

# CITIES AND HUMAN COMMUNITY

## Spirituality and the Urban

*Philip Sheldrake*

THE FUTURE OF CITIES is one of the most critical *spiritual* as well as economic and architectural issues of our time. The city is now the context where for the majority of humanity 'the practice of everyday life' takes place, either constructively or destructively. The growth rate of cities urgently requires that we give attention not merely to design and planning but also to deeper questions of meaning and purpose. Any attempt to address the complexities of the city needs more than a mechanical approach. The challenge is how to relate city-making to a vision of the human spirit and what enhances it.

Cities enable or disable 'place identity'. The sense of place is a category of human experience with a strong impact on how we see the world and situate ourselves in it. Most contemporary thinking about 'place' in philosophy, history, the study of religion and the social sciences emphasizes that it involves a dialectical relationship between physical location and human narrative. We not only live in the world; we also live with a sense, implicit or explicit, of what the world means. In other words, the 'world' that surrounds us is not merely raw data. However the world can no longer be seen as a mosaic of separate cultures, nor is 'place' any longer as simple a concept as Enlightenment thinking would propose. Technology and rapid travel have increased the number of global connections. Cultures that previously seemed homogeneous are revealed as plural and implicated in issues of power. In short, 'place identity' nowadays embraces a range of associations from the local 'home' or neighbourhood to a single 'global community'. In a world of multifaceted place identity, city-making increasingly needs to attend both to what might be called 'micro-place' (satisfactory homes and effective neighbourhoods) and to 'macro-place' (meaningful expressions of wider connections).



Our environments are active partners in the conversation between location and the geographies of the mind and spirit that create 'place'. Place involves human narrative and memory, which are embedded in a location, including deeper narrative currents that absorb the stories of all who have lived there. It is therefore appropriate to think of places as texts, layered with meaning. A hermeneutics of place continually reveals new interpretations in the interplay between physical environment, memory, and specific people at a particular moment.

Precisely because 'place' involves narrative, it is not surprising that it is often contested. We only have to think of Jerusalem, claimed by Jews and Palestinians and sacred to three faiths. In deconstructing modernity's belief in objective, 'absolute' place, postmodern critiques assert that definition is power. The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's analysis of place also reminds us that systems of spatialisation are historically conditioned—not merely physical arrangements of things but also patterns of social action and routine, as well as historical conceptions of the world. The metanarratives of the people who hold power take over the public places they control in such a way that, however altruistic their agenda, the history of such places often becomes a story of dominance and repression.

At a basic level, environment shapes the human spirit. Conversely, our understanding of what enhances the human spirit shapes the environments we construct. If cities are to be places that reinforce a sense that human life is sacred rather than merely locations for organizing human life, they must embrace all of its dimensions—functional, ethical and spiritual. First, we need somewhere to pass effectively through the stages of life and reach our full potential. Second, we need places where we belong to a community. Third, we need cities that continue to facilitate a fruitful relationship with the natural elements. Last, we need environments that offer access to the

sacred (however we understand it)—or, better, relate us to life itself as sacred.

We need to build into cities what is precious to us. In particular, cities have always been powerful symbols of how we understand and construct community. Modernist 'design rationalism', which divides cities into zones for living, working, leisure and shopping, fragments the rituals of daily life. The result is zones that are dead and dangerous when they are emptied of activity, such as some city centres at night or suburban neighbourhoods by day. Zoning demands the separation of areas by distance and by clear boundaries. This substantially increases the need for travel and generates more stress and more pollution.

In broader terms, this differentiation into discrete areas reflects a kind of secularisation of Western culture. There is no longer a centred, let alone spiritually centred, meaning for the city. It becomes a commodity, parcelled into multiple activities and ways of organizing time which are matched by the multiple identities of its inhabitants. Overall, cellular urban design undermines a unified sense of existence and bypasses shared, humane places of encounter. New domestic ghettos are increasingly protected against sterile public space that is treated unimaginatively and abandoned to violence and vandalism.

Cities represent and create a climate of values that implicitly defines how we understand ourselves and gather together. There are four aspects of cities that urban planning must take seriously. First, the two Latin concepts of the city as *urbs* (a physical place, the buildings) and as *civitas* (people and their life together) are interdependent. Second, urban issues are never purely practical. For example, transport obviously involves management, investment and strategy. However, the balance of private and public transport also highlights how we relate individual choice to the 'common good'. Third, cities have always been complex realities. We cannot separate planning technology from people, the local from the global, or a sense of place from increasingly mobile lives. Finally, while there is no way back to the relatively compact city of pre-modern Europe, cities and their development must nevertheless critically embrace their past if human desires for the future are to be effectively grounded.

### ***The City and Christian Thought***

Christianity has sometimes been accused of an anti-urban bias. Certainly the Scriptures get off to a tricky start. The Book of Genesis seems deeply gloomy about cities. Cain, symbol of human pride and violence, is portrayed as the founder of the first city, Enoch—an alternative to God's Garden (Genesis 4:17). Later, the people of Babel seek to replace the authority of God (Genesis 11:1-9), and Sodom and Gomorrah become classic symbols of corruption (Genesis 19). In the light of these texts, the modern French Protestant thinker Jacques Ellul suggests that 'the city' stands for a refusal of God's gift, and for humanity's desire to shape life autonomously. Thus 'God has cursed, has condemned the city instead of giving us a law for it'.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, there are other, positive biblical images of the city in the Jerusalem tradition, for example in the Book of Psalms. God is enthroned in the sanctuary of Zion (Psalm 9); the city becomes a living reminder of God's power and faithfulness (Psalm 48), and is described as the house of God (Psalm 122). In the Jerusalem tradition the city is intended to express the peace of God. Those who live in the city are required to share God's peace with one another (Psalm 122:6-9). Turning to the New Testament, in the Gospels, Jerusalem is the focal point and climax of Jesus' mission. The cities of the Roman Empire become the centre of Christian mission in the Book of Acts, particularly in the strategy of the Apostle Paul. Christianity rapidly became an urban religion.<sup>2</sup> Most striking of all, on the very last page of the New Testament (Revelation 21), the new holy city of Jerusalem, perfectly harmonious and peaceful, is made the image of the final establishment of God's kingdom.

However, the apparent ambivalence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition towards the city provides ammunition for the American sociologist Richard Sennett when he blames Christian theology in part for contemporary urban decline. Sennett argues that Western culture suffers from a division between the private and public realms. 'It is a divide between subjective experience and worldly experience, self and

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 16.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Wayne Meeks, 'St Paul of the Cities', in *Religious Interpretations of the City*, edited by Peter S. Hawkins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 15-23.



city.<sup>3</sup> This separation, according to Sennett, is based on our unacknowledged fear of self-exposure—interpreted as a threat rather than as life-enhancing. Sennett suggests that city design has increasingly reflected this separation. Sennett's main theological target is St Augustine's *City of God*, which he takes to be a classic expression of the triumph of an inner spiritual 'world' over the physical city. Sennett argues that Christian theology denies the true value of the outside world, and by doing so has underpinned the way that Western culture doubts the value of the diversity so characteristic of public space. While much that Sennett says about Western urban culture is astute and important, I suggest that his interpretation of Christian attitudes to the city and his understanding of Augustine are unbalanced.

True, Augustine says at the start of *City of God* (Book 1, Preface) that the earthly city is marked by a 'lust for domination'. However, this is essentially a critique of late Imperial Rome, his urban paradigm. Again, the true 'city' for Augustine is the community of believers destined to become the City of God. He is rightly suspicious of any attempt by even Christian Emperors to suggest that their commonwealth is the perfect *polis*, let alone the Kingdom of God on earth.

Yet, the majority of Augustine scholars are clear that he does not deny the status of the secular realm or of the human city in particular. We need to distinguish between the 'profane', which takes on the negative connotation of whatever is contrary to the 'sacred', and the 'secular', which is simply the world of 'this age', space and time, the here and now. We also need to distinguish carefully between Augustine's 'earthly city' (the *civitas terrena*, realm of sin) and the

<sup>3</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), xii, also introduction and Chapter 1.

political realities of state and human city. The secular realm, for example the state or the human city, is a neutral 'space' where the spiritual reality of 'the city of God' and the counter-spiritual reality of 'the earthly city' coexist and contend, like the wheat and tares, until the end of time. Augustine, while far from indifferent to the *moral* foundations of society and the city, defended a legitimate place for the secular realm within a Christian interpretation of the world as the theatre of God's action and of human response.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some commentators suggest that the vocation of the human city was to strive to become a trace of the *civitas Dei*. According to this view, while Augustine was neither city planner nor political theorist, he nevertheless effectively redeemed an urban culture in crisis by using the city as his image of heaven.<sup>5</sup>

### **What Are Cities For?**

Cities have always had the capacity to create a diverse community and to be places of innovation and creativity. However, our current attempts to reflect on cities and our response to them must absorb radical changes which originated with the industrial revolution but have accelerated since 1945. First, there is the sheer size and rate of expansion of cities. Second, the increased mobility and flow of life within them calls into question any simple notion of place identity. Third, we must acknowledge the increasing plurality of the communities and cultures to which their people belong. Fourth, any large city has a global reach and is involved in a multiplicity of connections with other cities and communities throughout the world. What are cities for? They are clearly no longer defences against attack, or essential for commercial production. In the future, if cities are to have meaning, this will be in fulfilling the wider requirements of human culture. There needs to be greater reflection on the civilising possibilities of cities. They have a unique capacity to focus a range of creative energies because they have an unparalleled ability to combine differences of age, ethnicity, culture and religion, and also to balance plural community and anonymity. Some twenty years ago, a Church of

<sup>4</sup> For an updated defence of a positive view of 'the secular realm' in Augustine, see Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> David Mayernik, *Timeless Cities: An Architect's Reflections on Renaissance Italy* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 2003), 5-13.

England commission produced a controversial and influential report on the state of Britain's cities: *Faith in the City*. Now a new report, *Faithful Cities*, has been published by the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, which combines representatives of several Churches, including two Roman Catholics, one a bishop, with those of other faiths.<sup>6</sup> A question raised throughout the report is: what makes a 'good city'? Words and phrases used in this context include 'active', 'diverse', 'inclusive', 'safe', 'well-led' and 'environmentally sensitive'. The good city needs an 'active civil society'; it 'values its inhabitants' and offers 'opportunities for all'; it 'attracts wealth creators', but also 'shares its wealth'. It is big enough to be viable but small enough to be on a human scale. In sum, it is where people do not merely exist but truly *belong*. The good city enables human aspirations to be productive rather than repressed or limited to self-indulgence.

Fundamentally, the good city is centred on people rather than just on planning. There is a growing preoccupation, even beyond religious circles, with the ideals of civic life and, indeed, with what might be called a secular spirituality of the urban. A number of commentators concern themselves with the nature of 'urban virtues' for the twenty-first century. For example, in *Civic Spirit: The Big Idea for a New Political Era*, Charles Leadbeater promotes the notion of 'mutuality', based on the recognition of diversity. This demands 'renunciation' (giving up the absolute claims of individual choice in favour of social cohesion) and requires us to value restraint as a virtue, 'a counterintuitive view in consumer society' as Leadbeater notes.<sup>7</sup> In the United States Eduardo Mendieta (influenced in part by Christian theology) writes of 'frugality' as the key urban virtue.<sup>8</sup> The influential British architect and government advisor Richard Rogers has been a notable proponent of person-centred architecture and planning. His concept of 'open-minded space' has ethical and spiritual resonances. This multi-functional space has a variety of uses in which as many people as possible become participants. It contrasts with the dominance of 'single-minded' space, predetermined by planners and prioritising efficiency. 'Open-minded' space needs to be accessible physically,

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<sup>6</sup> *Faithful Cities: A Call to Celebration, Vision and Justice* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Leadbeater, *Civic Spirit: The Big Idea for a New Political Era* (London: Demos, 1997), 30.

<sup>8</sup> See his article in *City*, 5/1 (2001), 7-25.

intellectually and spiritually: in its design, it should evoke freedom and inclusivity rather than the opposite.<sup>9</sup> Other ethical-spiritual values, such as memory, desire or aspiration, and a sense of the sacred, find a place in the writings of the international planning guru Leonie Sandercock.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Hospitable City***

Yet, to speak of the ‘good city’ as a spiritual issue we need a more developed vision of the human spirit and of what enhances it. Christian spirituality is concerned with what we love most deeply, with our desire fundamentally to encounter and respond to God. So, in the cities of today, can Christian spirituality contribute to the enhancement of urban dreams? *Faithful Cities* suggests that a critical spiritual issue in the modern city is the need to push beyond ‘tolerance’—that catchword of liberal societies which tends to suggest the passive magnanimity of the powerful towards those less favoured—and promote the more challenging biblical theme of ‘hospitality’. Hospitality implies a *real* relationship with those who are different, and the risk that we may be moved out of our comfort zone to be changed in the encounter.

In this context, the report refers briefly to hospitality in the Rule of St Benedict (Chapter 53). To develop the reference a little, the Rule states: *Omnes supervenientes hospites tamquam Christus suscipiantur* (‘All guests who arrive are to be received as Christ’). But the Rule goes on: ‘for he himself will say, I was the stranger and you took me in’. Christ is the stranger. This implies a deeper theology of hospitality than merely giving food and board to a passing guest. Commentators have regularly noted the word *omnes*—emphasizing the importance of inclusiveness and its particular link to *strangeness*, or as we might say, ‘otherness’, in contrast to the familiarity of those who are ‘like us’. The second word, *supervenientes*, ‘those who arrive’, underlines the point even more. It suggests those who ‘turn up out of the blue’—not merely those who did not write in advance, but those *who are a surprise to us* in broader terms. Close to the surface here is the understanding that Christian

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Planet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), especially 167-168.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Leonie Sandercock, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003).



disciples are not to be choosy about the company they keep. And *hospes* is a nicely ambiguous word that can be translated as ‘stranger’ as well as ‘guest’. The former sense is reinforced by the Rule’s reference to Matthew 25:35. And finally, *suscipiantur* is literally ‘to be received’, but its deeper meaning is ‘to be *cherished*’.

I would suggest that, in our contemporary Western cities, the notion of ‘hospitality’ should be supplemented by an even sharper concept, ‘solidarity’. Theologically, this notion derives implicitly from much of Catholic social teaching and appears explicitly in liberation theology, for example in the writings of the Dominican theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. Solidarity is a great deal more than a purely political slogan.<sup>11</sup> It is a moral imperative based on a belief in the fundamental unity of humanity rooted in the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Communion of Saints, and demanding a profound conversion of heart and a conscious commitment to the quest for ‘the common good’ as an essential ethical virtue.<sup>12</sup>

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### ***The Human City and Ignatian Spirituality***

In thinking about a Christian response to the complexity of the public realm and of contemporary cities, the Ignatian spiritual tradition may also offer some useful pointers. So, for example, in the opening Principle and Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises* (Exx 23), Ignatius promotes a kind of Augustinian vision of the neutrality of the secular realm. Here, ‘the earth’ and ‘created things’ are not irrelevant or simply the realm of sin, but rather gifts of God to help us fulfil our purpose and identity. However, their value is not absolute and so the Ignatian virtue of indifference (make use of created things but only in so far as they direct us towards our destiny) underlines the importance of not confusing contingency with ultimate reality. In the contemplation on the Incarnation (Exx 101-109) retreatants are invited to see the world as the Trinity does—as a mixture of good and bad—but most importantly to realise that from all eternity the gaze of God is redemptive. In one of the great classic meditations in preparation for

<sup>11</sup> See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Well* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), especially Chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> See Michael and Kenneth Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), Chapter 7.

an Election, *The Two Standards* (Exx 136-148), Ignatius uses the image of the spaces outside two cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, where Christ Our Lord and Lucifer each gather their followers. Superficially, the contrast may appear to be between the Kingdom of God and the material order. However, the conflict is actually between two different ways of 'being in the world'—or, for our present purposes, of being engaged with the human city. Importantly, the key temptation that Ignatius presents is not that of the secular realm as such but of an attachment to the 'empty honours of the world'. By the end of the Exercises the retreatant has hopefully been moved to a fundamentally positive evaluation of the world of time and space. In the *Contemplation for Attaining Love* (Exx 230-237) the retreatant is invited to love and serve God 'in everything' (Exx 233), to experience God dwelling in creatures and God working on our behalf 'in all created things on the face of the earth' (Exx 236).

A spirituality of urban living necessarily engages with the 'practice of everyday life'. Maurice Giuliani, one of the first to theorise the modern revival of the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, reminds us that for Ignatius Loyola a 'spiritual exercise' meant anything that opens us to receive the grace of God. If our notion of a spiritual exercise is confined to explicitly religious practices, such as extended prayer, there is a problem for those who desire to engage profoundly with the public world. Giuliani suggests that 'attentiveness in faith' should extend to God's self-disclosure in every moment. This does not imply that simply doing our everyday tasks is automatically a 'spiritual exercise'. However, the generality of everyday life is a potential context in which God's spirit may be explicitly experienced, resistances may be overcome, discernment may take place, life-directing choices may be made, and commitment may be deepened. Thus our activities in the public realm and our commitment to build the 'good city' may be transformed into genuinely spiritual exercises. Christians must cultivate a contemplative attentiveness to the city so that transformative encounters with God can occur in and through our immersion in everyday life and then feed back into transformed responses to people and situations.

Following this thought, one of the most interesting Christian thinkers on the city is a French Jesuit, the late Michel de Certeau (1925-1986). The degree to which he continued to be influenced by Ignatian themes in his later writings has yet to be carefully analyzed.

However, there are certainly striking echoes. De Certeau defended the 'practice of everyday life' (the title of two volumes of his essays) against the secular utopianism of much urban theory, and the needs of people against totalitarian planning. As for Augustine, for de Certeau the human city prefigures a mysterious Heavenly City—hence his rejection of utopian visions such as those of Le Corbusier in which the city itself becomes a secularised 'salvation' produced by the social engineering of highly regulated city planning. In his essay 'Walking in the City' de Certeau expressed one of his favourite themes: 'resistance' to systems that leave no room for difference and transgression. The 'weak', in this case those who actually live in the city rather than plan it, find ways to make space for themselves and to express their self-determination.

In his later writings, de Certeau also sought to respond to the question of how Christianity might address a world no longer dominated by the Church. In 'The Weakness of Believing' he settled for 'lived practice', a provocative notion of presence-in-the-world expressed in the classic themes of discipleship (following) and conversion (change). The believer bears witness by following the way of Jesus faithfully, being changed and provoking change in others. Building on this thought, spirituality in the city is essentially seeking to live out the 'story of Jesus' so as to highlight a way of being differently in the world. De Certeau's dispersal of Christian discipleship into 'the practice of everyday life' seems to be a radicalisation of his original commitment to Ignatian spirituality and its theme of 'finding God in all things'. For him, it is now the empty tomb that is the primary symbol of Christian discipleship. And therefore, discipleship is not a matter of settling down, but rather a risky journey (de Certeau explicitly used the phrase 'a way of proceeding', derived from the Jesuit *Constitutions*), a practice that subverts our human tendency to set fixed boundaries. 'Boundaries are the place of the Christian work', he says, 'and their displacements are the result of this work'.



### ***City-Making and the Sacred***

The design and the life of the pre-modern European city underlined the importance of memory, of an ethics (even a spirituality) of city life focused on 'the common good', in turn related to a desire for 'the good life', and a sense of 'the sacred'. While it is impossible to hark back to such pre-modern visions, I believe it is nonetheless vital to recover a sense that a city can somehow be 'sacred' to its inhabitants.

Conventional interpretations of the sacred frequently reflect, at least implicitly, the approach of the great historian of religion Mircea Eliade. One of the problems with his viewpoint, however, is that it separates the sacred (the 'wholly other') from everyday action and experience. The 'profane' for Eliade is everything that lies outside what is explicitly dedicated to the sacred. Such a viewpoint evacuates the outer, everyday, public world of sacred meaning. However, another Christian way of viewing the world—as gift of God's creation and as revelation of divine presence—suggests that no part of the world can be inherently profane, although it may be profaned by human actions. In such Christian thought 'the sacred' may be articulated in a variety of ways, of which the spatial structures and social organization of a city provide an important example. The idea of 'the sacred' in the city introduces a critical note of 'otherness' (in Christian terms, it introduces the divine Other) and so underlines that what is centrally important about urban life is more than the mere enhancement of the individual self. In this sense, an important element of the re-enchantment or resacralisation of urban life must be bound up with the recovery of a sense of the 'common good' in the challenging environment of today's diverse, plural and global cities.

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