

Book Review

by Peter Robinson

Cities of God, by Graham Ward, Routledge. 2000, pp.314

I write this in an inner-city parish on Tyneside. On my desk is a copy of the latest regeneration plans from the City Council entitled *Delivering an Urban Renaissance for Newcastle*. Beside it is a Green paper on community participation. On the wall is a picture of the Angel of the North on the south side of Gateshead, a constant sign that I relate to a North East region that wants to promote a positive identity to a globalizing economy that constantly threatens to exclude it. Someone released from prison yesterday has just knocked on the door wanting something to eat for his child whilst his benefit is reinstated.

A first impression of *Cities of God* creates a strong expectation. The frontispiece indicates the author's view that his book fills a vacuum in urban theology and 'offers the first detailed theological response to the city for thirty-five years', that is since the publication of Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*. Its author, Graham Ward, is Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics at the University of Manchester and the book is published in the Radical Orthodoxy series edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Ward himself. So, what might this book offer to a practitioner in a locality undergoing intense social and economic regeneration?

The book's dedication is, in part, to 'all those who worked on *Faith in the City*' and this genuinely signals one of Ward's intentions. He gives an important reminder that *Faith in the City* does now require a degree of mediation to influence its contemporary readers, taking into account the dramatic changes in the structures of the global informational economy since its publication.

On the one hand Ward suggests that *Faith in the City* failed to understand that cities were at the time undergoing rapid change and that the social atomism of city life might have moved to a level beyond which themes such as collaboration and community had any practical meaning. On the other hand, and more constructively, Ward situates the writing of the report in the transition period between the modern city of 'eternal aspiration' (chapter 1) and the emergence of the post-modern city of 'endless desire' (chapter 2).

At an intellectual level, this does help the reviewer to understand the difference between the implicit philosophy of a nearby 1970s housing estate that set out to create a redemptive and utopian environment and the most recent private development on the East Quayside which sold fifty apartments on the opening sales day, (some having camped outside for over 48 hours!), exploiting the consumerist and never-ending pursuit of satisfaction promoted by the free market.

Equally, Ward's analysis of the well-known theological strategies for the city is a helpful characterisation, if a little brief. Whether discussing the liberal tradition (for example Harvey Cox and John Dunne's *The Cities of the Gods*) or a conservative one (Jacques Ellul's *The Meaning of the City*) Ward argues these are irretrievably tied into the 'Old City' as it was constructed by modernity – in an attempt to be included or as a protest respectively. The city of 'eternal aspiration' is not an adequate concept. This is not just because it is the place where

humanity confidently aspires to imitate the divine by pursuing its salvific dream but also because these cities 'have not seen human beings joining together at all'.

In Ward's analysis, this is related to the key failure by the theologies that responded to the 'Old City': the unwillingness to take gendered corporeality seriously. Any theological response to the 'New City' must engage with the forces that have forced changes in urban culture through the 1970s and 1980s. Ward perceptively identifies five of these: the introduction of late capitalism; the demise of urban planning in the wake of production relocation in a post-industrial context; an eclipse of the real product behind the image of a heightened logo; globalism and the rise of the network society. If the contemporary city that results may be understood more acutely then it is possible, Ward contends, to move towards a theological response, one that he argues must be partly derived from the postmodern city in order to be fruitful within it.

This response is adumbrated at some length in some stimulating and often densely argued text, but there are invaluable intermediate summaries of the whole argument at key points. Ward's overriding concern is to undermine the advanced social atomism of the global city with a doctrine of 'participation'. This is attempted by the construction of 'a new analogical world view', the entry point to which is the notion that the human body is the site of power operations. The physical body in this approach is the template for a series of analogical relations with ecclesial, sacramental, social and political bodies. Once this is established then the key to this world-view is an analysis of embodied desire and the Christian tradition of desire for God and God's desire for human beings, represented above all by Augustine, is brought into critical dialogue with the distorted desire of the city. This is the desire that is governed by logic of privation - 'whatever I achieve there is more to achieve', symbolised for this reviewer by the rush for quayside apartments.

It is the pursuit of this vision that dominates the central chapters of the book. In chapter 3 Ward establishes the concept of 'transcorporeality' through what he calls 'the ontological scandal' of the dominical eucharistic words 'this is my body'. 'Bodies are never simply there (or here)' and in Christ the body expands, often fractured and dispersed to others, becoming 'Christ's body broken, given, resurrected and ascended'. Therefore Ward is led to a theology for the marginalized and physically broken who experience a greater sense of 'living in and through others'. At this point the caller on my doorstep is transfigured to someone who opens a perspective of dependency on the other that 'the able-bodied need to accept as a gift'.

In Ward's argument his theological anthropology maps the physical body on to the body of Christ. Coupled with a Christology that emphasises the displacement of Jesus Christ's own body in the Ascension (chapter 4) enables Ward to establish the church as the erotic community par excellence that challenges the distorted modern concepts of desire, enlarges it beyond simply the narrowness of libidinous eroticism and produces a restored understanding of redemption (chapters 5, 6 and 7).

At one level it was good to hear Ward's confidence that there is a new space for theological productivity and for theology as a public discourse. At another level I had doubts about the style of engagement. So often it is characterised by the expressions 'announce' and 'intervention' and I was left asking whether the style of delivery is separable from its content? Privileging theology in the way that Ward does has its dangers. Not least it may inhibit dialogue and therefore the creation of genuine partnership between the church and three sectors – public,

private and voluntary. I am not sure that, in a plurality of the inner-city context, a practical starting point for a discussion on the necessity for participation between the body of Christ and other social bodies is the theology of the Eucharist.

Related to this is another difficulty: the nature of the urban experience with which Ward engages. Aside from ubiquitous interpretations of urban films, the concrete examples of city life include a detailed description of a 'private shop' and an encounter with a tramp on the Oxford Road in Manchester who happens to have a book by Hegel lying beside him. Notable by its absence, for instance, is the theme of social exclusion as mediated through central Government policy since 1997 and which has a wider reference than rooflessness. It is not that Ward has nothing to contribute to this debate but it does mean that urban practitioners have to work hard in overcoming the apparent gap between his theological discussion and the everyday realities of urban ministry. In the hermeneutics of the practical theology cycle *Cities of God* contributes to a very defined area of reflection; it is not always easy to define what the connection is with city life nor seeing what the reflection offered might yield in terms of renewed practice.

Nevertheless, Ward has contributed to my thinking about urban culture. I now have a sensible discussion help me interpret the Angel of the North. Perhaps according to Ward it is a sign of contemporary longing for the divine in a culture that is experiencing a disillusionment of the aimless use of technological power in modernity? Maybe angels as a 'resurfacing of the Christian imaginary' indicate to us the transformation of space, time and matter of the post-modern city and offer a chance to reflect on their significance beyond mere fantasy (chapter 8). Ward's discussion of the possibilities for the redemption of cyberspace (chapter 9) is also helpfully suggestive: the Internet fulfils modernity's ideal of 'total presence' in one moment and it colludes with the pressure towards omniscience. Even though it is not clear how a dialogue would take place, Ward argues that the analogical world-view offers a chance for a recontextualisation of the Internet that would supplement social relations rather than fragment them.

At the end I am not sure that *Cities of God* fills the need that it has itself identified. This is partly because of the distance from urban experience and partly from a lack of practicality in terms of dialogue. I do, however, recommend *Cities of God* as a challenging project that makes a key contribution to our interpretative strategies and will no doubt stimulate a variety of reactions in the theological community and hopefully beyond.

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