

God / city / place

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interdisciplinary

perspectives

Chair's introductory remarks

1. Let me open the conference by making some preliminary remarks to introduce our theme. What is the aim of this conference? How are the spaces of cities to be developed as habitable places, and what religious resources are relevant to this discussion?
2. Interviewing Ed Soja yesterday, he made the following comment: the future of politics revolves around urban poverty, and thereafter described urban poverty as an 'explosive' (his

- word) issue, and as more important than climate change. Let's not start a competition between climate change and urban poverty—yet today is about facing the pleasures and the problems of living in the city.
3. How shall we face these pleasures and problems of the city—problems, mostly! A persistent temptation here for theology is to moralise the matter. That is, to consider that the core issue is the application of the correct ethical theory. And am I wrong, but does this theory not always turn out to be a version of utilitarianism? Furthermore, because churches regard themselves as communities of forgiveness and mediation, the language of values often appears here: what values, we ask, must be in play as we consider how to make our cities more habitable. Yet the straining after values represents an effort at consensus...when it is not at all clear that the search for social justice can be arrived at by consensus rather than by, say, struggle and social transformation. Moreover, this moralising of the city has tendencies towards voluntarism and offers Christianity up as a resource to be re-functionalised as an ideology for urban improvement: the technologising of love. What could grace possibly be in this scenario?
 4. Should we then consider doctrines instead? Of course, Christian doctrines have a great deal of sociality in them: think of the community of the triune God, of the church, or of creation. Yet it is not at all clear that the deployment of doctrinal resources to novel urban situations is that illuminating. Moreover, such deployment appears abstract, lacking concreteness, not properly contextual. And postmodern emphases are pressing us to be attentive to micro-politics, to detail, to specificities, to perspectives, to situated knowledges.
 5. This is not to say that there are no theological resources when considering the spaces and places of the city. Let us consider three.
 6. First, a sense of the people of God being a migrant people, a pilgrim people runs deep in Christianity, and can be learned through Christianity's relationship with Judaism. As US

Lutheran theological Robert Jenson writes of Israel: 'Her God is not salvific because YHWH defends against the future but because YHWH poses it'. Therefore we should expect Christianity's understanding of place to be a curious one. This God stirs up from the future, and does not offer protection from the future. The actions of this God are interruptive, we might say.

7. Second, such interruptions are not simply destabilising, as if God's actions are somehow sadistically directed towards denying to human beings order and rest. The incarnation of God in this carpenter's son indicates a principle of immanence in Christianity, sometimes abbreviated to God with us. Salvation is always material, even if it cannot be reduced to the material. Yet even here matters are not simple. Incarnation can be unhelpfully employed as a kind of continuity between heaven and earth that stabilises the present. That God affirms the present is not the same as saying that God approves of all our presents. If I may be so bold, it seems to me that here spatial readings are vital to stop Jesus Christ being reduced to a principle of immanence. A spatial reading requires that attention be paid to the span of Jesus' life, passionate death and lively presence, precisely to his comings and goings in space. It seems to me that this would be one way of protecting and developing discipleship: after all, no-one follows after a principle of immanence. To paraphrase a liberation theologian, who would risk their life for a principle of immanence? And, indeed, we know from the C20th that vicious political systems that de-personalise and kill might be understood as informed by principles of immanence.
8. Third, can God be understood as a God of place, or is there also real danger in this affirmation? Must God not also be understood as a God of space? If we commend that view that God is the God of places, do we propose a God of the parts, but not of the whole? And if we do not propose a God of the whole, are we not in danger of failing to see how places relate to one another. Thereby the matter of sustainability of cities is raised. For what is sustainability apart from the effort to see how places relate to, are affected by, support and undermine each

other? Distortions in one place lead to distortions in another, and we need a concept of space to understand that. And because the point I'm making is a theological one, this is code for saying that we need a robust doctrine of creation.

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