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Preface

Kathryn Tanner

Cities are back. In our world of Internet connection and globalized economic exchange, one sign of the times is urban resurgence. Cities and towns as commercial centers and transportation hubs were once the heart of industrial capitalism but lost influence with the shift of population and production to the suburbs and the general deindustrialization of America. Now cities—with the technical infrastructure to support global economic transactions and with the service and entertainment sectors to support the high-flying lifestyles of the economic elite—are once again central.

Cities are the managerial nodes for the lightning-fast exchanges of international finance and for the complex coordination essential to the internal operations of multinational corporations. Low-paid workers from all over the world are drawn into this urban infrastructure for global capitalism and international finance, so that the city becomes a microcosm of the uneven development of capitalism

worldwide. The privileged of the developed regions of the world and the economically oppressed of the less developed ones meet side by side in our cities.¹

In this increasingly globalized, Internet-connected world, another sign of the times is, ironically, space. "We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition . . . of the side by side, of the dispersed Our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."² Our moment on the world historical stage is no longer commonly understood in terms of a present torn between past and future, between stasis and change—between conservative, backward-leaning forces bent on sustaining, unchanged, the achievements of the past, and forward-looking, future-oriented movements for progress. Instead, our time is being defined by our decisions about how persons, products, and processes are to circulate and be arranged in space. Fundamental political and economic questions concern the transnational movements of workers, shifting sites of production and consumption in a world dominated by multinational corporations, the connection or disconnection of regions to global financial and media networks, and the way bodies—whether they be in prisons or ghettos, or on factory floors—are corralled and enclosed, measured and manipulated. "Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than historical projection" once one realizes "that it is now space more than time that hides things from us, that the demystification of spatiality and its veiled instrumentality of power is the key to making practical, political, and theoretical sense of the contemporary era."³

Space from this new point of view is no longer the passive, already given, empty container through which historical processes flow. History is instead found materialized in varying spatial arrangements; history becomes a matter of how space comes to be organized. Space, in short, is now understood both as the product of social processes and as an influence upon them. Capitalism, for example, is not simply temporalizing—always revolutionizing the production process, dooming to obsolescence, and chasing the new. It is also a force for ever-new spatial configurations—pushing

people out of their settled agrarian existences, concentrating populations and production sites, connecting disparate regions of the world (raw materials becoming inputs for far-off production; products then shipped away for consumption elsewhere), creating and feeding off of divisions between town and country, city and suburb, developed and underdeveloped regions of the world. As such a social product and social force, "space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. . . . Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies."⁴ Politics and ideology help configure space and are consequently embedded in the way space is arranged and the way people move through it. The social construction of space therefore calls for an interpretive geography—a hermeneutics of suspicion for space, if you will—that might uncover the history, power dynamics, and cultural biases materialized there.

The chapters in this volume take off from both these signs of the times, to offer spiritual cityscapes, religious views of urban places. They lay out the physical geographies of various urban sites—Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark, Philadelphia, Havana—in ways that combine theological and political discernment. Often, in a quite personal fashion, they narrate, among other things: the concrete shape of physical locations (a Newark neighborhood; an automobile assembly line in Detroit); the way different areas of a city like Los Angeles both connect and disjoin to form a complex patchwork visible to train and bus riders but invisible from the freeway; the competing processions of tourists and protest marchers in Philadelphia; the movements of displaced persons circulating back to and then away again from places they still consider home. In the process, each author makes clear how we are constituted by social spaces, by the quite physical layout of the places we inhabit and pass through.

Political discernment, too, is a part of these tales. Each essay provides a sense for how things got arranged this way and for the sort of community or lack of it that such arrangements foster. Each uncovers the history and political stakes materialized in these

places—quite concretely in their architecture, in the movements they encourage or forbid, and in what they reveal or hide from view. Theological discernment is also an integral part of these reflections in that each tries to track the forces for spiritual regeneration or degeneration, for life enhancement or disempowerment, contained in these places; each asks after the possible theological significance of their arrangement. Is this the sort of cityscape that might physically embody an incarnate God? Is this a place where grace can be concretely realized? Are these movements in space—between old and new homelands—a way to shape a liberating historical project?

In so doing, the authors rethink contextual theology in spatial terms. Contextual theology—theology that owns up to the influence of race, class, and gender, theology that self-consciously addresses problems endemic to those specific social locations—becomes a theology of quite physical geographical contexts: of architecture and transportation, of travel and emigration, of public processions and urban divisions. The usual matters of contextual theology are all found concretely embedded in these shifting sites, to be unpacked or unwound through combined political and religious analysis and critique.

Understood in this concrete physical fashion, contextual theology begins to reveal the ever-broadening nontraditional locations of religious questioning in our cities. This questioning often takes place out of sight of theology as it is commonly practiced in university and seminary settings; indeed, it takes place “off-site” with reference to either academy or church. How is one to make sense religiously of physical abandonment—of the deserted buildings and empty shops and all that they entail for people’s external and internal well-being? Of the ordering of workplaces and of the damaged relations between workers and managers that such ordering embeds? Of the disconnections and divisions in our cities that alienate and blind us? Of those fundamental movements through life that essentially involve movements in space—the loss of one’s original homeland, or guilt-ridden escapes from declining neighborhoods? Of the anger and shame of those forced to stay?

Moving as the spirit does, without regard for the usual boundaries of religious institutions, spirits of resistance surface in these nontraditional urban locations of religious questioning. Those spirits of resistance emerge in forces for humanization and regeneration. They can be found in new communities that enable people to cope, survive, and hope within and across the multiple urban locations. Resources for life and healing well up through the interstices of city life, as these authors envisage and re-envisage cityscapes through a religious lens. People are centered and reconnected in ways that make the ordinary seem extraordinary, in ways that offer hope for some breakthrough to life-giving forces of support to those in need. Today’s cities are religiously vibrant in new and exciting ways.

Loci theology—a theology organized according to settled topics—becomes in this way a theology of new, often overlooked, places. In an odd but deeply appropriate subversion of its usual connotation, the “loci” of loci theology—from the Latin *locus* meaning place—shifts its meaning from commonplace of theological discussion to, literally, unexpected places. But the contents of the traditional theological themes of loci theology are also altered, accordingly, to highlight their spatial forms. Sin, grace, spiritual renewal, transcendence, incarnation, reconciliation, and liberative redemption are all fundamentally reconfigured spatially to suit the problematics of an urban geography. At issue are mobility and rootedness in place, dislocation and belonging, connection and disjunction, occlusion and display, division and incorporation, exclusion and inclusion—new, redemptive orderings of all these spatial forms so as to rework the old in life-enhancing and spiritually fulfilling ways.

The authors are all members of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology, which got its start in the mid-1970s as a forum to encourage collaborative and constructive (rather than merely methodologically preoccupied) work in academic theology with attention to new shifts in the field and new problems of the times. As chair of the Workgroup between 1992 and 1998, I oversaw a series of meetings in Newark and Chicago in which we tried to

enter into conversation with individuals and communities struggling to improve the lives of people in these urban areas, in order to engage the implicit or explicit theologies emerging there. Without much of a formal prior agenda, we simply wanted to learn from others about the problems with which they struggled, and to reflect with them about how religious questions or institutions entered into their own hopes for change. In Newark we met with cloistered Dominican nuns, AIDS caregivers from the Episcopal church, practitioners of Santería and candomblé, black leaders of mainline churches, and members of an ecumenical Islamic cultural center. In Chicago we visited with staff of the Night Ministry (an organization that tries to "build relationships with persons of the nighttime streets that empower them to meet their needs") and some of us accompanied them on their rounds; we also had spirited theological discussions with women currently or formerly involved in prostitution who were participating as clients or program organizers in the residence and outreach programs of Genesis House. The general idea behind all this was to help ourselves, and the people we met, to think theologically about crucial issues affecting people on a daily basis in urban environments. Using the resources of our academic training in theology and our access to other academic disciplines such as economics, politics, and social theory, we hoped to lift them up and reflect with them upon the theology already at work in their daily lives as persons committed to social change, and to bring the results of that reflection back to bear on the pressing issues of urban life in ways that might aid such struggles for change. Practicing this sort of engagement between academic theology and grassroots political theology together at our meetings, Workgroup members would then go off and do the same sort of thing more thoroughly and realistically for the communities of struggle and the urban environments with which they were personally associated. The energy for this part of the group experiment faded. But the process itself during that six-year period nevertheless represented a significant rethinking of constructive and collaborative work—again, in spatial terms, in a spatially materialized form, albeit an ephemeral one.

Constructive theological work during our time together was literally the construction of new spaces; the new spaces of interaction that we created by venturing to different cities for theological engagement with people working for change in those environments, the new spaces formed by bridging our usual locations as academics with the religious forces afoot in the cities we visited. Rather than amounting to the sharing of formal papers for the purpose of mutual criticism and the advancement of new ideas, our collaboration became a more event-centered performance, enacted in and through the construction of these new spaces of interaction. Our collaboration was the active constitution of a group around the shared experiences of our urban excursions to Newark and Chicago. It occurred as we moved together into those urban spaces to engage others; it occurred in our conversations with people in those urban sites that we entered for a time and left behind. Our dialogue partners, we hoped, received their own experiences back from us with a difference informed by our competence as academic theologians, but this collaboration with persons in urban locales other than our own also surely affected our work as professional theologians. These chapters—with their occasional odd mix of personal narrative, historical recounting, political analysis, and theological rumination—are some of the sedimented effects of what was stirred up for a time in those new spaces of interaction. The wonderfully unexpected precipitate is the shape-shifting theology on display here—theology that flows across the usual divides between intimate personal history and academic treatment of global social forces, theology that opens up religious reflection to the concrete, pluriform dimensions of life by embedding it in the physical details of place while allowing religious reflection to move with the spirit, toward the newly configured terrains of full human flourishing.