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Incarnation in the City? Some Tentative Explorations of the City as a Locus for Theology¹

In this paper I present some thoughts on the city as a theme that is important in relation to the conference theme “building bridges” in more ways than one. Nowhere are so many bridges found as there are in cities, since many cities were founded near a river. In cities, as in the centre of Budapest, one finds all kinds of bridges, connecting and disconnecting many different places, traditions, as well as connecting and disconnecting many different people. As a general theme the city has only recently attracted renewed systematic theological attention. It is my hypothesis that nowhere else so many incarnations of divine presence can be found as in the flesh and stones of the city.² In this paper I will present some tentative explorations into this field, because I am convinced that we, as systematic theologians, need to develop such themes and reflection in order for theology to be a challenging – and hopefully bridge-building – enterprise in these days of globalization and transformation.

Why the city?

Since I do believe that we incorporate biographical elements in our choice of themes,³ let me start by confessing that I love cities. Walking around in a city

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² Allusion to Richard Sennet, *Flesh and Stone. The Body and the City in Western Civilisation* (W.W. Norton & Company: New York / London 1996). This paper is not a demonstration of this hypothesis. I only offer some preliminary thoughts on this subject and my future directions.

³ This “autobiographical drive” is also recognised by geographers. See: John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology; Ashgate: Aldershot / Burlington 2003), 15.

is one of my favourite leisure activities. I am fascinated by the architecture of cities, by the planning and development of cities, and the vision of a good life for all that often lies behind it. I find it fascinating to detect how a city reflects and forms economic, social, cultural, gender and religious identities; how the city mirrors and constructs different types of communities. I am fascinated by its mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. I always try to imagine who the inhabitants are, where and how people are living, crying, laughing, suffering, playing and praying, working and celebrating.

Furthermore, on a global scale, the majority of people live in cities, either by choice or by necessity. This seems to be an inescapable demographic development. Since I am in favour of developing a contextual theology that gives full attention to the places where people experience what I prefer to call “a sense of presence” in their everyday life, the city seems an adequate *locus* (sic) *theologicus*. If Robert Orsi is right, and there are indeed distinctly urban religious experiences and practices and the industrial and postindustrial cities have been the ground of a unique religious creativity,⁴ then this would be an enormous challenge for theological reflection. If we want theology to contribute to connecting or building bridges between people, traditions, religions, and contexts, we need to build them in those places where people are actually living.

From chronocentrism to toponophilia

The above brings me to my first theme: the emerging critical reflection which addresses the lack of attention to “place” in theology and philosophy. This reflection is one of the signs of the resurgence of space or place as an important theological topic.⁵ Jon Pahl speaks of a shift in paradigms: from chronocentrism to “topophilia” – the term coined by the geographer Tuan.⁶ Recently a lot of philosophical and theological publications focus on “place”. The central arguments in this emphasis on place are twofold: “place” is directly related to the “local” particularity, and a focus on place fully acknowledges that people are always embodied and therefore always located “somewhere” and “somehow”.

⁴ Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indiana 1999), 43.

⁵ I will not go into the highly complex and sophisticated discussions on the distinction between place and space.

⁶ Jon Pahl, “God’s Clothing: The Limits of Postmodernity and Living Waters: God as Source, (Dis)solution, and Delight,” in: *Les Questions Liturgiques* 81 (2000), 317-331, esp. 317-318. See also: Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, ch. 1.

However, it is not only the reference to the importance of geographical location to being that makes place a relevant theological topic. Place, as Philip Sheldrake states, highlights the connection between place, memory and human identity, since it has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious. “We have to think about where we are and what is unique and special about our surroundings so that we can better understand ourselves and how we relate to others.”⁷ More specifically: “It is place that lends structure, contextuality, and vividness of memory to the narratives of spiritual or religious experience.”⁸ In other words: What is postulated here is the key role of place in providing adequate human and religious identity. For that reason, a sense of place *is* a theological and critical issue.

A more fundamental and critical aspect in this turn to place can be found in the critical stance towards “the bias of theologies of time”.⁹ Or perhaps it is more suitable to speak of the disappearance of “place” from theology and philosophy in favour of time as a central category. This is a disappearance we do not only find in systematic or philosophical reflection but in biblical studies as well.

In biblical usage, the words for “place” (*maqom* in Hebrew and *topos*, especially *chora* in Greek) seldom refer to an empty, indifferent location, abstractly conceived. They speak instead, of a place where events of human and divine significance have occurred – a dwelling place, a place of meeting, a site for gathering together of being. In Hebrew thinking, therefore, “not to have one’s place is to cease to be.”¹⁰

Coinciding with my “sense of presence”, Lane points at rabbinical Judaism, where one can find “the notion of place as the extension of divine presence”.¹¹

Leaving aside what has caused this historical disappearance of place, it should be noted that all authors agree that privileging time above place should be reconsidered in favour of place. Apart from the motives mentioned above,

⁷ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred* (SCM Press: London 2001), 1, quoting Linden and Moore.

⁸ Belden C. Lane, *Landscape of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2002), 244.

⁹ Jon Pahl, *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Space: Putting God into Place* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2003), 32.

¹⁰ Lane, *Landscape of the Sacred*, 244.

¹¹ Lane, *Landscape of the Sacred*, 244.

explicit theological motives emerged in the plea for place above time. As Pahl emphasizes:

“[...] chronocentrism makes it difficult for humans to recognize the immanence or ‘real presence’ of God, and it denies the freedom of God to transcend the arbitrary human markings of moments. [...] Metaphors which ‘map’ God’s presence in the most common and ordinary phenomena of life can reorient Christian theology and practice in ways that avoid the vanity which blinds human beings to excessive and indeed gratuitous, appearances of God’s presence as love in *places*....”¹²

Formulated in a more general way: underneath the question of the religious and theological relevance of place, lies the urgency to rethink the relation of God to human experience in a more encompassing or holistic way. This stance is directed against the disenchantment of the world in modern times and against the way the churches have contributed to the strict division of the secular and the sacred and subsequently have restricted the sacred to those maps only they are in charge of constructing.¹³ In the light of this renewed attention to place, a strengthened or renewed sense of sacramentality is aimed at.¹⁴

But there also is a critical, more political dimension at work in my preference for place and sacramentality. This brings me to my second theme: the city.

The city: complex and ambivalent

Not only places but cities too, have returned in Western theology. According to Kathryn Tanner, one sign of the times is urban resurgence.¹⁵ Cities may have lost their influence with the shift of population and production to the suburbs and the general de-industrialisation of the West. But nowadays, due to the technical infrastructure and the service and entertainment sectors which support the high-flying life-style of the economic elite, cities have once again regained their position of centrality. The exchanges of international finance

¹² Pahl, “God’s Clothing”, 318-319.

¹³ Maaïke de Haardt, “Opgraven en vormgeven. Alledaagse sacramentaliteit,” in: Angela Berlis / Stephan van Erp / André Lascaris (eds), *Overgeleverd aan de toekomst. Christelijke traditie in een na-traditionele tijd* (DSTS / Meinema: Nijmegen / Zoetermeer 2001), 63-80.

¹⁴ Compare John Inge who, although from a somewhat different perspective, also defends a sacramental approach in his theology of place. Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 59-90.

¹⁵ Kathryn Tanner (ed.), *Spirit in the Cities. Searching for Soul in the Urban Landscape* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2004), ix.

and the complex coordination of multinational corporations intersect in the cities. In cities low-paid and unemployed workers from all over the world are drawn into the urban structure of global capitalism. The city becomes a microcosm of the uneven development of capitalism.¹⁶ It is the place where “*les extrêmes se touchent*”, where the most privileged and the most oppressed meet. Besides, in the 21st century metropolis [that is: New York, London, Sao Paulo, Hong Kong, Seoul, and not primarily the old European cities] such contrasts as North-South, East-West, rich-poor, well developed-underdeveloped, city and countryside, are broken, and are therefore a drastic challenge to the Western worldview that is partly constructed on the basis of these kinds of contrasts. According to the well known economist Sassen, “The downtown section of New York is deeply connected to the downtown section of Sao Paulo, much more than the downtown of Sao Paulo is to its own periphery.”¹⁷ However, these global networks and transnational corporations need to be produced. Sassen therefore points at the practices that constitute this economic globalization and global control.¹⁸ And thus the categories of place (and production) enter the analysis of economists, since many of the resources, necessary for global economic activities, are deeply embedded in place. Subsequently Sassen adds “gender” as an important category to the analyses and understanding of contemporary economic processes in which women and immigrants, form alternative global circuits.

In this respect, she speaks of counter geography and the feminization of survival.¹⁹ In this globalized world, according to Tanner, ironically another sign of the times is space: a new understanding of space, no longer as an empty container through which historical processes flow, but as both the

¹⁶ Tanner, *Spirit in the Cities*, ix-x, following the well known economist Saskia Sassen in her work *Globalization and its Discontents* (New Press: New York 1998).

¹⁷ I found this quote from Saskia Sassen on http://www.org/artikelen/sassen_review.htm, a review article by W. Minderhout, “The Return of the City. Saskia Sassen over de invloed van mondialisering op de Stad,” (originally published in: *Socialisme en Democratie* 57 [2000], 5, 264-268). I could not trace the exact location in Sassen’s work.

¹⁸ Saskia Sassen, “The Global City: Strategic Site / New Frontier”, <http://www.indianaseminar.com/2001/503/503%20saskia%20sassen.htm>; see also her *Globalization and its Discontents*.

¹⁹ Saskia Sassen, “Counter Geographies of Globalisation: The Feminisation of Survival”, paper presented at the conference on “Gender Budgets, Financial Markers, Financing for Development”, February 19th and 20th 2002, <http://www.transformaties.org.bibliotheek/sassgender.htm>; see also her *Globalization and its Discontents*, ch. 8 on this informal economy, and see the chapters 5 and 6 on women and global economy.

product of social processes and as an influence of them. She quotes John Berger:

“‘Prophesy now involves a geographical rather than historical projection’ once one realizes that it is now space more than time that hides things from us, ‘that the demystification of spatiality and its veiled instrumentality of power is the key to making practical, political and theoretical sense of the contemporary era.’”²⁰

How, then, can we make religious and theological sense of place within the complexities of the city? How can we locate the forces for spiritual regeneration or degeneration; for life enchantment or disempowerment? How can we locate the possible theological significance of the arrangements of the city? And, following my sacramental approach: Can we speak of the city, of these concrete cities, as a place/places that physically embody an incarnate God?

‘Incarnational Presence’

In order to find the answers it seems necessary to look for places of what I call “incarnational presence”. Although I do not know yet which places I can or should refer to as concrete places of presence, I, as a contextual theologian from a feminist and liberation tradition, do know that for me these places of presence are connected with spiritual resistance, with centering and connecting people in ways that make the ordinary extraordinary, in ways that offer strength, energy, creativity to live and to survive, in ways that offer moments of energy and power to resist apathy, moments of creativity to celebrate life, and that generate care and support for each other.²¹ Following the strategy of feminist geographer Daphne Spain, I am also convinced that we need to look for places where women are actively involved in building communities. Places where women, often volunteers, are creating all kinds of places of support and comfort and thus are “saving the city”, as Spain discovered for American cities

²⁰ Quote from John Berger in Tanner, *Spirit in the Cities*, x.

²¹ In this way of questioning I am trying to integrate the three modes of investigating the city (from the perspective of perceived space, conceived space and lived space) that are developed and used by Edward W. Soja. Studying cityspace presents, according to Soja, a potentially endless variety of exemplifications and interpretations. Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis. Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Blackwell Publishers: Malden / Oxford / Victoria 2000), 10-12. However, as far as I understand it at this moment, Soja hardly shows any sensibility for the religious dimensions of the cityspace.

in the turn of the last century.²² As theologians we need to develop skills to detect these “living”, perhaps even “graced”, but more often than not unnamed places in a city, in order to discover the city as a religiously vibrant and challenging place. To be able to speak of places in cities as “graced” or “incarnational places” it is also necessary to reconsider the contents of our theological concepts. In view of this, I expect that the specific characteristics of the city will re-order, re-shape, and re-figure theological understandings of central Christian concepts.

Theological meanings of the City

Before entering into this creative and constructive form of theology, I will look at the city as a theological notion that is laden with highly ambivalent meanings, ranging from extreme negative to utmost positive, with the negative pole predominant.²³

This ambivalence is already present in the Hebrew Bible, especially in those passages in which strong anti-urban sentiments are conveyed.²⁴ God created a garden, paradise, but Cain, after he murdered his brother, went out of the presence of the Lord ... and built a city. Nimrod, the first mighty ruler in the Bible, was the second city builder and he built, among other places, Nineveh, that wicked city. Other descendents of Noah, who built their city Babel with its tower, were severely punished because of their hubris. Other very famous and sinful, depraved, destructive or perverted cities, with Babylon as the prime example, are referred to in metaphorical terms as women. These cities are called whores or harlots, who try to lure and seduce the king and his followers – all males as can be understood from the images – to immoral behaviour and/or idolatry. Histories in which cities are demonized, simultaneously with the demonizing of women, are easy to find in the Bible and its reception history. Nevertheless this is seldom noticed by biblical scholars or theologians.

At the same time, and again that makes the city such a challenging place and concept, the city has also been considered as a place of redemption. The city

²² Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis / London 2001).

²³ In the context of this short paper I restrict myself to a few very general remarks.

²⁴ Spiro Kostov, *The City Shaped. Urban Patterns and Meaning through History* (Thames and Hudson: London 1991); Timothy J. Gorrige, *A Theology of the Built Environment. Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2002); Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (Routledge: London and New York 2000).

is the place where people dwell and where they feel at home. The city is also the place where God dwells. It is the place of well-being. The city is the best place for people to live together in peace and harmony. Both in the Greek conceptions of the *Polis* – no matter how complicated and ambivalent they are – and in biblical texts we find images representing ideal images of the city as community and as a visionary place to live. According to the biblical texts, the city is the place of God's presence *par excellence*. In Revelation 21, for instance, Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem, the holy city, is the biblical archetypal image of the city as the place of God's presence. Again, this city is represented as a woman, radiant with the glory of God.

Although most theologians do realize that concrete cities incorporate both negative and positive elements, this could not prevent a historical and even contemporary predominance of identifying the concrete, "earthly" city with sin, idolatry, and divine absence and estrangement; instead, the insoluble and ultimately creative tension and ambivalence surrounding the city has been "solved" by exclusion. All of this features in Augustine's sharp distinction between the city of God and the city of Men.

"Of these two first parents of the human race, then, Cain was the first-born, and he belonged to the city of men; after him was born Abel, who belonged to the city of God. [...] Accordingly, it is recorded of Cain that he built a city, but Abel, being a sojourner, built none. For the city of the saints is above, although here below it begets citizens, in whom it sojourns till the time of its reign arrives"²⁵

Here we find one of the foundations of the Christian negation of concrete and material places – particularly cities – as embodiments of divine presence. However, the ambivalent and paradoxical character of the city never disappeared from tradition. Again, this makes the city such a challenging theme.

The last element I want to mention in this plea for a theological and sacramental approach to the city is that the search for divine presence in specific locations will need to reckon, as David Brown noticed:

"[...] with a complex dialectics of place that have found God not only in the given nature (mountains, cave etc.) but also both in specific forms of permanence (such as particular homes or town plans) and in flight from these (in pilgrimage). It is important to recognize that architecture, and thus town planning too, in our day and

²⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, book XV,1.

time seen as an entirely human, cultural product, was in most of human history not regarded that way. Just as music was once seen as both human product and divine gift, architecture was held to embody, at its best, principles that reflected the divine architect behind the world's own making."²⁶

Bishop Isidore of Seville, one of the most active city builders in the seventh century, was one of the theologians who not only recognized the importance of the *civitas*, the community, but was also aware of the function of stones and the function of town planning for spirituality.

Again, this is what leads me to exploring the possibilities of a broader concept of incarnation that does not only encompass the human capacity to embody the divine but also encompasses the city as a place of incarnational presence.

Cet article examine le thème de la ville à la fois comme un lieu où faire de la théologie, et un sujet théologique important en soi. La ville, en tant que lieu (géographique), est une des manifestations de la condition humaine dans sa dimension locale, particulière et incarnée. C'est un lieu précis où les êtres humains trouvent leur identité. Le lieu présente donc de façon critique un moment privilégié historique, et nous rappelle sa signification biblique d'extension de la présence divine. La ville, et sa réémergence dans les sciences humaines contemporaines, comporte des caractéristiques propres et est devenue un microcosme du développement inégal du capitalisme mondial. Quel sens religieux et théologique donner à ces paradoxes et à ces complexités? La ville peut-elle être un lieu de présence divine ou incarnée pouvant fonctionner comme un contre-exemple efficace de sa vision religieuse essentiellement négative?

Dieser Artikel bedenkt die Möglichkeiten der Stadt als eines *locus theologicus*, und als eines zentralen theologischen Themas. Die Stadt als (geographischer) Ort ist ein Hinweis auf die lokale, partikulare und verkörperte menschliche Situation. Menschen finden ihre Identität nirgends anders als an einem konkreten Ort. Der Begriff des Ortes ermöglicht es daher, die historische Priorität von "Zeit" zu kritisieren und erinnert uns an den biblischen Sinn von "Ort" als Ausdruck göttlicher Gegenwart. Die Stadt, folgt man dieser Wiederentdeckung des Raumes in gegenwärtigen geisteswissenschaftlichen Diskursen, hat ihre eigenen Charakteristika und ist zu einem Mikrokosmos der ungleichen Entwicklung des globalen Kapitalismus geworden. Wie kann nun aus diesen Paradoxa und Komplexitäten religiöser und

²⁶ David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place. Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2004), 34.

theologischer Sinn gewonnen werden? Kann die Stadt ein Ort göttlicher oder inkarnierter Präsenz sein, der als ein produktives Gegenbild zum dominierenden religiösen Blick auf die Stadt funktioniert?

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