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0521814650 - A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption

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## CHAPTER I

*The theology of the built environment*

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart . . . write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.  
(Deuteronomy 6.6–9)

To be human is to be placed: to be born in this house, hospital, stable (according to Luke), or even, as in the floods in Mozambique in 2000, in a tree. It is to live in this council house, semi-detached, tower block, farmhouse, mansion. It is to go to school through these streets or lanes, to play in this alley, park, garden; to shop in this market, that mall; to work in this factory, mine, office, farm. These facts are banal, but they form the fabric of our everyday lives, structuring our memories, determining our attitudes. How, as Christians, should we think of them? Are they a proper subject for theological reflection? Here and there great theologians, notably Aquinas and Calvin, have glanced in this direction, but the built environment forms no *locus* in theological ethics except insofar as it has dealt with land and property, and with the city as a metaphor for community, or our final destination.<sup>1</sup> It is in ethics that theology has engaged with the concrete – with war, economics, work, sexuality. Why not, then, with the built environment? We are invited to do that by the very terminology involved. Paul constantly urges his congregations to ‘edify’ one another. The word ‘edify’ comes from the Latin *aedificare*, to build.<sup>2</sup> The metaphorical use of the word points to a profound truth about the built environment. Form follows function; buildings serve a purpose. For good or ill buildings, from the humblest garden shed to the grandest cathedral, make moral statements.

Learning from Barth, I take it for granted that for the theologian ethics and dogmatics cannot be separated. They are continuous sections

<sup>1</sup> Land is the theme of the third chapter, and the city of the sixth.

<sup>2</sup> A point made by K. Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1998), p. 11. The Greek word Paul uses, *oikodomeo*, has the same literal and metaphorical meaning.

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on the theological railway, not a main line (dogmatics) and a branch line (ethics). In that case, what is called for is a theological reading of the built environment. This will differ from other ethical accounts in its reference to a primarily narrative frame. Like teleological ethics, it will raise the question of the purpose of our building and planning; it will always ask about context, and to this extent resemble situation ethics; in the ongoing debate which constitutes church life it will seek to discern the command of God in this area as in others; in all cases it will be concerned with the way in which the built environment furthers human virtue or destroys it. But in each case it will do so in reference to the narratives which give us our account of the Triune God: the stories of creation, reconciliation, redemption. To the question, 'Where do we find the measure of the validity of a given form of architecture or planning?' it will reply – precisely in these narratives and their explication.<sup>3</sup>

The point of this is not, of course, to teach planners and architects what to do. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has said, 'Christianity has no direct competence in the realm of worldly structures.' This has not prevented theologians from drawing up quite precise guidelines for economic structures, as in the theories of the 'just price' and the 'just wage' and in Catholic Social Teaching, or for armed combat, as in the so-called 'just war theory'. These theories follow, because, as von Balthasar goes on, the gospel 'sends Christians into the world with an image of the human whereby and according to which they are to organise its structures as responsibly as they can'.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is still to state the matter too ecclesiocentrically. In his work in Finnish cities Seppo Kjellberg has sought to understand theology as a science of reconciliation, promoting interdisciplinary dialogue, bringing all concerned with questions of the built environment together, but offering as its own perspective an understanding of the overall purpose of humankind within creation.<sup>5</sup> We can accept this if we understand 'reconciliation' in Barth's sense, as the vivifying and revolutionary action of God within human community seeking the realisation of life in all its fullness for all people. If 'reconciliation' meant the Church adopting a managerial role, 'mediating' between rich and poor, bosses and workers, oppressors and oppressed, pouring the oil of middle axioms on the troubled waters of social conflict, it would certainly be untrue to the gospel. Christianity brings to all debates about

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> H. Urs von Balthasar, 'Liberation Theology in the Light of Salvation History' in J. V. Schall (ed.), *Liberation Theology in Latin America* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982) p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> S. Kjellberg, *Urban EcoTheology* (Utrecht: International Books, 2000), p. 26.

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the structures of the world through which we reproduce ourselves – economics, social and criminal justice, but also town planning and building – its understanding of God become flesh, ‘whereby and according to which’, as von Balthasar says, they build. In view of the silence of the tradition it is essential to insist that Christian theology has at its core a vision of the human which is especially pertinent to the built environment. In his *Ten Books of Architecture*, written in the first century BC, the Roman architect and engineer Marcus Vitruvius Pollio gave a description of the geometry of the human body which formulated the principles of classical architecture, rediscovered and taken up again at the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> For many centuries this perception provided the ground rules for an architectural practice which was by definition humanist, which sought and built according to human scale. For Vitruvius, in fact, we become human only *as* we build.<sup>7</sup> In the twentieth century another architect, Rudolph Schwartz, who regarded ethics as determinative for architecture, gave further expression to this principle.<sup>8</sup> Building, he said, is done with the whole body, so that it is the movements of the body which create living space.

What then comes into being is first and foremost circumscribed space – shelter, living space, ceremonial space, a space which replaces the space of the world. We could almost say, and indeed it is true, that building is based on the inner spaciousness of the body, on the knowledge of its extent and the form of its growth, on the knowledge of its articulation and of its power to expand. Indeed it is with the body that we experience building, with the outstretched arms and the pacing feet, with the roving glance and with the ear, and above all else in breathing. *Space is dancingly experienced.*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The passage runs: ‘For if a man be placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centred at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height, as in the case of plane surfaces which are perfectly square.’ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, tr. M. Morgan, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 73. Leonardo produced a classical illustration of this claim. See on this the excellent discussion in M. J. Ostwald and R. John Moore, *Disjecta Membra: The Architect, The Serial Killer, His Victim and Her Medical Examiner* (Sydney: Arcadia Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Vitruvius, *Ten Books*, Book 2, ch. 1, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Speaking in 1951 to architects concerned with rebuilding in Germany he told them: ‘I am terribly sorry to say this, but you only get a house by marrying and by devoting yourself to that great law. That may well be much more demanding than designing a house with wonderfully large windows. But I don’t think we can arrive at a house in any other way. And this should be the first step towards establishing a decent house, then a village, then a city.’ Quoted in Harries, *Function*, p. 363.

<sup>9</sup> R. Schwartz, *The Church Incarnate* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), p. 27 (my italics).

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This is a profound expression of the Vitruvian view, though the conclusion is more of an eschatological hope than a lived reality. In the twentieth century such humanist architecture was more the exception than the rule, as this kind of humanism was discarded in favour of a brutalist technocracy for which ‘man’ was a ‘machine’ and buildings, accordingly, ‘machines for living in’.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, from Patrick Geddes onwards, sociologists have seen that if utopia cannot be produced by building better, at least the reverse is true, that there are environments which generate crime and physical and mental ill health.<sup>11</sup> Balthasar is right: in relation to the built environment the recovery of a new humanism is an urgent need, and in this Christian theology, as one dialogue partner amongst many, certainly has a role to play. Kjellberg, however, points out that the anthropocentrism of earlier Christian theology is inadequate. What is needed is what he calls a ‘cosmological holism’, which understands creation and incarnation, doctrine and ethics, together.<sup>12</sup> Balthasar is right that the church’s involvement in the city was always based on the doctrine of the incarnation, the idea of the ‘humanity of God’.<sup>13</sup> However, he seems to have forgotten what otherwise he has learned from Barth, that there is *no* theological assertion without its ethical correlate. It is not just Christian anthropology which determines our activity, but all the propositions of the creed. Christian faith *brings the whole Trinitarian economy of creation, reconciliation and redemption to its reflection on the world*. I shall, therefore, be attempting a Trinitarian reflection in what follows. A Trinitarian theological ethic will also, I shall argue, be a theology of grace, and for that very reason a theology of liberation.

Barth gave his entire *Dogmatics* a Trinitarian structure. He had, therefore, an ethics of creation, and planned an ethics of reconciliation and of

<sup>10</sup> The slogan of Le Corbusier. On these grounds Harries notes that it is possible to charge modernism with moral failure. *Function*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> See further on this the discussion in chapter 7. <sup>12</sup> Kjellberg, *Urban EcoTheology*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> I cannot agree with Elaine Graham’s criticism of the incarnational theology of *Faith in the City* as the perfect expression of ‘the Church of England’s position in a settled, harmonious social order’ (‘Theology in the City: Ten Years after *Faith in the City*’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78.1, 1996, p. 184). Incarnation can be an expression of the status quo, but for the Christian socialist tradition in which the Report stands it was always a reminder that God identified with the poor, and that justice demanded concrete, and more egalitarian, expression. Harvey notes that the socialist utopian literature of the nineteenth century contains a ‘powerful and important critical element’ (*Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 195). The same applies to the views of the incarnation. To appeal to the incarnation as the ground of a humanist architecture is queried by both Schopenhauer, who criticised the Christian aspiration to verticality, as opposed to the horizontal which stays close to the earth, and by Bloch who contrasts Greek corporeal-humane proportions with Christian otherworldly ones (*The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 716). But the incarnation, which begins with a story set in a cow shed, is precisely what announces a this worldly intention.

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redemption. Different aspects of human life were grouped by him under these headings. For example, he dealt with the relations of women and men, with work, with respect for life, under ‘creation’. As that which forms our ‘third skin’, however, I want to argue that the built environment relates to every area of Christian ethics, and that only a Trinitarian ethic, an ethic of creation, reconciliation, and redemption, is adequate to explore it. It is a fundamental principle of Trinitarian theology that *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*: the works of God cannot be divided. If it is God who acts, it is God who acts, not ‘parts’ of God, for God is indivisible. At the same time the Church has always spoken of ‘appropriations’, whereby we speak of some forms of divine activity more especially in terms of one person of the Trinity than another. In relation to the built environment we can say that God the Creator is the one who brings order out of chaos, and is therefore the source of all order and of the planning which gives form to our world. The perspective of creation points us away from the anthropocentric city to one in which the wider ecology is fundamentally respected. God the Reconciler is the one who ‘breaks down the walls of partition’ both between God and humans and between humans themselves. God is therefore the source of all attempts to realise community and of the justice without which community cannot survive. God the Redeemer is the author of all dreams and visions, the author of the imagination which seeks the new Jerusalem and anticipates it in structures here and now. One or other of these ‘appropriations’ lies behind my attempt to think through the question of the built environment theologically in each of the chapters that follow.

I speak here of God, the origin and end of good – which is to say, creative, reconciling, redeeming – human action. A major strand of theological reflection has wanted to confine truly good action within the sphere of the Church. We cannot say that the great pagans had true virtues, said Augustine. The best we can allow is that they did not depart from virtue very much.<sup>14</sup> I cannot share this view. God sustains in being all that is, works in and through all events, and elicits response in all created reality. It is, of course, foundational to Christian faith that God works through history, through the particularity of Israel, of Jesus of Nazareth, of the Church. In no way do I wish to reduce these historical particularities to myth or symbol. But the Christian scriptures are quite clear that God is not confined to Israel and Church, and they invite us,

<sup>14</sup> Augustine *Contra Julianum* 4.3.25. This conclusion follows because without faith it is impossible to please God, (Heb. 11.6). He wrestles with the issue from 3.18 on. This is probably the most intransigent of his Anti Pelagian treatises.

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therefore, to move from the narrative of the particular to discern God at work in all things. Redemption was finished neither on Calvary, nor at the resurrection. The work of redemption is continued by the Holy Spirit. The Messianic writings, the narratives which speak of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, together with all the texts which they presuppose, provide us with criteria to discern that work.<sup>15</sup> It is on these grounds that Aquinas, when turning his mind to the city, noted that there are two aspects of the work of God in the world, creation and governance, and invited rulers and planners to an analogous practice:

One who is about to establish a city or a realm must, in the first place, choose a suitable site; healthy, to ensure the health of the inhabitants; fertile to provide for their sustenance; one which will delight the eye with its loveliness and give natural security against hostile attack . . . Having chosen the site, the next task which confronts the founder of a city or a kingdom is to plan the area to meet all the requirements of civic life . . . one must decide where to build towns and where to leave the countryside open, or to construct fortifications: centres of study, open places for military training, and markets, all have to be taken into consideration: otherwise neither city nor kingdom would long endure attack.<sup>16</sup>

This activity, the activity of establishing a city and setting up civic life, is not outwith the remit of theology and Church precisely because of God's activity in creation and providence. If God is active and not absent, then faith in the activity of that God informs our building and planning. Because God is the Creator, says Elaine Scarry, 'making' is set apart and honoured as the most morally authoritative of acts, creating divine resonances, amongst other places, at the doorway of the house and the gateway of the city. In imaging God as Creator the Hebrew bible conceives the whole cosmos as the proper territory for acts of artifice and intelligence.<sup>17</sup> These are not autonomous, but represent responses to the Creator Spirit.

There were, of course, very good reasons for the emergence of the divide between sacred and secular, specifically the desire to avoid the worst of all forms of government, theocracy.<sup>18</sup> Here above all we see how religion can lead us into the valley of the shadow of death. In this as in

<sup>15</sup> In his condemnation of liberal theology Graham Ward seems to me to miss this point. There is a difference between *reducing* incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection to metaphors, and learning from them how it is that God acts and seeking to discern God in the world in the light of them. *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, 'On Princely Government', ch. 13 in *Selected Political Writings*, ed. A. D'Entreves (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948).

<sup>17</sup> E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 222.

<sup>18</sup> I read thus Marsiglio of Padua's *Defensor Pacis* which, in 1324, already argued for a properly secular realm. He had every reason for being sceptical of the claims of the Church.

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other areas recognition of the Lordship of Christ over every aspect of life is a quite different matter from the tutelage of the Church over every area, or even the belief that piety is always what promotes true human integrity.<sup>19</sup> But this political need cannot blind us to the foundational impossibility of generalising the divide. A Trinitarian theology cannot allow a secular and sacred divide, in which ‘secular’ occupations are left to the non theologians, and theology confined to specialists. Rather, the rationale of such a theology will be a discernment of God active in God’s world. This includes the built environment. This seems to be straightforward, but as I have noted, the written tradition is largely silent about this and amongst many Christians the secular/sacred prejudice is still strong. 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. To answer the disappointment of those who look for a book on ‘sacred’ buildings and places I begin by considering the reasons for the silence of theology about the built environment, and ways we might go about such theological reflection.

## GOD IN THE (EVERYDAY) BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Writing about the suburban house, John Archer remarks that eighteenth century European thought had articulated a number of fundamental polarities – subject/object, public/private, masculine/feminine – but that ‘such distinctions had no more than putative existence until they could be realized in the material domain of everyday life’.<sup>20</sup> One may doubt both that Archer’s polarities are the invention of the eighteenth century, and that they are exclusively European, but he is right that ideologies are only of consequence when they impinge on ‘the material domain of everyday life’ through legal and political codes, social practices, and the shaping of space. The built environment, which ‘provides us with all the most direct, frequent and unavoidable images and experiences of everyday life’, is never just happenstance.<sup>21</sup> It reflects conscious decisions which in

<sup>19</sup> As Blake puts it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: ‘Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor his accepted brethren – whom, tyrant, he calls free – lay the bound or build the roof. . . . For every thing that lives is Holy.’ *Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> J. Archer, ‘Colonial Suburbs in South Asia 1700–1850, and the Spaces of Modernity’, in R. Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> M. Smith, J. Whitelegg and N. Williams, *Greening the Built Environment* (London: Earthscan, 1998), p. 13.

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turn reflect ideologies and class positions.<sup>22</sup> ‘Grasped as an image’, says Heinrich Rombach, ‘the basic character of a farmhouse says a great deal more about the “spirit” of the country, and a style of building reveals more of the basic philosophy of a period, than the carefully smoothed-out texts of the school philosophy of that time.’<sup>23</sup> Not just farmhouses, we have to add, but council estates, tower blocks and out of town shopping centres; and not just philosophy, but theology. Theology, as one form of ideology, plays its part in the shaping of space, and not just in overtly religious buildings, nor just in pre secular societies.

I have insisted that a Trinitarian theology eliminates any fundamental distinction between sacred and secular. This seems to be a paradoxical claim the moment we look at the built environment, for humans have everywhere marked out sacred space from the secular. Karsten Harries suggests that the history of building forms an ellipse between the private and the public, domestic and ‘pedigreed’. The archetypal version of the latter, in his view, is the church or temple (we must add, mosque).<sup>24</sup> There is, he insists, a necessary dialectic between these two forms, in that it is the whole point of ‘architecture’, by which he means the non domestic, to take leave of the everyday and then return to it with fresh eyes.<sup>25</sup> I think we cannot escape this ellipse, but it is not unproblematic from the perspective of the Christian tradition. Karl Barth noted that Christianity showed a certain preference for the oppressed, those falling short, for the immature and the sullen.<sup>26</sup> I would put it slightly differently and say that we find in Scripture, classically in the Magnificat, a preference for the everyday, the modest, humble and ordinary, and we cannot but take account of that in reflecting on the built environment. This leaves us with an embarrassment, because to be interested in ‘architecture’ is to be concerned almost solely with what I will call, following Redfield, ‘the great tradition’.<sup>27</sup> Redfield distinguishes between the great tradition, the written and celebrated, the work of the philosophers, historians, theologians, the learned, and the little tradition, which for the most part comes to us only in scraps, in folk memories, songs, tales and ballads, in pamphlets crudely written. One of the remarkable things about the

<sup>22</sup> Cf S. Giedion: the main task facing contemporary architecture is ‘the interpretation of a way of life valid for our period’. *Space, Time and Architecture*, 5th edn (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. xxxii.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in G. Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith* (London: SCM, 1998), p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> Harries, *Function*, p. 286. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>26</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, tr. E. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 463.

<sup>27</sup> R. Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) ch. 3.

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New Testament is that it contains so many documents which bear the marks of the little tradition, written in a Greek which was an acute embarrassment to the first educated Christians. In the built environment the great tradition means the work of prestigious architects or planners, whilst the little tradition corresponds to the work of unknown craftsmen who have left their mark on every ancient village, town and city. Christianity, I shall claim, is wedded to the little tradition. This would not be contentious were it not for what seems to be the elective affinity between Christianity and the great tradition – in music, art, literature and, perhaps above all, building. Since one of my aims is to champion precisely the little tradition in the built environment, I will substantiate my claim about the Christian marriage, and by the same token ask about the reason for the deafening silence on the little tradition in architecture in Christian reflection.

Theology works between a triangle of text, tradition and experience. ‘Tradition’, here, almost invariably means the great tradition, from Origen to Barth or John Milbank. In this tradition, it is true, there have been many trends which have militated against a perception of God in our everyday built environment. There has been, in the first instance, a marked emphasis on the spiritual as opposed to the material, on the priority of the *civitas Dei* to the *civitas terrena*. We crave freedom from death, deception and distress, Augustine wrote, and we will never have that in this life. ‘In our present state what human being can live the life he wishes, when the actual living is not in his control . . . life will only be truly happy when it is eternal.’<sup>28</sup>

The problem with this Platonising train of reflection is that it rules out true happiness in this life, and in so doing relativises the significance of what we do here. Even in the late twentieth century, with all its hedonism, activism and emphasis on the pleasures of the body, prominent representatives of this view could be found. Thus Edward Norman, in his 1978 Reith Lectures, claimed that the ‘true Christ of history’ directed people to ‘turn away from the preoccupations of human society’ and characterised Christianity as the ‘evocation of the unearthly’.<sup>29</sup> No theological understanding of the built environment could emerge from this theology. Such a theology is interested only in church building, and in building which seeks to ‘evoke the unearthly’ at that. But such a theology shortchanges the world in which we live. As Nicholas Wolterstorff remarks:

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 14.25.

<sup>29</sup> E. Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 78–9.

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The tragedy of modern urban life is not only that so many in our cities are oppressed and powerless, but also that so many have nothing surrounding them in which any human being could possibly take sensory delight. For this state of affairs we who are Christians are as guilty as any. We have adopted a pietistic-materialistic understanding of man, viewing human needs as the need for a saved soul plus the need for food, clothes and shelter. True shalom is vastly richer than that.<sup>30</sup>

On top of this relativising of the present has been an introspective tradition which began with Augustine's *Confessions* and which has concentrated on the inner life at the expense of the active. In medieval theology in particular there was a strong sense that communion with God required retreat, the cloister, cutting oneself off from the everyday. 'Unless a man has disentangled himself from all things created,' wrote Thomas à Kempis in the fifteenth century, 'he will not be free to make for the things of God', and this was a representative view.<sup>31</sup> Richard Sennett's marvellously rich meditation on the urban order, *The Conscience of the Eye*, begins with precisely this prioritisation of interiority. 'Nothing is more cursed in our culture', he writes, than the continuing separation between inner and outer. It makes the places we live in puzzling to us. 'The street is a scene of outside life, and what is to be seen on the street are beggars, tourists, merchants, students, children playing, old people resting – a scene of human differences. What is the relation of these differences to inner life?' The Augustinian tradition, he says, deprives us of the ability to make sense of them.<sup>32</sup>

A further difficulty is symbolised by the medieval distinction, based on the Latin of 1 Corinthians 7.25, between precepts, binding on everyone, and counsels, taken up by those who sought to be perfect, which institutionalised a distinction between religious and everyday, sacred and secular.<sup>33</sup> Those who took monastic vows, and fulfilled the counsels, were the ones who led a truly Christian life. Politically, the division of powers between Pope and emperor corresponded to this distinction; socially, the division of realms between sacred and secular. The need to find God apart from the structures of everyday life found architectural expression in the theology of sacred space. To say that the eucharist can only be celebrated on 'consecrated' ground could be seen as denying the holiness

<sup>30</sup> N. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Carlisle: Solway, 1997), p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959), Book I ch. 20(a); Book III ch. 31.

<sup>32</sup> R. Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Norton, 1990), pp. 9–10.

<sup>33</sup> Paul wrote: 'Concerning virgins I have no commandment (*praeceptum*) of the Lord, but I give my opinion (*consilium*) as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.'