways. Rather than theological differences, this study highlights how sacred spaces foster political resistance, environmental ethics, and cultural memory (Chidester and Linenthal 1995; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Grillo 2016).

Using socio-historical criticism and cultural analysis (Crossan 1991; Mbiti 1990), the study reads Matthew's account of Jesus challenging Roman and Jewish authorities (Carter 2000) alongside ATR's understanding of shrines as communal symbols. Despite distinct theologies, both traditions depict sacred spaces as contested sites where communities engage power, memory, and ecology.

These insights have broader relevance. In today's ecological and cultural crises, traditions like the Akan's *asaase yaa* and Igbo *ala* offer ecological models that align with Jesus' teachings on creation care (Matt 6:26-30), suggesting dialogue between indigenous and Christian environmental theologies (Oduyoye 1995, 88-92; Deane-Drummond 2008). Similarly, early Christians' move from Temple to house churches post-70 CE parallels



ATR's adaptive responses to colonial suppression (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 145; Horsley 2014).

In conclusion, sacred spaces in both first-century Palestine and modern Africa are not static locales but dynamic, evolving realities. They serve as means for communities to assert spiritual and cultural identity amid changing contexts. Juxtaposing these traditions reveals shared human efforts to locate the sacred within lived environments.

Literature Review

The study of sacred spaces has garnered significant scholarly interest across theology, anthropology, and postcolonial studies. However, comparative engagement between Matthean Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) sacred geographies remains methodologically thin and conceptually fragmented. This review critically evaluates three interrelated domains—Christian sacred spaces, ATR sacred spaces, and comparative sacred spatiality—highlighting their contributions, limitations, and the theoretical and empirical gaps this study seeks to address.

Sacred Spaces in Matthew: Theological and Socio-Historical Perspectives

Matthean sacred space has been predominantly approached through theological and socio-historical lenses. Foundational studies emphasize the centrality of the Jerusalem Temple as a focal point of Jewish identity (Sanders 1992), but also recognise Matthew's repositioning of holiness through Jesus' ministry, where sacredness is fulfilled and transcended (Allison 2005). The Gospel reorients spiritual geography from fixed sacred institutions to dynamic, embodied spaces of discipleship. Notably, Carter (2000) and Myers (1988) reinterpret the wilderness and synagogues not merely as physical locales,



but as politicised zones of resistance against Roman and Temple-centric authority.

Socio-historical scholars such as Crossan (1991) argue that Jesus deliberately employed liminal spaces—homes, hillsides, and roads—to deconstruct institutional hegemony, while Smith (1987) insists that it is ritual performance, not innate sanctity, that renders space sacred. These contributions, while illuminating, are largely confined to Greco-Roman contexts, neglecting the relevance of non-Western spatial epistemologies, including African Christian expressions.

Liberationist and postcolonial theologians offer further nuance. Tamez (1982) reads Jesus' Temple action as resistance to economic injustice, while Sugirtharajah (2002) critiques the imperialist co-optation of biblical sacred imagery. Yet, these critical perspectives often operate at the hermeneutical level, without corresponding ethnographic attention to lived Christian spatial practices, revealing the need for more interdisciplinary approaches that integrate ritual theory, ethnography, and comparative theology.

Sacred Spaces in ATR: Anthropological and Postcolonial Insights

Anthropological and religious studies on ATR sacred spaces have laid important groundwork in understanding the sacralisation of natural environments. Foundational thinkers such as Mbiti (1969) and Idowu (1962) argue that ATR spatiality reflects cosmological configurations—groves, rivers, and shrines as points of divine-human encounter (Mbiti, 1990; Idowu, 1973). Olupona (2011) advances this by showing that Yoruba sacred groves are not only religious centres but also act as ecological sanctuaries and socio-cultural institutions. Similarly, Asamoah (2007) views Ghanaian shrines as sites of collective memory and ancestral identity.



Despite these contributions, most studies remain ethnographically bounded, focusing on specific ethnic or regional expressions. The absence of comparative theological dialogue with Christianity limits the broader implications of ATR spatial epistemologies. Postcolonial critiques, such as those by Chidester (1996), trace the colonial erasure and replacement of indigenous sacred sites with mission infrastructure, while Oduyoye (1995) documents the gendered resistance through secret sacred spaces preserved by Akan women. However, such studies often frame sacred space in terms of binary oppression and resistance, insufficiently engaging the hybrid, syncretic, and negotiated forms of sacred spatiality that have emerged post-colonially.

Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Sacred Geography

The comparative study of sacred space between Christianity and ATR remains a significant lacuna in existing scholarship. While Isichei (1995) gestures at historical parallels, her analysis lacks the theoretical scaffolding necessary for deep spatial critique. Similarly, Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) provides valuable insights into Pentecostal sacred spatialities, such as prayer camps and open-air revivals, but stops short of extending these findings into comparative or postcolonial frameworks.

Three enduring gaps emerge. First, the literature privileges theological divergence over functional or ritual similarity, missing how both traditions produce sacredness through ritual and performance. Second, there is a striking neglect of materiality and embodiment in sacred space studies, despite ample evidence of the significance of tactile, natural, and sensory dimensions. Third, little attention is paid to historical transformations of sacred space—how it is reconfigured through colonialism, migration, and technological



mediation.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a robust interdisciplinary methodology, incorporating biblical exegesis, ethnographic fieldwork, ritual theory, and postcolonial spatial analysis. It builds on Lefebvre's (1991) triadic model of conceived, perceived, and lived space to understand sacred geography as both discursively constructed and ritually enacted. Methodological synergy is achieved through Cox's (2007) integration of ethnography with theology, and Smith's (1987) theory of ritual as spatial performance. This framework allows for a critical reconceptualisation of sacred space as contested, dynamic, and performative, whether in Jesus' Temple action (Matt. 21:12–17) or ATR shrine restorations (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). Matthew's Great Commission is thus read as a spatial act of discipleship (Carter 2000), while ATR groves represent "topographic spirituality"—natural sites as cosmological archives (Olupona 2011). These approaches also uncover deep ecological and theological convergences, such as between ATR's environmental ethics and biblical creation care (Deane-Drummond 2008), or Hebrews 12:1 and ATR ancestor veneration (Bediako 1995).

Emerging developments in digital sacred space—including online Pentecostal "prayer mountains" and ATR virtual shrines (Adogame 2013)—signal new modalities of spatial adaptation. Likewise, diasporic phenomena such as Yoruba shrine preservation in Brooklyn reveal "devotional remapping" that maintains ancestral continuity (Clarke 2004). These case studies necessitate new methodological tools such as digital ethnography, participatory GIS mapping (Asamoah 2007), and multimedia archival co-creation (UNESCO 2020).



Ultimately, this study offers three original contributions to scholarship on sacred space:

(1) a cross-cultural analytic model that transcends doctrinal boundaries; (2) renewed emphasis on the embodied, material, and ecological dimensions of sacred geography; and (3) critical historical sensitivity to the transformative processes shaping sacred space in both traditions. These contributions aim to enrich religious studies theory, advance comparative methodologies, and promote interfaith engagement by revealing how sacred space functions as a shared site of ritual, resistance, and renewal.

Conceptual Framework Understanding Sacred Spaces

The study of sacred spaces demands a robust theoretical foundation that accounts for their religious, cultural, and socio-political dimensions. This section establishes a conceptual framework by engaging with key theoretical perspectives—from Mircea Eliade's phenomenological distinction between the sacred and profane to contemporary socio-cultural theories of space as a constructed and contested reality. By synthesising these approaches, this research develops an interdisciplinary model for analysing sacred spaces in Matthean Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR).

Definitions and Theoretical Perspectives

Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) distinguishes sacred from profane space, defining the former as a site of hierophany, where the divine manifests (Eliade 1959). Such spaces, including temples or mountains, are divinely "revealed," not arbitrarily chosen (26). His *axis mundi* concept—a vertical link between heaven and earth—explains spatial hierarchies across traditions, from the Jerusalem Temple to African sacred groves.



However, Eliade's essentialism is critiqued by Smith (1987), who asserts that sacred space is constructed through ritual. Chidester (1996) furthers this critique, revealing how sacred spaces are also political tools, shaped through colonial power.

Three contemporary perspectives expand the discourse:

- Victor Turner's liminality frames sacred space as a transitional zone for transformation, such as in pilgrimages or initiation rites (Turner 1969).
- Emile Durkheim sees sacred space as reinforcing group identity (Durkheim 1995).
- Henri Lefebvre argues space is historically and socially produced, reflecting ideological power (Lefebvre 1991, 35).

Together, these approaches recast sacred space as dynamic and contested—useful for interpreting both Jesus' Temple protest (Matt 21:12–17) and colonial reshaping of indigenous shrines. Sacred space becomes an interdisciplinary lens for examining religious, social, and political realities.

Sacred Spaces as Cultural and Social Constructs

Sacred spaces are active cultural constructs, encoding memory, identity, and power. The Jerusalem Temple shaped Jewish national identity (Luz 2001), while ATR's ancestral shrines rooted territorial and familial belonging (Olupona 2011). Jesus' redefinition of Temple authority (Matt 12:6) parallels ATR adaptations of sacred landscapes during colonial upheaval.

Sacredness emerges through embodied, repetitive practice. Bourdieu's habitus (1977) explains how ritual transforms space. Early Christians sanctified homes (Osiek 1996),



and ATR rituals like libation and dance similarly enact the sacred (Asamoah 2007).

Such spaces also reflect power dynamics. Jesus' Temple protest foregrounds ethical over ritual holiness (Carter 2000), while ATR shrines became sites of resistance to colonial suppression (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). Lefebvre's triad—conceived (myth/theology), perceived (routes/sites), and lived (ritual use)—shows sacred space as multilayered, shaped by memory, doctrine, and practice. This dismantles rigid sacred/profane binaries and reveals sacred space as a lived and negotiated reality.

Toward an Integrated Understanding of Sacred Space

A robust understanding of sacred space requires a multidimensional approach. Eliade's idea of divine manifestation (1959) offers a phenomenological base but must be expanded. Lefebvre's spatial theory (1991) reframes sacred space as historically produced and contested, often shaped by political and religious struggles. Crossan (1991) shows how early Christians redefined sacred geography to challenge dominant systems.

The cultural-performative dimension, seen in Turner's liminality (1969) and Mbiti's focus on embodied ATR ritual (Mbiti 1990, 45–50), emphasizes sacred space as lived and experienced. This tripartite model—phenomenological, socio-historical, and performative—reveals sacred space as dynamic (constantly reinterpreted), contested (subject to power struggles), and embodied (enacted through ritual and memory).

Such an integrated approach enhances comparative religious studies by explaining both the evolving role of the Jerusalem Temple in Matthew and the resilience of ATR sacred groves. It transcends static binaries and recognises sacred space as a vital and adaptive expression of belief, identity, and resistance.



Sacred Spaces in Matthean Christianity: A Theological and Socio-Historical Analysis

The Gospel of Matthew reconfigures sacred space, engaging with and subverting Jewish and Roman spatial paradigms. This section examines three key spaces—Temple, wilderness, and domestic/synagogue settings. It highlights their socio-historical significance and theological reinterpretation through Jesus’ ministry. By situating these spaces within their first-century Jewish context and Matthew’s theological agenda, it reveals how early Christian communities reshaped sacred geography, challenging religious authority while establishing new frameworks for divine encounter.

The Temple in Matthew: Authority, Conflict, and Reinterpretation

The Jerusalem Temple in Matthew represents both Jewish identity and Roman dominance. Jesus’ actions disrupt this dual authority. Horsley (2003) notes that Jesus’ attack on the Temple’s economy challenged both the priesthood and Roman patrons. While Sanders (1992) affirms the Temple’s centrality to Jewish life, Matthew presents Jesus as both revering and critiquing it.

Three major episodes develop this tension. First, the Temple Cleansing (21:12–17) becomes an eschatological act of judgment. Citing Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, Jesus indicts the Temple’s corruption. Matthew uniquely adds healings (21:14), reframing the Temple as a place for inclusive worship (Luz 2005).

Second, Jesus prophesies the Temple’s destruction (24:1–2), critiquing the cultic system as incompatible with his mission (Carter 2000). Third, the veil tearing at his death (Matt 27:51) symbolically removes barriers to divine presence (Nolland 2005). These events shift sacred significance from the Temple to the messianic community.



The Wilderness in Matthew: Testing and Revelation

Matthew recasts the wilderness as a theological crucible that both tests and reveals Jesus' identity. The 40-day fast (4:1–11) recalls Israel's desert trial (Deut 8:2–3). By resisting temptation, Jesus becomes the faithful Israel (Davies & Allison 1988).

The wilderness also aligns with prophetic preparation, echoing John the Baptist (3:1–3) and Isaiah's vision of renewal (France 2007). It serves not as desolation, but as a site of divine preparation.

Matthew uniquely ends the temptation with angelic ministry (4:11), turning the wilderness into a cosmic battleground and place of divine affirmation (Keener 1999). Allison (1993) calls it a liminal space, where identity is both contested and revealed. This portrayal extends to discipleship as a spiritual wilderness journey, marked by trials and divine sustenance.

Redefining Sacred Space in Matthew: From Synagogues to Households

Matthew transforms sacred space from public institutions to personal and communal settings. Jesus critiques ostentatious synagogue prayer, urging private devotion (Matt 6:5–6). While not rejecting synagogue worship outright, Betz (1995) sees this as a call to authentic communion with God.

This shift culminates in the sanctification of homes. Jesus instructs disciples to enter and bless homes (Matt 10:11–14) and promises his presence among small gatherings (Matt 18:20). Osiek (1996) links this to early Christians' exclusion from synagogues, leading to the domestication of sacred space. Thus, Matthew reimagines holiness as decentralised and communal, found wherever believers gather in sincerity.



Jesus' Subversion of Sacred Geography and the Birth of a New Spatial Theology in

Matthew

Jesus' ministry reconfigures sacred geography, dismantling old paradigms and introducing new ones. His itinerant lifestyle challenged Temple-centred worship (Freyne 2004), while healing the marginalised within Temple grounds (21:14) transgressed purity laws (Chilton 1992). Declaring himself "greater than the Temple" (12:6), Jesus relocates sacred presence in his person (Wright 1996,).

This spatial reorientation unfolds in three shifts:

1. The Sermon on the Mount redefines holiness through ethical conduct (Stassen 2006).
2. Divine presence among "two or three" gathered believers (18:20) democratises sacred space (Wilkins 1995).
3. The prophecy of Temple destruction (24:2) points to worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23), unbound from geography (Harrington 1991).

Smith (1987) sees Matthew's Gospel as a "rectification of categories," deconstructing Temple worship and establishing the Jesus community as the new cosmological centre. This spatial theology equipped early Christianity for its post-Temple, global expansion, redefining sacredness in relational and ethical terms.

Sacred Spaces in African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Sacred spaces in African Traditional Religion (ATR) constitute complex cosmological, social, and political landscapes that mediate relationships between the human, natural,



and spiritual worlds. This section examines the key sacred spaces in ATR within their socio-historical contexts. These spaces may include groves, shrines, and natural sites. The study further interrogates how indigenous cosmologies have adapted to colonial and postcolonial pressures while maintaining vital cultural functions (Mbiti 1990; Olupona 2011).

Sacred Spaces in ATR: Nature, Architecture, and Ancestral Presence

ATR constructs a sacred geography where nature, built shrines, and ancestral memory converge. Central to this are sacred groves—Nkang (Akan) or Igbo-ilo (Yoruba)—which function as ecological sanctuaries and spiritual power centres. Mbiti (1990) notes these groves are preserved by taboos, safeguarding biodiversity, and sacred energy. Rivers like the Osun and peaks like Mount Kenya are viewed as divine embodiments (Olupona 2011). Shrine architecture embodies cosmology. Asamoah (2007) shows how shrine design—materials, orientations, carvings—encode spiritual meaning. Meanwhile, ancestral veneration turns graves and lineage shrines (e.g., *nsamanpow*) into active portals between realms (Olupona 2011). Festivals like the Yoruba Odun Egungun (Idowu 1962) briefly transfigure entire villages into sacred space, reinforcing ATR's interactive sacred geography.

Sacred Landscapes in Flux: The Socio-Historical Dynamics of ATR

ATR's sacred spaces arise from cosmologies that unite spirituality with nature. Earth is a divine trust, with spirits guarding specific regions (Idowu 1973, 65–70). Oduyoye (1995, 88–92) highlights ATR's "sacred ecology", where groves and rivers are protected as sources of life. The Akan concept of *asaase yaa* frames land as communal, with rituals



like Nkabom promoting harmony (Gyekye 1996, 102–105).

Colonialism disrupted this system, replacing shrines with churches (e.g., Posuban sites in Ghana, Chidester 1996) and alienating land through new tenure laws (Chanock 1985). These changes desecrated space and shattered cosmological structures.

Yet, ATR shows adaptive resilience. Ghana's Afrikania Mission reclaims sacred groves (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005), while syncretic shrines blending nkisi and Christian symbols reveal evolving identities (Meyer 1999). ATR thus reconfigures sacred space to sustain continuity amid historical change.

Sacred Spaces as Living Institutions: Cultural Memory and Social Governance in African Traditional Religion

ATR's sacred sites act as dynamic institutions preserving identity and regulating society. Sacred groves among the Dagara serve as bush schools during initiation, embedding youth in clan history (Somé 1994). These sites anchor collective memory in the land (Riesman 1992).

They also govern society. Ghana's Okomfo Anokye Sword Site serves as a spiritual court (Wilks 1993, 210–213), and healing groves offer both medicinal and spiritual remedies (Ngubane 1977).

Political legitimacy is often rooted in sacred geography. In Benin, the Oba palace is both a seat of governance and ancestral shrine (Ekeh 1975). This fusion of cosmological and social order reflects ATR's holistic social vision.

Sacred Spaces as Radical Epistemologies: ATR's Challenge to Modernity

ATR's view of sacred space challenges Western binaries like nature/culture and secular/sacred. Ramose (1999) explains how ubuntu philosophy sees land as a living,



participatory agent. Sacred groves, as both spiritual and ecological spaces, reject modern notions of land as mere resource.

Such sites act as zones of resistance—protecting ecosystems and preserving indigenous knowledge (Scott 2009). A tree might be spared not for conservation, but because it houses an ancestor. This reflects what Escobar calls an “ontological alternative” to modern paradigms.

By linking spirituality, ecology, and identity, ATR offers a lived critique of capitalist modernity. Strengthening traditional custodianship systems may better serve African environmental futures than imported models disconnected from local cosmologies.

Comparative Analysis: Sacred Spaces in Matthean Christianity and African Traditional Religion

This section examines sacred spaces in Matthean Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR), revealing both convergences and divergences in their spatial ontologies, ritual practices, and political contestations. Using Jonathan Z. Smith’s “rectification” model and postcolonial spatial theory, the study moves beyond superficial comparisons to uncover deeper structural parallels and irreducible differences.

Sacred Space in Transition: Convergences Between Matthew and African Traditional Religion

Both the Gospel of Matthew and African Traditional Religion (ATR) reinterpret sacred space as dynamic and evolving, especially in response to disruption. In Matthew 24:1–2, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, shifting the sacred from a physical structure to relational presence among believers (*ekklesia*) (Matthew 18:20; Carter 2000). Similarly, ATR regards sacred groves and shrines not as fixed monuments, but as ritual spaces continually activated through practice, such as the Yoruba *ebo* sacrifices (Olupona



2011). In both traditions, sacred space also becomes a medium for resistance and justice. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (21:12–17) is a critique of religious exploitation. This parallels the *Dagara* priests' role in community arbitration and justice rituals (Somé 1994, 89–93). Both traditions demonstrate resilience: early Christians regrouped into house churches after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and ATR communities reclaimed or reimagined shrines following colonial disruptions (Chidester 2014).

Furthermore, sacred space in both Matthew and ATR is performative defined by ritual action and presence rather than geography. For Matthew, sacrality is centred in Christ's presence; for ATR, it resides in land-based, ancestral continuity. While both traditions challenge spatial hierarchies, they diverge in their theological centre: universal Christology in Matthew versus localized ancestral presence in ATR.

Divergent Visions of Sacred Space: Temporal and Ontological Contrasts Between Matthew and African Traditional Religion

Contrasting Ontologies: Teleology vs. Ecology: Matthew and ATR hold distinct ontological views of sacred space. Matthew presents a teleological framework, where the physical Temple gives way to Christ as the ultimate locus of holiness (Matthew 12:6; Wright 1996). ATR, in contrast, maintains a sacred ecology—where rivers, forests, and mountains are permanently indwelt by spirits and retain their sacred character indefinitely (Mbiti 1990).

Different Conceptions of Time: Linear vs. Cyclical: Temporality is another key contrast. Matthew operates within a linear, eschatological timeline—the Temple's destruction marks a turning point in salvation history (Sanders 1993). ATR embraces a layered and



cyclical temporality, where sacred sites like the Osun River hold multiple historical, spiritual, and ecological meanings simultaneously (Meyer 1999). This simultaneity is foreign to Matthew's paradigm of prophetic fulfilment.

Responses to Violation: Transfer vs. Restoration: These theological differences shape each tradition's response to desecration. In Matthew, holiness is transferred to the community of believers. In ATR, sacred sites are ritually rehabilitated and reactivated. Thus, Matthew reflects a theology of replacement, while ATR represents a practice of restoration. Yet, both traditions offer robust theological strategies for reimagining sacred space amid historical and cultural upheaval.

Bridging Sacred Geographies: Interreligious Dialogue Between Christianity and African Traditional Religion

The comparative study of sacred spaces in Matthew and African Traditional Religion (ATR) reveals fertile ground for interreligious dialogue, particularly in three key areas: ecological theology, ancestral memory, and postcolonial reconciliation.

Sacred Space as Common Ground: Interfaith Dialogue Between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Ecological Integration and Sacred Geography: Matthew's theology of sacred space, particularly after the destruction of the Temple, opens an avenue for interfaith dialogue with ATR, which holds a deeply ecological understanding of the sacred. Sacred groves in ATR are both ecological preserves and spiritual portals, revealing a union of land and liturgy (Mbiti 1990). This challenges Christianity's historic "disenchantment of nature" (Deane-Drummond 2008, 80) and suggests the need for what Oduyoye (1995) calls a "sacred ecology"—an integration of worship and environmental care.

Ancestral Veneration and Theology of Remembrance: Traditional Christian critiques of



ancestor reverence in ATR can be softened through recognition of parallels with Hebrews 12:1's "cloud of witnesses" and the early Church's veneration of saints and martyrs (Bediako 1995). This opens a path to a "theology of remembrance" (Olupona 2011, 59), which respects African cultural memory while maintaining theological integrity.

Shared Sacred Sites and Postcolonial Healing: Examples such as Ghana's Posuban shrines, where churches coexist with traditional shrines, illustrate "spatial reparations"—spaces reclaimed for healing and mutual respect after colonial disruption (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Chidester 2014). These spaces become interreligious sanctuaries that resist both displacement and religious erasure.

Toward Ubuntu Encounter, Not Syncretism: Meyer's (1999) concept of "religious remixing" and Ramose's (1999) "ubuntu encounter" suggest that dialogue between Christianity and ATR need not collapse into syncretism. Rather, it can result in mutual enrichment, where both traditions retain their distinctiveness while addressing common concerns like ecological degradation, urbanisation, and cultural erosion.

Toward an Intercultural Theology of Sacred Space: Bridging Temporal, Political, and Material Divides

Temporal Dialogues: Linear and Cyclical Time: Matthew's linear eschatology—marked by the Temple's destruction (Matt 24:1–2)—reflects a teleological understanding of history (Sanders 1993). ATR, by contrast, offers a cyclical and layered temporality: sacred sites accumulate meaning over generations through ritual renewal (Meyer 1999). A temporal dialogue between the two traditions proposes a model of sacred history that honours both transformation and continuity.

Sacred Space and Political Resistance: Both Matthew and ATR use sacred space as a form



of political resistance. Jesus' Temple protest (Matt 21:12–17) critiques economic exploitation (Carter 2000), while ATR shrines function as sites of indigenous resilience against colonial forces—what Scott (2009) calls “weapons of the weak.” These practices reflect spatial agency rooted in sacred geography.

Embodied Rituals: Eucharist and Libation: Christian and ATR material rituals—Eucharist and libation—are expressions of sacred materiality. One remembers Christ's sacrifice; the other sustains ancestral communion (Olupona 2011). Both are embodied enactments that bind theological meaning to physical space and practice.

- The Intercultural Framework: A ‘Both/And’ Approach: Drawing on Gifford (2015), an intercultural theology of sacred space affirms:
- Temporal plurality: embracing both eschatological transformation and ancestral repetition.
- Political realism: acknowledging that sacred spaces are often contested terrain, not neutral ground.
- Ritual legitimacy: validating practices like libation, pilgrimage, and anointing as authentic ways of encountering the divine.

This “both/and” framework does not force a choice between Christian and ATR perspectives. Instead, it holds space for creative theological tension, offering tools for navigating land disputes, environmental stewardship, and postcolonial reconciliation.

It is important to note here that the sacred space dialogue between Matthew and ATR does more than enrich theology; it provides practical strategies for healing, sustainability,



and interfaith coexistence. In confronting shared challenges—ecological degradation, cultural fragmentation, and religious conflict—these traditions illuminate how sacred geography can become not a battleground, but a common ground.

Pathways Forward

To ensure meaningful engagement, the study proposes three practical recommendations:

Interdisciplinary integration: Biblical studies should employ participatory mapping (Asamoah 2007) and digital ethnography to explore the sacred through spatial technologies such as GIS.

Pedagogical transformation: Theological education must embrace indigenous epistemologies. Dube (2000) advocates teaching ATR alongside Matthew’s spatial theology to prepare leaders for issues such as ecological justice and interfaith land disputes.

Community documentation: Building on UNESCO (2020), ATR and Christian communities should co-create multimedia archives to preserve endangered rituals, stories, and sacred sites.

Bediako’s (1992) concept of the “earthiness of the spiritual life” encapsulates this integrated vision. Matthew and ATR alike affirm the divine in healing, meals, land, and ritual. Ultimately, sacred space emerges not as static territory but as a living, transformative reality—political yet spiritual, enduring yet fluid, materially grounded yet transcendent. The future of sacred geography lies in applying these insights across scholarship, classrooms, and communities, honouring the sacred as both embodied and emancipatory.



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