

Reviews

CITIES OF GOD by Graham Ward *Routledge*, London and New York, 2000. Pp. x + 314, £15.99 pbk.

We have witnessed much since 1965 when Harvey Cox's *Secular City* attempted to engage with the city from a Christian perspective. Graham Ward's new book takes these many changes into account; new cities 'now plural' have emerged with their own attendant complexities and problems. The new urban geographies are implicated in the shifting social and political allegiances of a world dominated by the conceits of late capitalism. These emergent cities use spaces to control and manipulate time. As ironic pastiches of the past, delighting in artifice, they exalt the end of history. Modernity has accelerated to a maximum speed that has become, paradoxically, inert. Yet, it is also this very manipulation of time that exemplifies the modernity that these cities are trying to surpass. One of Ward's subplots is this relationship of time to space. The utopic abstraction of these timeless spaces is, of necessity, 'contaminated' by the exchanges of the people who live and work there. These imaginary cities, with their bedazzling and phantasmic spaces, become 'places' inhabited by people living in time.

Ward's central question is how we are to found a community in a world of no-places. *Cities of God* represents a comprehensive outworking of Ward's continuing project to write theologically in this context. Many of the book's themes will be recognisable to those who have been following his work, and the voices of Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, de Certeau and von Balthasar are productively juxtaposed. Within this catholic heritage, Ward firmly situates the work within the Anglican theological trajectory begun, but by no means finished, by the 1985 *Faith in the City* report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas. He again attempts an exploration of the problems of living and working within and alongside a rapidly changing universe.

Beginning with the articulation of a Christian theology of signification and social semiotics (which defines much of Ward's method), Ward moves on to critique the cultural atomism rife in Western society. He describes the passing of the 'cities of eternal aspiration', the cities created by Fritz Lang and Le Corbusier, and known and criticised by Harvey Cox and *Faith in the City* respectively, as they are displaced by the 'cities of endless desire'. These latter cities are the postmodern cities of growing telecommunication networks, cyberspace, of gentrification and urban renewal. The implicit rendering as virtual of social, political and even sacramental bodies ever since the late

medieval period is made unashamedly manifest in these spaces.

A Christian conception of time is then used to elucidate the metaphysics of eucharistic and psychoanalytical debates on presence. In response to the exalting of a static or nihilistic present moment, Ward argues for a temporal and excessive understanding of God's relation to the world. Ward hopes to re-articulate an analogical world-view in opposition to, but also from within, this world. In this cosmology the analogical orders of bodies (physical, social, political, ecclesial, and sacramental) are interrelated through their mutual implication in Christology, and so through their dependency on the active creating triune God. The libidinous desires of postmodern consumer cities are replaced, in Ward's account, with a kenotic and non-acquisitive theological desire. The 'endless desire' of new cities is not theological because it is perforce predicated upon lack and an insatiable grasping after more and more. Theological desire confounds this account with an economy of self-giving love sustained by a graceful transcendent source, at once provoking desire even as it is satisfied. Having reached this point, Ward is able to examine the theological practices of contemporary living that can hope to bring about the 'redemption of cyberspace'.

Cities of God thus lays to rest the accusation that Ward's work is postmodern through and through (whether this has been seen as good or not). Rather, the 'redemption of cyberspace' he works towards is a thoroughly theological vision that necessarily has to make its home within a universe that exists in a space formed by the irretrievable collapse of Christendom. It is the very postmodernism of these cities, their virtuality and secular construals of desire, with which Ward struggles. Ward concludes with an Augustinian vision of the concrete and abiding nature of theological cities and the eschatological disappearance of virtuality. Christologically informed living allows for a defence against, and transformation of, the seductive cities of today.

How recognisable are the worlds that Ward sketches? Ward's analyses traverse many different aspects of contemporary culture, from critical theory and linguistics, to more concrete and embodied phenomena such as architecture and film. These are all aspects of culture that we encounter and respond to everyday. There will be those who will find Ward's lack of prescription disappointing, but his argument is not one that allows for easy answers. We do not have access to final answers, and there is a necessary suspension of final judgements. Ward presents a vision of living with others in this space, and this ethical moment is one within which we will have to struggle to find appropriate ways of creating and recreating cities.

It is an important and timely book that returns us, as Christian community, to a risky engagement with the changing world that we inhabit, sometimes joyfully, sometimes in despair. It takes us beyond a quietist acceptance of the *status quo*, and propounds a hopeful awareness. To be aware prevents either an uncritical acceptance of the seductions of cities or rejection of the opportunities they offer; to be hopeful is already to be moving actively toward the founding of theological places.

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