The question of what makes for a good city is an urgent one. More than half of humankind lives in cities and the number of urban residents grows by nearly 73 million every year. Today's urban population is 3.3 billion and by UN calculations it is expected to double by 2050. That means that two out of every three people will live in the city in 2050. Most will be poor, with limited resources. Yet, given the numbers, it is in cities that the future of humanity will be decided. In this new wave of urban development how should we imagine cities? And what counts as a good life for a city?

To answer this question, let me begin with a semantic sleight of hand. The term city can also be used in Christian political thought as a synonym for a polity or polis or republic. I want to answer the question about what is a good city through focusing primarily on the political dimension of this question. And in particular, the political dimensions of what it means to live in a hyper diverse, world city such as Melbourne or New York.

In a world city you do not choose either whom you live next door to or who lives in the next block or neighborhood. You find yourself living in proximity with people from whom you may be very different, whether individually or collectively. They may speak a different language, have different eating habits, or look at the world very differently. But whether one likes it or not one shares the same fate as them. If the electricity is cut off, everyone loses power. If gangs rule the streets, everyone is under threat. Living in a city shaped by global population flows and diverse patterns of life confronts religious and non-religious groups with an intense sense of disjuncture between the common life they build as a “congregation” or collectivity to sustain their beliefs and practices and the
common life they inherently share with everyone in their neighborhood or city. Gated communities, “white flight” and *de facto* segregation are one, prevalent kind of response to living with others. Later on, I will suggest that democratic politics as exemplified in the practice of community organizing represents another kind of response.

To understand what makes for a good city is, in the first instance, is seeks ways of forging a common life between different communities of faith who whether they like it or not, are participants in a shared community of fate. And forging a common life is inherently a political process. To understand what makes for a good city must also mean reflecting on the virtues of its citizens and the character of what they love. A good city is not just an economically prosperous, environmentally sustainable, well-designed and aesthetically pleasing place to live. It is also one whose common life is characterized by the pursuit of meaningful moral, spiritual and political goals.

This was an insight of ancient Greek philosophy as it reflected on the intersection of the cure of the soul and the cure of the city. As exemplified in Plato and Aristotle, the cultivation of virtue and cultivation of a good city go hand in hand. There was no good life apart from a good city and there was no good city apart from a virtuous citizenry.

But, from a theological perspective, there can be no truly good city as there are no sinless people and we should not look to any earthly social and political project to save us. Salvation comes from Christ, not London, Lagos or Los Angeles. Here let me invoke Augustine, someone who had a thing or two to say about cities.

Augustine divides human societies in two: there is the City of God – which combines both the true church in this age and the New Jerusalem of the age to come – and Babylon or the earthly city. Augustine characterises the division not as a division *within* society but a division *between* societies. These two cities are understood as two polities coexistent in one space and time: the time before Christ’s return. Citizens of both cities seek peace; however, in the earthly city peace is achieved through the imposition of one's own will by the exercise of force, and is at once costly in its creation, lacking in real
justice,\textsuperscript{3} and unstable in its existence.\textsuperscript{4} For Augustine, the only true society and true peace exists in the city of God.

\textbf{City as kosmos}

Augustine’s understanding of the earthly city as a worldly city can be collocated with a more contemporary, social science usage of the term “world city.” The social science use of the term “world city” builds on the work of John Friedman’s “world city hypothesis” that postulated that certain cities took on the status of being world cities by dint of the extent of their integration and importance within the global economy, their acting as “basing point” for global capital which results in them functioning as points of control in the organization of production and markets, their being points of concentration for labor migration and resulting forms of spatial and economic polarization, and finally, their generating social costs that exceed the fiscal capacity of the nation-state in which they are located to cope.

For example, London, the city where I grew up and lived for most of my life is a world city. It has a tentacular spatial and temporal spread, with mutually dependent social, economic, political and administrative relationships, reaching not just throughout Britain but around the globe. This is most obvious in its role as the center of international finance capitalism (New York has more trades, but London has the highest volume of international trades and deals). London is a if not the command point in the global financial services industry. Another example of this is the dependence of London’s health services on recruitment from overseas and how in turn the localities from which migrant workers come suffer from a “brain drain” while at the same time gaining from financial remittances from expatriates.\textsuperscript{5} What happens in healthcare is repeated across London’s labor markets, from the menial to the managerial.\textsuperscript{6} London is now the most ethnically and religious diverse city in the world. In short, the whole world is in London and London is in the world.
In its theological usage the term “world” (κόσμος) is a synonym for the universal order of things and how, before the Day of Judgment, this order is coterminous with a worldly system opposed to God’s ordering of creation: what Augustine called the “earthly city.” As a “world city,” London is an earthly or worldly city, an instantiation of “Babylon.” This is an insight first articulated in the nineteenth century with the rise of London as an imperial and industrial center. For example, Benjamin Disraeli identified London as a “modern Babylon” in his 1847 novel Tancred. His account was part of a widespread nineteenth century sentiment that viewed London elegiacally through the prism of the great Biblical motif of imperial power: a prism encouraged in part by the discovery of the ruins of the original Babylon and the transport of artifacts from that ancient city to the British Museum. London, like Babylon and Rome before it, was simultaneously the center of things and embodied the system as a whole, and thus stood apocalyptically under judgment. Like all imperial centers, it is awe-inspiring and capable of producing things beautiful and precious as well as decadent and damned. As with the depiction of Babylon/Rome given in Revelation, London, like other world cities, stands for and is imbricated in a whole system of production, domination, and degradation.

Something of this is captured in the poem ‘A Hymn to London’ by Ben Okri, which is inscribed around the staircase of the recently built City Hall on the Southbank of the Thames.

Here lives the great music
Of humanity
The harmonisation of different
Histories, cultures, geniuses,
And dreams.
Ought to shine to the world
And tell everyone
That history, though unjust,
Can yield wiser outcomes.
And out of bloodiness
Can come love  
Out of slave-trading  
Can come a dance of souls  
Out of division, unity;  
Out of chaos, fiestas.  
City of tradition, conquests,  
And variety;  
City of commerce and the famous river,  
Tell everyone that the future  
Is yet unmade.  
Many possibilities live in your cellars.  
Nightmares and illuminations.

Okri’s poem also captures something of deep ambiguity of any world city. It is this ambiguity and its impact on what it might mean to pursue the good of a city that I would like to explore further.

**Faithful witness in a world city**

So how might we pursue the good of a world city such as London or Melbourne? Let us return to Augustine. His use of Babylon and Jerusalem as metaphors draws on Jeremiah 29. The key passage in Jeremiah 29 states:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.⁸
For Augustine, Jeremiah 29 is an allegory of what it means to be a Christian in the worldly city while we wait, not for a return to Jerusalem, but the coming of the New Jerusalem. Augustine writes:

For, while the two cities [the city of God and the earthly city] are intermingled, we also make use of the peace of Babylon. We do so even though the People of God is delivered from Babylon by faith, so that it is only for a while that we are pilgrims in her midst. It is for this reason, therefore, that the apostle admonishes the Church to pray for king’s and for all that are in authority, adding these words: ‘that we may live a quiet and tranquil life in all godliness and love.’ [1 Tim 2.2] Again, when the prophet Jeremiah foretold the captivity which was to befall the ancient People of God, he bade them, by divine command, to go obediently into Babylon, thereby serving God even by their patient endurance, and he himself admonished them to pray for Babylon, saying ‘in the peace thereof shall ye have peace’: the temporal peace which is for the time being shared by the good and the wicked alike.9

Augustine is recognizing that before Christ’s return the godly and the wicked share a common world, a world in which the sheep and goats can only be separated by God at the last judgment. And that while the People of God are no longer bound by Babylon, until Christ’s return, they share in and benefit from the peace and prosperity of Babylon, i.e. the pridelful and sinful earthly city.

The allegorical contrast between Jerusalem and Babylon is of course a central theme not only in Augustine but also in the Bible. In the New Testament it is seen most explicitly in Revelation. Despite the very negative portrayal of Babylon as representing the empire of the anti-Christ, Revelation does not counsel Christians to leave Babylon but to be faithful witnesses – martyrs – within Babylon so that all peoples might come to acknowledge and worship God.10 Following Revelation, Augustine sees the Roman Empire as equivalent to Babylon – a strange, sinful and evil place directed away from the love of God – but a place that nevertheless, Christians, for the moment, are called to serve God within and enjoy the peace of.
The challenge of Jeremiah 29 is to repentance and to re-learning obedience to God. However, the place and manner of this learning is somewhat counter-intuitive: the Israelites were to learn obedience through pursuing the welfare of Babylon and through forming a common life with pagans and oppressors. Jeremiah’s call to seek the welfare of Babylon comes to a defeated, subjugated and marginal people struggling to make sense of what has happened to them. In many ways that is the situation of Christians today: the church no longer has priority and Christians are not in control. The salience of Jeremiah 29 is its call to become part of the public life of the city and to reject the false prophets who perpetuate illusions of escape into either a private world of gated communities, or religious fantasies centred on Christ’s immanent return; while at the same time, Jeremiah warns us not give way to a despairing fatalism that believes nothing will ever change.

What Jeremiah 29 alerts us to is how the place of exile is now the place where justice and faithfulness can be pursued and how Jerusalem – i.e. where we were most at home – has become a place of faithlessness, oppression and corruption. In short, the Israelites are to learn in exile what they failed to learn in Jerusalem. Instead of seeing dislocation and domination as a reason to despair, the Israelites were invited by Jeremiah to see it as the context where God is most powerfully at work bringing new vision and being present in new ways. A world made strange through rapid change was to be the place where God could be encountered anew. Jesus and the early church follow the Jeremianic pattern of not orientating themselves to the world militarily so as to re-gain control or be in charge, but missiologically, so as to bear faithful witness. Such a missiologial orientation implies neither withdrawal nor sub-cultural resistance but, as exemplified in the stories of Joseph, Daniel and Esther, it entails combining active investment in Babylon’s well-being with faithful particularity and obedience to God. On a Christological reading this can be put even more strongly and in the words of John Howard Yoder’s suggestive translation of Jeremiah 29.7, it entails seeking ‘the salvation of the culture to which God has sent you.’ On this account we discover at the heart of Jeremiah 29 the theo-logic of Easter: that the way of the cross, the journey into exile, is the beginning of new life and new hope.
Following Augustine and Jeremiah, a Christian conceptualization of the world as *kosmos* allows us to see world cities as having intrinsic value as part of the non-eschatological order of things in which we can perform the gift and vocation of being human but, at the same time, not be naïve about how, like Babylon, they are also an instantiation of a worldly system that can utterly desecrate this gift and vocation. Enabling life in the worldly city to be an arena in which this gift and vocation can flourish rather than be desecrated and distorted entails ensuring the prevailing political and economic order is neither made to bear the full weight of the meaning and purpose of being human, nor divested of any meaning and purpose and thus rendered a nihilistic vortex of dominatory relations.

For Christians, Christ is Pantocrator over the *kosmos*, but his rule is neither about Christianizing the worldly order nor turning it into the church (both temptations to which the church repeatedly falls prey) but rather it is to liberate it to be the world (an arena of human flourishing to which the church can contribute) rather than worldly (the world turned in on itself so that social, political and economic relations diminish our humanity and desecrate our dignity). Yet for the negotiation of a meaningful and penultimately good common life to be possible, some kind of common sense and moral vision needs to be developed among these people, in this place, at this time. So how should we go about pursuing the penultimate good of a world city? As already suggested, seeking the good of the city is an inherently political project and requires us to understand the city as, first and foremost, a polis.

**Seeking the welfare of the city**

The city as a polis is a body politic. There are various ways of imagining what it means to be a body politic and thus how this body should be ordered and governed so as to pursue good ends. Many of these images are organic.
• An Aristotelian organicism sees the body politic as a polity governed by natural laws capable of being apprehended by the virtuous statesman who thus possesses the appropriate capacity to reason rightly and make good judgments about how to direct the body. In this approach the need is to identify a wise and capable ruler who can govern the city through pragmatic, common sense yet robust policies. It entails a top down, heroic vision of change. The heroic figure is in many instances the mayor who can initiate and drive through needed change, cutting through red tape to get things done. Michael Bloomberg in New York, Boris Johnson in London and perhaps Clover Moore in Sydney portray themselves along these lines. They are not ideologically driven partisans so much as those who portray themselves as ruling by common sense.

• A Newtonian organicism that sees the body politic as a mechanism with internal systems, principles and procedures governing its actions that the social scientist and technocrat can measure and mold on the basis of the right method and evidence in order to ensure the machine runs smoothly. The Newtonian approach posits seeking the good of the city through the rule of technocratic experts with data sets and spreadsheets. Unlike the mayor who rules on behalf of the people out of noblesse oblige, the technocrat rules on the basis of specialist knowledge about how things should be done and on behalf efficient and effective administration. They know better how everyone else should live and they have the data sets to prove it. Any opposition to them is opposition to progress. The patron saint of urban technocrats is Robert Moses, the so-called “master builder” of mid-twentieth century New York, who’s nearly absolute but unelected power fundamentally re-shaped the city. Robert Caro’s Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Moses, *The Power Broker*, is a seminal study of urban politics of a particular kind.

• A Darwinian organicism envisages the body politic as an ecosystem in which atomized and disaggregated elements, each pursuing their own self-interest, generate a spontaneous order that seeks equilibrium, an order in which the remit
for political rule is largely limited to maintaining the rules defining property rights and intervening to make minor, incremental improvements.\textsuperscript{13} The Darwinian approach is to maximize market processes and trust that within the seeming disorder is a hidden harmony. This is the neoliberal approach to urban governance. As a political project that constantly seeks to monopolise state processes to achieve its aims, neoliberalism gives rise to particular approaches to governing such as privatization, out-sourcing government provision, “individual responsibilization,” economic zoning, and the differentiated legal regimes affecting different zones in terms of tax and labor laws. Crises and disorder becomes modes of governance as they allow for scaling back of state provision.

Yet none of these visions of how to seek the good life for a city has any account of power. In Jeremiah’s terms, they are fantasies that proclaim peace, peace when there is no peace. On an Augustinian account we must reject the illusion of the single pragmatic leader, the illusion of rational administration, and the illusion of spontaneous order. Against these dangerous daydreams we can pose a theological vision of the body politic as a social and political creation riven with rival loves, conflicting visions of the good and dominatory relations. What is need for the health of this body politic is neither a heroic leader, an enlightened technocrat nor licensed disorder but some means of negotiating a common life.

The formation of a common life involves questions of love, politics and power. It is the common object of its loves that defines a polity. The pursuit of these loves necessitates action in time (power) and so entails making judgments about when, where and with whom to act, and what to do and how to do it in order to forge and sustain some kind of common life between friends, enemies and strangers and their estranged or competing interests and rivals visions of the good (politics). On this account the body politic can never be good, but it can be good enough.

I would like to suggest that we can best pursue a good enough and more neighborly city through democratic politics. Democratic politics entails a commitment to listening,
talking and acting together as ways to settle the inevitable conflicts that arise in complex societies. It does not presume to know better how other people should live. Rather, a commitment to democracy is a wager that politics as a form of shared speech and action and thence communication and reciprocal relations can, over time, provide the antibodies necessary to keep in check the ever-present viruses of violence, domination, fear of others, envy, and asymmetries of power that arise when navigating the constraints imposed by necessity, finitude, and competing loyalties and obligations within a body politic. It is an immune system that enables the polity to maintain equilibrium and to re-arrange itself so as to keep things steady (homeostasis), while combining this with the ability to grow, change shape, and adapt without breaking apart (morphogenesis). A healthy city, like a health body, involves a dynamic inter-play between homeostasis and morphogenesis so as to live and act as a contingent, historical, time-bound form of shared life caught betwixt and between continuity and change. Rather than pursuing faddish, top down schemes of social engineering, a good enough city is one capable of continuity and change and formulating adaptive solutions to complex problems.

Community organizing exemplifies a process that enables this to happen. As a formal practice community organizing emerged in Chicago in the 1930s and was brought to prominence and distilled into a distinct craft by Saul Alinsky who founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940. In the Australian context it is best exemplified by the IAF affiliate, Sydney Alliance. As a particular practice of participatory, urban democratic politics, it allows for multiple traditions of belief and practice to identify and pursue goods in common while recognizing these common objects of love are provisional and penultimate: that is, of the world but not necessarily worldly. A plurality of moral traditions in relation becomes the basis of a genuinely common life as opposed to either brittle schemes of social engineering, one size fits all plans of urban design or a system that disaggregates and dissolves any form of common life.

The political vision organizing encapsulates holds that if a group is directly contributing to the common work of defending, tending, and creating the commonweal then it deserves recognition as a vital part of and co-laborer within the broader body politic. It is
the emphasis on participation and contribution to the building up of a common life that allows for a greater plurality and affirmation of distinct identities and traditions, as each is able to play a part in this common work. This is distinct from an identity politics and from multicultural approaches because recognition and respect is not given simply by dint of having a different culture or identity: recognition is conditional upon contributing to and participating in shared, reciprocal, and public work. The long-term hope is that involvement in democratic politics through community organizing creates space for the emergence of a shared story—not a “religious” story but a civic and penultimate one—and a context for real relationship where all participants—however distasteful their views to others—can begin to touch on difficult issues in a place of trust. Community organizing thereby embodies a realistic yet hopeful vision of how to seek a good enough and more neighborly city. It is a vision that we urgently need to grasp hold of as the future takes on an increasingly urban hue.


3 *City of God*, XIX, 15.

4 *City of God*, XIX, 5.

5 Tikki Pang, Mary Ann Lansang, and Andy Haines, “Brain drain and health professionals: A global problem needs global solutions,” *British Medical Journal* 324 (2002): 499–500. A report from 2001 estimated that in London 23% of its doctors and 47% of its nurses are born overseas (Stephen Glover et al. *Migration: An Economic and Social Analysis* [London: Home Office, 2001], p. 38). While a two-way relationship, it is also asymmetric and exploitative with London gaining far more than the “client” states it draws from in order to staff its schools, hospitals and other public sector services.

6 For an account of migrant labour in London see Wills, *Global Cities at Work*.

7 The term “world” (*kosmos*) draws on the use of the term in the New Testament to denote either the unified order of created things, understood as a neutral description (John 17:5, 24; Rom. 1:20; 1 Cor. 4:9), or the worldly system that is hostile to God’s good order (John 15.18-19; 17:14-16; 1 Cor. 1:20; 5:10). In New Testament Greek a number of variations on these two basic connotations can be discerned. For example, Paul Ellingworth identifies six variations: i) the universe; ii) the earth; iii) human beings and angels; iv) humanity as a whole; v) humanity as organized in opposition to God; and vi) particular groups of human beings (Paul Ellingworth, “Translating Kosmos ‘World’ in Paul,” *The Bible Translator* 53.4 [2002]: 414–21). See also David J Clark, “The Word Kosmos ‘World’ in John 17,” *The Bible Translator* 50.4 (1999): 401–406.
9 City of God XIX, 26.
11 This particular emphasis is drawn from Calvin’s reading of Jeremiah 29. See John Calvin, Calvin's Commentary - Volume 10 - Jeremiah 20 – 47 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999).