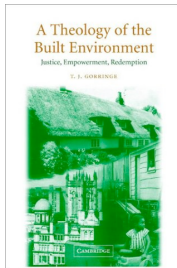


A Trinitarian approach to renovating

Reviewed by Stephen Cox



Timothy Gorringe

A Theology of the Built Environment

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I live in Sydney, which means I am compelled to live and breathe real estate. My interest is piqued by special newspaper supplements, home improvement television and the headlining news of adjustments in interest rates. Even social conversation is frequently hijacked by concerns of who is looking for what, and who is doing up which so that they can sell it for something else. The 'built environment' has so filled our horizons that we cannot see past what we have built, bought or desire.

In a culture so fixated with the built environment, careful holistic thinking is important. Tim Gorringe attempts it in his book, '*A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*'. Gorringe reflects theologically on the built environment as a whole. He pulls together a vast array of secular and theological sources to examine the nature of this built environment we live in and to propose how the Christian church should act within it and work to reform it. His basic thesis is that only as we understand the Trinitarian

nature of God can we properly understand how to engage ethically with the built environment:

I want to argue that the built environment relates to every area of Christian ethics and only a Trinitarian ethic, an ethic of creation, reconciliation and redemption, is adequate to explore it (p.5).

A 'Trinitarian' mode of investigation is a very powerful method of examining and critiquing the universe that we live in. From the cursory glance that is this review, several aspects of Trinitarian thinking are worth noting. Firstly, to explore the universe in the manner of the one who created the universe seems immediately profitable. Despite controversy over the extent of the relationship between creator and creation, to some degree the universe will reflect the character of the one who created it. If the being of God is, by nature, relational, then understanding the creation in relational terms seems productive.

Second, advocates of Trinitarian thinking argue that without this type of analysis a faulty view of creation will ensue with disastrous effects. For example, prominent Trinitarian thinker, Colin Gunton, argues that theologies which neglect or distort the Trinity provide atheistic worldviews such as Modernity, which cripple subsequent theological thinking and have devastating consequences for the world:

[T]he leading thinkers of the modern world had some cause for the direction they took. The development of theology in the West had been strongly monistic, stressing the oneness and arbitrary will of God in such a way that the reality and importance of the created world appeared to be called into question. Modernity's protest against bad theology is therefore in large measure justified, although its displacement of the divine has been catastrophic in its effects.¹¹

Thirdly, Trinitarian theology in bringing together the ideas of diversity and unity within the Godhead, allows considerable latitude and finesse for diagnosis and prognosis. It also has the potential to become spectacularly complex and divisive, and it is little wonder that the topic

is so controversial. Like most Trinitarian theologians, Gorringer draws on a range of heavyweights, from Augustine to Barth, Von Rad to Bruggeman, from architects Vitruvius to Le Corbusier, and in philosophy Hegel to Foucault.

In his introduction, Gorringer seeks to encompass both the secular and sacred—because the Trinitarian ethic he pursues eliminates any such distinction:

When you announce a lecture on the theology of the built environment people expect you to talk about churches, and are disappointed when you do not! This book is not about churches, but about supposedly 'secular' buildings and settlements... A Trinitarian theology cannot allow a secular and sacred divide, in which 'secular' occupations are left to the no theologians, and theology confined to specialists. Rather the rationale of such a theology will be a discernment of God active in God's world. (p.7)

Gorringer argues that the Bible is a book that is concerned with the commonplace: "...we find in Scripture, classically in the Magnificat, a preference for the everyday, the modest, humble and ordinary" (p.8). This preference for the everyday means similar thinking is necessary concerning the built environment. It is not the grand philosophies of architecture that are important but also the mundane, the activities and produce of the 'little people'. He is also dismissive of Platonising views of the world that limit truly good acts to the church or focus on the eternal life to come.² Gorringer argues that no true theology of the built environment could arise from such thinking.

Gorringer proceeds to explore a theology of the built environment commencing with thought about the 'divine grounding of our experience in space' (p.24) and then turning his investigation to land, the human dwelling, town and country, city, community and finally to the question of whether cities can be beautiful. In the last two chapters, he focuses on what is required of *us* as builders, planners and place dwellers in the opening decades of the millennium. This 'us'

is notable in that it encompasses the responsibility of all people in thinking and acting responsibly about the built environment.

In the second chapter, 'Constructed space and the presence of God', Gorringe demonstrates the correspondence between knowing God properly (as Trinity) and appropriately shaping our built environment. To know God the Redeemer (the Holy Spirit) as the author of all hopeful visions and human creativity, is to know the inspirer of all visions of a better human environment. The fact that so much of our built environment is so bad is the result of sin, that is, the denial of relational priorities, justice and integrity. "Alienation, domination and reconciliation can all be and are expressed in the built environment' (p.49). If reconciliation is real, that is grounded in knowledge of God the Reconciler, it needs to go beyond pious talk and actually do something in environments where there is social injustice.

Similarly, if we understand God the Creator as a dictator rather than 'one who loves in freedom' ungodly and repressive thinking is bound to be the result. For example, someone who has a proper understanding of this God, who 'loves in freedom', would prefer a more consultative planning process rather than the detached, idealistic process favoured in modernist urban planning schemes. Historically, planning was left to experts who distrusted the ability of ordinary people to think and act for themselves. Gorringe introduces what he sees as a decisive text for the involvement of ordinary people in light of the Trinity: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29).

In chapter three, 'The land', Gorringe reflects biblically on Israel's relationship with the land expressed in God's promises and instructions about how to live in the Promised Land. He focuses on the Hebrew word *nahalah* ('inheritance') which embodied a "stakeholder economy" where "every family was assured of approximately equal access to resources by organisation into extended families, clans and tribes" (p.69). This was to prevent land becoming the possession of a few, and so protecting the poor and foster an understanding of land as

a gift. If land is understood as a gift, possession can never be absolute. Those who occupy land should be stewards of this gift, but stewards on behalf of all. Gorrington then applies this biblical analysis through his Trinitarian ethic. Proper democratic control of land is important, so that the rich and powerful cannot control the land to the detriment of the poor. This is the political realisation of God as Creator. Understanding God as Reconciler and Redeemer will enable us further to reconsider land use and liberate those who have been unfairly dispossessed.

Gorrington's following chapter on the human dwelling laments on the failure of mass housing and suburban housing to properly accommodate people. To house the six billion inhabitants of the world a new vernacular of housing is necessary. This housing should be sustainable (with reference to God as Creator)³; concerned with fostering community and the individual within it (God as Reconciler)⁴; and both beautiful and allowing the ordinary person the opportunity to shape their own dwelling (God as Redeemer).

Chapter seven, 'Constructing Community', considers what is a buzz-word in secular and ecclesiastical circles. As with earlier chapters, Gorrington embarks on a detailed survey of the concept, examining the development of community through the village, city and suburb. He argues that while the traditional village fostered community, the development of the city and suburb diminished it through segregation of affluence, homogenisation, (city) and isolation (suburb). Gorrington's solution for thriving communities is to look to the church, but in an unexpected way. In the theological sphere, to speak of community is to speak of the church. Hence, if our understanding of God as Trinity draws us into this idea of community, Gorrington argues that the salvation of secular communities lies in their understanding and adopting the ideas that make the church a community. These ideas are: the local community that is networked globally; the organising paradigm of the Eucharist that provides a common memory for the whole community; sin recognised and forgiveness asked for; a

concern for justice; a common purpose⁵; and recognition of the inevitable development of the community, always reforming albeit with no utopian goal.

To conclude his book, Gorringer looks at the future of the world we live in and the essential task of housing eight to twelve billion people in dignity and beauty. Gorringer likens the role of the church in this to the Servant of Isaiah 49:6, to be “a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth”. Given the dire state of the world’s poor, the church’s role in correcting ‘the perverse logic of capital’ is essential. If the church’s mission is about anticipating and working towards a new world, a reshaping of the built environment is also involved. Therefore, Gorringer writes, the church should be seeking: justice for the poor; empowerment of the people (so that they are involved in the shaping of their environment); ‘situated-ness’ (being ‘at home’ so that community can flourish); and fostering diversity (since humans thrive on difference).

Gorringer’s book is shrewd and provocative. Unlike some writing in this area, Gorringer does more than call for governments to change their unjust practices. By connecting the mission of the church to a needy world and potential of Trinitarian thinking, Gorringer advocates an increased responsibility for the church in thinking about the built environment. The church has a great legacy of concern for the poor and oppressed; it seems appropriate to include thinking and action about the planning and development of the built environment.

His focus on Trinitarian thinking is also productive. When the Trinity is abandoned or ignored, the result is attitudes and behaviour that ruin the world and its inhabitants. The Bible is full of examples of this, starting with the refusal of divine relationships after the Fall in Genesis 3. To understand God as Trinity does help us understand how to live in this world and with each other. By reasserting Trinitarian thinking some progress can be made—but how much? Gorringer avoids the modernist utopia trap but there are still problems. Is it realistic for a community to adopt a common purpose of “sharing and safeguarding

the basic resources of life” when individuals are unable or unwilling to live up to this principle? This leads to a more important question. If there is room in this ‘theology of liberation’ for sin at a personal level, is the role as God as Redeemer and Reconciler then reduced to something that is incomplete? The focus on reversing the damage of sin in the world moves the problem of humanity’s relationship with the triune God into the background. By dismissing ‘Platonising’ or dualistic modes of thinking about reconciliation, Gorringer appears also to dismiss God’s claims of sovereignty and omnipotence. While helpfully advocating the church’s active role in this world, this comes at the expense of a vision of eschatological and complete reconciliation. These are significant theological shortcomings.

It seems that Gorringer has downplayed the role of Jesus in his thinking.⁶ Jesus did not come to earth to move humanity and the built environment to a higher experience of existence. Rather, he comes to complete history, so it can begin again. Jesus’ ascension in the flesh heralds this new beginning, but it begins somewhere else.⁷ Rather than seeing an eschatological reconciliation and a present reconciliation as competing ideas, the church’s concern for justice and dignity in this world should arise from understanding the new world to come.

When this ultimate reconciliation is on view, the difficulty of the church’s mission is highlighted. While it is right and appropriate for the church to consider how it can address issues of justice and dignity in this world, the message of reconciliation for the next world is at least of equal importance; in the words of God the Reconciler, “what good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26). The salvation of the world is on view. Therefore, if an eschatological view of a complete reconciliation is on view then there will be misgivings about some of Gorringer’s interpretation of biblical data. The servant in Isaiah brings light and salvation to the earth, not merely so that living conditions can be beautiful and comfortable but that sin can be dealt with and God’s wrath avoided.

Gorringe advocates distancing ourselves from our culture's current preoccupation with better homes and gardens, expensive real estate and wasteful use of resources. He urges us to consider how we can assist in making this world just and life affirming for all. But the role of the church contains a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, it must proclaim the message of reconciliation that the death and resurrection of Jesus achieved. It must warn people to repent and turn to God because their souls are at stake—this is a key responsibility. But on the other hand, the church is also called to be concerned with justice and the dignity of people in this present world. Christians are called to be the best citizens in their communities, to live such good lives among others that they glorify God on the day he returns (1 Peter 2:12). I think sometimes there is a temptation for churches to emphasise (or even dismiss) one thing at the expense of the other. In redressing the importance of the present world, I fear Gorringe may have tipped the scales too far in one direction once more.

¹ Gunton, Colin E., *'The One the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity. The 1992 Brampton Lectures'*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993. 210

² Such as the relationship between *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* in Augustine's *The City of God*.

³ Sustainable is a key term in the field of the Built Environment. Sustainable development would consider building economically, efficient energy use, water and waste management, minimal environmental impact and other issues.

⁴ A point where some modernist housing schemes have failed miserably.

⁵ Gorringe thinks that the secular common purpose is 'about the sharing and safeguarding of the basic resources of life'. This is not the same as the purpose as the church but the 'echoes and analogies' in the gospel of the church allow dialogue between the two.

⁶ Gorringe's understanding of the Trinity seems to err on the side of modalism given his focus on *God* as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer. The unity of God in these three 'modes' of action is important, but it seems to detract from the historical enactment of these modes.

⁷ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1999, pp.76-9.