The City as the New Frontier

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I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN A RURAL COMMUNITY IN SOUTH DAKOTA IN THE middle two decades of this century. I grew up in a context where everybody knew your name, where neither houses nor car doors were locked, and where neighbors thought nothing of pitching in to help when someone was in need because of illness or accident.

The city was a rather distant place, psychologically more than geographically, which we only occasionally went to visit. Although such visits were often exciting, the city remained an alien place. As for many people raised in rural America, the city for me was more to be avoided than admired. Life in rural America was the way life was meant to be.

Images of the city began to change for me with college, a year in Germany, and seminary. Internship brought me to Los Angeles one year after issues of racism, poverty, and injustice had led to street riots in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts.

Internship was followed by eight years in Chicago and now nearly twenty years in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. On six different occasions during the last decade, there have been opportunities for extended stays in Mexico City, one of the largest and fastest growing cities in the world.

From a small rural community in South Dakota, through major cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, to the enormous concentration of people in Mexico City is a journey that is being taken in some form or another by ever increasing numbers of world citizens as the twentieth century comes to an end. It is a journey involving much more than a change in physical location. It

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involves the ways in which we as men, women, and children think about each other, the values and beliefs that we hold, the ways in which we understand and organize human community, and the kind of future we envision and seek for ourselves. The city, for increasing numbers of world citizens, has become the new frontier, the arena in which their hopes and aspirations for a life of value and meaning are being played out.

I. The Emergence of the City

The earliest forms of human communal organization were likely family and tribal groups that wandered from place to place following the animals and growing seasons upon which they depended to sustain their lives. Domestication of plants and animals made possible a more settled existence, and an agricultural economy developed in which access and attachment to specific plots of land became essential.

Concentrations of people in sufficient numbers to be called cities (or city-states) apparently began "rather naturally around 3000 B.C. They emerged as a way to enhance the security of peasants."[1] The development of cities changed the life possibilities of their inhabitants in many ways. They provided more security, to be sure, but they also fostered the development of diverse forms of social organization in which individuals could pursue particular interests distinct from the strictures of family, tribe, or clan. As cities developed and grew, they became increasingly important as places in which the diverse functions of human organization were located.

> Born as defensive reactions, they thrived as politically and legally autonomous entities, economically free and robust. Over time they have proven themselves as centers of the world's commerce, government, tribes and religions.[2]

As economic centers, cities needed and could absorb more and more people to meet the demands of developing economic enterprises. "Cities' power stems from the creative power of humans challenging each other in the close, shared society of urban settings."[3] And chief among the factors contributing to the unleashing of that creative power have been the economic interests of men, women, and children finding expression in increasingly specialized as well as corporate forms.

The importance of economic factors has meant that urban growth has been most pronounced in the more industrialized countries of the world. In 1970, for example, 67% of the population of industrial countries lived in urban areas. 57% of Latin America's population lived in urban areas while only 23% of Africa's and 20% of Asia's (excluding Japan) did. Overall, urban areas were home to 37% of the world's population in 1970.

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[1]Neal R. Peirce, *Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World* (Washington, DC: Seven Locks, 1993) 7-8.

[2]Ibid., 10.

[3]Ibid., 11.

By the year 2000, however, it is projected that 51% of the world's population will live in urban areas.

> In the developing world, urbanization is taking place at a pace unmatched elsewhere. Asia, Africa and Latin America are expected to host 90 percent of the world's urban growth over the next three decades. The role of third world urbanization is not uniform though; by the year 2020, 83 percent of Latin Americans are expected to live in cities (surpassing the urban portion in industrial countries) as compared with 54 percent of Africans and 56 percent of Asians.[4]

What is happening so dramatically now around the world has already happened in the United States. For example, the population of Manhattan (New York City) was 33,131 in 1790, even then the country's largest city. By 1890, 1,400,000 people lived in Manhattan, and by 1910 it had grown another 23 percent.[5] Since then the population of Manhattan itself has declined, but the larger metropolitan area has continued to expand until today more than 15,000,000 people live in that one urban area.

Such growth, indicative of what has happened throughout the United States, has led one observer to comment:

> Despite the romance of the frontier, the true land of opportunity in America for over 150 years has been the cities. From farms and foreign lands, urban immigrants flocked into the cities, seeking better schools, better jobs, better health care—in short, a better life.[6]

For some years, then, the new frontier in this country has not been the wide open spaces of the west but the burgeoning cities of urban America.

II. Images of the City

The accelerating pace of urbanization, however, has not put to rest the fear of the city that has also been part of the American consciousness. Alongside their attractive power, cities have also been seen as strange and artificial environments, a threat to both physical and moral well-being. Suspicion about cities has been a pervasive cultural theme and that suspicion is given currency by the view of the city that exists within the dominant religious traditions in U.S. history.

My own situation is a case in point. In spite of visions of the heavenly city and the new Jerusalem, the religious tradition and church in which I grew up tended to view the city as a more sinful place and a more difficult arena in which to live one's faith than a non-urban environment.

The struggle of the church with the city has been accounted for in a number of ways. The interpretations offered by Harvey Cox and Jacques Ellul illustrate some of the possibilities. Writing almost thirty years ago, Cox made a strong connection between urbanization and secularization.

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[4]Marcia D. Lowe, "Shaping Cities: The Environmental and Human Dimensions," *Worldwatch Paper* 105 (October 1991) 12.

[5]David Rusk, *Cities without Suburbs* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1993) 18.

[6]Ibid., 15.

> The rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related movements. Urbanization constitutes a massive change in the way men [and women] live together, and became possible in its contemporary form only with the scientific and technological advances which sprang from the wreckage of religious world-views. Secularization, an equally epochal movement, marks a change in the way men [and women] grasp and understand their life together, and it occurred only when the cosmopolitan confrontations of city living exposed the relativity of the myths and traditions men [and women] once thought were unquestionable.[7]

From this perspective, the city is not merely a way in which human community is organized, but a concrete manifestation of the diminished influence and role of traditional religion in the world of human affairs. The city in its modern form could only emerge when the traditional power of the divine reality had been eliminated from the ordinary affairs of men and women.

> If the Greeks perceived the cosmos as an immensely expanded polis, and medieval man [and woman] saw it as the feudal manor enlarged to infinity, we experience the universe as the city of man [and woman]. It is a field of human exploration and endeavor from which the gods have fled. The world has become man's [and woman's] task and man's [and woman's] responsibility.[8]

In other words, "the age of the secular city, the epoch whose ethos is quickly spreading into every corner of the globe *is* an age of 'no religion at all.'"[9] If the city is seen as "godless," an antipathy on the part of the church to urban realities is not surprising.

Another perspective on the struggle of the church with the city is developed by Jacques Ellul on the basis of his reading of the biblical story. The city, as Ellul understands it, is a human creation; but rather than an achievement to be celebrated it is a manifestation of the rejection of and rebellion against God that constitute human sin.

As the first builder of a city, Cain exemplifies the rejection of God which lies at the root of city building.

> Cain has built a city. For God's Eden he substitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God he substitutes a goal chosen by himself—just as he substituted his own security for God's. Such is the art by which Cain takes his destiny on his own shoulders, refusing the hand of God in his life.[10]

Just as the city which Cain builds is a manifestation of rebellion against God, it is also, therefore, the enemy of Israel and the enemy of the church. It is a spiritual power that stands in opposition to God.

> The city is the great enemy of the church. The city is also the "assembly," the "gathering together," but it is exactly the opposite of the church assembly; it is the place where the church is held captive and is a prey for war and threats, a

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[7]Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York.: Macmillan, 1965) 1.
[8]Ibid.
[9]Ibid.
[10]Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970) 5.

place where it is in combat not against flesh and blood, but against idols, against that spiritual power which is the essential characteristic of the city.[11]

In this reading also the city is more than a way in which human beings have chosen to organize their lives in community. As a spiritual power it stands under God's curse and instead of providing protection and security for men and women it brings destruction.

Within the framework of the biblical story so understood, Jerusalem as a human creation does not escape the curse of God either and stands under God's condemnation. However, God also has chosen Jerusalem as a witness to the power, grace, and love of God.

> Jerusalem is called upon, therefore, in her destiny as a city, in her reality as a city, to show that the reality of God's grace is for the very object of man's [and woman's] revolt, that the love of God extends to everything made by man [and woman], that [God's] election is inalienable and unalterable. For God loves Jerusalem not as man's [and woman's] work, but as the object of [God's] election.[12]

Jerusalem thus becomes a symbol of new possibilities, but new possibilities dependent on God's action. It is not the city created by men and women that is the city of possibility; it is the new city of Jerusalem, the heavenly city, that represents the movement of history and the outcome of God's plan.

Cox and Ellul offer different perspectives on the tension, even antipathy, existing between the city and the church, the people of God. Cox describes a secularization process that has reduced the human ability and willingness to see God at work in the world. At a time when divine power has been banished from the world, the city is the prime manifestation of an irreligious and godless age.

Ellul sees the antipathy as the inevitable result of human effort overreaching itself. From the beginning of human history, men and women, following the lead of Cain, spurned the relationship with God that was intended and sought to secure their own future. The city is the prime manifestation of a rebellious people, a monument to misplaced faith in human creativity and ingenuity, and rejection of the Creator God.

As descriptive explanations, the accounts of Cox and Ellul—or any other account for that matter—can be evaluated and assessed with respect to their accuracy and interpretive richness and, in recognition of the different factors being considered, each perspective may be able to claim a certain validity. Their immediate importance is that, their differences notwithstanding, each sheds light on what is understood to be both an historical and current reality: the suspicion, fear, and antipathy with which the church has tended to view the city.

III. THE CHURCH AND THE NEW FRONTIER

The question for the contemporary church is whether what has historically

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[11]Ibid., 15.
[12]Ibid., 107.

been the case will continue to be the way in which the church views the city in the future. In an increasingly urban world, a church unable or unwilling to engage the reality of the city more actively will have failed in its mission of bringing the proclamation and witness of God's saving activity to all people.

To challenge and then change the reality of the church's engagement with the city is to claim that the description of what has been the case will not be allowed to stand as the prescription for what is and will be the case. It is at this point that differences in explanations such as those provided by Cox and Ellul do become important.

For Cox, urbanization is finally to be affirmed, and the new freedom and opportunity that the city represents are finally an invitation to responsible, mature Christian action. Such a perspective is more likely to call forth the response needed by the church than is a perspective that defines the human activity that builds cities as exclusively a paradigm for rebellion against God. However appropriate it may be to look cautiously at what can be wrought by human action, unless there is some acknowledgment that human striving in building cities is not merely sin, the church will be both ineffective and unfaithful in its response to the city. The result will be increasing numbers of people whose struggle for survival, justice, and fullness of life will not be graced by the word of hope that the church can give and the future of the institutional church itself will be increasingly at risk. Neither result is finally inevitable nor what I believe to be God's intention for the people of the city or the church.

It is the reality of the city itself that calls the church to respond—not simply that more and more cities are growing larger and larger, but that in doing so the chances for a meaningful and fulfilling life for their inhabitants are being threatened and the quality of life for all persons is in jeopardy.

By continuing to view the city with fear, suspicion, and as a place to be avoided, the church, in fact, contributes to fulfilling the image of the city that has been projected: a dangerous, violent, evil place. It becomes so because it has been abandoned by those most able to "make it work," leaving a disproportionate number of the poor, the undereducated, underskilled, and the marginalized of society as its main inhabitants.

A report from the charity organization Population Control, described the situation this way: "Cities are growing so fast that the world is heading for urban crisis highlighted by a spread of mega-slums across Asia and in less developed countries." The greatest surge in population growth is now occurring in countries least able to provide either jobs or resources to meet basic human needs. The inability of rural areas to sustain the growth that is taking place means that "some 20-30 million of the world's poorest people are moving every year to towns and cities in search of a better life....By the year 2000, 17 out of the 20 biggest mega-cities will be in developing countries."[13]

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[13]"Population Group Warning That Mega-Slums Are Wave Of Future," *The Mexico City News*, 13 December 1993.

With the physical increase in the number of urban inhabitants comes critical, unbearable pressure on necessary resources such as potable water, housing, and health care. In the long run the issues extend beyond the urban area itself.

> The unhealthy conditions...can only be addressed fully through extensive economic and social reforms that attack the root causes of poverty — not just in cities but also in the rural areas that urban migrants abandon in their search for economic opportunities.[14]

What is true globally can be seen in microcosm in the United States. A brief look at urban America can thus serve to suggest some ways in which the church can begin to rethink its stance with respect to the new frontier that the city represents.

> The situation of urban America can be instructive in this regard because American cities are excellent metaphors for our world as a whole. Within them we can see pockets of first world affluence, professional competence, institutions that work. But we can also see pockets of third world poverty, despair and institutional collapse. Cities need technical assistance certainly, but more fundamentally they must become communities if they are to be places where human beings can at least survive, and perhaps someday flourish.[15]

The call for the creation of viable communities is sounded over and over again in the debate on the problems of cities and what needs to be done about them.

> We suggest that Americans, notwithstanding the proclivity of many of them to change residencies as easily as they might change a suit of clothes, have a yearning for communities they can call their own.[16]

Yet another observer has noted that "the (urban) crisis requires exchanging the old politics of exclusion for a new politics of inclusion. It will test whether or not the American people can develop a new spirit of community."[17]

This call for community represents the desire to create some form of cohesiveness among people occupying a common geographic area. It is not a call to deny or eliminate diversity but to appreciate diversity in the context of a commitment to more comprehensive goals and possibilities. It is a call to which the church can legitimately respond out of its own concern to break down the barriers that divide people, isolate them, and keep them separate from each other. But the church must strengthen its own bonds as a community as part of the effort to build larger communities in which it is only a part and not the whole.

As a community, however, the church can respond to urban issues in yet another way. As James Wallis has argued,

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[14]M. Lowe, "Shaping Cities," 14.

[15]Robert N. Bellah, "A Good City Must Be A Community," *Ethics & Policy*, Quarterly Newsletter of the Center for Ethics and Social Policy of the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA (Spring 1993) 8.

[16]N. Peirce, *Citistates*, 307.

[17]D. Rusk, *Cities without Suburbs*, 126.

> The escalation of violence on our nation's streets has reached such a crisis that perhaps only the religious community can adequately respond to it. Why? Because the cruel and endemic economic injustice, soul-killing materialism, life-destroying drug traffic, pervasive racism, unprecedented breakdown of family life and structure, and almost total collapse of moral values that have created this culture of violence are, at heart, spiritual issues.[18]

Wallis goes on to argue that the litany of urban issues that he has just identified requires the transformation of both "the structures of oppression and the morality of personal behavior" if the city is to become anything more than a killing field of the body and the spirit. The radical change required is what the biblical writers described as the need for justice and righteousness. The language of transformation and radical change is the language of the church, as is the language of community. In both the work of transformation and the work of creating community the church has the opportunity and the resources to take a lead.

Yet a third way of characterizing what is at stake in the accelerating growth of cities is to recognize that in most cities the growth that has occurred and continues to occur brings with it racial and economic segregation in which poverty becomes a defining characteristic. "The severity of the social chaos in many inner-city neighborhoods—unemployment, poverty, dependency, illegitimacy, drugs, crime—is a function of the intense concentration and isolation of the poor."[19]

The relationship between racism and poverty is a complex one and is much debated in our society. Both are realities and both are reflected in the urban situation. What may be helpful is to recognize the possibility stated by Eleanor Scott Meyers when she says, "Much of what appears to be an issue between the races is in fact an issue between classes, an issue that has been historically much more obscure in our society."[20] In any event issues of both race and class present challenges to the church in which Paul has said there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal 3:28).

For each characterization of the "urban crisis" noted above, there is reason to believe that the church could be instrumental in efforts to envision and seek a new reality. To state the matter more directly, the church has a primary commitment to the formation of community in which diversity can be appreciated and accepted even as common goals are pursued. Furthermore the church understands itself to be about spiritual transformation in which both persons and structures come to embody the values of justice and righteousness in a fuller way. Finally, the church also understands itself to be concerned about the creation of an inclusive community in which neither race nor class functions to divide.

If the church is to attend to urban reality as a new frontier, it will need to overcome the fear and antipathy that is its historical legacy in many of its efforts to define its relationship to the city. It will need to acknowledge and claim the

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[18]Jim Wallis, "Worth Fighting For," *Sojourners* 23/2 (February-March 1994) 10.

[19]D. Rusk, *Cities without Suburbs*, 128.

[20]Eleanor Scott Meyers, "Tensions in Urban Ministry," *Ethics & Policy* (Spring 1993) 3.

possibility that men and women can serve human well-being through their actions, and it will need to be supportive of efforts to transform urban practices as well as urban values. It is both a theological challenge for the church and a matter of hard work and discipline.

Even then,

> ministry within our cities will be forced to continue to live within the tensions present today. Demographers predict that the suburban and rim populations—of all races and ethnic groups—will experience increased fear of the movement of poverty and crime into their areas from urban ghettos. The fear of crime and violence can paralyze us all, including those of us interested in the future of the church. This will not change until we are successful in learning and teaching about the economic structures that continue to unravel a downward spiral of poverty among us. The church must understand these lessons before we can select a model for ministry that will make a difference in our lives.[21]

But, finally, this may be what is important: not attempting to stay untouched by the issues of the city out of fear, not even seeking to preserve the future of the church in more secure places, but learning the lessons that the city has to teach us so that we can be about the mission of trying to make a difference in the lives of all people by engaging in witness and work that mirrors the commitment and activity of a God already at home in the city.

[21]Ibid., 7.