

Noah Levitt

Professor Russell Mcleod

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*The Secular City* Chapter 2 Reflection Paper

In Chapter 2 of *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, Harvey Cox discusses the social shape of the contemporary city. In doing this, he chooses to focus on two key characteristics of contemporary cities: their anonymity and their mobility. He introduces these topics by explaining how they both have been very misrepresented and attacked “by both religious and nonreligious critics” (47). Both have argued that the inevitable anonymity of urban relationships is a destructive force in society because it objectifies people and reduces relationships to impersonal. It causes people to not care about everyone they encounter but to just give or take whatever services are needed and then just move on with their day as if they never met that person. This lends to the philosophy of utilitarianism in effect because people are no longer viewed as ends in this framework. People are viewed as means to an end which many times is their own pleasure, not a personal relationship. This view is even more reinforced among certain religious groups who only support life in the rural context because it involves much deeper relationships among the people you encounter, not anonymity. They would argue that that’s the only type of relationship God calls us to have and therefore, anything less is unbiblical or sinful.

However, Harvey Cox raises some serious objections to these claims against anonymity. He explains “what is often left unsaid by the morbid critics of anonymity is, first, that without it,

life in a modern city could not be human, second, that anonymity represents for many people a liberating even more than a threatening phenomenon. It serves for large numbers of people as the possibility of freedom in contrast to the bondage of the law and convention” (48). This is a good point because if every relationship unequivocally had to be intimate and deep, it would be pretty legalistic and binding since we really wouldn’t have a choice in the people we draw near to or fellowship with. We would also run ourselves ragged trying to get to know everyone on our block or floor because we’d have put ourselves under the law of having to get close to every person around us.

The next point Cox makes is that “the anonymity of city living helps preserve the privacy which is essential to human life” (49). Here lies an extremely important idea that must be addressed when discussing this issue. Privacy is a necessity for healthy human living. You cannot trust everyone. There are people who want to hurt you and destroy you. This is ever more of a reality when you are living in the urban context. Therefore, for your safety and security, anonymity must be a component of the urban lifestyle because without it our lives would be public to all and hence be extremely vulnerable and dangerous. To me this is one of Harvey’s best points on why anonymity is key and beneficial in the urban context.

After making a few more points, Harvey moves on to assess the qualities and drawbacks of mobility in the urban city. He breaks down a lot of the misconceptions about mobility and the reasons why a lot of people avoid it or attack it when they shouldn’t. One of the main reasons people do is because they fear social change or a change of the status quo that they want to hold on to. This position is especially prominent amongst aristocrats or the higher-ups of societies because they want to maintain their power and their socio-economic status. Mobility can be a

threat to this because “mobile people are generally tolerant of new ideas and possibilities” (62). Mobile people are also “usually on the move intellectually, financially, or psychologically” (64). This means that social change is inevitable and change to the status quo will most likely happen sooner than later. However, we should never fear mobility from an objective standpoint because “Mobility is not the menace religious romantics paint it” (70). In fact, “Americans have always been a mobile people. They had to be, even to come here” (61). It is therefore deeply ingrained in our American culture to be mobile and progressive in that sense. We have never been a sedentary society in America and probably never will be. Without it we also wouldn’t have grown how we have as a nation, both literally and metaphorically.

Personally, I agree with what Cox expresses for the most part about anonymity and mobility. As a society, we would not be able to grow and progress without movement and the growth that comes thereby. However, it’s important that Cox admits that “Endless movement from place to place can betray the same kind of unwillingness to take responsibility for decisions which can be seen in switching wives” (70). This is important because some people will go to the opposite extremes in relation to mobility and anonymity which is just as bad. We cannot afford to just not care about people at all because we can’t trust everyone. We also cannot become so mobile to the point where there is great instability in our society and our families. However, if we can keep Cox’s points and qualified arguments in mind then I think we can begin to reconstruct our views of anonymity and mobility and seek the benefits of them both in a better way.