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The Great Challenge of the Cities — “The World Goes to Town”

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The Economist [London], one of the world’s great news organizations, publishes several major survey reports each year — and each is priority reading for the world’s leaders. This is certainly true of the most recent survey, “[The World Goes to Town](#),” a report that should remind Christians of the challenge represented by the modern city.

Consider this paragraph:

Within ten years the world will have nearly 500 cities of more than 1m people. Most of the newcomers will be absorbed in a metropolis of up to 5m people. But some will live in a megacity, defined as home to 10m or more inhabitants. In 1950 only New York and Tokyo could claim to be as big, but by 2020, says the UN, nine cities —Delhi, Dhaka, Jakarta, Lagos, Mexico City, Mumbai, New York, São Paulo and Tokyo—will have more than 20m inhabitants. Greater Tokyo already has 35m, more than the entire population of Canada.

As writer Johnny Grimond asserts, “Human history will ever more emphatically become urban history.”

How many Americans know that the city of Tokyo has more inhabitants than the nation of Canada? What does it mean to recognize that there will be almost 500 cities with a population of a least one million each? It is fair to suggest that public policy has not kept pace with this development — but neither has the thinking of the church.

The report traces the development of cities from the ancient Near East to today’s hypercities. Cities, it is argued, first emerged from a need for security, but then grew because of economic and social factors. “The city became a centre of exchange, both of goods and of ideas, and so it also became a centre of learning, innovation and sophistication,” the report explains.

Technology brought great changes in the life of the city, and the development of innovations such as modern sanitation, high-rise architecture, the elevator, mechanized factories, and mass transportation made the growth of truly massive cities possible.

By 1900, 13 percent of the world’s population lived in cities. Sometime over the next few months, more than half of the world’s people will live in cities. This represents a massive restructuring of the human experience.

More:

The sheer scale and speed of the current urban expansion make it unlike any of the big changes that have punctuated urban history. It mostly consists of poor people migrating in unprecedented numbers, and then producing babies on a similarly unprecedented scale. It is thus largely a phenomenon of poor and middle-income countries; the rich world has put most of its urbanisation behind it.

In poor countries, though, the trend is set to continue. The United Nations forecasts that today's urban population of 3.2 billion will rise to nearly 5 billion by 2030, when three out of five people will live in cities. The increase will be most dramatic in the poorest and least-urbanised continents, Asia and Africa. They are the ones least able to cope. Already over 90% of the urban population of Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda, three of the world's most rural countries, live in slums.

The report points to several interesting developments. The city developed in many cultures as a center for worship, but in the West we now live in an increasingly secular age. The massive growth of the city in the Industrial Revolution was tied to the development of great engines and massive factories. These are giving way to the information economy. The necessity of work in the city drew millions over the last couple of centuries, but a wave of new information technologies makes it easier for many to work far away from city life.

All these are true, but humanity still seems persuaded by the metropolitan temptation — most persons want to live in cities. For some time this has been true in the advanced economies of the West. It is now true of the developing world as well. Inevitably, the cities are very different.

In another article from the survey, "[In Place of God](#)," the magazine considers what secularization has meant for the city. The suggested answer is simple — culture has replaced belief in God. As the magazine puts it, "culture replaces religion:"

From the earliest times, a central role of any big town was sacred or religious. Until the 16th century, the status of a city was in England granted only to towns that had a diocesan cathedral, and to this day the title "metropolitan" is in some churches given to senior clerics. Cities still tend to have bigger and more splendid churches, mosques and temples than do mere towns and villages. But in the rich world the religious role of the metropolis has diminished, often to vanishing point. The ensuing vacuum has generally been filled by a secular alternative.

The main secular alternative is culture, represented by orchestras, galleries, museums, and the theater. Cities such as Sydney in Australia and Bilbao in Spain have catapulted themselves into the world's consciousness through massive leaps in cultural institutions.

When belief in God recedes, belief in culture takes its place, especially among the elites. Secularism creates an opportunity for art and other cultural forms to claim transcendence, and the elites celebrate and venerate art in almost sacramental terms.

An honest evaluation of church history should serve to remind Christians that there has often been some hesitation to embrace the city. After all, when in the Book of Genesis Lot chose the cities of the plain for his habitation, it led to disaster. With the exception of Jerusalem, most cities referenced in the Bible are mentioned with considerable concern, if not outright judgment. Think of Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, Gomorrah, Corinth, and Rome.

Yet, as God reminded Paul with reference to Corinth, "I have many in this city who are my people." [Acts 18:10] The Great Commission surely includes the great cities of the world.

How are we to reach the teeming millions gathered in these great cities? How do we even think about a city of over 50 million people? How do we develop a missiological strategy to reach China, when that nation may soon have 200 cities with populations over 1 million? What about people in the exploding mega-slums of the world's fastest-growing cities?

This survey report in *The Economist* offers the kind and quality of insight that should remind Christians to think again about the challenge represented by the city. As the numbers add up the picture becomes clear — the world is indeed going to town.

List of articles included in the survey:

["The World Goes to Town"](#)

[“Failures at the Top: Lucky the City with a Decent Government”](#)

[“Thronged, Creaking, and Filthy: Bursting Cities, Bust Infrastructure”](#)

[“A Cul-de-Sac of Poverty: Successful Cities Need Economic Growth”](#)

[“The Strange Allure of the Slums: People Prefer Urban Squalor to Rural Hopelessness”](#)

[“In Place of God: Culture Replaces Religion”](#)

[“Author Interview: Johnny Grimond”](#)

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