

CHAPTER 6

The meaning of the city

‘Come, let us make bricks, and bake them thoroughly . . . Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’

(Genesis 11. 3–5)

What is a city? Since everyone knows what a city is the question seems unnecessary, but the answer is not as simple as it might seem at first sight. A city, for example, is not just a very large town. As we saw in the last chapter, population is sometimes suggested as a marker, ranking anywhere with more than a hundred thousand inhabitants as a city. But London’s largest borough, Harrow, has a population of more than a million, and it is certainly not a city. Furthermore, there have been quite small cities – Periclean Athens and fifteenth century Florence spring to mind – which have been amongst the greatest cities in human history. What is it, then, which defines a city? Joel Garreau lists industry, governance, commerce, safety, culture, companionship, and religion as the function of cities, and on those grounds argues that Edge Cities are proper cities.¹ All these too, however, could be found in large boroughs which were not properly cities. Jane Jacobs wants to define the city in terms of consistent generation of economic growth from the local economy. In her view any settlement that becomes good at import-replacing becomes a city.² There are many examples of cities in decline, however, like fifteenth century Rome, or cities which are off today’s world trade map, like Addis Ababa, which challenge such an economic definition. Kostoff proposes a whole range

¹ J. Garreau, *Edge City* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1991), p. 26. H. Pirenne (*Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948)) suggests that a city may be defined as ‘a locality the population of which, instead of living by working the soil, devotes itself to commercial activity’ (p. 35). Alternatively it may be a community endowed with legal personality and possessing laws and institutions peculiar to itself (p. 46).

² J. Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986; first published 1984), pp. 39, 41.

of criteria: a place where there is an energised crowding of people; a place where there is specialised differentiation of work; places favoured by a source of income; that rely on written records; that have a territory which feeds them; that are distinguished by some kind of monumental definition; which have some kind of physical circumscription to mark them off from the non urban realm; and which are part of an urban system.³ Clearly, some of these markers would apply equally to villages and towns. More simply Peter Hall describes them as ‘places for people who can stand the heat of the kitchen’, places full of adrenalin, and for that reason places superbly worth living in.⁴ In this respect they are different from small towns or villages. Even here, however, we can instance sleepy or rather dull cities like Bonn which are nevertheless true cities.

Another attempt to define what it is that makes a city, alluded to by Kostoff, begins from the relation of city to region. What decisively marks off a city from a town, according to Geddes and Branford, is that a city ‘accumulates and embodies the heritage of a region, and combines in some measure and kind with the cultural heritage of larger units, national, racial, religious, human’. The individuality of the city is for them ‘the sign manual of its regional life and record’. ‘Regional élan vital fruits in civic life. The city and its region compose into the true social unit.’⁵ In a similar way Christian Norberg-Schulz speaks of the *genius loci* of cities as involving the ‘gathering’ of local and more distant meanings. ‘In the town “foreign” meanings meet the local *genius*, and create a more complex system of meanings. The urban genius is never merely local.’⁶ Christopher Day puts the relation of city and region in terms of spirituality. When you go from countryside to market town, he argues, you feel this intensified spirit. You feel it even where towns have been swollen and distorted by industry. Paris, Edinburgh or Washington have the spirit of France, Scotland or America as unmistakably as Bristol or Newcastle have the west or the north of England.⁷ In the city it is the mood of the region which finds expression in the built environment, which is why Mumford spoke of the region as well as the city as ‘a collective work of art’. The invocation of the idea of a resident ‘genius’ calls

³ S. Kostoff, *The City Shaped* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), pp. 38–40.

⁴ P. Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p. 989.

⁵ V. Branford and P. Geddes, *The Coming Polity* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1919), p. 158.

⁶ C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), p. 170.

⁷ C. Day, *Places of the Soul* (London: Thorsons, 1999), p. 150. Branford and Geddes express the same view, speaking of cities as ‘essentially psychic entities’ whilst not forgetting that bread and wine are produced by hand labour. *Polity*, p. 158.

to mind Wink's account of the reality of the Powers, mentioned in the first chapter. Drawing on that idea I want to argue that cities, by virtue of their tradition, or their activity, the way in which they 'gather' their regions, have a degree of *creative spirituality* which other places lack. It is this which constitutes their place in the economy of redemption, and this which the book of Revelation means by the 'angel' of a city, indicated by the fact that they are often addressed as corporate personalities in Scripture.

THE DIALECTIC OF CITIES

To talk of the creative spirituality of cities is to invoke at once millennia of anti city polemic, beginning, perhaps, with the gloomy assessment of cities in the book of Genesis. Looking back to that time of pastoral nomads the author of Hebrews wrote: 'By faith [Abraham] stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob . . . For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Heb. 11.9, 10). This seems to imply that the earthly city has no foundations worth counting. Is it a relativisation of the city, teaching us that our true citizenship is eternal, or could it be construed as an eschatological promise for the cities in which we actually live?

There is certainly a deep ambivalence towards the city in the Christian tradition which is recognised and shared today by many secular theorists.⁸ On the one hand the city is understood as a focus of violence and human hubris – this is the significance of the fact that both Cain and Nimrod are said to be the founders of cities. On the other hand the city is the model of what will finally be redeemed, the paradigm of the human home and the focus of human creativity. The city is both Babylon, the place of alienation, exile, estrangement and violence, and Jerusalem, the place where God dwells, sets God's sign, and invites humankind to peace. This twofold imaging of the city calls for a dialectic. Any city is always at any one time both Babylon and Jerusalem, as we are reminded by Jesus' description of Jerusalem, the city of peace, as the one who stones the prophets (Luke 19.41).

The danger with dialectical perceptions is that they tend to fall apart. Thus, on the one hand, doom laden views of the city abound, especially

⁸ Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Lewis Mumford and Peter Hall all express this ambivalence – and especially Mumford.

on the part of those worried about the environmental impact of cities.⁹ From the fourth century on there is often a sour hostility to the city amongst Christians. In the city, said John Chrysostom, the devil uses ‘lewd sights, base speech, degraded music and songs full of all kinds of wickedness’ to lead us on the road to damnation.¹⁰ The most famous Christian account of the city, Augustine’s *City of God*, is usually regarded as stressing the negative side of the earthly city. The earthly city, he tells us right at the beginning of his work, is marked by a ‘lust for domination’ – a fair enough comment on imperial Rome, which is his paradigm earthly city.¹¹ It lives by self love carried to the point of contempt for God, whilst the *civitas Dei* lives by the love of God marked by contempt for self.¹² ‘The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, “I will love you, my Lord, my strength.”’¹³ Whilst it is on pilgrimage in this world the *civitas Dei* is a collection of resident aliens which ‘makes use of the earthly peace and defends and seeks the compromise between human wills in respect of the provisions relevant to the mortal nature of man’.¹⁴ They occupy the same physical city, do the same sort of jobs, live under the same laws, but goal and orientation separate them.¹⁵ What the earthly city prizes is for the most part illusory.¹⁶ True happiness will only be realised in the perfect peace of the eschatological kingdom.¹⁷

This negative view reappears at the Enlightenment and on to the present. Thomas Jefferson regarded cities as ‘pestilential to the morals, the health and liberties of man’.¹⁸ For some contemporary writers the city is parasitic on natural and domesticated environments, since it makes no food, cleans no air, and cleans very little water to the point where it could be re-used. For Mayur cities are ‘overgrown monstrosities with gluttonous appetites for material goods and fast declining carrying capacities . . . Only catastrophe awaits such a system of disharmony.’¹⁹

On the other side we find endorsements of the city from some Christian theologians, obviously reflecting their vastly different situation.

⁹ Mary Grey cites as examples of such pessimistic assessments Frank Norris’ novel *The Pit*, about Chicago, Charles Williams’ *Tahessin through Logres*, and Thomas Merton. ‘The Shape of the Human Home – A Response to Tim Gorringer’, *Political Theology* 3 (November 2000), pp. 95–103.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *De Poenitentia* vi. ¹¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk 1, Preface.

¹² By ‘*civitas*’ Augustine means something like ‘community’. ¹³ *Ibid.*, Bk 14.28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk 19.17. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk 1.35. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk 19.4–10. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk 19.13.

¹⁸ Cited in M. White and L. White, *The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 17.

¹⁹ G. Houghton and C. Hunter, *Sustainable Cities* (London: Regional Studies Association, 1994) p. 15. The Finnish biologist Pentti Linkola likewise claims that cities destroy everything valuable for a good life. S. Kjellberg, *Urban EcoTheology* (Utrecht: International Books, 2000), p. 112.

Where Augustine wrote against the background of the still powerful, if senescent, presence of imperial Rome, Isidore of Seville's world in the seventh century needed cities to survive in a turbulent world of barbarian invasions. For this reason '[t]he Church of Isidore's time became a congregation of builders. From the sixth to the tenth century the Christian obligation to provide shelter was put into practice, and a network of cities developed.'²⁰ The twelfth century and thirteenth century theologians shared in the sense of a new springtime after a greater peace had at last descended on Europe, and trade, law and learning were all at last beginning to pick up, and cities blossoming into new life. No surprise, then, that Abelard, living and working in Paris, could speak of cities as 'convents' for married people, where they could live together in charity.²¹ According to Aquinas in the next century the city (again *civitas* – but this time this particular type of settlement) is the most complete of all human communities (as opposed, say, to monasteries or villages). The study of the city is called politics, 'a branch of practical philosophy which excels all others since it deals with the most perfect means of procuring goodness in human affairs through the use of human reason'.²² It excels all others because theology understands community as essential to human flourishing. For this reason, as we saw in the first chapter, he took from Aristotle detailed plans for the construction of the city, all aimed at the realisation of the good life.

Although the Reformation was an urban phenomenon it did not produce an urban theology. Perhaps this is because it all but coincided with the rise of the cult of nature and a renewed moral critique of the city, as we saw in the last chapter.²³ Nineteenth century theology could hardly affirm the 'cities of dreadful night', but the centrality of cities to God's purposes was newly affirmed by the secular city theology of the 1960s for which the city was the central icon of modern culture. Though this theology was quickly superseded, the liberation theology which followed it, with its emphasis on God's presence on the margins, often seemed to suggest that the inner city was a privileged locus for God's presence, to

²⁰ R. Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 11.

²¹ Peter Abelard, *Theologia christiana*, II 43–56, in E. M. Buytaert (ed.), *Petri Abaelardi opera theologica*, II *Corpus Christianorum* XII (Brepols: Turnhout, 1969), pp. 149–155. His own history, of course, seems tragically to deny that.

²² Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Politicorum, Opera omnia* VIII (Paris, 1891), Prologue A 69–70.

²³ Though 'the cult of nature' had to wait for the eighteenth century, attitudes to nature were already changing in the sixteenth, as we can see from *As You Like It*, in which the natural world, which opposes nothing to human beings but 'winter and rough weather', is opposed to the malice of the human world.

the occlusion of either the comfortable suburb or the countryside. The inner cities and housing estates are alienated from sources of power and influence, writes John Vincent, and as such feel a kinship with Jesus and his friends.

Like the nuclear community of the kingdom of God which Jesus set up in his disciple group, the urban disciple community today represents perhaps a new humanity, a new 'Son of Man', free of race and class and economic and cultural distinction, perhaps because, being nearer the bottom, they know what the basics of human existence are, and what it is that moulds and even secures human beings in mutuality and survival and in the hope of significance – very like the simple basic rules and common life of Jesus and his disciples.²⁴

Whilst I agree with the basic thesis of liberation theology of God's 'bias to the poor', a theology which seeks to follow the humanising work of God in history will not, I believe, be able to make such an undialectical assessment.

Most theologies tend to fall on one side or the other of this dialectic. In the twentieth century the most searching theological expression of the ambivalence of the city was provided by Jacques Ellul, as noted briefly in the first chapter. He treated the city as a paradigm of the situation of humankind under sin and grace, calling therefore for a radically dialectical treatment.²⁵ On the one hand the city is a memorial to human conquest.²⁶ It is a world 'for which man is not made'. We find no law concerning the city because 'God has cursed, has condemned, the city instead of giving us a law for it.'²⁷ The city originates in the refusal of Eden, humankind's provided home, and the substitution of one humankind provides for itself.²⁸ It begins, then, with the rejection of what is freely given, grace. Urban civilisation is warring civilisation.²⁹ Overlooking much contrary evidence – the campaigns of the early Arab

²⁴ J. Vincent, 'An Urban Hearing for the Gospel', in C. Rowland and J. Vincent (eds.), *Gospel from the City* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 1997), p. 112.

²⁵ Ward misses the ambivalence of Ellul's account, finding only separation here. G. Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 48f.

²⁶ J. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13. He derives this from the name Nimrod, the next city builder after Cain, which he translates 'plunderer', and from the name of one of the cities he builds, which means 'cavalry'. Mumford agrees with him here. 'Every part of life became a struggle . . . a gladiatorial contest . . . the new myths were mainly expressions of relentless opposition, struggle, aggression . . . Though the more cooperative village practices retained their hold in the workshop and the field, it is precisely in the new functions of the city that the truncheon and the whip – called politely the sceptre – made themselves felt.' L. Mumford, *The City in History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 65.

invaders, the German and Scandinavian invaders who formed present day Europe, the Huns and Mongols and more recently Pol Pot – Ellul maintains that there is no such thing as a great agricultural war. ‘A rural people is never a ravenous people . . . War is an urban phenomenon.’³⁰

The city embodies spiritual power. In fact, for Ellul, it is one of the ‘principalities and powers’, in a sense more negative than that proposed by Wink.³¹ It is not the people in a city who are cursed, but ‘the city’ as a spiritual entity, as what embodies humankind organised against God.³² The city is a cursed place by its origin, its structure, its selfish withdrawal and its search for other gods.³³ Sin, ‘the world’ and the powers of hell are all symbolised in the city. ‘In the clear vision of the Lord’s Spirit the truth about Rome is the truth about Moscow, about Berlin, about Paris and about Washington.’³⁴ The life of a powerful city is always a constant succession of revolts against God. This is notwithstanding the fact that the city is the product of good will, ‘the engineer’s bright eye, the urbanist’s broad sweep of mind, the hygienist’s idealism’. The results, however, speak for themselves: slavery tolerated and human relations destroyed in the anonymity of the great city. It is a familiar theme: the best virtues of good pagans are nothing but splendid vices. The city is the greatest human work, the attempt to attain autonomy. ‘No other of man’s works technical or philosophical is equivalent to the city, which is the creation not of an instrument but of the whole world in which man’s instruments are conceived and put to work.’³⁵ Because the city is the great means of separation between human beings and God, the place human beings made to be alone, ‘she is the very centre of the world’s disorder, and it is therefore useless to speak to her of order’.³⁶

Alongside all this negation, however, lies affirmation, as noted briefly in the first chapter. From the oldest period ‘there was a tendency to pardon, to accept the city’.³⁷ Thus Nineveh itself, the bloody city, is saved by Jonah’s preaching. But of course mention of Nineveh shows that the city is not necessarily unredeemed. There is the possibility of reconciliation with God in the city (Ps. 87.4). In the cities of refuge the city plays a positive role in the order of preservation which is part of God’s plan for the world (Num. 35; Josh. 20).³⁸ The purpose of these cities is to

³⁰ Ellul *Meaning*, p. 51.

³¹ Wink always assumes that the powers are created, fallen and can be redeemed. As it turns out, Ellul shares this view, but in speaking of the city as one of the powers he intends it wholly negatively, as a force aimed against God.

³² He appeals to Isa. 14.12–15; Ezek 28.1–9 for this reading.

³³ Ellul, *Meaning*, p. 60. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50. ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

ensure greater justice.³⁹ Mumford, too, notes the same function. Even if power was the mainstay of the new city, he says, 'it became increasingly shaped and directed by new institutions of law and order and social comity'.⁴⁰ As trade grew the part played by the city as a seat of law and justice, reason and equity also grew, supplementing the part it played as a religious representation of the cosmos. The city, therefore, is both a centre of violence and protection against it.

Ellul goes further than this, however, in finding in Jerusalem an analogy to the incarnation. In the promise to David, God takes possession of Jerusalem and in so doing symbolically takes possession of all cities. Christ had no conciliatory or pardoning words for the cities, but his death and resurrection mean that the city is now a neutral world where human beings can be free again, where there are possibilities for action. There is no question of expecting a new Jerusalem on earth, for the new Jerusalem will be God's creation, absolutely free, unforeseeable, and transcendent, but God's act gives human beings room for autonomous action.⁴¹ In particular the person of faith is involved in a battle on a spiritual plane, a battle comparable to Abraham's battle for Sodom, in praying for the good of the city. 'We must ask God to take away this condemnation which we know so well, and herein lies our liberty in relation to the city.'⁴²

This dialectic cannot be regarded as a peculiarity of theologians, for it is shared by urban theorists like Mumford. On the one hand the city is 'the most precious collective invention of civilization . . . second only to language itself in the transmission of culture'. It is through the city that labour is sufficiently organised to channel the forces of nature and establish order and justice.⁴³ On the other hand there is a 'negative symbiosis' resting on war, exploitation, enslavement, and parasitism. Mumford's concern is that the former aspect should not be eclipsed by the latter. David Harvey agrees. The city is both the high point of human achievement, and the site of squalid human failure, 'the lightning rod of the profoundest human discontents, and the arena of social and political conflict. It is a place of mystery, the site of the unexpected, full of agitations and ferments, of multiple liberties, opportunities and alienations; of passions and repressions; of cosmopolitanism and extreme parochialisms; of violence, innovation and reaction.'⁴⁴ Henri Lefebvre remarks that the modern city is not thought out because we have not resolved the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92. ⁴⁰ Mumford, *City*, p. 63. ⁴¹ Ellul, *Meaning*, p. 170.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 75. ⁴³ Mumford, *City*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ D. Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 229.

contradiction between these two traditions but in fact the dialectic is ineluctable.⁴⁵ Like all human life cities make manifest the dialectic of sin and grace but it is in what they contribute to the furtherance of life that they play their role in the economy of redemption.

CITIES IN THE ECONOMY OF REDEMPTION

Haddon Willmer puts the question of redemption squarely by asking what sort of humanity is encouraged by different types of city.⁴⁶ It is clear that whilst all cities may share certain features in common, some are far more creative, or humanising, than others. In particular we have to ask, as *Faith in the City* did, what cities do for the poor.⁴⁷ Much Christian writing about the city is about the struggle of the poor and their triumph over adversity, especially in the genre of 'urban theology'. But if we think about the Indian poor, for example, flooding into the cities from the villages and increasing city populations by tens of thousands every day, we could ask whether it would not be better for them, as Gandhi thought, to remain in the village, where they have the same poverty, but not the same pollution; the same oppression, but not the same pressures of crime and prostitution. Cities, generations of fiction and film have taught us, are characterised by 'mean streets' where only the fittest survive. In the stories of the poor, what is creative about the city *as such*, and what is human hope and courage rising above appalling odds? In enquiring about the redemptive and humanising aspect of cities it is essential to keep that question in view.

In his history of Western Europe during the first Christian millennium Peter Brown illustrates the way in which cities were, for many centuries, literally life saving. Those in the rural hinterlands retreated behind city walls when raiders came, and the Church played a central part in maintaining them once the old structures of the Roman Empire had disappeared. 'Walls and bishops went together.' The Church helped cope with famine and siege by charitable work and 'the buildings of the church spoke of the day to day determination of cities to survive and

⁴⁵ H. Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, tr. E. Kofman and E. Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 205–6.

⁴⁶ H. Willmer, 'Images of the City and the Shaping of Humanity', in A. Harvey (ed.), *Theology in the City* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 34.

⁴⁷ I take for granted the debate about relative deprivation made famous by Peter Townsend. In speaking of 'the poor' I have in mind both the destitution of the Indian city I know best, Madurai, where some communities live on pavements or by railway tracks, but also the relative poverty encountered everywhere in the North, which excludes many from the goods enjoyed by the majority. In Britain at the turn of the millennium over a million households are officially homeless, and around five million people have an income below the European poverty line.

to be seen to survive'.⁴⁸ This function of cities is now over. Artillery began this process and the atom bomb completed it. If anything, security is now associated more with the country than the city, though inner city violence, the possibility of murder and mayhem, has always been part of city life, as the story of Sodom reminds us. Dealing with that violence is part of the construction of urban order, but in thinking of the city's redemptive role we cannot begin there. In considering cities in the economy of redemption we have to give pride of place to what Elias calls '*the civilising process*'.⁴⁹ Cities are, by definition, places which 'civilise' us, which teach us the arts of cooperative and creative living. Recalling Luther's account of the purpose of redemption as humanisation, we can compare Mumford's remark in 1961: 'If we are to have cities it is because *they make men*'.⁵⁰ Given the literature of the mean streets which goes back at least to Thomas Dekker in the late sixteenth century, and indeed to Genesis, such a claim needs some elaboration.

Mumford's claim goes back to Aristotle who, improbably from our point of view, thinks of cities as *nurseries of the virtues*. The city, he says, originates in the union of a number of villages which come together for the bare needs of life, 'and continue in existence for the sake of a good life'.⁵¹ The good life is directed towards the goals proper to humans, namely to produce human beings who embody courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, greatness of soul, gentleness, being agreeable in company, wittiness and modesty. This can only be done in a city because such virtues can only be learned through interaction and fellowship and because the urge for community is part of human nature. To live outside community, therefore, is to live an unnatural life, and community, for Aristotle, is the city. The city exists to promote the flourishing of education and excellence,⁵² and provides the essential framework for this to happen, for without the justice which the laws of the city imposes human beings are 'the most unholy and the most savage of animals, the most full of lust and gluttony'.⁵³ To the objection that it is precisely in the city that lust and gluttony are stimulated, he replies that crime and disorder are to be dealt with by moderate possessions and occupation on the part of the citizens, habits of temperance and the study of philosophy.⁵⁴ Since the supreme human goal is the exercise of our rationality, this last is the real key. It turns out that the city ultimately exists to make metaphysical contemplation

⁴⁸ P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 61.

⁴⁹ N. Elias, *The Civilising Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). ⁵⁰ Mumford, *City*, p. 127 (my italics).

⁵¹ *Politics* 1252b28. ⁵² *Ibid.*, 1283a25. ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1253a37. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1267a10.

possible for a tiny number of leisured citizens. As Alasdair MacIntyre remarks, 'All Aristotle's conceptual brilliance . . . declines at the end to an apology for this extraordinarily parochial form of human existence.'⁵⁵ It is also necessary to remind ourselves that the achievements of classical Athens, and the background to Aristotle's philosophising, depended on extremely cruel treatment of slaves.⁵⁶

Aristotle's claims for the city may have been flawed but this does not mean that the idea of the city as a nursery of the virtues is to be rejected, strange as it seems to us after three centuries of experience of the capitalist city. To make sense of it we need to understand the virtues as those things which promote our humanness, which promote the goods of human flourishing. We can then listen to Mumford's judgement that '[t]he final mission of the city is to further man's conscious participation in the cosmic and the historic process'.

Through its own complex and enduring structure, the city vastly augments man's ability to interpret these processes and take an active, formative part in them, so that every phase of the drama it stages shall have, to the highest degree possible, the illumination of consciousness, the stamp of purpose, the colour of love. That magnification of all the dimensions of life, through emotional communion, rational communication, technological mastery, and above all, dramatic representation, has been the supreme office of the city in history. And it remains the chief reason for the city's continued existence.⁵⁷

The city is the nursery of the virtues in this sense. The city is purposive in a qualitatively different way to the village or town. It represents a corporate attempt to fashion the human future. It is 'larger than life'; the buzz of its diverse trades and conditions stimulates both art and ideas. It provides a stage on which even the poor can act, and that they do so is witnessed by urban theologians. Panache, says Laurie Green, 'is a quality highly valued and applauded in most Urban Priority cultures whether it be expressed as a "Jack the lad" jauntiness or capitalized

⁵⁵ A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 83.

⁵⁶ Thus Oswyn Murray writes: 'The skeletons and evidence of living 300 feet underground in tunnels fed with air through downdrafts created by fires halfway up the shafts, the niche for the guard at the mine entrance, and the fact that the tunnels were so small that the face workers must have crawled and knelt at their work while all portorage was carried out by pre-adolescent children, reveal the truth . . . It is an appalling indictment of Athenian indifference that Nicias, whose money was made from child labour of this sort, could widely be regarded as the most moral and religious man of his generation. 'Life and Society in Classical Greece', in J. Boardman, J. Griffin and O. Murray (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 224.

⁵⁷ Mumford, *City*, pp. 655–6.

upon in the street market trader'.⁵⁸ The scene which is acted may be tragedy, comedy, tragical-historical, scene indivisible or poem unlimited, as Hamlet puts it, but in and through it the dimensions of life are magnified and consciousness illumined.

All creativity requires a balance between stability and anarchy, for where there is perfect order there is death. For this reason, Peter Hall argues, creative cities are places in which social relationships, values and views of the world are in the throes of transformation. 'Conservative, stable societies will not prove creative; but neither will societies in which all order, all points of reference, have disappeared. To a remarkable degree, creative cities have been those in which an old established order, a too-long-established order, was being challenged or had just been overthrown.'⁵⁹ Practically speaking this means that creative cities are often immigrant cities. 'The creative cities were nearly all cosmopolitan; they drew talent from the four corners of their worlds . . . Probably no city has ever been creative without continual renewal of the creative bloodstream.'⁶⁰ Cosmopolitanism, of course, is one of the key distinguishing markers between city and town.

The creativity of cities is manifested above all in the arts, in the economy, and in industry. With regard to the arts the champion of the suburb, Herbert Gans, argues that cities are not necessary for their flourishing. Historically speaking it is simply the fact that they have housed the rich who have supported the creators of culture which gives this impression. Today it is perfectly possible to live in the suburbs without loss of creativity.⁶¹ Whilst many creative people doubtless live in the suburbs, however, there is the question of concentration, the electricity of creativity, the possibility for the innovative to spark each other off, which we find, for example, in Paris at 'the moment of Cubism' or in Periclean Athens, Renaissance Florence, Elizabethan London, and so forth. Putting one's finger on what precisely generates this creativity is, however, no easy matter. Peter Hall, who considers the question in detail in *Cities in Civilization*, admits that 'it becomes increasingly hard to find any single satisfactory explanation'.⁶² He does, however, find instability an essential part of the creative mix. Thus he believes that in quattrocento Florence it is rapid accumulation of wealth, and a resultant breakdown

⁵⁸ L. Green, 'Physicality in the UPA', in P. Sedgwick (ed.), *God in the City: Essays and Reflections from the Archbishop's Urban Theology Group* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p. 109.

⁵⁹ Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, p. 286.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁶¹ H. Gans, *The Levittowners* (London: Allen Lane, 1967), p. 424.

⁶² Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, p. 282.

of values, which produces the explosion of creative power which gives us Brunelleschi, Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo and all the rest. But like Elizabethan London this city was not at all a nice place, Hall points out, a place of sweetness and light, but a place of murder and mayhem alongside great spirituality and dynamic commercialism. 'Perhaps the sense of moral breakdown is the price such a society necessarily pays.'⁶³ I shall return to this question shortly.

As well as being centres of artistic creativity, cities are also *nurseries of industrial innovation and experiment*. Laurie Green senses 'the majesty, energy and power of God in heavy industry and in that a sense of belonging with God in a solidarity with God's creativity. . . . a sense of wonder in industry that we have been given gifts to work with such complexity and find comradeship, worth and identity in the endeavour'.⁶⁴ Hall's focus is on the processes which make industry possible in the first place, though it is not clear that the innovation he talks about can always be ascribed to cities. In the case of Silicon Valley, for example, universities and the Defence establishment seem to play the key role, along with Schumpeter's entrepreneurs, whilst in Japan it is 'the state as permanent innovator'. What are certainly needed, even in the age of Information Technology, are geographical foci, without which 'synergy', the mutual sparking off of minds, does not happen. He also finds for the cities he mentions – Manchester, Glasgow, Berlin and Detroit – a position on the fringe, but not in outer darkness, a tradition of work in the area in which innovation came. Marginality meant the absence of well established hierarchies, and therefore an egalitarian ethos was possible. 'There was little sense of deference. Careers were open to talents. The prevailing ethos, whether inspired by Protestant religion or hedonism or by shintoism, encouraged achievement in commerce and industry and the making of money.'⁶⁵ Hall seems to put the heroic tradition in first place, the Schumpeterian entrepreneur beginning in his or her garage or garret, but all his instances illustrate the importance of networking, which, in crucial instances, produces 'chains or cascades of innovation'.

The 'career open to talents' is indeed one of the key creative aspects of the city. Here is one of the classic ways in which the city in itself is supposed to be able to better the life of the poor. The medieval German saying that *Stadtluft macht frei nach Jahr und Tag* points to the way in which it has been possible to escape the social policing of small communities or,

⁶³ Ibid., p. 71. ⁶⁴ L. Green, 'Blowing bubbles: Poplar', in *God in the City*, p. 75.

⁶⁵ Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, p. 494.

in the middle ages, feudal obligation, in the more tolerant, or perhaps simply more commercial, atmosphere of the city. But as Mumford points out, what was meant by freedom changed in the transition from medieval to early capitalist city. The medieval city gave freedom from feudal restrictions, whereas the eighteenth century city gave freedom for private investment and profit without reference to the welfare of the community as a whole.

This change is linked to the city's role as market. Without doubt cities have been the mainspring of dynamic economies and it can be argued that they remain today the driving force of the world economy.⁶⁶ But then, as Bernard Mandeville pointed out near the beginning of the present, capitalist, phase of the city, in this world public vices are essential for capitalist survival. In the city 'Luxury/Employ'd a Million of the Poor/And odious Pride a million more.'⁶⁷ In Ireland Mandeville's book was burned by the hangman because he argued that Christian virtues, conscientiously practised, would lead to commercial failure. Both industrial and finance capitalism have been wedded to a *Realethik* which pours scorn on the Sermon on the Mount.

This takes us back to the dangerous nature of artistically creative cities. Hall's study of the role of the city in civilisation could suggest the Nietzschean thesis that it is Dionysian energy which makes for true humanness, and that Christianity, with its favouring of 'the weak', undermines that. Hall's running together of creativity and injustice could suggest the thesis of Konrad Lorenz that rough and tumble and inequality is necessary to human creativity, or Hayek's vision of human history as a moving column. It is regrettable that those in the rear are trampled on, suffer and die, but it is the price we pay for progress, and it is worth it in the long haul.⁶⁸ Were we to achieve social justice would this perhaps mean a dull, safe suburban existence for all which would destroy the exercise of our creativity? To put it bluntly, are Christian virtues humanly counter productive? Artistically we have the disaster of periodic bouts of religious iconoclasm: Savonarola burning piles of great works of art in the market square at Florence because they contravened what he took to be Christian standards of morality. Ought we, then, to redefine the

⁶⁶ Finance capital still has relatively few powerful bases: New York, London, Frankfurt, Singapore, Hong Kong, but the position of the great corporations which control the global economy is less clear. They tend to have a host nation, but it is of their essence that they can move freely and at a moment's notice to places where labour is cheapest.

⁶⁷ B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1914, orig. 1714).

⁶⁸ K. Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness* (London: Unwin, 1988); F. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: ARK, 1986).

virtues, as Nietzsche proposed, and produce a new list, as those things which promote capitalist success?⁶⁹ Are Christians eternal Malvolios, protesting against the enjoyment of cakes and ale? How does the gospel respond to the fact that feelings of aggression and sexuality are important survival instincts in the city?⁷⁰ Is Mary Whitehouse right, or Nobuyoshi Araki with his claim that ‘without obscenity our cities are dreary places and life is bleak’?⁷¹ If, as I have claimed, all creativity ultimately derives from God, is there an *opus alienum* in God, wedded to mayhem and creative destruction, alongside God’s *opus proprium* discerned in Christ? To put the question in this way is already to answer it. The gospel can have no truck with social Darwinism of any kind. It is predicated on the assumption that true human flourishing is bound up with the flourishing of all. The tension between stability and anarchy may be necessary for creativity, but this is quite a different thing from injustice and oppression. Following Mumford I spoke of the ‘corporate attempt to fashion the future’ in the city, but historically this ‘corporate’ has not included the poor. Their exclusion was not the necessary condition of creativity, I suggest. On the contrary, we have yet to see what creative potential can be unlocked under conditions of justice, precisely the future to which the prophets of Israel, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and all the greatest teachers of the Church have called us. The creativity we have seen is built on an ‘in spite of’. What we await is a creativity built on a ‘because’.

SUSTAINABLE CITIES?

Will the city continue to play a role in the economy of redemption? With more than half of the world’s population now living in cities, and that proportion changing in favour of the city day by day, it is a poor lookout if they do not. Nevertheless the question is serious. One of the key questions is whether the mega city is sustainable, and what we should do about it if it is not. Mumford noted in the nineteen sixties that New York now covered 2,514 square miles and London was 650 times as big as its medieval predecessor. To hold that such cities represent the new scale of settlement to which human beings must adapt their institutions and personal needs was, he said, ‘to mask the realities of the human situation and allow seemingly automatic forces to become a substitute for human

⁶⁹ John Atherton, for example, suggests self interest, efficiency, freedom in competition and the importance of individualism as new virtues compatible with the gospel. *Christianity and the Market* (London: SPCK, 1992).

⁷⁰ Green ‘Blowing bubbles: Poplar’, p. 82.

⁷¹ N. Araki, *Tokyo Lucky Hole* (Cologne: Taschen, 1997).

purposes'.⁷² The Population Crisis Committee, reporting in 1990, noted that some cities, such as Tokyo with 30 million, or Mexico City with 20 million, were becoming too big to be efficient.⁷³ Today Sao Paulo and Shanghai also have populations over twenty million. Schumacher felt half a million was the limit of what was desirable. Above such a size, he said, nothing is added to the virtue of the city whilst enormous problems certainly were created.⁷⁴ For Papanek, social chaos ensues above 120,000.⁷⁵ Even were we to allow Jane Jacobs' argument that it is city creativity which stimulates regional growth, cities have always been parasitic on their regions in the sense that they cannot produce the food and water they need for their citizens. The advent of mega cities intensifies this to an extreme degree. Not only are cities the main consumers of energy world wide, but they produce vast quantities of waste, demolish forests and lakes and drive the unsustainable rush for cheap food, reflected outside the city in increasing levels of soil degradation. Murray Bookchin argues that such vast conglomerations cannot be adapted to alternative energy. 'To use solar, wind and tidal power effectively, the giant city must be dispersed. A new type of community, carefully tailored to the nature and resources of a region, must replace the sprawling urban belts of today.'⁷⁶ It is easy to sympathise with Kirkpatrick Sale's plea for buildings and cities in human scale which can easily be taken in by the human eye, and comfortably walked.⁷⁷ He formulates what he calls the Beanstalk

⁷² Mumford, *City*, p. 616.

⁷³ Cited in H. Girardet, *The Gaia Atlas of Cities* (London: Gaia, rev. edn 1996), p. 71.

⁷⁴ E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (London: Sphere, 1973), p. 55.

⁷⁵ 'With our objective a benign, neighbourly way of life, rich in interconnections and cultural stimuli, we can say that "face to face" communities will consist of 400 to 1000 people (the ideal is around 500), "common neighbourhoods" will accommodate roughly 5000 to 10,000 residents (or 10 to 20 face to face communities), and the "ideal city" will house about 50,000 souls (or 10 to 20 common neighbourhoods). Special functional reasons may decrease city size to 20,000 or increase it to 120,000 – beyond that lies social chaos.' V. Papanek, *The Green Imperative* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 112.

⁷⁶ M. Bookchin, 'Towards a Liberatory Technology', in *Post Scarcity Anarchism* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), pp. 85–139. Kjellberg found in surveys that approaches to the city could be schematised between cosmological and anthropocentric views. He maps them as follows:

cosmological holism	anthropocentric sustainability
city as organism	city as machine
nature and man together	nature for the benefit of human beings
equitable distribution	economic growth
users' power	elite power
unity of all created	personal freedom

Urban EcoTheology, p. 17. The map points up some of the cultural contradictions of our present situation, and underlines the need for a fundamental cultural and spiritual shift.

⁷⁷ K. Sale, *Human Scale* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), pp. 38, 59.

principle, that for every animal, object, institution or system there is an optimal limit beyond which it ought not to grow. And its corollary, that beyond this optimal size all other aspects of a system will be affected adversely.⁷⁸

An obvious alternative is to argue for small scale developments based on permaculture. Castells' comment on such proposals is that '[t]he ecological dream of small, quasi-rural communes will be pushed away to counter cultural marginality by the historical tide of megacity development'. 'There will be epidemics and disintegration of social control . . . but megacities will grow in size and dominance because they keep feeding themselves on population, wealth, power and innovators from their extended hinterland. They are nodal points connecting to global networks.'⁷⁹

This proposal, however, seems quite as impossible as the small scale developments he dismisses. Although earlier he has examined Green movements, Castells does not ask at this stage of his work whether this historical tide is either ecologically or socially sustainable. He seems to presuppose the arguments of those economists, like Julian Simon, who maintain that human inventiveness will always come up with something, and then use this as an argument that human beings can do as they please.⁸⁰ The record of extinct civilisations ought to warn us of the dangers of such folly.

Radical utopian alternatives are proposed by the Greek thinker Constantin Doxiadis, and the American Paolo Soleri. Doxiadis assumed that the human population would go on expanding up to 22 billion. This, he believed, was the absolute limit of the earth's carrying capacity, and would only be possible if we stopped building on fertile agricultural soil at once (this was in the 1970s). He distinguished four basic spatial areas: one for nature, another for cultivation, another for human living and another for industry. He then broke these up into twelve zones beginning with a zone which was 'as nearly virgin as possible', then one visited by humans but without permanent human installations, up to an industrial area which was the site of 'every possible use for achieving the goal of the best industrialisation'. Looking at the planet he saw a coastline of approximately 261,000 kilometres, and proposed that the area for human settlement should consist of low, medium and high density settlements

⁷⁸ Victor Papanek agrees. 'My primary conviction as a human being, a designer and an ecologist is *Nothing Big Works – Ever!* Green Imperative, p. 24.

⁷⁹ M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 409–10.

⁸⁰ cf. J. Simon, *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

following this coastline, globally.⁸¹ Since Doxiadis' death in 1975 global warming has made a significant impact on world coastlines, leading Paul Ehrlich to suggest that coastal zone development should be limited as far as possible.⁸²

Paolo Soleri has proposed housing people in vast structures which are mini cities in themselves. 'Around vertical vectors', he writes, 'megalopolis and suburbia can contract.' As with Le Corbusier the idea is that one can step out from the high rise building into the countryside. His towers are surrounded by greenhouses which both grow food and channel heat into the settlement. Within the settlement transport is eliminated altogether. His image of these vast structures is of great passenger liners, afloat in the global sea, his version of the 'machine for living in'. Like Teilhard de Chardin, his inspiration, he envisages human beings evolving from nature to neonature, partly through the structures of his 'arcology' (architecture plus ecology). High density is central to his thinking. In his view 'death comes when the system uncrowds. No eco thinking can ignore the miracle of crowded living.' The fate of tower blocks seems to be the best commentary on his proposals.⁸³

Vance proposed that there has always been an alternative to synoecism (the process by which villages come together to form a city, as proposed by Aristotle), namely what he called dioecism, in which cities dispersed into their rural hinterlands.⁸⁴ Some have proposed that Information Technology will reverse the movement of the first industrial revolution. Bill Gates, of Microsoft, believes that there are now 7 million telecommuters in the United States, significantly reducing pressures on traffic. They could, of course, simply lead to what Hall calls 'telesprawl', a further undisciplined spread of suburbia.⁸⁵ Counter urbanisation is in part a flight from the mega city, and represents a perception that vast communities are not socially sustainable. This trend, however, is so far only visible in the North, and the cities of the South continue to grow a rate of 20 million a year, so that the planet grows steadily more urban. The push and pull factors which account for this are well known, and include land degradation first and foremost, along with the promise of higher incomes, freedom from the constraints of traditional societies, and greater access to health care and education. As the pressure on the

⁸¹ C. Doxiadis, *Ecology and Ekistics* (London: Elek, 1977).

⁸² Foreword to R. Samuels and D. Prasad (eds.), *Global Warming and the Built Environment* (London: Spon, 1996) p. xvii.

⁸³ P. Soleri, *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man* (Boston: MIT Press, 1969).

⁸⁴ J. E. Vance, Jr, *The Continuing City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 74.

⁸⁵ Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, p. 959.

environment grows, however, and as numbers in the shanties, barrios and favellas grow, it is only a matter of time before this tide turns, and a search for more sustainable ways of living in the countryside begins.

If utopian visions and growing suburbanisation seem no solution, others look for specifically city shaped solutions. Many put their faith in the compact city, which will, it is argued, reduce ecological footprints because of more efficient land use and transport.⁸⁶ The argument is that they reduce travel distances, save rural land from development, and support local facilities. Hedley Smyth claims that the history of the compact city can be traced back to biblical times when a range of government functions were administered at the city gate, controlling the comings and goings in and out of the city as well as defending it against attack.⁸⁷ Thomas Sharp, who, as we have seen, already argued for compact cities in 1932, was inspired by the old English towns, and in a similar way European thinking draws on the model of the densely developed core of the Italian hill city. An example of compact city theory in practice is the fourth report on physical planning in the Netherlands, *On the Road to 2015*. This proposes to concentrate residences, work areas and amenities so as to produce the shortest possible trip distances, most being possible by bicycle and public transport. Work is arranged so that those sites with the most workers are located close to city centre stations; hospitals, research and white collar work are situated near a good station and with good access to motorways; and work which needs high accessibility by car or truck and has relatively few workers is situated close to motorways.⁸⁸ This is a reverse of the movement of suburbanisation, where people chose to live as far from the workplace as they conveniently could. In this kind of strategy cities are seen not only as the source of the problem, but also as the means of solving it, and the general objective of achieving sustainability is seen as dependent not on radical utopian schemes but on producing sustainable built environments from the cities and towns already in existence, by steering rather than overnight radical change.⁸⁹

The compact city idea, however, is not without its problems. Some argue that it meets neither energy efficiency nor economic demands, and that it lacks the popular or political support to make it workable.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ M. Wackernagel and W. Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint* (Gabriola Island: New Society, 1996), p. 103.

⁸⁷ H. Smyth, 'Running the Gauntlet', in M. Jenks, E. Burton and K. Williams (eds.), *The Compact City: A Sustainable Urban Form?* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 101.

⁸⁸ Hall, *Cities in Civilization*, p. 973.

⁸⁹ M. Smith, J. Whiteleg and N. Williams, *Greening the Built Environment* (London: Earthscan, 1998) p. 211.

⁹⁰ L. Thomas and W. Cousins, 'The Compact City: A Successful, Desirable and Achievable Urban Form?', in Jenks, Burton and Williams (eds.), *Compact City*, pp. 53ff.

Others doubt that it meets the demands of the contemporary workplace and challenge the findings on transport, at the same time pointing out that crowded conditions often do not enhance the quality of life and noisy neighbours are a prominent cause of disputes and even murder!⁹¹ Smyth argues that many will come to live in a transition zone because of continuing displacement as a result of urban renewal and gentrification which will then displace lower income groups. This is, in fact, something already well evidenced in London. The result, he argues, will be that this zone will become a doughnut of social disadvantage around the compact city. In the worst analysis this could even be an example of eco fascism.⁹² Against those who propose town cramming are those who say that it is vital for urban dwellers to be put back in touch with 'nature' and that we need space for urban farms, orchards and neighbourhood gardens.⁹³ If sustainability is the new religion, argues Tim Mars, then planners are its priests, and the compact city the new Jerusalem. 'It sounds plausible and seductive but it is a chimera. In environmental terms even compact cities are hardly benign.'⁹⁴ If the compact city has a finite capacity then it is not on its own a true, long term, sustainable solution.⁹⁵ The case for the compact city, then, 'remains largely unresolved'.⁹⁶

Perhaps this is true, but ongoing suburban sprawl, or megalopolis, is even less benign, and for this reason it is widely accepted that medium sized cities, at least, are not only part of the problem, but also a key part of the solution to the environmental crisis, assuming that there is a solution. Many argue that cities are the most environmentally sustainable way of housing people and providing factories, offices, shops, leisure facilities and many of the other things that society wants.⁹⁷ Harley Sherlock even concludes that to prevent pollution in the twenty-first century most of us will have to live in cities.⁹⁸ Travel in cities is less energy consuming than in small towns and rural areas, because journey lengths are shorter, so people can walk and cycle more. Some planners hope that well designed and well managed cities can reduce travel

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53ff., and K. Williams, E. Burton and M. Jenks, 'Achieving the Compact City through Intensification' in the same volume, p. 90.

⁹² Smyth, 'Running the Gauntlet', pp. 103, 107. ⁹³ Girardet, *Gaia Atlas*, p. 173.

⁹⁴ Tim Mars, 'The Life in New Towns', in A. Barnett and R. Scruton (eds.), *Town and Country* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), pp. 276–7.

⁹⁵ C. Knight, 'Economic and Social Issues', in Jenks, Burton and Williams (eds.), *Compact City*, p. 119.

⁹⁶ Editorial comment in *ibid.*, p. 215.

⁹⁷ Here T. Burton and L. Matson, 'Urban Footprints: Making Best Use of Land and Resources', in *ibid.*

⁹⁸ H. Sherlock, 'Repairing our Much Abused Cities', in *ibid.*, p. 295.

distances and therefore energy use, though in practice it seems that improved transport facilities promote decentralisation.⁹⁹ When these ideas are linked to the importance of obtaining food and energy from the region we are not far from the deep green city and bioregionalism.¹⁰⁰ Far from being utopian some such move from global to local is going to have to be part of any move towards a more sustainable world. A whole raft of practical proposals is available to move in this direction, and have been implemented in various parts of the world. In Stockholm, Stuttgart and Helsinki inner city combined heat and power stations are in use, which greatly reduce damaging emissions and both produce hot water and generate electricity. Recycling and reuse programmes are being introduced in many cities: Stockholm recycles 80 per cent of all aluminium cans, and in Denmark the use of ‘one way’ plastic bottles is banned; in China human waste has traditionally been used as fertiliser, and ways of using rather than ‘disposing’ of sewage, let alone dumping it in the sea, need to be found; a new sewage processing system which demands far less water and avoids the use of chlorine has been developed in Australia and is now in use from Japan to Britain. As Herbert Girardet emphasises, cities, which use between two thirds and three quarters of fossil fuels world wide, need to take responsibility for their biocidal processes. In order for the waste gases they produce to be absorbed through photo synthesis cities need to nurture forests as ‘symbiotic partners’ to ensure climatic stability. Achieving this, as he says, means making commitments on a global scale.¹⁰¹ As the debate around the Bush administration’s attitude to climate change makes clear, culture change underlies the adoption of such practical proposals. To have an ecological city structure we have to have what Kjellberg calls ecological citizenship, based on values which have internalised the ecological question.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Houghton and Hunter, *Sustainable Cities*, pp. 12–13; G. Barrett, ‘The Transport Dimension’, in Jenks, Burton and Williams (eds.), *Compact City*, p. 179. A related set of proposals are urban villages linked by light transit systems: already Munich, Freiburg, Stockholm, Vancouver, and Washington DC have such networks. The key aspect of such villages are mixed land use, with commercial and residential properties in together; high density, with everything within walking or cycling distance; extensive landscaping, including roof top gardens; good provision for children and for the community in the form of libraries, child care, centres for the elderly, and perhaps small urban farms, and as high a degree of self sufficiency for the community as possible. P. Newman, ‘Urban design, transportation and greenhouse’, in Samuels and Prasad (eds.), *Global Warming*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. V. Andruss et al., *Home! A Bioregional Reader* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1990); D. Gordon, *Green Cities: Ecologically Sound Approaches to Urban Space* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1990).

¹⁰¹ Girardet, *Gaia Atlas*, p. 166. ¹⁰² Kjellberg, *Urban EcoTheology*, p. 46.

THE FUTURE OF THE CITY

In a widely accepted piece of analysis Saskia Sassen speaks of the emergence of global cities. She claims that the combination of spatial dispersal and global integration has created a new strategic role for major cities which function in four new ways: as command points in the organisation of the world economy; as key locations for finance; as sites of production and innovations; and as markets for these. What we have in cities such as New York, London and Tokyo is a new type of city, for which the earth is its hinterland.¹⁰³

The structure of the business and finance centres, the magnitude of them, and the weight in the economies of these cities are what have changed. The power wielded by these cities, Sassen suggests, calls the primacy of the nation state into question. The interactions among them in terms of finance and investment suggest they may be a system. The sharp concentrations of such activities constitute internationalised spaces at the heart of these large, basically domestic, urban areas.¹⁰⁴

The waning of the power of the state is both a threat and a promise. It is a promise for distinct cultural regions, long dominated by powerful neighbours: Scotland and the Basque country, for example. It is a threat when its disintegration leads to murderous Balkanisation as in Yugoslavia. In this new situation Castells, somewhat surprisingly, puts all the weight on the family. He envisages a situation where people are 'disaffected from the crumbling institutions of civil society' and individualised in their work and lives. In such a situation, in his view, the reconstructed family will be the only security in a dangerous sea. 'Families are more than ever the providers of psychological security and material wellbeing to people in a world characterized by individuation of work, destructuring of civil society and delegitimation of the state.'¹⁰⁵ But families only exist as elements in larger cultural units, speaking particular languages, cooking in particular ways, forming kinship groups thus and not otherwise. Pentecost is not the obliteration of regional diversity, but the situation where we learn to understand one another, and confess, in our manifold ways, the wonderful giftedness of all things. And in a world of the decline of old nationalisms the region is the site of struggle, not only against the old centres of power, but also against the homogenising cultural power of multi nationals and of the global media. Traditional cultures are under threat all over the world, impacted by the new media

¹⁰³ S. Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 3–4.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169. ¹⁰⁵ M. Castells, *End of Millennium* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 349.

technologies.¹⁰⁶ The family cannot resist such cultural trends. What is needed is a new affirmation of regional power, if not of the nation state as known during the twentieth century.

Braudel argues that the great cities of the medieval and early modern periods ‘produced the modern states, an enormous task requiring an enormous effort. They mark a turning point in world history. They produced the national markets, without which the modern state would be a pure fiction.’¹⁰⁷ Perhaps the global city will give birth to a new world order. Alternatively, ecological demands could ensure that cities once again have to find their resources in their immediate regions.¹⁰⁸ Harvey agrees that respecting the diversity of the local environment is a key aspect of the human future. ‘The richness of human capacity for complexity and diversity’ has to be understood in the context of ‘the free exploration of the richness, complexity, and diversity encountered in the rest of nature’, and above all in the region.¹⁰⁹ What Geddes, Norberg-Schulz and others argue about the relation of city and region instantiates Aristotle’s tenet that respect for limits is a key part of creativity. If this is the case then the emergence of the global city could ultimately be stultifying.

The acid test of the city’s role in the economy of redemption is precisely the question of what the city does for the poor qua city. In Engel’s city, the city of dreadful night, the poor just disappeared and died, often enough bereft of all support. Examples of this can be found even in the cities of the North, for all their welfare systems, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To this extent there is a judgement on the city. It is, however, the urban poor who tell us that this is not the whole story. To concentrate only on judgement is to allow too little place for the

¹⁰⁶ R. Barnet and J. Cavanagh, ‘Homogenization of Global Culture’, in J. Mander and E. Goldsmith (eds.), *The Case against the Global Economy* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1996), pp. 71 ff. Speaking to village activists in Tamil Nadu in 1994 I was told that in the evenings now, rather than telling stories, dancing and singing songs, the whole community sits round and watches western porno videos.

¹⁰⁷ F. Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life* (London: Collins, 1981), p. 527.

¹⁰⁸ Folke Günther argues this, for example, believing that cities need to rediscover their dependence on their agricultural hinterland and develop this. *Dense Urban Settlements: Ecological Obstacles and Energy Price Vulnerability* (Stockholm: Department of Systems Ecology, Stockholm University, 1995).

¹⁰⁹ D. Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 202. There is no need to accept unsustainable cities as fate. In particular the present environmental costs of transport mean that it is still essential for cities to respect their regions. Geddes and Mumford argued that it was vital for cities not to turn them into specialised machines for producing a single kind of goods – wheat, trees, coal. To forget the many sided potentialities which a region has as a habitat for organic life is to unsettle and make precarious any economic life at all. Historically we know that some of the greatest ancient cities died because they failed to respect this relationship.

ongoing creativity of the Spirit of God. As with the other forms of the built environment we have to allow that the city too must 'die to sin', to its city pride, to its unsustainable consumption of resources, to its marginalisation of the poor. On the other hand it may be that if we recover and respect our limits the city may remain the focus of human creativity, the place where the Spirit of God is known most intensely, and this is known in the vivacity, warmth and mutual support of many poor urban communities.

To do this it requires focus. Speaking of the new urban developments in the United States, which he calls Edge City, Joel Garreau notes that the shopping mall is the new spiritual centre, and that 'there is apparently no reason for any "ceremonial centres" dedicated to a "life more abundant" to be at the core of Edge City'.¹¹⁰ This development signifies the loss of the transcendent question about where we are going and what we are for. 'As we collectively produce our cities', writes David Harvey, 'so we collectively produce ourselves. Projects concerning what we want our cities to be are, therefore, projects concerning human possibilities, who we want, or, perhaps even more pertinently, who we do not want to become.'¹¹¹ Cities have always been about markets, pleasure, deifying the human project. But the great religious monuments of the past have both challenged this, pointing to a justice to which human societies should aspire, and sublimated it, turning wealth and enterprise into miracles of corporate endeavour.

Lack of transcendent purpose in the city is not an absolutely new phenomenon. If Mumford is right, the Hellenistic city effectively built to celebrate its own achievements, as did imperial Rome. This ought to be a warning to us, for today we wander about in their ruins. For what gave a new lease of life to Rome was Christianity without which, at several points in the past two millennia, it would probably not have survived. Cities necessarily have markets; they are centres of the arts and of innovation. But without a creative spirituality, a sense of transcendent purpose, they die, they cease to be cities in the true sense. Perhaps it was because he wrote in the milieu of the Hellenistic city and of imperial Rome that the author of Hebrews insisted that 'here we have no lasting city, but look for the city that is to come' (Heb. 13.14). With regard to the cities that he knew, he was right, for imperial ambitions, whether

¹¹⁰ Garreau, *Edge City*, p. 65.

¹¹¹ D. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 159. Cf. Mumford's remark that precisely because cities were part of the humanising process they were formed 'not by necessity but by discipline, desire and design' (*City*, p. 127).

colonial or neo colonial, are no substitute for transcendent purpose. He would be right, too, about Edge City. But here, too, perhaps, we can learn from the past. For it was in those very cities that Paul preached and faith communities took root which, as Peter Brown shows, sustained the city through the dark ages when the city almost died in the West, and after that once more gave it purpose. Socialism, says David Harvey, 'needs must arm itself with concepts and ideas, ideals and imaginaries . . . with foundational beliefs and persuasive arguments if it is to go about its task effectively'.¹¹² These concepts and ideas, ideals and imaginaries sound pretty much how the author of Hebrews describes the faith which takes us into the future. Such faith stands at the heart of the survival and shaping of the city as a key part of God's economy of redemption.

¹¹² Harvey, *Justice*, p. 434.