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To cite this article: Chris Philo (2022) A 'geographer of the soul': James M. Houston's voyage from geography to theology, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 138:3-4, 247-270, DOI: [10.1080/14702541.2022.2125562](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2022.2125562)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2022.2125562>



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Published online: 30 Sep 2022.



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# A ‘geographer of the soul’: James M. Houston’s voyage from geography to theology

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## ABSTRACT

In the year of his 100th birthday, this contribution considers the unusual story of Scottish geographer James Macintosh Houston (1922–). Following his passage from undergraduate geographer at the University of Edinburgh to postdoctorate and then lecturer in geography at the University of Oxford, aspects of Houston’s approach to geography – increasingly a cultural-historical geography, sometimes framed by him as the ‘history of ideas’ – are reconstructed. Narrating his dramatic change of career circa 1970, from academic geographer at Oxford to academic and practising theologian at Regent College, Vancouver, continuities are uncovered between Houston’s geography and his theology. Particular attention is paid to his pioneering essay from 1978, the only one obviously directed back to geography from his new theological orbit, and one that should arguably be better-known as a profound statement of a humanistic geography critical of humanity becoming drawn into an abusive relationship with the world predicated on abstracted space rather than meaningful place(s). Drawing upon the example of Houston, reflections are offered on the relations between ‘geographical theology’ and ‘theological geography’.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 June 2022  
Accepted 13 September 2022

## KEYWORDS

J.M. Houston; geography and theology; humanistic geography

## Introduction: gleanings from a bookshop

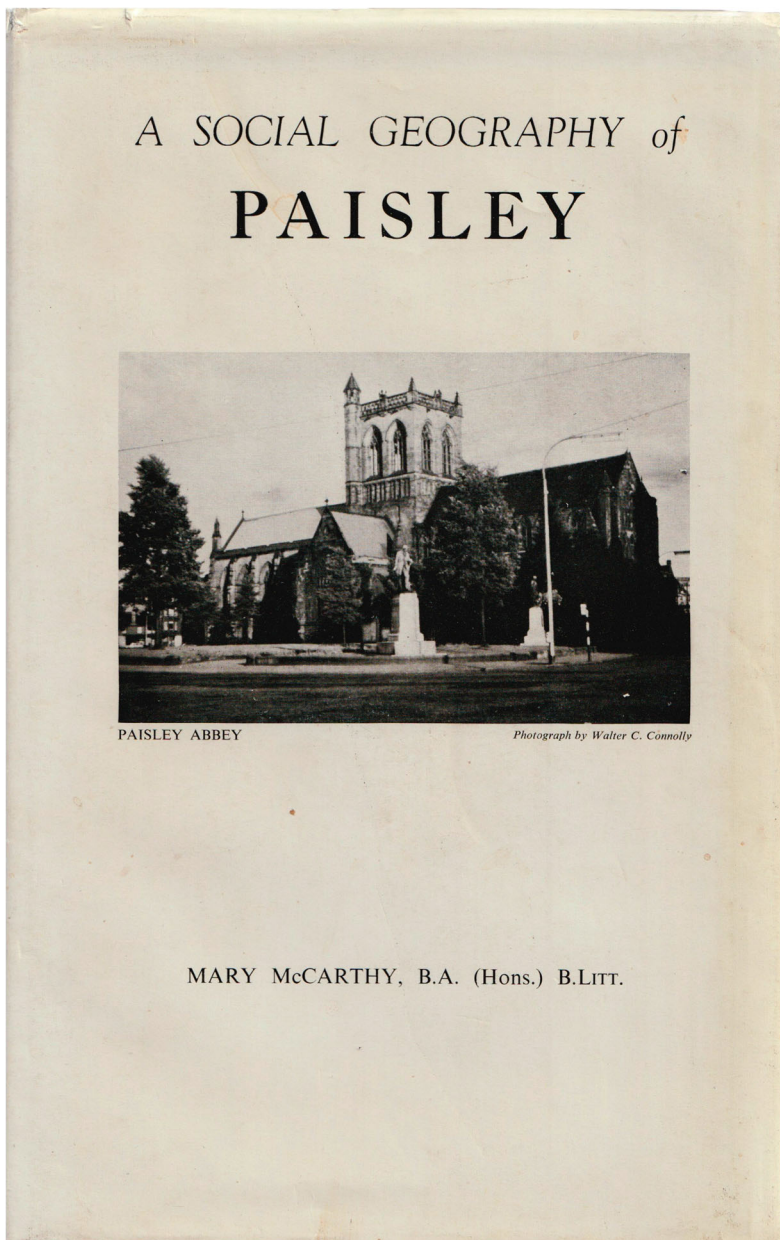
It begins with a chance find in a Glasgow second-hand bookshop. Browsing in the Scottish History section, I stumbled across a book entitled *A Social Geography of Paisley*, by Mary McCarthy, published in 1969 by the Committee of Management, Paisley Public Library (Figure 1). It had to be purchased and closely inspected. Replete with dozens of hand-drawn maps and diagrams, informed by patient archival inquiry, its emphasis is historical, carefully reconstructing the geographies of economic activity and social inhabitation<sup>1</sup> associated with Paisley, a settlement to the south-west of Glasgow in Scotland’s west central Lowlands. The approach taken is resolutely empirical, rarely venturing beyond description of spatial patterns (of landuse, industrial premises, civic amenities, and more) and their temporal change.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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**Figure 1.** Front cover of McCarthy (1969). Source: author.

Lightly echoing forms of ‘locational analysis’ that had swept through Anglophone academic geography from the mid-1950s, some attention is paid to ‘spheres of influence’ – associated with cattle markets, transport routes, school catchments, and newspaper distribution – and to evaluating Paisley’s ‘regional influence’ as ‘part of a greater urban unit’ (McCarthy, 1969, p. 152), the ‘Clydeside conurbation’. Contrastingly, the book’s opening chapter explicitly signposts a rather older ‘site and situation’ tradition of geographical inquiry, stressing Paisley’s religious origins in the church ‘at the fording point of the

River Cart' (McCarthy, 1969, p. 14) founded during St. Mirin's sixth-century evangelising of the locality.<sup>2</sup> McCarthy also considers the foundation of a Benedictine monastery, complete with an abbey, in the twelfth century, and an argument is pursued that casts the Abbey as equivalent too – possibly even more significant than – the Industrial Revolution, including textile-weaving mills producing the famous Paisley silks, shawls and prints, in the making of Paisley.<sup>3</sup> Unlike more environmental determinist 'site and situation' accounts, however, McCarthy lays stress on the vision, the ideas, of the settlement's founders,<sup>4</sup> here with a religious flavour, and this conjoint humanistic and religious inflection is of moment for what follows.

One of the front matter pages of the book indicates that it was originally a 'Thesis submitted for the degree of B.Litt. at the University of Oxford' (McCarthy, 1969, p. 4). The degree of B.Litt., or Bachelor of Letters, was usually a second undergraduate degree awarded to a student conducting a more specialised line of study than was possible during an undergraduate programme, and was closer to what is now understood as a Masters-by-research qualification. It was comparatively rare in the UK, except at the University of Oxford. I was intrigued to discern more about the intellectual context that had nurtured this work, and the only clue was the final acknowledgement in the 'Preface': 'to my supervisor, Dr. J.M. Houston, who encouraged me throughout my work on this thesis' (McCarthy, 1969, p. 9).

This figure must have been James Mackintosh Houston (Figure 2), a Lecturer in Geography at the University of Oxford from the 1940s to 1970, which means that he would have been supervising McCarthy towards the end of his career at Oxford. Pursuing this thread, I learned that Houston had been born on 21st November 1922, meaning that he will be 100 years old in November 2022. For he is indeed alive and still following the trajectory that he elected to take from 1970, foresaking his life as a geographer and instead switching to become a theologian, specialising in 'spiritual theology' and being a founder of Regent College in Vancouver, described now as 'An innovative graduate school of theology' (see <https://www.regent-college.edu>). 'It is rare for someone to



**Figure 2.** James M. Houston. Source: <https://www.jimhouston.org>.

totally change field midway through one's academic career' (Torrance & Torrance, 2012, no pagination), as two theologians state in a *festschrift* celebrating Houston's 90th birthday, but that is exactly what Houston did. It can nonetheless be argued that he never completely abandoned geography as a way of thinking about – as a sensibility towards – the world, and that important resonances can be detected between his geography and his theology. The quite specific focus in what follows is hence to describe the 'case' of Houston as a conduit between geography and theology, reconstructing what he takes from geography into his version of theology but also addressing moments in his *oeuvre* when something tracks back as well.

## Houston the geographer: from Edinburgh to Oxford

The intention is not to offer a comprehensive biography, but rather to stay close to James (Jim) Houston as geographer or theologian-geographer, invaluable for which task are Houston's own *Memoirs of a Joyous Exile and a Worldly Christian* (Houston, 2019) and the first of a two-part account given by church historian Arthur Dickens Thomas Jr. to mark Houston's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday (Thomas, 1993).<sup>5</sup> There is warrant, even so, for underlining that Houston was born into a devout Christian family, his parents having been missionaries and meeting each other while engaged on missionary work in Spain circa 1920. Both parents held to the principles of Christian evangelism, with Thomas (1993, p. 3) characterising them as being 'Plymouth Brethren' missionaries.<sup>6</sup> Houston grew up in a religious household full of worship, prayer and committed spiritual work, with his father in particular a vital role model, if not always the easiest one to follow given the extraordinary rigour of Houston senior's prayerful existence and itinerant missionary activity (Thomas, 1993, p. 4).<sup>7</sup> A story is told of Houston's 'religious conversion' age 12, when he realised that, like his parents, he too would look eventually to serve God in some form of missionary capacity.

Due to childhood illnesses, Houston was classified as 'medically unfit' for active service in WWII, so he proceeded instead directly into higher education to study geography. 'I started at Edinburgh University in September 1941, and geography professor Ogilvie was particularly memorable' (Houston, 2019, p. 10),<sup>8</sup> not least for predicting future worldly 'trouble spots' – including the Balkans<sup>9</sup> and the Middle East – and for teaching about subjects as diverse as rebellious ethnic minorities and aerial photo interpretation. 'During his first two years at Edinburgh he read geography, English, history, and psychology,' states Thomas (1993, p. 5), 'all of which would later influence him as a geographer, historian of spirituality, and a spiritual director.' Houston graduated in the summer of 1944, and, having been turned down for naval intelligence due to his medical record, he was recruited into the Strathclyde Valley Regional Authority as part of a team planning the locations for a new town at East Kilbride (to house people from bombed-out areas in Glasgow) and other civic facilities. 'I was the first geographer to be appointed,' Houston recalls, but he quickly became 'disenchanted with regional planning' because, 'in reality, such locations were political decisions made by the municipalities' (Houston, 2019, p. 13).<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately, as well as receiving the Gold Medal of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society for his undergraduate performance, Houston also received a fellowship that enabled him to go to the University of Oxford to commence doctoral studies in

geography.<sup>11</sup> It appears that he was unenamoured by how geography was then being studied at Oxford,<sup>12</sup> and the following passage from his *Memoirs* tellingly encapsulates both his alternative and how it pointed towards theology:

... the School of Geography at Oxford has been the headquarters for Naval Intelligence, and my senior colleagues had been turning out guidebooks for naval commanders in the countries that they were visiting. It was all very factual. Now, they had to redesign the field of academic geography and what it might become. I turned in another direction, choosing as my doctoral thesis a specialised topic of sixteenth-century Spain, based on the Archives of the Indies in Seville and the Archives in Valencia. Essentially, I switched my doctoral programme to research in 'the history of ideas'. It was a study of cultural transmission – essentially, the exchange of plants – between the Aztecs of the New World and the Arab cultivators who developed the *huertas*, irrigated gardens, of the Levante coast in the east of Spain during the mid-sixteenth through early-seventeenth centuries. These were the two leading horticultural civilizations of the world at that time. Ever since, I have essentially followed this new trajectory, the history of ideas. My Spanish studies later helped me to broaden others' horizons, in the shift I advocated from teaching 'systematic theology' towards the introduction among evangelicals of 'spiritual theology', including doing receptive exegesis with my colleague Bruce Waltke in our cooperative studies on the psalms. (Houston, 2019, pp. 14–15)

This passage has so many elements: geographers' putting their work into the service of the military and national intelligence;<sup>13</sup> the task of reconstructing the spirit and purpose of academic geography post-WWII, with the hint that the direction being taken in this respect by Oxford geographers was too 'factual', even too utilitarian; the suggestion that Houston himself favoured something different, more scholarly, culturally-attuned and open to the rich diversity of ideas and practices spanning Old and New Worlds; the characterisation of his doctoral (D.Phil.) thesis as an exploration into both geography and the 'history of ideas';<sup>14</sup> and the claim that such a 'history of ideas' perspective then translated into his theology, with its spiritual rather than systematic dimensions.

The latter two elements will recur throughout what follows – they are the hinge of Houston's shift from geography to theology – but for the moment it will suffice to indicate that Houston progressed from his D.Phil. into a lecturing position at the University of Oxford. As Thomas summarises:

He became a university lecturer in the School of Geography at Oxford University in 1947, and lecturer in various Oxford colleges, then fellow of Hertford College, Oxford from 1964 to 1970, and bursar of Hertford from 1967 to 1970. While at Oxford, he published three books: *A Social Geography of Europe* (1954), *Problems of Urbanization* (1968) [edited by Houston and R.P. Beckinsale], and his 793-page magnum opus, *The Western Mediterranean World: An Introduction to its Regional Landscapes* (1964). (Thomas, 1993, p. 9).

Houston's own favoured approach to geography is especially evident from his two single-authored monographs, entailing a weave of physical terrain, cultural landscape and socio-historical textures that reworks older forms of geographical inquiry, while also being highly interdisciplinary and unabashed about addressing 'big picture' themes to do with the press of ideas, values, processes and problems.

His Mediterranean survey explicitly plays on both region as identifiable areal unit and landscape as 'the visible appearance of place or region, its scenery' (Houston, 1964, p. 1), and is notable for its superb hand-drawn maps, diagrams and indeed 'scenes' (Figure 3). Drawing inspiration from diverse older geographical writers – from de la Blache and



FIG. 102. Types of rural settlement in Spain.

**Figure 3.** Types of rural settlement in Spain. Source: Houston (1964, p. 243).

Sorre to Mackinder and Sauer<sup>15</sup> – an effort is made to rehabilitate regional geography, ‘whose image is apparently bruised in contemporary thought,’<sup>16</sup> through the observational sensibilities of the painter who ‘must choose only what it is most significant for [the] purpose’ (Houston, 1964, p. 706). Houston’s was a species of synthesis, although he wonders if ‘a better term would be ‘syncretism’, a word first used by Plutarch to describe the combination of incompatible elements, specifically theology and philosophy’ (Houston, 1964, p. 707).<sup>17</sup> The reference to ‘theology’ is striking, as too the suggestion of ultimately ‘incompatible elements,’ indexing a more sophisticated approach to synthesis – and to how knowledge is created and always partial – than surfaces in many other regional or landscape geography offerings.<sup>18</sup>

Houston's readiness to frame his work as 'social geography', as in the titles of both D.Phil. thesis and 1954 text,<sup>19</sup> also hints at a willingness to see 'the social', including the creative human agency constitutive of social orders, forms and spaces, in a fashion quietly rebelling against the twin determinisms – environmental and geometric – integral to other geographical orthodoxies, older and newer, wherein humanity is seen as derivative not constitutive. It is also revealing that in his mammoth Mediterranean survey, Houston identifies 'six major themes' traversing his regional portraits, the sixth of which alights on how humanity 'has evaluated what is meaningful and significant in the landscape from the beginning of the human race,' exemplified by such spiritually-charged scenes as '[t]he sacred grove, the templed promontories, the sanctified territory of the town site' (Houston, 1964, p. 6).<sup>20</sup> That Houston should immediately conjure examples with spiritual resonance is anticipatory of the turn that he would later take. In certain respects, then, the flavour of Houston's geography can be interpreted as humanist in advance of the more fully-fledged humanistic geography surfacing in the 1970s (see also below), as may similarly be claimed for another Scottish geographer with strong religious convictions prominent in the 1950s-1960s, James Wreford Watson.<sup>21</sup> Houston's own spiritual beliefs, increasingly clear about the centrality of human personhood in its complex nest of relations, not least with the divine, were surely exerting an influence.

Houston's religious palette was richly nourished by his time at Oxford. In his *Memoirs* he recalls his strict Brethren upbringing, particularly his father's version, being challenged by experiencing more relaxed Brethren activities, such as 'open assemblies' where non-Brethren evangelical Christians could be present, but indeed in concert with Christians of wholly other persuasions. For a while he lodged with the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain, who introduced him to Russian mystics and philosophers, as well as to new forms of 'spiritual friendship' (Houston, 2019, p. 17). While at Oxford he also became acquainted with the famous Oxford literary professor and Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, with whom he attended meetings and entered into debate (Thomas, 1993, pp. 7–8). Lewis undertook a sinuous life-long spiritual journey, taking on board theism and Catholicism at certain points, before becoming ostensibly orthodoxly Anglican (Church of England and Protestant) while still always being prepared to entertain – and to debate with – bases for 'scepticism' towards Christianity (Clark, 2007). Houston (2019, esp. pp.20-21) identifies that the core message he derived from Lewis was the necessity of opposing 'reductionism', meaning any effort to reduce a terrain of knowledge, whether literary criticism, theology or Christian belief, to the simplistic formulae not just of conventional science but potentially also of other idea-formations.<sup>22</sup> Such a stance departed from the narrowness of his father's Brethren world, demanding from Houston an openness of intellectual, doctrinal and wider worldly engagement that cut the cloth for the theologian who he was to become.

### ***Houston the theologian: from Oxford to Vancouver***

Houston enjoyed teaching at Oxford, partly as he 'began to specialise in the interface between the physical landscape and the modifications in the history of [humanity], ... changing them into cultural landscapes' (Houston, 2019, p. 34). This orientation subsequently deepened into humanistic and theological perspective on human-environment



relations, as I will explain later. For him, moreover, ‘[t]he unique Oxford ‘tutorial’ system at Oxford also became a major part of [his] life’ (Houston, 2019, p. 34), since it demanded often quite intense inter-personal time assisting individual students in their academic studies and, on occasion, more pastoral problems maybe with spiritual imbrications. It also likely chimed with both his emerging theological perspective on Christian personhood in relation with Christ – concerning the person’s *place* ‘in Christ’<sup>23</sup> – and his growing sense of what might comprise effective but sensitive ‘spiritual direction’, almost as a kind of counselling with therapeutic qualities that he would later call ‘soul care’ (Houston, 2017).<sup>24</sup> Tellingly, he recalls this tutorial work as ‘enrich[ing him] concerning what Hannah Arendt [1958] was to call ‘the human condition’” (Houston, 2019, p. 35). This trajectory, alongside frustrations and occasional spiritual conundrums posed by his secular workplace, led him – together with his wife Rita – increasingly to contemplate taking a quite other path, one that eventually led him to ‘g[i]ve up [the] security of his academic career in Oxford in 1970’ (Boersma, 2012, no pagination).

There is no need here to delve deeply into the details,<sup>25</sup> but suffice to say that Houston took a leave of absence from Oxford in 1970 (eventually resigning in 1971) and relocated to Vancouver in Canada, where he gained a role lecturing to geography students, on an *ad hoc* ‘honorary’ basis, at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Immediately upon arriving in Vancouver, he started planning for what was to become Regent College, affiliated with the University and anchored in the delivery of a one year Diploma and then a fuller Master of Christian Studies. The programmes were to be taught by a small core staff, Houston included, supplemented with invited scholars speaking at summer schools. A modest evangelistic orientation was offered, conceived as a joyous bearing ‘witness’, alongside emphases on both biblical study interweaving with ‘the personal nature of a living faith’ (Houston, 2019, p. 63) and the necessity of ‘personal sacrifice’ (not least a readiness to take time out of, or even to abandon, professional careers, as had Houston himself).<sup>26</sup>

The teaching was to be Christian, ‘never secularised by ‘Christian scholarship’” (Houston, 2019, p. 62), in which respect Houston was clear that his own orientation would not be that of religious studies – the study *of* religion, potentially comparatively and from a secular standpoint – and neither that of ‘systematic theology’ – wherein (Christian) theological principles are explored in an abstractedly rational, logical, manner. Instead, it was to be a ‘spiritual theology’, fully immersed in spiritual values derived from close scriptural reading and a detailed knowledge of early church history: it was to be an encounter with *ideas* about God, Christ and spirit, and a conduit for allowing those ideas to flow into the ‘spiritual direction’ or ‘soul care’ of Christians (and maybe of others coming to Christ). Some of the many books that Houston has since published hint at being populist, ‘how to do’ good spiritual Christianity textbooks, yet they still contain a learned content, while his corpus also includes numerous works full of sustained intellectual engagement dependent upon the skills of the critical scholar.<sup>27</sup> Two commentators, reflecting on Houston’s switch, note that: ‘Not only did Jim become a theologian, ... he became one with a remarkable knowledge of the history of ideas and one who has written extensively on biblical, pastoral and spiritual theology’ (Torrance & Torrance, 2012, no pagination).

My own eye has been caught by Houston’s co-authorship of substantial book-length inquiries into the Old Testament Psalms, especially one dealing with ‘lament’ in the

Psalms (Waltke et al., 2014) and arguing for a renewal of lament as a central plank of prayerful worship. Deploying a geographical metaphor, the authors here argue that, '[j]ust as an ecological environment has its own context, so Old Testament 'lament' can only be appreciated distinctively within its biblical mindset' (Waltke et al., 2014, p. 7). The complex ingredients of lament are thereby reconstructed from a dense ecology of scripture, the exegeses of early Christian writers, and the historical geographies of Old Testament peoples, lands and migrations. At the same time, what happens in the *absence* of lament is noted: 'Without it we cannot express our solidarity with the sick, the disabled, the persecuted, the tortured, the dying – that is, with those in the depths of despair' (Waltke et al., 2014, p. 2).<sup>28</sup> Geographer Andrew Williams has similarly advocated a renewed place for the 'lament Psalms', and lament more generally, as a vehicle for 'corporate' (collectively embodied) church worship explicitly naming injustice, highlighting oppressive social relations and 'critiqu[ing] the principalities and powers at work in the world' (Williams, 2014, p. 4).<sup>29</sup> Key differences nonetheless remain: whereas Williams enthusiastically borrows from the critical theology of Walter Brueggeman, Waltke et al. (2014, p. 3) fear that the latter's approach to lament risks reducing God to 'a god whose sense of social injustice is being questioned like an accused criminal in the dock'.<sup>30</sup> I underscore this point to make clear that any dialogue between Houston and contemporary geographers, even ones in the orbit of a Christian geography, would not always be an easy one.<sup>31</sup>

Returning to my root narrative, though, my claim is that, notwithstanding Houston's evident switch from geography to theology, there was never a complete break for him from geography as a mode of understanding the world. Moreover, he continued to teach geography and environmental issues. 'At the University of British Columbia,' writes Hans Boersma (2012, no pagination), 'his students included some of the young activists who went on to found the first serious environmental advocacy organisations.'<sup>32</sup> As the same commentator also states, Houston 'worked widely in environmental ethics and a theology of creation, long before this became fashionable' (Boersma, 2012, no pagination).

In this respect, extended mention must be made of Houston's chapter in the pioneering 1978 collection of essays *Humanistic Geography: Problems and Prospects*, edited by David Ley and Marwyn Samuels (Ley & Samuels, 1978a).<sup>33</sup> This volume, routinely cited in disciplinary histories, compellingly assembles a body of writings crystallising how 'humanism' – a meaning-facing humanism infused with ideas about humanity's *place* in the world – challenges versions of geography impaled on the meaningless logical reasoning of 'scientism'. While other contributions to the volume – the co-authored introduction and singly-authored chapters by Ley and Samuels, as well as chapters by Anne Buttner, James Duncan, Cole Harris, Gunnar Olsson, Graham Rowles, David Seaman, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Iain Wallace – garnered the most attention, Houston's piece is a worthy contribution that echoes Wallace (1978) in its attention to biblical sources of humanist philosophy and action.

Entitled 'The concepts of place and land in the Judaeo-Christian tradition' and drawing on an impressive range of intellectual traditions – citing Heidegger, building on Eliade and 'sacred space', acknowledging and critiquing Marxism, borrowing from psychology and psychiatry, deconstructing 'technocracy' and stressing emotionality,

and much more – Houston offers a spirited (in every sense) account of why attention should be lent to place not space. One ringing passage runs as follows:

What is clear to us is that space is not place. *Space* is the arena of freedom that has no accountability, no commitment, no meaning other than a mathematical one. It is the temptation of technocracy to trade in space. ... *Place*, on the other hand, has human context: space with historical associations where vows are made; encounters and obligations, met; commitments, fulfilled; limits, recognised. Place implies belonging. It establishes identity. It defines vocation. It envisions destiny. Place is filled with memories of life that provide roots and give direction. Place provides human specificity for the embodiment of the human will. (Houston, 1978, p. 226)

Such claims may now sound familiar, but it must be remembered that this passage heralds from 1978, at the dawn of such thinking by geographers. As his chapter unfolds, Houston turns to Judeo-Christian resources for deriving spiritual meaning from place and ‘land’, notably ‘a theological geography of the Gospels’ (Houston, 1978, p. 228). He narrates how an early Christian apprehension of the world deployed language, biblical words, to transform an earlier magical sense of humans and the things of nature as one, lodged on the same ‘plane’, into a more complex ontological picturing of nature ‘as theocentric: God given and God centred’, *but* at the same time as ‘a moral equilibrium’ whereby humanity is compelled to enact ‘stewardship’ (as ‘shepherd’ but not ultimate ‘lord’) over place, land and nature (Houston, 1978, pp. 229–230).

Carefully tracing ancient Hebrew into modern Jewish concepts and constructs of land, nation and territory, Houston does not shy from the vexed – exiled, nomadic and ‘home-seeking’ – history of the Jews, nor the modern phenomenon of Israel as secular state and its implications for Palestinians. He chides any perspective that becomes ethnocentric, ‘mythic’ and ‘paganistic’ over who *should* occupy given lands, aspects surfacing in Zionist tropes about Israel and Palestine, and he even laments: ‘What tragic irony there is in the forces of naturalism that one form should spawn the Nazi mythology of blood and race to generate Auschwitz, while another should now promote the Israeli mythology of soil’ (Houston, 1978, p. 233). He adds that Martin Buber, while recognising ‘the holistic needs of [humanity]-land-God in the new transformation of working the soil of Israel,’ also ‘saw the moral dangers of nationalism and of secularism, insisting the land must be built upon justice and goodness’ (Houston, 1978, p. 232).<sup>34</sup> In some regards modern Israel has engendered ‘good stewardship of the earth,’ but in others Houston concludes that Israel’s ontology of place is equally fractured by technocratic, secular and ‘desacralised’ impulses (Houston, 1978, p. 233).

In concluding, Houston ponders three possible alternative scenarios for how geographers might envisage humanity’s future placement in the world. One might be an ‘Aquarian’ return to a mythic condition of at-oneness with nature, but that would sacrifice any sense of humanity’s special place, role and responsibility; a second would be ‘blasted space, where the thermonuclear warfare of the Northern Hemisphere has left two-thirds of the planet a nuclear desert’ (Houston, 1978, p. 234) and the rest dependent on a ‘totalitarian’ appliance of techno-science to survive; and a third would be ‘lived placeness, ... the hopeful one for [hu]mankind,’ able to retrieve a more spiritual sensibility - preferably for Houston Judeo-Christian – able to reconvene science (and all the disciplines) in constantly ‘celebrat[ing] the first days of creation in the acknowledgment of the sacramental in every place’ (Houston, 1978, p. 234). ‘As geographers, we have ...

the choice between a placeless geography and a geography of place' (Houston, 1978, p. 235), and it is transparent for him which choice should be made.

There is much in Houston's chapter that can hail, engage and in part convince geographers of many different stripes, whether secular or spiritual. Indeed, it offers a learned but powerful call for a geographical imagination that fundamentally reappraises the ideas through which humanity receives – and too often arrogantly, exploitatively and destructively confronts – nature.<sup>35</sup> Such a call is now commonplace in the horizon of climate change, environmental injustice and the Anthropocene, but Houston voiced these warnings in the 1970s before geographers more widely, across the whole gamut of political-economic and socio-cultural orientations, cottoned on to the enormity of what is at stake. In this context, echoing Boersma's remark quoted above and another positing that Houston's 1979 book *I Believe in the Creator* (Houston, 1979) 'outlined a thoughtful theology of creation long before environmental concerns became popular' (Hindmarsh, 2012, no pagination), it is obvious that Houston as theologian-geographer was an originator.<sup>36</sup> Seeds of a more theologically-attuned environmental geography can be found elsewhere, notably in Robin Doughty's wide-ranging piece on 'environmental theology' (Doughty, 1981),<sup>37</sup> surprisingly neglectful of Houston (1978), but also in various other statements where humanity's divinely-delegated environmental 'stewardship' or 'covenantal relations' are foregrounded *contra* (capitalistic) 'growth-obsessed' drives (eg. Curry-Roper, 1998; Hoekveld-Meijer, 1998; Park, 1992; Wallace, 1998).<sup>38</sup>

It remains in this section to trace continuities from Houston's Oxford geography into his Vancouver theology. He reflects directly on this matter in his *Memoirs*, and the nuance is instructive:

I have often been asked, What does being a geographer have to do with getting involved in a theological college? I answer: Not much, if you are a geomorphologist (interpreting the interplay of geology and physical landscape). But as a cultural geographer (a historian of ideas) trained in air-photographic interpretation, the interplay of history in differing cultures, and having a mind trained to synthesise, it makes much more sense. (Houston, 2019, p. 117)

The 'history of ideas' notion recurs here, Houston regarding the 'cultural geographer' and the 'historian of ideas' as interchangeable,<sup>39</sup> with the further implication being that the geographer – particularly when gazing down on material patterns in the physical landscape – should be attuned to how historical shifts in prevailing cultures, or better in the ideas (and meanings) integral to those cultures, cannot but shape those landscapes (which become cultural landscapes).<sup>40</sup>

He continues by stating that '[m]y *magnum opus* as a geographer was the university textbook published in 1964, *The Western Mediterranean World: An Introduction to its Regional Landscapes*' (Houston, 2019, pp. 117–118), before referencing a range of 'regional' texts that he continued to edit long after leaving Oxford, most of which were authored by 'natives of the countries they wrote about' (Houston, 2019, p. 118).<sup>41</sup> 'For me, ... publishing on diverse world landscapes was a cause, not just a career' (Houston, 2019, p. 118),<sup>42</sup> intimating how his inherent non-reductionist perspective – inspired, as noted, by C.S. Lewis – was intimately bound up with recording and celebrating the diversity of regional landscapes. The inference is that for Houston there was no singular template from which all these regional landscapes were being

cut, and that it required the synthetic susceptibilities of the humanist scholar, with attention to history and culture paramount,<sup>43</sup> to reconstruct them appropriately.<sup>44</sup> ‘A mathematician tends to be skeptical about all reality, while a painter or a poet trusts in personal intuition’ (Houston, 2019, p. 117), and it can be deduced that for Houston geographical imagination, humanist scholarship, artistic intuition and, he adds, Christian ‘trust’ should all be working in tandem.<sup>45</sup>

Houston’s most insightful reflections then follow:

People used to tease me, knowing my background in geography, that I must have come to Regent to study the landscape of the soul! There was truth in that: reviewing knowledge in synthesis, rather than by analysis, has become my *métier*. But in a hyper-cognitive world (even of evangelical leaders), it was not a popular approach! Your mind ‘mattered’ more than your heart, especially for evangelical leaders who did not realise they were still under the hyper-cognitive influence of the ‘age of reason’. But I was already in revolt against teaching the reductionism of ‘systematic theology’, and so we introduced ‘spiritual theology’ into the Regent curriculum from the start. (Houston, 2019, pp. 118–119).

Houston willingly concedes that his new approach could be deemed an inquiry into ‘landscapes of the soul’ – one indeed open to the soul or heart, to meanings and emotions – and synthesising what occurs there rather than analysing it with the ‘hyper-cognitive’ tools of the ‘age of reason’. Such a proclamation, querying the dominance in academic theology but also in evangelical leadership of (European) Enlightenment rationalism, dovetails squarely with moves taken by other Christian geographers – as I will note in conclusion – but also with those taken by geographers of countless other persuasions (postmodernist, poststructuralist, postcolonialist, feminist, phenomenological, non-representational, and more).

For Houston, though, the route was not then *back* to geography – to rethinking and re-practising academic geography – but rather *towards* theology and the intimacies of Christian ‘spiritual direction’ or ‘soul care’. Specifically, he observes that, ‘[f]or texts for my new surveys on ‘the landscape of the soul,’ I began to teach on church reformers (especially the Christian mystics), using their own writings’ (Houston, 2019, p. 119). Thomas, meanwhile, ponders ‘lessons learned from geography’ (Thomas, 1993, p. 5) by Houston as theologian and ‘spiritual guide’. While some of Thomas’s words reiterate what has already been unpacked above, they merit repeating in full:

Later in life, Houston reflected upon how his training in geography had taught him principles of spiritual direction. He now sees himself as a ‘geographer of the soul’ when thinking about his role as a spiritual guide. Geography is the synthetic study of the earth and its features and of the distribution of life on earth, including human life and the effects of human activity. Thus, it is by nature interdisciplinary. It involves synthesising more than analysing. As an historical geographer, Houston also drew insights from cultural anthropology, climatology, ecology, and cartography. Geographers seek to grasp the interconnectedness of all the environment. (Thomas, 1993, p. 5)

Thomas borrows the phrase ‘geographer of the soul’ to subtitle his own article<sup>46</sup> – in turn I have borrowed it for my own title – and also as a way of culminating his appraisal of Houston’s life-work: ‘During his years in England and Scotland, Houston developed as a ‘geographer of the soul.’ These experiences prepared him for lengthy sessions of spiritual direction with students and friends in Vancouver and around the world’ (Thomas, 1993, p. 9).<sup>47</sup> Concurring with Thomas, I might nonetheless add that Houston’s

attentiveness to geographies of the soul is also central to his 1978 essay, discussed above, where the direction of travel is as much from theology back to geography as *vice versa*. With these remarks about directions of travel between geography and theology, however, it is time to bring this essay to a conclusion.

### Conclusion: geographical theology and theological geography?

James Houston is relatively unknown in contemporary disciplinary circles, not least because his obviously geographical works – published with a clear ‘geography’ badge – date back to the middling years of the last century, if with one telling outlier in 1978. Yet, there is a fascinating story to tell about Houston that speaks about a geographer becoming a theologian: about someone whose deeply-felt and carefully-executed geographical stance before the subject-matters of the world has not so much been abandoned, as reconstituted within the orbit of a ‘history of ideas’ that itself affords the tools for a distinctive form of spiritually-turned theology. As in many respects the most circumspectly evangelical of evangelicals<sup>48</sup> – always concerned to avoid ‘reductionism’ and consistently bearing ‘witness’ to the contextual specificities of church history, varying from place to place and with the sufferings and accomplishments integral to the fallibly human personhoods of diverse ‘Church Fathers’<sup>49</sup> – Houston appears to have derived a wisdom that is sure of its own truths but humbly heedful of not dictating unduly to others.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, as a self-proclaimed ‘worldly Christian – even as he also presents as a ‘joyous exile’ from mainstream secular society (Houston, 2019, p.xiii) – it is evident, not least from his *Memoirs*, that he *has* entered into the world: into the under-developed spaces of many places in the Global South (he would likely still say ‘Third World’);<sup>51</sup> into the apocalyptically-charged spaces of nuclear politics through his spiritual companionship with Soviet Cold War ‘warriors’; into the conflictual spaces of South African anti-Apartheid struggles; into resisting the hateful spaces of American racism; and much more. He has allowed the ethics and politics of these spaces to play upon his theology, and to recognise the salience of claims that may now be framed as ‘decolonial’ or of cries emerging from those who are dispossessed, victims of abusive modern mindsets that he so surely rebukes in his 1978 chapter (and to an extent elsewhere).

The case can be advanced that Houston’s theology is indeed a *geographical theology*, where the prime direction of travel for him has been from geography to theology. The content of his theology – its history of ideas, its spiritualism, its non-reductionist alertness to the particularities of people, ideas, spirit and place, its learnings (its ‘witnessing’ and ‘wisdom’) derived from such particularities – reflects, as he acknowledges, an acute geographical sensibility.<sup>52</sup> The practice of his theology as ‘spiritual direction’ or ‘soul care’ is also informed by a contextual-environmental openness to the whole person, whether tutee, counsellor, partner, colleague or whoever. In this latter regard, Houston might even be seen as a proponent of ‘applied theology’. Geographer Callum Sutherland (2017) has coined the term ‘theography’ to designate inquiry into the spatialities of how the ‘religious subject’ – the person questing for religious and spiritual insight – comes to know, and in various (imperfect) ways becomes able to ideate for themselves, the ‘theological’ coordinates (and struggles) of their religious selfhood in the horizon of possible ‘transcendence’. In quite other vocabularies, to be sure, Houston has seemingly

arrived at a parallel grasp of how the ‘religious subject’ comes into formation, but more with the goal of applying such an understanding in his own spiritual encouragement of individuals towards a mode of being ‘in place’ with Christ.

If Houston’s trajectory has indeed been from geography to theology, then the mirror-image move, from theology – or immersion in ‘holy orders’ – to geography, can be detected in the biography of Anne Buttimer (1938–2017), the celebrated humanist(ic) geographer who also contributed an essay to the Ley and Samuels collection (Buttimer, 1978). Buttimer’s case is perhaps less clear-cut, more overlapping throughout, in that she undertook undergraduate and Masters Geography degrees *before* entering the Dominican order (in Tacoma, US) and also maintained links to geography while *in* the order (Maddrell & Buttimer, 2009). She formally relinquished her holy vows in 1976, but it is evident that her religious values – including her Dominican theology – then continued profoundly to shape her work as a geographer. As Maddrell reflects:

Buttimer (1987a) wrote that the Dominican ethos of *contemplata aliis tradere* (sharing with others the fruits of one’s own contemplation) has motivated and directed all her professional work, an ethos which continued to influence her life and work. Clearly her spiritual journey has affected not only her life decisions but also a sense of what geography can offer humankind, inspiring her work ... (Maddrell & Buttimer, 2009, p. 743)

As such, Buttimer’s approach might be described, with caveats, as a *theological geography*, where it is the theology – or, as in McCarthy’s Paisley study, a more inchoate sense of religious belief shaping geographical focus – that comes to infuse the geography rather than *vice versa*.

For both Buttimer and Houston, however, the distinction – between geographical theologian and theological geographer – remains fuzzy, necessarily hedged with caveats. For instance, glimmers emerge of a possible reciprocal move for Houston whereby, paralleling Buttimer, a ‘travelling of theory’ (Said, 1983), of theology into geography, arises when he brings the (biblically-inspired) idea of environmental ‘stewardship’ into the orbit of humanistic geography and the wider discipline. That said, Houston says little else about how theology – and more narrowly *his* Christian theology – might play back upon the concepts, methods, ethics and more of academic geography. For the most part, he has simply left that domain behind in Oxford. ‘With my Oxford students, we frequently discussed what it means to be a ‘Christian geographer’ (Houston, 2019, p. 117),<sup>53</sup> but that problematic unsurprisingly ceased to preoccupy him once embroiled in Vancouver and the nurturing of ‘spiritual theology’.

That this was the case for Houston perhaps explains his curious *non*-presence in the literature of geographers explicitly debating what a Christian geography, a geography flavoured by Christian theology, belief and spirituality, might entail. For instance, he is entirely absent from the philosophically and theologically wide-ranging collection *Geography and Worldview: A Christian Reconnaissance* (Aay & Griffioen, 1998), notwithstanding that several essays here (Griffioen, 1998; Ley, 1998; Wallace, 1998)<sup>54</sup> proceed from much the same disenchantment with secular-Enlightenment colonisations of knowledge – and with much the same acknowledgement of what ‘postmodern epistemologies’ both offer, by cracking open the confines of conventional knowledge-making, and threaten, by substituting instead an anything-goes relativism – that engages some of Houston’s thinking.<sup>55</sup> The same absence is true in other texts where the contours of

a theologically-inspired geography or more narrowly a Christian geography have been explored (e.g. Clark, 1991; Clark & Sleeman, 1991; Denning et al., 2022; Ley, 1974; Pacione, 1999; Slater, 2004; Wallace, 1998, 1985). In more recent years the dial has shifted, with theological concerns more complexly interwoven into debates about ‘geographies of postsecularity’ (Cloke et al., 2019) or ‘postsecular geographies’ (Williams, 2015) – addressing how ethics (or ‘theo-ethics’) are now interwoven with practices of care, service, activism, consumption, political conduct and more, sometimes complicit with and at other times oppositional to neoliberalism – but where Houston again remains a source untapped.

Maybe there is just too much of a disconnect between his geographical theology and the concerns of theological geography, or perhaps too fugitive are his remarks leaning into the baggy field of geographies of religion,<sup>56</sup> for Houston to register in the relevant literatures. That he *has* become an eminent theologian, evidently a writer of numerous well-known books spanning academic theology, church history and more popular versions of Christian outreach or Christian therapeutics, is nonetheless worthy of notice. That his endeavours in these respects are characterised by him and others as those of a ‘geographer of the soul’ is compelling; that he has embodied, practised and voiced a distinctive gathering-place between geography and theology is thought-provoking; and that he has personally witnessed a century of change in theology, geography and the spirited worlds beyond is remarkable.

## Notes

1. It includes a perhaps surprising amount on what might now be termed the settlement’s ‘biopolitical’ health geographies, recreating patterns and chronologies of disease outbreaks during the 1800s, as well as issues to do with water supplies.
2. ‘This was the church which the monks founded in the tiny village of Seedhills when they settled there, and its existence is well substantiated by the charter of the Abbey’ (McCarthy, 1969, p. 14).
3. Under the Abbey’s rule, the ‘use of existing [labour] and encouragement of crafts had at least as much significance as the effect of the Industrial Revolution. Through it the village became a burgh [an officially recognised market] and craftsmen settled, and it is not too far-fetched to imagine that the home craft of weaving was first fostered by them. By comparison, the Industrial Revolution mechanised an existing industry and doubled and quadrupled the population annually, but, without the Abbey, the small population of less than 2,000 which existed there at the beginning of the [eighteenth] century might not have been there at all’ (McCarthy, 1969, p. 17).
4. Indeed, three sizeable paragraphs are given over to the aims and accomplishments of Walter Fitzalan, founder of the monastery (McCarthy, 1969, pp. 16–17).
5. For a brief overview of Houston’s biography, see <https://www.jimhouston.org/about>. This text is part of a well-populated website (<https://www.jimhouston.org>) with copious information about his many theological and spiritual publications. It also includes a sequence of blog-posts, ‘Letters from a Hospital Bed: Reflections from a 99 year old’, with a remarkable sense of optimism informed by the psalmists, and often deploying geographical metaphors (landscapes, rivers, valleys) to capture his sense of the ‘emotional dustbowl’ created proximately – by pandemic and its mental health challenges, geopolitical ruptures in Ukraine, interruptions to global grain supply, racing inflation, and more – and contextually – by the failings of ‘rationality’ and ‘an unravelling beyond our cognitive capacities’.
6. The Plymouth Brethren, founded in the 1820s with a decisive early meeting in Plymouth, UK, is a strict Calvinist movement, described as ‘traditional’ and ‘low church’ but also



‘maverick’, with an emphasis on ‘exclusivity’ and keeping a distance from secular society, other faiths and even other Christians (see <https://victorian-era.org/plymouth-brethren.html>). Houston is clearly influenced by the Brethren, but without being anything like so ‘exclusive’ or suspicious of worldly things: indeed, as per his 2019 memoir, he regards himself as a ‘worldly Christian’.

7. Houston notes a key distinction between his parents: ‘My mother was considered ‘open-minded’; she came from the ‘Open’ Brethren. However, my father came from the ‘Glanton’ Brethren, an offshoot of the ‘London’ or ‘Tight’ Brethren. There has been, then, some tensions between my parents. I had always navigated between them, feeling much more sympathetic to my mother’ (Houston, 2019, p. 16; see also Thomas, 1993, pp. 6–7). The history and indeed geography of the Brethren has been extremely tangled.
8. Alan Ogilvie is a significant figure in the history of British (and Scottish) geography (see Withers, 2011). On the history of geography at the University of Edinburgh, with material on the (post-)war time Edinburgh department adjacent to when Houston studied there, see Withers (2008). Reminiscences touching in part on this period can be found in Howell et al (2008).
9. ‘Unbeknownst to us all, Professor Ogilvie had been a spy in the Balkans during the First World War, and he was supplying RAF intelligence with recruits, to join the war in the Western Mediterranean’ (Houston, 2019, p. 11). Withers (2011, no pagination) reports that ‘[i]n July 1915 [Ogilvie] was transferred to intelligence duties in connection with the Mediterranean expeditionary force,’ as well as noting his work on mapping and telegraphy, including for ‘the geographical section of the War Office’ and ‘the geographical section of the British peace delegation’ to Paris in 1919. During WWII, Ogilvie was ‘involved in the production of the *Geographical Handbooks* for the naval intelligence division.’
10. At this time Houston also undertook research for the Planning Division of the Department of Health for Scotland, elements of which informed a paper delivered at a British Association meeting in Dundee in 1947 that was subsequently published with the title ‘Village planning in Scotland, 1745-1845’ (Houston, 1948). This study became a departure-point for further research work reported in the present journal (Lockhart, 1978, 1980; Philip, 2003). This study was followed up, once at Oxford and inspired by E.W. Gilbert, by a substantial archivally-based inquiry into the historical geography of ‘The Scottish burgh’ (Houston, 1950) that has also been referenced subsequently in the present journal (Whitehand & Alauddin, 1969).
11. As part of this Fellowship, he also ‘had to write a B.Sc. thesis on the cultural contrast between the Scottish and English sides of the Solway Firth Plain’ (Houston, 2019, p. 14): the impression is that this project held the same status of enhanced undergraduate study as McCarthy’s B.Litt. It informed a paper on the rural settlement of the Solway Firth that Houston delivered at an International Geographical Union Commission event in Lisbon in 1949 (referenced in Lockhart, 1978).
12. A sense of geography at the University of Oxford, as researched and taught over the century following the establishment of ‘the Mackinder Readership, can be gained from Coones (1989).
13. The contributions of British geographers to the WWII war effort, notably to the Admiralty’s *Geographical Handbooks*, are documented in Balchin (1987).
14. Houston’s D.Phil. thesis, supervised by the wonderfully eclectic Oxford geographer E.W. Gilbert, had the enticing title of *The Social Geography of the Heurta of Valencia*. In its openness to matters of culture – taking seriously ‘cultural transmission’, maybe too the hybridities of cultural ideas and practices around ‘horticultural’ innovations – and in its alertness to the cultures of ‘indigenous’ peoples, the Aztecs, and peoples of other (here non-Christian) faiths, there are elements that sound refreshingly contemporary (even perhaps ‘decolonial’).
15. ‘My indebtedness to French geographers, in particular, is immense,’ writes Houston before evoking Sorre’s attention to landscape, adding – in a comment reflecting an admirable counter to Anglocentric geography – that ‘[t]his attitude is now being revived by [some]

- Italian geographers, and by some Iberian geographers trained in France' (Houston, 1964, p.vii).
16. A reference to how geography as Anglophone spatial science or locational analysis had, by the 1950s and 1960s, directed stinging criticisms at a older, seemingly unscientific and ineffectually descriptive regional geography. Space precludes me offering more to contextualise key directions, debates and disagreements in British academic geography during the middling years of the last century, and I have to assume that the reader will have passing familiarity with the struggle between regional geography and spatial science.
  17. Plutarch was an Ancient Greek philosopher. Houston (1964, pp. 706–707) tellingly elaborates and critiques different epistemological positions associated with the term 'synthesis', including even a nod to Hegelian dialectics, essentially to debunk any notion that his own work here – even at its gargantuan length – could ever provide 'a complete geographical synthesis' (Houston, 1964, pp. 706–707).
  18. In line with the painterly theme, Houston positions Ruskin's approach to 'the art of painting the landscape' as 'syncratic' (Houston, 1964, p. 707). Ruskin, celebrated art critic, philosopher and polymath of Victorian Britain, had a complex relationship with Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity. It is unsurprising perhaps that he has attracted Houston's attention.
  19. In my own 1992 discussion of rural geography's relative dearth of socially-inflected inquiry prior to that date, I had actually noted, as an exception, Houston's 1954 text. As I wrote there: 'another interesting early example is J.M. Houston's (1954) lengthy treatment of 'rural geography' in a text entitled *A Social Geography of Europe* which is itself framed quite explicitly against complex debates over the respective identities of geography, history and sociology' (Philo, 1992, Note 26, p.204). I did immediately add, however, that 'the rural chapters tend to provide quite conventional and morphological accounts of landscape, settlement and house types.' In this text Houston traces French precedents for naming and conducting 'social geography', leading it to be the first port of call in one paper exploring 'early occurrences' of the term (Dunbar, 1977).
  20. At the close of this work, Houston speculates about what might be usefully learned from specific religious-spiritual values, *both* Christian and non-Christian, imprinted into landscapes: 'From the Muslims we can re-establish the qualities of neighbourliness, to counteract modern mass-mindedness. From the medieval Christians we can recognise again the values of local initiative through strong municipal government, and so avoid over-centralisation' (Houston, 1964, p. 708).
  21. The parallels between Houston and Wreford Watson are legion: their links to Edinburgh and specifically the University of Edinburgh, with Wreford Watson as staff member in Geography 1954–1973 (then as Director of the Centre for Canadian Studies 1973–1982); their Canadian connections, with Wreford Watson holding appointments at Canadian Geography departments 1939–1953; their penchant for characterising their work as 'social geography', a term that Wreford Watson used in publication titles alongside writing a landmark essay on 'The sociological aspects of geography' (Watson, 1951); their interest in 'souls', with Wreford Watson giving a presidential address to the Institute of British Geographers on 'The soul of geography' (Watson, 1983); and their religious adherence, with Wreford Watson, while always pre-eminently an academic geographer, authoring religious poetry. For relevant discussion of Wreford Watson, see Collins (1991), Johnston (1993), Philo (2017), Robinson (1999), and biographical outline at <https://www.howold.co/person/james-wreford-watson/biography>. Might there be a common constellation of approach, conviction, thought and practice here that comprises something distinctive in the history of Scottish geography?
  22. Nicely, in turn, one writer states that: 'If there is any 'methodology' that I learned from Jim Houston, as a student of his from 1996–2000, it was to fight reductionism in any form ... particularly as one reads the great Christian authors of the past' (Canlis, 2012, no pagination). Relatedly, she underscores Houston's 'methodological generosity,' and how, when lecturing on the Christian 'giants' of the deep past, he was always 'delving into the history,

- foibles, cultural background, and childhood ... , modelling a non-reductive approach to reading and to life' (Canlis, 2012, no pagination).
23. Boersma (2012, no pagination) suggests that Houston's 'whole career was founded on ... Christian personalism.' Canlis (2012, no pagination, original emphasis) suggests that his 'golden thread ... was [his] quest for the *personal* – whether in his relationship to past authors or current students.' See also the previous Note.
  24. 'From his days as an Oxford tutor, Houston saw that God was calling him to be not only a geography tutor in the academic sense but also a counselor and friend' (Thomas, 1993, p. 9).
  25. Houston himself narrates an emerging vision – a calling perhaps – to switch career from academic geography into running a Bible College, something then fuelled by a series of 'remarkable coincidences ... beyond our wildest dreams' (Houston, 2019, p. 58) leading to his central role in the founding of Regent College.
  26. 'It is the formation of Christian character and conduct that is essential, not just being an academic factory that manufactures products called 'degrees' and 'diplomas'' (Houston, 2019, p. 63).
  27. For a full listing of Houston's book-length theological writings, see <https://www.jimhouston.org/books>.
  28. Reference is made to why lament is so needed today: due to terrorism, violence, global warming, environmental disasters, ageing populations, depression, 'stress-related diseases', and more.
  29. Williams does not reference Waltke et al. (2014).
  30. The central argument of these authors, as I grasp it, is that, while the Old Testament lamentation of the psalmists 'may be accusatory of God' – particularly when people suppose themselves to be suffering for following a righteous path – the New Testament teaches that 'suffering is constitutive of the Christian faith' and so 'a voiced protest' *contra* God 'is not heard in Christ's or the apostles' teaching' (Waltke et al., 2014, p. 5). As such, Christians can and indeed should lament, but cannot turn that lament into a criticism of God, which they fear ultimately does occur in Brueggemann's writings.
  31. Here, of course, I have only scratched the surface of how Houston's 'spiritual theology' (and his many publications in and around this field) *might* be of relevance to theologically-inspired geographers.
  32. 'I taught environmental ethics at the university's Geography Department. ... Students attracted to my environmental ethics course at UBC included young lawyers and political scientists who later created the Greenpeace Movement' (Houston, 2019, p. 65).
  33. Ley and Houston presumably knew of each other through the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. In the contributor listing for the collection, Houston is recorded as 'Principal of Regent College, Vancouver, and Honorary Lecturer in Geography at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver,' and Ley as 'Associate Professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.'
  34. Revealingly, here is how the collection's editors summarise Houston's contribution: 'Houston (chapter 14) addresses the timeless issue of the [hu]man-environment relation as mediated through the idea of the land in the Judaeo-Christian ethic. As is true in many such areas the original idea has been submerged in an ongoing dialectic of consciousness and action and has now been transformed into an aggressive ideology antithetical to the stewardship motif of the original mandate' (Ley & Samuels, 1978b, p. 15).
  35. In concluding his Mediterranean *magnum opus*, he speaks about humanity's often 'destructive thoughtlessness' in how it exploits the environment of a given 'territory', critiquing humanity's 'dangerous and naïve faith in material progress and ... temptation to live beyond [its] means' (Houston, 1964, pp. 707–708). He also wonders if something can be learned from 'the simple Mediterranean peasantry,' for whom 'balance and restraint have been the wise directives in the quest for *Bios*, 'life according to reason'' (Houston, 1964, p. 708). Themes from the 1978 chapter are hence lightly foreshadowed here.
  36. A further sense of Houston's environmental theology can be discerned from a 1976 lecture (Houston, 1976). Here he argues that 'this ecological threat to our planet earth is the mirror

image of our own values and our own motives, and therefore there is to survive a great need for Western man [*sic.*] to change gear, perhaps even more so to radically restructure his private and his public values, and indeed his institutions' (Houston, 1976, no pagination). He explores how North American landscapes indeed mirror a human mindset beset by commodities, disposability and waste, what he terms a 'Kleenex culture' suggesting that it can always and easily be wiped away, as well as worrying about the new 'paganism' or back-to-nature romanticism that neglects the hardships, for humans and other beings, of an ultimately 'amoral', red-in-tooth-and-claw, nature as 'wilderness'. He favours instead returning to biblical instruction that teaches humanity how 'wisdom is living creaturely. Wisdom is living with sagacity in a structured world, where everything is not in flux, everything is not just simply processes, but where human life is lived eventfully because of our uniqueness before the stewardship that we have in the mandate that we have of God' (Houston, 1976, no pagination).

37. Doughty structures his paper as a response to the well-known claims of historian Lynn White about the extensive *blame* that Judaeo-Christianity must take for the emergence of a rapacious, nature-dominating modern society precisely for its 'anthropocentric' elevation of the human above nature (White, 1967). White's claims are also rebuked by Houston on the basis of what he regards as a fairer, more nuanced return to biblical authority: indeed, a substantial section of his 1976 lecture is devoted to this matter (Houston, 1976, no pagination). With characteristic honesty, though, Houston (1976, no pagination) admits the following: 'we have to confess that there has been, on the part of many of us – and I would include myself with those who are Christians – that there have been many of us as Christians who have had a woeful lack of insight and thought concerning our environment, that we have not really thought these things through, and [that] it's time we did.'
38. Curiously, Houston (1978) remains unreferenced in virtually all the relevant works that I have consulted about geography and environmental theology (see also conclusion).
39. 'My training, after all, was in the history of ideas' (Houston, 2019, p.xii).
40. Such a vision of physical landscapes transmuted into cultural landscapes under the impress of 'culture', often taken to entail ideas, meanings, values, mind-sets or belief-systems, can of course be found in many versions of academic geography.
41. 'I was asked by the publisher of my university text to edit a whole series of books, which continued to flow long after I had left Oxford: *China* ([Tuan,] 1970), *The Soviet Union* ([Parker,] 1969), *Ireland* ([Orme,] 1970), *New Zealand* ([Cumberland & Whitelaw,] 1970), *Terrain Evaluation* ([Mitchell,] 1973), *Australia* ([Heathcote,] 1976), *France* ([Beaujeu-Garnier,] 1976), *Japan* ([Kornhauser,] 1976), *Brazil* ([Dickenson,] 1982), *Nigeria* ([Morgan,] 1983), *Italy* ([unknown,] 1983), and *Eastern Europe* ([Rugg,] 1985)' (Houston, 2019, p. 118). I have identified the authors of all but the Italy volume (see names in square brackets above), several being notable academic geographers with substantial scholarly track records. Not all publication dates located in my search are the same as those cited by Houston.
42. The theme of 'cause *not* career' is crucial for Houston. He evidently believes that there *is* a reason to study, teach and learn geography – at least, geography in a regional-humanist guise – that is about *more* than just pursuing a career; and such a stance surely also underlay his own quitting of a professional geography career for a purpose ultimately more meaningful to him (one that did give him a second career, but might well not have done). This prioritising of 'cause *over* career' also echoes across versions of critical or 'committed' social science suspicious about the deadening – depoliticising – effects of 'professionalisation' and 'credentialisation' in academic life (e.g. Merrifield, 2017).
43. Elsewhere, Houston (2019, p. 126) states that '[c]ultural studies were always my *forte*, even in writing these memoirs, concerning the great cultural changes of the twentieth century,' a statement immediately followed by a claim about how much he has learned, including about 'human emotions', from visits to the Far East.

44. Earlier in this piece I have recovered something of how Houston framed his Mediterranean survey in the book itself, including his reflection that it might better be cast as a work of 'syncretism' than one of 'synthesis'.
45. I feel more confident in arriving at such a statement when running these words from Houston's *Memoir* alongside the likes of his core claims about 'place' from the 1978 essay (see above in main text).
46. Thomas bases his account in part on interviews with Houston, and it seems likely that this phrase came up during these interviews (and maybe what was discussed then subsequently influenced Houston in his 2019 *Memoirs*).
47. A directly parallel argument can be made about how Liz Bondi's brilliant work as a scholarly geographer – informed by intellectual resources from feminism and psychoanalysis – has threaded through into the heart of what is now the main focus of her professional work, being a psychotherapeutic counsellor ever alert to the micro-spatialities of intimate, emotionally-charged relations between persons (including between counsellor and counselled): for a discussion, see Parr and Philo (2020). Another example might be Millicent Todd Bingham (1880–1968), an academic geographer following in the regional traditions of the French school of human geography, who switched into a literary role editing the poems and letters of American poet Emily Dickinson – work commenced by Bingham's mother, Mabel Loomis Todd – as well as publishing works central to scholarship on Dickinson: for a discussion, see Berman (1980).
48. Light-years away from the closed-minded, self-righteous aggression of what Susan Shaw, a US Southern Baptist, calls 'Christian mean' (at <https://baptistnews.com/article/i-wrote-about-climate-change-now-im-hearing-from-mean-christians/#.YrS9p0bMLIW>).
49. Houston is seemingly alert to dangers of overly patriarchal Christianity. In the specific context of what he perceived about Japanese gender relations from visits to Japan and also the circumstances of Japanese women students at Regent College, he acknowledges that Protestantism's impulse to distance itself from Catholic 'Mariology' 'leads to downgrading women in other chauvinistic ways' (Houston, 2019, p. 127).
50. That said, Houston obviously abides by a very strong moral code, shaped by his Brethren upbringing and the 'seven vital attitudes' underpinning Regent College (discussed in Houston, 2019, p. 62), and on occasion he will talk about Christians being led 'into error' and 'apostasy'. A dialogue between him and secular, critical geographers could never be easy, to be sure, but I hope that this contribution shows possible grounds for dialogue.
51. In various registers he criticises 'Western arrogance' (Houston, 2019, p. 128) in both himself and others, a criticism of a piece with his geographical sensitivity to the lives, ideas and worlds of other humans living in other places.
52. A reviewer beautifully captures matters: 'If Jim Houston has moved further down the passage from geography to theology than any other practitioner of theological geography, it could be argued that his geography gave him the epistemology (synthesis, the 'whole human', anti-reductionism, the power of ideas) that enabled his theology to flourish'. In the terms of my paper, I would propose that he moved sufficiently far 'down the passage' as to become a practitioner of geographical theology, rather than of theological geography. Moreover, Claire Taylor, in a personal communication, reflects: 'We have for years heard Dad describe himself as a 'geographer of ideas'. I think he still aligns himself much more as a geographer than a theologian, but his relational faith is his main identity' (Taylor, personal communication, 13/08/2022).
53. Tantalisingly, he adds that '[a] few of my alumni still meet periodically for that purpose!' (Houston, 2019, p. 117).
54. The conference on which this collection is based was attended by 'fourteen geographers and one philosopher' (Aay & Griffioen, 1998, p.ix). Perhaps Houston's academic-professional basis in 'big-T' Theology (rather than 'big-G' Geography) has some relevance in this respect.
55. Houston dates postmodernism to the Cuban missile crisis of June 1962, an event which 'triggered a series of radical changes in Western civilization,' student protest, sexual

revolution, feminism and more, as well as a new opening for a 'radical' and 'worldly' Christianity (after Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian, Lutheran pastor and anti-Nazi) embracing new flexibilities and formulating new Christian alternatives (Houston, 2019, pp. 86–87).

56. In their many and varied guises, inquiries into geographies of religion are simply too numerous to encapsulate here (although see the framing in Park, 1994). My impression, derived from sustained reading in this overall field (Philo et al., 2011), is that Houston is indeed absent with the occasional exception of his 1978 chapter (e.g. in Clark, 1991; and Park, 1994). Recall that Houston explicitly distanced his approach from studies of religion.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to Katrina Steckle for sending me and giving me permission to use the Arthur Dickens Thomas Jr. (1983) article from *CRUX: A Quarterly Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion* published by Regent College (for which there is no publicly accessible online version). I must express my sincere gratitude to two reviewers for their wise comments and suggestions, to which I have sought where possible to respond, and also to Callum Sutherland and Andy Williams for their generous readings. Most importantly, though, I am humbled by the extremely kind responses to my article offered by James Houston and Claire Taylor, his daughter, and for their granting of permission to reproduce the images in Figures 2 and 3.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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