Cityscape: The relationship of people to place

by James W. Lewis in the June 20, 2001 issue

Hardly anyone likes suburban sprawl. Although most suburbanites prefer to live in suburbs, many of them regret that so many others have followed them out of the city, thereby destroying the advantages that attracted them in the first place. For many, the answer is to move still farther out. Rural landscapes recede, traffic increases and strip malls proliferate.

The cities and suburbs in which we live significantly affect our lives, including our religious lives. But too many churches of all denominations, especially metropolitan ones, are unreflective about the implications of their particular geographic location. Once they have chosen a favorable spot (a corner lot in a populated area, a visible intersection), their reflection about place tends to cease. Some megachurches intentionally appeal to an entire region, effectively cutting the link between congregation and local place.

But as Robert Orsi notes in his introduction to *Gods of the City*, place is important both for the questions asked of religious faiths and the answers they propose. “Specific places structure the questions, and as men and women cobble together responses, they act upon the spaces around them in transformative ways. . . . Religion is always, among other things, a matter of necessary places.” Religious life is deeply embedded in physical space—something we forget at our peril. This neglect of place would be of little concern if it were only geographical. But it is, in fact, essentially theological.

My thinking about these things has been shaped to a considerable degree by my own place—the mid-sized metropolitan area of Louisville, Kentucky. During the past year Louisville’s news has been dominated by several seemingly disparate issues—the troubled relationship between the police department and the African-American community; efforts to build more mixed-income housing in the city; adoption of a regional plan intended to moderate suburban sprawl; disagreement

about the number and location of proposed new Ohio River bridges linking Louisville and southern Indiana; a campaign to attract high-tech business to the downtown area; and a lively election campaign around the issue of a city-county merger.

Similar issues and the questions they raise can be found in many cities. What does it mean for contemporary Christians to live in the city? What is the proper relationship between center city, suburb and exurb? Where should political power reside and why? What are the distinctive opportunities and responsibilities of local religious leaders? What is the good life in the contemporary metropolis? What opportunities and temptations does the city offer? What about the automobile? What about the environment? What about suburban sprawl? What do and what should religious institutions contribute to urban life?

Historically the church has played an important if sometimes heavy-handed role in attempting to shape urban life. Calvin's Geneva comes to mind, as does colonial Boston. And many urban pastors have exerted their influence on today's cities. But our willingness to think seriously about the relationship between our Christian faith and the places in which we live seems to come and go. For a few brief decades at the turn of the 20th century, such Protestants as Graham Taylor and H. Paul Douglass thought and wrote about the emerging industrial city. In the '60s Gibson Winter and Harvey Cox praised some urban churches but found suburban ones sadly lacking in religious vitality. Now, it no longer makes much sense to distinguish sharply between suburbs and city.

If the church abdicates its role in the shaping of 21st-century metropolitan America, developers, politicians and individual consumers will make those decisions by themselves. But the shape of the city should not be determined solely by political and economic concerns, since the nature of metropolitan life, our responsibility to the earth, and the physical and social conditions necessary for human flourishing are deeply theological issues.

Three of the many issues facing contemporary metropolitan areas impact churches directly: a rapidly growing ethnic and religious pluralism; the ethnic, racial, physical and economic boundaries between city, suburb and country; and the changing economic realities of the postindustrial city. The increasing religious and ethnic pluralism of American cities is among the most obvious challenges confronting American Christians. Initial reports from the 2000 census suggest that 9.5 percent of the American population is foreign-born. This diversity is most obvious in the larger

cities, especially those on the coasts. But it is increasingly evident in mid-sized cities like Louisville and in many rural areas as well. While many of these immigrants are Christian, many others, especially those from Asia and the Middle East, are not. Not since the turn of the 20th century, in fact, have American cities confronted such ethnic multiplicity, and never have they confronted such religious diversity.

Those who wish to understand this diversity and its implications for American religious life should consult Orsi's book. Its portraits of urban Hinduism, Afro-Cuban Santería, Japanese Presbyterianism and popular, ethnic Catholicism vividly illustrate the growing religious diversity of cities. Orsi's thoughts on the relationship between urban space and religion are stimulating and provocative. He illustrates the remarkable creativity of religious groups as they remap their physical surroundings so as to understand what otherwise would be alien urban territory. The book includes Jack Kugelmass's portrait of Moishe Sacks, a lay Jewish rabbi—a masterful and moving account of an innovative religious leader in a challenging urban neighborhood.

Unfortunately, by concentrating almost exclusively on the inner city, and inner city New York in particular, *Gods of the City* contributes to a preoccupation with the major metropolises (New York, Los Angeles and Chicago) that has characterized most scholarship on urban religion. One of the greatest gaps in the literature is an account of religious life in small and medium-sized metropolitan areas. In addition, the book focuses so much on religious diversity that it distorts the more mundane reality that religion in the metropolitan U.S. continues to be dominated by Christianity.

The religious and ethnic pluralism described by Orsi and his colleagues reflects a shifting population. But as James Wellman and Nancy Eiesland show, boundaries of other kinds are also shifting. Wellman's study of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church focuses on the relation between the church's physical location on affluent North Michigan Avenue and the Cabrini-Green public housing project just blocks away. Throughout the church's history, the physical boundary between church and ghetto has been reinforced by other boundaries of ethnicity, race and class, boundaries the church has sought to bridge through a variety of social ministries. Wellman's discussion of these ministries is thorough and sympathetic. But he concedes that these well-intentioned efforts have left social, class and religious boundaries largely intact and unchallenged.

Fourth Presbyterian Church is also the subject of a particularly fine chapter by Matthew Price in *Public Religion and Urban Transformation*. Like Wellman, Price is very aware of the significance of the economic, social and racial boundaries that have separated Fourth Presbyterian from Cabrini-Green. Deftly exploring the impact of market forces, Price notes that the working poor may soon replace the desperately poor of Cabrini-Green. Such a shifting boundary, he suggests, could have significant implications for the wealthy congregation's relationship to the city, and for its identity as a moral community.

The congregations in Dacula, Georgia, discussed by Eiesland faced a very different set of circumstances than those faced on Chicago's Gold Coast. In the 1990s the residents of this rural portion of Gwinnett County found themselves firmly in the path of Atlanta's metropolitan growth. Fields were turned into subdivisions, and the town's small downtown was overshadowed by a sprawling regional mall. To ignore this change, as some churches did, could be institutionally fatal. Religious needs changed along with physical space. Styles of being church and doing ministry that were attuned to the rhythms of an agricultural small town no longer fit Dacula as it became increasingly suburban and danced to the beat of metropolitan Atlanta.

Eiesland shows how economic and social forces implacably reshaped this formerly rural hamlet, reminding us that contemporary urban restructuring includes not only traditional suburbanization but rapid development well beyond the suburban fringe. As one resident put it, "The way it looks from here is that the city's coming out to meet us." Once that kind of rapid urban movement begins to alter the physical and economic face of a small town, its religious life is changed forever. Religious innovation thrives and new religious institutions come into being, while existing ones adapt, wither or die. Of course, the religious lives of their members change as well.

Related to the themes of growing pluralism and shifting boundaries is the changing nature of the postindustrial economy in contemporary cities and its implications for religious institutions. No one explores these implications more insightfully than Lowell Livezey and his colleagues. Assuming the importance of place at both the neighborhood and metropolitan levels, they studied religion in several diverse Chicago neighborhoods, including impoverished public housing projects, mixed-income ethnic/immigrant neighborhoods and highly prosperous suburbs. The resulting portrait of religious life in these neighborhoods is rich and nuanced.

Livezey and his cohorts craft these detailed neighborhood portraits against the backdrop of a changing urban economy. Today's Chicago is a postindustrial metropolis quite different from the great manufacturing city that arose in the 19th century. Once "hog butcher to the world," Chicago is now broker of pork futures to the global marketplace, and this economic shift has enormous implications for life in the metropolis. In the traditionally middle-class black neighborhood of Chatham, for example, the decline in high-paying industrial jobs has important ramifications for Carter Temple (Christian Methodist Episcopal) and the other thriving African-American churches. Across town, the growth of a postindustrial economy has made the northern and western suburbs attractive destinations for a technically oriented immigrant population from India and Pakistan and its religious institutions. Economic factors strongly shape both urban and suburban space and the boundaries between them. The character of those physical spaces, in turn, powerfully shapes churches, synagogues and temples.

Chicago's varied religious institutions—from an ethnic Catholic parish, to an African-American, Afrocentric congregation, to a Hindu temple, to Fourth Presbyterian Church—have responded to this urban restructuring in remarkably similar ways. In Livezey's terms, adapted from Robert Wuthnow's, they are more likely to engage in "cultural production," focused on theology, morality and community, than in traditional social action. Says Livezey:

The institutions of urban religion are made up of people whose frames of reference have been shaken by some combination of structural and cultural change. In response, these churches, temples, synagogues and mosques produce the cultural material that enables their members and adherents to locate themselves with respect to the places and time in which they currently live, to identify with others, to find their moral bearings, and to achieve some measure of efficacy with respect to their own needs and aspirations. Mainly through worship, education and social activities, these congregations appropriate symbols and generate new ones, claim and revise traditions, defend and bridge social boundaries, articulate and invent meanings and values by which to make sense of changing circumstances.

Different though they are, all four books remind us that physical space is religiously charged. Rural Dacula shaped Hinton Memorial Methodist Church in ways quite different from the way Atlanta is shaping it. Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church would have been very different had it been located eight blocks west of North Michigan Avenue and may become very different yet if the nearby ghetto continues

to be gentrified. As Karen McCarthy Brown notes in *Gods of the City*, “serving the spirits” of rural Haiti in a Brooklyn high rise requires a lot of adaptation. Physical space shapes religion.

But religion, in turn, helps us to “map” our physical space, to interpret and make sense of the physical “given” of our lives. As Eiesland says, “Finding your place is no small feat, and perhaps particularly not in the midst of rapid social and religious change.” Hinton Memorial helped the residents of Dacula make sense of the sudden changes occurring there by self-consciously linking Dacula’s present to its past. Fourth Presbyterian’s tradition of religious tolerance and religiously motivated service across social boundaries helps affluent Presbyterians to situate themselves in an increasingly pluralistic city.

My own reading of the contemporary urban situation and my understanding of the Christian faith lead me to care about education, housing, employment and transportation policies that affect the city, especially as they affect the needs of the poor. We need to control growth in view of the broader metropolitan fabric. We should balance the demands of the automobile with the needs of people. And while Christians may disagree over specific policy recommendations, they must not live as if physical location and faith have nothing to do with each other. For Christians, place matters.