Cities and Gods

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> Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised
> in the city of our God!
> His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
> is the joy of all the earth,
> Mount Zion, in the far north,
> the city of the great king.
> Within her citadels God
> has shown himself a sure defence.
>
> Walk about Zion, go round about her,
> number her towers.
> Consider well her ramparts,
> go through her citadels;
> that you may tell the next generation
> that this is God. (Psalm 48)

It might not seem too misguided to look upon the whole vast biblical narrative, and much subsequent Christian writing as well, as one stupendous epic, a Tale of Two Cities: Jerusalem the holy city of God, upon the one hand, 'Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion' (Revelation 14:8), upon the other. Long after the historical Babylon had ceased to matter in the least to Jew or Christian, and long after the historical Jerusalem had ceased to matter all that much to Christians at least, the symbolism of the two cities lives on, and new Babylons continue to be denounced, new Zions, new Jerusalems continue to be built in Europe, America, Africa and elsewhere. The names have come to symbolise a warfare of the spirit, a vision of the end-time, the security of a spiritual home, a model even for ethical and

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political interpretation, always seemingly renewing a sense of warfare, a dichotomy, a dualism between heavenly and earthly, good and evil, the holy and the profane.

Yet the Bible is not in its vast complexity really as simplistic as that, and in the perplexities of our own time—in which we still, albeit a little desperately, seek for faith in the city, yet sense that towns, in which we once thought maybe we had gone some way towards building Jerusalem around spires and towers, have instead more the appearance of Babylon—it may be helpful to begin by exploring a little the deep ambiguities that have always existed in the city/God relationship. When occasionally some harassed citizen of the late 20th-century world looks again at the Bible (could there after all be guidance, there?) what is most important is that she or he should not be offered a cop-out, a credulous escape-hole—whether nostalgic or millenarian—from today's predicament.

The city is mankind's characteristic home and achievement—not where we start but where we arrive. As humanity congregates together, shaping and reshaping a vast civic artefact, domestic, commercial, artistic, academic, pleasure-seeking, the myriad expression of our collective industries, imaginings, whims, aspirations across generations, it can only integrate the endlessly diverse through men and women sharing something of a common understanding of themselves and their destiny, a sense of good and evil, a common will, an ideology. It is inconceivable that such a subtly inter-involved complexity, a bubbling organism like a hugely diversified ant-hill or bee-hive, could shape itself in all its uniqueness and come to greatness without the unifying and urging-on force of a shared and imaginatively creative belief system. That is as much a Durkheimian conclusion as a religious one.

The odd myth of the building of the city of Babel to be found in Genesis ch. 11 is not a bad point at which to begin. The supposition of the story is that the city was a human achievement made possible by a gathering of people in one place with a common purpose and a single language. Should such a great leap forward be pleasing to God? The city's building ends when they are scattered geographically and linguistically. A single language is not far different from a single religion—each provides a common medium of meaning, interpretation and communication. Out of the intensity of such intelligent sharing grows a city.

Of course, one biblical theology might be that man in his pride makes the earthly city—Babel, Babylon or whatever. Only God makes the heavenly city, his city, Jerusalem. The dilemma 'God *or* man' is one which the bible wrestles with continuously and only with 'God made man' will it in principle be resolved. Yet nothing is made only by God. Jerusalem is, after all, David's city as well as God's, and the building of

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the temple comes quite late in its history. Like every other city, it has to be a place of buying and selling, of a diversity of trades, of rich and poor, of public work and private enterprise. In point of fact it is also a city of sin, in which temple and holy law can themselves become tools of exploitation, so that the historical Jerusalem turns out to be only too like other cities—Tyre, Moab, Edom, Damascus: whatever sins can be found elsewhere, are to be found here too. Amos makes the point with painful explicitness. The winsome city of God, the subject of so many passionately devoted psalms, is a city in which justice is not done, in which shady deals are the order of the day, in which the rich grow richer and the poor poorer.

So Jerusalem, whose towers and ramparts seemed the very proof of God's power and presence, the unique city of God, standing up in glorious contrast with all other cities, becomes in the grey light of day an unholy Jerusalem, as condemnable as any. But then—if still more tentatively—they become as Jerusalem. Even—and especially—Babylon, the most infamous of all. It seems to be Jeremiah who here pioneers the intellectual revolution: a faithful, good-living Jew can inhabit Babylon much as he inhabited Jerusalem. Thus Jeremiah wrote to the exiles: 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce ... seek the welfare of the city (Babylon) ... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare' (Jer 29:5—7). A very basic step in the secularisation process is taken at that moment, and with it a step towards the acceptance of pluralism and away from too close an identification of faith and the city. The real city in which one lives and the mystical city to which one spiritually belongs can henceforth be divided, despite many subsequent attempts of Jewish nationalists—or again Christian or Islamic nationalists—to reunite them. From now on one may be a Jew in faith but live in Babylon and pray for Babylon. One may preach to Nineveh. God may send prophets to them all. He may forgive them all. He may punish them all. He has, clearly, distanced himself from any one. The 'City of God' is ceasing to be localised—that is, then, already true for post-exilic Judaism as well as being, of course, a taken-for-granted presupposition of Christianity: 'Not on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth' (John 4:21—23). Not in Rome, then, nor Lourdes, nor London. Of course the Christian world could not quite live up to that. The medieval idea came very near to re-identifying kingdom and church in a very precise territorial and institutional way. And we have never quite got over that either, which makes it all the more important to insist, as we struggle with the debris of too many legacies, that the medieval one is not in fact the biblical and Christian one, but just a bewitching misreading of the former.

And yet, wholly to dissociate the city of faith from the temporal/physical city could not be biblical or Christian either. The

kingdom of God is not just in the future, it is here with tares in it. The kingdom of God is not wholly different from the Church. The Church is not wholly different from the political community. There must at least be a continual sense of provisional symbolic sacramentalisations of a reality far beyond them, and these sacramentalisations need to be as much political, civic and artistic as ecclesiastical or self-evidently religious. So long as we recognise their provisionality it is not wholly wrong to re-erect our pilgrimage centres, to build our new Jerusalem again and again in Rome, in Lourdes, in England's green and pleasant land, in strange little villages up and down Africa. But these, of course, derive their symbolic validity not just, or chiefly, from ecclesiastical ownership or liturgical cycle, but from the experience of a living community of faith and love and hope: that is what makes Iona or Taizé or some house of Mother Teresa's nuns a new Jerusalem set in space and time. So too, at the other end of human experience, there are, in an equally recognisable way, new Babylons—a Devil's Island, an Auschwitz, a Gulag Archipelago.

Between Taizé and Auschwitz there is an immense distance, and one may argue that the ends of this spectrum are so remote, the large intervening area so vast, that one can hardly throw light upon the middle by consideration of the extremes. I am not so sure. The message of Babel is that one cannot have a city without a common language, a shared ideology—even if that ideology be an evil one. Try as one may to stimulate a wider appreciation of the values of pluralism, unless beneath the pluralism there be a sense of common human community, a sharing of values which transcend the pluralism, will the city not inevitably go the way of Belfast or Beirut? The idea that such a sense just naturally and inevitably exists is simply incorrect. Certainly our western and English culture traditionally strove to see its city as, in a unified way, a city of God—the cathedral spire in its midst. The city of London makes no topographical sense without St Paul's as a focal point. There was plenty of place too, pluralistically, for subordinate gods, like Lord Nelson on his high pillar, or the Stock Exchange, or the corpse of Bentham in University College—though the effort was made too to draw these minor deities where possible together within the walls of Westminster Abbey. This was no very pure religion but a strange mix of Bible and medieval inheritance, the monarchy, Scrooge, Dick Whittington; and it could as well be a cruel and perverted religion, when it isolated and exiled the Jews, or turned on Lollard, Papist or witch. But it did follow the law of Babel in linking human achievement with civil community held together by a common language and blessed, à la Jerusalem, with a central temple served in their different ways by priest and merchant alike, and it included the alms house and the jury of common men to judge even the poor. The Christendom ideal, the concept of the Established Church of the nation providing a broad authenticating framework of belief behind

public action and civic organisation, that ideal was wobbling unhappily for long but it has only completely and manifestly crumbled as a working reality with our time, whether that crumbling be judged liberating or disastrous. It was seen as a glorious liberation in the characteristic thinking of the sixties, the optimistic lauding of the arrival of *The Secular City* by such as Harvey Cox. In San Francisco California offered the world a new, uninhibited model. Not, of course, that this new model did not carry with it something of a new language, the very ideology of western secularism in all its glitter, the vision of Hollywood—the saints replaced by stars, perfect in health, beauty and the attainment of happiness. Evelyn Waugh's biting account of it, *The Loved One,* was a prophetic little book. The revelation of the pathetic life and death of Marilyn Monroe betrayed in due course the truth of that pseudo-gospel and today San Francisco is, to its misfortune, more than any other place the city of AIDS.

The ideology of the Hollywood of Marilyn and Ronald Reagan and their colleagues, even supplemented by Disneyland, Melodyland, and what have you, is only too obviously inadequate to reflect and cement, à la Durkheim, the city of today. It is a solvent of more serious ideologies but does not replace them. For a little while the new secularist ideology of beautiful affluence might make almost enough sense in Los Angeles, but it can make very little in Brixton and still less in Cairo, Calcutta or Beirut. The modern city may be mobilised effectively enough for a moment or two by Marilyn here, Hitler there, the Ayatollah somewhere else, but in most places and times one is conscious on the contrary of a cumulative disintegration: the collapse of cheaply-built multi-storey blocks in Cairo or Mexico City; the million-strong prostitute trade of all the great towns of the third world; the dread of being out at night in almost any major American city; the way town houses are being turned into mini-fortresses in places like Lusaka; the riot at Broadwater Farm; the sheer uncontrollability of a modern city; the ever more obvious absence of an appealable-to common belief system.

No large city can operate healthily without a very real measure of pluralism—the refusal to admit that led straight to the Inquisition. Even the Empires of the ancient world saw this—as did, of course, the British Empire. One sees it in the letter of Cyrus, King of Persia, at the beginning of the Book of Ezra, ordering the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. What had been *the* faith of the city becomes *one* faith in the city and the city—logically at least—becomes in principle itself tolerant but faithless. Yet if the city wholly submits to that logic, its own survival is bound to be in question for it will have lost its principle of unification and cohesion. Its very existence requires at least some sort of acceptable umbrella above the pluralism. That really is the nub of the modern problem. The modern city has privatised faith, but without a living civic

faith things fall apart. In our apparently post-religious, post-Christian, even post-Marxist age, the gadgets of society, ever more bewilderingly potent silicon chips, are in seemingly inexhaustible supply, but the glue to hold society itself together is almost visibly disintegrating. The option of the urban guerilla, undividedly committed to some essentially private faith or ideology or minority cause, whether tragic or potty, is proving more and more appealing, because there is less and less of a shared language in which to communicate the folly of such ways. The umbrella—even Mao's umbrella—is today exceedingly leaky.

It would be foolish to consider this country's problems of both city decay and the decay of faith in the city without continually relating them, as I have been trying to do, to a far vaster and more horrific panorama of civic geography. Consider Bombay or Manila, Kinshasa or Nairobi. In sheer human terms they—not London or Leeds—are the focus points of humanity and its predicament today. The drama of faith and pluralism is being fought most evidently at this moment in Beirut. Such cities have, all of them, taken over a western civic model and various layers of western culture, religion, political ideology—all more or less in tatters. But they have not much else to work with other than a resurgence of one or another bitter fundamentalism or equally bitter nationalism or some maimed splinter off the Marxist tree, together, of course, with the gun.

When Augustine, in later middle age, faced the collapse of ordered imperial civilisation around him in the years subsequent to the sack of Rome in 410, he had to deal with the charge that all this was due to the abandonment of Rome's traditional gods: they had seen Rome safe and glorious through centuries of crisis and expansion, the Mediterranean-wide pursuit of law and order. Now they had been abandoned, Christianity hurriedly adopted, and ruin had followed. It was to face such a charge that Augustine wrote the twenty-two books of *The City of God*. Here again was a tale of two cities—the city of God and the earthly city, but he wished to detach them both from any too precise historical incarnation. The rise and fall of empires is not be be explained, he argued, by religious but by secular causes. Rome was not protected by its gods, nor abandoned by Christianity's that is not how things work. The city of God is identified with no state and will subsist through all. Augustine is here clearly in the line of Jeremiah. Each was facing a crisis of his state and each responded by a measure of disentangling of the religious from the secular. He was right, but was he not wrong too? A Durkheimian perspective might make us suspect that the abandonment by Rome's emperor of Rome's traditional religion must almost certainly have had a far more disruptive effect than Augustine was willing to admit. The religious, in fact, is a decisive part of the secular. Again, Augustine is misleading in suggesting at times that the earthly city can be

explained in merely selfish terms. No city can be, not even a temporarily abiding one. The more a city sees itself in merely self-seeking, market economy terms, the more danger of disintegration must it be in. The earthly city is intrinsically required, for its very existence, to seek peace, the best peace it can, and no such peace is conceivable without conviction and faith that go far beyond the immediately self-seeking. Augustine recognised (again not unlike Jeremiah) that the peace of the two cities actually overlaps (DCD XIX 17) and this is important for them both. Those who believe in a city of God cannot ignore the need for peace of the earthly city. They cannot collectively withdraw into cave or monastery from the responsibility of pursuing the latter. They share an obligation to be concerned with the state, with justice, with the common pursuit of peace. But those who see themselves as primarily concerned to build up the earthly city—and, quite especially, the earthly city in its most complex forms—can equally not ignore the relationship between what they seek and the pursuit of higher things only possible in terms of a common language of meaning and value. If they do ignore these things, they are cutting their own throats.

This, of course, does not and cannot imply a return to the sense of a sacred city. All our history bars the way to that, including our religious history. Jeremiah and Augustine point towards a far more complex theology of the provisionality of all temporal forms. Nevertheless, within a perspective of the provisional, we have still—especially in a time of marked disintegration—to remember that every city stands willy-nilly somewhere on a line between Taizé and Auschwitz. Whatever we do in regard to the city will move things, just a few inches, in one direction or the other—towards, or away from, a civilization of love. And that movement will depend at least as much upon the engendering of a sense of collective civic faith as on the material provision of particular resources. It is only too clear that our age is as far as can be from one of large public commitment. The vast erosion of confidence in priest and belief system of any sort is obvious—as clear as the need of it. We cannot think today of even provisional cities of God, only perhaps of stimulating into new life some sort of anonymous Christianity, stimulated and led on by quite little groups of faith, 'basic communities' of believers not closed off from the mass of the city but rather wombs of a new wider consciousness. We can all of us look into the sky and see Lord Nelson far above us, now nicely cleaned and newly photographed. His symbolic value—the sense of history and place and the sheer particularity of all that is on earth worth loving—is certainly not to be spurned; but at least some of us need to be able to look up, at least in our dreams, and still see far beyond Nelson, 'the traffic of Jacob's ladder, pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross', or look down and see 'Christ walking on the water, not of Gennesareth but Thames'.

The prophet Jonah was sent to preach not to Jerusalem, but to London, that is to say Nineveh. It was a great and wicked city, but Jonah was reluctant to take on the job and fled away. The Lord seized him, arranging for a whale to swallow him up, until he agreed to do as he was told. So Jonah proclaimed, walking through the city streets, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed'. The people listened. They put on sack cloth and ashes, God relented, and Jonah was annoyed. 'Did I not say this would happen? I knew you were a soft and merciful God and would never really do it. Why have you put me to all this trouble?' To which God replied, 'There are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons in Nineveh who do not know their right hand from their left'. Now if Jonah's swallowing by the whale is no more than a pleasing story, so is his preaching to the city of London, and its repentance. What stands is the final message—Nineveh is a mess, but behind the sin is an abysmal ignorance. They know not their right hand from their left. That really is God's comment upon us all: Nineveh and Jerusalem and Rome, medieval London and modern London, San Francisco and Beirut. It is no new predicament. Never identify the city of God with any earthly city, but never quite separate them either. Never wholly sacralise one spot, nor wholly secularise any other. Pray for the welfare even of Babylon. Even in Dachau find Christ. Realise that the peace of the one city is not separable from the peace of the other, that every sort of real peace depends upon the pursuit of truth and justice, and that both heavenly peace and earthly peace will be best authenticated by nothing more sophisticated than the sound of cheerful laughter. In the words of Zechariah, 'Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets' (Zech 8:4—5). The very old and the very young will be there in the streets, relaxed and playful. Yes, even in Broadwater Farm. That is what concerned the prophets, what concerned Augustine, in the grimmest of times. It is what faith in the city is all about.

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