THE COMMON GOOD AND THE GLOBAL EMERGENCY

God and the Built Environment

Planning and architecture have to be understood in relation to climate change and peak oil, and the concept of the common good is key to understanding how important this is. Leading on from his previous book, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, T. J. Gorringe provides a theoretical and political framework of the common good, applying this to the built environment. This framework is used to discuss and highlight issues regarding place, transport, food and farming, and, as such, explains the relation of Christianity to the built world in which we live. Exploring new themes in the context of the concern about climate change and resource depletion, Gorringe provides an innovative account, covering a wide range of source matter and illustrating the connections between modern theology and ethics.

T. J. GORRINGE is Professor of Theological Studies at the University of Exeter. *A Theology of the Built Environment* (2002), his previous book with Cambridge University Press, was the first to reflect theologically on the built environment as a whole. He is also the author of *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge, 1996).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107002012

First published 2011
First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Gorringe, T. J. (Timothy J.), 1946–
The Common Good and the Global Emergency : God and the Built Environment / T. J. Gorringe.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-00201-2 (hardback)
1. Common good – Religious aspects – Christianity. 2. Cities and towns – Religious aspects – Christianity. 3. Human ecology – Religious aspects – Christianity. I. Title.
BR115.P7G687 2011
261 – dc22 2010051437

ISBN 978-1-107-00201-2 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-107-41480-8 Paperback

For Gill

A new politics of the common good has something to do with the project of building a common life, of shared citizenship. A lot of our public institutions – public libraries, public transportation, public parks and recreation centres . . . are also traditionally sites for the cultivation of a common citizenship, so that people from different walks of life encounter one another and so acquire enough of a sense of a shared life that we can meaningfully think of one another as citizens in a common venture.

Michael Sandel

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Preface

When *A Theology of the Built Environment* appeared in 2002 it was claimed that it was the first attempt to think theologically about the built environment as a whole. One reviewer challenged this claim, though without telling me where to look for rivals. Since then a number of books have appeared, most particularly Eric Jacobsen's excellent *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, a most promising study by a young scholar. I am grateful to him for the parcel of second-hand books, which included J. H. Kunstler and Daniel Kemmis: he will see how much I have learned from them. Philip Sheldrake has beautifully explored the theological significance of space, and John Inge and David Brown of place, largely in relation to sacred space and building. Some of the essays in Sigurd Bergmann's *Architecture, Aesth/ethics, Religion* explore secular themes, though it too mostly deals with the sacred. Many articles on the theology of the built environment are now beginning to appear in learned journals, some in planning as well as theology. In general, however, the sacred–secular divide continues to appear self-evident: people are not convinced that 'the earth is the Lord's'. Although people take for granted the fact that the church has something to say about war and sexuality, and perhaps even economics (though this is more contentious), the idea that one can reflect theologically about the everyday built environment, and not about churches or temples, seems perplexing. It is worthwhile, therefore, once again to try and make the point.

After the book appeared I got to know Simon Fairlie and the Tinker's Bubble community. Simon did not like the book ('academic'), but every time we met he asked me if I had read Christopher Alexander. I knew only the article 'A City is not a Tree', which did not seem to me sufficiently revelatory to prompt further reading. However, the possibilities of prevarication are not endless, and I duly read Alexander's oeuvre: the results will be obvious. By and large Alexander is a prophet without honour. Some eco-architects say he does not respect the ecological imperative sufficiently.

I am sure, however, that the insights of the Pattern Language are indispensable towards the emergence of cultures in common (which are not homogenised cultures) around the world. Following up footnotes also led me to the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy. Reading his work, so full of humour, humility and wisdom, is to get a glimpse of that earlier world, in twelfth-century Europe, where, while the military classes engaged in power games, the intellectuals and artisans learned from each other and largely agreed on fundamentals. So-called 'inter-faith dialogue' is as nothing alongside sitting at the feet of such a great souled human being.

It was only after the book appeared that I started to teach a course on theology and the built environment. The course has been taught from the back of a lorry: visiting cities, towns and villages, talking to planners, and sitting afterwards in churches, pubs and cafés to reflect on what we have seen. I am immensely grateful to all the planning departments who have given up time to talk to us when most of them are worked off their feet. The material in this book on Plymouth, Milton Keynes, Poundbury and Sherford all comes from these visits. In Milton Keynes Michael Synnot was an inspirational guide. I am also grateful to the students, who all began with perplexity and sometimes ended with it, but many of whom produced brilliant work in reflecting on their home streets, towns and cities.

A number of universities and departments of theology and of planning have responded to the first book. I am grateful to John de Gruchy in Cape Town; to Charles Marsh and the University of Virginia; to Rob Furbey at Sheffield; to Bob Scott and Mark Richardson at the Trinity Institute, New York; and to Mark van der Schaaf in Minneapolis for arranging seminars and conferences which utilised the work. Some of the material in Chapter 5 appeared in an earlier draft in the *International Journal of Public Theology* and in *The Land*; in Chapter 6, *Theology* published an earlier draft of material on public houses.

I had no intention of writing a second book on the theme. In 2004 I had begun writing a book on the body, a topic which I have taught for many years, when the death of my first wife intervened. I started to take this up again in 2008, but after a few weeks a word from the Lord instructed me with absolute clarity that I needed to return to the built environment. Such a statement will be a gift to critical reviewers: I simply record it as a fact. Demythologisers can translate it in terms of involvement with the Transition Town movement and an increasing sense that climate change, food and energy issues are going to be the key ethical issues of the coming century. I have said something about the differences of emphasis between this book and the first in the first chapter. Here I want only further to record

my debt to my daughter Iona, an inexhaustibly enthusiastic companion in walking streets, examining buildings and places and thinking about the issues.

The book is dedicated to Gill, with whom I am once again seeking to learn how to share a journey.

Epiphany 2010 TIM GORRINGE