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Place, Process & Misperception

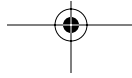


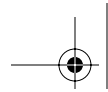
WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED "CITY" around which God's mission and ours revolves? That is harder to answer than one might suppose. Scholarship devoted to the city has yet to find a commonly accepted definition of either *a* city or *the* city (Gulick 1989:1-21).

The diversity of cities makes such a question extremely difficult. In some ways it is easier to focus on cities in the plural than on the city as a monolith. Are we speaking of precolonial West African settlements built of grass houses? Or Aztec holy cities like Tenochtitlán, with its boulevards carefully laid out in geometric patterns to mirror its view of the four-quartered universe? Or the clay houses of Mesopotamia's ancient cities, built on the remains of earlier centers?

Where is the point of comparison between Beijing in the fifteenth century and Los Angeles in the twentieth? Beijing was reconstructed then to reflect the order and harmony of the universe. At its walled center was the Hall of Divine Harmony, the sacred core of the world, and the Temple of Heaven. Here earth and sky met, the four seasons merged, and yin and yang were in harmony. Its architectural design symbolized the role of China as the Middle Kingdom. It united the will of heaven to the will of earth, power and cosmic harmony merged.

By contrast, modern Los Angeles exists virtually without a downtown center. It is fragmented by freeways and distance into a complex of clus-





tered suburbs in search of a city. Some say that in the twenty-first century it will spread 150 miles from San Diego to Santa Barbara, from ocean to desert Palm Springs. If Los Angeles has a walled center, it is probably Disneyland, an amusement park of fantasy and order, the Magic Kingdom of la-la land. Its unity is not readily apparent. It is the second largest Mexican city in the world, the second largest Guatemalan city, the second largest Cambodian city.

Of crucial importance: If we cannot find common connections between cities past and present, how shall we link the biblical perceptions of the city and urban mission discussed in previous chapters with the city today? Is the link we think we see between the remote, preindustrial cities of the Bible and cities like Copenhagen and Colorado Springs an artificial, imposed one? Is religion a part of it? Is the gulf so large that it isolates radically the walled city of Jericho from the double-beltway-circled Washington, D.C., or the island-mainland harbors of Tyre from those of Kowloon-Hong Kong?

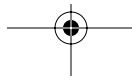
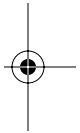
In the face of such great differences, can we reach any conclusions about this thing called city? Where do we look for commonality?

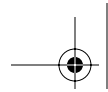
The City as Place

Pioneering European studies of the city in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries largely set the direction in the search for commonality. Following the lead of Ferdinand Tonnies (1855-1936), a sharp contrast was drawn between two types of human social life. The one was *Gemeinschaft* or community, the quality said to be characteristic of the small country village. Here people worked for the common good, linked by ties of family and neighborhood, common interests, common purposes. The lifestyle of this "living organism" was "intimate, private, and exclusive living together," its members bound by a sense of "ourness," of "us" (Tonnies 1957).

In sharp contrast was *Gesellschaft*, the urban society. A "mechanical aggregate and artifact," the urban lifestyle of association was said to be characterized by disunity and hostility, rampant individualism and selfishness. There was no belief in common good. Ties of family and neighborhood tended to be of little significance.

Other interests and developments also emerged in this early stage of reflection. Georg Simmel (1858-1918), for example, moved in Tonnies's direction but focused on the social psychology of the city. In the midst of overwhelming stimulation and the call for rational response, the urbanite, he argued, finds relief in the development of social reserve and a blasé mindset. Out of that more calculating and rational mindset, he feared,





might come indifference and even aversion.

Out of these early emphases was emerging a strong antiurban pattern, oriented to the city as a place in contrast to the rural setting (Karp, Stone and Yoels 1991:12-44). What became known as the Chicago school of sociology amplified and modified these directions. In the period between about 1913 and 1940 it formulated the problems and provided the research that would virtually define the whole field of study (Bulmer 1984). How do we understand the ecology of the city as a place? How do we see the human community shaped by and shaping the city as place?

Sociologist Louis Wirth, a prominent member of the Chicago School, produced a classic definition in 1938 that scholars still debate, deny, correct or modify. "A city," he argued, is "a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals" (Wirth 1980:35).

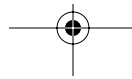
Wirth's focus was fixed on definite physical boundaries, on population size and density. Contrasted sharply with the homogeneity of the rural setting, the city was perceived as heterogeneous, a place of specialization and diversity. And, asked Wirth and his supporters, what was the effect of this on our way of life in the city, on what he called urbanism?

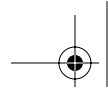
Kinship ties are eroded by social contacts. Individualism grows, competition dominates. Community is replaced by noncommunity, simplicity by sophistication. In the city the sacred becomes secular, the integrated life moves toward anomie, toward life without norm. The warmth of personal relationships is exchanged for rational, impersonal anonymity.

Scholarship has continued to modify or challenge Wirth's thesis with a variety of emphases over the years. Studies have pointed out, for example, Wirth's heavy dependence on the industrial city for his urban model. Chicago, after all, cannot be a paradigm for the whole urban world. Researchers have asked in response, what about the preindustrial city (Sjoberg 1960)? Was Wirth's model really universal enough?

What of modern cities like Cairo where over one-third of the inhabitants were born outside the city? How many of these newcomers are urban in residence but, by Wirth's definition, are still rural in outlook and behavior? In extensive research, Janet Abu-Lughod found thirteen communities or subcities of Cairo in that city's last hundred years. Scattered through the thirteen subcities, past and present, was a spectrum of four lifestyles from rural to urban, traditional to modern (Abu-Lughod 1971).

Other contrasts suggested by Wirth and refined by his supporters have been attacked or modified severely. Is it true, to cite one significant debate example, that migration from a peasant village to a large urban center





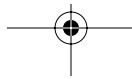
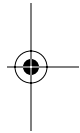
leaves the newcomer disorganized and marginalized? Can one really find in the village, as Robert Redfield contended from his neo-Romantic bias, all the moral virtues and communal solidarity and homogeneity missing from the city (Redfield 1941)? Isn't it actually true, responded Oscar Lewis, that life in a Mexican village like Tepotzlan shows much of the fragmentation and dislocation imagined in the city? Isn't Redfield's evolutionary model of cultural development from the simple to the complex, from tribal to rural to urban, an oversimplification? And conversely, in the urban environment of Mexico City cannot one find the continued maintenance of kinship lines and the healthy support of religious systems thought to have been eroded (Lewis 1963:31-41)?

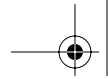
Liabilities and modifications. We will return throughout this book to the heavy baggage that comes with this paradigm of the city as a place. But at least two major flaws must be uncovered before we move on now. They both can play a strong role in an understanding of urban mission—and in damaging it.

One of those flaws is the strong antiurban direction taken by the paradigm. The eulogy it pronounced over the city has been bane, not blessing (Conn 1987:20-22). The city was observed through a bipolar moralistic model of rural versus urban. Everything rural was good, everything urban was bad. Urbanism as a way of life was ultimately an acid that would eat away traditional rural values and undermine meaningful relationships and institutions.

Linked to this was a second major flaw: static determinism. In this ethical stereotyping of rural versus urban, all the destructive patterns of life were peculiarly, essentially or exclusively urban. As urbanism increases, the thesis argues, neighbors become less important, social norms are enfeebled. We are left with "peculiarly urban phenomena—stress, estrangement, individualism, and, especially, social disorganization" (Fischer 1984:31-32).

Abstracted from these flaws, there is still some wisdom in using population size, density and social heterogeneity in the beginnings of a sketch of urbanism and the city (Gulick 1989:18). After all, the demographic criterion is common to virtually all definitions of urban or city. Other dimensions—institutional, social, cultural or behavioral—must also be added. Yet these demographic qualities are relative: "they are not all-or-nothing characteristics" (Fischer 1984:25). Ultimately, regardless of where we put our emphasis, "definitions largely consist of threshold criteria that describe minimal levels of demographic, institutional, or structural complexity beneath which city or urban levels cannot be applied" (Press and Smith 1980:12).





In keeping with this reminder, even size of area and density of population provide no uniform measure for definition. A feudal city like Damascus could be crossed in a morning's leisurely walk. To cross modern Tokyo or Mexico City would take an automobile. "The populations of all but a few of the greatest medieval cities could be dropped into our modern urban centers and make scarcely a ripple. The Los Angeles metropolis was in 1980 over 150 times greater in area and about 14 times greater in population than Cairo at its most glorious around 1500" (Fischer 1984:8).

Scholarship still stumbles over relative questions of size, population and their measurement. How, for example, do we deal with history's early urban settlements? Archaeological evidence is fragmentary. And research struggles with finding uniform standards for measuring those early settlements (Shiloh 1980:25-35).

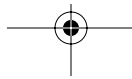
Even in our contemporary world, government census takers continue to find little agreement when it comes to statistical definitions. In Denmark and Sweden it takes only two hundred inhabitants for a place to be defined a city. In the United States there needs to be at least twenty-five hundred, in Greece and Senegal ten thousand. Sensitive to the diversities particularly between developed and less developed countries, the United Nations has set up its own classification system. Urban characteristics on an international scale, UN thinkers argue, are most readily found in population areas exceeding twenty thousand people.

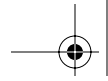
All this underlines that the value of demographics in defining city is only relative. There are other more significant pieces to add to the urban mix.

The church's early response. During the first stage of emerging great cities Christians joined in the antiurban bias toward the city as a place. As early as the 1830s and 1840s church sentiment in Europe was turning against the cities as strongholds of irreligion, as religious deserts. That view quickly took on traditional status: urbanization leads to the decline of faith.

By 1880 Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), an evangelical pastor in Edinburgh, was writing a series of missionary tracts to Parisian working men and speaking of cities as "great centers of human evil." Pleading that his readers not forget "the warnings of Noah's days and the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah," he asked, "Does God care for our Great Cities or has he given them up?" (Bonar 1880:83-84, 90-92). Others were asking the same question but with less compassion.

For Pietists Berlin was a "Babel . . . where all ties were broken and nothing was sacred." A London clergyman in an 1844 sermon spoke of





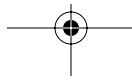
the life of cities as “essentially a worldly life,” in contrast to “the country with its pure serenity” (McLeod 1995:8). Catholic clergy supported the negative judgments of Francois Courtade, who, writing in 1871, saw cities like Paris as “without faith and without God” (Kselman 1995:165). Cities had become a threat to faith.

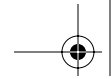
In the rapidly urbanizing United States a similar pessimism was growing. Protestant churches were feeling overwhelmed by urban growth and change. Dwight L. Moody’s early enthusiasm over the church’s role in the city was dying. Urged to resume his urban revival campaigns, he was becoming reluctant. By 1896 he was writing, “The city is no place for me” (quoted in Conn 1994a:60). “The city as a menace to be resisted and redirected into familiar Protestant patterns—this was the predominant understanding among Protestants at the turn of the century” (Handy 1969:94).

To a greater degree in America than anywhere else, Protestant clergy took the lead during the latter half of the nineteenth century in publicizing what they perceived as “the urban peril”—pauperism and chronic poverty, crime and political disorder, alcoholism, the new immigrants from southern Europe and the concomitant growth of Roman Catholicism. Fear replaced hope as the city became “a serious menace,” “the fever sores of the land,” the ultimate challenge to religious commitment and faith (Lees 1985:165-68). Frequently accented was the demographic disproportion between the growth of the city and the availability of clergy and churches to respond to the needs.

American Catholics voiced similar pessimism regarding the city. By the 1920s the church’s membership was largely urban. But there were those like Father John Ryan who concluded somberly, “The future will be with the Church that ministers to the rural population” (quoted in Cross 1962:41). Critics saw the weakening of the territorial parish and the rapid multiplication of national ethnic parishes as telltale signs of the present disunity of the city and warnings of further demoralization. “Imbued with respect for the past, nostalgic for a life close to nature, and bemused . . . by an urban sociology that clothed similar sentiments in a majestic scientific terminology, they yielded too readily to impulses of dismay” (Cross 1962:51).

Industrializing Europe and long industrialized Britain underlined similar concerns. Many of England’s Protestant clergy “saw the city as at worst a den of iniquity and at best a serious challenge that could be effectively countered only through constant vigilance” (Lees 1985:153). In the 1870s an Anglican bishop remarked to Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli that “the Church would probably lose the city.” Replied Disraeli, “Don’t be mistaken, my Lord, the church has nothing to lose, for she has never had the city.”





Around 1850, life in Germany was still predominantly agrarian. Two generations later it had become the leading industrial power on the European continent. Already its Protestant clergy were joining England's voices of despair, denouncing the urban way of life for its destructive "impact on the religious and ethical standards of the previously faithful. Traditionally allied with the conservative forces in state and society to an even greater extent than their British counterparts, they perceived the big city as a milieu in which all their efforts to retain and guide their parishioners continually faced attack by the forces of secular individualism" (Lees 1985:158). The cities were "shapeless giants . . . comparable to powerful vacuum cleaners," "a wildly fluctuating chaos of human beings" in which the forces of Christianity would be placed inevitably on the defensive.

History revisited. Revisionist looks at these early prophecies of urban downfall question the full historical accuracy of these judgments. Did the rural-urban polarization and the migration to the city produce a real decay in faith? The clergy's verbal "for example" is apparently no proof. The polarization is too simplistic, too ideological, to explain the full picture. The late anthropologist Margaret Mead, noted for her wit as well as her scholarship, provides another evaluation of such migration: " 'At least 50 percent of the human race doesn't want their mother-in-law within walking distance.' Mead's remark may tell us as much about life in the countryside as the typologies do" (Phillips and LeGates 1981:129).

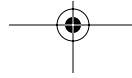
Further, where should the final judgment be placed—on the city as an unresponsive place? Even when we restrict gospel impact to the demographics of church attendance, there are enough historical examples from this early history of industrialization to indicate that urban unresponsiveness is too easy an answer.

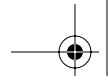
In 1851 the city of Glasgow had a church attendance rate higher than a quarter of Scotland's rural counties. And in nearly all cases major Scottish towns had higher rates than their immediate hinterlands (Brown 1995:251). After a complex evaluation of England's industrializing cities,

An Indictment of the Urban Context

"All dangers of the town may be summed up in this: that here, withdrawn from the blessed influence of Nature, and set face to face against humanity, man loses his own nature and becomes a new and artificial creature—an inhuman cog in a social machinery that works like a fate, and cheats him of his true culture as a soul. The most unnatural fashions and habits, the strangest eccentricities of intellect, the wildest and most pernicious theories in social morals, and the most appalling and incurable barbarism, are the legitimate growths of city life."

REV. AMORY D. MAYO, SYMBOLS OF THE CAPITAL: OR, CIVILIZATION IN NEW YORK, 1859.





Callum Brown concludes that “taking mainland Britain as a whole, the degree to which industry contributed to a city’s economy is probably a poor predictor of church participation” (Brown 1995:253).

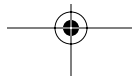
Also ignored in early judgments against the city were the immigrants who brought their own faith to the cities from their rural heritage. The ghettos built by Catholic and Protestant newcomers to European and North American cities were more than forced retreats in the face of Anglo-Saxon racism. They were that, to be sure. But they were also efforts by the newcomers to deal with the city’s pluralism. In these enclaves their people would be safe from over-close contact with commitments alien to their faith.

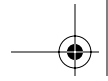
Subsequent history underlined this impact of the new migrants. In England the initial period of rapid immigration was a time of religious growth. But as immigration declined from 1870 to 1914, religious stagnation and decline accelerated. Another explanation for the decline of faith was also being offered during this time. It laid the blame not on the unresponsive city but on the church’s neglect of urban need. The city was a God-given opportunity as much as a diabolical threat.

For evangelicals like General William Booth (1829-1912), founder of the Salvation Army, the decaying state of the city was a call to Christian action. Beyond the city as a place, he was alert to the processes that made up the city. “As there is a darkest Africa,” he asked, “is there not also a darkest England? Civilisation, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone’s throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest?” (Booth 1890:11-12).

Booth’s pleas, along with those of others in the United States (Conn 1994a:62-70), drew attention to the church’s isolation from the working classes. To be sure, class patterns of church involvement showed considerable variations from country to country (McLeod 1995:27). Even so, were class distinctions that had long divided churched from unchurched more to blame than the city as a place? Was revulsion at the irreligiosity of the urban lower classes in the cities of England, Germany and the United States as much revulsion at lower classes as at irreligiosity?

Responses from contemporary Christian scholarship. One hundred years later, Christian reflection has still not caught up completely with these revisionist discoveries—or, for that matter, with modifications of the early flaws. The defect of static determinism in the rural-urban polarization can be quickly acknowledged. After all, such determinism





strikes at the very heart of the Christian notion of conversion, of radical change. With it hope for change will quickly vanish.

There still appear to be traces of a defeatism regarding city life. This shows in a tendency to resist the city's impact on the church instead of developing the church's impact on the city.

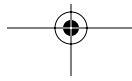
The stereotypical negativism spawned by antiurbanism still surfaces, from various directions. For some the reality of God's common-grace blessings in the city is still minimized as the city is primarily perceived as a place of Satanic power. Its inhabitants are still described as powerless, alone, vulnerable, lost, rejected, bewildered, insecure, used, void of meaning. Others, in a proper assault on the Enlightenment background of modernity and modernization, speak of urbanization as one of the main realities that drives the process.

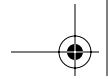
Happily, the earlier version of the rural-urban contrast has undergone revision or readjustment among some Christian theorists. Some speak of a rural-urban continuum rather than of polarization; they underline the damage caused by the negative and simplistic stereotype of the past. "The city does not exist in opposition to the countryside" (Hiebert and Meneses 1995:262). Others speak of it as an "idealized contrast" (DuBose 1978:34-35) or a heuristic typology to provoke analysis and discussion of society and social change (Filbeck 1985). The proposed continuum is seen as a meaningful channel, not a barrier, for spreading the gospel (DuBose 1983:515-16). Whether these revisions are adequate to offer a new path for healthy urban mission is a question awaiting more in-depth Christian research.

The City as Process

The interests of cultural anthropology and sociology in urbanism as a way of life have moved in many directions in the last few decades. Some of those interests are still tied to past discussions. What social relations have been generated by these areas of relatively heavy population, density and heterogeneity we call cities? Will we find these relationships exclusively in the city? Can we find them also in places other than cities? Cities are mosaics of institutions, family and kinship groups, ethnic enclaves, and associations. How do we understand the complex interactions that go on between them, and the interactions with areas beyond the city?

Burgeoning study agenda. In the 1960s and 1970s, a heyday of urban anthropology and sociology, interest in urban processes created a wide but limited agenda. How do we understand urban poverty? What happens in the process we call rural-urban migration? How do we





describe life in a residential neighborhood? What goes on in the structures and functions of associations not built on kinship? How can we best explain the persistence of extended kinship relationships? How do role relationships work in an urban setting? What is this thing called “ethnicity” (Sanjek 1990:152)?

In the 1980s the scope of these studies expanded. The liabilities of earlier studies were recognized and modified as new directions were pursued. In the process, less formal attention has been devoted to issues of definition (Sanjek 1990:153). But a consensus has been growing on the significance of the socializing process for understanding urbanism.

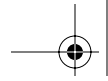
In the development of this consensus Marxist-oriented scholars have pressed the hardest in the most radical terms. Some, like Anthony Leeds and Leonard Plotnicov, have decided that the city under capitalism cannot be distinguished from complex society as such. Words like *city* and *town*, *village* and *rural*, become relative in any society, ancient or modern, integrated as they are by class differences in the area of production (Plotnicov 1985:50-51). In such a world, “No Towne is an Islande of Itselfe” (Leeds 1994:71-79). Cities and towns, villages and metropolises, goes the argument, are simply nodal points within societal systems. They are only distinct specialties of an urban society linked (under any technology known) to specific geographical spaces.

The impact of this radical emphasis, we argue, has played some part in further confusing significant areas of study. Urban anthropology now struggles more than ever with defining its area of research. What really is urban? Has the virtual equation of urban with civilization and human culture not left us with something too diffuse and too large to be studied with anthropology’s traditional method of participant observation and intense fieldwork? If everything is urban, then nothing is urban.

The Chicago School saw the development of cities as a natural process. However, others take a different stance. Neo-Marxist political economists take into consideration the manipulative capacities of those in power. Primarily viewing the development of cities through the economic maneuvering of government and big business, they focus on such phenomena as exploitation and discrimination. The question we must ask is, does the neo-Marxist orientation to economics restrict our understanding of urbanism to the point of imbalance and one-sidedness? When economics are absolutized at the center of urban studies, what happens to the significance of history and the arts, politics and religion, for understanding the city and urbanism? Are they really useful—or only when they are redefined within a Marxist framework?

At the same time, out of this ferment of discussion, Marxist and other-





wise, have come new issues for study that add to an interdisciplinary picture of urbanism. Political and class questions begin to explore work relations, enrich urban migration studies, and expand interests beyond the urban poor to gender and public culture issues. Even the study of urban religion, long neglected in contemporary sociology and anthropology, seems to be making an appearance (Kemper 1991:383-84; Sanjek 1990:154-55).

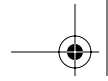
Above all else, scholarship, even outside the Marxist orbit, now finds itself wrestling with the social connections between the city and the world outside the city. Urban history does touch, and is touched by, widening circles beyond its own. "Paris sneezes and France blows its nose." Urban and rural are not simply bipolar, isolated opposites but distinct entities integrated by mutual action and reaction. How will we understand that interaction? In the process how does the city act? And how is it acted upon? How is power exercised, and who benefits from it?

The restrictive demographic definitions of the past are breaking down. Scholarship appears to be recognizing more and more that cities are places but also participants in, and respondents to, social process (Palen 1992:339-56).

Christian research reflections. Urban mission studies in recent decades have not moved as quickly as larger scholarship concerns into considering the city as process. Among evangelicals the worldwide growth of cities, coupled with pragmatic interests in personal evangelism and church planting, has led to a narrow study agenda dominated by demographics. The gathering of reliable statistical information on urban growth—particularly on world-class cities—and on unreached people groups has been a central focus of concern (Conn 1997:26-28). Urbanization, in this light, has been understood more as a demographic process than as a process of sociocultural shifting.

Also restricting progress has been a lack of interfacing between Christian mission and the social sciences most useful in analyzing the city. Linguistics, cultural anthropology and communication theory are becoming more comfortable, though still debated, instruments in research. But little serious attention is being paid to sociology, economics or political science.

Studies also remain disproportionate geographically, ecclesiastically and topically. A growing body of studies from America's mainline churches focuses on North American urban history and mission (Hartley 1996:308-63). Deeply sensitive to social and institutional context, these studies add a much-needed dimension missing from more explicitly evangelical research. But their ties to biblical and evangelistic concerns



can sometimes be weak, and their connections with the American geographical scene and to theological pluralism can hamper wider usefulness.

Outside the Anglo-Saxon world both macro-level and micro-level research on urban mission is much more limited. The churches of Asia and Latin America, for example, "recognise that our ministry demands a clear and intelligent understanding of the complexities of our economic, environmental, social and cultural context" (Ro 1989:1; cf. "Seeking the Peace" 1989:18-24). But Christian research has still not caught up fully with the shift of ecclesiastical gravity from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere.

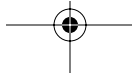
Some agenda topics related to broader studies of the urban process have received considerable attention. The interest of the church growth school in the homogeneous unit principle has fostered wide research into questions of family and kinship groups. But little, comparatively speaking, has yet been done to relate these issues to the urban setting. General inactivity in sociological research and reluctance among some toward a holistic approach to ministry has minimized such mission studies. Issues of neighborhood, role relationships, societal structures and networks receive some attention, but it is often hit and miss.

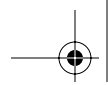
If there was one issue that gained mission ascendancy in the 1980s, it was poverty and social transformation. The global city is reminding the church of our calling to serve the poor. Why poverty exists and how the church should fulfill that calling are still debated. Mainline discussions within the Anglo-Saxon world join with many minority communities in underlining a systemic approach to the problem. A substantial number of evangelicals from the Two-Thirds World, joined by many from the Anglo-Saxon world, plead for a holistic balance that will unite the systemic and the personal in a vital connection with evangelism and church planting (Nicholls 1986). Others are concerned that such a balance is too fragile and evangelism will be minimized in such a wedding.

Urban Misperception

Left behind from this history of academic study and popular perception are accumulating images of the city. Scholarship through the years has rejected some and corrected or modified others. We will be dealing in more detail with some of these images in future chapters.

One particular image continues to capture and summarize many others into one popular ideology—the city as an urban wasteland. Christian joins with non-Christian in a stereotype of concentrated chaos and disorder, the city as a maze of disruption and dislocation, bewildering sprawl





and confused worldviews. Everything about the city then becomes “too much”: too much crowding, too much noise, too much stress.

Just how realistic is this chaotic image, particularly as a negative barrier?

Why do migrants

with enthusiastic optimism still seem to ignore it and move into the cities across the developing world?

They continue to pour into what the expert perceives as the disorder of Jos and Lima, Tokyo and Cairo, pulled by the attractions of cities struggling with the chaotic growth that their presence helps create.

The pull factors are usually stronger than the push factors. Why? For the migrants growth, however disordered, means change and progress. It means educational and medical benefits, improvement of family income. For many

young men and women it means freedom from social constraints and traditions. How do they cope? They create positive mental maps of the city that allow for mobility, communication and enough organization for emotional security (Krupat 1985:70-71).

Creating the chaos image. Where then do the ideological images of chaos and disorder come from? They come in large part from the spectated presuppositions through which we filter what we want to see. The images are shaped by more than objective reality; they are shaped also by our social, cultural and human ideologies. Chaos is in the eye of the beholder.

Cities and Chaos

Whatever has been my taste for solitude and natural scenery, yet the thick, foggy, stifled elements of cities, the entangled life of so many men together, sordid as it was, and empty of the beautiful, took quite a strenuous hold upon my mind. I felt as if there never could be enough of it.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

New York City, the incomparable, the brilliant star city of cities, the Cyclopean paradox, the inferno with no out-of-bounds, the supreme expression of both the miseries and splendors of contemporary civilization . . . at once the climactic synthesis of America and yet the negation of America.

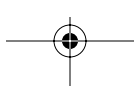
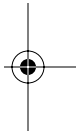
JOHN GUNTHER, AUTHOR

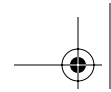
New York is great. I've got so much noise. Subways. Horns. I can't stand something quiet, I go nuts.

MILES DAVIS, JAZZ MUSICIAN

President Anwar el-Sadat and I, separately considering the Egyptian capital city of Cairo, recently arrived at the same conclusion; it was about to explode. . . . I do not mean seismically. Cairo is not a city of meteorological extremes. . . . No, I am speaking of the metaphysical condition of the place, its political, social, historical state, which is never languid or lethargic, but which seems to me now almost to be almost lethally excitable. . . . Hush and tumult: the ancient and majestic streaked indefinitely, somewhere among the city lights, with the ominous.

JAN MORRIS, DESTINATIONS



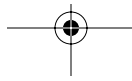
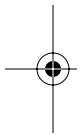


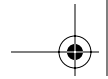
The rural-urban polarization outlined in this chapter surely affects us. It assumes our response will be, "The city is too much." On the other hand, some research has looked at the rural model and affirmed, "The noncity is too little." There is a human need for complexity, novelty, excitement and exploration. And those are needs uniquely met by the city (Geller 1980).

Change, linked to the rural-urban polarization, can also be seen as a part of negative chaos and disorientation—moral and cultural. "Human beings need the framework of ideas, images, and behavioural norms that culture provides in order to develop, to communicate and to interact with one another. Culture gives significance to experience and is the basis for the human articulation and creation of meaning" (Shorter 1991:141). So when Koreans move from their homeland to North American cities and members of ethnic tribal groups make their way to African cities, they find themselves a cognitive minority bombarded by new cultural signals. Traditional norms and comfortable social institutions are not quickly at hand. The result can be a profound cultural alienation and moral upheaval. In Africa "family life, sexual mores and the socialization of children all suffer, and crime, alcohol, drug-taking and sexual promiscuity appear as viable survival strategies" (Shorter 1991:141). In Korean-American homes there are role changes for husbands and wives and frequent conflicts between first and second generations as the new culture is either assimilated or ignored.

Change, as part of the human process of adjustment, can also mean growth and transformation. The Mataco Indians of the northern Argentine Chaco plain, twenty-five thousand strong, are traditionally a hunting, fishing, gathering society. Their traditional society now faces rapid urbanization, many being drawn by the "glitter of the city" syndrome. Crowded in barrios at the very edges of the urban centers, they often lose the dignity and security of their cultural identity and forest existence. Their concepts of ownership and property are threatened, their traditional extended family system undergoes change; white Argentinean racism continues its harassment of them (S. Barrett 1997:29-30).

Yet the Matacos, with the encouragement of the Anglican Church, are seeing change in a new light. "We can't resist or reject change," some acknowledge, "but we must know how to distinguish between good and bad change." Apprehension for the future of the culture, a sense of insecurity, remains. But it is not a fear of chaos. In the language of one church leader, "In the past, the Indians did not have salt, herbs, and spices to flavor their food. When these condiments became available to them, their food took on a new and more appealing taste. Positive changes can have



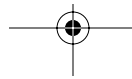
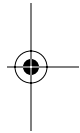


a similar effect on the life of our communities" (Barrett 1997:37-38).

The negative judgments of social class, especially outsider (etic) judgments, surely play a part in the discovery of chaos. Middle- and upper-class observers assume the good life is defined by order and the choices that wealth makes possible. They look at the inner-city slums of Chicago and the vast peripheral squatter settlements of Calcutta and see congestion, a cluttered sea of huts constructed from sacking, packing cases and rusting sheets of corrugated iron. Four miles from the beauty of downtown Nairobi, along the sides of the Mathare River, there is a squatter settlement of some 200,000 people. "The area . . . is ugly," writes one sympathetic commentator, "the houses crammed together in an apparently haphazard fashion. . . . The roads are makeshift, garbage is piled high in open areas, and the children play in the dust." Its inhabitants, the report continues, are "highly marginal in every sense of the term" (quoted in Lloyd 1979:17). Note the consistent language of rootlessness, disorder, and chaos used to describe this area—*ugly, crammed, haphazard, makeshift, marginal*. Do these descriptive words not point to an ideological judgment that the outside observer has added, and in the adding missed other features clearer to the (emic) insider?

In the maze of Mathare Valley, what of the kinship and ethnic ties that still bind Akamba to Akamba, Luhya to Luhya in community? An outsider also could easily miss the highly organized and politically integrated organization that a 1973 observer perceived in the life of Village Two in the valley: a "clearly identifiable group of community leaders who direct the village committee," a village-run cooperative society that maintains nursery schools and has a social hall for dances to finance the schools and pay beer fines (Lloyd 1979:17-18).

Is there nothing but chaos and disorder in the inner-city slums of the United States? Gerald Suttles, in his classic 1968 study of the Taylor Street area of Chicago, found otherwise. He noted a social order structured around ecologically settled ethnic areas, boundaries invisible to the outsider but well known and respected by insiders. Ordered segregation marked the Italian, Mexican, Puerto Rican and African American communities. And within that negotiated order of stability among competing groups one found a stable moral order based on shared values. Within those ethnic borders were safety and comfort, in-group membership designating churches, parks and business establishments as in-group territory. Frequently even distinctive ways of dressing and local speech patterns marked off social order (Suttles 1968), and graffiti at strategic corners was a means for youth gangs to mark off their territoriality and zones of safety.



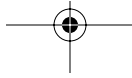


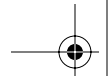
Seeing a new way. Changing the chaos mindset from fear to favor has not been easy for the Christian community. In 1900 a statement of the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church looked at the American city and saw “the menace of the American State and Church. To penetrate this alien mass by an evangelical religion is as difficult as it is imperative. The question of the city has become the question of the race. How to reach the heart of the city and to change its life is, indeed, the question of questions” (quoted in Handy 1969:94).

As late as 1962 the question remained, unanswered perhaps in part because of the high proportion of Protestant ministerial students coming from rural backgrounds. Out of a sampling of 1,079 students, only 36 percent came from cities of more than 250,000 people. Concluded Truman B. Douglass, “Because of their rural and small-town origins many ministers bring to their work in a city church a distaste for city ways—a distaste which is the more disabling because it is largely unconscious” (Douglass 1962:90).

In 1994 evangelical urbanologist Fletcher Tink suggested a new path for investigation in the future. In a survey of 265 urban laity, pastors and missionaries, both international and U.S.-based, he focused on perceptions of the city in terms of order and chaos. He found among them a strong view of the city as a place of heightened disorder. In a comparison of metaphors of ministry, he found a high majority turning repeatedly to less-ordered descriptors like “three ring circus,” “a community clinic,” “a sandlot ‘pickup’ game,” “a flea market,” “a fiesta,” “a lifeboat” (Tink 1994:210-12). But along with these metaphors, there was also “common consensus that disorder is not necessarily hostile” (Tink 1994:300). Like a jazz combo, urban ministry aims not for order but resolution into harmony. Tink’s own conclusions, drawn out of a rich biblical investigation of the role of chaos, suggest that a healthy skepticism toward order is an appropriate stance for the urban practitioner of ministry.

“Malignant chaos” will need exorcising as surely as an order chosen primarily because it is secure and comfortable. Is the manifestation of chaos truly disordered or only apparently so? Is the urban practitioner equipped emotionally and theologically to see chaos as an ingredient of harmony? Or will a phobia or reticence toward chaos as a path to harmony step around it or trample it? What discernment gifts are needed to mete out order for those governed by chaos and offer some measure of appropriate disorder for those bound by exaggerated order (Tink 1994:301-2)? Safety, after all, is not always salvific, nor is security always sound. Boundaries, Tink reminds us, are not always beneficial, and surprises are not always subversive.





Randy White, a former realtor who became national director of urban projects for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, describes his family's awakening to these new images of urban reality at Oxford, England. There they met Michael and Robyn Duncan and their "three very young, bouncy children," a family from New Zealand who had been working and living in a squatter settlement in urban Manila. The photograph albums they showed one another painted two worlds.

Our pictures were filled with smiling, well-dressed children amidst their toys. Michael and Robyn's were of smiling children too, but amidst the rubble surrounding the cardboard and tin shacks they lived in. Ours were filled with extended family, healthy and affluent, treasuring the grandchildren. Theirs were filled with Filipino friends, barely surviving, treasuring their "adopted" grandchildren. Ours were filled with the well-ordered, edged and trimmed world of suburbia; theirs with chaos, pollution and the ceaseless efforts of the urban poor trying to clear a space to raise and feed their families. (White 1996:21)

Puzzled, Randy commented, "You must be an amazing person, and your family must be an amazing family, to be able to do this."

Michael's reply was an eye-opener to the upside-down urban kingdom of God: "No, we're not. Jesus lives in our neighborhood, in the slums, and we've moved there to be with him."

