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ANALOGIA CIVITATIS ET CORPORIS:
SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF
THE CHRISTIAN COSMOPOLIS

A review of Graham Ward, *Cities of God*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

GRAHAM WARD CONFESSES that his latest book, *Cities of God*, “was conceived in New Orleans and brought to birth in Manchester” (1). Given that New Orleans serves as the context for conception, especially in hotel rooms in the French Quarter, Ward’s pregnant literary symbolism appears quite appropriate. Indeed, after reading his book, one cannot help but appreciate just how appropriate its “Big Easy” provenance truly is.

New Orleans prides itself on being an Epicurean epicenter, a bayou culture focused on eating, drinking, music, dance and on the various pleasures of the flesh. As a carnival city, it emphasizes the carnal, attuning more to Mardi Gras than Lent, and reflecting more an excess of desire than an aura of austerity. It embodies a certain idolatry of the “body” – naked bodies, intoxicated bodies, corpulent bodies, stinking bodies and seductive bodies. It eternally aspires to maintain its endless desires, thriving ultimately on the insatiable desire for desire itself. As a milieu of constant celebration and immediate gratification, it ostensibly offers in its crush of bodies a genuine encounter of selves with others, while actually only creating a virtual reality of community – nothing more than an atomistic amalgamation of voyeurs and fondlers duped by the city’s *trompe l’oeil* of fulfillment.

Such a city offers something of a microcosm of the broader themes that Ward addresses in his book, themes such as body, sex, desire, atomism, virtual reality and community. As he sights these various topics while surveying the general idea of “city” and its symbolic implications for interpreting culture, he attempts to answer one primary question: What kind of theological statement does the city make today? But throughout the book, certain permutations of this question also drive his thought: What kind of theological statement can one make about the city today?; What kind of statement about theology can one make utilizing the

idea of city today? Under the rubric of “city,” therefore, Ward develops a cross-disciplinary and panoptical hermeneutic of culture that functions as a theology of language—an interesting and broad-based endeavor in critical discourse analysis, specifically a critical analysis of discourse within and beyond post-modern idioms (70).

For Ward, urban culture is both semiotic and somatic. The city textualizes reality by offering various ciphers for understanding personal, social and cosmic order. Through the warp and woof of its architectural styles, its infra-structural bureaucracy, and its shuttle-like movements of inhabitants as they etch patterns of life through its topography, it weaves together a certain tropological texture signifying different perspectives on human being-in-the-world. Although Ward acknowledges Jean Baudrillard’s conclusion that “the city is foremost the site of the sign’s execution” (24), he establishes throughout the work that “execution” implies a double meaning: to put to death and to perform or carry out. Consequently, through its social atomism and virtual realities, the city might well act as a semiotic Golgotha where the sign suffers crucifixion; however, it may also serve as the empty tomb where signs continue to be resurrected as living metaphors and symbols for comprehending and communicating existence. In other words, Ward insists that the city continues to inform anthropology by mapping out its tropes onto the body. Semiotics become “somatics” as cultural symbols affect how one understands physical, social, political, ecclesial and theological bodies (23).

Ward insists that since Christian theology esteems the doctrines of Creation (reality) and Incarnation (embodiment) so highly, since it has always been more or less a theology of the sign (Christ as *Logos*), since the Church (the spiritual body of Christ) must exist and minister within the structures of secular culture, and since Christ’s great commandment is to love the other (the basis of community), Ward finds it foolish for Christian theology to avoid a creative encounter with urban culture and yet fail to exploit the semantic and symbolic resources it offers for talking about God (69). In dialogue with sociologists, architects, psychoanalysts, film makers, philosophers of language and theologians, Ward hopes to reestablish a traditional Christian theological language that may speak anew in both a prophetic voice of judgment and a priestly voice of justification. These voices speak in the dialect of the Christian heteropolis that already exists, but not yet, within the limits of the secular city. These voices, as per Augustine, express the higher communitarian love of the heavenly city in response to, and distinct from, the lower narcissistic love of the earthly city.

Ward directs the prophetic voice against the fragmentation of humanity resulting from social atomism and cyber-technology. He condemns the digital age for deceptively alienating individuals by putatively offering new technologies for

making contact and creating a community, yet all the while increasing the distanciation among people by substituting genuine touch and real-embodied connections for the evanescent virtuality of cell phones, chat rooms and list-servs. But of course, he recognizes that the digital format of secularity in the postmodern or post-pluralistic age is but the latest development in the long history of urban culture. The earthly city has been a Mercantile City in the Renaissance, a Competitive Industrial Capitalist City in the Industrial Revolution, and a Corporate-Monopoly Capitalist City of the mid-twentieth century (34-35). Each of these urban models indicate that the city has been understood as a market-driven site of consumerism in which faith becomes increasingly privatized within a purely secular structure of reality. The dominant secular order becomes utopian, given over to a legislating attitude of progressivism—a bastardized eschatology of the Kingdom of God *sans* God—which Ward believes realizes itself in Le Corbusier’s perfectionist architecture of Enlightenment. Ward terms this urban model “Cities of Eternal Aspirations,” and identifies John S. Dunne and Harvey Cox as two significant theological responses to it (44-51).

Consumerism and the aspiration for a secular utopia has evolved in the postmodern era into a phallogentric *libido dominandi*—“Cities of Endless Desire”—for pleasure, the new, and a fear of social castration, aptly described as the possibility of being denied or excluded from having new experiences, even if they are fantasy experiences of various simulacra (56). Forces of production have become forces of reproduction through which signifier and signified become estranged to the point that a cultural nominalism ensues. With the loss of any semblance of connection between symbol and reality, reality goes into quotes as “reality” and becomes pluralized in ways even unimagined by Nietzsche, e.g., Las Vegas and its reproduction of Disneyland!

Ward contends that Christian theology must respond to this latest realization of the earthly city and do so in humility, recognizing that it is but one more impure voice crying in the wilderness, yet one preaching a definite message of “universal justice, peace and beauty . . .” (70). He wishes to replace the digital format of the postmodern city with the analogue format of the Christian heteropolis. He argues that only the analogical language of theology—the language of relationship and participation supposing the Kingdom of God as announced by Christ—can offer hope and love to the world. His priestly analogical language focuses on the prime analogate of the body of Christ as the word of salvation for overcoming cultural atomism and for establishing a certain erotics of redemption—a desire of and for God and the other. His linguistic reformatting depends upon an Eucharistic hermeneutic, whereby Jesus’s ironic identification of his body with the bread produces an “ontological scandal” establishing the symbolic fluidity of “body.” Christ’s body is gift, nourishment

and sacrifice, serving symbolically as the unifying center for the resulting community of faith; consequently, it becomes a sign that disseminates under the power of the Spirit into what Ward terms “transcorporeality,” a fleshly expression of intratextuality. To live out this transcorporeality is to recognize bodies as “fractured endlessly, by the Spirit, and yet . . . gathered into the unity of the Word . . .” (92). To live in the unity of the Word means to live “in Christ.” It also means to live out metaphorically the crucified and resurrected body of Christ, which is both a dying to self and an “incorporation into the city of God.” As such, a theology of transcorporeality offers a “theology for the disabled, the sick, the racked, the torn, the diseased, the pained” (96).

Ward moves through what he terms the “displaced body” of Christ, examining incarnation, transfiguration, eucharist, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. In some manner, most, if not all of these displacements renew an interest in the subject of desire, ranging from an erotic desire relevant to the sexed and gendered body of the incarnate Christ—an issue bringing Ward to Freud and Lacan—to an empathic desire of mourning over suffering induced by the symbolic determination of the crucified body. A certain communal Christology develops out of these displacements by which living the *imitatio Christi* results in communities of embodied persons that continue metaphorically the incarnation of God. Ultimately, the continuation of the incarnation in communities of enfleshed, desiring persons come to fulfillment in the spiritual body of Christ—the Church—which should embody the Christian *agape*; therefore, it should exist as a divinely erotic community proclaiming in word and deed the “erotics of redemption.”

In contemporary society, secular communities of desire have evolved through various Dionysian technologies of the erotic and certain libidinal economies of self-centered sexual consumerism. Ward considers these secular communities to be parodies of the Christian *ecclesia* and its emphases on love, covenant and election (125). Remarkably, he suggests that the current secularization of the Church as a holy expression of redemptive desire was spawned through the social contract theories of Hobbes and Spinoza, who ultimately failed to maintain an analogical world-view through which difference and identity (atomism and community) may be synthesized. Only by insisting on the ecclesiastical analogies of embodiment and participation may theologians speak a justifying word powerful enough to counteract the contemporary profaning of desire. In order to accomplish this, Ward references explicitly the liturgical practice of “fraction,” in which the Eucharistic elements come to symbolize one and the many that coalesce in the sharing of the table and the presence of Christ (152). However, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not to be interpreted as a metaphysical presence fragmenting reality and leading inevitably to the virtual reality of Being as presence and toward various nihilisms. Instead, it’s the presence of a

participation that reconfigures the past of the divine sacrifice and prefigures the future of the promised consummation (171). It is participation as relationship, as constitutive of a community of agapic and erotic desire. Only in this analogical understanding of difference as relational—as a desire for God—is the world awarded significance and therefore redeemed.

As an erotic community, the Church quite naturally embodies and proclaims an “erotics of redemption.” Ward refuses to bifurcate agape and eros into two foreign and discrete fields of desire, as he thinks Anders Nygren and Karl Barth did. He foresees such equivocal separation between the two economies of love to result in human passions remaining unredeemed. Of course, he does not want to err to the other extreme and univocally identify eros with revelation (184). Consequently, he opts again for an analogical perspective that attempts to hold in tension the dis/similarities among theological (Trinitarian), ontological (Creator/creature), and sexual (gendered bodies) differences, differences grounding genuine love and doing so within the reciprocity of kenotic and erotic desire—the giving and receiving that ultimately establish covenantal relationships. Although he criticizes Barth for reprising a type of “natural theology” and an “*analogia entis*” with reference to the biological distinctions and gendered differences between male and female, he utilizes Barth’s basic structure of sexuality and the *imago dei* as a rubric for developing his own embodied erotics of redemption. For Ward, God does not “see male and female [but] God sees human being in partnership, in covenantal relationships of I and Thou, One and the Other reflecting His own Triune nature” (193). Such an interpretation allows him to include same sex unions within the broader erotic expressions of divine love and interpret analogical participation in the Church as the ecclesial and eschatological body of Christ.

Ward concludes by returning to Augustine and re-examining the symbolism of the two cities and the significance of the *amor dei*. The only way to overcome the social atomism of the *amor sui* is to reconnect with the analogical worldview of communitarianism found in the erotics of redemption as proclaimed by the spiritual body of Christ. The relationship between the two cities already exists. Consequently, the Church need only live faithfully within the structures of secular reality, constantly mapping onto sacramental, ecclesial, gendered and social bodies the poetic symbolism of Christ’s displaced, kenotic and transfigured body (257). In addition, the Church must also dabble in humility, recognizing that its voice is one of many, that it does not possess absolute knowledge, and that it proclaims no utopian future but instead a time-bound “liturgical [and] doxological space” *in media res* (258)—a space in which differences are not feared, but loved, and where belonging to self is belonging to “everyone else.” In this “belonging-to,” the theologian keeps “alive the vision of better things—of justice, salvation and the common good—and [works] to clarify

the world-view conducive to the promotion of those things" (260).

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