Urban transformation and the challenges to theology

Neil Darragh

Abstract: This paper describes the process by which a project for the transformation of an urban area regarded as a concentration of deprivation is being developed. The process requires a multi-agency approach in which several national and local government agencies cooperate with one another and with the local community to stimulate social, economic, and environmental change. The paper seeks to uncover the attitudes (or spirituality) that underlie this approach to urban change. It suggests how these attitudes can be seen to synchronise with traditional theological concepts and to be taking options among traditional theological debates. In taking such options urban project planning also throws out some serious challenges to existing Christian theology.

This paper is an exercise in 'practical' or 'public' theology. It attempts an interaction between a public 'spirituality' (or ideology or philosophy) on the one hand with Christian theology on the other. The theological reflection that is presented here is focused by particular circumstances. It arises from my own involvement in a project of urban transformation which is managed by a combination of agencies of central and local government. The language and concepts used in such a project are those of the public service rather than of the church or theology. In this case, theological reflection differs from other more common circumstances of practical or public theology where a community project is instigated by a church, a theological institution, or the theologians themselves on the basis of their own theology and vision. It is different again from theological reflection undertaken from the position of an outsider's comment on an existing public project rather than an insider's voice, albeit limited, within the project planning. My own position within the project is one of three 'community commentators' invited to be part of the project on the basis of many years of experience living and working in the locality. Our role is to provide a local community

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perspective in the initial planning period while the formal structures of local community participation are being worked out.

My intention here is to describe how the spirituality that underlies an urban transformation project interacts with and challenges some of the key concepts of existing Christian theologies. This requires

a) a description of the Project in its own concepts and terms,

b) the synchronizing of key concepts, that is, matching the central attitudes of the Project planners with concepts familiar to theologians, and

c) an indication of how the practical choices made within the Project are also theological choices and thereby throw out challenges to existing Christian theology.

This paper begins from a description of a public project and seeks to find how the spirituality implicit in that project impacts upon existing Christian theology. This is just one half of the 'interaction' between a public planning project and theological reflection. It is the direction of most interest to theologians not personally familiar with the urban transformation project described in this paper. The reverse direction, where we ask how Christian theology might affect the project itself, is one that I do not in fact deal with in this paper. Such a description would be the next logical step, but is one that will have to be left for another time. This latter is the direction of most interest to those involved in the project itself, but is of less interest to theologians outside the project.

Description of the Project[1]

The project discussed here is a programme of suburban transformation that is being developed collaboratively by several public

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[1] The information given here derives from Project papers that are unpublished but available in the public forum. Many of the Project's papers are confidential because they are commercially or politically sensitive. In my description here I use only information that is publicly available at the time of writing.

agencies (ministries and departments) of central and local government. It has received preliminary but not final approval from the political authorities. It is still in its planning stages and remains vulnerable to changes in the political climate. In this paper I shall refer to it simply as the 'Project'.

The suburban area concerned has about five thousand households with a high proportion of single-parent families and large families; it has a high level of state housing and a low level of home ownership; it is ethnically diverse; and its population is relatively young compared to the rest of the city.

The area is considered to be a 'concentration of deprivation' where the indicators of deprivation are low levels of educational achievement, low labour force participation, low incomes, high unemployment, and high dependency on social welfare benefits. There are many resultant social issues related to housing, education, employment, health, crime and safety.

There are also strong indicators of strength or opportunity such as the area's history, the strengths of diverse local communities, its relative youth, wide green spaces and proximity to coastal environments, availability of rail and road transport, and proximity to the city's central business district. New opportunities arise from: new city planning regulations that allow for a wide mix of housing; a growing population with increased demand and opportunities for businesses and community facilities; substantial state land holdings giving opportunities for state initiatives for better state rental housing and more affordable housing for first home buyers; recent local government focus on environmental sustainability; and opportunity for improved social and health outcomes through initiatives addressing the physical environment, housing quality, employment, and education.

In brief, the Project it is intended as a multi-agency, public sector-lead plan

- in collaboration with the local community and non-government sectors
- to cooperate and commit their resources
- to transforming a suburban area into a more socio-economically vibrant community
- for both current and future residents.

It is intended to be 'transformation' rather than business as usual.

The Project's objectives and action plan are grouped under four key areas:

- A thriving and prosperous local community with a strong and diversified economy. This implies an increase in the size and strength of the local economy, enhancement of local employment opportunities, improved transport connections within and outside the area, support for educational achievement and skills training.
- A strong, cohesive community with opportunities for all, including new residents attracted by affordable home ownership. This implies best practice approaches to create a healthy, safe and supportive community, strengthen community identity and improve public safety, and provide access to good quality public services for all groups in the community.
- A sustainable, high quality urban environment. This implies an attractive, safe and vibrant town centre, enhanced pedestrian and traffic safety, easy and safe access to community facilities and open spaces that meet local needs, protection and enhancement of the natural environment, accommodating the planned growth (variety of housing types) for the area.
- Access to housing choices to meet diverse needs. This implies provision of housing options to meet the needs of a diverse and

growing community (increase supply of affordable, social and open-market homes, Healthy Housing Programme).

The Project may be described summarily as a place-based, strength-based, housing-lead approach to urban transformation.

Public Service language

So far this paper has been descriptive in summarising the nature of this Project using the concepts and terms that are normal in the discussions of the Project planners. A good deal of the discussion within the Project is more technical and detailed than what I have described above. What I have described above gives a sense in broad strokes of the concepts and attitudes that drive the Project and the language in which they are expressed. This is the language of the public service rather than that of theology. While it is still English, it is a language that has built up its own implications, emotional history and unstated references, many of which are unknown to those outside the public service or corporate organizations and professional managers with whom they interact. It is a type of English that is culturally distant from the suburban local 'community' most affected by this Project and it is just beginning to adjust to the relatively new professional language of community participation. A dominating feature of this public service language is that it is constantly conditioned by the role of public servants as responsible to elected politicians whom they must not only obey in the final count but whose likely desires and requirements they must also anticipate.

The theologian engaged in a public project of this kind needs to 'translate' this public service language into that more familiar to theology. This is not just a matter of translating words but of translating attitudes and perspectives. It requires a procedure by which the public

service language and the language of theology not only impact on one another but can in some degree synchronize with one another.

Synchronizing key concepts

In the remainder of the paper I shall attempt a procedure that I have termed 'synchronizing key concepts'. The procedure is concerned with identifying correspondences between the concepts of a public service project and the concepts familiar to theologians.

This procedure is best treated as taking place at two levels. Concepts such as 'reign of God', 'salvation', 'faith', 'mission', 'church', 'salvation, 'the human person', 'community', 'creation,' God', 'sin, 'world', 'authority', and 'revelation'are high level theological concepts which I shall refer to from here on as 'key concepts'. These are concepts for which one easily finds definitions in theological dictionaries and which occur often in theological discussion.

There are also lower level implications of these key concepts that are highlighted in traditional theological debates. Does the 'reign of God' refer to some future reality, a past glorious age, a present reality, or some combination of several of these? I propose to prescind here from the evaluative component of these debates. Rather than be concerned with evaluative issues such as whether a particular standpoint is scriptural or unscriptural, right or wrong, true or false, orthodox or heterodox, I propose here to regard such debates as indicating the more concrete implications of the key concepts. That there are such implications becomes clearer when we address to a key concept such questions as when? who? for whom? what for? how? how much? and why? When, for example, does 'salvation' occur, who are its agents, is it for everyone or only some, what is its long term benefit, how does it come about, is it all or nothing or can we have degrees of it, and why should we want to be

saved at all? People's differing answers to these questions reveal the implications of the key concept as each understands it. All of the key concepts named above have such lower level, more concrete implications. Such potential implications are often identified in theological debates. I shall refer to these as 'stances' in the sense that they indicate the various ways in which the implications of a key concept may result in particular stances towards theological or public issues. I shall illustrate how this works in a moment.

It turns out in fact that some of the public service language corresponds more directly with the lower level *stances* than with the higher level *key concepts*. By adopting one stance rather than another a practical project is making choices within theological debates. This is perhaps surprising but I hope I can demonstrate how this occurs through the rest of this paper.

The synchronizing of public service concepts with key theological concepts can be attempted with almost any key theological concept. For the purposes of this paper I have summarised here four concepts that seem to me to be the most interesting from a theological point of view. These are: the reign of God, salvation, mission, and sin.

In setting out the results of this synchronization I adopt the following format:

a) a brief dictionary definition of the concept in traditional theological terms—for this purpose I have used the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (McKim, 1996) and noted this definition by quotation marks; [2]

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[2] The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms'* definitions have the quality of succinctness which is important in attempting a synchronization. Since these definitions have a slight orientation towards the Reformed tradition in theology, I have checked these against corresponding entries in O'Collins and Farrugia's *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (O'Collins & Farrugia, 2000). There are no substantial disagreements on these definitions

b) my own re-definition of that concept in language that moves towards a more public and less specifically theological language—I have italicised this re-definition;

c) a list of some of the theological debates within that concept which alert us to the various 'stances' that are implied at a more concrete level;

d) the concepts and attitudes from the Project that can be seen to correspond with that key theological concept;

e) the stances taken by the Project that can be seen to correspond with, and in fact are making options among, the stances taken in theological debates related to that key concept;

f) the challenges that the Project thereby makes to existing theologies.

The reign of God

"God's sovereign reign and rule. The major focus of Jesus teaching. Its fullness is in the future and yet it has already come in Jesus himself."

This is what the world would be like if it were in accordance with the will of a benevolent God. It is an image, based in the present but also projected into the future, of an ideal state of existence among human beings within the planet Earth.

Theological debates around the concept of the reign of God:

➤ Is this reign a 'this-worldly' or 'other worldly' concept? Is it mainly beyond death? Does it refer to our present experience of life or does it refer rather to the end-times?

➤ Transformation or intervention? Is the future reign a transformed continuity of the world as we currently know it, or is it a supreme

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between these two dictionaries. O'Collins & Farrugia have somewhat larger entries and have applications to a more Catholic tradition in theology.

intervention by God, an interruption, that bears little relationship to the present world or to any human attempts to improve it?

➢ In terms of human action, does the reign of God imply an engagement in social and sustainability issues, a withdrawal from them into personal and communal holiness, or an attempt to combine both self-focused holiness and outward engagement?

➢ Who are the agents of this reign? In what sense are there human agents of this reign or is human effort entirely pointless? If there are human agents, can some people bring it about for others?

The Project's vision and objectives amount to a non-theological description of an ideal community. This future ideal is an integration of physical, social, economic, and environmental outcomes. This envisages a long time frame and will not necessarily occur within the lifetimes of living individuals. In this sense the Project vision corresponds at least in part with the theological concept of the reign of God and may be a concrete expression of it in contemporary terms.

In terms of theological 'stances' at a more concrete level, the Project is already an option for a this-worldly ideal. In stating its objectives it states what this ideal (this reign of God) should look like in real life. It opts for a transformational approach to the medium-term future (20 years), but has no particular stance towards the very long-term future. This transformation requires engagement in social, economic, and sustainability issues, but the Project is cautious about direct involvement in personal issues. It also believes that government agencies in collaboration with the local community and other private interests can be agents of this ideal. There is a recognition nevertheless that each of these three kinds of agency has proved incapable on its own of accomplishing this ideal in the past.

The Project implicitly poses a number of questions to theology:

a) Just what are the characteristics of the reign of God in partial fulfilment before the 'end'? A project of this kind requires that the characteristics of such a 'reign of God' or vision for the future ideal be described in specific contemporary outcomes not just in biblical terms. Is theology able to do this or at least to recognise it when someone else describes it? The Project does not specifically advocate more 'transcendental' dimensions like life after death or resurrection, but it does not exclude these either. It does want to know what difference such transcendental dimensions might make to the wellbeing of the community.

b) Theologians normally ascribe the causality here to God. The Project neither affirms nor denies this. It does still require that there be human agents who are named and their qualifications identified. If theologians prefer to attribute such agency to God alone, then should government agencies, NGOs and churches simply ignore states of deprivation? The Project thus takes it own stand on the transformation-intervention debate.

c) Where does theology stand on environmental sustainability since this is a debate quite close to the understanding of a reign of God?

Salvation

"God's activities in bringing humans into a right relationship with God and with one another through Jesus Christ. They are saved from the consequences of sin and given eternal life."

Salvation is a process or state of wellbeing with an implication of rescue from a previous state of personal or collective fault, evil, destruction, or danger.

Theological debates around the concept of salvation:

➢ What is the salvation being offered here, of what does this salvation consist – eternal life, health, general wellbeing? Is it individual, communal, economic, political, spiritual, physical, environmental?

- From what are we being saved? – personal faults? guilt? social/structural oppression? ideological confinement? unhealthy living conditions?

- Who or what is saviour – Caesar, Diana, the Law of Moses, Jesus of Nazareth, the church? Or, in the contemporary world, who are the agents of this salvation? Can people save themselves? Can individuals and their communities achieve beneficial outcomes by their own efforts or do they require special higher-powered outside assistance?

- In what way is such salvation mediated to us? What kind of theory of salvation/atonement is legitimate or appropriate?

The stimulus for the Project was a recognition that many people in a particular suburban area live in conditions of deprivation that are unacceptable to responsible government and that they need assistance to overcome or escape from those conditions. The Project is an attempt at salvation from these conditions. It assumes that government agencies can be saviours, but not on their own. They require at least that the local community be co-operators in the Project. Questions still remain about the local community's capacity for participation, the style of government agency intervention and the several different ways in which these two interact.

In terms of theological 'stances' at a more concrete level, the Project is reasonably clear that the salvation it seeks is a transformation of the social, economic, and environmental conditions in the area, and it includes such specific components as healthy housing, personal safety, better transport, work and education opportunities, and access to health care. It does not include any provisions for after death, but it is careful to show respect towards, though without favouring, the various spiritual beliefs and customs that exist in the suburban area. This kind of salvation does not require commitment to Jesus Christ or affiliation to any church.

The government agencies in the Project regard themselves as not only capable of being agents of this salvation but as having a statutory responsibility to attempt it. As with the 'reign of God' ideal, government agencies recognise that they cannot do this without strong community participation even though it is not yet clear how such participation can be achieved. There is a recognition of 'higher powers' operating here such as large scale economic forces and the transcendent 'taxpayer' whose will is mediated through the political authorities. Project planners do not however take into account any Supreme Being except that prayers (sometimes but not necessarily Christian) are not unusual at meetings and meals. This is probably because some participants have made it clear that they regard such prayers as culturally normal. The model of how this salvation is mediated is most commonly represented as an external power (a multi-government agency programme) making an 'offer' (of finance, personnel and expertise) inviting local community participation to produce significant beneficial outcomes for the local community at environmental, economic, social and personal levels.

The Project implicitly poses a number of questions to theology:

a) As in the 'reign of God' concept, the Project here again challenges theology to state just what exactly it means by 'salvation'. Is there a 'spiritual' dimension that is not physical, social, economic, and environmental? Or, more specifically, there is a challenge here to theology to state precisely what it thinks people need to be saved from? – guilt, sin, deprivation, oppression, ideological confinement, propaganda, unhealthy living conditions? What does 'unsaved' look like?

b) It also challenges theology on any juridical perspective on salvation. Does theology maintain a king-subject or parent-child model of salvation where the rescue consists in a declaration of restoration by a

superior authority towards a rebellious subject or child? Or is the transformation model used by the Project a theologically more satisfactory model of salvation?

c) Theology is reasonably clear about who is Saviour in biblical terms. But how does this translate into contemporary agents of salvation? Do the churches themselves claim to be contemporary agents of salvation? Are government agencies such saviours or are the people themselves agents of their own salvation? Since none of these looks like being able to monopolise such agency, what combinations is theology prepared to recognise or encourage?

Mission

"All that is done by the church and by Christians to serve God. More specifically, the term may be used to denote direct activities or tasks undertaken by the church for particular purposes."

Mission is the activity of the church directed outwards to the wider society or to those who are not church members, in service of the wellbeing of all people and the whole Earth.

Theological debates around the concept of mission:

➢ Is mission to be understood primarily as church growth or primarily as service to the reign of God in the world especially in terms of justice, peace and sustainability?

➢ Is mission to be understood primarily as foreign mission to other countries or as involvement in the missionary's own society?

➢ What is thought to be wrong with the recipients of mission that they should be the objects of missionary concern?

➢ What are the benefits that missionaries are supposed to bring to the recipients of their mission and do these also come with a package of harmful side-effects?

➢ What are the required qualities of missionaries so that their activities be beneficial rather than harmful to the recipients of their mission? What are the personal, cultural, life-style, and technical qualities required for mission?

➢ Is the goal of mission focused primarily on the inculturation of the gospel or on the liberation of people from injustices in the society and culture?

In the Project, the government agencies are understood to have a mission to provide services outside the boundaries of their own organization that result in a transformation of the local suburban community. The mission is, with the help of the local community itself, to transform that local community to be a place 'where people thrive and prosper for generations, a place with a strong and vibrant community spirit, valued for its natural beauty and history'.[3]

In terms of theological 'stances' at a more concrete level, the Project has little interest in its own growth. It is envisaged as a service to the local community for the benefit of that community. It is an option for a mission within its own society, but that mission could be considered to some degree a 'foreign mission' in that it is directed to a locality where the Project planners do not live, only a few work, and where there is a large cultural gap between themselves and the local community residents. What is thought to be wrong with the recipients of mission that they should be the objects of missionary concern is clear in the Project's identification of the area as a concentration of deprivation even though there also exist strengths and opportunities within the area. The benefits the Project seeks to bring to the area is its transformation into a more socio-economic vibrant community for present and future residents. The

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[3] The first public pamphlet issued by the Project organizers gave this as its opening description of what the Project is about.

government agencies involved are prepared to commit considerable financial and personnel resources to this objective. The Project is also aware of the possibilities of harmful side-effects or 'perverse outcomes' in that the 'deprivation' in the area was largely caused by urban planning mistakes in the past. Yet problems in communicating the Project to the local community indicate high vulnerability to misunderstandings between the government agencies and the local community. The Project is also conscious of some of the qualities required for people involved in this Project such as personal integrity, professionalism and political expertise, cross-cultural and communication skills. The Project is not particularly concerned with inculturation of its own values nor with liberation from injustices, but travels a middle road where its own values are mildly propagated without any deliberate intention to do so. It is transformative rather than liberative in the sense that it is strongly averse to any revolutionary implications but seeks to raise the standard of living of those living in some deprivation.

The Project implicitly poses a number of questions to theology:

a) The amount of time, energy and professionalism the Project puts into clarifying its objectives and strategies challenge theology on the adequacy of its own views on missionary organisation. Missiology is sometimes suspicious about the impact of highly organized missions insensitive to the recipient community. But the Project illustrates the complexities that need to be dealt with to achieve the intended objectives rather than perverse outcomes. It here challenges a tendency in missiology to rely on the personal faith and commitment of the missionaries with less attention to planning and professionalism. The idea in theology that the mission is *God's* mission, rather than a humble acknowledgement that the planners are not in control, may

indicate rather an expectation of divine intervention to compensate for the inadequacies of missionary organization and sensitivity.

b) The Project's vision parallels church mission in the sense that both include an intention to promote social transformation, but the language of each is clearly different. In what cases are the differences just about language where the church uses God-language but government agencies do not, or are the differences more substantial? There is a challenge to theology here to articulate more clearly the sense in which the church's mission is or is not unique in a substantial way rather than simply in its language. Does the church's mission overlap with and should therefore ally itself with other organized action for social transformation? Should theology encourage such church-state alliances, and where are the boundaries that establish limits to such alliances?

Sin

" . . the human condition of separation from God that arises from opposition to God's purposes. It may be breaking God's law, failing to do what God wills, or rebellion. It needs forgiveness by God." "Actual sin: thoughts, words, or deeds that constitute a deliberate violation of God's will and law and are thus sinful."

A destructive human condition that is the result of some evil act or omission by oneself or other persons, or the act itself of doing evil.

Theological debates around the concept of sin:

➢ Is sin primarily understood as personal, structural/social, or pre-existing/original, and how do these different emphases impact on prevention and reconciliation?

- Not all sin is equally destructive or alienating from God. How do we identify and deal with the degrees of sin both in respect to degrees of objective evil and in respect to degrees of personal responsibility?
- Is humanity radically depraved so that we are incapable of self improvement or may we assume a relatively strong human capacity even though flawed by both structural/social and personal sinfulness?

In this Project, the term 'sin' does not occur. A state of deprivation is however recognised to exist and has provided the main stimulus for instituting the Project. This is a state that pre-exists the individuals and families living in the local area. It is believed that conditions such as inadequate housing, lack of access to education and employment, and poverty are in part contributors to anti-social behaviour and to a continuing spiral of deprivation. Outside intervention that alters the conditions of deprivation, when combined with the internal vitality of the local community, is believed to be the way to bring about a transformation that not only alters the state of deprivation but encourages more socially responsible behaviour in the local community.

In terms of theological 'stances' at a more concrete level, there is an easy match between a situation of deprivation and 'structural (or social) sin' or sin as a pre-existing condition. The concentration of deprivation is seen to be caused by earlier flawed efforts at community development. The Project does not deal explicitly with personal sin or individual anti-social or criminal behaviour. It is not therefore focused on individual responsibility. It is believed though that the transformation envisaged by this Project will have a major influence in preventing such behaviour. The Project takes an optimistic rather than a 'depraved' approach to human beings and their human rights. A strength-based approach assumes the essential goodness of people and situations.

The Project implicitly poses a number of questions to theology:

a) The Project does not use the vocabulary of 'sin' but is clearly dealing with socially unacceptable conditions and behaviour that theology would recognise as sin. The Project has a range of vocabulary that could effectively be a substitute for the theological language of sin, and theology could consider adopting it for its own discourse:

- individual actions may be 'abusive' or, more mildly, 'inappropriate';

- structural conditions may be 'concentrations of deprivation', 'unhealthy', 'unsustainable';

- public or corporate interventions may have 'perverse outcomes'.

b) The Project questions theological ideas about depraved humanity and the consequences of this. This Project began with a deprivation-based assumption (rather than deliberate policy) but shifted to a strength-based approach and is optimistic about the capacity of government agencies to produce beneficial outcomes and the capacity of the local community to participate. The issue here for theology is not so much the debate about the scarcity or abundance of grace, but about the pessimistic or optimistic attitudes that a theology of sin can create towards people living in a state of deprivation.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted an interface of an urban transformation project and theological reflection. I have suggested that there is a spirituality (or an implicit theology) lying below the concepts and attitudes that drive the project planning. When these attitudes are matched with traditional theological concepts it becomes apparent that project planning decisions are also theological decisions though they are not expressed in theological language. An urban planning project is continually taking options that theologians can recognise as the options thrown up in theological debate. A major part of the paper consists in

synchronising the attitudes inherent in a particular urban project with key theological concepts and more concrete theological stances. Such synchronising of project attitudes with theological concepts results in challenges to theology.

In general, theology is here challenged to consider whether some of its familiar concepts may be simply flights of imaginative fiction and whether theological reflection should be more concrete about the impact of those concepts in the world of practical decision making and behaviour. Theology is also challenged to reconsider whether some of its specialised language may be an unnecessary avoidance of a more common public language.

In more specific terms related to the concepts discussed in this article, theology is challenged to state what it means by the 'reign of God' not just in biblical or 'end-time' terms, but in contemporary terms; and in terms that are not confined to exposing injustice and oppression, but can more positively identify development initiatives by human agencies as good and worthwhile (or not). Similar remarks may be made about the concept of 'salvation' where theology's role is not just to discuss God's initiatives in personal conversion and Christian community but to identify salvific activities in society even when these do not invoke the name of Christ. The 'mission' of the church and of other agencies in society can often be seen as parallel. But theology does not always help in developing the kind of perspective that encourages cooperation in these mission activities. Local churches can appear to government agencies as simply another kind of lobby group working for their own interests rather than with a mission to society. And finally, the language of 'sin' has almost disappeared from public discourse and is disappearing even from theology. Yet public discourse has, in spite of Christian theology,

developed a range of terms to deal with evil in society and failures in personal or social responsibility.

This paper has been concerned with the challenges that urban planning poses to theologians. The reverse direction where theology poses challenges to the process of urban planning and similar forms of public engagement is the next logical step in this process of theological reflection but is not addressed in this paper.

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Author: Neil Darragh has lectured in theology at the School of Theology in the University of Auckland and in the Catholic Institute of Theology, Auckland. He is currently engaged in theological research, postgraduate research supervision, and in pastoral and community projects.

Email: n.darragh@auckland.ac.nz