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Urban Mission: A Sociological Perspective

This paper is not written from a disinterested, so-called 'objective' sociological viewpoint. Having spent the last four years living in a deprived inner-city area, my analysis is bound to be coloured by my own experience, and by my perception of urban mission in that context. I hope however that the use of the sociological approach will enable us to step back from our day-to-day involvement and to take a look at ourselves, providing a broad framework through which we can all assess our experience and develop a strategy for the future.

I propose to examine first some of the broader problems confronting the church in industrial society before looking in more detail at some specific aspects of urbanism. I shall then consider the response of the churches in this situation and discuss alternatives.

Secularisation

I suppose the word most frequently used with reference to the church of the last two hundred or more years is the word 'secularisation'. It can hardly be refuted that the institutional church, from being the medium of the recognised values in our society, and possessing a creed which was accepted orthodoxy, however little it may have penetrated heart and life, has been pushed to the fringe of our society. It has lost much of its authority; it is one voice among many in the 'marketplace of religion'. Its official announcements, such as the Archbishop's call to the nation, are questioned fiercely within the church and treated as almost irrelevant outside. In the 1976 drout, it was the Sikh rainmakers who got the attention, not Christians praying. Other detailed evidence of the decline of the institutional church can be found in church statistics; the drop in church baptisms and marriages shows clearly that people are no longer seeking the blessing of the church for these most significant events in life.

This view of secularisation tends to base its conclusions on the official institutions of the church and on middle-class Christianity. However, it can well be argued that the mass of working people who moved into our cities with the onset of the Industrial Revolution were never really 'Christianised'. Those who were in fact reached

during the Methodist Revival tended to lose their working class roots. Bennington[1] quotes Charles Booth (1902):

> Those (of the working class) who do join any church become almost indistinguishable from the class with which they mix, the change that has come about is not so much *of* as *out of* the class to which they have belonged.

So one can argue that secularisation is a middle class phenomenon; as the church has lost its respectability for the middle classes and as it has lost its hold on the media, so the cries of secularisation have been heard.

In addition, there is plenty of evidence that people still have an incipient need for some system of belief. They want some system by which they can organize their lives, some beliefs to fall back on in times of crisis. This tendency can be seen in the revival of interest in the supernatural, in the popularity of books such as *Was God an Astronaut?* and in other practices like Transcendental Meditation. In working class people it comes out in an almost stoical belief in fate. So it seems clear that in the late twentieth century in our urban areas, among working class and middle class alike, the wish to believe in a God is still there; it is the institutional church and the traditional forms that are rejected.

The institutional church has responded in a variety of ways to these developments. Many churches have seen a slow decline; they are orthodox, but have no life. Many have older congregations which are slowly dying off. There have been a number of positive responses. *Radical* theologians such as Robinson and Teilhard de Chardin were at least aware of the problems confronting the church, but in attempting to solve them they sold out to the secular world, producing a justification for secular trends rather than a radical critique of them. Others have reasserted the *ritualistic* element in the faith, and in so doing have put faith apart from intellectual questions and doubts. The growth of *ecumenism* in the 60s was another response, which has been described as a 'banding together in weakness'. The *charismatic* movement is also probably partly a reaction to these developments. The final response, which is perhaps most typical of the evangelical church this century has been the *sectarian* response. With its emphasis on individual personal salvation it has been all too easy for Christians to withdraw from the world, to establish close caring groups where one is sure of one's faith, to assert what is true and leave the world around to its own devices. Evangelical theology has little positive to say about the world around. In this way the churches were cushioned against the effects of urbanism. If one lives in a world where one is fully involved with church organization and meetings, and where the bulk of one's friends are Christians it is all too easy to miss what is going on in the world around and to underestimate the changes which have made the church irrelevant to the bulk of the urban population.

We could spend time looking in detail at the causes of secularisation, tracing its origins in the growth of industrial society and in the history of ideas, but it is probably more useful to pass on to identify certain features of urban life and to assess their importance for the Christian church.

The growth of cities

It is very difficult to differentiate the growth of cities from the development of industrial society itself. The characteristics of urbanism are the characteristics of industrial society at large, intensified and on a huge scale, but not necessarily of a different quality. Therefore the cities we have today must be seen as the result of a complex economic process which has gathered momentum since the Industrial Revolution, is still gaining speed and may, as Marx once said, carry with it the seeds of its own destruction. Profit has become the dominant motive, and the pressure to ensure profits are maximised has had the power to alter men's lives dramatically. Thus we have seen the shift from the country to the towns which have turned into cities, so that people may be grouped into larger and larger work units, close to centres of communication. As other values have receded, material gain has become increasingly dominant, not only for those making enormous profits but for those who work in the factories, whose only satisfaction is the improved standard of living resulting from the weekly wage packet. In this broad economic framework we can identify certain features of city life which are clearly 'urban' although they may be present in a diffuse form elsewhere in industrial society.

The work situation

First one must look at work and the work situation. Industrial man increasingly feels cut off from the work he does. The growth of mass production leads to drudgery and routine. Most important, man never experiences in his work the satisfaction of creativity. He has a hand in only a part of the product, and probably a useless product at that. More and more people are not engaged in production of any sort, but work in the service industries or in administration. Working conditions are often bad in factories, steelworks or mines; those who are lucky enough to work in a clean office may find they are cooped up with a mass of other people. And the only incentive held out to the working man is the carrot of material gain. It is no wonder that a city man, travelling to work each day along dirty streets from his concrete suburb, has his consciousness dimmed to spiritual values; if he was more aware of other dimensions to life his alienation from the current situation would become unbearable. Urban society has a vested interest in obscuring those values.

Bureaucracy

Man in his work situation often feels a cog, just one small part of the process in which he is involved. 'They' determine what he should do, 'they' pay his wages, 'they' make him redundant. And working man is increasingly conscious of other bureaucratic forces at work, controlling other aspects of his life besides work. As he queues for the dole, or to see the housing manager, he is constantly reminded that there are unseen people who have enormous influence over his life. Sometimes fairly traumatic events increase this awareness: if the planners decide to build a motorway near his home and he is suddenly confronted with the problems of noise and finds he is powerless to stop it, or if he suddenly finds his home is included in a clearance area, and again, he is powerless to stop its demolition. Most people are aware of the growth of bureaucracy, even if they are not confronted with extreme situations such as these; local government re-organization is one instance of its development. They feel controlled by forces they cannot identify, which they do not know how to fight, and consequently they feel powerless. Man, created to have dominion, is himself controlled. It should be no surprise that some writers have identified the bureaucratic forces dominating our society today as evil spiritual powers. I do not wish to suggest that the bureaucrats themselves are not well-intentioned. Social Security benefits are designed to ensure that no one goes hungry in this country today, yet the way they are administered makes people feel inadequate and humiliated. Planners are trying to produce a better, more healthy environment, yet they cause endless misery in the process. Ellul[2] sums this up very well.

> It is the engineer's bright eye, the urbanist's broad sweep of mind, the hygenist's idealism, which determine its (the city's) course. Yet, look at the results: more slavery—which recreation can only make more tolerable.

Community and association

When differentiating urban and rural life sociologists distinguish between community and association. They have no definite agreement about the use of these words, and I fear that in the wider world there is even greater discrepancy, particularly over the use of the word 'community'. The *community* represents often a neighbourhood group in which an individual can live most of his life, from which he derives his identity and his values, in which he works, has his family and finds most of his social relationships. The overall characteristic is permanence. By contrast, *association* represents interest groups, usually temporary phenomena that do not embrace the whole of a person's life. It is characterized by secondary relationships; friends are usually known only in a particular context that does not necessarily overlap with any others. Urban life to an increasing extent depends on such secondary relationships. Even the most

tightly knit urban community will not be totally self-sufficient; some inhabitants will go outside to work, television will be a major influence on people's thinking. While such urban communities as remain are steadily demolished, as they usually exist in areas of older housing, the huge anonymous council estates take their place, where secondary relationships are the norm. The destruction of the extended family as found in long established urban areas, to be replaced by the small nuclear family on the suburban estate, is a well-documented phenomenon. Thus when we talk of urban life we are not talking of one experience, but rather of a variety of life-styles which may exist in the same city, even in the same street. For one person it will consist of a community, where most of one's relationships take place within a very small radius of about one half mile. For others life will consist of a series of associative relationships over a wide area, pivoting on one small point where most of one's deep meaningful relationships take place.

The effect on the individual

The various developments clearly have affected the individual who is subjected to them. First we can see that it is far more difficult for a person to maintain an integrated personality in the city. Rather we see the fragmentation of individual identity as man moves through a series of situations all of which are governed by differing values and codes of behaviour. The hard-headed businessman is a different person from the father who cares for his children and puts a great deal of effort into his garden, and different again from the man playing his round of golf on a Sunday morning. One part of man becomes mass man, he learns to be ultra-sensitive to the signals put out by others from the moment he meets them, he can comumnicate (at a certain level), he is trained to be tolerant. He is open to advertising and the media which tell him how he should dress and behave. He learns to move smoothly through a large and often very confusing world. To compensate for this, there are some relationships which he invests with great emotional significance. These usually revolve around the family. In a world in which he is constantly on the move, these are the people who stay with him, who 'know' him. These are the people he cares about; he does not have the energy to care for all the others he meets. This is the phenomenon known as privatization, where a person, to compensate for the variety of superficial relationships confronting him, retreats into his private world which is his and where he may still, to some extent, 'have dominion'. It is in these relationships that he finds his significance and meaning. Yet because of the huge emotional load these relationships have to carry they often crack up; the pressures are too great. Parallel with this, it is often only in these close relationships that the individual feels a sense of guilt. In most of the other relationships in which he takes part, because he feels little sense of commitment,

the feeling of guilt is less. He may feel guilty only if he gets caught. Certainly he feels no guilt about the wider society of which he is a part. The planner does not feel particularly guilty if his plan is going to disrupt many homes, nor does the worker feel guilty if the machine he is turning out is designed to break down within the year. We tend to shut ourselves off from this kind of guilt; it is 'they' who are responsible—not us.

I have tried to demonstrate not only the complexity of relationships within the city, but also how they may vary even within the same street. I turn now to examine some of the more common church reactions.

The response of the churches

The redevelopment of inner-city areas has considerably weakened the church in those areas. The Roman Catholic church was perhaps more community-based than any other denomination, but now, although the faithful come back to worship, the hold on social life has lessened. The Anglican church, with its strong parish emphasis, has also suffered but at least had some basis from which to start dealing with the new estates going up around the churches. The Nonconformists have suffered worst, with a few exceptions. The congregations, having moved out to the suburbs, come back for services but have little contact with the people on the new estates around them. My knowledge of suburban areas is limited, but I suspect there has been little neighbourhood emphasis. People may attend the church from a fairly wide area, but most of the contact with the locality is through youth work. Often there is no choice about this; if a church is on a housing estate, and most of the members are owner-occupiers, not with all the good will in the world are the council going to rehouse them. Finally, one has the city-centre church with a popular preacher, drawing a congregation from miles around. If one analyses this in terms of the community-association distinction we have already made, it seems fairly clear that the church has moved away from the community idea and become more and more of an association, a place where one goes to meet like-minded people (and hopefully ones who have the same doctrinal emphasis) and pursue a particular interest. That is at least how it appears to an outsider. Such a tendency has serious implications for mission, and must also await theological comment.

The theology of the evangelical church in this country has made this development away from community and towards association easier. In its reaction against the 'social gospel' promulgated by theologians at the turn of the century the emphasis on individual personal salvation grew, and alongside there tended to develop a negative doctrine of the world[3]. This links closely with the sectarian

response we have already discussed. This development had huge repercussions for the whole concept of church and mission. Earlier, the church would be at the centre of a web of relationships in the community and society. It ran the risk of being absorbed by the world, but at least it was in a position where it could provide a radical critique of what was going on. But as soon as the emphasis was placed on separation from the world, that web of relationships was broken. Mission was conceived of as a series of forays into the world, not continuous involvement with it. So missionary work became dominant, situated safely across the sea rather than requiring any deep involvement with the community around the church. Mission consisted of 'bringing people in': on *our* terms of course, the kids mustn't wreck the place, no smoking etc. It is strange how 'mission' which so clearly involves 'being sent' totally altered its meaning except in an overseas context. The indications are that as the church was being pushed to the fringe of society, so evangelicals produced a theology which justified the move; we perhaps went more willingly than most.

We are thus confronted with a paradox; in the eyes of the world around we are just another secondary group, which comes together more or less frequently to pursue a particular interest. This is reinforced when we consider the physical distances involved in travelling to church for most people. Yet we ourselves tend to emphasize the community aspects of the church, such as the warm, close fellowship. Furthermore this emphasis on community is being reasserted, developed in certain areas of the church. One of the earliest moves in this direction was developed around the correspondence '*Christians in Industrial Areas*'[4] and is spelt out by David Sheppard in *Built as a City*. This emphasises the importance of a physical Christian presence. While these developments are valid, and often exciting, ways of re-establishing a Christian presence in urban areas, they also pose certain problems.

There is a danger that they may turn out to be just another sectarian response to the threat of the world around. One can have one's community in an urban area without having to participate much in the wider community around. Such churches tend to rely on a magnetic approach to draw people in, working on the principle that if we can demonstrate a loving community, others will be attracted to join us. Such an approach is likely to draw the victims of society, those who are aware of need, who have problems which need solving. Such a church community is fulfilling a comfortable function in society, not far removed from Marx's opium of the masses. Surely it is just as much part of the Gospel to provide a challenge, to call the person who has everything to follow Christ. One has to go out from the church to provide that challenge.

Closely related to this is the fact that if our Gospel is presented chiefly in terms of reaching individuals, of solving individual problems, of healing relationships then we are speaking only to 'privatised' man. We speak entirely to the emotional side of man as he is involved with his relationships with home and family where he is probably most conscious of guilt and thus where the idea of 'sin' cuts some ice. But we have seen that man seems to be aseries of selves in many different situations, and if we concentrate exclusively on the privatised man we ignore many other opportunities to confront him with the Gospel, or with other aspects of the Gospel. How much are we saying to that man at work, in the pub, or as he fights to get something done about the noise from a nearby factory? If we limit our Gospel to the privatised areas of man's life we leave vast areas untouched, just as we neglect huge areas of society.

The final danger of the emphasis of the community is that by many around it may not even be noticed. A group of Christians meeting in a home every night may not occasion much comment; this is just their particular quirk, just as other people are out rugby training every night. I believe the physical presence of Christians, with or without a church, is bound to make an impact, because any community group that actually works in an urban area is an exception. But this should not mean that we are not involved in the other associative groups within the city as part of mission, as part of demonstrating God's presence here.

Such a development will involve changes in our thinking about the world and about mission. Several books have come out in the past ten years re-emphasizing the importance of the world in Christian doctrine, and there has been a growing recognition that mission involves not just evangelism, but must work in all areas of society as well. Stott summarises this well[5]:

> To see need and to possess the remedy compels love to act, and whether the act will be evangelistic and social, or indeed political, depends on what we 'see' and what we 'have'.

This brings me to my final point. If we 'possess the remedy' for the problems of the city and its people, we have power. If we do not act, or if we use it only for the benefit of the church community, we are holding that power to ourselves. I am not thinking just about the message we have, but of very material things. Often our church buildings on an estate are the only communal buildings; we have a resource which the community around desperately need. If we hang onto that for ourselves, what kind of image of the gospel does that present? Similarly, if we say Christ can heal relationships and give people a new kind of life, what right have we to reserve that for our church community, and not go out, positively, and share the

message with those around? The challenge for us is to give up power, those resources we have, and genuinely to go out and serve the community around. In such service I believe we can reach deep spiritual needs which most churches, because they hang onto their position and to their power, cannot.

I close with a passage taken from Gordon Cosby, writing in *Post American*. I hope it brings together some of the threads in this paper, and may show us a way forward.

> To mature in that process of downward movement, to give up power, to be with the powerless and victimised poor of this earth, we need to become part of an intense Christian community which comforts and supports us. . . Radical obedience means belonging to a deep and intense community which takes seriously both the contemplative relationship with Jesus Christ and the servant posture among the poor and oppressed of the world.

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