Seeking the Welfare of the City

A remarkable conference on the city—Chicago in particular—was convened May 30-June 3 on the theme of “Reading the World: Developing a Christian Perspective for Our Times.” The conveners were Prof. Brad Breems of Trinity Christian College and Clinton Stockwell, director of the Chicago Semester, a program for undergraduate students in the heart of the city (www.chicagosemester.org; 312-922-3243).

In the last half century, cities throughout the world have grown tremendously. Many of the largest cities in the world are fraught with dangerous or degrading crime, slums, poverty, pollution, and congestion. Yet cities epitomize the complex, multifaceted meaning of human community in which the manifold gifts and callings that God has given men and women can be realized simultaneously. How should Christians read our urbanizing world and contribute to the welfare of the cities in which we live? That was the question addressed by noted urbanologists R.C. Longworth and Larry Bennett, by social/cultural scholars David Lyon and Jan Nederveen Pieterse, by art critic Calvin Seerveld, by social/political commentators Govert Buijs and James Skillen, and by an equal number of additional panelists and workshop leaders. For more on the conference and its resources, go to the Chicago Semester web site.

Govert Buijs, who teaches social and political philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam, spoke on the early Christian and medieval sources of what today is often referred to as civil society organizations—the reality of which one sees abounding in most of the world’s cities. A background text on which Dr. Buijs based his presentation was published just before the conference as an occasional essay—“The Promises of Civil Society”—distributed by the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (contact iapche@dordt.edu). Below are some slightly edited excerpts from that essay.

—The Editor
Civil Society and the City

by

Govert J. Buijs

The antecedent to the emergence of civil society is the societies of the heroic-imperial type. There have been quite a number of these, enough to justify the hypothesis that it is somehow the default option of humankind. Think of the great and small empires [of biblical times: Assur, Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Rome]. There we encounter warring tribes and cities, and every now and then one tribe or city becomes the dominant power and develops into something called an empire. This political situation is reflected in ancient interpretations of the universe itself and especially of the gods: the universe is often portrayed as the result of a primordial war between different gods, and the gods continue to be experienced as warriors.

Historically, we encounter several attempts to break away from this heroic-imperial constellation. The first is definitely Israel’s exodus—an event very much underrated in the history of political ideas.

Another, much later, attempt in the classical world, both Greek and Roman, is what Aristotle coined as *koinonia politike* and Cicero later called *societas civilis*, phrases that are the ancestors of our present-day term “civil society.” Characteristic of these attempts is the conviction that the well-being of the political community is the responsibility of each citizen. However, the notion of well-being, and therefore well-doing, is deeply colored by a moral horizon in which the honor and glory of the city remains pivotal. This implies that the institutional energy is focused on society as a whole, which should be powerful and honorable among all nations.

[In the background of this understanding of the classical city] there remains operative an ontology of fate and power. This precludes any perception of the universe that could justify a non-violent or non-domination-oriented pattern of human behavior. The general spirit remains “imperial.” [Consequently,] the public sphere is not a platform for a plurality of free associations, but is itself an [all-encompassing] association. So public life consists of individual citizens or of family groups, but not of free associations.

The moral horizon in the West was redrawn by Christianity. This gave rise to a new type of civility, that which can be described as a compromise between a transcendent vision and a reticent, immanent world. The new community envisioned by St. Paul had its citizenship in heaven. This, on principle, did not imply a withdrawal from this world but a new way of living in it and of obeying a new law, not the law of power and glory but the law of *agape* [love]. In light of the transcendent vision, the classical civil morality and its concomitant public sphere were found wanting. Over against the ethos of pride, honor and civil courage, the Christian ethic concentrates on the notion of *agape* and denial of self. Worldly glory is vainglory, *vanitas*. Doing good is
not intended to be visible to others, but only to God. Being a Christian then entails a mental exodus from the classical do ut des scheme [give in order to receive] toward a scheme basically inspired by divine grace: do quia mihi datum est (I can give because much has been given to me).

Beneficence (*euergeteia*) or philanthropy is now meant to be hidden, a private act, rather than a public display. But it is public in the sense that its beneficiaries are not confined to an inner, private circle, but are found on the streets, in the naked public square, along the roads: they are those who are in need for whatever reason. So the private act requires public presence: for example, buildings are built or bought to serve as shelter houses for the disabled, the homeless, the poor, the orphaned, etc.

Furthermore, this precarious construction gave rise to a type of community that at first sight might be thought of as “uncivil”—the monasteries. But even the contemplative orders perceived themselves as existing for the well-being of all. Moreover, they embodied a new sense of the dignity of human labor, which had been despised in antiquity, but now was recognized as an essential part of the human condition. *Ora et labora* (pray and work) was St. Benedict’s dictum. And even a purely hermetic monk like St. Pambo refused to eat anything for which he had not previously worked.

However, Christianity really entered the civil sphere in the establishment of the medieval cities of Northern Italy and especially Northwestern Europe. These cities could be called an experiment in Christian civility. The exodus from the bondage of feudalism turned out to be a societal experiment of world-historical significance. The city is a worldly, though not at all a secular community. Out of an explicitly Christian inspiration [the medieval cities] realized what can be called a Western value coalition of free participation, social justice, and care for the weak—three key elements of many contemporary accounts of civil society. Moreover, we find here a keen sense of a differentiated social structure, in which different human activities are given their own institutional setting, in guilds, religious orders, lay orders, hospitals and orphanages, and what came to be known as universities.

So we must [therefore] take issue here with a genre of interpretations of Christianity often inspired by German Pietism that treat Christianity as entirely otherworldly. These interpretations tend to overlook the impact of Christianity, exactly because it had the duality of otherworldliness and this-worldliness, even in its more contemplative expressions.

Crucial for the proper functioning of this value coalition was the [ever present] possibility of experiencing guilt and forgiveness. It served as a constant reminder of the fallibility and the temporal character of the civil experiment. It safeguarded both on an individual and on a collective level civil society’s non-utopian character. For as soon as the awareness of imperfection and self-limitation erodes, the civil experiment is in jeopardy. It becomes vulnerable to various absolute threats, either the temptation to
view the accumulation of wealth as the central goal of the civil experiment, or the temptation to create an even better, more perfect world. So the efforts to establish civil societies are threatened by new absolute powers: state absolutism, religious fanaticism, and market possessivism.

[As a consequence, we should interpret the quest for the development of civil society in our day] as a protest movement against the disparity, the ominous divide, between the moral aspirations of Western culture on the one hand, and the actual developments of society at large, particularly those of politics and economics, on the other hand. Neither the sovereign state with its raison d’etat [reasons of state], nor the sovereign economy with its invisible-hand mechanism, seems to qualify as an embodiment of civil hopes as they had been articulated in medieval times.