


Can land help church history? A spatialised historical methodology using land contestations



Author:

Ntandoyenkosi N.N.
Mlambo¹ 

Affiliation:

¹Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Ntandoyenkosi Mlambo,
mlambnnn@unisa.ac.za

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Time has historically been discussed as a container of history, with many philosophers exploring it as a dynamic concept. However, the emphasis on the dynamism of time has led to a diminished appreciation of space's equally dynamic nature. Space (such as land) plays a crucial role in historical narratives, particularly in contested areas like South Africa. It allows for what has been referred to as dynamism in analysis, alongside time. This article proposes a spatial-temporal method for studying history, particularly church history, using a qualitative research approach. Firstly, the article examines the relationship and dynamics between time and space through a literature review. Secondly, it discusses spatial contestations (particularly regarding church land) with examples from South Africa. Finally, it reflects on a temporal and spatialised methodology in church history. The article advocates for a spatial-temporal methodology in church history, which includes the use of space as a mode of analysis, a decolonial perspective on memory, and an interdisciplinary approach.

Contribution: This article aligns with the scope of the journal by fostering a conversation around the methodology regarding church history and the interrelated concepts of time and space.

Keywords: church history; land; methodology; space; time.

Introduction

Time is often seen as the container of history, with philosophers like Bergson exploring the concept. However, the elevation of time has led other philosophers to discuss the devaluation of space. Foucault (1980) states:

Did it start with Bergson or before? Space was treated as the dead, fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. For all who confuse history with old schemas of evolution, living continuity ... the use of spatial terms seems to have the air of an anti-history. If one started to talk in terms of space that meant one was hostile to time. (p. 70)

Space holds value in the telling of history, particularly in contested places such as South Africa. It provides what Massey (2005:n.p.) calls dynamism in analysis alongside time. In this article, a spatial-temporal method for history, specifically church history, will be suggested using a qualitative research approach. Firstly, the article will review the concepts of time, space, and the relationship and dynamics between them through a literature review. It will then explore spatial contestations (particularly concerning land owned by churches) with examples from South Africa. Finally, the article will introduce a spatial-temporal methodology for church history. This methodology incorporates space as a mode of analysis, adopts a decolonial view of memory, and is interdisciplinary in nature.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research method, drawing on journal articles, papers, books, dissertations, and theses. These sources provide an overview of the concepts of time, space, and their relationship. They are also used to discuss potential transformations in the methodology of church history. Additionally, a decolonial theoretical framework underpins the creation and dynamics of this methodology. This framework seeks to move beyond the modernist emphasis on time towards a spatio-temporal perspective. The following section discusses different scholarly contributions on the concept of time and its valuation in relation to space.

Time and its valuation in relation to space

The concept of time has been studied for centuries, particularly through philosophy and historical inquiry. Henri Bergson is one of the scholars who emphasised the primacy of time as a concept.

Bergson (1911) argues that time and space should not be conflated:

More particularly, in regard to concrete extension, continuous, diversified and at the same time organised, we do not see why it should be bound up with the amorphous and inert space which subtends it a space which we divide indefinitely. (p. 244)

This view regards time as continuous, while space is seen as consisting of instants, infinitely divisible (Massey 2005:22). These views portray space negatively, implying it is devoid of movement or duration (Massey 2005:22). Bergson (1911) further states:

Movement visibly consists in passing from one point to another, and consequently in traversing space. Now the space which is traversed is infinitely divisible; and as the movement is, so to speak, applied to the line along which it passes, it appears to be one with this line and, like it, divisible. (p. 248)

Bergson's view reduces space to something inferior to time in all aspects. He perceives space as abstract and static because of its divisibility, whereas time, in his view, is continuous and inherently dynamic.

In addition to his views on time as continuous, Bergson also discusses the relationship between the past and the present. He (Bergson 1911:191) suggests that the past is represented in our psychical life. This psychical life influences our present state without necessarily determining it. Bergson (1911:192) asserts that the brain is conscious only of the present moment and is part of the process of becoming. Furthermore, he (Bergson 1911:192) argues that the continuity of existence is attributed to consciousness which 'make of its past a reality which endures and is prolonged into its present'.

Thus, according to Bergson's conception, the brain finds consciousness in the present but constructs a past reality that endures over time. While the past influences the present, it does not dictate it. Bergson holds that the conscious brain continually creates and recreates a reality of the past.

Boundas (1996:81) expands on the work of both Bergson and Deleuze, philosophers of time. He (Boundas 1996:81) notes that Deleuze centralises Bergson's thoughts on time. Boundas (1996:82) encapsulates the work of Bergson and Deleuze in the formula 'multiplicity = movement = becoming = difference'. This formula, which involves multiplicity and constant change, provides a complex view of time (Boundas 1996:82). Deleuze views time as a continuous multiplicity (Boundas 1996:83). This multiplicity, consisting of connected continuous moments, relates to duration or time (Boundas 1996:83). Thus, both Deleuze and Bergson conceive of time as continuous.

In a series of lectures, Peirce (1992a:241) introduces what he calls the universal concept of habits and states:

The most plastic of all things is the human mind, and next after that comes the organic world, the world of protoplasm. Now the generalising tendency is the great law of mind, the law of association, the law of habit-taking. We also find in all active

protoplasm a tendency to take habits. Hence I was led to the hypothesis that the laws of the universe have been formed under a universal tendency of all things toward generalization and habit-taking. (p. 241)

Building on this, Peirce (1992b:261–262) analyses the logic of continuity through habit-making, using a blackboard analogy to illustrate his point. He (Peirce 1992b:263) explains that chalking on a blackboard exemplifies a process 'in which the generalising tendency builds up new habits from chance occurrences'. As the chalk line extends, it creates newness, yet retains continuity from the blackboard itself (Peirce 1992b:263). As the line grows, it gradually loses its individuality (Peirce 1992b:263). Like Deleuze and Bergson, Peirce views time as continuous and unbreakable.

While Bergson, Deleuze, and Peirce focus on the concept of time as continuous and not breakable, Foucault discusses its discontinuity. He (Foucault 1984:81) uses genealogy to explore ruptures in time and explains that genealogy does not trace the destiny of people but follows a complex process of descent. This process reflects accidents, small deviations, and complete reversals, which 'gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us ...' (Foucault 1984:81). Foucault (1984:83) argues that descent, or time in progress, leaves marks and ruptures, giving it a discontinuous character. The body, he suggests, embodies the progress of time. Furthermore, due to the progress of time through descent, 'effective' history (or the progression of time) is as follows (Foucault 1984):

'Effective' history differs from traditional history in being without constants. Nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men ... History becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being – as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself. (pp. 87–88)

Foucault distances himself from previous scholars' assertions of the continuous nature of time. Instead, he uses the body and its progression through time to assert time and its progress as discontinuous. Quite interestingly, he uses the body and embodiment as a case for the discontinuity of time. This presents an interesting counter to the valuation of time over space (especially bodily space). Over the past 50 years, there has been increasing scholarship around the dynamism of space, its complexities, and its value alongside time. The next section explores scholarship on space and its dynamism.

Space and its dynamism

Historically, space was viewed through Newtonian and Cartesian lenses, where it was conceived as an objective phenomenon (Costa 2016:29). Consequently, space has often been regarded as something that exists in itself and 'independently from its contents' (Costa 2016:29).

Space has historically been marked as dislocated and inherently quantifiable, whereas time has been seen as continuous and containing context and multiplicity

(Massey 2005:29). Massey challenges these views in her book, *For Space*. Bergson's prioritisation of time over space has, she (Massey 2005:21) argues, had a damaging effect on the philosophy of space. This has led to a modernist perception of time (Massey 2005:21).

Massey (2005:10) makes three key claims about space in her book. Firstly, she asserts that space is interrelated with other concepts and that there has been an emergence of a movement against essentialism. Space is a product of these interrelations. Secondly, space can be seen as a sphere that contains multiplicity, where no single universal story can be told (Massey 2005:10). Thirdly, space is constantly in the process of being reshaped and reformed by subjectivities, meaning that, like time, it is open to change (Massey 2005:11). In making these claims, Massey challenges both Bergson and Deleuze. She (Massey 2005:24) opposes Bergson's argument that time is the ultimate concept over space, and she disputes Deleuze's assertion that space and time are unequal.

Massey (2005:30) further explores the potential of space and its dynamic nature, arguing that space surpasses time because it represents history or the real world. Space, then, is intrinsically connected to real-life, and despite the traditional portrayal of space as dislocated, Massey (2005:30) contends that the ordering of space overcomes temporal dislocation.

Lefebvre, in his book *The Production of Space* (1991), also challenges the notion of time being superior to space. He (Lefebvre 1991:71–73) posits that humanity, or social practice, makes and produces things. Space is therefore not an object or a product but encompasses things that are produced, including interrelationships (Lefebvre 1991:71–73). It is part of a set of operations and cannot be reduced to a mere object (Lefebvre 1991:71–73). Moreover, social space allows for new actions and is itself the result of past actions (Lefebvre 1991:71–73).

This view, then, reveals not abstractness in space but space that is formed and reformed in social practices. Both Massey and Lefebvre highlight the ways in which space is shaped by interrelations and real-life processes, challenging the previous dominance of time in historical analysis. Their assertions resonate with Foucault's views on embodiment in time, which can also be seen as involving the complex interrelation of space and time. Additionally, they explore the openness of space, which is subject to continuous change, just like time. These ideas subvert traditional thoughts on space, suggesting that both time and space are interrelated, dynamic concepts, and should be analysed together.

Thus, as demonstrated above, there have been significant scholarly contributions recognising space as more than just an isolated entity. The increasing focus on space has been termed the 'spatial turn'. Over time, there has been growing recognition that the choice to prioritise time over space as a mode of analysis is a conceptual one.

One framework that has historically aligned with the modernist prioritisation of time is Marxism. Castree (2009:31) notes that even within Marxism, time is consistently chosen over space. In the analysis of capitalism, Harvey (1985:141) similarly describes space as the 'step-child' in relation to time and argues that scholars like Marx, Marshall, Weber, and Durkheim have commonly chosen to prioritise time over space.

Marxism adopted a modernist epistemological methodology. However, by the 1980s, the 'spatial turn' emerged in the social sciences (Castree 2009:32), leading to the exploration of "location", "positionality", "place", "site", "border" and "horizon" in fields ranging from philosophy to cultural studies to English literature' (Castree 2009:32).

Castree (2009:27) discusses the interrelations in space and time by analysing capitalism, arguing that it is constituted through both time and space. Space and time are integral components of capitalism, and Castree (2009:27) promotes a spatio-temporal view of capitalism. This perspective reveals the complex and dynamic processes in which 'diverse material landscapes of commodity production, distribution, exchange, consumption, servicing, and disposal' operate (Castree 2009:27).

As the 'spatial turn' and an understanding of time and space being part of social processes has deepened, space has been analysed in greater detail, with scholars increasingly recognising its complexity and the need to integrate time and space in the analysis of social processes.

Having examined the interconnectedness of time and space, it is important to look at discussions on church history methodology and historiography, as well as an overview of land contestation in South Africa and the involvement of South African churches.

Discussions on church history methodology and historiography

Church history is considered the broadest discipline within historical studies of the church's past (Bradley & Muller 2016:17). It encompasses scholarly discussions on church practices as well as the thoughts of the church, doctrinal developments, and the interaction between the church and society (Bradley & Muller 2016:17). Initially, church historians focused on confessional history, but after the Reformation, critical church history emerged (Bradley & Muller 2016:19). This shift included a stronger emphasis on analysing original documents and the freedom to interpret sources without predetermined objectives (Bradley & Muller 2016:19–23). Bradley and Muller (2016:31) observe that the term 'history' is very ambiguous. They note that history includes both past events and written contemporary accounts (Bradley & Muller 2016:31), as well as primary (first-hand) and secondary (second-hand) sources (removed accounts on the historical narrative) (Bradley & Muller 2016:34). Their work is comprehensive but does not engage deeply with the concept of space.

Kosso (2009:9) notes that the challenges in historiography (the writing of history) are mainly epistemological. The core concern regarding epistemologies lies in the description and understanding of the past (Kosso 2009:9).

Historiography is also troubled by the question of objectivity (Newall 2009:172). Newall (2009:172) explains that, in some scholarly debates, objectivity is the goal of history-writing; however, he argues that objectivity may be limited by inherent biases. Furthermore, facts do not speak for themselves; they are interpreted (Newall 2009:176). Therefore, while objectivity is an aspiration, we can only approximate the truth (Newall 2009:179).

Vosloo (2017) engages with Ricoeur in the discussion on the complexities of historiography. He (Vosloo 2017:20) identifies two key issues in Ricoeur's work: Firstly, no one approaches the archive or history with a blank slate. There must be a rejection of epistemological naivety, and an understanding that facts, documents, and questions are interdependent (Vosloo 2017:20). Secondly, while subjectivity cannot be entirely avoided, there must be a careful distinction between good and bad subjectivity (Vosloo 2017:23). Moreover, access to archives and primary sources 'does not absolve us from the task of interpreting the sources and placing them within meaningful interpretive frameworks and narrative configurations' (Vosloo 2017:23). Additionally, engaging with historiography raises ethical questions on history and memory (Vosloo 2017:24).

While church history and historiography face challenges around evidence, objectivity, and the ethics of memory, another challenge that must be addressed is the treatment of time and space as lenses for historical analysis.

In some writings on historiography, there have been calls for a decolonisation or de-linking from Western views of historiography. One example is a book by Martínez-Vázquez on Latina/o historiographies (2013) in which he discusses the issue of developing historiographies. He (Martínez-Vázquez 2013:2) argues that standard narratives of United States religious historiography constitute a colonial discourse that suppresses new subjectivities. Even though some scholars have embraced new voices, historiographic paradigms remain resistant to change (Martínez-Vázquez 2013:2). In traditional historical narratives, the land of the subaltern is seen as 'discovered' rather than occupied, and subaltern voices are silenced (Martínez-Vázquez 2013:2). These images are constructed to maintain Western hegemony (Martínez-Vázquez 2013:2).

Martínez-Vázquez continues his exploration of how hegemonic historiography silences subaltern voices by discussing the potential for a Latina/o historiography. Martínez-Vázquez (2013:129) argues that subaltern memory includes reigniting the past and breaking normative understandings through embodiment. Furthermore, due to the embodiment of subaltern history, historians should

examine the experiences of the subaltern to construct their narratives (Martínez-Vázquez 2013:130). Thus, lived religion becomes an essential methodological approach to exploring subaltern histories (Martínez-Vázquez 2013:130).¹

From these discussions on historiography, several observations can be made. Firstly, there is a diversity of scholarly views on the nature of history-telling and the degree of objectivity that can be achieved. While some, like (Bradley & Muller 2016:76–77), treat history and historiography as an objective science, others, such as Kosso and Vosloo, caution against the assumption of historical neutrality and emphasise the importance of acknowledging subjectivity. Memory is a critical component in constructing historical narratives. Secondly, in a postcolonial world, there is a need for plurality in historiography, and a single, dominant view of history should be questioned. The decolonial turn, particularly in the Global South, requires an attempt to break free from normative methodologies. Finally, while primary and secondary sources are crucial, embodied sources such as lived experiences are also valuable tools for building and analysing historical narratives. These real-life experiences include experiences in spaces, demonstrating that both space and time play an important role in historical and contemporary analysis.

With these considerations in mind, I now move on to an overview of land contestation in South Africa, the involvement of South African churches, and the need for a spatial-temporal methodology in church history.

Land space contestation in South Africa and the complex involvement of South African churches

South Africa has a long history of spatial contestation, particularly over land. Numerous scholars have examined these contestations, particularly in relation to colonial settlement in the country.

An early example of land dispossession in colonial South Africa can be found in the history of the Cape and its indigenous Khoi and San peoples. As far back as the early 17th century, land was a point of contention between settler colonialists and indigenous communities (Iyer & Calvino 2021:12). After the Dutch East India Company claimed the Cape in 1652, it assumed the authority to allocate land (Davenport & Hunt 1974:1). Settlers began to establish their own tenure systems within the Cape (Davenport & Hunt 1974:1), creating property rights for themselves on indigenous lands – rights that, in many cases, still exist today.

By the 19th century, in what is now known as the Western Cape, land claimed by various colonising forces became linked to Christian faith, burgher status (citizenship), and

¹In his book, Martínez-Vázquez (2013:130) labels lived religion as 'religious practices of individuals and groups in everyday experiences'.

property rights (Malherbe 1999:2). According to Commissioner of Inquiry, J.T. Bigge (this 1822 commission was to look at conditions at the Cape, Mauritius and Ceylon [Sri Lanka]), Christian faith was a key prerequisite for citizenship (Malherbe 1999:2). However, despite this connection, the criteria for property ownership were constantly shifting for indigenous peoples, often making land acquisition practically impossible (Malherbe 1999:2). For example, Khoi and San Christians living in or near mission stations were often denied baptismal certificates, a necessary step for gaining citizenship and land rights (Malherbe 1999:2). Even though some people were granted the legal right to own land in 1828, this occurred during a period when land had already become difficult to obtain (Davenport & Hunt 1974:9). This example highlights how land dispossession operated in colonial South Africa.

During both the colonial and apartheid eras, a series of legislative measures were introduced to restrict land rights for black, Indian, and coloured people across South Africa. One of the most significant laws was the *1913 Natives Land Act*, which limited land tenure for black, Indian and coloured people² (Iyer & Calvino 2021:13). The amount of land allocated to those classified as 'natives' was initially set at 7% and later increased to 13.5% in 1963 (Iyer & Calvino 2021:14). The *1913 Natives Land Act* formalised land ownership restrictions (Iyer & Calvino 2021:13). Other laws, such as the *1936 Native Trust and Land Act* and the *Group Areas Act* during apartheid, further limited land tenure (Iyer & Calvino 2021:11–34). In post-apartheid South Africa, the dynamics of land ownership have changed very little, with the white minority still controlling the majority of privately owned land (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2017). Thus, land dispossession remains a pervasive issue in South Africa. The role of the institutional church in this history of land space is also complex.

In both my Master's and Doctoral theses, I have discussed how various church denominations in South Africa own extensive amounts of land (Mlambo 2020, 2024). In one case study on land ownership by the Roman Catholic Church in South Africa, it was shown that the church owned over 20 000 ha of land across the country, including more than 1700 properties spread across 26 dioceses (South African Catholic Bishops' Conference 2004). Of these, 87 properties were classified as rural land (SACBC 2004). Another case study focused on the ownership of multiple urban properties by St John's Parish in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town (Mlambo 2024).

Other institutional churches also own numerous properties across South Africa (Mlambo 2024). Many of these properties were granted during the colonial era, implicating the institutional church in the country's history of land space and dispossession (Mlambo 2024).

²In terms of the *Natives Land Act of 1913*, 'natives' were defined as 'any person, male or female, who is a member of an aboriginal race or tribe of Africa' (Iyer & Calvino 2021:13). I use the racial classifications that oppressed peoples still use and am aware of the complexities and histories of these. I use them as part of the historical narrative and as a note to the continued complexities.

These unequal land dynamics and the involvement of churches in land contestation highlight the need for a more dynamic form of history-telling. This method should not only track disputes over time but also engage in a spatial-temporal analysis.

Church history and a spatial-temporal method

How can church history be applied to the world today? This is a key question for me as a historian focused on the church. Legal scholar Pietro Costa (2016) discusses the 'spatial turn' in historical methodology, particularly within legal history. He (Costa 2016:27) notes that every historian engages with both time and space; however, as history is the study of the past, historians often assume that time is the distinguishing feature of their discipline. Costa (2016:27–28) explores how time is typically viewed as the unit of change that historians use in their research and methodological inquiries. Despite interdisciplinary engagement between history and geography (Costa 2016:28), there has not been sufficient emphasis on the partnership between spatial and temporal dimensions, particularly regarding their interrelation (Costa 2016:28).

Given the insights of various scholars into the dynamics of space and time, it is essential that theology, including the study of church history, embrace this dynamic and recognise space as an important factor. While other theological disciplines have experienced clear 'spatial turns', church history remains behind the curve. Therefore, it is imperative to develop a method that engages and analyses both time and space for a more comprehensive approach to history-telling.

While history is rooted in time, Ricoeur (2004) stresses the need to include spatial dimensions in history-telling:

I shall first consider its formal conditions, namely, the mutations affecting the spatiality and temporality of living memory, whether collective or private. If historiography is first of all archived memory and if all the subsequent cognitive operations taken up by the epistemology of historical knowledge proceed from this initial gesture of archiving, the historian's mutation of space and time can be taken as the formal condition of possibility for this gesture of archiving. (p. 147–148)

With this in mind, three markers for a spatial-temporal church history method can be identified: The first marker is the active use of space as a mode of analysis. This requires that memory and history-telling include the discussion, critique, and analysis of the spatial dynamics present within the archive. There should be understanding that the existing archive often relies on time as the primary mode of history-telling, but space should also be incorporated into the analytical process. Space is not the only mode of analysis but, given its historically 'step-child' role, it must be re-evaluated and paired with time more intentionally.

An example of this can be found in the history of land contestation in South Africa, which includes the occupation of land over time. These actions, which occurred over time, have had profound effects on land space. The use of land as part of the colonial process, and its subsequent impact on the people within that space, is more than just a series of activities that took place over time. It is also the reshaping of how land space is perceived and utilised, with these views evolving through history up to the present day. Therefore, *space* is an important analytical tool in history and should be used alongside *time*.

Another example can be seen in relation to Christian doctrinal formation in history. For instance, the Nicene Creed was discussed and written at a specific time, but it was also developed in a particular place, under certain conditions that influenced its content and reception. This opens new avenues for analysis. Questions such as 'Why that space?' and 'Why those people and not others?' offer a fresh perspective on church history that goes beyond time alone and incorporates spatial dimensions.

The second marker is a de-linked view of memory in the analysis. Mignolo (2017) discusses how decolonial processes entail de-linking from so-called universal ways of knowing and instead embracing contextual knowledge production (Mignolo 2017). This means that space and time should be understood within their specific contexts. For South Africa, this would involve examining the dynamics within the country and how they operate across both space and time. A universal approach to 'being-in-time' cannot apply in a method that aims to account for contextual spatial dynamics.

In discussions around de-linking, theologians have emphasised the importance of reconstructing subaltern identities outside of colonial paradigms. Baloyi (2020:7) argues that decolonisation is impossible without the reconstruction of black or subaltern identities that lie beyond the colonial paradigm.

The final marker of a spatial-temporal church history method is the need for interdisciplinary engagement, both within theology and beyond theology. The dynamics of space have been discussed across fields such as geography, sociology, and law. These disciplines offer valuable tools for producing knowledge within the field of church history. Furthermore, they reflect different aspects of life in motion, all of which serve the purpose of history-telling.

Conclusion

The conference for which this article was written, notes that 'Time plays a significant role in the formation of both the self and the other in the Abrahamic traditions' (Van der Tol 2023). This is certainly true. However, time does not play this significant role in isolation. Time is dynamic, but as demonstrated above, the concept of space is equally dynamic and can be used in socio-political reflections on the world. The space we inhabit and in which we develop social

processes plays a key role in the formation of the self and the other, and must be considered in analyses, especially in the context of Christian church history. Theological reflection, when considering political and contextual realities, must incorporate space as a mode of analysis. The modernist view that prioritises time over space must be replaced with a dynamic method that utilises both space and time to form a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to history-telling and analysing history.

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