

Culture on the Tyne – Reflections on an Unsuccessful Bid

On Wednesday evening, 4th June I attended a party on the balcony of the Baltic Art Gallery, along from the Gateshead Millennium Bridge and opposite the significantly priced quayside flats next to the Newcastle Law Courts. It was an idyllic setting, with the sun setting through the five visible bridges spanning the Tyne.

Only 24 hours earlier I had been rung by the Newcastle-Gateshead Initiative to see whether we could ring the church bells in celebration after the announcement by Culture Secretary the following morning at 8.10am. Newcastle-Gateshead was after all ‘the peoples choice’ for the accolade of European Capital of Culture. Then there would be the party and the fireworks, and the following day the beginning of a four and a half year process towards the beginning of the real celebrations in 2008.

On the balcony overlooking the river, there was no sense of antagonism towards the North West, indeed the tone had been set earlier in the day by the bid team officials who had offered their good wishes and congratulations to Liverpool. Nevertheless, as the day had gone on the size of the economic prize had become apparent and therefore also the sense of loss. It was not as if there would be another chance, since Britain’s turn to nominate a city will not come round again for another 20 years or so. Genuine surprise was mingled with an acceptance that the reality of competitive cities was a harsh one.

The faith communities were planning to play a key part and had offered a project that would have generated a

programme of events linking faith and culture. The initiative had been led by a small group of clergy across Newcastle and Gateshead – straddling the boundary of Newcastle and Durham Diocese - and had gained the sponsorship of the Faith Leaders Group.

Culture had been defined, in a strategy document written by the two local authorities as that which expressed value and identity. It was bold move by the bid team because it placed the emphasis on the present and the future rather than then past, but for the faith communities it opened up all sorts of possibilities. For the churches in particular, it raised the intriguing prospect of being able to explore the meaning of the region’s Celtic Christian heritage in a contemporary context. For all communities of faith, it offered a particular prophetic challenge. Was a more dominant definition of culture, as high culture or art going to obscure the contribution that local communities only a stone’s throw from the opulence of the River Tyne regeneration had the potential to make? The next few years were going to be difficult - not least about making an impression on a predominantly secular cultural movement that seemed to have forgotten the historical contribution faith has made to cultural activity and that the values faith might bring with any engagement might bring criticisms with which to be reckoned.

It was not to be. However, as we had worked on the faith communities project and met with the Newcastle-Gateshead bid team a whole number of issues to do with practical theology in the contemporary urban context rose to the surface.

First of all, was the church's contribution to a City of Culture programme to be about buildings or people? Well, the definition of culture answered that and it was easy to concur with the idea of a series of events that demonstrated the part that faith had to play in shaping the identity and values of the North East. However, the relationship between the physical renewal of the urban setting and the renewal of communities and even individuals, is a key one to tease out. A City of Culture programme would have undoubtedly given a stimulus to the regeneration of some of our church buildings, yielding a much-needed injection of finance. I wonder how we would have reacted to this and whether our practice would have followed the logic of the city's definition of culture, the rhetoric of which put people and communities before infrastructure?

Second, a theological underpinning for the celebration of city life was required. "City of Culture" required a strong sense that diversity is a positive feature of our built environment, but Christian theology is better at pointing out the negatives. Callum Brown in his recent book *The Death of Christian Britain* has written about 'the myth of the unholy city' that grew up in Christian circles during the industrial revolution.¹ City life was the epitome of depravity and sinfulness. Even now the church's urban practitioners face discourses that imply that the urban church is an unnecessary drain on precious financial resources. As we approached the decision, I wondered whether the Church had the theological capacity to think positively about city living. If not, our task was going to be an uphill struggle.

This takes me to the third question that emerged clearly – issues to do with social inclusivity. One of our Byker

parishes overlooks the redeveloped quayside. Its deprivation scores are among the highest in the country. It was perfectly possible that such communities could not only be physically hidden from visitors, behind the multi-thousand pound apartments and art galleries lining the River Tyne, but also they could be effectively excluded from participation. Ethical questions loomed here and it was going to all very well to set out a doctrine of inclusion for such places, the faith communities playing a key part in enabling this, but would we have been strong enough to influence the outcome?

Culture in the urban context has become part of the metaphor of regeneration. Regeneration can be regarded as a theological word and yet used carelessly, as it often is, it can imply 'degeneration', and can promote the negative images that already hang over fractured and disconnected local communities needing 'regeneration'. The language of regeneration masks its own contribution to the stigmatisation of localities and avoids the conclusion that the deprivation of urban areas is a result of processes in which we are all inevitably caught up in, regardless of where we actually live.²

Finally, there was the challenge that working on such a project with the other faith communities would bring. Government policy more and more speaks in terms of 'faith communities', an inclusive term itself yet one which leaves open many configurations that might be brought into the service of urban renewal. The question is raised about the church's partnership with non-Christian faith communities and the need to find ways of working towards common goals. Not least there are questions to do with exploring together our common humanity and the way

that this allows agreement on what shape a good city might take. Why were we getting involved? Was it because of government thinking or was it for some deeper reason?

Cities today face huge challenges in their renewal and at the very least these four practical ones were highlighted for me in the preparation of our planned contribution to the Capital City of Culture. We would have been one of fourteen flagship community projects. We are unsure what will happen how, but the issues that I have identified remain. Their definition has been sharpened by the experience we have been through and that in many ways was the whole point. At all times in the preparation process we were advised to ensure that the directions we proposed to move in would happen in any case. The challenge for faith communities is perhaps greater in Newcastle-Gateshead and the other unsuccessful cities now than it would have been with the stimulus of a positive result.

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¹ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp 18ff

² See Rob Furbey, 'Urban Regeneration: Reflections on a Metaphor', *Critical Social Policy* 19:4 (1999), pp 419-446 for a discussion on the way that the regeneration metaphor works.