Nature, Human Nature and the Soul
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In order to facilitate conversation, I would like to make three large points. The first point concerns the origins of human culture as an offering to sacred order, and the physical and spatial expressions in the landscape and the city of human culture so conceived. The second point is philosophical, and is about the relationship between Nature, Human Nature and Culture. The third point is historical and sociological, has implications for the future of traditional urbanism in an individualist consumer culture, and proposes an argument against economic determinism. With respect to the general concerns of the Congress for New Urbanism, it is possible that my three points move closer to those concerns in descending order; but in my own thinking the three points are interrelated.

Point I: Human Culture and Sacred Order

Religion is socially constructed and transmitted, but originates in and is sustained by experiences of the sacred. The sacred is not simply *a* religious category, it is rather *the* religious category; and the experience of the sacred in everyday life tends to the recasting of everyday life in a religious mode. For a person encountering the sacred, the psychological core of the experience is what religious historian Rudolf Otto called "creature consciousness": a feeling of dependence and contingency, "the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to what is supreme above all creatures." In turn, the sacred itself is experienced by the individual as an overwhelming, awesome, and strangely fascinating power—in Otto's famous characterization, as a "mysterium tremendum." The sacred itself appears where it wills, and by definition is not subject to conjuring or manipulation; nevertheless, human beings invoke the sacred and seek its presence.

I think it is accurate, both historically and phenomenologically, to speak of human encounter with the sacred as having a "structure" of sacred presence and sacred anticipation, of sacred call and human response. Sacred presence is simultaneously experienced as sacred call; and human beings respond to that call by seeking and anticipating the presence of the sacred. The most common and obvious human response to the sacred has been to worship it, entailing ritual actions in which the presence of the sacred is invoked, and including the type of gesture known as *sacrifice*—literally, an act of making holy.

However, human response to the sacred is not limited to religious ritual. Cultural historian Philip Rieff argues that human culture itself—from books and vows to prayers and parading, from law and architecture to music and the sciences, from dancing and piety toward parents to theater and athletic competition--is in origin if not essence the human response to the sacred; and likewise, that every culture so ordered is also marked by some set of prohibitions, of "thou shalt nots," of things that are not to be done.

For our immediate concerns as urbanists, what are the marks of a shared sense of the sacred in architecture and the city? If we speak solely in terms of sacred presence, I would say that the sacred manifests itself when and wherever it chooses. But if we speak in terms of sacred anticipation, of architecture created in response and offered to the sacred, let me suggest several characteristics of architecture so designed and built. First, a sense of verticality, in which height and/or depth are accorded sacred significance. Second, a concern for light and

shadow as emblems of the immateriality of the sacred. Third, a care for and delight in craftsmanship, durability, and material particularity, indicative of the intrinsic created goodness and/or the sacramental potential of material things. Fourth, a conscious employment of mathematics and/or geometry as ordering devices emblematic of the "structure" of the natural order and its grounding in the sacred. Fifth, an aspiration to achieve a compositional and artistic unity, whether simple or complex. And finally, a sense of hierarchy, of sacred things being in either their grandeur or their humility exceptional.

Most if not all of these characteristics are common to humanity's great architectural and urban achievements. From Stonehenge to the pyramids of Egypt, from the temples of Angkor-Thom to the temples of the Yucatan peninsula, from the buildings on the Acropolis to Europe's Gothic cathedrals, from the sacred precincts of Kyoto to the Forbidden City of Beijing, from the domes of St. Basil's in Moscow to the domes of Renaissance Italy, the origins and histories of architecture are largely the origins and histories of *sacred* architecture. Starting in the west however, and for several centuries now, architects have been able to divorce such concerns from religious architecture per se, and to view them simply as proper concerns of architecture. But in late 20th century architecture even this can no longer be taken for granted; and as the city in like fashion has come to be conceived almost exclusively in utilitarian terms, disenchanted and desacralized, one wonders aloud with Philip Rieff not whether civilized men and women can believe, but whether unbelieving men and women can be civilized.

Point II: Nature, Human Nature and Culture

If my first point has been about the effects upon culture of extraordinary religious experience, my second concerns a philosophical view of nature, human nature and culture known as natural law theory. Natural law theory is Aristotelian in its origins (and therefore empirical in its methodology), and has been carried into the modern world by Jewish and Christian religious traditions that have found it both rationally persuasive and consonant with their beliefs about divine creation. My outline of a natural law theory view of nature, human nature and culture goes something like this:

> Nature exists independently of human beings; "human nature" is part of nature; and it is part of human nature to make culture, including physical culture made from found nature transformed by human efforts into cultural artifacts. Human beings moreover are by nature social; and different cultures are the social and historical forms of individual and communal human aspirations for, and understandings of, the very best kind of life. The cultivated landscape, buildings, and cities are, in turn, the physical and spatial forms of culture. Arts such as agriculture, architecture, and city making are therefore cultural interventions in nature, but are also themselves in some sense natural. Indeed, it is in this sense that Thomas Aquinas meant that reason is the tool with and by which man (male and female) participates in nature; and that art is "reason in making." It is also this sense in which Aristotle meant that "art imitates nature," i.e., the human artist acts towards his or her desired ends in a manner analogous to the way nature acts towards her ends; and the human being does so due to his peculiar place in nature as the "rational animal."

In the natural law tradition, the genuinely good life in any culture is about character rather than possessions, the life of moral and intellectual virtue rather than the life of accumulated external goods. And to this I would add that it seems part of human nature that we desire and find good in *both* individual freedom *and* communal belonging; and that we understand *justice* intuitively to

be that which persons deserve. But these desires and this understanding are a source of perennial conflict and tension in human life; and they lead me to a conclusion that is both anti-utopian and (I hope) humane. That conclusion is *not* that freedom, belonging and justice are not genuine goods; or that it is impossible to live a good life; or that some cultures and forms of social organization are not better than others. It is rather that a *permanent* resolution of conflicts between the goods of the natural order does not seem possible within the context of the natural order itself.

Point III: Against Economic Determinism / Ascetic Ideals vs. Consumer Culture

My final point is an argument against the rampant economic determinism that characterizes so much of contemporary social theory and political discourse. One of the most famous arguments against economic determinism is Max Weber's early 20th century book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which Weber argued that a major influence upon the rise of modern industrial capitalism was the "inner-worldly asceticism" of the Calvinist reformers by which they embodied their idea of religious vocation in the secular world. According to Weber's thesis, the Calvinist character habits of discipline, self-denial, hard work, thrift, and savings helped launch in both America and Protestant Europe—quite apart from anything intended by Calvin--an economic revolution that became a, if not *the*, driving force of the modern world; and this revolution attained and continues a life and influence of its own long after the great majority of Calvin's religious descendants became (shall we say) less spiritually disciplined.

Weber's thesis is controversial, but remains a powerful argument. I would go further back, however, and suggest that one sees in the whole history of Christian reform movements generally, and Christian monasticism in particular, a similar dialectic between ascetic discipline and worldly accomplishment. We sometimes forget that monasteries were not merely and not only for monks. In addition to the religious observances that were their primary reason for being, monasteries also had an economic basis in practices such as agriculture, brewing, and animal husbandry that led to the creation of wealth. According to St. Benedict, monasteries were not to beg; they were to give. Monasteries were also centers of art and learning, with primary responsibility for the education of the lay nobility; and monks carefully preserved and transmitted both Christian and pagan texts from classical antiquity. Moreover, since part of their mission was to perform works of charity in imitation of Christ, they also functioned as centers of pilgrimage and hospitality for travelers. For about 600 years of European history, monastic complexes were the closest things to an urban environment to be found.

Pertinent to the CNU's general interest in economics, environmental stewardship, community, and its physical forms, let me briefly mention two perennial paradoxes of the ascetic lifestyle as exemplified in western monasticism. The first I have already alluded to, which is that the life of voluntary poverty, the communal discipline of work and self-denial, has a tendency (which economists of all persuasions understand) to create wealth. Indeed, it could be argued that Aristotle himself recognized something similar in classical antiquity when he wrote that "mankind do not acquire or preserve virtue by the help of external goods, but external goods by the help of virtue." At the same time, however, the accumulation of wealth has a tendency to undermine the ascetic disciplines--the habits of virtue, if you will--by which wealth is created; and the history of religion is in part the history of disciplined ascetic movements being undermined by their own success and subsequently giving rise to disciplined reform movements.

The second paradox is this: Monasticism is typically motivated by "other-worldly" concerns, viz. an intense desire for eternal goods that finds one expression in the rejection of wealth and the

material goods of the world. Nevertheless, among the products of monastic discipline have been beautiful building environments that endure in the world for centuries—an achievement which stands in sharpest contrast, for example, to architecture built for commercial purposes that because of the very logic of the market place proves to have but a fleeting existence.

Alasdair MacIntyre concluded his landmark 1981 book of moral philosophy *After Virtue* with the conjecture that contemporary culture is awaiting and in need of "another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict." This made many of his critics uneasy; and I would not be surprised if some of my remarks today make some members of this audience uneasy. But if traditional urbanism (including new urbanism) is to avoid becoming just another consumer item proper to a certain kind of "lifestyle," it seems to me that defenders of traditional urbanism need to articulate the practical ends of urbanism in terms of the good life for human beings, in a manner not exclusive of but larger than economics, in a manner inclusive of sacred sensibilities. And finally, it is good always to remember that even if it is not proper to human nature that we presume to be independent masters of our own fate, neither is it proper to our nature to regard ourselves as mere playthings either of our appetites or of the ingenious social arrangements it seems to be in our nature to create.