

**Leonard Hjalmarson (ed), *The Soul of the City: Mapping the Spiritual Geography of Eleven Canadian Cities* (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2018)**

In my explorations of a theology of space, I ran across the editor of this volume of essays through his book, *No Place Like Home: A Christian Theology of Space* (2015). It has shaped some of our approach around Brentwood to being a missional presence in our neighbourhood and, in particular, how we use our space to provoke conversations with those who don't identify as Christians in Canada's most secular urban centre. That mission, for us, becomes more real every year. Our geographical neighbourhood, within 15 blocks of the church say, is rapidly densifying and growing. From a population of 10,500 in 2011, the projected population is estimated at 52,000 by 2041. Most of these new neighbours will live in high-rises. Some buildings will be 60-stories tall. How do you engage in dialogical evangelism within this space with those neighbours?

So, I went to this collection of essays with that question in mind, hoping to find some insights to further illuminate our participation in the Commonwealth of God. We are promised 'thirteen theological practitioners' who will exegete the spiritual topographies of their cities across Canada, from Victoria to Halifax. They will explore what impact gentrification, immigration, and religious pluralism will have on spiritual life, especially on Christianity. Hjalmarson recognizes that these authors represent different experiences, expertise, and perspectives. I'll make mention of one that I found particularly helpful.

Gary Thorne retired this year after 13 years as chaplain at the University of King's College in Halifax. Prior to that, he was the rector and St. George's, Halifax. He rebuilt that church and congregation in the heart of the city after a devastating fire. What I like about this essay is the fact that he saw the potential of a traditional congregation facing serious problems and collaborated patiently and persistently with them to 'renovate' their mission. His work was grounded in, but not restricted by, his Anglican tradition. In particular, he drew on the insights of English novelist, poet, and theologian Charles Williams (1886-1945). Williams posed three related principles – co-inherence, exchange, and substitution. Co-inherence is the mutual indwelling and interdependence of all persons in one another in the reality of the Holy Trinity and the Commonwealth of God. Exchange is the dynamic of voluntary giving and taking by which in-coherence gets expressed in concrete acts of justice and kindness. Substitution is the carrying of another's emotional and spiritual burdens of pain, anxiety, and grief, and fear. In sum, the soul of a city is the complex dynamics of these activities.

Thorne's years as a university chaplain, following his work with a community that 'renovated' itself, provides the deepest framework for paying attention to the soul of the city. He describes what he found among the students was a 'new secularism.' It is not a denial of wonder and transcendence. Rather, it is an agnostic curiosity about the forms these things take in human being and civic community.

That is the lens through which he sees the religious, ethnic, economic, and political diversity of Halifax. He weeps with Christ, as our Lord did over Jerusalem, insofar as the citizens of Halifax do not recognize the truth of their co-inherence with each other. As we model this reconciling reality in our churches, with a welcoming spirit for the diversity the triune God has generated around us, we open up the possibility of healing the terrors and traumas that infect our cities at so many levels.

Thorne's essay stands out because of its theological depth and its sensitive reading of the soul of Halifax. Sadly, the other essays fall short of this. I'm not quite sure why. There is a thread through the writings

of many of the authors that denigrates the congregations that currently exist and think they need to be replaced by some kind of new church planting that will be more in tune with the souls of these cities. As Ross Lockhart says of Vancouver, “Old faltering expressions of Christianity are fading, and the Triune God is raising up new witnessing communities in the midst of this post-Christendom City of Glass.” As I have mentioned in other book notes, I’m not ready to give up on what some call the “old faltering expressions of Christianity.” There is more potential and wisdom there than those who abandon them and seek to do something untried but different, often in a parasitic relationship with those older congregations as they starve them to death and liquidate their resources for their experiments. Harsh language, I know. But I think this dynamic is at work and deserves to be challenged.

I am grateful for the many authors that pay faithful attention to the presence of indigenous peoples and immigrant peoples in our cities, offering some insightful ideas on how to enter into dialogue with them. The dominant features of secularism – individualism, immanentism, and consumerism – get prayerful attention. I read this book as one beginning of a series of conversations that need to deepen and broaden. Brentwood looks forward to being part of that.