The relationship between the “sacred” and the “profane” realms of reality has been a highly debated issue within the Christian church since its inception. Throughout the ages the pendulum has continually swung between two opposing views. For some, there is – and should be – a strict dichotomy between things that may be considered “holy” or “sacred” and things that are not. This dichotomy is often marked by a Gnostic dualism that equates “ethereality” with sacredness and “materiality” with profanity. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who believe in no such dichotomy. This worldview is sometimes marked by a pantheistic vision that holds all things sacred, even all things divine. Between these poles lies a *via media*. A common Christian worldview has been to view all created things as *potentially sacred*. This essay will explore the ways in which this “sacramental worldview”\(^1\) reveals itself within the writing of Egeria, a Spanish pilgrim in the late 4\(^{th}\) century. An exploration of the historical context of Egeria’s travels will give the reader some perspective with which to understand her basic religious assumptions. Then, a critical analysis of her travelogue will show how those assumptions are evidenced within her pilgrimage. Finally, an assessment of her worldview will explore any possible applications for today’s church.

In 1884 an incomplete manuscript was found in Italy that detailed the travels of a certain female pilgrim. Early opinions on authorship were varied, but most now agree

\(^{1}\) The term “sacramental worldview” here refers to the belief that the “ordinary” sphere of reality can be made “holy.”
that the author’s name was Egeria\textsuperscript{2} and that her pilgrimage took place from 381-384 CE.\textsuperscript{3} She is most likely the same Egeria mentioned in the writings of Valerius of Vierzo (\texttextsuperscript{-650 CE) who identified her as a nun from the northwest part of Spain.\textsuperscript{4} Egeria lived in an unprecedented time in the history of Christianity. The Roman Empire was no longer interested in persecuting the church. In fact, Emperor Constantine built churches and urged Christians to take pilgrimages to the “holy places” in Palestine.\textsuperscript{5} By the time Egeria took her pilgrimage, Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. This is not to suggest that pilgrimages were not dangerous. Rigorous travel conditions and “barbarian” aggression endangered pilgrims and travelers constantly.\textsuperscript{6} However, Christian pilgrims braved the journey in hopes of praying “in places made holy by Christ and his saints.”\textsuperscript{7} This phrase reveals the worldview that was prevalent in Egeria’s own time. Some places have been made holy, while other places have not. This collocation of the sacred and profane realms of reality in geographical space offers the Christian pilgrim the opportunity to experience “holiness” firsthand.

One clearly sees the sacramental character of Egeria’s worldview throughout the record of her travels. Ironically, the manuscript begins mid-sentence, “…these were shown according to Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{8} From the very onset we see that Egeria’s concern is to see places that she has read about in the scriptures, not simply the “wonders of the

\textsuperscript{2} John Wilkinson, trans., \textit{Egeria’s Travels} (Warminster: Aris & Phillips LTD, 1999), 167
\textsuperscript{3} Wilkinson, 170
\textsuperscript{5} Thiebaux, 23
\textsuperscript{6} Thiebaux, 27
\textsuperscript{7} Wilkinson, 4
\textsuperscript{8} Egeria, “A Pilgrim to the Holy Land,” in \textit{The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology}, ed. Marcelle Thiebaux (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1994), 34 – All future references to the primary text will be sited in text (page #).
world.” Egeria then describes the valley that leads to Sinai, “the holy mountain of God” (34). Her guides encourage her to pray at that very spot, revealing the importance of geographical space. This particular mountain has been made holy because it was the mountain at which God chose to reveal God’s self to Moses. Egeria’s excitement is palpable as she describes all of the events that have taken place there, including Moses’ receiving the Law, the “golden calf” debacle, and the theophany at the burning bush (35). It is important to note that the whole Book of Moses was read at the “cave where the sainted Moses was” (35). Reading scripture or other “holy” writings at the places described therein mark Egeria’s pilgrimage, and reveal a desire to be personally connected with the biblical story. This is somewhat akin to modern day tourists who pay to see an Abraham Lincoln impersonator recite the “Gettysburg Address” on the hallowed grounds of the Gettysburg Battlefield. The difference, however, lies in the pilgrim’s desire to experience God’s holiness and secure God’s favor by the act (modern tourists are less concerned with securing Mr. Lincoln’s favor).

After receiving “blessed gifts” (i.e. gifts made holy by virtue of the fact that they come from a place made holy by God) and visiting Mount Horeb (the place made holy because it is where God spoke to Elijah), Egeria moves on from that place. She eventually makes her way to the city of Edessa, hoping to see the famed “Letter to King Abgar.” The bishop of the city agrees to show Egeria “the places the Christians rejoice to see” (36) and tells the story of how Jesus wrote the letter as a response to one that King Abgar wrote. The beliefs about this letter enlighten the nature of the “sacramental worldview” common in Egeria’s own day. Present within this ordinary piece of paper is miraculous power to confuse armies, stop rivers, and create fountains of water within the
city walls (38). If ever there were a collocation of the “sacred” and “profane” realms, surely it is the “Letter to King Abgar”.

Egeria concludes her journey in Constantinople, but not before traveling through Seleucia of Isauria in order to see “St. Thecla’s shrine”. The group of travelers was “extremely happy to go there” (38). St Thecla, no doubt, was highly revered by Egeria and her traveling companions. Much like at Mt. Sinai, the group reads “all the Acts of St. Thecla” at the shrine, bringing Egeria nearly ecstatic pleasure and inspiring spontaneous praise to God (39).

The second half of Egeria’s journal describes her time in Jerusalem during Holy Week.9 The church’s worship there is greatly concerned with geographical space and physical relics. All of the people begin in Gethsemane, the garden in which Jesus was betrayed. There is a reading of the account of the events that took place there, accompanied by moans and groans that “can be heard at the far end of the city” (41). The whole crowd then moves across the city, where they read more scripture and are encouraged by the bishop who “urges them not to weary but to hope in God, since their exertions will be richly rewarded” (41). Egeria is the first to record the *adoratio cruces*, the “veneration of the Cross.”10 This ancient practice is the climax of Egeria’s account of Holy Week and is a remarkable example of the “sacramental worldview” in which she is immersed. At Golgotha, the people gather in hopes of touching the “sacred wood of the true Cross” (41) believed to have been found by Helena, the mother of Constantine.11 The Bishop ambiguously remarks “the sacred wood of the Cross… will secure future

---

9 Thiebaux, 33  
10 Thiebaux, 33  
11 Thiebaux, 26
salvation for each of us” (41). While one could interpret this as a reassurance that God’s redeeming work has been finished by virtue of that very same cross, it is more likely that he meant that the wood of the “true cross” effectively has the power to save, in and of itself. This is reinforced by the fact that all the people waited to touch the cross personally. Truly, the power of a piece of wood to “assure salvation” is an extraordinary example of the ordinary made holy.

The church today can learn much from Egeria and her contemporaries. The Protestant Reformation saw an extreme reaction to the cult of relics and the veneration of saints. Part of the reaction was against the commoditization of spirituality and salvation. Even in our own day religious opportunists peddle supposed “holy water” or “magic prayer beads” on late night television infomercials. A predisposition toward a “sacramental worldview” can lead to excesses of religious consumerism and superstition. However, today’s church is probably in danger of the opposite extreme. The tendency within the contemporary church is to view the world in a bifurcated way. Religion is a private affair, saved for Sundays (and sometimes Wednesdays), and concerns only subjective values (not objective reality), this view says. Egeria causes us to ask questions relevant to this issue. What if God is active and present in our world today? What if God chooses to reveal himself within his creation in a way that transforms ordinary objects (or relationships or circumstances) into holy vessels of grace? Is this not what the Incarnation is all about? Each individual must answer these questions for themselves. Egeria is a helpful conversation partner because in her writing one experiences a truly “sacramental worldview” and the valuable perspective that the current prevalent paradigm is not the only possible way to see reality.
Works Cited
