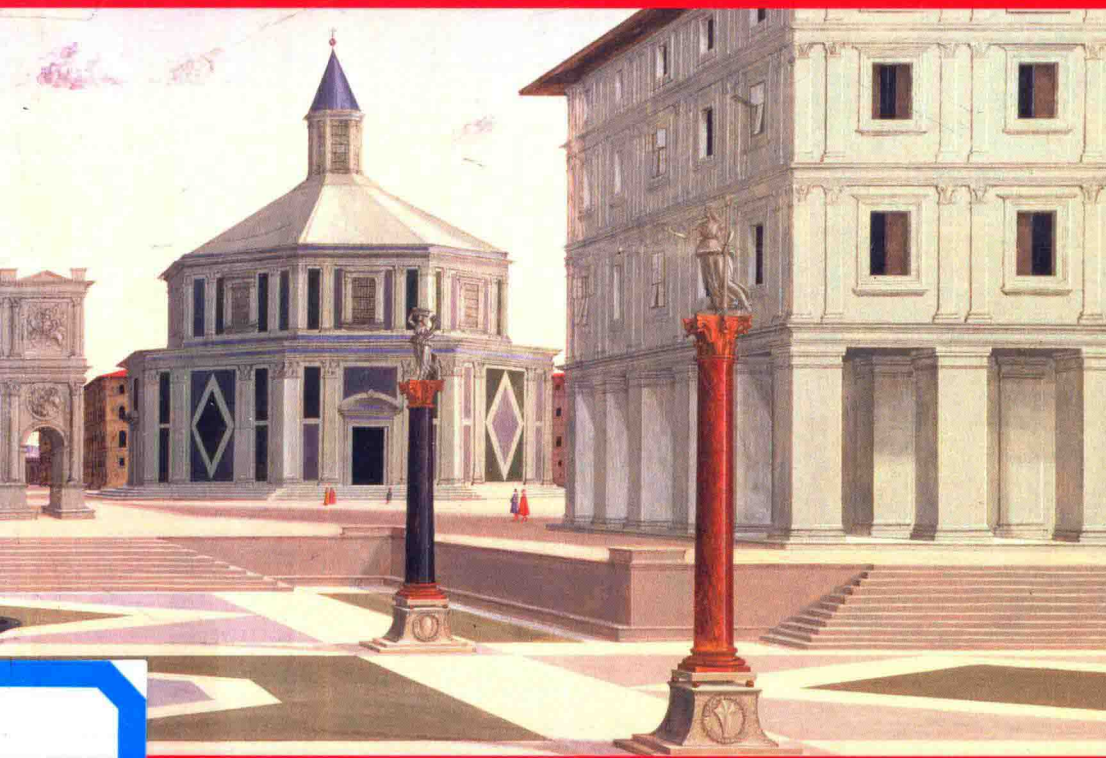
Philip Sheldrake

THE SPIRITUAL CITY

Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban



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Praise for *The Spiritual City*

"Christian understandings of the city have often been negative, but Sheldrake shows that there is a rich tradition of thinking about the city throughout Christian history. This tradition can contribute to the moral and spiritual vision which is essential if cities are to continue to be humanising and hopeful places, spaces of reconciliation rather than alienation. In dialogue with geographers, philosophers as well as social theorists, Sheldrake sets out a rich and complex vision of how Christian thinking can contribute to a worldwide debate."

Tim Gorringe, University of Exeter

"This is an extraordinarily thoughtful book. In carefully tracing the history of Christian thought on the city, Philip Sheldrake shows how a sense of the sacred can replenish the urban aesthetic and lives led today largely in environments that push belonging, community and fulfilment to the very edge of togetherness. A compelling and beautifully written book."

Ash Amin, University of Cambridge

"A quite exceptionally original and timely book, which combines deep knowledge of the Christian tradition with sensitivity to the issues of urban life today, and offers fresh insight into what the sacramental community of Christian faith brings to our current anxieties about social cohesion, justice and inclusion."

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and now Master of Magdalene College, University of Cambridge

Philip Sheldrake is Senior Research Fellow at Westcott House in the Cambridge Theological Federation, UK and Director, Institute for the Study of Contemporary Spirituality, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio Texas, USA. He has taught and written extensively in the field of Christian spirituality, on the nature of space and place in religion, and on spirituality more generally. He is involved internationally in inter-religious dialogue. His dozen books include *Spirituality: A Brief History* (Wiley Blackwell, 2nd edition, 2013), *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice* (2010), *Spirituality and History* (2nd edition, 1998) and, as editor, *New SCM/Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (2005). He is a Past-President of the international Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality.

To Susie

Preface

I have been fascinated for many years by the theme of "place" in relation to human identity. My first real opportunity to give this topic some theological and interdisciplinary reflection came when the Divinity Faculty at the University of Cambridge invited me to give the Hulsean Lectures in the academic year 1999–2000. These were published in 2001 jointly by SCM Press and Johns Hopkins University Press as *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity*. The final lecture and chapter, "Re-placing the city," gathered together a number of my initial thoughts on "place" in reference to our understanding of urban living. I am particularly grateful to Professors David Ford and Denys Turner, who hosted me during the Hulsean Lectures, for encouraging me to develop my thinking on cities into a separate project.

The opportunity to give this idea sustained attention came during 2003–2008 when I held the Leech Professorial Fellowship at Durham University. The Fellowship was supported by the William Leech Foundation set up by the Newcastle philanthropist Sir William Leech. The Fellowship enabled me to concentrate for five years on theological, historical, and urban research in relation to the past, present and potential future of cities. While I have had the opportunity since 2008 to further refine my thinking on cities, and have been invited to speak on the subject in the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, the USA, and Canada, this book is essentially the product of my time in Durham. I am very grateful to the Leech Trust for appointing me. Additionally, during the Fellowship I was fortunate to work from time to time with Revd Dr Peter Robinson and his urban theology project in Byker, East

Newcastle. I also gave a number of public lectures and other presentations on cities in Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne, two of which were co-presentations with Professor Ash Amin, the founding Director of Durham University's Institute of Advanced Study, and with Professor Fred Robinson, a colleague as Professorial Fellow of St Chad's College in the university. In 2007 I was also privileged to co-organize an international colloquium on "Faith and Spirituality in the Post-Secular City" with Professor Amin and Professors Joe Painter and Stephen Graham of the Department of Geography. This was co-hosted by the Institute of Advanced Study and St Chad's College.

Thanks are also due to Westcott House in the Cambridge Theological Federation, where I am currently Senior Research Fellow. There, I have been able to put the finishing touches to the book and have also been helped by the stimulation of assisting with the Westcott Foundation urban project. I also want to thank my research assistant, August Higgins, at the Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, for help with compiling the index. As always, I dedicate this book to Susie whose thought-provoking questions as well as loving support have been vital throughout and who contributed significantly to the cover design.

Finally, the image on the cover is a painting *The Ideal City*, attributed to the fifteenth-century Italian artist and Dominican friar Fra Carnevale, now in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD. The structures and architecture of an imaginary piazza are metaphors for a well-designed and well-governed city. The fountain in the foreground, source of life-giving water, is flanked by four statues on columns portraying the urban virtues of Justice, Moderation, Liberality and Courage.

Philip Sheldrake
Senior Research Fellow
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Contents

Introduction

The meaning and future of cities is arguably one of the most important and challenging issues of our time. As we shall see, there is a widespread sense that we need some kind of compelling urban vision that moves us beyond the limitations of a purely instrumental or utilitarian response to the issue. By a vision I mean a sense that the human city is, or can be, more than an efficient socioeconomic mechanism or convenient but impersonal administrative system conceived by policy-makers and shaped by detached urban planning. In other words, if we accept the need for vision we inevitably point towards frameworks of values based upon some kind of worldview, an understanding of human existence and a horizon of ultimacy.

This book seeks to be a theological and historical "essay" from a Christian perspective on a variety of approaches to cities. In other words, it is not a comprehensive analysis of either urban theory or of other people's theological writings. My purpose is to uncover a few of the rich sources of urban thought and practice in Christianity from a range of different contexts. I hope to suggest ways in which, with due respect to the difference between the various historical and cultural contexts, these may contribute fresh perspectives to the wider human community. As we shall see, I view cities essentially in terms of a "public arena," characterized by the interaction of strangers. Consequently, the

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central Judeo-Christian virtue of hospitality to strangers – those who are "other" – is a thread throughout the book.

Engaging the riches of urban thought and expression in Christianity with the contemporary problems of cities is an exercise in what has become known as "postsecularism."[1] The concept counters the ideology known as the "secular project" that held sway in Western countries after the Second World War. This sought to promote a belief in the wholly private nature of religion. Such a viewpoint is rendered implausible both by the simple fact that the majority of the world's population remains religious in some sense and by the recent upsurge in global conflicts with overtly religious dimensions. A critical engagement with religion is now a major global priority. One dominant theme of "postsecularism" is that we must seriously question the argument that any form of shared belief is impossible in plural societies.[2] This clearly has application to the search for shared values in contemporary, diverse urban environments.

Contemporary Cities

The current global growth rate of cities is a critical challenge. By "cities" I mean urban environments characterized not simply by substantial size or large population but also by diversity – social, cultural, ethnic, and religious. The world is rapidly becoming urbanized. In 1950, roughly 29 percent of the world's population lived in urban environments. By 1965 this had risen to 36 percent, by 1990 to 50 percent. This figure is predicted to rise to around 60 percent by 2025, 70 percent by 2050 and at least 75 percent by the end of this century.[3] In the first part of the twenty-first century the "big story" is a worldwide migration of people from rural environments to the city. Humanity for the first time faces a mega-urbanized world. This also means that we are dealing increasingly with mega-cities, many of which are in the new economic giants of India, Brazil, and China. For example, Mumbai has a population of some 18 million, São Paulo is 17+ million, and Shanghai is 14+ million. We increasingly confront sprawling and de-centered cities burdened by crime, congestion, pollution, and social divisions. This means, in effect, that the urbanization of the world is often simultaneously "slumization," to borrow a concept coined by the American philosopher, Eduardo Mendieta. One in six city-dwellers worldwide is

currently a slum dweller, and at current rates of increase, by 2050 one in three people – 3 billion – will be.[4]

Cities have a vital role in shaping the human spirit for good or for ill. They represent and create a climate of values that define how we understand human existence and gather together into communities. Conversely, our understanding of what enhances the human spirit shapes the environments we build. As a consequence, their future is not merely a social or economic matter but is also a profound spiritual challenge. Thus, "To read the cities we have built or imagined is, in the end, to read the spiritual biography of our civilization."[5]

This fact was clearly recognized by several late-twentieth-century popes. In the 1971 Apostolic Letter, *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI directed his remarks at social inequality, particularly in reference to contemporary urbanism and its problems. He was concerned with what he called the "irreversible stage" of urbanization associated with social consequences of industrialization in the developing world, and the millions of poor farmers who fled the land for the big cities in hope of a better life. The task of Christians should be "to create new modes of neighborliness" (paragraphs 8–12). He also referred explicitly to the hidden misery to be found in the city which "fosters discrimination and also indifference," homelessness, loneliness, and exploitation of various kinds (paragraph 10).

Pope John Paul II in Chapter IV, section 37 of his 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* stated:

> Where before there were stable human and social situations, today everything is in flux. One thinks, for example, of urbanization and the massive growth of cities, especially where demographic pressure is greatest. In not a few countries, over half the population already lives in a few "megalopolises," where human problems are often aggravated by the feeling of anonymity experienced by masses of people.
>
> .... efforts should be concentrated on the big cities, where new customs and styles of living arise together with new forms of culture and communication, which then influence the wider population. It is true that the "option for the neediest" means that we should not overlook the most abandoned and isolated human groups, but it is also true that individual or small groups cannot be evangelized if we neglect the centers where a new humanity, so to speak, is emerging, and where new models of development are taking shape.

In addition, in his 1991 encyclical, *Centissimus Annus*, marking the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's groundbreaking social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul II also underlined the problems of uncontrolled urbanization in the developing world.[6]

As background to our reflections, a positive challenge is offered by Joel Kotkin's provocative study, *The City: A Global History*.[7] He suggests that throughout history successful cities have performed three critical functions in varying ways – the provision of security, the hosting of commerce, and the creation of sacred space. Historically, the latter has been expressed by religious buildings, cathedrals, temples, and mosques, which embody a transcendent horizon in and for the city. However, Kotkin suggests that the city itself is, or should be, a sacred place, that authentically offers an inspiring vision of human existence. He recalls that all major religions have produced models of urban meaning. However, he also notes that the sacred role of cities is regularly ignored in contemporary discussions of the urban condition and the future of cities.

When we confront possible urban futures in the twenty-first century, one key question is "what are cities *for*?" They no longer have strictly practical roles as defense against attack or as the necessary focus for economic systems. If cities are to have *meaning* rather than merely an irreversible existence, there needs to be greater reflection on their civilizing possibilities. Cities have a capacity to focus a range of physical, intellectual, and creative energies simply because they combine differences of age, ethnicity, culture, gender, and religion in unparalleled ways. As Richard Sennett, the eminent sociologist, reminds us in reference to the writings of Aristotle, this is both opportunity and challenge. It is precisely the combination of different people, rather than of similar people, that brings cities into existence.[8] Any attempt to address the conundrum of the city needs more than a mechanical approach. The challenge is how to relate city-making to a vision of the human spirit and what enhances it.

While the "new urbanism" that seeks to respond to current city problems addresses, for example, questions of sustainability, the recovery of a sense of history and the kind of urban design that shapes cohesive neighborhoods, it rarely refers to the need for some kind of moral or spiritual vision with the power to hold cities together.[9] A notable exception is the work of the eminent urban planner, Leonie Sandercock, who writes of "the city of spirit" in her

book *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century*.[10] Yet, as Kotkin notes, what is more important than the creation of new buildings or spaces in isolation is the value city-dwellers actually place on their urban experience. In other words, a successful city is, in the end, a state of mind that offers a vision of a human community that is capable of promoting co-existence between strangers and of learning how to seek a shared code of social behavior. Kotkin critiques all religions, including Christianity, for somehow losing touch with their own historic urban visions. As a result, when religion addresses urban questions it too often tends merely to echo the pragmatic urban language of professional or policy groups. At the same time it largely fails to contribute its own distinctive discourse to the contemporary conversations about the future of cities.

It follows from this that a key challenge to religions such as Christianity in today's radically plural, multicultural, and multireligious Western cities, is to rediscover their own voice – their traditions of urban thinking and practice. This is the building material of ideas, symbols, or experience that is needed to help create a compelling spiritual vision for cities. For, as Kotkin comments starkly at the conclusion of his book, the history of cities teaches us that without some kind of "widely shared belief system it would be exceedingly difficult to envision a viable urban future."[11]

In this context, the phrase "the good city" recently seems to have become common currency. For example, the urban thinker Ash Amin addresses the theme from the perspective of human geography.[12] For Amin the key is to develop the habit of solidarity among strangers built upon a commitment to the common good. Solidarity is shaped by four everyday basics of urban living: repair, relatedness, rights, and re-enchantment. "Repair" refers to the proper maintenance of technological and mechanical infrastructures. The point is that such infrastructures are never purely a matter of mechanics. They are the life-support system of a city that enables effective human orientation and movement. "Relatedness" seeks to counter various forms of human marginalization, exclusion, and disconnection. This may involve a universal provision of the basics of healthy human existence, the creation of social or cultural projects that bring together people of different backgrounds or creatively returning public spaces to effective mixed use. "Rights" again addresses the problem of the effective exclusion and restriction of certain groups in favor of the safety or dominance of

others. This needs to be countered by a concept in public culture and civic politics of "the open city" where new voices can emerge and marginalized groups may stake their claim to participate. Finally, "re-enchantment" seeks to make public space more than a context for human socialization created purely by consumerism or tourism. Rather, we should work imaginatively and experimentally with public space to make it the medium for a transformation of imagination and behavior through protest gatherings (nonlegislative "politics"), art, education, and entertainment.

The question "what makes a good city?" also animated the 2006 Church of England Commission on Urban Life and Faith and its report *Faithful Cities*.[13] Among the words and phrases used in response to the question were that a good city is "active," "diverse," "inclusive," "safe," "well-led," "environmentally sensitive," has an "active civil society," "values the inhabitants," offers "opportunities for all," "attracts wealth creators," but also "shares its wealth," is "big enough to be viable" but also is "small enough to be on a human scale." In a sentence, the "good city" enables human aspirations to be enhanced, to be productive, and to be inclusive, rather than for them to be repressed or selfish. Fundamentally, the report *Faithful Cities* suggests that the "good city" is person-centered rather than shaped by abstract approaches to politics, planning, and structural efficiency.

By contrast, the monumental modernist architecture that still characterizes many of today's Western cities does not stand for the value of individual people, for intimate relationships, or for focused community. Rather, it speaks the language of size, money, and power. Commercial complexes such as Canary Wharf in London's Docklands stand in brooding isolation rather than in relationship to anywhere else. Modern cities built in the last 60 years frequently lack proper centers that express the whole life of a multifaceted community. Even the centers of older European cities reconstructed after the devastation of the Second World War can often be described as soulless.

A major part of the problem was the dominance of "zoning" or a cellular view of urban planning (originating in part from the iconic Swiss-born French architect Charles Jeanneret, otherwise known as Le Corbusier) which divided cities into "special areas" or zones for living, working, leisure, and shopping. The immediate consequence of this "zoning" was a fragmentation of human living and of a coherent sense of community diversity. On top of this, the creation of a

"city of special areas" has the effect of emptying parts of it at night, especially the centers and commercial districts. This tends to make them dead and sometimes dangerous. Finally, a cellular design demands the separation of areas by distance and clear boundaries. This substantially increases the need for travel and consequently increases pollution.

In more general terms, this differentiation into discrete areas may be said to reflect a growing desacralization of Western culture. There is no longer a centered, let alone spiritually centered, meaning for the city. It is now a commodity, fragmented into multiple activities, multiple ways of organizing time and space, matched by multiple roles for the inhabitants.[14] Overall, zoning or cellular urban design does not invite people out into shared, humane places of encounter. New domestic ghettos are increasingly protected against sterile public spaces that are no longer respected but, at best, treated unimaginatively and, at worst, abandoned to violence and vandalism.

Cities reflect and affect the quality of human relationships. The fact is that in the context of urban environments we cannot separate functional, ethical, and spiritual questions. If places are to be sacred, they must affirm the sacredness of people, community, and a human capacity for transcendence. In an earlier age in European cities the cathedral was an icon of such an urban vision. It offered at the same time an image of God and a symbol of the ideals of the citizens at the heart of the city.

What Counts as Urban?

When we think of what is meant by a city or, more broadly, the urban, we nowadays tend to concentrate on questions of density and size whereas, for example, in England until relatively recently a major criterion for being a city was the presence of a historic cathedral. However, as the seventh-century Christian thinker St Isidore of Seville reminds us, in thinking about what we mean by the urban we need to balance two Latin concepts: *urbs* (cities of stone) and *civitas* (cities of people). Our sense of place refers both to the built environment and the state of mind (or soul) shaped by this, or by geography. The point is that Isidore's use of *urbs* and *civitas* does not refer to alternative

concepts of "the city" or two separate planes without interaction. For Isidore, there could be no absolute separation between physical design and urban community. Such a split would have mutilated a reality in which these two dimensions are naturally co-dependent and fused. Yet, according to his philosophy, in the end what makes a place a city is the people, not the architecture in isolation. "A city [*civitas*] is a number of men [*sic*] joined by a social bond. It takes its name from the citizens [*cives*] who dwell in it. As an *urbs* it is only a walled structure, but inhabitants, not building stones, are referred to as a city."[15] Nevertheless, we need to give attention to *urbs* – to the powerful impact on people and human community of design, architecture, and the planning of physical spaces.

In the Western world, from the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle onwards, cities have always been powerful symbols of how we understand and construct human community. In particular, cities are paradigms of our outer, public life. Unfortunately, since the nineteenth century Western culture, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, has become deeply polarized. The private sphere (inwardness, family and friends, home) has been idealized as the backstage where individuals are truly themselves, relaxing unobserved before playing different roles on the public stage.[16] However, from a Christian perspective is public living simply a role to be taken up and put down at will? A recent Archbishop of Canterbury, the British theologian Rowan Williams, notes that "we are systematically misled, even corrupted, by a picture of the human agent as divided into an outside and an inside – a 'true self', hidden, buried, to be excavated by one or another kind of therapy."[17] Rather, our identity comes into being from the start through human communication and interaction. An unbalanced *rhetoric* of interiority has had serious moral consequences because it suggests that our social or public life is of secondary importance. However, Christian theology, following St Augustine, affirms that there is no absolutely private identity. To be human embodies a common life and a common task. Without developing a complex point further at this point, it is important to note the intimate link between human identity and the Christian relational theology of God as "Trinity." The core of the Christian life – a paradigm of redeemed human existence overall – is to become united with God, in Jesus Christ, through a Spirit-led communion with one another. God's own relational nature is fundamental to such a life. The doctrine