SPIRITUALITY IN THE CITY

Encountering the Other

Chad Thralls

IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES over the past eight years, and now in his recent book *The Spiritual City*, Philip Sheldrake has brought the issue of cities as the place and context of people's lives to the forefront of discussions about contemporary spirituality. In a 2006 essay in this publication entitled 'Cities and Human Community: Spirituality and the Urban', Sheldrake discussed the growing urbanisation of the planet and some dynamics of the role that cities play as the context where the spiritual life is actually lived. He is especially interested in the way cities are planned and how this planning should 'reinforce a sense that human life is sacred'.[1] By emphasizing the importance of the city as place and context, Sheldrake is consciously trying to steer the discussion of spirituality away from a rhetoric of interiority towards its significance in the realm of public life.

Sheldrake's work emphasizes that place matters. And cities are a specific kind of place. Cities cultivate habits and practices that differ from the ways that people go about their daily lives in villages, small towns or suburbs. By highlighting the importance of the city as the place where an increasing number of people live, Sheldrake invites us to think about some of the things that make cities different from other places and the impact that these factors have on our relationship with God.

I moved to New York City four years ago. One aspect of city living is that you come into contact with other people in a more intense manner than in small towns or suburbs. Cultural difference, or the 'other', is encountered in a fundamentally different way from how it is encountered in less populated places. Sociologists use the idea of the 'other' in describing a process of identity formation by exclusion. In most big cities, it is natural to expect significant cultural diversity. People of various religions, races, ethnicities and sexual orientations mix together in cities.

[1] Philip Sheldrake, 'Cities and Human Community: Spirituality and the Urban', *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006), 108.

The Way, 54/2 (April 2015), 83–89

These differences are simple cultural differences. But sometimes one group comes to define itself against those who are not included in the group: the *other* possesses a trait or characteristic that they wish to exclude from their group. This allows the construction of an identity by the in-group, but results in the stigmatization of those outside. The existence of the other allows the in-group to construct an identity by deciding, often on an arbitrary basis, that specific others do not belong.

Encountering the other happens most often for me in the basic process of navigating the sidewalk. I sold my car when I moved to New York, so my primary means of transport is walking. When you travel this way, there is no vehicle to insulate you from the other travellers around you. I enjoy not having to drive and fight for parking along busy city streets. Almost everything I need is within walking distance. But instead of roads and vehicles separating me from my destination, hundreds of people stand between me and my groceries.

The sidewalks of New York are usually so crowded that you cannot avoid interacting with other people. I do not find them conducive to a leisurely stroll. (When I moved here, an acquaintance advised me to 'walk with purpose'.) Few of my fellow pedestrians are walking at the pace at which I prefer to walk. Tourists look up at the buildings. Someone might dart in front of you at any moment; the person directly ahead of you might suddenly stop dead in her tracks to check something on her mobile phone. And everyone moves as if where he or she is going is more important than where you are going.

When I walk in the city, I interact with scores of other people every day. But these interactions are quite brief, because we are in motion. There are two places, however, where cities bring us intimately into contact with the other on a frequent basis. The first is public transport. In a piece in the *Christian Century*, the luminous preacher Barbara Brown Taylor professes her love for the subway system in Atlanta, Georgia, the MARTA. She describes a few of the pleasures she derives from this mode of transport:

> To sit shoulder to shoulder with a woman in a printed silk sari, even if we never acknowledge each other's presence; to listen to the pounding rhythms that escape the headset of the black teenager in front of me; to watch the baby in the pink pantsuit hanging over her mother's shoulder, making eyes at the hung-over man whom everyone else pretends not to see.[2]

[2] Barbara Brown Taylor, 'The Subway Incident', *Christian Century*, 115/26 (7 October 1998), 909.

Taylor writes as a tourist. She lives in the country, and when she visits Atlanta she enjoys seeing the diversity of people in the city. I felt this way when I moved to New York. When I first arrived in the city, it was exciting to see all the different kinds of people. It was fun to see people dressed in styles I had never imagined before and to see performers doing their best to entertain passengers as they travelled underneath the city. After having been here for four years now, however, my experience of public transport is no longer that of a tourist.

My daily commute involves riding the subway to Penn Station and then hopping on a train from there to New Jersey. On the mornings and afternoons of my working week, I have a commute of an hour and twenty minutes in each direction. There is no quiet coach on the commuter trains I take. As I try to read, mark papers or simply relax after a long day, it is impossible to avoid the other people around me. I do not find it appealing when people listen to music without headphones or engage in loud phone conversations. I have recently begun wearing headphones myself so that I can play music to drown out the noise of those around me.

Another place where it is impossible to avoid coming into close contact with other people is the grocery store. City supermarkets attempt to stock most of the items found in suburban ones in half the space. The closest grocery to my apartment is Trader Joe's. This chain is extremely popular with budget-minded shoppers. The one around the corner from my apartment has 26 checkouts. Unless you go quite early in the morning or late in the evening, a pair of checkout queues up to 60 paces long (or more) snake through the aisles of the store. The lines move more quickly than you might imagine, but you still start out with dozens of people in front of you. And while you stand there, slowly pushing your red shopping basket six inches forward with your right

foot each time the line moves, it is impossible to isolate yourself from the crush of people.

The US novelist David Foster Wallace wrote about his experience of shopping in his celebrated commencement address at Kenyon College in Ohio from 2005, titled 'This Is Water'. In order to describe to recent college graduates what day-to-day adult life is like, he narrates a typical week-night visit. He writes,

> So getting to the store takes way longer than it should, and when you finally get there, the supermarket is very crowded, because of course it's the time of day when all the other people with jobs also try to squeeze in some grocery shopping. And the store is hideously lit and infused with soul-killing muzak or corporate pop and it's pretty much the last place you want to be but you can't just get in and quickly out; you have to wander all over the huge, over-lit store's confusing aisles to find the stuff you want and you have to maneuver your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts and eventually you get all your supper supplies, except now it turns out there aren't enough checkout lanes open even though it's the end-of-the-day rush. So the checkout line is incredibly long, which is stupid and infuriating. But you can't take your frustration out on the frantic lady working the register, who is overworked at a job whose daily tedium and meaninglessness surpasses the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college.[3]

He continues by describing the commentary running inside his head during this experience,

> My natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me. About MY hungriness and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home, and it's going to seem for all the world like everybody else is just in my way. And who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are, and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem in the checkout line, or at how annoying and rude it is that people are talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line. And look at how deeply and personally unfair this is.[4]

Living in a city means coming into closer contact with other people than we would if we lived in a less populated place. What do these annoying experiences of others have to do with one's spirituality?

[3] David Foster Wallace, 'This Is Water', available at http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words, accessed 18 June 2014.
[4] Wallace, 'This Is Water'.

In the second and third points of the Contemplation to Attain Love, which close the Fourth Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius states that God 'dwells' in everything and that 'God … works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth' (Exx 235–236). Here we find one of the foundational principles of the Ignatian tradition, namely the encouragement to 'find God in all things'. In a classic article in *The Way Supplement*, Maurice Giuliani wrote about Ignatian retreats in daily life. In such a format, he claims, formal times of prayer are still essential. But when placed among the responsibilities of daily life, attention to the movement of the spirits outside formal times of prayer grows in importance. The retreat in daily life highlights that everyday situations can become spiritual exercises and that ordinary activities 'are potentially revealing to someone who is aware and sensitive'.[5] This understanding of the significance of ordinary moments is also reflected in the work of Michel de Certeau. Sheldrake claims that behind de Certeau's social-scientific project *The Practice of Everyday Life* is his lifelong interest in Ignatian spirituality.[6]

Everyday situations can become spiritual exercises

So where does this leave us? There are moments of everyday life when city-dwellers cannot avoid coming into contact with the other. When we do so, this usually does not elicit our kindest, most generous thoughts about the people we encounter. When our personal space is violated on the subway, or when someone is loud, rude or obnoxious only inches from us, our most uncharitable thoughts about those who differ from us arise. What should we do with these thoughts?

In his commencement address, David Foster Wallace is interested in teaching new university graduates survival skills for day-to-day adult life. He wants these young adults to learn how to navigate the boring and frustrating situations that regularly confront us all. He writes,

> The traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm [going to] be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop.[7]

Wallace is interested in what the graduates give their attention to. He uses his experience in the grocery store to provide an example of a situation

[5] Maurice Giuliani, 'The Ignatian Exercises in Daily Life', *The Way Supplement*, 49 (Spring 1984), 89.
[6] Philip Sheldrake, 'Michel de Certeau: Spirituality and the Practice of Everyday Life', *Spiritus*, 12/2 (Fall 2012), 207–209.
[7] Wallace, 'This Is Water'.

in which different interpretations are possible. He argues that if you interpret experiences of being confined in small spaces with lots of other people as these people being in *your* way and wasting *your* time, then this attitude will eventually 'eat you alive'.[8] He pulls back the curtain of everyday adult life for these graduates to try to get them to see that they have an option as to how they will interpret such experiences, and that this interpretation will make all the difference as to whether or not they will be able to navigate life as happy and well-adjusted people.

Wallace is interested in the mental health and sanity of his audience. Another way to approach what to do with our thoughts about the other comes from the psychoanalyst and scholar of religion Ann Ulanov. Ulanov is interested in how the unconscious affects our ability to live full, abundant lives. She refers to the thoughts that emerge from the unconscious as 'primary speech'.[9] Our primary speech is composed, as Freud theorized, of raw, instinctual content that, if always acted out, would endanger others and ourselves. But it is also composed of untapped potentialities for life that need to be integrated and lived.

Ulanov insists that the voices making up our primary speech are all parts of ourselves. They are voices that need to be heard and listened to. It is essential that we acknowledge all the voices inside us. We must be honest about who we are, both to confess the unhealthy bits and to incorporate those voices with the potential to bring us new life. Prayer, for her, is an inner conversation in which we gather up all the voices inside us, listen to what they have to say, and use them as conversation starters in our dialogue with God. In this process, we grow in knowledge of self and God.

One of the core practices of the Spiritual Exercises is the Examen. Twice a day, retreatants are asked to make an examination of conscience (Exx 130–131). In this practice, the retreatants looks back over their day in an attempt to recall moments of sin. Cities provide two specific places that furnish excellent material for such examinations. In the encounters we have while using public transport and navigating the shopping process, we become aware of our worst thoughts about others. We become aware of what we really think about people who differ from us.

At the end of the working day, in the long checkout queue at the grocery story, David Foster Wallace confessed that his fellow shoppers

[8] Wallace, 'This Is Water'.
[9] Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982).

around him appeared 'repulsive', 'stupid', and 'cow-like'.[10] Living in a city offers the opportunity to practise the Examen in everyday life. It offers the opportunity to observe our secret feelings about others and confess them. It gives us a chance to see beyond our momentary inconvenience and realise that all these other people are just like us, stuck in the same situation, just wanting to pay for their groceries and get home. If embraced, these moments allow us to see our connection to others instead of succumbing to frustration and anger. And by doing so we open ourselves to conversion and transformation.

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[10] Wallace, 'This Is Water'.