New Urbanism and Religion

The historic premise of religion in the western world, both pagan and biblical, is that there is another order of reality, a sacred order of reality, in which the realities of *this* world---the secular world---have their origin and destiny, and to which this world is therefore necessarily accountable. Western men and women have acknowledged this sacred order in part by making buildings dedicated to the sacred that, while empirically a part of a realm of human (indeed civic) artifacts, are nevertheless distinguishable from other buildings by their form, the quality of their materials, their prominence in the urban and natural landscape, and the fact that they refer explicitly to this sacred order.

Christian churches and their ancillary buildings contribute substantially to the social and aesthetic richness of the traditional European and European colonial cities that are overwhelmingly the formal models for New Urbanist practitioners, and are physical manifestations of the theological conviction that Christians are residents of both an earthly city and a heavenly city with obligations to both---notwithstanding that the question of where one set of obligations might conflict with the other has always been disputed territory, at least potentially if not actually. But this inherent tension has also resulted in something unique in human history, to wit: a culture in which neither the state nor religion has been granted absolute authority in the governing of secular political affairs. In other words, western Christian culture---precisely because of its belief in the legitimate authority of both Church and State---has never been tempted seriously to idealize or embrace either secular tyranny or theocracy.

For a thousand years after the fall of Rome, Catholic Christianity was the state religion of western Europe, spread by communities of monks and both defended and exploited by secular kings. The historic centers of European cities give physical evidence---beautiful physical evidence---of this not always but mostly happy relationship between Church and State, a relationship that was broken subsequent to the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation and the European wars of religion that ensued. Catholic and Protestant religious factions scurried to align themselves with political protectors, with much subsequent warfare and bloodshed.

It was in this historic cultural context that the American Founders, having appealed in spite of their religious differences to the laws of nature and nature's God as justification for their rebellion against England, and having subsequently won their independence, were faced with the question of how to peacefully accommodate religious differences within their new democratic political experiment that was itself premised upon a natural liberty they professed to be God-given.

Their answer was in Article VI of the Constitution, in the clause which reads:

> "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States,"

and in the very first two clauses of the 1st amendment, which read:

> "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…"

It is possible to miss the audacious genius of this solution. Without rejecting the first premise of the Declaration of Independence---i.e., that human liberty is grounded in divine order itself---it acknowledged the right of human beings to the free exercise of their religion or of no religion at all, which the non-establishment clause itself was intended to defend. And while it also affirmed that there are legitimate civil constraints upon the exercise of religion (if only the constraint of non-establishment), it also tacitly affirmed the general principle that government is neither authorized nor competent to adjudicate religious disagreements, and that government itself is justified in accordance with its respect for the laws of nature and nature's God.

So what did this audacious experiment mean for the physical presence of religion in the urban environment? One thing it meant was architectural competition in the civic realm among free religious communities, stripped of their ability to call in the state to adjudicate their disagreements. And one of the most interesting if perhaps unintentionally "pure" embodiments of the idea of religious "free exercise / non-establishment" was and is the City of Savannah, Georgia, the historic center of which is comprised of 23 14-acre wards each centered around a public square, about half of which are fronted by churches hosting different communities of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Jews and---Savannah originating as an English colony---eventually even Catholics.

Fast forward to today. Post-1945 America is a world of even greater religious pluralism, but also a physical environment characterized not only by the conspicuous absence of public squares but also by an astonishingly tawdry and degraded public realm to which religious institutions contribute a dismayingly large share of tawdriness and degradation. Today American religious buildings shelter not only the activities of Christians and Jews, but also Muslims and Sikhs and Hindus and Buddhists, among others. Too many of these buildings are not only suburban in location but also suburban in character, barely distinguishable in their parking lots from adjacent Wal-Marts and muffler shops. How therefore should New Urbanists try to think urbanistically about religion in contemporary America? And how should New Urbanists try to encourage American religious communities to think urbanistically about the buildings they create?

I've already suggested one formal model for thinking about how to urbanistically accommodate America's religious pluralism: the aforementioned multiple public squares of Savannah, even if we don't necessarily need to make such squares in so geometrically disciplined a way. But even if New Urbanists shouldn't expect every religious community to want to be part of a walkable mixed-use neighborhood, we know there are many such communities out there at least interested in considering that possibility if presented to them; and we should continue to engage such communities in our master plans for large scale New Urbanist projects, both greenfield and infill.

But there is a second model more suited for smaller scale projects, the London residential square; and it suggests a strategy for dealing with those ubiquitous congregations undertaking a new building project, typically on some 5-15 acre suburban parcel of land. For a 200-year period beginning in the 17th century, London's west end grew from an accumulation of aristocratic estates into the high density city it is today largely by means of the development of more than three hundred 6-10 acre residential squares built by English aristocrats in partnership with speculative builders, and the subsequent infill in between them. So my thought is this: New Urbanists working with willing religious communities should encourage such communities to take on the role of the London aristocrat. Admittedly, things happen faster today than in the 18th century.

Nevertheless, it is possible to put much more on 10 acres of land than just a church, a parking lot, and a retention pond, and to do so beautifully, graciously and (not least) to the economic advantage of the religious community. And who knows? Maybe there are religious communities out there who would like the idea of being not only a spiritual but also a physical center of their community.

Finally, some comments that grow out of an animated and ongoing discussion about a novel development in American life, which is the increasingly noisy culture war between mostly Republican religious traditionalists and mostly Democratic secularists, both of whom are represented in the membership of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU). I think it extremely important that the CNU as an organization not become a partisan in this war. I am myself an orthodox Catholic, and have secularist New Urbanist friends with whom I argue and disagree about many fundamental things. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that notwithstanding the influence of religious traditionalists upon Republican party politics and of secularists upon Democratic party politics, the vast majority of Americans---some 70%---identify strongly with neither of the partisans.

My point here is not to cast either "secularist" or "traditionalist" as pejoratives. I'm simply referring to an obvious political divide in contemporary culture. Empirically, the CNU is not a religious organization, nor should it be. Empirically, the CNU is a secular organization. There is however an observable cluster of political behaviors and beliefs that can be and is known as *secularism*. If the CNU wishes to appeal to and be effective across the spectrum of American political culture, it really is important that we 1) understand and 2) *if necessary* make the distinction that we are a secular but not a secularist organization; that traditional urban form supports many kinds of good communal life; and that New Urbanists are available to any community---including religious communities---interested in traditional urbanism.

Beyond that, and speaking only for myself, I do think there is a corporate spiritual and existential depth to at least some religious communities with which New Urbanists may need to acquaint or re-acquaint ourselves if New Urbanists are to keep from becoming a wholly owned subsidiary of the real estate industry. Perhaps this is something some of us can learn from working in and with religious communities, even as we all try to re-learn the art of traditional urban design and recall the long history of religious communities as great patrons of good architecture and urbanism.

This essay is adapted from remarks delivered to a June 2005 Congress for the New Urbanism symposium in Pasadena, California.