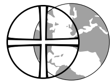

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Going Downtown: Historical Resources for Urban Ministry

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THESE ARE HARDLY THE BEST OF TIMES FOR URBAN MAINSTREAM PROTESTantism.[1] In many American cities, large church buildings dot the landscape, buildings which all too frequently dwarf the congregations left behind after suburban flight. Others house congregations of a different denomination, race, or ethnicity after having been abandoned by the original, now suburban, congregation. Still others, physically abandoned, stand as ruined reminders of an urban ecclesiastical age that has passed. What, if anything, can we learn from that past? Are there resources in protestant urban history that can profitably be employed by contemporary urban churches and ministers?

I. RECENT HISTORICAL STUDIES

I must concede at the outset that historians have very few answers as such for urban ministers. In fact, for a variety of reasons, historians have paid relatively

[1]By "mainstream" protestantism, I mean first those denominations typically so called, namely the United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (USA), American Baptist Churches, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Episcopal Church, and Reformed Church in America. But I also suggest that we broaden the definition to include the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, and other denominations with broad cultural influence in particular regions.

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little attention to the church in the city. But the recent publication of several books suggests that such neglect may be ending and that the reflections of historians and other scholars on our urban past may contribute to our understanding by helping us reassess secularization theory, recover an appropriate sense of ambivalence toward the city, and strive for greater precision in our thinking about the city and religion.

From time to time, both sociologists and historians have commented on urban religion over the years, sociologists more so than historians. The 1920s and 1930s, for example, saw an intense concentration on urban churches by a group of sociologists associated with the Federal Council of Churches' Institute for Social and Religious Research. Under the leadership of Harlan Paul Douglass the institute carried out studies of 1,041 churches in 56 American cities, producing an unprecedented body of literature on urban congregations. The institute's goal was to identify, for the benefit of the urban churches themselves, the factors that contributed to the success and failure of urban churches. Their basic message was that, by utilizing contemporary methods like neighborhood surveys, American urban churches could adapt more successfully to the cities. As with so many projects based on "soft money," the funds eventually ran out, and the institute ceased operation in 1934. Nonetheless sociological attention to the relationship between religion and the city, frequently shaped by secularization theory, has continued.[2]

During the 1930s and 1940s historians also began to pay at least some attention to urban religion. Prominent Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., for example, included a chapter on "The Changing Church" in his seminal 1933 work, *The Rise of the City 1878-1898*.[3] In this chapter he anticipated two major themes characteristic of scholarship on the urban church. First he noted what he called the widespread "failure of the church to adjust itself to the unprecedented conditions created by rapid urban and industrial growth" (330). But, second, he also noted the encouraging efforts of at least some protestants to adapt their ministry to urban conditions. Although he does not use the term "social gospel" when discussing these protestants, such social gospellers as Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden are clearly the persons he has in mind. Subsequent historical accounts of urban protestantism, following Schlesinger's lead, have continued to emphasize the social gospel and have tended to judge urban congregations by the extent to which they employed social gospel strategies for urban ministry.

By the 1950s, America's urban landscape was changing rapidly, as large numbers of city residents headed pell-mell for the suburbs. Following the lead of Gibson Winter's famous critique in *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (1961), critics of urban congregations condemned the tendency to address the privatistic

[2]Jeffrey K. Hadden, "H. Paul Douglass: His Perspective and His Work," *Review of Religious Research* 22 (September 1980) 66-88.

[3]Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City: 1878-1898* (1933; reprint, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971).

needs of an increasingly suburban membership and to ignore the social needs of the inner city.

A concern with urban problems also encouraged several historians in the 1960s and 1970s to follow Schlesinger's lead and turn greater attention to America's cities. Urban history entered something of a golden age, dominated by the contributions of Richard Wade, Stephan Thernstrom, Sam Bass Warner, and a host of their disciples. Their studies of social mobility, ethnic and class-based conflicts, and the role of institutions in urban society remain important to any student of urban America. But, unlike Schlesinger, they virtually ignored the important role of religion in America's urban history.

In discussing this omission, Katherine Conzen has suggested that such historians (including herself) often saw religion as a "marker" for some other characteristic, like ethnicity, race, or class, thought to be more important in determining the behavior of urban residents. For some, this tendency reflected both a Marxist emphasis on economics and social class, which allowed little room for religion, and an uncritical acceptance of secularization theory. As a result they missed completely, or at least failed to take seriously, the abiding significance of religion in America's cities. This omission Conzen, for one, seeks to correct in her current work. As she notes, other urban historians as well are emphasizing a broader, cultural approach to American cities—an approach which takes more seriously the whole spectrum of values that shape city life and the urban institutions, including religious ones, that embody those values.[4]

That development may well explain why several recent works in both history and sociology have underlined the importance of urban religion. They include: David G. Hackett, *The Rude Hand of Innovation: Religion and Social Order in Albany, New York 1652-1836* (1991); Michael Engh, S.J., *Frontier Faiths: Church, Temple, and Synagogue in Los Angeles 1864-1888* (1992); Nicholas J. Demerath III and Rhys Williams, *A Bridging of Faiths: Religion and Politics in a New England City* (1992); James D. Bratt and Christopher H. Meehan, *Gathered at the River: Grand Rapids, Michigan, and its People of Faith* (1993); and my own *The Protestant Experience in Gary, Indiana, 1906-1975: At Home in the City* (1992). We may, in fact, be standing at the beginning of a new period of systematic attention to the crucial role of religion in the city. It is attention sorely needed.

II. Secularization and Ambivalence

In the remaining pages I seek to do two things—first, reflect briefly on the themes of secularization and ambivalence in current scholarship on religion and city in the United States. Second, I explore the need for greater precision in our thinking about the city and religion, precision which could stimulate fresh approaches to the subject by both academics and urban pastors.

[4]Professor Conzen of the University of Chicago made these remarks at a January 18, 1993, seminar on Indianapolis religious history sponsored by the POLIS Research Center of Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis.

1. Rethinking Secularization

Even a cursory reading of historical and sociological scholarship on the city reveals the remarkable domination of secularization theory. For years scholars generally assumed that, as societies urbanize, industrialize, and modernize, religious commitments and religious practice decline.[5] Pastors of urban protestant churches may often assume its truth as well, as they watch their membership rolls steadily shrink.

But as religious practice has persisted, even in an advanced capitalist country like the United States, scholars have begun to reassess secularization theory. In fact, as Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have noted recently, religious participation in the United States has grown steadily since the Revolutionary War, with occasional deviations disrupting only slightly the steady upward trend.[6] Although membership loss is a painful reality in many places, overall religious participation in the United States remains at a level that belies simple secularization theory.

Moreover within American cities there is a rich flowering of popular religiosity or spirituality which must be taken seriously if we are to have any clear picture of religion in the American city. As Hugh McLeod has noted in an important essay on "Religion in the City":

> even where religious institutions are relatively uninfluential, there is still a need to show what systems of explaining the world, of giving purposes to individual life, of sanctifying obligation, of coping with suffering, *have* been effective; which symbols of community, of the good life, or of something beyond the individual *have* evoked a response; how men [and women] have faced the death of others, or their own.

McLeod, for example, calls attention to several "non-Christian forms of supernaturalism" such as astrology and spiritualism prevalent in the modern city. As David Hall and Jon Butler have found in colonial America and Wade Clark Roof has discovered among contemporary baby boomers, American popular religion has been and remains a complex and multi-faceted reality, often combining formal religious affiliation and informal, sometimes esoteric, religious practices even in the same persons. Whatever else this situation proves, it certainly illustrates the need to reassess the inevitability of secularization.[7]

Secularization theory has also supported a long-standing scholarly tendency to assume that cities are less religious than the countryside. This has been particularly true of scholarship on American protestantism, which has portrayed a basi-

[5]See, for example, Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1966).

[6]Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Church of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992) 274.

[7]Hugh McLeod, "Religion in the City," *Urban History Yearbook* 5 (1978) 16; David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1990); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1990); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

cally rural protestantism thriving in the countryside only to founder after moving to the city. This has contributed, in turn, to a kind of fatalism about urban churches, an assumption that mainstream protestantism may well survive in suburb and small town but is destined to die in the inner city. Such general fatalism has hindered our ability to see and interpret adequately the wide variety of urban protestantism. Protestant churches atrophy and die in some urban settings; they thrive in others. Little is gained by presuming that disaster awaits them all.[8]

2. Recovering Ambivalence

In addition to reassessing the adequacy of secularization theory as it pertains to religion in the city, I would like to recover the century-old tradition of protestant ambivalence toward the city. Evident by the 1870s and 1880s, protestant concern about the city was part of a general concern on both sides of the Atlantic about the apparently nefarious effects of modern city life—slums, disease, moral collapse, family disintegration, and religious decline.[9] This concern was perhaps expressed most baldly by observers like Josiah Strong and has often been cited as evidence of a fundamental protestant hostility to the city.

But as I have noted elsewhere, the fundamental protestant attitude was one of ambivalence, not hostility.[10] The distinction is crucial, for hostility can result in both withdrawal from the city and indifference to its fate. Ambivalence, on the other hand, can be accompanied by the most strenuous efforts on behalf of the city by religious folk. Indeed ambivalence may well be a particularly appropriate perspective on the city, given the persistence in contemporary cities of racial segregation and social injustice, the failure of urban education, the ubiquity of urban violence, the development of an urban underclass, and so forth. Unlike hostility, ambivalence allows for a more nuanced interpretation of urban reality and provides room for hope in the face of that reality.

III. Religion and the City

In addition to reassessing secularization theory and recovering a proper ambivalence toward the city, we need to strive for greater precision in our thinking about religion and the city. Once again, the essay by McLeod on "Religion and the City" is suggestive. He notes, for example, that the metaphor of "uprooting" is the most frequently cited characteristic of modern urbanization that has weakened organized religion. But as McLeod notes, the metaphor embraces at least three distinct claims—that urban churches have failed to provide religious services to new populations, that urban immigrants are disconnected from former patterns of religious observance, and that such immigrants become integrated into a new

[8]For a series of case studies of vital urban congregations, see *Center City Churches: The New Urban Frontier*, ed. Lyle Schaller (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

[9]Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived* (New York: Columbia, 1985) 306-7.

[10]James W. Lewis, *The Protestant Experience in Gary, Indiana, 1906-1975: At Home in the City* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1992) 3-5.

urban culture in which religion plays only a peripheral role. All three may, of course, be true, but they need to be carefully distinguished if our scholarship about urban religion is to be accurate and helpful.

Nor is this the only area in which precision is called for. In the American case, for example, is it accurate to assert that mainstream protestantism is fundamentally incompatible with the inner city? In which cities have protestant denominations thrived and in which have they failed? Why? What difference do social class, ethnic group, and race make? Care and precision in addressing these and other questions is clearly necessary if we are properly to understand American urban religion.

Such attention will reveal that there is no single best model for the urban congregation. Indeed the diversity of urban environments, with different economic realities, ethnic and racial makeups, histories, political influence, and so forth, requires an equal diversity of religious congregations. The city's religious landscape, then, is something like a complex ecosystem, with a multitude of ecological niches to be filled if the ecosystem is to thrive. There is room for (and need for) a rich diversity of religious organizations.[11] Both scholars and pastors need to take this variety more seriously as evidence of religious vitality in urban America.

IV. The City and the Suburbs

Finally, since urban America encompasses more than the inner city, we need to take less seriously the accidental political boundaries separating a municipality from its suburbs. An aerial view of virtually any metropolitan area provides a wonderful reminder of the arbitrary quality of those boundaries. Urban religious history, I suggest, includes suburban religious history, and our thinking about the urban church should include the entire metropolitan ecology of which it is a part.

Only recently have scholars turned their attention to the suburb, and, like their urban history colleagues, they have paid relatively little attention to the role of religion there.[12] Even given their traditional antipathy to the city, suburbs remain dependent on them in a myriad of ways. Even the suburbanite who "never goes downtown" depends on the existence of the central city in more ways than he or she could imagine. As someone has observed, "you can't be a suburb of nowhere." Some parts of an urban area are more attractive, some more prosperous,

[11]Carl S. Dudley and Sally A. Johnson suggest one typology which is applicable to urban congregations in their *Energizing the Congregation: Images That Shape Your Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). They describe survivor, prophet, pillar, pilgrim, and servant congregations.

[12]See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford, 1985), and Henry C. Binford, *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985). A notable exception is James Bundy's *Fall From Grace: Religion and the Communal Ideal in Two Suburban Villages, 1870-1917* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991), which examines the role of religion in Oak Park and Evanston, Illinois. An important, new discussion is James Hudnut-Beumler's, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1994).

some more troubled, some more dangerous. But "the city" broadly conceived includes them all, and a complete understanding of the role of religion in both city and suburb requires that we include them all as well.

As urban pastors think about their ministry and as urban historians ponder their urban surroundings, both should consider the indispensable contributions of the other to the common task of understanding our cities and the important role that churches play in them. Perhaps, in turn, greater understanding will contribute to more imaginative and effective service in urban America.