
Book Review

T.J. Gorringe, *The Common Good and the Global Emergency: God and the Built Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xi + 309 pp., £55.00 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-107-00201-2.

This is a typically impassioned foray into the current sustainability debate from an established and influential political theologian who not only talks the talk, but walks the walk when it comes to practical engagement with environmental and political reform. Though Gorringe does not discuss his backstory in the book, he has for many years run his own small-holding in the beautiful Devon countryside, and so has unusually (for an academic) had considerable first-hand experience of what it means to manage land, grow crops, and rear livestock in both highly traditional but also innovative ways. He also spent a formative period of time teaching in a radical South Indian theological seminary (which amongst other things taught courses in Dalit liberation theology), and so has a Gandhian but also Marxian inflection to his theology and spirituality and his views on social and economic development. The other main influence in his life is the work of Swiss theologian Karl Barth whose radical critique of liberal theology convinced him that God's grace operates throughout the world, but is ultimately a mystery beyond human comprehension. Barth also held that salvation was similarly a mystery, a tension that he held in respect also of the judgment of the Word of God on all human endeavour. Thus, there is a mixture of radicalism and conservatism in Gorringe's work which generally serves him well, but also can lead to a sort of restless and relentless tunnel vision, which some readers might struggle with.

This background is useful for understanding the book as a theological and political enquiry into the way cities are planned because it is in cities, Gorringe maintains, that we find expressed the vision human society has for itself, and the virtues and values by which it seeks to understand its present, but also its future. With his feet formally rooted in the rural tradition, however, and in the philosophers and theologians of the past, Gorringe rightly recognises that we cannot look at the urban built environment without reference to its previous but also current relationship with farming and the land, especially with regard to the inherent 'grace' contained within the beauty of the landscape and the methods by which we grow our food and care for the land in general. With the theme of grace firmly in his mind, Gorringe seeks to ask how humans might construct graceful environments in which both human and non-human life can flourish. Grace in this sense not only means beauty, but also truthfulness and learning to order a society by the virtues and principles of justice, relationality, and living within sustainable limits. These are clear moral principles which Gorringe believes should guide the way humans design, plan, and politically govern urban environments, irrespective of religious or secular worldviews.

So not surprisingly, Gorringe provides the reader with material from the three 'As' (Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas) about the nature and purpose of the polis, and how we might (in Augustinian terms especially) mitigate against the worst excesses of human pride and our desire for control (*the libido dominandi*) that tend to characterise

the building of cities since the Babylonian era. Grace, as expressed in civility and proportionality, is more likely to be found in the organic but also symbolic form of the medieval city. Gorringer starts his book with a dissection of the Lorenzetti's fourteenth-century fresco entitled *The Allegory of Good Government*, which hangs in the council chamber of the nine rulers of Sienna (Italy), a chamber which itself opened directly out onto the main square of the city. Gorringer also shows his own predilection for classical and gothic architectural forms over and against modernist and postmodernist ones, although in expressing his strong preferences he is always at pains to present a counter-argument, so that at least the reader is fully informed of other perspectives and thinkers. Surely one of the strengths and pleasures of this book is the breadth of learning around issues of planning, architecture, farming, and land management, and the deeper ideas, philosophies, and theologies that have shaped these debates. Gorringer's main argument can be summarised to the effect that (compared to past generations) urban dwellers have lost the will and skill to create spaces of meaning and purpose, and this is profoundly distorting the ability to respond to the depth of the global emergency they now confront. This is conveyed in a clear yet lively prose form that should engage and inform more general as well as specific readerships. The book ends, however, in a considerably darker place than where it began, as Gorringer vents his deeper fears as to whether humankind has the emotional, spiritual, and political will to reverse the tipping points toward environmental disaster. He is compelled to claim that Christian revelation (especially as expressed in the book of Revelation) offers a deeper set of foundations on which to pin our hopes and actions for a bleak-looking future; 'The door to heaven is open. If it were closed it would mean that there are no other powers, but those of the Domination system. John (the Seer) insists, the Christian faith believes, that that is not the case' (p. 289).

However, even this clarion call is reduced somewhat prosaically on the final page to the well-worn trope of 'If you know the word ended tomorrow, what would you do?' 'Plant an apple tree', is Gorringer's answer (after Luther). Reading this I felt that all the great lines of argument and debate, and the skillful blending of theology, philosophy, politics, science, urban, and development theory had largely been for naught. It summons up an appropriate sense of urgency but perhaps its familiarity from other settings is somewhat at odds with the originality of the rest of the text.

Although I agree with much of his analysis, I find Gorringer's Barthian-inflected theological anthropology too pessimistic. In common with many within the environmental movement, he is in danger (although far less than others) of painting human activity into a political/ideological cul-de-sac, where all we do is either surrender to mindless hedonism or plant trees. He also has little to say about positive or ethical capitalism. But if we are to save ourselves, one of the ways we are going to do so is through the application of green technologies on a hitherto unprecedented and globally co-ordinated way, which cannot be produced by small-scale localised collectives, although they are clearly important. It is too easy to write off global capitalism as pernicious and evil. Such an approach is understandable, but finding a workable and pragmatic solution requires complex, creative, and above all, pragmatic thinking.

That said, in the main, this is a finely argued and thought-provoking book that leaves hard questions rolling around the reader's mind long after the covers have been shut.

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