

1988

# Foreword to Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality

Sandra Marie Schneiders

*Jesuit School of Theology/Graduate Theological Union, [sschneiders@scu.edu](mailto:sschneiders@scu.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/jst>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Schneiders, Sandra Marie "Foreword." To Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality. By Belden C. Lane. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988.

Reprinted with permission.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit School of Theology by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## Foreword

The reader of Belden Lane's fascinating study, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, cannot escape a sense of encountering, in one and the same moment, insights which are both highly original and yet somehow so inevitable that one wonders at not having thought of them before. It is an experience of wandering into new territory and recognizing it as home, which is precisely the experience the book is trying to describe. In that sense, this work is a medium which is its message.

The thesis of this volume is that the experiences of place and space profoundly structure our experience of self and others in relationship to God, that is, our spirituality. And, conversely, our spirituality structures our "landscape," that is, our vision of the "where" of our experience. The thesis is explored and developed through an analysis of five characteristic American spiritualities in and through their relationship to the geographical settings in which they arose and were lived. The result of this two-sided exploration is a double enrichment. On the one hand, we are invited to attend to the ambiguity of place which simultaneously bespeaks travel and home, rootlessness and belonging, ordered space and outer chaos, immanence to and transcendence of our world, and the ambivalence that this ambiguity introduces into our everyday experience as placed beings. On the other hand, we are reminded constantly of the sacramentality of place which is at one and the same time earthy and material and yet transcendent of matter because, as human habitat, it is created and sustained by personal and communal meaning.

This book will provide engrossing reading for both the educated lay person and the professional student of spirituality. Any American will instantly recognize her or himself in the rich descriptions of the ambivalence of the American soul in relation to space and place. The American spirit is involved in a deathless love affair with space. We are the descendants of pioneers who incarnated their love of God and free-

dom in a transoceanic voyage long before such a venture was commonplace or safe, and whose love of the homestead and village was ever at war with the lure of adventure in the endless open spaces to the west. When there was no more land to explore we turned to the inner space of the spirit and the outer space of the galaxy. But everywhere we go we long to settle, to cultivate, to create home. Our characteristic spiritual challenges are to risk exploring the unfamiliar, to commit ourselves to the long haul, and to make room for the other in our secure environments. They are spiritual challenges which can be well understood in terms of our relationship to place and space.

Spirituality is a rapidly developing academic discipline which can perhaps best be described as a field-encompassing field, namely, the interdisciplinary study of religious experience as such. While it is abundantly clear that the understanding of religious experience involves the study of sacred texts and rituals, spiritual classics, history, theology, the arts, and the social and personality sciences, this book makes it clear how integral to spirituality is the study of cultural geography and anthropology. In our experience of the sacred the “where” is as determinative as the “how.” I have no doubt that this book will supply the incentive for some interesting studies designed to pursue some of the questions raised by the author in his epilogue.

Readers, both lay and professional, will be struck by the beauty of Belden Lane’s prose. The photographs and excerpts from original documents enrich his text. And the biographical and autobiographical “mythic landscapes” which conclude each of the chapters on spirituality are fascinating personal visions which lend depth and color to the theoretical treatments of the various spiritualities described. There is no doubt that the reader will be informed by the contents of this volume. But more importantly, he or she will be educated in the best sense of that word. This book richly justifies the author’s claim that “the category of place offers . . . an intriguing and insightful horizon for studying the American experience of the sacred.”

Sandra M. Schneiders  
Assoc. Prof. of New Testament  
and Spirituality  
Jesuit School of Theology and  
Graduate Theological Union