

VISION ON THE BIBLICAL CITY OF GOD AND PRAGMATIC ISSUES INVOLVED IN UNDERSTANDING ECOLOGICALLY

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Introduction

Nowadays most of us think that city life could be the ultimate place where all will have their life at the end of human history and so the gradual transformation from rural to urban is inevitable. Almost everyone wants to live and enjoy the urban facilities, where modern cities offer affluence, easiness, galaxies and luxuries. Julian Saldanha feels that the city is the result of historical process, which is the intelligent interaction of humans. Together with language, the city is among the best achievements of human culture; though it has its shadows, it offers freedom, economic advance, social mobility and extraordinary possibilities of development.¹ Simultaneously there is a tendency towards a growing attraction for ecological taste to have an effect on living residences and atmosphere. Most of the city builders and urban planners in India today are picking up green ideas incorporating green location, atmosphere, green energy and green disposals, although it is very much linked with their commercial

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¹Julian Saldanha, "From Garden to City," *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 6, 2 (2012) 267.

purposes. Names like Garden city, Green Cascade, Green Field, Lake View, Park Avenue and such views are inevitably coming up at least in the advertisements. The urban high rise housing flats are depicted as 'sanctuary in the sky.' The fundamental question arises here whether we are really marching towards a completely different city life orientation or just giving a lip service to the green city model since it is an attraction of our time. There are both positive and negative arguments emerging on the question of green citification process.

Moreover there are floods of theological and ecological discussions appearing today from the biblical perspective both on realized eschatology and futuristic end of this earth. We Christians believe that God the creator, after He saw his creation works, felt it was good. He continues to work to make the world good and to allow the earth to be beneficial to offer abundance of life and for sustainability towards a wise and perfect end. It is humanity, who, although it does not match with the God's plan, strives to bring a progressive perfection. It is interesting to watch closely what kind of eschatological City of God is described in the Bible? While most of the traditional Christians regard Heaven with a 'City of God' sort of outlook, the ecologists critically raise the issue of what sort of city we are witnessing already now and that we are looking forward to. Are we going to inherit the present state of affairs of city planning and waste management, etc. or are we looking for an entirely different atmosphere of a new city? What kind of cities are secular humanists striving to develop? Are both of them going in the same direction or are they contradictory? If we Christians are going to concentrate on more of an earth affirming eschatology, could we also plan a City of God in that direction?

United Nations' Vision

The current United Nations' discussions also reflect complexities of urban problems. Their concerns are mainly connected with the exploding migrations in the context of globalization. The findings they derived from the recent National Workshop 2012 on internal migration and Human development in India organized by UNESCO and UNICEF, in order to advance 'a knowledge' on the crucial issue of internal migration. Migration should be acknowledged 'as an integral part of development,' pleads Ram B Bhagat from International Institute of Population Science. He notes that 'cities are important destinations for migrants and the rising contribution of cities to India's GDP would

not be possible without migration and migrant workers'. Bhagat stresses that "Government policies should not hinder but seek to facilitate migration. It should form the central concern in city planning, and city development agendas should seek to include and integrate migrants economically, politically, socially, culturally and spatially."² We are aware that this sort of approach is eventually greatly aligned with the present neo-liberal market economy, with a view to removing all the hurdles within the system to bring more and more investment from outside and ultimately paving way for jobless growth. Moreover this approach will help to further aggravate the centralization of attention on cities and the marginalization of rural peripheries.

It is alarming to see huge international migration moving presently from rural areas to the urban cities; it is taking place especially among the developing and underdeveloped countries. On the other hand urban slums are equally growing at an alarming rate, old drainage systems are collapsing, and brimming with foul smells and the air is filled with dusty pollution. In spite of all those apparent problems, attraction to the cities has not reduced in any way. All newly developing countries have had discussions, as we had in the pre- and post-independent India, whether our future would be rural centric or urban centric development. Gandhi and Nehru had diametrically opposite views on Rura-centric and Urba-centric. Even among the Marxists of that contemporary era many differences of opinion arose based on this question.³ The unbalanced development of the cities and industrial towns, through the periods of centralization of state power, concentration of the money market, and large-scale factory production, drained the rural economy of much of its work and, with that, its relative autonomy.⁴ This echoes some of the persistent questions which repeatedly reappear in our modern history, and which we can not skip or postpone for ever.

City from Secularist's Perspective

The much acclaimed discussions of *Secular City* by Harvey Cox revolve around his argument that the 'enchantment of nature' makes

²*UN News*, Monthly Newsletter of the UN Information Centre, New Delhi: UN Information Center for India and Bhutan, 8, 6 (2012) 13.

³Bastiaan Wielenga, *Marxist Views on India in Historical Perspective*, Bangalore: CISRS & CLS, 1976, 136ff.

⁴Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, London: Verso, 1989, 231.

nature 'available for man's use.' He compares the Christian perspective of Kingdom of God with the secular city. For him 'the idea of the secular city supplies us with the most promising image by which to both understand what the New Testament writers called 'the Kingdom of God' and to develop a viable theology of revolutionary social change. His contention is attacked by objections directed at it from two different sides, theological and political. On the theological side we must demonstrate that the symbol of the secular city does not violate the symbol of the Kingdom of God. On the political side, we must prove that the concept of the secular city, while remaining faithful to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, still lays open and illuminates the present ferment of social change.

In answer to these objections, Cox writes that 'if we begin with the theological objections, three principal retorts must be considered':

1. Whereas the Kingdom of God is the work of God alone, the secular city is the accomplishment of human.

2. Whereas the Kingdom of God demands renunciation and repentance, the secular city requires only skill and know-how.

3. While the Kingdom of God stands above and beyond history (or exists in the heart of believers), the secular city is fully within this world.

He rejects all of these counter objections, writing, 'but none the less they are understandable, and no discussion of the Kingdom of God and the secular city can proceed without replying to them satisfactorily. Let us then take them up in order.' First objection is made about the contention that the secular city is constructed by man, while the Kingdom is the work of God, and it was made all the more serious by the fact that American theology especially during the period of the social gospel allowed the phrase *building the Kingdom of God* to gain wide circulation, implying sometimes that the Kingdom was a human accomplishment. Others insist that God and God alone can bring in the Kingdom.⁵ The kingdom of God, concentrated in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, remains the fullest possible disclosure of the partnership of God and human in history. Our struggle for the

⁵Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, New York: Penguin Books, 1968, 122.

shaping of the secular city represents the way we respond faithfully to this reality in our own times.⁶

In his second objection Cox writes, 'Our idea of the repentance demanded by the Kingdom has tended to be entirely too moralistic. Amos Wilder shows us that repentance involves a far more sweeping and inclusive act of sacrifice. If he is right, then the Kingdom of Jesus came when God's action in doing something wholly new coincided with man's action in laying aside previous values and loyalties, and freely entering the new reality. The life in the emerging secular city entails precisely this kind of renunciation. So it does require penitence. In fact, the emergence of the secular city may help us discard our moralistic perversion of repentance and return to a more biblical version.'⁷

The third objection is whether the Kingdom stands beyond history or within history. 'Here the traditional discussion has revolved around the question of whether the Kingdom will come sometime in the future or if it has already come. The words of Jesus himself can be interpreted in either way. Recent German scholars have suggested that the debate over futuristic versus realised eschatology posed the question falsely and that we should speak instead of an eschatology which is in the process of realizing itself. He accepts this interpretation while still arguing the problems of whether God or man brings the Kingdom, whether there is a need for repentance, and whether the Kingdom touches our present crisis can all be set aside by a thoughtful examination of the idea of the Kingdom in the Bible.'⁸ All the above discussions, though meaningful, were very much limited to Cox's own time, rather than current economic and ecological sustainability point of view.

Biblical View of City

The futuristic issues usually considered in theological terms are normally called eschatological discussions. The Bible does not systematically develop a single unified perspective on this question, rather it allows many possibilities. The references about the future chiefly falls under two criteria: earth-centric or heaven-centric (other worldly) and realized eschatology or futuristic eschatology. In this article I am exploring more of the possibilities of looking at the city of

⁶Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, 123-124.

⁷Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, 124.

⁸Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, 125.

God or Holy City from an earth-centric as well as a realised eschatological perspective, and especially from a supplementary ecological outlook.

The Bible speaks a lot about the City of God in spite of many negative connotations about the cities in some portions. The human race was created in a garden, but their destiny as God's image-bearers and as social beings lay in the city. The cultural mandate which God gave Adam (Gen 1:28) implied, even required, city building. Adam was commanded to cultivate the earth's resources and build with the things placed at his disposal and the cities of an unfallen race would have been cultural centres beyond imagination.⁹ However in a few places we get an entirely different picture of the biblical city connotations beyond we have today. For instance the concept of City of Refuge (Num 35:11-12, Josh 20:4, 20:9) is closer to an ecological sense like the concept of a bird's nest. Imaginings of Earthly Paradises in the ancient cities like hanging gardens in Babylon were part of the attempts to bring everything into reality. There are many cities in the Bible used as symbolic pictures and suffering the consequences of its sins. For Julian Saldana 'the symbolic capitals of the two cities are, in Biblical terms, 'Babylon', "the city of chaos" (Is 24:10) and "wickedness" (Zech 5:8), a city which is arrogant, proud (Jer 50:29-32); Is 14:13ff) and doomed to perdition (Rev 18:1-8). The capital of the city of God is 'Jerusalem', "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 12:22), "the wife of the Lamb" (Rev 21:9). These two cities are arrayed opposite each other (Gal 4:26; Rev 21). This is the drama which is described in the Book of Revelation.¹⁰ We do not know how and when God will bring about the "new heavens and new earth" (2 Pet 3:13). However it will not be another world, but a new ordering of this created world, which will be changed into a new (or renewed) world. So also the Garden city mentioned in the Book of Revelation (22:1-2) is itself something very different from modern understanding of industrial cities.

Jesus' Life in the City of Jerusalem

Jesus did not have much attraction for the city life and so he very rarely made his visits to Jerusalem city. Rather he was closer to the rural Galilean regions as it was his primary centre of ministry. Jesus,

⁹Roger S. Greenway & Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1994, 3.

¹⁰Julian Saldanha, "From Garden to City," 269.

although born in Bethlehem, grew and spent most of his time in Galilean areas. It was a greatly neglected area and considered a dark region by Judaism for many centuries (Is 9:1). No matter that Galilee was always infamous for being characterized as some sort of rebellious people who preferred to live out their lives there; rather he preferred to spend the majority of his time in the country side. Relatively Jesus' stay in the city was very brief¹¹ (Mt 21:17-18) and he had many bad experiences in the city, like Satan taking him on the pinnacle of the Temple (Mt 4:5), disappointment over fruitless fig tree (Mt 21:18-20), weeping over the position of the city (Lk 19:41), betrayal, denial, crucifixion, etc. His advice for the city dwellers at times of crisis was that "...those in Judea must flee to the mountains and those inside the city (Jerusalem) must leave it, and those outside in the country must not enter it [Jerusalem]" (Lk 21:21). This is a typical verse of Jesus advocating people turn not to the city for safety and security especially in crisis times. However many theologians hold the references of Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem city and later asking the disciples to 'stay in the city' as suggesting that Jesus and our eschatological hope must be geared towards urban based development. However this could be a narrow and quick conclusion over convenient selection of texts for a particular task or goal. Most of the city references in the New Testament come only in the books of Acts and Revelation. Apostle Paul had the privilege of spending most of his ministry period in urban area. The references such as Holy City, New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2, 10) or City of God in the book of Revelation are very much connected with Old Testament visions and dreams. Therefore any attempts for gearing up towards pro-urban-centric realisation of history could not be a clean chit to derive a conclusion from the biblical perspective.

Although it is a speculative exercise to reflect about the City of God, many Christian believers are deeply curious about knowing the strategy behind realizing the 'Kingdom on Earth' and moreover, it is pertinent to have ecological direction based on the current discussions. We realise that there is a definite constant tension between country and urban sides, especially in the Bible as well.

¹¹Albert Verdoot, "The Gospels in Comparison with the Pauline Letters: What We Can Learn from Social-Scientific Models," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J Malina, Gerd Theissen, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.

Many Christian theologians and Biblical researchers today have started discussions about eschatological issues such as, if God directly reigns over the earth what sort of centre may s/he chose? Will it be a rural centric or urban centric? What sort of human co-operation could be channelized today for such vision? Do humans have the privilege of imagining the City of God and working towards that or is it purely God's realm to interfere? These sort of questions are raised by people like Cox not simply out of curiosity alone but to develop a perspective for a future of the earth from the biblical basis as well.

Some of the Christian researchers in discussions of this sort of end time pick out a few biblical passages like book of 1 Peter and they connect the temporal cities with eschatological factors.¹² Nevertheless our concern here is how to connect eschatology with a material basis, especially linking it with ecological questions. Rebuilding the human city in partnership with God and nature is the concern of many eco-theologians like Paul Santmire, for whom the biblical account of salvation, although it starts with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, ends with a vision of the saints in the garden city of Jerusalem. For Santmire,

The end is not like the beginning, this thought has not escaped numerous Biblical interpreters. The Scriptures begin with the narrative of a world with a Garden, in Genesis 2, and end with the narrative of a new world with a new city, in Revelation 21. The scriptures also begin in Genesis 1 with the narrative of the birth of human community, in the midst of a vast and variegated and beautiful divinely created world, but with a picture of the human community that, on the surface anyway, seems to have little relationship to any human city whatsoever, whether in its promissory expressions – above all, Jerusalem – or in its threatening expressions in the era when the Priestly writers did their work – above all, Babylon.¹³

Christianization of City of God

The current attempts to Christianize everything being systematically explored by the Conservative Rightists mislead the believers into one attitude of a sacred city sort of feeling. For instance

¹²Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as the Beneficiaries and Citizens*, Michigan: William B. Edermans Publishing House, 1994, 19.

¹³H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in Time of Crisis*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008, 233.

Ray Blakke writes, "Today half the world's population of six billion people lives in urban complexes. This call for a dramatic change in the mission strategy of the church...¹⁴ God reminds them and us that the eternal city is also under construction. We will live there forever as believers."¹⁵ Caral Braaten and all understand the context of the early biblical cities as,

The intervening history of salvation is intertwined with the city. The road to paradise lost to paradise regained runs through the great cities built by the children of Cain—Babel, Babylon, Sodom, and Nineveh. Finally, the earthly Jerusalem became the battle ground on which Christ defeated the "powers and principalities."¹⁶

Christopher R. Seitz reminds us about the present day problems before going to argue for city centre.¹⁷

Ray Blakke criticizes the Jewish writer, Jacques Ellul who was greatly impressed by the Babel and Babylonian texts in the Bible (in *Meaning of the City*) that Ellul was not a professional theologian, but he has had a profound effect to this day on the way many Christians think about the cities in scripture.

Put it simply, Ellul views Babylonian as the archetype of evil in scripture and concludes that all cities are evil. I personally think Ellul misread the data. The Bible has many other city case studies he could have used to correct his rather depressing view... Cox's *Secular City* was too optimistic in 1966; and Ellul was too pessimistic in 1968.¹⁸

Thus from St Augustine to Martin Luther and to John Bunyan there were many discussions to enlighten Christians so they could understand the issue. Today many of such biblical discussions artificially justify a city-based eschatological end. R. Seitz draws his arguments from the 'Two Cities' ideas in *Christian Scripture*:

From the very first, biblical texts tell of the building of cities: from Cains's modest construction of the first city, Enoch, in Genesis 10; to Nimrod the Great's Babylon and Akkad in Genesis; to the famous city and tower of Babel in Genesis 11; up to and including the heavenly

¹⁴Ray Blakke, *A Theology as Big as the City*, East Sussex: Monarch Publications, 1997, Foreword.

¹⁵Ray Blakke, *A Theology as Big as the City*, 82.

¹⁶Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God: The Church's Responsibility for the Earthly City*, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, viii.

¹⁷Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God*, 11.

¹⁸Cited by Ray Blakke, *A Theology as Big as the City*, 185.

city Jerusalem in the Revelation to John, on the Bible's last horizon.¹⁹ Zion Jerusalem is the focus of much of the Old Testament's reflection: the city of Israel's Messiah, the place where God's glory dwells. "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill" (Ps 2:6). This doesn't change in the New Testament, though a transformation takes place. This will make it inevitable Jesus setting his face, not back towards wilderness, but toward Jerusalem, when all is said and done... This having been said, old hopes associated with Zion and the city of Jerusalem are not just shunted off onto Jesus spiritualised. They retain their own integrity and remain central to Christian hope. In John's final vision the old temple is gone – the rivers that make glad the city of God flow now from the throne of the Lamb rather than Zion (Rev 22).²⁰

R. Seitz continues to justify city-centeredness from the scripture. For instance, "Stay in the city," the risen Lord had said in Luke 24:49, "Until you are clothed with power from the high." This promise is fulfilled in short order when the spirit is poured out on "devout men from every nation under heaven dwelling in Jerusalem" (Acts 2:5). In Jerusalem a gift of hearing reverses Babel's confusion of tongues. And all this serves as a foretaste of the final victory in the heavenly Jerusalem, come down to earth at last, as the spirit poured out in Jerusalem now testifies to John on Patmos.²¹ In Zion, then, we see a foretaste of what is to take place in every city in the Christian dispensation. Zion is not just God's city of old but, as Revelation reminds us, our own hope and final destiny, as the heavenly city descends and takes up unto itself every city on earth.²² R. Seitz is very much convinced that the cities and civilizations are meant for subjugation of nature and questions,

Why is this divine intention for the holy city – the city of cities – frustrated? It bears repeating that there is nothing inherently flawed about cities in the Bible. Cities are depicted as being built no sooner than the paint had dried on the flaming sword guarding Eden. There is not sustained period of country living that then devolves in to city life. The first city is built by Cain in Genesis 4 and named after his son. It represents the desire for protection and shelter, for oneself and in the name of one's children. The city has no name, no other purpose, than that. The same Hebrew word, 'ir', applies to foreign cities in the Promised Land, cities big and small, holding potential for blessing

¹⁹Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God*, 11.

²⁰Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God*, 12.

²¹Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God*, 12.

²²Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God*, 16.

(Jerusalem) or curse (Sodom)... Following the flood, the nations emerge from the sons of Noah, and begin to spread out. Cities are built for them... Nimrod is a mighty hunter, the pithy note at Genesis 10:9 reads; to hunt is to be more powerful than animals, to subdue nature. Cities and civilization entail the subjugation of nature. For this Nimrod is renowned. And there is no romantic memory of savage innocence here, an unspoiled time before civilization... Cities are monuments to human labour. They provide shelter, from one generation to the next. But they can also get tied up with the wrong in itself. To make a name for oneself is not wrong in itself. But in Genesis 11, the final episode, in primordial time, city building is connected by the citizens of Babel with an effort to thwart God's designs...²³

R. Seitz at last concludes,

To be the church in the city is to bear a degree of unmerited suffering... To be church in the city is to take up a cross simply because Babylon's fury persists and catches in its thrall those who misuse power and in so doing injure the helpless. Because cities are locations of amassed resources and raw power, proud towers are built, which often fall on the innocent.²⁴

This is the on-going problem we are still witnessing, yet our quest remains—how do we respond theologically to build an ecologically responsible community of city of God?

Can We Say all Human Initiatives End Badly?

As we know from the Bible there are many arguments for and against new ecologically sound futuristic worlds. Odil Hannes Steck puts the dilemma in following words,

For the future of the world of creation opened up in the Christ-event shows the existing world to be a fallen one, which has still its temporal existence but not significant future arising from its own initiative. It shows autocratic man as the cause of this destruction of the meaning of elemental in his natural world and environment. It makes it evident that human endeavors to form the natural world and environment into a world that is just and perfect according to man's own standards are simply madness. It is a madness which unmask the sinner who pushes God out and has as future only death, transience, and loss of significance. It thereby reveals a sober view of the natural world as we see it, and preserves us from ecological

²³Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God*, 18-19.

²⁴Caral E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *The Two Cities of God*, 23.

illusions, as well as from frustration over the gap between utopia and reality.

On the other hand, it is just as strongly opposed to all resignation and despair about the world; for it makes it equally clear that in Christ God turns to man, his life, and all created things with the offer of meaning, salvation, and righteousness in a perfect, final world. God now points men and women through Christ to this future event, which is already beginning, thereby liberating them from having all by themselves to give their worldly existence contentment and meaning, even though it is existence in illusion, anxiety, fear, madness and violence.²⁵

City from Eco-perspective

The topic, City of God, has already, although from Biblical, Christian conservative understanding of mission, been dealt many eschatological, secular perspectives, and now it is time for doing it in an ecological perspective. Present realities include displacement out of urbanization, migration, slums, growing infrastructure buildings like airports, industrial estates and highways, roads displacing the farm lands, pollution, waste disposal problems, health hazards, congested population, registered call-girls centres and red light areas. However these are untouched as yet in the discussion of the city of God. The cities also give rise to individualism and competition, loss of solidarity, a feeling of rootlessness, isolation and solitude; it can impoverish human and family relationships and provoke the break up of the family. All this leads to an increase in crime and in psychological illness, etc. Hence religious people like Kabir puts it: "A settled town or city may provide a fine life with pleasures at every turn; but if it lacks friends of God, I regard it as a desert" (Sakhi 4.4).²⁶ The question resonates whether it is possible to evolve a society without such problems as those mentioned above? The present scenario of such problems is alarmingly threatening the survival of the marginalized rather than of the centre. Is that the vision of our city of God—society marginalizing half of the population? Therefore the challenge is to preserve human values (love, trust, pity, friendly affection) and ensure the security and integration of the citizens in a humanized milieu of justice, righteousness, peace and integrity of creation.²⁷

²⁵Odil Hannes, Steck, *World & Environment*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1980, 288.

²⁶Cited by Julian Saldanha, "From Garden to City," 267.

²⁷Cited by Julian Saldanha, "From Garden to City," 267.

In a recent article on city development, although from secular point of view, Sunita Narayan pleads with us to rethink our city visions. For her the Indian cities are dumped with 'piles of garbage and glitzy new shopping malls' and asks,

Is this our vision of urban development? There is no question that cities are imploding; growth is happening faster than we ever imagined. Construction is booming and expansion is gobbling agricultural land. But the quality of life is no better. In most parts there is traffic, dust, air pollution and most of all the chaos of unplanned growth. Road expansion is eating up lines of shady trees... majestic trees hacked down mercilessly. The city's lungs are going, and so are its sponges, as water bodies are making way for buildings.²⁸

In the context of this ecological degradation, is it not good to consider what could be the vision of the City of God? Could it not be an ecologically sound vision? Are we still planning to pursue the current pattern of development to the vision of the City of God? Is there any possibility of having 'no waste economy' sort of life style in the City of God as propounded by J.C. Kumarappa? Cannot humans live without dumping wastage at neighbour's backyard (NIMBY)?

However eco-theologian, Paul Santmire is aware of such problems, and is very hopeful of renewing the present urban state into a very sustainable existence under Christ's reign.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" – we have already seen that this text in the New Testament points to Jesus as an Eschatological figure who comes to inaugurate the beginning of the end time. Now I want to underline this crucial fact, which I passed by earlier. Jesus inaugurates the beginning of the ending of all things by entering into Jerusalem. Jesus hereby reclaims Jerusalem as the city of God, the city that is to be redeemed, as the centre of the promise coming up the New Heavens and the New Earth, a theme picked up by the seer of the book of Revelation, as we have seen. In this sense Biblical testimony is not just anthropocentric (as well as being cosmo-centric). Right in the middle, in its heart, it is urba-centric.²⁹

"Urba-centric," for Santmire, "... means developing new approaches to human dwelling places and neighborhoods and cities themselves,

²⁸Sunita Narayan, "A Tale of Two Cities," Editorial - *Down to Earth*, October, 18, 2012.

²⁹H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature*, 236.

for the sake of just and equitable and sustainable and indeed beautiful homes for all.”³⁰ He writes that many Americans—Christians who have been shaped by Anti-urban (anti-earth?) vision, no less than others—we have to experience a renewal of their minds (cf. Rom 12:2). Biblically speaking, the glass of the city is half full. This time is long overdue to see the city not as a bottomless pit of problems, but as a rich well of promise. To illustrate this truth, he quotes at length from an essay by two urban advocates, Douglas Foy and Robert Healy, “Cities are the answer.” They write,

The old paradigm of the pollution-filled city as blight on the landscape and the leafy- green suburbs with pristine lawns as the ideal is outdated and does not lead us to a future of energy independence, clean air and a stable climate. Cities are the best hope to realize our need for a bright, sustainable and promising future.³¹

In similar vein E. Calvin expects something unimaginable or miraculous to happen at the end times by God, and writes,

What, then, might the Bible tell us of the human adventure? If we are looking for a biblical image to guide environmental thought, it must be New Jerusalem, the final culmination of a harmonious city where the groaning and the travail of nature itself finally cease. As Revelation makes it clear, that unimaginable conclusion will come only at the end of time and by God’s final action. In the meantime, we can only hope to move closer to a condition that will ultimately not be the result of our efforts. Our choice is not between a robust civilization and a mostly undisturbed nature. Our choice is between a better civilization and nature... and a fearful flight from our own powers that, given our numbers today, will spell disaster for civilization and nature.³²

However E. Calvin did not leave entire efforts with God but he had consciously moved out of cities into a rural farm setting.

..You see, it is possible for mankind to tame and even settle a region without robbing it of its beauty. It is possible for us even to develop an area’s resource without destroying either its magnificence—as

³⁰H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature*, 239.

³¹Cited by H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature*, 239.

³²E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate*, Michigan: Action Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty & Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, 212-213.

well-managed selective cutting in the lumber business can show—
its suitability as habitat for wild creatures.³³

Creating a new atmosphere in a rural setting perhaps would solve the problems to a great extent provided all modern basic facilities were available. It may not be quite as easy for other people like him. However the question of sustainability is very important issue. Are Christians interested to achieve that goal? Can we find, in the meantime, a technology to realise zero level of CO₂ emission? Kumarappa used to propose a model of countryside of England in 1950s alongside Indian citification, a combination of pre-modern and modern, village-ism and urbanism, keeping all those modern city problems in mind.³⁴

New Heaven and Labour Issues

We need to bear in mind that the ultimate vision of the city of God in the Bible is understood to remove the pain, suffering, tears and death, but not labour (Rev 21:4). This clarity is very vital for any biblical believers. City of God does not promise labour-free society, rather Book of Isaiah (65:23) emphasises very specifically that the labour will not be done in vain. This simply means a state where the labour will not be exploited by anyone and all labour will be rewarded justly. The people who are involved in constructing homes for others will enjoy their own home as well and thus all the labourers will not be involved just for others only but they will also enjoy the fruits of their labour. The labour will not be the cause for anyone's tears, suffering and death. Jesus said that the birds, animals and nature will not labour (Mt 6:28) and he meant a labour without accumulation. According to the capitalist understanding any labour must involve extraction of work, surplus production, profit, accumulation, investment, etc. The biblical vision of 'new heaven and new earth' has to be understood rather as a space where labour without exploitation happens. By nature the labour is not of a suffering, curse and burden-producing character but it has been made burdensome and tends to be transferred onto others by those who are dominant. Selfless labour is an enjoyment and gift for community living.

³³E. Calvin Beisner, 126.

³⁴Solomon Victus, *Religion and Eco-Economics of J.C.Kumarappa: Gandhism Redefined*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2003, 243.

The Bible also rejects the idea of permanent rest. The concept of rest also paves the way for another sort of exploitation. 'Rest for only myself' sort of thinking makes everyone extract labour from others and also makes them create surplus labour and overtime labour. Kumarappa emphasises that words such as labour, toil, drudgery and violence must be distinguished from each other. The labour must be used to fulfil the needs of the human personality. Labour is an inevitable gift of God.³⁵

Towards a Garden City of God

Although the concrete future of history as well as of mystery belongs to God (Deut 29:29), our role in transforming it towards his liberative end is inevitable and in no way does it work against God's plan indicated in the Bible. No doubt as far as my opinion is concerned, humans, the bearer of God's image, are given the task of witnessing to be channels of transformation of earth and society through justice, peace and integrity of creation. Ray Blakke at one point rightly understood the key components of the City of God as building from the vision of the Book of Isaiah (Is 65:17-25): Public celebrations and happiness (vv. 17-25), Public health for children and aged (v. 20), Housing for all (v. 21), Food for all (v. 22), Family support systems (v. 23), Absence of violence (v. 25).³⁶ Nevertheless this vision although it is not directly connected with industrial pollution and all, it implicitly has a connection with healthy life for all. But according to Roger S. Greenway, those cities mentioned in O.T. without sin would have been temple cities, and all the worship and praise would have been to the one true God. They would have been theocentric, covenant cities, honouring God by perfect obedience and benefiting the inhabitants in every way. Each might appropriately have been called "Holy City of God." But such cities have not happened in that way in history so far.³⁷

The redemption drama in the Bible which began in a garden will end in a city, the New Jerusalem. Heaven's citizens will be urbanites. Drawn by bonds of grace from all races, nations, and language groups, new-city citizens will live together in perfect harmony as God's redeemed people, his new covenant community. This understanding leads many Christians to interpret in another way. For

³⁵Solomon Victus, *Religion and Eco-Economics of J.C.Kumarappa*, 104.

³⁶Ray Blakke, *A Theology as Big as the City*, 83.

³⁷Roger S. Greenway & Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*, 4.

Instance, Meredith Kline points out that it was plainly by an act of grace and mercy that, after Adam and Eve had fallen into sin and broken covenant with God, God again appointed a city structure for the benefit of the human race (Gen 4:1-6:8).³⁸ We can not be simply satisfied with such narrow interpretations and solutions to the city problems; rather our challenge is how to transform the world to be in a more liveable way in tune with God's abundance of life principle displacing forces of death.

Conclusion

If the Garden is considered to be the work of God, we might say that the city is the work of humans.³⁹ However it is not out of aversion to the city but out of a sustainability point of view the present city model is discouraged. Moreover without any strong base from the life of Jesus Christ, strong arguments for the City of God have become baseless to Christians. The very Biblical term 'City of God' itself is misleading in our highly polarized context. The New Jerusalem need not be either based on city or country side; what is required is to develop a new liberative culture which emerges out of the merger of two valuable cultures.

In most of the cases the cities behave in an anti-rural manner by exploiting rural resources and people, treating them to be an unnecessary appendix and consumer market and dumping unsustainable urban cultures on them. The present urbanism is at war with the countryside and powerless country folk are yielding to the dominant urbanization process. In a way the urbanites have more faith on the imported processed tin foods than on the natural fresh food from the peasants. Therefore we need to identify the usable past of the country side; apart from these usable parts many of the traditional oppressive elements like castism, patriarchy, feudal oppressions and superstitions are already there, which need to be rooted out slowly. On the other hand the existing city life was never concerned about the life of the rural people, their basic needs, subsistence economy, receiving a fair price for their products and their practice of simple natural life; rather the rural areas are seen as the dumping ground of the heaps of wastages produced by the urban

³⁸Cited by Roger S. Greenway & Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*, 4.

³⁹Julian Saldanha, "From Garden to City," 261.

people. On both sides deculturalization should take place. The rural people must give up certain oppressive feudal as well as modern consumerist practices and the urban people must also get rid of similar practices from the globalization fever. We need to change the reductionist understanding of redemption of soul to socio-cultural aspects. What is required is repentance by both side of the cultures of the past and present and try to mutually appreciate and discover liberative elements.

We often forget the fact that urbanization can flourish only where agriculture flourishes and most large cities are located in rich farming areas. Cities depend on farms for food, and farms depend on cities for manufactured products. Using a term from biology, one can say that the relationship between farm and city in contemporary society is symbiotic; the one can not exist without the other.⁴⁰ Any attempt to neglect the rural economy and ecological future would be disastrous. It is appropriate to summarise this discussion with the words of Raymond Williams, one of the visionaries of neo socialism:

The only sustainable objective of a Common Agricultural policy is... the maintenance of a viable rural economy and society...(p232). None of these complex matters can be resolved within the simplifying images of a polarized 'country' and 'city'. I would take the naming of 'wilderness' - a cultural import from the United States - as an example. It is indeed important that some 'wild' places should be kept open and within the forms of natural growth... (p236). The most hopeful social and political movement of our time is the very different and now emergent ' green socialism', within which ecology and economics can become, as they should be, a single science and source of values, leading on to a politics of equitable livelihood.⁴¹

⁴⁰Roger S. Greenway & Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*, 107-108.

⁴¹Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, 232-237.