LAMENT FOR THE CITY:
The Quest for a Credible Faith in an Urban World

David Smith

I want to attempt to do two things in this discussion: first, to reflect on the significance of the global spread of urban culture and its impact on the human family, both at the societal level and in relation to individual consciousness and identity; and second, to ask how the faith of the Bible and its appropriation and practice within the Christian community might have credibility within the context of an urban world, or what has been called 'the endless city'? In particular, I will ask critical questions regarding forms of spirituality, liturgy and music which suppress or ignore the painful realities of a broken urban world, while maintaining the practice of 'endless praise' by which the harsh realities of urban life and death are evaded. As my title indicates, the underlying concern here is with the search for an articulation of faith which might be credible in the specific context of the urban world, and a corresponding conviction that this must include the recovery of the lost practice of the prayer of lament.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE 'ENDLESS CITY'

The phrase 'endless city' comes from the title of a major reference work which reported on 'The Urban Age Project' of the London School of Economics. This had involved extended research in which the phenomenon of the contemporary urban world was explored in great depth. Leading scholars from a wide range of disciplines wrestled with the implications of the fact that 75% of the global population are likely to be urban dwellers by the year 2050. But in addition, even the minority remaining outside the physical space of the city will be profoundly influenced by urban *culture* which is increasingly dominant everywhere.[1] The geographers Edward Soja and Miguel Kanai concluded that, although city regions occupy only a small part of the earth's surface, 'they concentrate well over a billion residents' and account for a vast share of 'the world's built environment, economic wealth, cultural creativity and political power'. The continent

[1] *The Endless City*, ed. by Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic (London: Phaidon Press, n.d.) This ground-breaking volume was followed up by *Living in the Endless City*, ed. by Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic (London: Phaidon Press, n.d.).

of Africa, which came late to the urbanising process, is now the most rapidly urbanising region on the planet, while the eruption of cities in China represents 'the largest scale of urbanization and the most rapid rural-to-urban transition in human history'. Soja and Kanai conclude that we are witnessing a shift in 'the world's urban centre of gravity' from the previous industrial cities in the northern hemisphere to the exploding megacities across the global south. Consequently, 'it can be said that the earth's entire surface is urbanized to some degree' since the 'major features of urbanism as a way of life – from the play of market forces and the effect of administrative regulations, to popular cultural practices and practical geopolitics – are becoming ubiquitous'. To a degree not seen before, 'no one on earth is outside the sphere of influence of urban industrial capitalism'.[2]

The crucial question, which has been asked since urban settlements first appeared on earth, but became urgent with the rise of the industrial conurbations, concerns the meaning of the city. Throughout the past two hundred years this question has preoccupied scholars, artists, poets, musicians and film makers, and it has been of particular concern to sociologists. David Clarke observes that when people were streaming into cities like Glasgow in the nineteenth century many writers 'expressed astonishment, perplexity and often a pronounced concern over the developing conditions of modern urban life'. He describes how the industrial city appeared to many people to result in nothing less 'than a fundamental and unnatural mutation of the human species'.[3] Urban life and the values which accompanied it resulted in social fragmentation, a spirit of competition in the quest for wealth and security, and a growing sense of isolation and loneliness for many people. This fundamental concern with the meaning of the city was memorably expressed by T. S. Eliot:

> When the Stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city?"
> Do you huddle close together because you love each other?
> What will you answer? "We all dwell together
> To make money from each other"? or "This is a community".[4]

However, if the industrial revolution gave birth to a new era of urbanisation in which the city came 'to provide the economic, cultural and politi-

---

2 Edward Soja and Miguel Kanai, 'The Urbanization of the World', in *The Endless City*, ed. by Burdett and Sudjic, p. 62.

3 David C. Clarke, *The Consumer Society and the Postmodern City* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 78-9.

4 T.S. Eliot, 'Choruses From the Rock', in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 106.

cal framework of the whole society', the contemporary shift in the world's urban centre of gravity signals another paradigm shift in which quite new urban forms have emerged and announce their arrival with skylines suggesting that the question of the *meaning* of the city is now being answered in the language of postmodernity and globalisation.[5] It is possible to read the changing meaning of a city through its skyline, observing the most prominent buildings and what they tell us about the location and exercise of power at any particular time. An obvious example would be the cathedral which, prior to the industrial age, dominated many European cities, signalling the power of the church and the location of the sacred. In the nineteenth century urban planners and architects reshaped the industrial city to reflect the shifts in power which resulted from modernity, so that town halls, railway stations and factories arose, often borrowing architectural styles from an earlier age to signal that the city was being reshaped and given new meanings. What makes the present urban age different from all that has gone before is the appearance of a veritable forest of symbols on urban skylines, thrusting ever higher into the heavens and, once again, indicating a new shift of power. In particular, what has come to be called the *iconic building* is the means by which a global elite write their meanings across urban horizons throughout the world.

The rise of the 'Iconic Building' is now the distinguishing feature of architecture and urban development throughout the world. Everywhere, from Lagos to Colombo, and from Shanghai to Karachi, urban skylines increasingly reflect the global dominance of a particular view of the world and of the meaning of human existence within it. Charles Jencks has described how the emergence of the iconic building is the consequence of a specific historical and cultural context, namely, the loss of a unifying faith and the rise of a consumerist ideology which insists that human life *does consist in the abundance of things that are purchased and possessed*. The proliferation of ever taller, more spectacular buildings, he writes, is driven 'by social forces, the demand for instant fame and economic growth', and 'when a global culture has no unifying faith, the iconic building will continue to prosper, perhaps even increase in volume'.[6] Jencks describes the relationship between the image of the postmodern city and consumer capitalism as follows:

---

5 The quotation in this sentence is from Krishnan Kumar, *Prophecy and Progress: The Sociology of Industrial and Post-Industrial Society* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 68.

6 Charles Jencks, *The Iconic Building: The Power of an Enigma* (London: Francis Lincoln, 2005), p. 7.

> Now every new corporate headquarters seeks to be an icon, has to have a nickname that sums it up, a one-liner, a bullet point that journalists love to hate, love to spice up their workaday prose – "erotic gherkin", or "shard", or "crystal beacon."[7]

He cites the example of London, where a skyline previously dominated by Christopher Wren's masterpiece of St. Paul's Cathedral is directly challenged by the skyscrapers which have appeared in the City, both north and south of the Thames, transforming the image and meaning of the capital. Describing Norman Foster's Swiss Re building (popularly called the 'Gherkin') Jencks writes:

> As its skycourts spiral on the diagonal heavenward, this rocket inspires a kind of cosmic awe that makes Christianity look a bit like yesterday's faith… Who wants to be an earthbound Dean of St. Paul's, a John Donne writing poetry for the few, when you can be an upward-busting trader heading for the mile-high club.[8]

This amounts to an acknowledgement that the profusion of ever higher and more spectacular buildings is the consequence of a particular world-view in which money has come to shape human values and aspirations. Jenck's language suggests that we are witnessing developments that are *religious* in character, which is of course precisely what Jesus recognised when he warned that money may become an *idol* demanding the worship that belongs to God alone! Jencks says that the 'triumph of shopping' confronts us with a situation in which 'the commercialization of culture' is accompanied by a loss of belief, and that this context 'generates the iconic building, just as Christianity generated the cathedrals'.[9]

What is abundantly clear from the work of Jencks and other scholars is that the emerging cities of the twenty first century are being shaped in a way which suggests that their answer to the Stranger's question as to their *meaning* is unambiguous: *we all dwell together to make money from each other.* However, there is a growing body of evidence that the individual, social and ecological consequences of this ideology are extremely serious and in the long run are likely to prove catastrophic. As Leslie Sklair observes, 'The culture ideology of consumerism relentlessly promotes the view that the true meaning of life is to be found in our possessions', and in

---

7 Ibid, p. 13.

8 Ibid, pp. 13-14. The celebration of Gordon Gekkoe over John Donne tells us all we need to know about the tragedy that is reflected in these developments, yet completely ignored or played down by Jencks.

9 Ibid, p. 47.

a globalising world 'iconic architecture promotes an insatiable desire for the fruits of consumer culture'.[10]

The fact that so many of the buildings which now dot urban landscapes rise ever higher into the sky suggests the contemporary relevance of the biblical description of the city and tower of Babel, erected with the specific aim of making 'a name for ourselves' (Gen.11:4). Elsewhere the Hebrew prophets associate 'every lofty tower' with the hubris of human beings (Isaiah 2:15-17) and, in a text which can sound extremely ominous in the light of actual events in recent history, Jeremiah anticipates the destruction and collapse of the towers which had been celebrated as the glory of the city of Babylon (Jeremiah 50:14). Stephen Graham has noticed how terminology which refers to height, or what he calls 'the vertical scale', has become embedded within our language in metaphors 'which describe hierarchies of power and worth in society', so that 'lowness' describes 'deceit, weakness, vulgarity or immorality'. Meantime, the class structure of British society is reflected in the language of height, so that words like 'upper', 'lower' and 'under' signify peoples' location on a vertical scale, while visual representations of the world itself depict the global south as being 'down under' so that the traditional cultures and peoples of Latin America, Africa and Asia were often viewed as uncivilized because they existed 'in the lower parts of the dominant visual schemes used to depict the world's geography'.[11]

When seen in this light the proliferation of iconic buildings of ever-increasing height can be understood not only as the expression of a particular worldview, but as the claim to power and status of the owners and builders, including the planners and architects who translate such ambitions into concrete reality. As Graham says,

> In designing headquarters of large companies, architects sought the symbolic powers of height, splendour and a memorable silhouette as a means of generating maximum commercial and cultural impact. […] Above all, the new towers were symbols of the aggressive, centripetal pull of capitalist urbanism, and of the growth of corporate headquarters organised to remotely control

[10] Leslie Sklair, *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 3. He goes on to say, 'These buildings convey the message that the true meaning of life is in consumerism, the fuel that drives the global capitalist machine and provides the profits for those who own and control the transnational corporations', p. 5.

[11] Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 17-19.

> disparate and widely spread sites of manufacturing, marketing and distribution.[12]

This then is the world of the 'endless city'. It is a context within which it is more than ever important that Christians insist on asking the old questions:

- What is the *meaning of the postmodern city?*
- What and who is it for?
- What vision of human society and well-being shapes the city and its distribution of power, opportunity and resources?
- How does the city enable human beings to flourish, rather than accumulate possessions or find themselves on the margins, excluded from even the possibility of sharing the urban prosperity so ostentatiously displayed by those who must be 'looked up to'?

The plain fact is that the image of success and power which iconic buildings are designed to promote conceals the reality that the endless city is profoundly and disturbingly divided. In 2011 the UN Habitat organisation reported that the numbers of slum dwellers was continuing to grow and is expected to reach the staggering figure of 889 million by 2020. Many of these people in cities like Lagos, Mumbai and Buenos Aires literally live in the shadow of the buildings we have described, but at ground level they face hunger as the relentless rise in food prices, combined with consistently low incomes, create a situation in which 'the urban poor cannot afford to purchase adequate amounts and types of food'.[13] Saskia Sassen has described how increasing numbers of people not only exist on the margins of social and economic life in the endless city, *but are actually expelled from it in that they are eliminated from official statistics as the economy is redefined to exclude the poor and unemployed.*

---

12 Ibid, p. 152.

13 UN-Habitat, *State of the World's Cities 2010/2011: Bridging the Urban Divide* (London: Earthscan, 2008). See David Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations: Theology for an Urban World*, 2nd edn (Carlisle: Langham Literature, 2019), pp. 14-19 for an extended discussion of these issues.

> Such a redefinition makes "the economy" presentable […]. The reality at ground level is more akin to an economic version of ethnic cleansing in which elements considered troublesome are dealt with simply by eliminating them.[14]

The inability of the builders of the endless city to provide an answer to the Stranger's question as to its meaning, has inevitably resulted in the creation of cities which are sites for the stimulation of the endless desire for material things, and for experiences which distract mind and heart from the awareness of the reality of the meaninglessness of existence in the postmodern metropolis. The result is an inevitable increase in grave psychological, social and ecological crises. David Harvey describes 'the clear and imminent dangers of out-of-control environmental degradations and ecological transformations' as at the centre of a global urban problem which, he says, is not only a material but also a *spiritual and moral question* of changing the human sense of nature, as well as the material relation to it'. Harvey goes on to acknowledge that there is no 'purely technological fix' to this problem, since it requires 'significant lifestyle changes', including the challenging and reversal of 'the socially constructed and historically specific law of endless capital accumulation'.[15] Which brings us to the quest for a credible faith in the urban world we have attempted to describe.

WORLD CHRISTIANITY AND THE ENDLESS CITY

We have heard urbanist scholars describing a shift in the 'world's urban centre of gravity' as vast numbers of people across the Global South swell the megacities which continue to expand in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is significant that this same phrase has been used in relation to the transformation of Christianity and the paradigm change by which it has become a truly world religion. As long ago as 1984 Andrew Walls was speaking of a 'dramatic shift' in the 'centre of gravity' of the Christian movement. The era during which it had been almost entirely a European and North American phenomenon was giving way to a new phase in which 'it is a faith distributed throughout the world, is specially characteristic of the southern continents and appears to be receding only among people of European origin'.[16] Walls went on to say,

---

[14] Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA.: Belnap Press of Harvard University, 2014), p. 36.

[15] David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 127-8. Italics added.

[16] Andrew Walls, 'Christianity', in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. by John Hinnells (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 69-70.

> Christianity is now much more diverse in its forms and manifestations, its geographical spread and its cultural variety than at any previous time in its history. The only safe prediction appears to be that its southern populations in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific, which provide its present centres of significance, hold the key to its future.[17]

The overlap of these two major shifts, the rise of the 'endless city' on the one hand, and the emergence of world Christianity with its new heartlands in precisely the expanding urban conglomerations across the southern continents on the other, is pregnant with significance and potential for the future of both Christianity and the city. The crucial issue, of course, is what shape this global Christian movement will take and specifically, how it might respond to the urban context which currently provides fertile soil for its extraordinary growth?[18]

It is obviously beyond the scope of this discussion to speculate on the answer to this question in any detail. However, I wish to briefly explore two aspects of the biblical tradition which may be of crucial importance to the future of Christianity in the urban world. We have seen how the multiplication of iconic buildings reflects and propagates a particular ideology and stimulates the quest for 'upward mobility' and for the financial and social rewards that accompany it. Movies and TV dramas frequently depict corporate executives in luxury offices looking down on the city from a great height, and career advancement is measured 'by physical ascent up to be "on top of the pile"'.[19] In such a world the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the 'downward mobility' of God himself, accepting not only the limitations of human flesh and blood, but descending to the horrific and disgraceful death of the Cross, could hardly be more radically counter-cultural. Paul's exhortation to the Philippians to 'do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit', a moral imperative which parallels

---

17 Ibid, p. 73.

18 Fernando Segovia draws upon the work of Andrew Walls and concludes that we are witnessing a shift from 'territorial Christendom to global Christianity – away from its Western base, where it undergoes decline in the face of the forces of modernity, toward the non-Western world, where it witnesses incredible growth'. He describes the numerical figures concerning Christian growth in the Global South as 'astounding' and says that this shift 'has only just begun'. Where it leads world Christianity in the future 'will not be fully grasped until a century or two from now', but 'the past dominance of the West in the formulation and direction of Christianity will gradually but inexorably yield to a much more decentered and diversified formation'. *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. by Fernando Segovia (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 20-2.

19 Graham, *Vertical*, p. 151.

David Harvey's recognition of the need for 'significant lifestyle changes', is inseparable from the gift of a new way of thinking, an *attitude* like that of Jesus Christ, who 'did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself *nothing*…' (Phil. 2:3-7).

I suggest that we have scarcely begun to appreciate the revolutionary character of this message in which, to use the striking words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'God allows himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross', so that it is 'not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us but by his weakness and suffering'.[20] Perhaps it is impossible for those of us who have long been embedded within the capitalist structures of the modern world to fully grasp the transformative power of the event of the incarnation of God; to grasp it, that is, not merely as a doctrine to be believed, but as a new life to be lived in the fellowship of the redeemed and transformed human family of which it is the foundation. By contrast, millions of Christians in the new heartlands of this faith, living in the margins of the endless city and frequently struggling on the edge of life and death, have a perspective from which they *can* recognise the radical newness of the Gospel and its promise of a world of justice and peace.

Writing about the current transformation of Christianity, Lamin Sanneh says that if we are to understand the significance of the changing face of the church today, 'we must forget our modern rationalism, our proud confidence in reason and science, our restless search after wealth and power and after an earthly kingdom' and enter 'sympathetically into the mood of populations disillusioned with old assurances'. The new Christians in the heartlands of the faith across the Global South stand 'between the shipwreck of the old order and the tarnished fruits of self-rule of the new, finding all the dreams of a worldly utopia shattered by betrayal, war, vanity, anarchy, poverty, epidemics, and endemic hostility'. In Africa, India China and Latin America, as during the industrial revolution in nineteenth century Britain, masses of people suffering the

[20] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Fontana, 1959), p. 122. Timothy Gorringe, writing about the crisis of Christianity in Europe, says that the Gospel has at its heart a 'radical perception about power, violence and weakness' so that, when reflecting on the Cross, Paul asserts that the weakness of God is stronger than human understandings of power (1 Cor. 1:25). Gorringe concludes that this provides a new way of reading history: 'contrary to appearances, history does not belong to the big battalions, to the generals, the torturers, the merchant bankers, the big shots. […] The Gospel celebrates the power of the poor in history. It claims that God's Spirit is to be found in their joys and celebrations and stories'. 'After Christianity?', in *Christianity for the Twenty First Century*, ed. by Philip Essler (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), pp. 265-7.

dislocations caused by the move to the city 'are inspired and comforted by the narratives of ancient scripture, and throw themselves 'upon the mercy and goodness of God and upon one another's charity'.[21]

What is taking place today, almost entirely beneath the radar of Western-based news agencies, is a renewal of the Christian tradition as significant numbers of poor and marginalised people are discovering in the humble and poor Christ the motivation to challenge the corruption and injustice of the world, and are given a hope which inspires them to work for its transformation. As the World Council of Churches' important statement 'Together Towards Life' says,

> People on the margins have agency and can often see, what from the centre, is out of view. People on the margins, living in vulnerable positions, often know what exclusionary forces are threatening their survival and can best discern the urgency of their struggles; people in positions of privilege *have much to learn from the daily struggles of people living in marginal conditions*.[22]

LAMENT FOR THE ENDLESS CITY

We turn to the second theme which I suggest will be vital in shaping an emergent world Christianity. If the *incarnation* of God in the man Christ Jesus is the foundation of the new community which offers the world an alternative way of being a human family, it is crucial that the face of God upon which we are privileged to gaze in Christ is frequently tear-stained, reflecting *the divine lament at the brokenness and recalcitrance of the world*. The prophet Isaiah anticipated that Messiah would be 'a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering', and we find Jesus in the gospels uttering an 'urban lament' over the city of Jerusalem. His tears are caused not simply by what the city had become, *but by what it might have been had it responded to his invitation to receive the reign of God*.[23] This dual emphasis, the *lament* over the existing urban reality and the possibility that the

---

[21] Lamin Sanneh, 'The Current Transformation of Christianity', in *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, The West, and the World*, ed. by Sanneh and Carpenter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 222.

[22] 'Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes', in *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century : A Reader for Theological Education*, ed. by Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner (Geneva: WCC, 2013), p. 196. This book is an invaluable resource and itself reflects the changing paradigm of Christian identity and mission.

[23] Luke describes a weeping Christ who laments the failure of those who exercised religious and political power in Jerusalem to recognise the possibilities of urban transformation: 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what

city could be transformed into a sphere of righteousness, love and *shalom* is characteristic of the Bible as a whole.

Although the tradition of the prayer of lament is a fundamental aspect of the worship and spirituality of biblical Israel, it plays little part in modern, Western Christianity where, as one contemporary song says, the believer's approach to God is one of 'endless praise'.[24] This loss of lament is difficult to explain, especially since it occurred during a century in which the continent of Europe experienced the violence of war and destruction on an unprecedented scale. More than thirty-six million Europeans died between 1939 and 1945 from war-related causes, many of these were casualties resulting from aerial bombardments which targeted densely populated urban areas. That is to say that *cities became the prime targets for destruction*, with the result that few towns on the continent of Europe of any size 'survived the war unscathed'.[25] Tony Judt describes the bombing of Rotterdam, Coventry and London, but concludes that 'the greatest material damage was done by the unprecedented bombing campaign of the Western allies in 1944 and 1945, and the relentless advance of the Red Army from Stalingrad to Prague'. The deliberate destruction of cities resulted in a new word being added to the sociological dictionary: *urbicide* signifies the terrible fate of entire urban populations and their familiar habitats, often full of historical and cultural memories stretching back centuries, as aerial fire-bombing turned them into a mass of smoking ruins.

The horrors of destruction and death visited on Europe in the twentieth century accelerated an already existing crisis of faith throughout the continent in a manner that is analogous to the situation faced by the Jewish people in 583 BC when the Babylonian army laid waste to the city of Jerusalem. That historic tragedy gave rise to the urban lament which we know as the book of Lamentations. Kathleen O'Connor comments movingly on this neglected Old Testament poetry:

---

brings you peace [*shalom*] – but now it is hidden from your eyes'. Luke 19:41-42.

[24] Claus Westermann comments that in the Hebrew Bible 'from beginning to end, the "call of distress", the "cry out of the depths", *is an inevitable part of what happened between God and man*'. There is not 'a single line' in the Old Testament '*which would forbid lamentation*' or express the idea that 'it had no place in a healthy and good relationship with God'. *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 261. Italics added.

[25] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 16. See also Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage Books, 2011).

> For survivors of civil wars, destroyed cities, and genocides, for refugees, and for those who subsist in famine and destitute poverty, the poetry mirrors reality with frightening exactitude. […] Yet even in the prosperous United States there are normal human losses to lament, deaths, disappointments, and hidden depression with which to contend. There are broken marriages, catastrophic illnesses, and violence among our children, hatred between groups, and debilitating poverty exacerbated by wealth all around. Behind the wealth and power of the United States hide a despair and a violent culture of denial that drains our humanity. For our sake and for the sake of the world over which we try callously to preside, *these things demand lamentation*.[26]

However, if the prayer of lament has virtually disappeared from the worship and spirituality of Christianity in the Western world, this is emphatically not the case in the new heartlands of the faith across the Global South. In the slums of the burgeoning cities of Africa, the *favelas* of Latin America, and in the ruins of cities destroyed by typhoons, earthquakes or tsunamis in Asia, the ancient questions of the psalmists, 'Why?' and 'How long?', are frequently directed to God.[27] But in addition, the fierce protests of the psalms of lament against the abuse of power and the oppression of the poor provide millions of Christians in the endless city with a language with which to express before God their anger at the injustice and corruption which causes endemic poverty, and is related to the eruption of the violence of war and the horrors of genocide.[28]

Emmanuel Katangole has recorded striking examples of contemporary African laments emerging from the seemingly unending tragedy

---

[26] Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 5. Italics added.

[27] See for example, Federico Villanueva's commentary on the book of Lamentations, dedicated to the victims of Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan, which devastated the city of Tacloban in the Philippines. He writes: 'Lamentations' emphasis on tears, lament, uncertainty, mourning and suffering resonates with our experience in Asia today. These are the main themes of many theologies that are being produced here'. *Lamentations: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016), p. 29.

[28] The greatest tragedy of all may be that which has been played out in the Congo and then spilled over to embroil the whole of central and east Africa. Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan Books, 2012) is the starting point for the study of this tragic story. See also, Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011) and Gerard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo, The Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

of the Congo and he comments that, far from a being a form of passive acquiescence in suffering, they have become the foundation for a social and political engagement which reconstitutes 'the very nature and meaning of politics'. Writing of African Christians who have expressed the pain and confusion of their own people in profoundly moving poems and songs of lament, he says,

> Their advocacy and initiatives reflect the shape of the new world, which now breaks forth within the shell of the old world as both a radical critique of and an alternative to the politics of military alliances and economic greed. The faith activists understand themselves as both the agents and fruits of that new world.[29]

In other words, lament enables sufferers to articulate with integrity and honesty the depths of their pain and trauma, while at the same time creating a portal through which new and surprising hope emerges and brings into focus the vision of a transformed urban world.

The question we are left with in light of this study concerns the relationship between the two overlapping shifts in the contemporary world; one in which the urban centre of gravity has moved south to the megacities of the majority world, the other by which Christianity is undergoing a paradigm shift resulting from its penetration of non-Western cultures and the relocation if its centre of gravity in the southern continents, especially among millions of people living in the margins of the Endless City. It is impossible to exaggerate the extent of the crises which confront the world as the result of the consumerist ideology which currently drives the process of urbanisation, but the question we are bound to ask is whether world Christianity has emerged for just such a time as this? Theologians beyond the West can be heard speaking of 'the collapse of Euro-American (Western) dominance in Christian theology' and looking toward a future in which 'a truly catholic Christianity' will honour 'unity-in-diversity in both church and theology'.[30]

Finally, for those of us who seek faithfully to follow Christ within the Western world, the challenge is to recognise the call to discipleship in the margins of a secular culture where we may be able to relearn some fundamental aspects of the way of Jesus Christ which we lost as the lure of the

---

[29] Emmanuel Katangole, *Born From Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), pp. 264-5.

[30] These are the words of the Filipino theologians T. D. Gener and L. Bautista in 'Theological Method' in William Dyrness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen [eds], *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), p. 890.

dominant consumerist ideology sapped our spiritual energy and threatened the authenticity of our faith. Will we find the wisdom and humility to learn from Christ's 'little ones', from brothers and sisters who know the reality of pain and suffering, and whose faith is expressed in passionate prayers of lament and protest at the disorder of the world? Can we overcome our complacence and join the prayers of the saints in all the ages that God's will 'might be done on earth, as in heaven', so transforming the Endless City from the nihilism and materialism that leads it to toward death, with the vision of the New Jerusalem where no iconic temple is to be found, and the nations walk together in the light of God and find healing from the tree of life? The path toward that end must involve relearning the place of lament in worship and spirituality, and this may be the most important lesson which rich Christians can learn from the suffering church in the Majority World. Scott Ellington concludes his excellent study of the prayers of lament with these words:

> Though the prayer of lament remains a resource for all who experience a suffering that diminishes fullness of life, the vocation of lament is first and foremost the province of the foreigner, the widow, the deformed, and the destitute. The practice of this vocation challenges the hegemony of the Western church. The loss of the practice of lament in materialistic, wealthy cultures has signalled a shift away from a western, upper-middle class, male control on the proclamation and interpretation of the gospel. Increasingly it is the "nobodies" of Western society and the long-silenced voices of the remainder of the world that challenge a Church that finds no place for lament.[31]

[31] Scott Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2008), p. 191.