

CSR PROJECT FELLOWS APPLICATION
Subdivided by Faith?
Urban Altruism and Loving Our Neighbor(hood)s

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Summary

In their landmark study, *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith articulated the ways in which evangelical spirituality and practice actually contributed to the racialization and segregation of American culture—the very antithesis of the picture of the redeemed community “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev. 7:9).¹ Our proposal for a CSR Fellows grant seeks to launch a correlate (and supplementary) initiative that will consider how evangelicals tend to exhibit an anti-urban bias that contributes to a negative view of urban life and contributes to the growth of suburban and exurban social arrangements. (And like the case studied by Emerson and Smith, here evangelical sensibilities seems to be in contrast to the biblical eschatological hope that locates redemption in a *city* [Rev. 21:2].) We believe that such an anti-urban bias accords neither with an integral Christian theoretical framework, nor with the findings of social research—which increasingly points to the corrosive effects of the suburbanization of American populations, and also indicates the unique possibilities for community in urban settings. In particular, we plan to examine whether urban social arrangements foster “love of neighbor” in unique ways because of the unique social capital yielded by urban geographies.

In sum, our ultimate goal is to write a book that functions as both a supplement and sequel to *Divided by Faith*, considering a factor not considered by Emerson and Smith: the way in which urban and suburban social arrangements contribute to either racial segregation or integration, where racial reconciliation represents one facet of a general concern for loving one’s neighbor. In other words, we want extend Emerson and Smith’s analyses by considering not only racial concerns, but broader elements of “community-building” and other-regarding behaviors and practices that we describe with the shorthand “altruism.”²

This book project will require a multi-year, externally-funded research program; but a CSR Fellows grant will enable us to launch a pilot version of this project in Grand Rapids, providing the time and platform to secure additional external funding to expand the project to other metropolitan centers. The research and study funded by the CSR Fellows program would enable us to build and test instruments for research, generate preliminary data, confirm or disconfirm initial hypotheses, write two initial articles (which will become chapters of the book), and provide release time to generate a larger grant proposal for external funding to extend the research.

¹ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

² Here we follow the use of the term as employed in contemporary discussions in both natural and social sciences. See Stephen G. Post, Lynn G. Underwood, Jeffrey S. Schloss, and William B. Hurlbutt, eds., *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Dialogue* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

A. Project Description

We are proposing a theologically-driven social science research initiative which undertakes a mode of sociological research that is informed by a distinctly Christian theory of urban social relations and seeks to substantiate this theory with existing data and new qualitative research. One of our goals in this project is to exhibit a kind of sociological research that avoids both theory-driven blindness to empirical data as well as a naïve positivism about empirical description. All empirical observation, we would argue, is filtered through a constellation of assumptions and commitments (a constellation of beliefs described by Thomas Kuhn as a “paradigm”). At the same time, theory must be field-tested and verified in the arena of empirical experience. To paraphrase Kant, theory without observation is empty; observation without theory is empty.

All sociological research, then, is theory-driven and all sociological observation is informed by theoretical commitments. It is precisely recognition of this situation that opens the space for the “admittance,” as it were, of sociological research oriented by theory that is distinctly Christian. We believe that social science research that is distinctly Christian must work from robust theological assumptions about what it means to be human, the shape of human community, the breakdown of relationships, and the hope for new social configurations. However, Christian sociological theory that remains *a priori* speculation is not properly sociological. It must be supplemented and opened to confirmation (or *disconfirmation*) in the arena of experience through empirical observation. Our research initiative on urban sociality seeks to enact this vision of sociological research.

1. Major Theses

There is a widespread intuition³—perhaps especially among evangelicals⁴—that cities and urban spaces constitute a threat to virtue and morality. Often demonized as a place to avoid, “the city” is often portrayed as a haunting specter in the center of town. In the popular imagination, as articulated in film and music videos, the city is a place of

³ Alfred Kazin, “Fear of the City,” *American Heritage* (February/March 1983), pp 14-23; Joel Kotkin, “A Bit of a Chill for Hot Times in the Big City,” *The Washington Post* (March 24, 2002); and Alvin Mitchell, “Determinates of Safety in Urban and Suburban Areas,” *Race, Gender & Class* 11 (2005), pp 98-111.

⁴ This is suggested in Jeff Sharlet’s recent article, “Inside America’s Most Powerful Megachurch,” *Harper’s* (May 2005). In discussions with congregants from New Life church on the northern edge of Colorado Springs, he comments: “Cities [...] are especially dangerous. It is not so much the large populations, with their uneasy mix of sinner and saved, that make Christian conservatives leery of urban areas. Even downtown Colorado Springs, presumably as godly as any big town in America, struck the New Lifers as unclean. Whenever I asked where to eat, they would warn me away from downtown’s neat little grid of cafés and ethnic joints. Stick to Academy, they’d tell me, referring to the vein of superstores and prepackaged eateries that bypasses the city. [...] [T]he anti-urban sentiments of modern fundamentalists [*sic*] are also more specific to the moment in which they find themselves” (p. 49).

violence, crime, and gang warfare.⁵ It is often considered a place to get one's family *out of...*

But though these intuitions are widespread, we want to suggest that they have the status of an urban legend. These intuitions are not supported by sociological theory, nor do they find substantiation in existing sociological research.⁶ Moreover, sociological research has begun to point out the destructive effects of suburban and exurban settlement patterns: persistent segregation, exclusive homogeneity, costly infrastructure, disinvestment in the central city, and erosion of public space.⁷

Current sociological research, then, deconstructs these anti-urban intuitions⁸. Moreover, we would argue that a distinctly Christian sociological theory should articulate almost the exact opposite of this anti-urban intuition. Insofar as we are looking for a *city* (Rev. 21:2; cp. Heb. 11:10), Christian theology cannot participate in such a demonization of the city. To the contrary, the city is portrayed as the site of authentic community and the embodiment of the kingdom. The New Jerusalem is not necessarily a suburb. There are sidewalks in the kingdom.⁹

⁵ This finds a disturbing expression in the relationship between the police force of Los Angeles—which is drawn from an overwhelmingly suburban population—and the urban populations that they “serve and protect.” As one officer responded to an interview in the early 1990s: “You want to fix this city? I say you start out with carpet-bombing, level some buildings, plow all this shit under and start all over again.” In Marc Cooper, “L.A.’s State of Siege: City of Angels, Cops from Hell,” in *Inside the L.A. Riots: What really happened—and why it will happen again* (New York: Institute for Alternative Journalism, 1992), p. 14.

⁶ Especially when it is noted that the 2000 Census reported that during the 1990s crime poverty and crime rates declined in central cities while population and home ownership rates increased. Moreover, the Brookings Institution in 2003 reported a dramatic decline in concentrated poverty. Additionally a 2004 study by the Manhattan Institute indicated that the perceived benefits of suburban child-rearing may be severely over-estimated when examining the behaviors of urban and suburban high school students. For more, see Peter Dreier, “How the Media Compound Urban Problems,” 2005. *Journal of Urban Affairs*; P. Jargowsky, “Stunning progress, hidden problems: The dramatic decline of concentrated poverty in the 1990s,” 2003. Brookings Institution, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy; and Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster, “Sex Drugs and Delinquency in Urban and Suburban Schools,” 2004. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

⁷ See for instance: Kaid F. Benfield, et. al., *Once There Were Greenfields: How Urban Sprawl Is Undermining America's Environment, Economy, and Social Fabric* (New York: National Resources Defense Council, 1999); Andres Duany, et. al., *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000); Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor, 1991); William H. Frey, “Escaping the City – and the Suburbs,” *American Demographics* (June 2002), pp. 21-23; and Richard Harris and Michael Lehman, “Social and Geographic Inequities in the Residential Property Tax: A Review and Case Study,” *Environment and Planning* (May 2001), pp. 881-900; and Richard Hogan, *The Failure of Planning: Permitting Sprawl in San Diego Suburbs: 1970-1999* (Ohio State University Press, 2003); Stephen Bridges and Neil P. Coady, “Urban Size Differences in Incidence of Altruistic Behavior,” *Psychological Reports* 78 (1996), pp. 307-312; Charles Korte and Nancy Kerr, “Responses to Altruistic Opportunities in Urban and Nonurban Settings,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 95 (1975); Ralph Slovenko, “Desocialization by Automobile,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 45 (2001): 535-538.

⁸ It should also be noted that traditional urban sociology tended to view the city quite positively as well. Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Robert Park all wrote favorably about the development of the city. One major exception to this tendency, however, was Ferdinand Tonnies. His notion of *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gessellschaft*—which construes urban relations as necessarily atomistic—still seems to resonate with many people's perception of the city.

⁹ See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “A City of Delight,” in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 124-140; Eric Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Brazos, 2003).

We wish to undertake qualitative sociological research that will examine the possibility of a distinctly Christian sociological theory of urban sociality. Therefore, we plan to undertake a research initiative that will rigorously formulate a radically Christian sociological theory of urban sociality and then seek to confirm its hypotheses by qualitative sociological research. In particular, we want to investigate the following questions, beginning with the follow these:

- A first methodological/theoretical question: *What would be the shape of a theologically-driven, distinctly Christian sociological theory of urban life?* Our thesis is that a Christian urban sociology will articulate a fundamental affirmation of urban (and rural) social formations.
- *Do urban social arrangements hamper or foster meaningful, supportive, loving social relationships?* An investigation of the question will require honoring the complexity of conditions that affect urban relationality. For instance, issues of proximity and frequency of contact need to be supplemented with concerns about race, class, economic factors, etc. Is it the case that urban social arrangements *as such* foster meaningful, supportive, loving relationships; in short, urban social arrangements foster love of neighbor – if so, does that vary from rural, suburban, or exurban arrangements?
- *What are the possibilities for authentic urban community?* In particular, what role does Christian faith play in the construction and maintenance of urban social arrangements? And what are the *limits* of urban social arrangements, particularly in a fallen world? On the one hand, it is possible that Christian faith is not a simple guarantee for fostering urban altruism. We would also, though, question whether it is possible that non-faith-based commitments to urban social arrangements do foster more altruistic behavior than suburban social arrangements. In the end, we seek to examine whether there are clear limits to non-faith-based approaches, and whether the coupling of an intentional commitment to urban social arrangements *and* intentional Christian discipleship maximize altruistic behavior.¹⁰
- Finally, how have evangelical Christians in particular contributed to our urban-paranoid society? Is there an evangelical cultural tool kit that predisposes them to an avoidance of the city? In *Divided By Faith* Michael Emerson and Christian Smith have compellingly articulated how evangelicals have contributed to the racialized society. Is the same true of the urban-paranoid society?

Current research clearly indicates that the world is becoming increasingly urban. It becomes incumbent upon us then to reconcile these two seemingly oppositional forces: more population residing in the city and more population fearing the city. With recent scholarship we have a better understanding of evangelicals and the racialized society. What is less clear is the relationship between evangelicals and urbanized society. Such research will help to illuminate a powerful subculture of our society and how they think

¹⁰ For the most part, we believe that the same is true in *rural* contexts. In other words, many of the theses advanced regarding urban social arrangements we believe would also hold for authentically *rural* social arrangements (but *not* suburban social arrangements). However, our research will focus on urban realities.

about and relate to the continued social dominance of urban centers. This has relevance to both scholarly audiences and more general evangelical audiences.

2. Outline and Methods

We intend to implement qualitative research methods.¹¹ Using the city of Grand Rapids as a case study, we will conduct extensive interviews. We will create an instrument that will be administered to a representative population. In particular, we want to interview people at the nexus of different *religious* and *geographical* locations. The religious groups we want to consider have significant differences that we anticipate impact how they view their relation to urban realities. Thus, we have identified five sectors: Catholics (whose “parish” theology we believe to be a significant factor), evangelicals (in which we will include most CRC congregations), African-American churches, mainline Protestants, and nonChristians. We will then index interviewees to their geographical location of either urban or suburban. We expect, for instance, that urban Catholics and suburban Catholics might articulate different intuitions about “the city.” This will raise interesting questions about just what controls one’s imagination of urban space, one’s concern about those in geographical proximity, the degree of social interaction with neighbors, and other aspects of “loving one’s neighbor.”

We hope to supplement the CSR Fellows budget and resources by applying for a MacGregor student assistant who we will train to conduct interviews.

B. Expected Outcomes

As described above, the ultimate goal of this research is a book that supplements and extends the sociological work of Emerson and Smith’s *Divided by Faith*. (Our working title is *Subdivided by Faith? Evangelicalism and the Geography of Loving our Neighbor(hood)s*.) During the two-years of CSR-funded research, anticipated outcomes for this research initiative include a range of modes of dissemination, as well as plans to extend the initiative. In particular, we anticipate the following outcomes:

- (1) A *peer-reviewed article* articulating the distinct methodological vision of a theologically-driven, empirically-verified Christian (urban) sociology, using our project on urban altruism as a case study. We expect this would be published in *Christian Scholars’ Review*.
- (2) A *peer-reviewed article* related to theses 1 + 2 above. We hope to publish this in a leading journal in urban sociology, urban studies, and philosophies of place, such as *City and Community*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Philosophy & Geography*, *Ethics*, *Place*, and *Environment*.
- (3) “*Popular*” *articles and presentations*: Because we believe that these matters are of interest and importance to parishioners and even a broader public, in the second year of our initiative we want to disseminate some of our research in more “popular” venues, including Christian venues such as *The Banner* and *Christianity Today*, as well as *The Grand Rapids Press* and perhaps *Harper’s*.

¹¹ We also hope to draw on existing quantitative data, as well as census data that will help us, for instance, determine the suburban nature of evangelicalism in America.

We are also committed to taking the show on the road, so to speak, and doing multimedia presentations for churches and neighborhood associations.

- (4) *A major grant application:* In the final phase of our Fellowship, we plan to generate an external grant proposal to extend this research. We expect to submit the application to the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love at Case Western Reserve University (from which Smith has received prior funding for a related project), the John Templeton Foundation's initiative on spiritual capital [pending extensions of this initiative], and/or the Louisville Institute (from which Mulder has received prior funding).
- (5) *Teaching outcomes:* since we both teach classes dealing with urban issues, we fully expect this research process to both utilize and inform our students. Students in Smith's Urban Altruism course and Mulder's Urban Sociology class will be given the option to pursue these questions in literature reviews and research papers. In addition, the findings of this project will be vital for preparing young Christians to not just know about and understand the city, but to also be reflective about what being a Christian neighbor truly entails.