

## Urbanisation, the Christian Church and the Human Project

By Rowan Williams

It's said fairly often that the biblical narrative begins in a garden and ends in a city. Something about the way God leads us through history is linked, it seems, with our growth towards a situation in which we take a more and more creative role in shaping our environment – not just in cultivating the natural environment in which God has placed us, like Adam, but in building a complex kind of home that is shared by others, with whom we have to negotiate, whose concerns we have to ponder and interact with. The garden is a good image for some aspects of our growth with God. But it is the City of God that dominates the most sophisticated reflection on the nature of God's community.

And here we are likely to feel a bit of dissonance. Cities these days are not the soberly elegant city-states of medieval Italy, or even the burgeoning, buzzing, self-confident (and hideously polluted) industrial and commercial centres of the 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe and the USA. 'Urbanisation' is now one of the words that most vividly describes the demographic crisis and human tragedy of late modernity. It goes with globalisation: it signifies the inexorable drift towards structures and landscapes – including landscapes of economic relations and social possibilities – that are in various ways inhuman. These are structures and landscapes that proclaim the powerlessness of individuals and of small-scale societies to exercise any creative role in moulding the environment.

If this is the face of the contemporary city, how can it be a place where the spirit can flourish? I know that the current city landscape is often a scene of new energy and vitality; but I make no apology for concentrating in these reflections on the cost of urbanisation, the background of helplessness that shadows the most vibrant of city cultures and seems not to grow any less disturbing, whatever the 'upper' and sometimes more visible sectors of urban society are doing. It is hard to imagine the urbanising process going backwards. At the very least, we can't now imagine a situation where communities stop being mobile and mixed. We have become used to cities as places of variety – places where those with purchasing power can exercise the maximal amount of consumer freedom; but also places where difference between groups need not always break down into savage hostility, because there is room for some space between communities. Urban life is at once dangerous and creative; at once destructive of much that is humanly significant and a seedbed in which change can germinate and people become able to think of new possibilities. If we are trying to be clear about how to pray and how to be a disciple in the modern city, we have to avoid equally a sentimental view of urban life, one that celebrates its entrepreneurial energy and range of choices, and an apocalyptic picture that laments its unrelieved inhumanity. We have to ask what the significant available choices are, and how they serve the uncovering of God's image.

The contribution of the Church must always be something on another level from that of the various bodies struggling for dominance and access. It must simply offer a radically different imaginative landscape, in which people can discover possibilities of change – and perhaps of 'conversion' in the most important sense, a 'turning around' of values and priorities that grows from trust in God.

I want to suggest a few possible priorities for those concerned with the life of the spirit in the modern city. The first has to do with the use and organisation of time. Religious communities are all agreed that time needs breaking up, punctuating, by festival (and fasting too) – by rhythms that mark and shape the passage of time and recognise different emotions, different stages in growth, recognising that dimension of human living that involves process and the shifts of 'climate' in the life of mind and

heart.

Andrew Shanks's splendid and provocative book *God and Modernity* (Routledge, 2000) puts a case for 'calendar reform' – for a new civic consciousness that organises time around freshly thought-out historical commemorations (the fall of the Berlin Wall, the legacy of the slave trade and its ending). This, he suggests, would give us a corporate sense both of a present time that had pauses and movements, like a musical composition, and a past time that had both triumphs and failures. But this in turn suggests – whatever may become of such proposals at the level of a whole nation – that an urban environment needs the same rhythm of movement and pause at local level.

Perhaps it's often a matter of hanging some of this onto existing festival dates in the Church's calendar – commemorating specific local trauma in Holy Week, using Mothering Sunday to say something about the joys and challenges of parenting in a community, perhaps to remember the local difficulties or tragedies of children, certainly to make a point about communication between generations.

It is certainly not about replacing the Church's calendar with something completely other. It is both seeking new and independent commemorations, and, where appropriate, including local and particular history within the Church's story – while being careful not to swallow it, exploit it or make it no more than an illustration of some pre-existing Christian moral. The ethnic and religious variety of the modern urban scene means that the available religious calendars are not going to be exclusively Christian: nothing to regret there, as many pastors and workers in the urban context would testify. A second possibility. The urban landscape is characteristically characterless. What, then, gives 'character'?

Somewhere between the provision of space for quiet in households and the recognition of publicly accessible significant space is a phenomenon that seems to have become more prominent in recent years – an interest, mostly among voluntary groups, in reclaiming small public spaces as memorial gardens, protected places for quiet. The message that an environment is in some sense simply manageable – that it does not have to spiral out of control as far as basic cleanliness and usability are concerned – is a serious element of what the good news can entail in a physically degraded setting.

A third area is perhaps more obvious. Local trading schemes, micro-credit initiatives and so on are structures with well-defined and close local accountability, a good record in developing skills and restoring a sense of limited, but real, control over economic circumstances, and a low level of capital and organisational outlay. They generate self-respect and broad and forward-looking vision for oneself and others. They are something that a local faith community can contribute to very effectively, offering a ready-made pool of volunteers.

More importantly, though, they represent a challenge to the assumption of urban modernity that serious power and effective organisation has always to be centralised. There are good theological reasons for resisting this assumption, to the degree that it takes for granted a pattern of social relation that has little room for mutuality. The challenge is how to get theology onto the agenda of planning, locally and nationally (though without necessarily letting on that it is theology).

We have to take seriously what physical and psychological research tells us about the effects of certain material structures on how we think and feel about ourselves; and we need to have a positive vision of humanity and of what a freely co-operative humanity might require – a vision shaped not just by guesswork and vague goodwill, but by that fundamental Christian conviction about the Body of Christ as the best form of human togetherness. To talk about 'urban spirituality' must be to talk about the politics of the built environment as well as what particular persons can do within a given urban setting.

An approach to community regeneration that looks only for economic growth, improved choice, better access to development funds and so on will fail in enlarging the spiritual horizons of people if it is cut off from these awkward issues around the messages that an environment conveys.

In this as in so many areas, the education of the spirit is inseparably bound to highly practical challenges. We still treat separate zoning as unquestionable; we still design residential areas without visible points of focus, as if they were just an assembly of individual residences; we still struggle to get spiritual health onto the agenda of groups planning and discussing regeneration. We have some way to go. We need to rescue 'spirituality' from some of the ways in which it has been domesticated, even trivialised, in recent years. A popular and a vague word, it demands – especially for the Christian – an anchorage in some specific convictions about human beings and their possibilities. Without this, it becomes only a code for techniques of making people feel a bit better about themselves; whereas the life of the spirit ought also to make people uncomfortable about themselves and their environment, critical and creative, open to things being different.

The image of the City of God makes some sense. To the extent that urban life represents, in the history of human culture, a move beyond the sheer struggle for self-sufficiency, a move towards diversified community and a sharpened sense of the variety of goods (material, intellectual, imaginative) that people can exchange with each other, it is an appropriate metaphor for Christian community. The Gospel can be preached and heard anywhere, in any social or economic conditions. True, but this is never an alibi for failing to ask how we help it to be heard, and how we work to create persons and communities for whom.