

Does God Live in the City?: Ecology, Theology, and Urban Space

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The author, a confirmed urban dweller, points to the exclusion of the city in writings on ecology. Calling for a new lens to view the diversity of the urban landscape, she proposes an “urban ethic of care” as a means of promoting ecological responsibility.

Are the terms “urban” and “ecology” an oxymoron? Many would say they are. What happens when the word “theology” is added for good measure? Incredible? Maybe not. In fact, in this essay I try to make the case that the Catholic response to ecological issues is incomplete unless these three terms are used together. Yet this is not an easy task because the religious response to an ecologically challenged planet shows a consistent emphasis (in fact, I would say bias) on images and language describing the beauty of open spaces and wilderness places (what we tend to think of when we hear the term “natural world”) at the expense of urban landscapes. I offer here a work in progress which describes several building blocks which might serve as a foundation for a more complete urban environmental project.

America has a long history of writers who have used their talents to awaken others to the beauty and majesty of nature. Some examples of their work include *Baptized Into Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir* by R. C. Austin, *Nature* by R. W. Emerson; *Images and Shadows of Divine Things* by J. Edwards,

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and several works of Henry David Thoreau. In recent years, American Catholic bishops and the Pope himself have addressed issues of ecological concern. Unfortunately, in my judgment, these writers make the same limiting connection: human beings discover God's presence in the awesome beauty of mighty rivers, mountains, waterfalls, and open spaces and in those awesome presences realize their responsibility to care for and preserve the health of the planet. Because virtually all of these theological writings conclude by encouraging readers to take specific actions on behalf of the planet's well being, they also forge a direct link between appreciation of bucolic beauty and ecological responsibility. This urban environmental project seeks a more inclusive approach to ecological responsibility in a religious context.

It is past time to look beyond the "country" and to recognize the city of concrete and glass as a locus of God's presence, able to call forth ecological responsibility. Not to do so is to designate urban dwellers as "outsiders" who must "relocate"—figuratively if not literally—if they are to take up their own responsibility for the ecological health of the planet on which we live. More to the point, if God cannot be "located" in urban spaces, any ecological concern from a religious perspective must fall short of the mark.

Background of the Present Concern

The concern of the present essay was far from my mind when I began researching the ecological crisis from a theological perspective. It was at that time, however, that I came across a disturbing point of view. In a generally well-written and researched book on what he called the spiritual journey of nature preservationist John Muir, Michael Cohen articulates what I see as the nub of the problem I am addressing. In his work, Cohen describes his method and use of sources as an author. In doing so, I believe he also expresses a connection between his lifestyle, which includes extensive forays to Muir's favorite mountains and wilderness areas, and his own credibility as a writer in the field of ecological preservation. Cohen writes: "It matters a great deal that two nights ago in the shadows of towering canyon walls, I was cooking my dinner over a fire made of oak and cedar; their taste got into my tea, and into my dreams. It matters a great deal that I slept by the Tuolumne River and heard the sound of its waters" (Cohen, 276). What, I remember thinking, does this mean for those of us who will never experience a meal under those conditions? Are we excluded from any ecological concern? If all persons who feel called to ecological responsibility (especially those who do so out of religious concerns) must do so by tracing Muir's spiritual journey to the Tuolumne River and the California mountains, the consequences for the planet and its people could be dire indeed. Cohen articulates a long-standing and disturbing affirmation of wilderness at the expense of urban space.

A Nineteenth-Century Bias Against the City

A nineteenth-century essay by Catholic churchman John Lancaster Spalding frames that long-standing affirmation of wilderness, or “the country,” in religious language. Spalding begins his diatribe against all things city by going back to ancient Greece and Rome, which were pagan civilizations (with all the negative connotations suggested by the word *pagan*) when they were made up of cities and towns. When Christianity built upon those ruins, he claims, “social preponderance” passed from city to country and everything changed for the better. Not only was the family unit strengthened and preserved by being isolated from the “corrupt mass of mankind,” but the populace now enjoyed the newly healthful atmosphere of the natural surroundings (Spalding, 4–5).

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When Spalding contrasts the country and the city in relation to Christ, he first describes the Christ who walks by the seashore, goes up to the mountain, and withdraws into the desert, but who “will not so much as sleep within the walls of Jerusalem” where the “noise and stir” of the crowded city are disturbing to Jesus’ “sweetness and serenity.” Spalding then indicts the “atmosphere of great cities” generally as devoid of God-like peacefulness (Spalding, 6–7). As to the city specifically, it is the place where “nothing meets the eye that the hand of man has not shaped” and where so many “sleight-of-hand tricks” lead people to lose their sense of reverence as well as their faith. He describes, too, the deleterious effects the city has on children who see only “dirty streets and dingy houses” rather than flowers, birds, or running brooks (Spalding, 12).

At the end of his essay, Spalding tempers his speech, saying he does not mean to imply that the city is wholly evil. It has, he says, a “great and high social mission” which holds a fascination for all people (Spalding, 24). Alas, the final word goes to the country when Spalding says, “[B]ut if those I love were rich I should not wish them to live in the city; and if they were poor, and made it their dwelling place, I should despair of them” (Spalding, 28).

Spalding’s nineteenth-century essay reflects concern for the moral and religious lives of the flock he tended as a parish priest. Obviously he believed (at least at the time he wrote) that could best be done by keeping people in the countryside and out of the cities.

In our own time, pastors continue their concern for the moral and religious health of their people. In the twentieth century, concern for the ecological health of the planet on which those people live is also a pastor's concern. And, like Spalding, those pastors (broadly construed) have put their concerns into writing. It is illustrative of the challenges ahead to highlight the language and images used in these contemporary writings.

The Language of Contemporary Religious Writings

Three writings of the last decade illustrate the continuing turn to wilderness places and open spaces in calling forth human ecological responsibility in a religious context. Written in 1991, the American Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on ecological concerns calls the environmental crisis a moral challenge, and encourages people of faith (or, at least, of good will) to take action on behalf of the earth. To do this, the bishops draw on a gospel portrait of the Jesus who taught about salvation "with a countryman's knowledge of the land" (U.S. Bishops, 428). In a section describing a sacramental universe, the bishops allude to the drawing power of the natural world in language that John Lancaster Spalding would have applauded:

Throughout history people have continued to meet the Creator on mountaintops, in vast deserts, and alongside waterfalls and gently flowing springs. . . . But as heirs and victims of the industrial revolution, students of science and the beneficiaries of technology, urban-dwellers and jet commuters, twentieth century Americans have also grown estranged from the natural scale and rhythms of life on earth (U. S. Bishops, 428-29).

The bishops cap this off by describing the link between appreciation of such areas and the discovery of God's presence as they remind us that "nature shares in God's goodness, and contemplation of its beauty raises our hearts and minds to God" (U.S. Bishops, 431).

Just a year earlier, Bishop Anthony Pilla of Cleveland, Ohio had presented his pastoral letter on the environment in the context of this question: "What is the relationship between our basic Christian faith and our reverence and responsibility for the environment?" (Pilla, 335). With this question at its core, Pilla begins with a description of the picturesque shores of Lake Erie, the area's vast farmlands, parks, and woods, as well as the Black River in Lorain County.

The pastoral letter continues by drawing on the images of the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8-9) and the statement that all nature is a garden which people must reflect on in new ways. We must not only reverence the earth, we must also restore the garden. To that end, the pastoral letter concludes with a call for environmental

education which can change attitudes about how our garden on earth is treated (Pilla, 336–38). Tellingly, none of the bishop’s imagery relates to urban spaces, and indeed, if such places exist in his diocese, they are disconnected from the relationship between Christian faith and environmental concern at the heart of the bishop’s message.

Finally, John Paul II’s 1989 World Day of Peace message was devoted to ecological concern. Here the Pope speaks of the aesthetic value of creation which, he says, cannot be overlooked as a reason for human beings to take on ecological responsibility. Our very contact with nature, he says, has deep restorative power while contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity. He reminds us that the Bible speaks again and again of the goodness and beauty of creation which gives glory to God, citing Genesis 1:4ff; Psalm 8:2; 104:1ff; Wisdom 14:5; Sirach 38:16; 33; 43:1, 9 (John Paul II, no. 14).

These three examples are representative of the language and imagery still used to undergird the religious community’s ecological concerns and to urge people to take responsibility for restoring the health of the planet. But where is the language of the city? How can those whose concern for the planet is primarily a religious concern work towards a more inclusive approach to ecological problems? What are the building blocks of such a task?

The Language of Community and Particularity in an Ethic of Care

I draw the first building block of an urban environmental project from theologian Sallie McFague’s model of community in an ethic of care. In her work McFague claims that Christians should love nature by caring for and about a particular place and what that place needs to flourish. This community ethic cares about the whole (the planet), but also about the parts, such as particular neighborhoods, towns, and cities. McFague describes her ethic as one which must “take place in this city, that village, one neighborhood, as people weave together the fiber of social justice and ecological integrity in particular places” (McFague, 154).

This kind of caring focuses on the other’s point of view. It is a kind of empathetic care analogous to what we usually reserve for human relationships. Here the caring is transformed and extended through an empathy for the particular place in which we live, and analogous to the role of empathy within human relationships. What is called for is a deep knowledge of the particular place with which we have a relationship. Because it obviously includes those who live in cities, this model’s focus on *where* one lives is well-suited to the task of orienting persons toward their own ecological responsibility in an urban context. This focus on particularity of place is made clearer when McFague reminds us that,

although America has John Muir and an “ethic for wilderness,” we do not yet have an ethic for the rest of nature, including “the nature in our cities” (McFague, 159).

The City as Distinctive Landscape: The Example of Dorothy Day

The second building block of an urban environmental project from a religious point of view claims recognition of the city as a distinctive landscape. As such, it is related to a particularity of place as described above. In one portion of their pastoral letter, the American Catholic bishops say that along with other species and ecosystems, distinctive landscapes also give glory to God. Does the cityscape comprise a distinctive landscape? John Paul II seems to think so. After advertent to the aesthetic beauty of creation which has a “deep restorative power” the contemplation of which “imparts peace and serenity,” the Pope nods briefly in the city’s direction, saying, “even cities can have a beauty of their own, one that ought to motivate people to care for their surroundings” (John Paul II, no. 14). This is language we seldom hear. It is exactly the kind of language we need to search out and build upon.

One example at hand is the language of Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and the urban Worker houses of hospitality. In direct contrast to Michael Cohen’s depiction of the “towering canyon walls” of Muir’s favorite mountains, Day waxes lyrical about “that splendid globe of the sun, one street wide, framed at the foot of East Fourteenth Street in early morning mists” (quoted in Lane, 173). Evidencing a concern for a particular place, Day draws not upon the image of God walking in the garden paradise of Eden in the cool of the day, but Jesus discovered in the “tangible particularity of one’s cross-town neighbor” (quoted in Lane, 163).

The Diversity of Life

The third and final building block I offer for an urban environmental project draws on an oft-quoted section of St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas tells us that God “produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another . . . [t]hus the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatsoever” (I, q.47 a.1). The point often made is that Aquinas not only stressed the importance of the diversity of creation, but also the interrelation of all God’s creatures who share the planet with us and who have their own reason for being. From an ecological

perspective, writers make the point that this God-created diversity militates against despoiling habitants and causing extinction of species (See Johnson, 1; United States Catholic Bishops, 429.) In lifting up diversity as a building block of an urban environmental project I am claiming that diversity, by its very definition, expands our horizons in many ways. In the present context, diversity (a traditional hallmark of cities and the people who dwell there) allows us to include urban perspectives in ecological concerns.

The Three Building Blocks Considered Together: An Interim "Conclusion"

All told, the three building blocks of this urban environmental project constitute a "turn to the city." As such, this project requires a shift of focus, a new lens through which to view the possibilities inherent in urban landscape as it uncovers ways in which diversity, distinctive landscapes, and an "urban ethic of care" promote ecological responsibility for our day. Clearly much more work needs to be done to draw up a concrete, full blown urban environmental project. First, urban landscapes need to figure prominently and explicitly in whatever medium ecological concern finds a voice in contemporary expression. I do not see any way around this other than just doing it. In this "turn to the city" it must become obvious, as well, that any faith-based explication of ecological concern will be found wanting if the city and its dwellers are excluded. Not only do cities have to be "saved" but the people who live in them need to be part of the "saving team."

Next, as I continue this project, I am finding the life and message of Dorothy Day more and more compelling. I have no desire to make Day a convenient ecologically-sensitive pioneer. I do not know if she ever gave the environment or ecology as such a second thought. Yet serving others as she did, by performing works of mercy in her "little way," and in the midst of city life, she stands as a potent reminder of the possibilities inherent in the urban setting. It may turn out, in fact, that the way to an urban environmental project will be by a series of "little ways." This project must go forward because the city's time has come.

We have heard the language of the open spaces and natural places, and still the earth suffers from neglect and misuse. Does God live in the city? I claim that as people of faith we ought to live as though God does, and if we do, the entire planet will be a more worthy home for all God's creatures.

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