




2-2010

## Review of: T. J. Gorringer. The Common Good and the Global Emergency: God and the Built Environment

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### Recommended Citation

Stiltner, B. "Book Review: T. J. Gorringer, The Common Good and the Global Emergency: God and the Built Environment." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25.1 (2012): 96-99. Web.

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**Review of:** T. J. Gorringer. *The Common Good and the Global Emergency: God and the Built Environment*. Cambridge University Press. 2011. xii+267 pp. \$90.00/£55.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-107-00201-2.

**Appeared in:** *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25 (February 2012): 96-99.

**DOI:** 10.1177/0953946811428260b.

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Tim Gorringer follows up his positively reviewed 2002 book *A Theology of the Built Environment* with this offering from the same publisher. The former book was notable as a sustained attempt to think theologically about the ‘built environment’. The built environment is the context that humans construct for themselves through their industry and technology; it comprises all types of physical settlements (cities, suburbs, towns, and villages), roads and transportation systems, parks and outdoor spaces, and buildings of every sort. It matters to humans how we build social spaces, for this influences our individual flourishing and the common good. While any such investigation has its precursors, Gorringer, looking back on his previous work, can rightly claim to have ‘energise[d] what was at best a very partial conversation’ (p. 13). His new book aims to extend this conversation—more extensively than did the previous book—to the ‘global emergency’, which are the crises created by humans’ impact on the natural environment taking shape in population growth, climate change, and resource depletion.

Gorringer’s goal is to develop a theologically informed ethic of planning, organizing, and living in the world we make. This ethic will be more responsive to the global emergency than most current approaches to urban planning; it will be an ethic that

builds the environment graciously. Gorringer develops this ethic through a multidisciplinary investigation, drawing on history, aesthetics, architectural theory, geography, social science, urban planning, and environmental thought. Note that I use the term ‘multidisciplinary’ rather than ‘interdisciplinary’, because I do not see here a solid methodological account of how all these disciplines relate to each other in a systematic way. Theology is part of Gorringer’s conversation, and perhaps the main guide of it. Following on the more extensive theology of his previous study, Gorringer proposes a Barth-inspired trinitarian framework as a guide for understanding God’s relationship to the built environment. God the Creator is known in order and planning, God the Reconciler is known in embodiment and communal life, and God the Redeemer underwrites creativity and utopian vision. Aquinas’s theories of the common good, grace, and beauty play a role early in the book, while later the motifs of liberation theology are alluded to.

The first two chapters set up the key themes just described. Gorringer opens the book with a meditation on the city of Siena in a passage that shows off his multidisciplinary skills at their best. He shows how the ordering of Siena around its Piazza del Campo during the Renaissance reflected the democratic values of its citizens. ‘The Nine’, late-thirteenth century magistrates, planned Siena to be beautiful, educational, and spiritually uplifting. These magistrates commissioned Ambrogio Lorenzetti to paint a fresco allegorizing good and bad government in their meeting room. Gorringer reads this fresco to elucidate the theological and cardinal virtues that should guide the planning of a city in the service of the common good. This fresco, a photo of which graces the dust jacket of the book, stands as a metaphor for Gorringer’s project. As

a work of art, it is part of the built environment of Siena. Not only is it beautiful, it conveys the moral values of those planning the city. As Gorringer says, 'the built environment is a particularly sensitive barometer of the values of a culture' (p. 13). Inspired by their built environment, the Siennese enjoyed some success at living graciously with one another. Now this fresco can serve for us (modern Westerners and Christians, at least) as a metaphor of the common good and perhaps as an inspiration to enact similar values.

The middle chapters of the book (chapters 3 to 7) employ grace as a central theological concept. Aquinas is the major theologian here (though his relationship to Barth is not worked out). Grace is 'one of the divine attributes' which 'characterises the heart of all reality' (p. 43). Grace can be apprehended in such qualities as beauty, justice, and proportion. Each of these qualities connects a theology of grace to our lived and built reality. For instance, 'a long tradition of thought wants to insist on the connection between grace and proportion, and... say that building which respects this connection at the same time both reflects and helps to build better human societies' (p. 51). Gorringer opens up the theme of grace in his reflections on key elements of the built environment: place, politics, planning, public space, and settlements. Notable elements of this part of the book are his survey of eight types of public space, his support for a 'bioregional paradigm' over an 'industrio-scientific paradigm' of planning, and his comparison of the British cities of Plymouth and Milton Keynes. Post-war Plymouth is a positive and realistic example of morally responsible planning and development. By contrast, the planning of the 'new city' of Milton Keynes in 1967 was modernist, bureaucratic, and thus somewhat empty of meaning and style. Gorringer is not strongly critical of Milton

Keynes, but thinks that it fails to live up to one of his core principles for settlements: ‘the first thing any settlement needs is faith, something to believe in’ (p. 161). This suburban settlement doesn’t know what it stands for. The latter chapters of the book (chapters 8 to 11) are somewhat closer to applied ethics, as they consider the challenges of feeding the city, connecting the city with transportation, housing people in the modern city, and retaining humane architecture in the modern city. Through these chapters, the author again ranges widely, while grace remains an occasional touchstone: the ultimate question is how to have ‘settlements in grace’, that is, how to live graciously in light of the global emergency.

*The Common Good and the Global Emergency* makes a meaningful contribution to the conversation of theology with architecture and urban planning. It is worth reading for at least three reasons. First, Gorringer’s multidisciplinary approach generates fascinating ideas. Readers are likely to learn a number of things they didn’t know. Second, the concept of grace does sound theological work in this study. Third, Gorringer’s tone is always balanced, generous, and reasoned. For instance, he does not romanticize small towns. He is not deeply critical of any particular form in which people choose to build and live, yet he is still able to assess the shortcomings of the suburban form. Each of these strengths has a corresponding weakness. First, the multidisciplinary approach can be dizzying. People not familiar with architecture and related disciplines will feel slightly lost by Gorringer’s name-dropping. This situation is exacerbated by poor planning: terms like ‘vernacular’ and ‘pedigreed tradition’ are not defined until long after they are first used, and many authors are not described when first quoted. Second, the theological framework of the book is not consistently evident. Grace remains a

touchstone, but the trinitarian framework that Gorringer emphasizes at the end of chapter 1 rarely makes a return appearance in the book. *Studies in Christian Ethics*'s review of the 2002 book chided its 'theological sprawl' (a play on Gorringer's concern with urban sprawl), a problem which is also evident here. Third, the global emergency that is emphasized in the title and in chapter 2 is not addressed in detail. Chapters 8 to 11 are the application of gracious planning to the environmental problems of food, transportation, and housing. The chapter on housing is the most successful of these, as it addresses the challenge of slums in detail and develops some original ideas that flow from his theology and other research. By contrast, the chapter on transportation takes a side trip to ancient Roman roads and concludes with fairly broad claims such as 'unless we can learn to journey more lightly humankind will destroy its habitat' (p. 229). It is puzzling that the author conveys little urgency about the emergency, as reflected in his choice to make the penultimate chapter a calm investigation of the virtues of architecture.

Because of the close connection of this book with the author's previous book, I found it necessary to read *A Theology of the Built Environment* in order properly to review *The Common Good and the Global Emergency*. My conclusion is that the current book is unusual, for it is all-new, yet very much the same as the first book. In my opinion, no significantly new avenues or applications are opened up; the same questions govern and almost all the same topics are explored, yet these questions and topics are treated in dialogue with different authors from the same fields. Using a metaphor from the built environment, I would compare reading the books to taking a second holiday to a city known for its tourist sights. On the second trip, one might return to several of the most important sights that were visited the first time, while also visiting different locations.

The experience would be one of returning to familiar ground, confirming the major impressions of the first visit while learning about some new things.

I do not claim that nothing is new here. The biggest differences are that the current book gives more attention to the global environmental crisis (but the first book also treated this topic) and uses more examples from actual cities (the Plymouth and Milton Keynes case studies). The first book gave more sustained attention to theologians and the trinitarian framework. Reading reviews of the 2002 book, one finds general appreciation for Gorringer's promotion of the theme of the built environment, for his wide reading, and for his reasoned approach. One also sees reviewers complaining that the theological framework is incomplete and at times unclear, that the multidisciplinary investigation raises more interesting questions than detailed answers, and that the role of actual churches in the actual cities and towns of today is left curiously vague. Those same benefits and weaknesses can be found in the current book. So which book should one read, if either? If one has read the first book and greatly enjoyed its discussions of the history, philosophy, and sociology of architecture and urban planning, then there are many additional gems to be found in the current book. Other readers of the first book might not have a strong reason to read this book. Those who have read neither book would benefit from knowing about Gorringer's project. Either book seems apt for that purpose, though I find the current book to be more readable and down-to-earth.

Even if Tim Gorringer has not broken new ground in this second study of the built environment, his book is illuminating and thought-provoking. He has spurred a conversation in theological circles that ought to continue. He models a well reasoned conversation of theology with other disciplines. Thanks to Gorringer's efforts, theological

ethicists will be able to see plenty of avenues for future studies on the theme of the built environment, including applied environmental ethics, ecclesiological studies, and crosscultural investigations.