

URBAN REGENERATION – A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE FROM THE WEST END OF NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE

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In Summer 2004, I left the 'coastal suburbia' of Whitley Bay and moved to Scotswood, an 'Inner City' part of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and 'I now divide my time between being Priest-in-Charge of St Margaret's Church and Parish, and' – as Deanery Officer for Urban Regeneration – 'being the 'face' of the Church of England in the regeneration of the West End of Newcastle'. (1)

In the present paper, I hope to explore rather more fully what 'Urban Regeneration' might be, and then to offer some theological reflections on this now widespread concept and practice.

What does 'Urban' mean?

Both 'urban' and 'regeneration' are words that carry as many meanings as there are users, so it is important to begin by exploring those meanings, of the words 'urban' and 'regeneration'. I begin with the word 'urban' and its conceptually-related word, 'city'.

I suspect that most English speakers have a fairly clear understanding in their own minds of the differences between a 'hamlet', a 'village', a 'town', a 'city' and an 'urban area', but the distinctions are anything but hard and fast – the part of the City of Newcastle where I live calls itself Scotswood 'village', even though it is in a (now rapidly changing) extensive built up area. I suspect that my part of Scotswood, a handful of privately-built streets, has called itself Scotswood 'village' in order to distinguish itself from the Scotswood 'estate', just over the road and local authority-built. It is already apparent that the words for various sizes of human settlement have more than simply spatial meanings. They have conceptual or emotional resonances as well.

Further, the Metropolitan Authority called the City of Newcastle-upon-Tyne also has within its boundaries at least one 'real' village, a small settlement, surrounded by fields for at

least three miles in every direction – yet it is part of a City!

In English, the word 'City' can mean almost anything from a medium-sized market town with a Cathedral up to the biggest urban areas, whether or not they have Cathedrals. 'City' can also mean 'City Centre' as opposed to others parts of a urban area eg. the City of London, which is the 'Square Mile', not London as a whole!

To heighten this confusion, the Church of England's justly famous ground-breaking report *Faith in the City* (2) also had a quite specific understanding of what it meant by 'city' and 'urban': 'urban priority areas' (only), that is the 'inner city' or 'outer ring council estates'. Here, 'city' and 'urban' became ciphers for 'deprivation', an association that has continued until extremely recently.

Mercifully, 'city' and 'urban' in 'Church-speak' are now losing that close and almost exclusive association with what used to be called Urban Priority Areas and are now termed Areas of High Multiple Deprivation. The follow-up to *Faith in the City*, *Faithful Cities* (3) has the whole of England's urban areas within its purview, not just their most deprived residential neighbourhoods.

The 'city', the 'urban', includes all parts of a built up area. The Urban is (obviously) a *built* environment – it is man-made, not natural. The Urban has a high density of both buildings and population (indeed, some planners these days distinguish between City Centre, Inner City, Urban, Suburban and Rural by number of dwellings per hectare (DPH)).

It is also relatively large – some 'real' villages may have quite a high dwelling or population density within their limits, but they would not count as urban as their total area is far too small.

In spatial terms, then, 'urban' is about a high concentration of people over an extensive area. Urban areas are also rarely coterminous with local authority districts. Viewed from the air or on a map, urban Tyneside is clearly a single area, but within it

are the local authorities of Newcastle, Gateshead, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and (parts of south/east) Northumberland. There is a small amount of 'space' between South Tyneside and Sunderland (Wearside), but not much, and some policy makers are returning the view that Tyne and Wear should be seen as a single urban area (as it was in the days of the Tyne and Wear County Council in the 1970s and early 1980s).

Of course, the Urban is not only about living space. The very centre of Newcastle and the City of London, for instance, have relatively very few residents, yet they are still urban. They are 'City Centre', ie. civic, retail, financial, business, culture, entertainment, leisure, heritage, more than residential. In fact, it could be argued that for an urban area to 'count' as being truly urban it has to have all these things within it, alongside one or more institutions of higher education, hospitals and good road/rail/air links to the rest of the country/world.

Finally, it should be said that some recent writers and thinkers about the urban in a general sense also talk about it as the place of encounter with those different from ourselves and as contested space. It is certainly something that goes through my mind every time I get stuck in traffic in Tyneside!

The foregoing discussion reveals the huge ambiguity of even the word 'urban', before I come to the term 'regeneration'! It *is* a spatial term, but it is far more than that. It carries a whole lot of conceptual meanings as well, which need to be borne in mind when we start to think about regeneration.

What is Regeneration?

At its heart, the word 'regeneration' means 'being born again'. That gives a clue that its ultimate origins lie in Christianity. The word 'regeneration' only appears twice in the New Testament – in Matthew 19:28, where Jesus tells the twelve that, 'in the *regeneration*, when the Son of Man is seated on his glorious throne, you will also sit on thrones', and in Titus 3:5, 'God our Saviour ... saved us through the water of *regeneration* and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit'.

The first of these texts seems to be a reference to heaven, and to heaven as social experience, while the second seems to describe the individual receiving the salvation of Christ through baptism.

While the actual word 'regeneration' does not recur in the New Testament, the concept of the individual or the world being born again or made new most certainly is, notably in John 3:3-7 (Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus) and in Revelation 21 ('I saw a new heaven and a new earth' ... the One who sat on the throne said, 'I am making all things new'; compare 2 Peter 3:13).

Out in the 'secular' world, however, 'regeneration' has moved a long way away from these spiritual concepts. Furbey regards its use as metaphorical (4) but my experience of engaging with regeneration practitioners in Tyneside suggests to me that those who use the word do not regard it as a metaphor, but as concretely descriptive. There is even a British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA)!

The 60 years since the Second World War have seen in Britain a number of urban policy initiatives, and as time has gone on the general term for these initiatives has changed, from 'Reconstruction' in the 1950s, to 'Revitalisation' in the 1960s, to 'Renewal' in the 1970s, to 'Redevelopment' in the 1980s, to 'Regeneration' from the 1990s (5). In some quarters, the 'in' term is now 'Renaissance'!

So, 'Regeneration' in a secular urban context is a key word and concept. It does not seem to have been drawn directly from the religious lexicon, however. It would appear that it emerged as a term following on from the widespread practice of describing the way in which many areas, particularly urban ones, had become run down, as 'degeneration' (itself a morally-laden term, of course). The turning around of these areas (and their inhabitants?) therefore became, quite naturally, known as 'regeneration'. Regeneration thus certainly retains the idea of 'newness' we find in its earlier religious use, but newness of what?

Shortly after I arrived in post, one of the City Council's senior planners invited me to his

office to brief me about the regeneration of the West End of Newcastle, an area that has become extremely run down over recent years. I went to the meeting with the senior planner full of optimism, but was rather surprised when he spent the whole hour talking about plans for new housing! For him, 'regeneration' meant building new housing, nothing more.

Of course, the construction of new homes *is* a crucial part of regeneration. I can hardly live in Scotswood, one of the most heavily depopulated and cleared urban areas in England, and fail to realise that! But housing is only one part of regeneration.

Newcastle City Council has recently (Summer 2006) published its draft regeneration strategy for the next 15 years. One of the good things about this document is that it offers a definition of regeneration, although it has to be said that this definition is hardly written in language very accessible to non-specialists (a useful reminder that religious and theological language is not very accessible to non-religious people or to non-theologians!). Here is that definition:

Regeneration has a broad remit: it comprises a comprehensive set of actions which seek to encourage participation and prosperity, fulfilling the ambitions and aspirations of local people. It reverses decline, prevents failure, solves problems whilst maintaining and further developing truly sustainable, safe and integrated communities. It leads to lasting improvements in the economic, social, physical, environmental and cultural life of an area.

Apparently, many local authorities' regeneration strategies do not offer a definition of regeneration, presumably assuming that there is a commonly agreed understanding of what regeneration actually is.

That, however, would seem to be far from the case. Newcastle's definition of regeneration is actually quite similar to that offered in BURA's handbook:

Comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement

in the economic, physical, social and environment a condition of an area that has been subject to change. (6)

The areas covered by the chapters in Newcastle City Council's (draft) Regeneration give a flavour of the broad remit of regeneration:

- Strengthening the economy
- Improving transport and connectivity
- Providing the right choice of homes
- Transforming education and skills
- Ensuring wellbeing and health
- Promoting inclusion and social cohesion

The Council's overall aim is 'to create a vibrant, inclusive, safe, sustainable and modern European City' by 'building on the heritage and the cultural and economic strengths of Newcastle and the sense of identity and civic pride of our people' and 'improving the quality of life for all people and communities in Newcastle and playing a leading role in the sustainable growth and prosperity of the region'.

Following the publication of this Draft Regeneration Strategy, I was able to have a meeting with two of the senior Officers from the City Council who had produced it. When I arrived at that meeting, I was amazed to find that these council officers both had copies of the *Faithful Cities* report. Even more was amazing was that these officers had also both read *Faithful Cities*! That in itself says something about the continuing influence of the Church in our supposedly secular society.

Faithful Cities' view of regeneration was the one that I emphasised in my meeting with those regeneration practitioners from Newcastle City Council, namely that the main focus of regeneration must always be on *people*, not on economics or on buildings. The definitions of regeneration that I have quoted do not always make it clear that the main purpose of regeneration in urban (or indeed any other) areas must always be the promoting and encouraging of all that will enable human beings to *flourish*. In this sense, one of the failings, from a Christian perspective, of many statements about regeneration is that they fail to offer an understanding of what it means to be human. In Christian terms, briefly, human beings are made up of bodies, minds, souls

and spirits, as overlapping (not separate) categories, and we human beings are designed to be social, not solitary.

My argument is that one of the things that Christian theology can offer to Urban Regeneration in contemporary Britain is a strong reminder that **Regeneration is about enabling everyone to flourish, in every sense.** As *Faithful Cities* puts it, in the title of Chapter 6, a 'Good City' is one where Urban Regeneration is carried out with 'People in mind'.

This is, of course, not to say that economics, transport, housing and so on have no place in regeneration. On the contrary, they are extremely important indeed – but only as means to the overall end. The problem is when the means become the main focus, to the almost total exclusion of the end. It's very easy to lose sight of the importance of people in both BURA's and Newcastle City Council's definitions of regeneration.

In this sense, BURA's *Urban Regeneration: a Handbook* is a disappointment, for only one of its chapters is about social and community issues, and elsewhere local people as beneficiaries of regeneration schemes are rather in the background, and this despite Richard Caborn, at the time Minister of State for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning, saying quite clearly in his preface to the BURA Handbook:

Regeneration involves the public, private and community and voluntary sectors working together towards a clear single aim – to improve the quality of life for all (emphasis added).(7)

I cannot but agree: improving the quality of life for all is what is key and should be kept right at the top of the aims of any urban regeneration plan.

I have to say, in fairness to those at Newcastle City Council, that they were open to reshaping the draft Regeneration Strategy so that this aim became far more explicit in what they were saying – so that the wood wasn't lost for the trees.

If this view of regeneration is correct, then there are a number of biblical themes that

can illuminate this, and it is to these themes that I now turn.

Biblical Resources for thinking about Regeneration 'in all its fullness'

In John 10:10, Jesus is depicted as saying, 'I came that they may have life, and may have it in all its fullness', or 'and may have it abundantly'. In a New Testament context, this could be interpreted in a purely spiritual way. However, within the fullness of the Bible, the Old Testament corrects this one-sided view, by offering a view of the importance of abundant or full or prospering life in the here and now, as well as in the hereafter, in the physical and material realm, as well as in the spiritual realm.

It is well-known that the Old Testament, except in a few and later texts (such as Daniel 12) does not believe in an afterlife other than as a shadowy existence in Sheol. Hence, by and large, an understanding of God's blessing as being by means of the promise of heaven does not appear. This blessing is very much in this life. It is also the case that the Old Testament majors on blessing, prosperity and so on as being physical and concrete, at least as much or more than as spiritual and 'abstract'. Thus Coogan can say of the word 'salvation' in the Old Testament that

The meaning is overwhelmingly physical rather than spiritual and in this life rather than in some afterlife ... It is difficult to stress this too much ... the root [vay] in the Hebrew Bible ... rarely if ever has an unambiguously spiritual nuance.

(8)

And this applies also to other words and concepts that tend, within Christianity, to attract rather narrowly spiritual definitions – words such as 'blessing', 'abundance', 'peace', 'prosperity' and 'good'.

But this means that the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible can offer some rich theological concepts for looking at contemporary secular regeneration. This should not be a surprise, as the OT is the literature of a whole society, and deals with the whole life of that society, while the NT is far more

narrowly focussed on the Christ-event and its consequences.

The two-Testament Bible stands as a powerful corrective against any tendency to one extreme or the other, to an over-emphasis on either the material or the spiritual, on either this world or the next. Both are vital – and are inextricably interconnected. Human beings are made up of bodies, minds, souls and spirits, not as discrete compartments, but as overlapping facets, and all need to be attended to. Abraham Maslow viewed this within a 'Hierarchy of Needs', which stated that basic human physical needs have to be satisfied before 'higher', more 'spiritual' needs can be attended to. The 'Hierarchy of Needs' is a useful tool, but should not be pushed too far. It does remind us, however, that those who lack the basic necessities of human life are far less likely to be concerned with the spiritual issues.

With all this in mind, I now consider some of the words and concepts in the Old Testament that can be instructive within the 'secular' regeneration context.

Firstly, the word 'salvation' that I have already mentioned. The root meaning of the word 'to save' in Biblical Hebrew is something like, 'to be wide', or 'spacious', or 'to develop without hindrance' – 'to be in a spacious environment or to be at one's ease' (9).

While the understanding of salvation then develops to mean 'victory in battle', the root meaning of the word is something that has resonances within the regeneration context, especially if regeneration is 'regeneration with people in mind'. Offering people 'space' – in every sense - and facilitating development without hindrance are surely part of what regeneration has to be about, as long as that 'space' is for all (otherwise, the spectre of the Nazi *Lebensraum* doctrine rears its ugly head and 'salvation' becomes for some and not for all).

The necessity of benefit being for all is vital to this discussion. One of the problems with the scriptures (and not just with the Bible) is that temptation towards exclusivity. The 'space' given to the Israelites in the

Promised Land was good news for them, but hardly good news for those already living there!

Like the word 'salvation', the word 'blessing' in Biblical Hebrew is also one that originally has a material reference: '*In the OT ... blessedness is usually measured in material things – long life, increase of family, crops and herds, peace, wealth*' (10). '*Blessedness ... seems to take the form above all of fullness of life. Riches, success, prosperity, wife, children, beauty, wisdom here function as manifest signs of blessing*' (11). Again, that regeneration should seek to enable human fullness of life, in terms of longevity, security, fruitful work, prosperity, health, family and so on, seems almost to state the obvious. The fact that Israelite society was a patriarchal and agrarian society should not blind us to the underlying concepts – they are transferable.

Again, the well-known Hebrew word usually rendered 'Peace', *shalom*, has a far wider range of meanings than we usually associate with the word. It '*is used .. to refer to health or to restoration of health, to general well-being such as sound sleep, length of life, a tranquil death ... the physical safety of an individual ... good relations between peoples and nations ... quiet tranquillity and contentment ... friendship ... [the] root ideas are ... well-being, wholeness, soundness, completeness*' (12).

The ideas associated with *shalom* add the all-important social dimension to the general concepts of flourishing and well-being that the words I have been studying reflect. A key biblical verse for this essentially social flourishing is Zechariah 3:10, where not only shall every person sit under their own vine and fig tree (remember the agrarian context!), but also that every person shall invite their neighbour to come and sit with them (and remember the wider connotation of 'neighbour' in the Bible!).

Without labouring the point further, these words, along with the Hebrew words for 'prosperity' and 'good' (as a noun) show all too clearly the tenor of especially the first part of the Bible in depicting the 'good life', the flourishing of all humans, that in many ways sets the agenda for 'regeneration with

people in mind'. As I have already said, there is a danger in regeneration programmes to focus not on people but on buildings, economics, infrastructure and so on. It is not that these are unimportant, but they are only important insofar as attending to them can explicitly be seen to be for the direct benefit and welfare of people.

I am, of course, aware that a problem with all these concepts, within the framework of the Bible, is that there is often a link made between prosperity and being blessed, and poverty and being cursed. Already within the OT itself, however, that linkage has been convincingly buried, in the Book of Job. We cannot and must not subscribe to any view that links prospering with God's favour and being poor with his displeasure.

And we need to set all this concern for the physical and material welfare of all alongside a concern for the spiritual welfare of all. That is a further distinctive insight that can be offered from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. If Maslow is right, the human needs for food, warmth and shelter, are primary, then the need for safety, then the need for society, but there is a spiritual need also – somewhere near the top of his pyramid, but there nevertheless – and we ignore that need in ourselves and in others at our peril.

There is quite a remarkable congruence between the biblical concepts I have been outlining here and the understanding and importance of Happiness that has been developed recently as a 'new science', particularly by Richard Layard. He observes that, beyond a certain, fairly low, level, increased personal income does not increase personal happiness. In his analysis, the 'Big Seven Factors affecting Happiness' (13) are:

- Family relationships
- Financial situation
- Work
- Community and Friends
- Health
- Personal freedom
- Personal values

He develops a scoring system that demonstrates the effects on personal

happiness (ie. on human well-being or flourishing) of various 'adversities', using a scale of happiness which suggests that married believers with stable jobs and good health are the category of people in Western Society most likely to score the highest on the scale of happiness, more or less regardless of their income.

The biblical models of the Good Life similarly do not particularly emphasise wealth beyond a certain level as being important to that Good Life. The biblical emphasis is far more on those same factors as those identified by Layard.

Layard and the Bible therefore line up together in their critique of regeneration, by challenging 'regeneration professionals' to be explicit about what they are trying to achieve and who regeneration is for. Both the Bible and Layard would argue that what is of top priority are Quality of Life or human flourishing issues, and that increasing personal or even regional or national wealth is of only minor significance in increasing quality of life for 'ordinary citizens'. Significantly, Layard also makes clear that spirituality/religion has a significant impact on well-being – an area the regeneration industry has generally failed to even see as important, let alone try to consider.

Conclusion

As I have sought to engage over the past two years with regeneration as it affects the West End of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, two Christian texts have kept coming back to me as offering an insightful perspective on what is (or should be) going on, and I would like to finish this article with them.

The first is a prayer:

*Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our natures
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives make
known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*(14)

The second is a Fred Kaan hymn, written in the late 1960s:

*For the healing of the nations
Lord we pray with one accord
For a just and equal sharing*

*Of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
Help us rise and pledge our word.*

*Lead us forward into freedom,
From despair your world release,
That redeemed from war and hatred
All may come and go in peace.
Show us through care and
goodness
Fear will die and hope increase.*

*All that kills abundant living
Let it from the earth be banned:
Pride of status, race or schooling,
Dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
May we hallow life's brief span*

*You, Creator God, have written
Your great name on humankind;
For our growing in your likeness
Bring the life of Christ to mind;
That by our response and service
Earth its destiny may find.*

All of which reveals that so-called 'secular' urban regeneration in Britain is actually a vital part of the concern of the Church and that Christians are indeed called to play their part in regeneration in their local areas, as part of their Christian discipleship. To close with a telling observation from Tim Gorringe:

'The High Street is still more of a Christian task than the repair of the Church tower.'(15)
Amen to that.

Notes

1. *ExpTim* 116:12 (2004-2005):420-421
2. London, Church House Publishing, 1985
3. London, Church House Publishing/Methodist Publishing House, 2006
4. R. Furbey, "'Urban Regeneration": Reflections on a Mataphor', *Critical Social Policy* 19(1999):419-445.
5. P. Roberts, 'The Evolution, Definition and Purpose of Urban Regeneration' in P. Roberts and H. Sykes for BURA, *Urban Regeneration: A Handbook*, London, SAGE, 2000:9-36, 14.
6. Roberts, 'Evolution, Definition and Purpose', 17
7. Roberts and Sykes, *Urban Regeneration*, xiv
8. M.D. Coogan, 'Salvation' in eds. B.M. Metzger and M.D. Coogan, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford, 1993:669-670
9. F. Micaeli, 'Salvation (OT)' in ed. J.-J. von Allmen, *Vocabulary of the Bible*, London, 1958:383
10. Article. 'Bless' in ed. A. Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, London, 1957:33
11. M. Bouttier, 'Blessed (Happy)' in ed. von Allmen:36
12. G.F. Hawthorne, 'Peace' in Metzger and Coogan: 579.
13. R. Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Penguin, 2005:63
14. *Common Worship*, Church House Publishing, 2000: 384
15. T. Goringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, Cambridge, CUP, 2002: 260