

# A THEOLOGY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

*Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*

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## CHAPTER I

### *The theology of the built environment*

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart . . . write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.  
(Deuteronomy 6.6–9)

To be human is to be placed: to be born in this house, hospital, stable (according to Luke), or even, as in the floods in Mozambique in 2000, in a tree. It is to live in this council house, semi-detached, tower block, farmhouse, mansion. It is to go to school through these streets or lanes, to play in this alley, park, garden; to shop in this market, that mall; to work in this factory, mine, office, farm. These facts are banal, but they form the fabric of our everyday lives, structuring our memories, determining our attitudes. How, as Christians, should we think of them? Are they a proper subject for theological reflection? Here and there great theologians, notably Aquinas and Calvin, have glanced in this direction, but the built environment forms no *locus* in theological ethics except insofar as it has dealt with land and property, and with the city as a metaphor for community, or our final destination.<sup>1</sup> It is in ethics that theology has engaged with the concrete – with war, economics, work, sexuality. Why not, then, with the built environment? We are invited to do that by the very terminology involved. Paul constantly urges his congregations to ‘edify’ one another. The word ‘edify’ comes from the Latin *aedificare*, to build.<sup>2</sup> The metaphorical use of the word points to a profound truth about the built environment. Form follows function; buildings serve a purpose. For good or ill buildings, from the humblest garden shed to the grandest cathedral, make moral statements.

Learning from Barth, I take it for granted that for the theologian ethics and dogmatics cannot be separated. They are continuous sections

<sup>1</sup> Land is the theme of the third chapter, and the city of the sixth.

<sup>2</sup> A point made by K. Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1998), p. 11. The Greek word Paul uses, *oikodomeo*, has the same literal and metaphorical meaning.

on the theological railway, not a main line (dogmatics) and a branch line (ethics). In that case, what is called for is a theological reading of the built environment. This will differ from other ethical accounts in its reference to a primarily narrative frame. Like teleological ethics, it will raise the question of the purpose of our building and planning; it will always ask about context, and to this extent resemble situation ethics; in the ongoing debate which constitutes church life it will seek to discern the command of God in this area as in others; in all cases it will be concerned with the way in which the built environment furthers human virtue or destroys it. But in each case it will do so in reference to the narratives which give us our account of the Triune God: the stories of creation, reconciliation, redemption. To the question, ‘Where do we find the measure of the validity of a given form of architecture or planning?’ it will reply – precisely in these narratives and their explication.<sup>3</sup>

The point of this is not, of course, to teach planners and architects what to do. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has said, ‘Christianity has no direct competence in the realm of worldly structures.’ This has not prevented theologians from drawing up quite precise guidelines for economic structures, as in the theories of the ‘just price’ and the ‘just wage’ and in Catholic Social Teaching, or for armed combat, as in the so-called ‘just war theory’. These theories follow, because, as von Balthasar goes on, the gospel ‘sends Christians into the world with an image of the human whereby and according to which they are to organise its structures as responsibly as they can’.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is still to state the matter too ecclesiocentrically. In his work in Finnish cities Seppo Kjellberg has sought to understand theology as a science of reconciliation, promoting interdisciplinary dialogue, bringing all concerned with questions of the built environment together, but offering as its own perspective an understanding of the overall purpose of humankind within creation.<sup>5</sup> We can accept this if we understand ‘reconciliation’ in Barth’s sense, as the vivifying and revolutionary action of God within human community seeking the realisation of life in all its fullness for all people. If ‘reconciliation’ meant the Church adopting a managerial role, ‘mediating’ between rich and poor, bosses and workers, oppressors and oppressed, pouring the oil of middle axioms on the troubled waters of social conflict, it would certainly be untrue to the gospel. Christianity brings to all debates about

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> H. Urs von Balthasar, ‘Liberation Theology in the Light of Salvation History’ in J. V. Schall (ed.), *Liberation Theology in Latin America* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982) p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> S. Kjellberg, *Urban EcoTheology* (Utrecht: International Books, 2000), p. 26.

the structures of the world through which we reproduce ourselves – economics, social and criminal justice, but also town planning and building – its understanding of God become flesh, ‘whereby and according to which’, as von Balthasar says, they build. In view of the silence of the tradition it is essential to insist that Christian theology has at its core a vision of the human which is especially pertinent to the built environment. In his *Ten Books of Architecture*, written in the first century BC, the Roman architect and engineer Marcus Vitruvius Pollio gave a description of the geometry of the human body which formulated the principles of classical architecture, rediscovered and taken up again at the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> For many centuries this perception provided the ground rules for an architectural practice which was by definition humanist, which sought and built according to human scale. For Vitruvius, in fact, we become human only *as* we build.<sup>7</sup> In the twentieth century another architect, Rudolph Schwartz, who regarded ethics as determinative for architecture, gave further expression to this principle.<sup>8</sup> Building, he said, is done with the whole body, so that it is the movements of the body which create living space.

What then comes into being is first and foremost circumscribed space – shelter, living space, ceremonial space, a space which replaces the space of the world. We could almost say, and indeed it is true, that building is based on the inner spaciousness of the body, on the knowledge of its extent and the form of its growth, on the knowledge of its articulation and of its power to expand. Indeed it is with the body that we experience building, with the outstretched arms and the pacing feet, with the roving glance and with the ear, and above all else in breathing. *Space is dancingly experienced.*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The passage runs: ‘For if a man be placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centred at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height, as in the case of plane surfaces which are perfectly square.’ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, tr. M. Morgan, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 73. Leonardo produced a classical illustration of this claim. See on this the excellent discussion in M. J. Ostwald and R. John Moore, *Dissecta Membra: The Architect, The Serial Killer, His Victim and Her Medical Examiner* (Sydney: Arcadia Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Vitruvius, *Ten Books*, Book 2, ch. 1, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Speaking in 1951 to architects concerned with rebuilding in Germany he told them: ‘I am terribly sorry to say this, but you only get a house by marrying and by devoting yourself to that great law. That may well be much more demanding than designing a house with wonderfully large windows. But I don’t think we can arrive at a house in any other way. And this should be the first step towards establishing a decent house, then a village, then a city.’ Quoted in Harries, *Function*, p. 363.

<sup>9</sup> R. Schwartz, *The Church Incarnate* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), p. 27 (my italics).

This is a profound expression of the Vitruvian view, though the conclusion is more of an eschatological hope than a lived reality. In the twentieth century such humanist architecture was more the exception than the rule, as this kind of humanism was discarded in favour of a brutalist technocracy for which ‘man’ was a ‘machine’ and buildings, accordingly, ‘machines for living in’.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, from Patrick Geddes onwards, sociologists have seen that if utopia cannot be produced by building better, at least the reverse is true, that there are environments which generate crime and physical and mental ill health.<sup>11</sup> Balthasar is right: in relation to the built environment the recovery of a new humanism is an urgent need, and in this Christian theology, as one dialogue partner amongst many, certainly has a role to play. Kjellberg, however, points out that the anthropocentrism of earlier Christian theology is inadequate. What is needed is what he calls a ‘cosmological holism’, which understands creation and incarnation, doctrine and ethics, together.<sup>12</sup> Balthasar is right that the church’s involvement in the city was always based on the doctrine of the incarnation, the idea of the ‘humanity of God’.<sup>13</sup> However, he seems to have forgotten what otherwise he has learned from Barth, that there is *no* theological assertion without its ethical correlate. It is not just Christian anthropology which determines our activity, but all the propositions of the creed. Christian faith *brings the whole Trinitarian economy of creation, reconciliation and redemption to its reflection on the world*. I shall, therefore, be attempting a Trinitarian reflection in what follows. A Trinitarian theological ethic will also, I shall argue, be a theology of grace, and for that very reason a theology of liberation.

Barth gave his entire *Dogmatics* a Trinitarian structure. He had, therefore, an ethics of creation, and planned an ethics of reconciliation and of

<sup>10</sup> The slogan of Le Corbusier. On these grounds Harries notes that it is possible to charge modernism with moral failure. *Function*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> See further on this the discussion in chapter 7. <sup>12</sup> Kjellberg, *Urban EcoTheology*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> I cannot agree with Elaine Graham’s criticism of the incarnational theology of *Faith in the City* as the perfect expression of ‘the Church of England’s position in a settled, harmonious social order’ (‘Theology in the City: Ten Years after *Faith in the City*’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78.1, 1996, p. 184). Incarnation can be an expression of the status quo, but for the Christian socialist tradition in which the Report stands it was always a reminder that God identified with the poor, and that justice demanded concrete, and more egalitarian, expression. Harvey notes that the socialist utopian literature of the nineteenth century contains a ‘powerful and important critical element’ (*Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 195). The same applies to the views of the incarnation. To appeal to the incarnation as the ground of a humanist architecture is queried by both Schopenhauer, who criticised the Christian aspiration to verticality, as opposed to the horizontal which stays close to the earth, and by Bloch who contrasts Greek corporeal-humane proportions with Christian otherworldly ones (*The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 716). But the incarnation, which begins with a story set in a cow shed, is precisely what announces a this worldly intention.

redemption. Different aspects of human life were grouped by him under these headings. For example, he dealt with the relations of women and men, with work, with respect for life, under 'creation'. As that which forms our 'third skin', however, I want to argue that the built environment relates to every area of Christian ethics, and that only a Trinitarian ethic, an ethic of creation, reconciliation, and redemption, is adequate to explore it. It is a fundamental principle of Trinitarian theology that *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*: the works of God cannot be divided. If it is God who acts, it is God who acts, not 'parts' of God, for God is indivisible. At the same time the Church has always spoken of 'appropriations', whereby we speak of some forms of divine activity more especially in terms of one person of the Trinity than another. In relation to the built environment we can say that God the Creator is the one who brings order out of chaos, and is therefore the source of all order and of the planning which gives form to our world. The perspective of creation points us away from the anthropocentric city to one in which the wider ecology is fundamentally respected. God the Reconciler is the one who 'breaks down the walls of partition' both between God and humans and between humans themselves. God is therefore the source of all attempts to realise community and of the justice without which community cannot survive. God the Redeemer is the author of all dreams and visions, the author of the imagination which seeks the new Jerusalem and anticipates it in structures here and now. One or other of these 'appropriations' lies behind my attempt to think through the question of the built environment theologically in each of the chapters that follow.

I speak here of God, the origin and end of good – which is to say, creative, reconciling, redeeming – human action. A major strand of theological reflection has wanted to confine truly good action within the sphere of the Church. We cannot say that the great pagans had true virtues, said Augustine. The best we can allow is that they did not depart from virtue very much.<sup>14</sup> I cannot share this view. God sustains in being all that is, works in and through all events, and elicits response in all created reality. It is, of course, foundational to Christian faith that God works through history, through the particularity of Israel, of Jesus of Nazareth, of the Church. In no way do I wish to reduce these historical particularities to myth or symbol. But the Christian scriptures are quite clear that God is not confined to Israel and Church, and they invite us,

<sup>14</sup> Augustine *Contra Julianum* 4.3.25. This conclusion follows because without faith it is impossible to please God, (Heb. 11.6). He wrestles with the issue from 3.18 on. This is probably the most intransigent of his Anti Pelagian treatises.

therefore, to move from the narrative of the particular to discern God at work in all things. Redemption was finished neither on Calvary, nor at the resurrection. The work of redemption is continued by the Holy Spirit. The Messianic writings, the narratives which speak of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, together with all the texts which they presuppose, provide us with criteria to discern that work.<sup>15</sup> It is on these grounds that Aquinas, when turning his mind to the city, noted that there are two aspects of the work of God in the world, creation and governance, and invited rulers and planners to an analogous practice:

One who is about to establish a city or a realm must, in the first place, choose a suitable site; healthy, to ensure the health of the inhabitants; fertile to provide for their sustenance; one which will delight the eye with its loveliness and give natural security against hostile attack . . . Having chosen the site, the next task which confronts the founder of a city or a kingdom is to plan the area to meet all the requirements of civic life . . . one must decide where to build towns and where to leave the countryside open, or to construct fortifications: centres of study, open places for military training, and markets, all have to be taken into consideration: otherwise neither city nor kingdom would long endure attack.<sup>16</sup>

This activity, the activity of establishing a city and setting up civic life, is not outwith the remit of theology and Church precisely because of God's activity in creation and providence. If God is active and not absent, then faith in the activity of that God informs our building and planning. Because God is the Creator, says Elaine Scarry, 'making' is set apart and honoured as the most morally authoritative of acts, creating divine resonances, amongst other places, at the doorway of the house and the gateway of the city. In imaging God as Creator the Hebrew bible conceives the whole cosmos as the proper territory for acts of artifice and intelligence.<sup>17</sup> These are not autonomous, but represent responses to the Creator Spirit.

There were, of course, very good reasons for the emergence of the divide between sacred and secular, specifically the desire to avoid the worst of all forms of government, theocracy.<sup>18</sup> Here above all we see how religion can lead us into the valley of the shadow of death. In this as in

<sup>15</sup> In his condemnation of liberal theology Graham Ward seems to me to miss this point. There is a difference between *reducing* incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection to metaphors, and learning from them how it is that God acts and seeking to discern God in the world in the light of them. *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, 'On Princely Government', ch. 13 in *Selected Political Writings*, ed. A. D'Entreves (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948).

<sup>17</sup> E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 222.

<sup>18</sup> I read thus Marsiglio of Padua's *Defensor Pacis* which, in 1324, already argued for a properly secular realm. He had every reason for being sceptical of the claims of the Church.

other areas recognition of the Lordship of Christ over every aspect of life is a quite different matter from the tutelage of the Church over every area, or even the belief that piety is always what promotes true human integrity.<sup>19</sup> But this political need cannot blind us to the foundational impossibility of generalising the divide. A Trinitarian theology cannot allow a secular and sacred divide, in which ‘secular’ occupations are left to the non theologians, and theology confined to specialists. Rather, the rationale of such a theology will be a discernment of God active in God’s world. This includes the built environment. This seems to be straightforward, but as I have noted, the written tradition is largely silent about this and amongst many Christians the secular/sacred prejudice is still strong. When you announce a lecture on the theology of the built environment people expect you to talk about churches, and are disappointed when you do not! This book is not about churches, but about supposedly ‘secular’ buildings and settlements. To answer the disappointment of those who look for a book on ‘sacred’ buildings and places I begin by considering the reasons for the silence of theology about the built environment, and ways we might go about such theological reflection.

#### GOD IN THE (EVERYDAY) BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Writing about the suburban house, John Archer remarks that eighteenth century European thought had articulated a number of fundamental polarities – subject/object, public/private, masculine/feminine – but that ‘such distinctions had no more than putative existence until they could be realized in the material domain of everyday life’.<sup>20</sup> One may doubt both that Archer’s polarities are the invention of the eighteenth century, and that they are exclusively European, but he is right that ideologies are only of consequence when they impinge on ‘the material domain of everyday life’ through legal and political codes, social practices, and the shaping of space. The built environment, which ‘provides us with all the most direct, frequent and unavoidable images and experiences of everyday life’, is never just happenstance.<sup>21</sup> It reflects conscious decisions which in

<sup>19</sup> As Blake puts it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: ‘Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor his accepted brethren – whom, tyrant, he calls free – lay the bound or build the roof. . . . For every thing that lives is Holy.’ *Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> J. Archer, ‘Colonial Suburbs in South Asia 1700–1850, and the Spaces of Modernity’, in R. Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> M. Smith, J. Whitelegg and N. Williams, *Greening the Built Environment* (London: Earthscan, 1998), p. 13.

turn reflect ideologies and class positions.<sup>22</sup> ‘Grasped as an image’, says Heinrich Rombach, ‘the basic character of a farmhouse says a great deal more about the “spirit” of the country, and a style of building reveals more of the basic philosophy of a period, than the carefully smoothed-out texts of the school philosophy of that time.’<sup>23</sup> Not just farmhouses, we have to add, but council estates, tower blocks and out of town shopping centres; and not just philosophy, but theology. Theology, as one form of ideology, plays its part in the shaping of space, and not just in overtly religious buildings, nor just in pre secular societies.

I have insisted that a Trinitarian theology eliminates any fundamental distinction between sacred and secular. This seems to be a paradoxical claim the moment we look at the built environment, for humans have everywhere marked out sacred space from the secular. Karsten Harries suggests that the history of building forms an ellipse between the private and the public, domestic and ‘pedigreed’. The archetypal version of the latter, in his view, is the church or temple (we must add, mosque).<sup>24</sup> There is, he insists, a necessary dialectic between these two forms, in that it is the whole point of ‘architecture’, by which he means the non domestic, to take leave of the everyday and then return to it with fresh eyes.<sup>25</sup> I think we cannot escape this ellipse, but it is not unproblematic from the perspective of the Christian tradition. Karl Barth noted that Christianity showed a certain preference for the oppressed, those falling short, for the immature and the sullen.<sup>26</sup> I would put it slightly differently and say that we find in Scripture, classically in the Magnificat, a preference for the everyday, the modest, humble and ordinary, and we cannot but take account of that in reflecting on the built environment. This leaves us with an embarrassment, because to be interested in ‘architecture’ is to be concerned almost solely with what I will call, following Redfield, ‘the great tradition’.<sup>27</sup> Redfield distinguishes between the great tradition, the written and celebrated, the work of the philosophers, historians, theologians, the learned, and the little tradition, which for the most part comes to us only in scraps, in folk memories, songs, tales and ballads, in pamphlets crudely written. One of the remarkable things about the

<sup>22</sup> Cf S. Giedion: the main task facing contemporary architecture is ‘the interpretation of a way of life valid for our period’. *Space, Time and Architecture*, 5th edn (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. xxxii.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in G. Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith* (London: SCM, 1998), p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> Harries, *Function*, p. 286. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>26</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, tr. E. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 463.

<sup>27</sup> R. Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) ch. 3.

New Testament is that it contains so many documents which bear the marks of the little tradition, written in a Greek which was an acute embarrassment to the first educated Christians. In the built environment the great tradition means the work of prestigious architects or planners, whilst the little tradition corresponds to the work of unknown craftsmen who have left their mark on every ancient village, town and city. Christianity, I shall claim, is wedded to the little tradition. This would not be contentious were it not for what seems to be the elective affinity between Christianity and the great tradition – in music, art, literature and, perhaps above all, building. Since one of my aims is to champion precisely the little tradition in the built environment, I will substantiate my claim about the Christian marriage, and by the same token ask about the reason for the deafening silence on the little tradition in architecture in Christian reflection.

Theology works between a triangle of text, tradition and experience. ‘Tradition’, here, almost invariably means the great tradition, from Origen to Barth or John Milbank. In this tradition, it is true, there have been many trends which have militated against a perception of God in our everyday built environment. There has been, in the first instance, a marked emphasis on the spiritual as opposed to the material, on the priority of the *civitas Dei* to the *civitas terrena*. We crave freedom from death, deception and distress, Augustine wrote, and we will never have that in this life. ‘In our present state what human being can live the life he wishes, when the actual living is not in his control . . . life will only be truly happy when it is eternal.’<sup>28</sup>

The problem with this Platonising train of reflection is that it rules out true happiness in this life, and in so doing relativises the significance of what we do here. Even in the late twentieth century, with all its hedonism, activism and emphasis on the pleasures of the body, prominent representatives of this view could be found. Thus Edward Norman, in his 1978 Reith Lectures, claimed that the ‘true Christ of history’ directed people to ‘turn away from the preoccupations of human society’ and characterised Christianity as the ‘evocation of the unearthly’.<sup>29</sup> No theological understanding of the built environment could emerge from this theology. Such a theology is interested only in church building, and in building which seeks to ‘evoke the unearthly’ at that. But such a theology shortchanges the world in which we live. As Nicholas Wolterstorff remarks:

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 14.25.

<sup>29</sup> E. Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 78–9.

The tragedy of modern urban life is not only that so many in our cities are oppressed and powerless, but also that so many have nothing surrounding them in which any human being could possibly take sensory delight. For this state of affairs we who are Christians are as guilty as any. We have adopted a pietistic-materialistic understanding of man, viewing human needs as the need for a saved soul plus the need for food, clothes and shelter. True shalom is vastly richer than that.<sup>30</sup>

On top of this relativising of the present has been an introspective tradition which began with Augustine's *Confessions* and which has concentrated on the inner life at the expense of the active. In medieval theology in particular there was a strong sense that communion with God required retreat, the cloister, cutting oneself off from the everyday. 'Unless a man has disentangled himself from all things created,' wrote Thomas à Kempis in the fifteenth century, 'he will not be free to make for the things of God', and this was a representative view.<sup>31</sup> Richard Sennett's marvellously rich meditation on the urban order, *The Conscience of the Eye*, begins with precisely this prioritisation of interiority. 'Nothing is more cursed in our culture', he writes, than the continuing separation between inner and outer. It makes the places we live in puzzling to us. 'The street is a scene of outside life, and what is to be seen on the street are beggars, tourists, merchants, students, children playing, old people resting – a scene of human differences. What is the relation of these differences to inner life?' The Augustinian tradition, he says, deprives us of the ability to make sense of them.<sup>32</sup>

A further difficulty is symbolised by the medieval distinction, based on the Latin of 1 Corinthians 7.25, between precepts, binding on everyone, and counsels, taken up by those who sought to be perfect, which institutionalised a distinction between religious and everyday, sacred and secular.<sup>33</sup> Those who took monastic vows, and fulfilled the counsels, were the ones who led a truly Christian life. Politically, the division of powers between Pope and emperor corresponded to this distinction; socially, the division of realms between sacred and secular. The need to find God apart from the structures of everyday life found architectural expression in the theology of sacred space. To say that the eucharist can only be celebrated on 'consecrated' ground could be seen as denying the holiness

<sup>30</sup> N. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Carlisle: Solway, 1997), p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959), Book 1 ch. 20(a); Book III ch. 31.

<sup>32</sup> R. Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Norton, 1990), pp. 9–10.

<sup>33</sup> Paul wrote: 'Concerning virgins I have no commandment (*praeceptum*) of the Lord, but I give my opinion (*consilium*) as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.'

of creation as a whole. To say one's prayers, to encounter the divine, one therefore went to special buildings, set apart, and within those buildings the chancel and altar area were in turn increasingly fenced off from the mundane world, accessible only to the clergy. In the middle ages, at least, sacred and secular architecture were distinguished in terms of vertical and horizontal axes, the one reaching to heaven, the other 'the temporal death-shadowed dwelling on earth'.<sup>34</sup> I shall return to this distinction in the following chapter.

The Reformation represented an attack on many of these distinctions, and the radical Reformation changed the idea of sacred space, so that the house once again became church.<sup>35</sup> Sacred space, however, would not be pushed away. In his famous essay, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade argued that the distinction between sacred and profane was probably ineliminable, even in the most secularised of worlds. Human beings become aware of the sacred 'because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane', though in and through objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world.<sup>36</sup> As a description of the sacramental I would regard this as unexceptionable. The sacramental precisely refuses any division of realms. It arises from a Trinitarian perception which sees God in all things, even in sin and death (the cross). Eliade, however, with much of the Christian tradition, goes on to talk of two fundamentally different orders of human experience so that we have sacred and profane space, sacred time and ordinary time, even sacred and profane love, the practical implication of Nygren's *Agape and Eros*. The effect of the distinction is, once again, to mark off only one small area of experience as the sphere of encounter with God. This is counter to any kind of Trinitarian perception but, as we know, the doctrine of the Trinity was, for most of the Christian centuries hitherto, virtually a dead letter.

In the nineteenth century the 'art for art's sake' movement represented another version of this separation of realms. There was art, and all the rest was not art. During this period, says Benevolo, 'Art took on the task of communicating emotion and organizing the language of the heart . . . the urban setting was cut off from this process. Art was stripped

<sup>34</sup> Harries, *Function*, p. 187.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Flora Thompson's account of the Methodist meeting in her hamlet in *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), ch. 14.

<sup>36</sup> M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1959), p. 11. He was drawing on Rudolf Otto's *Die Heilige* (*The Idea of The Holy*), published in 1917, which traced the root of religion to the 'numinous', which broke in on the believer and left her trembling in awe and fear. This experience was marked off as sharply as possible from the everyday.

from the city and became an experience specific to certain spaces, to be enjoyed during leisure time.<sup>37</sup> When cities were ruthlessly rebuilt and only ‘important’ buildings preserved, quite apart from their original context, the separation of art and life and the transfer of beauty to the separate sphere of entertainment and free time was reinforced.<sup>38</sup> Harries remarks that religion and ‘art for art’s sake’ have to be enemies because all religion claims integrative power.<sup>39</sup> I have put this differently, in terms of the claims of God upon the whole of our life, and the activity of God in the whole of life, but I agree.

A new cause for the division of sacred and secular appeared when existentialism, the philosophy which was to dominate the middle years of the twentieth century, privileged the extraordinary, ‘boundary situations’, and the experience of *angst*, over the everyday. When Paul Tillich fled to the United States in 1933 he took his existentialism with him, and was responsible for its dominance in Anglo Saxon theology until the end of the 1960s. For Tillich the refusal of the division of sacred and secular was part of what he referred to as ‘the Protestant principle’, and on a number of occasions he attempted short reflections on domestic building. His audiences, however, repeatedly brought him back to churches, and, whilst much theological reflection on art may stem from Tillich, no theology of the everyday built environment developed from his theology.<sup>40</sup> Although Tillich himself believed any situation or reality might be a vehicle of ultimate concern I suspect that the concern of existentialism with ‘anxiety’ or ‘the boundary’ is the reason for this.

Before existentialism had reached the zenith of its influence it was already Eric Auerbach, writing in Istanbul during the Second World War, who marked a reaction to these preoccupations. He began by comparing the Hebrew bible with Homer and noted how in the latter the representation of daily life remains in the peaceful realm of the idyllic, whereas in the Old Testament ‘the sublime, tragic and problematic take shape *precisely in the domestic and commonplace* . . . The sublime influence of God here reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable.’<sup>41</sup> In the New Testament we do not, as is often suggested, enter a more spiritualised world. On the contrary, as Auerbach puts it,

<sup>37</sup> L. Benevolo, *The European City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 164.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.      <sup>39</sup> Harries, *Function*, p. 331.

<sup>40</sup> For his reflections on domestic architecture see ch. 8 in *On Art and Architecture* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) and for the way audiences drew him back to ‘church’ see ch. 17.

<sup>41</sup> E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 22 (my italics).

the story of Christ embraces ‘a ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy’.<sup>42</sup> This fact, and the common language and style in which all this was recorded, set a problem for the early Church Fathers, who had to defend Christianity against the attacks of the educated, and in so doing discovered that Scripture had ‘created an entirely new kind of sublimity, in which the everyday and the low were included, not excluded, so that, in style as in content, it directly connected the lowest with the highest’.<sup>43</sup> This, I suggest, will give us theological criteria for our understanding of the built environment. The same is true of the generalisation of vocation by Luther at the Reformation, which tacitly ennobles the calling of the ordinary craftsman, as against the exceptional genius, what we shall later call (in chapter 4) the vernacular against the pedigree.

Others who helped to create the conditions for a theology of the everyday built environment include Paul Tillich’s contemporary, Karl Barth. His second commentary on Romans, published in 1922, appropriated Otto’s language of the ‘*ganz anders*’ (‘Wholly Other’) in order to use it to attack the very view of religion it represented. Religion, for Barth, meant the domestication of grace – the defusing of the danger of God in our midst. On the edge of this attack was the sense that ‘religion’ became a privileged preserve which squeezed God out of ordinary life. This came into sharper focus in the course of resistance to Hitler, when Barth had to oppose the Lutheran ‘two kingdoms’ teaching. With increasing clarity Barth sought to put Christ at the centre of all human life – social and political as well as ecclesiastical, and by implication trivial, routine and humdrum as well as in the great events of war and revolution which he began by echoing in his work. The implications of this can be seen in his great ethics of Creation. Barth did not take up the theme of the built environment, but we have to ask, what are the implications of his attack on religion for this theme? What are the implications of the Lordship of Christ over all, as affirmed at Barmen in 1934, for the world we build?

Bonhoeffer famously developed Barth’s attack on religion in his prison letters, going on to ask how it was possible to speak in a ‘secular’ way about ‘God’, in order to understand God as ‘really the Lord of the world’.<sup>44</sup> The questions posed by this letter have rung down the decades since Bonhoeffer’s correspondence was first published. They were taken up especially by the ‘secular city’ theologians of the 1960s. The concern with

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 555.      <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>44</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 3rd edn (London: SCM, 1967), pp. 280–1.

secularisation began shortly after the Second World War, and the driving force was undoubtedly the massive fall off in church attendance, but there was also a more positive side to it. Led by Old Testament scholars like Von Rad, theologians pointed out that the roots of secularisation lay not in the Enlightenment but in Scripture. In Genesis, for example, sun, moon and stars are desacralised: they are there for street lighting, and not to be worshipped. The world is not an ‘enchanted forest’, but a garden to till and keep. The Exodus teaches us that no one rules by divine right and that all sacral politics can be challenged.<sup>45</sup> In the New Testament the idea of the holy is redefined, away from that which is set apart to a recognition of the common as itself holy – the point of Peter’s vision in Acts 10.<sup>46</sup>

In *The Secular City* Harvey Cox argued that secularity was rooted in the Hebrew approach to history as a series of events beginning with Creation and heading towards a consummation. The impact of Hebrew faith on the Hellenistic world, mediated through the early Christians, was to ‘temporalise’ the dominant perceptions of reality so that the world became history – part of the priority of time over space which was assumed in most disciplines throughout the century. The effect of this was to negate any distinction between sacred and secular, for the secular or ‘ordinary’ was the true sphere of God’s operation. Speaking about God in a secular fashion, in his view, requires placing ourselves at those points where the restoring, reconciling activity of God is occurring, where the proper relationship between people is appearing.<sup>47</sup>

Other theologians pointed out that the very etymology of the word ‘profane’ demonstrates that it is an unacceptable category for Christians to use. The word derives from the Latin *pro fano*, i.e. before or outside the temple. But according to Paul, ‘We are the temple of the living God’ (1 Cor. 3.16). For Paul the temple is not a building but the community living in the world. There cannot, therefore, be an idea of the profane as the sum total of common life outside the sphere of the holy.<sup>48</sup> From a very different standpoint, Teilhard de Chardin insisted that ‘by virtue of the Creation, and still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see it’.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> H. Cox, *The Secular City* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 46.

<sup>46</sup> So A. Hake, ‘Theological Reflections on “Community”’, in A. Harvey (ed.), *Theology in the City* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 57.

<sup>47</sup> Cox, *Secular City*, p. 265.      <sup>48</sup> J. G. Davies, *Everyday God* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin* (Glasgow: Collins, 1967), p. 66.

If Eliade's two realms mean the de-sanctification of the everyday then the implications of secularisation, by contrast, as Richard Niebuhr rightly observed, is the sanctification of all things. What we learn from Scripture is that every day is the day that the Lord has made; every nation is a holy people called by him into existence in its place and time and to his glory; every person is sacred, made in his image and likeness.<sup>50</sup>

There is no doubt that the theology of the Secular City was wedded to the optimism of the early nineteen sixties, especially in its embrace of that acme of Enlightenment ideas, the notion that humankind had at last 'come of age'.<sup>51</sup> It was overly rationalistic and its critique of the city far too muted.<sup>52</sup> It succumbed to the danger, of which Barth had warned, of a loss of Christian distinctiveness following from (in this case, not so) secret respect for the fashion of the world, and secret respect for its glory.<sup>53</sup> Ten years after Cox's book appeared the Green Movement and 'Celtic Christianity' were urgently engaged in the re-enchantment of nature in face of its ongoing destruction, and sacral politics made a comeback with a vengeance. It was a classic example of Dean Inge's famous remark that any theology which marries the *Zeitgeist* quickly becomes a widower. What was right about it, however, was the celebration of a world in which God is continuously at work, not just in the 'nature' of the Romantic poets, but also in the environments human beings produce for themselves. As Seppo Kjellberg has remarked, Cox was correct to understand the city as a man- and God-made process 'resembling the kingdom of God, which is eschatologically forthcoming, but also already present'.<sup>54</sup> That the world is fallen does not mean that goodness, gratuity and divine creativity cannot be found in that world, or that God is not active there. What it calls for is discernment.

<sup>50</sup> H. R. Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 52.

<sup>51</sup> I nevertheless do not find that it is reducible without remainder to 'liberal correlationism' or a craven submission to the values of consumer capitalism, as Graham Ward maintains, which is to miss Cox's insistence on prophecy. Ward, *Cities of God*, p. 47. Although the coming of age theme is for the most part patently absurd it should give us pause for thought that it is the author of *The Cost of Discipleship* who introduced it into the debate, albeit unwittingly.

<sup>52</sup> So Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (Glasgow: Collins, 1974). There is in this theology, he says, an 'overweening emphasis on the rationality of the city', especially in contrast with the countryside, and he insists by contrast that there is a great deal of superstition in the city and its tribalisms. The magic of the city, he says, 'is profoundly solipsistic, self-bound, and inward. Its very ignorance of plan or creation is its most obvious strength. One could not deduce the existence of God from the Portobello Road; but one might register from it the force of the amoral, the relative, the anarchistic' (p. 182).

<sup>53</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), p. 668.

<sup>54</sup> S. Kjellberg, *Urban EcoTheology*, p. 109.

## TRINITARIAN DISCERNMENT

To speak of God the Holy Spirit as God the Redeemer, a practice learned from Karl Barth, highlights the eschatological dimension of faith in God, its aspect as critical hope, in dialogue with all forms of secular utopia. 'Mere optimism about the future of human accomplishment and progress is never adequate for Christian witness,' writes Ben Sparks. 'There is an apocalyptic edge to the church's presence in the city, which requires us to be both prophets and builders for the well being of all citizens.'<sup>55</sup> Where Sparks uses 'apocalyptic' I would use 'eschatological', but the sentiment stands.<sup>56</sup>

Dreams, visions, and views of justice of course differ substantially, amongst Christians as amongst everyone else. Amongst liberation theologians there is a move away from 'a substantive theology' applied to diverse situations to 'a procedural theology where insight arises not from the application of timeless truths but from listening to the context in which God speaks'.<sup>57</sup> The problem is that contexts do not themselves speak. What we have to do is to discern God *in the context*. Any theology which wants to speak of God in the world is subject to a discipline of discernment. '[T]est the spirits to see whether they are from God' (1 John 4.1). In order to avoid bondage to some idolatry or other we need to measure our practices by revelation. For this reason theology is, as M. M. Thomas put it, 'a spiritual source of constructive and discriminating participation'. 'Certainly, we should not seek any new revelation of God in any historical event other than the Christ event, but faith in the divine revelation of Jesus Christ can be a key to understanding and discernment of God's creation, judgement and redemption in secular history.'<sup>58</sup> Here Thomas moves from the centrality of the Christ event to the Trinitarian economy. Nicholas Lash has argued that it is the task of the doctrine of the Trinity to obviate the danger of eliding God and the world, and therefore falling into idolatry, by insisting on *both* God's presence to the world, *and* God's difference. The doctrine gives us a grammar by which to speak of God. Thus, in the doctrine of the Spirit 'we learn to find God in all life, all freedom, all creativity and vitality . . . each

<sup>55</sup> O. Ben Sparks III, 'From Eden to Jerusalem', *Interpretation* 54/1 (January 2000), p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> Apocalyptic is an increasingly popular genre post Hiroshima and in the shadow of the environmental crisis. Its danger is luxuriating in hopes for an end for this wicked world. Eschatology, we have been taught by Moltmann, prioritises hope.

<sup>57</sup> P. Hackwood and P. Shiner, 'New Role for the Church in Urban Policy?', in M. Northcote (ed.), *Urban Theology, A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 74.

<sup>58</sup> M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM, 1966), p. 22.

unexpected attainment of relationship and community'.<sup>59</sup> The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, on the other hand, insists on God's absolute difference from the world, whilst the doctrine of the incarnation points us to the history of interpretative practice which teaches us to use the word God, in the stories which take us from Exodus to Easter. The doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, functions both 'to indicate where God is to be found and – by denying, at each point, that what we find there is to be simply identified with God – to prevent us from getting stuck in one sidedness . . . The doctrine thus leads at every turn, to both affirmation and denial.'<sup>60</sup> It offers us, in other words, rules for discernment in understanding where God is in the everyday world. This is not to say that faith is a matter of 'mere' interpretation because, as Lash argues, the interpretations we offer make a difference to our experience itself, just as being in relation or being in community do, and that is the 'point' of believing.<sup>61</sup>

Drawing on the theology of Gregory Nazianzus, Sigurd Bergmann offers a liberation theology of the built environment with a Trinitarian shape. The relationships of the Triune God point us to community; the crucified God points us to the simultaneous presence of good and evil; the Spirit works in each place for human freedom.<sup>62</sup> I shall be taking up these suggestions in various ways in what follows.

#### GRACE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

I have tried to argue that Christian reflection on the built environment will take the shape of a Trinitarian theological ethic, reflecting on God in all reality, and thus refusing the pre Christian distinction between sacred and secular. This articulates itself as a theology of grace. The word 'grace' as part of Christian vocabulary we owe to Paul. He took over a word in common parlance, *charis* (translated by the Latin *gratia*, and so by English 'grace'), which meant, amongst other things, charm, beauty, and spiritual energy, and reinvented it in relation to his understanding of what had happened in Christ. *Charis* means the fact that God works in weakness rather than in power (2 Cor. 12.9) and signifies love in action (Rom. 6.1). Christ inaugurates a new order *kata charin* (according to grace) rather than

<sup>59</sup> N. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM, 1988), p. 267.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267. <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>62</sup> S. Bergmann, *Geist, der Natur befreit. Die trinitarische Kosmologie Gregors von Nazianz im Horizont einer ökologischen Theologie der Befreiung* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995).

*kata opheilema* (according to what is due) (Rom. 4.4). Because it stands for what God has done freely in Christ, with no conditions or strings attached, it means radical giftedness, calling forth radical gift in return (1 Cor. 12). By the same token, it is about our ‘absolute dependence’, the fact that ‘I am a debtor to all/to all I am bounden/Fellowman and beast, season and solstice, darkness and light/And life and death’, as Edwin Muir put it in *The Debtor*. This great poem articulates what it means to live in response to grace, namely in acknowledgement that I am not my own, that I am bought with a price, that I am a debtor to all.

Augustine emphasised the need for grace to live the Christian life, though what he meant by the term was fatally distorted by his controversy with Pelagius, which forced him into extreme positions. Drawing on his discussions, Aquinas defined grace as ‘a kind of interior disposition infused into us which inclines us to act rightly’, ‘something supernatural issuing in human persons from God’.<sup>63</sup> He also thought of the sacraments as instrumental causes of grace, ‘instruments of divine power’.<sup>64</sup> Sacraments were, therefore, ‘channels of grace’. Though these views on grace can be interpreted freely they fail to do justice to the radical quality of Paul’s vision. First, in concentrating on the believing individual they underplay the sense in which creation is grace. The fact that creation is grace, acknowledged every time we say ‘grace’ at meals, is what illuminates the divine giftedness of everyday. The word ‘grace’ is not a reference to a ‘power’ or ‘influence’ breaking through at certain key moments but a way of saying that the God who loves in freedom sustains the fabric of daily life, including our own. ‘Sacraments’ signify precisely this.<sup>65</sup> What the eucharist signifies is not the existence of a sacred world set over against the profane, requiring its own sacral space and time, but rather the hallowing of the ordinary – of bread, wine, labour and community. Because creation is grace, grace is concrete: it meets us in what Padraic Pearse called ‘the bulks of ordinary things’ – and this of course includes buildings and settlements, the places in which we live and work. The theology of everyday life, therefore, is a theology of grace as a theology of gratuity, of love ‘for nothing’, and of joy in the minutiae of things.

Recognition that we ‘live by grace’ puts an end to all notions of ‘building the kingdom’. The insistence that we do not and cannot do

<sup>63</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 a2ae 108.1, 110.1.      <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 3a 62.1.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Buber recognised this in saying that the world becomes a sacrament through God’s indwelling; ‘everything wants to become a sacrament’. *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York: Horizon, 1960), pp. 96, 181.

this has been an obligatory caveat in all liberation theology from the beginning, and for good reason. ‘Dear N.N.,’ Karl Barth wrote to an enthusiastic theological student who used this language in 1967, ‘in speaking thus you do not contradict merely one “insight” but the whole message of the whole Bible. If you persist in this idea I can only advise you to take up any other career than that of pastor.’<sup>66</sup> This seems to call in question Blake’s famous verse:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall the Sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England’s green & pleasant Land.<sup>67</sup>

What is often not remarked is that Blake suffixes this poem with Numbers 11.29: ‘Would to God that all the Lord’s people were Prophets’, a reference to the descent of the Spirit on elders who had not initially been ‘ordained’. The poem is thus not Pelagian in intent at all, but an expression of confidence in God’s Spirit to re-make human beings and therefore their world. I have taken this text as the superscription for the whole book precisely for this reason, and because it classically calls into question that reliance on either the state or technocratic expertise which has so disabled people in relation to the built environment. Building Jerusalem, the city of justice, peace and beauty, is a project which will never be completed this side of the kingdom, but it is a project to which we are called by the kingdom, by ‘grace abounding in the lives of sinners’.

This was emphatically denied by the Calvinist sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul, who attacked ‘the Thomist heresy’ that ‘grace does not destroy nature but perfects it’. According to him the city is an attempt to prolong the momentary gift of Christ’s healing during his life on earth. ‘This is the tragedy of ideal cities, the terrible problem of modern urbanism, as of older utopianism; not believing that this meeting with Christ is unique, that it cannot be prolonged on earth, that it is only a sign of the hidden kingdom and an announcement of the kingdom to come.’<sup>68</sup> Cities represent the hubristic attempt to build an ideal place for full human development, equilibrium and virtue, the attempt to construct what God wants to construct, and to put humankind in the centre, in God’s place.

<sup>66</sup> K. Barth, *Letters 1961–1968* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), p. 283.

<sup>67</sup> W. Blake, *Milton, Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 480.

<sup>68</sup> J. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970), p. 130.

However, whilst rejecting the Thomist doctrine of grace Ellul replaces it by a doctrine of pardon and acceptance which concretely amounts to the very same thing. We learn from the myth of the heavenly city, he says, that the golden age will be characterised by an acceptance of history, and not by its refusal.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, because Christ is Saviour and Lord of both creation and humankind, he is also Saviour and Lord of human works. To the extent that in Christ, therefore, the city is not devilish, to the extent that it is destined to be transfigured, we must work along with others in the construction of the city.<sup>70</sup>

The city pardoned, or gracious building a sign of the liberative activity of God at work in the depths of creation? Whichever way we have it, what is essential is to recognise that, as Bonhoeffer put it, God is indeed and in truth Lord of the world, and therefore does not leave Godself without effect. 'Grace' is the word we use to talk about the way in which the liberating God works in the depth of the world. Because God's Word does not return to God void (Isa. 55.11) God's gracious activity has effects (what Aquinas called 'created grace') – what we can call 'gracious living'. This gracious living is, of course, the very opposite of what is usually designated by this phrase. It is, however, a fundamental reality in daily life, and not least in the built environment. Conversely, and equally importantly, the rejection of grace can also be seen writ large, and in concrete and glass, across our landscapes, the reality of sin. Sin calls for repentance, which in this context means learning new ways of building and planning which follow justice and do not have a hubristic approach to creation.

Because the older tradition of grace concentrates on the believer and the sacraments it misses the political sense of the doctrine, a sense on the whole not much remarked by the liberation theology of the late twentieth century.<sup>71</sup> The doctrine of grace, of the gratuitousness of all things, is, however, the most politically far reaching of all Christian doctrines. If creation is grace, if I am 'a debtor to all', then self evidently life is not there to appropriate the benefits for myself, to hoard things over against others. The only response to grace, as Barth always insisted, is gratitude, which politically means the struggle for social justice. It is precisely because he was a 'theologian of grace' that Barth was a political theologian. Grace, as a political doctrine, keeps the importance of the attempt to realise human equality on the agenda against the cynicism of 'realists' of all kinds, including theological realists. Because, as E. M. Wood puts it, 'a humane, "social", truly democratic and equitable capitalism is more

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 162.      <sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>71</sup> An exception is the work of L. Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).