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The city has become an increasingly important site of analysis for scholars in Religious Studies. For both of these volumes, the city is not a container in which something called religion or the sacred unfolds. Following Bergman, “I do not simply inhabit a city but a city and its atmosphere inhabit me” (Bergman 2012, 80). The city constitutes, frames and generates just as much as it itself is made through the myriad practices of architects and politicians, graffiti artists and lovers. Nor, of course, is it Le Corbusier’s city of efficient, machine-like functionality but rather it is a site of relationships and effect: of ambiances, moods, memories, feelings, textures, smells and sensualities. For Grange, the interrogation of “urban experience” (Grange 1999, xi) begins with the (parish) neighbourhood community as a place for a (sacred) solidarity. For the collection of essays assembled by Gómez and Van Herck however, the very idea of a neighbourhood community is problematic. From Van Herck’s philosophical reflections on Augé’s “non-places” and their consequences (Van Herck 2012, 17), on the one hand the city evokes Christian anticipations as being both anathema to the sacred and the site of its realization. On the other, the spatial violations dissected in a beautiful essay by Filip De Boeck about Kinshasa and its colonial, cultural and post-modern invigilements, point to the sacred uncanny that demands interrogation of the dislocations of secularization and postmodernity (De Boeck 2012, 201). In this review I will be reading the volumes against each other in order to try to bring into relief the different ways they approach the problematic of community in a world where Capital flows demand the disintegration of all the coagulants of kin, culture and religion.

Grange’s The City: An Urban Cosmology is self-consciously normative: early on he claims that “late capitalism distorts the value of urban environments” by reducing them to arenas for the “consumption of goods and ser-
vices” (1999, 2). The task, according to Grange, is to demonstrate that the city cannot be reduced to the transaction or to consumption. “I am” he says, “offering an urban curriculum that examines the major problems confronting contemporary cities as they seek to become places of wholeness within which human learning and growth can take root and flourish” (1999, 155). Later, this curriculum is framed as a “return to Plato’s understanding of philosophy’s purpose: To help human beings rule themselves and others well” (1999, 201). For this reader, however, it was precisely the invocation of philosophical resources such as Plato—but also Hegel, Dewey, Mead and Peirce—that undermined Grange’s project. Despite a brief engagement with the work of Kevin Lynch on city forms, Grange does not situate his work, except that is in relation to one of his own, previous books. He doesn’t even explore the discourse of the city that is to be found in the Western philosophical tradition. Despite the claim towards the end of the volume that he has been “trying to develop the resources for rebuilding community that are to be found within the tradition of American naturalism” (1999, 207), there is never a sustained discussion of “American naturalism” (or indeed, pragmatism) or how a philosophical movement predominantly concerned with addressing epistemological problems might be relevant to the question of sustaining a parish community in a fast-changing city.

The collection of essays assembled by Gómez and Van Herck brings together a range of methods and theories from philosophy and anthropology to theology, history and sociology. There are some excellent essays but also some bizarre editorial decisions. For example, Part Three of the book is called ‘Sacred Symbols, Sacred Spaces’ and is described in the editors’ Introduction as a section where the essays attempt an “historical-conceptual analysis discussing the relation of Christian iconography, visual and spatial culture and the sacred in regard to the (medieval) order of knowledge” (Gómez & Van Herck 2012, 6). The presence, in that section, of an excellent essay on a chapel in a Finnish shopping mall (Nynäs and Pessi) is, as such, somewhat perplexing. Likewise Part One of the volume, which is framed as an extension “of the introduction” due to the discussion therein of “the central notions of the book” (2012, 6): the extent to which Gómez’ study of the College of Sociology formed by Georges Bataille, Roger Callois and Michel Leiris or Dronkers’ interest in republican and communitarian theories of publics and the post-secular city as a place where one can “walk past women wearing headscarves, breathe in the pervasive smell of incense and catch an atheist bus” (2012, 66) constitute engagements with
the “central notions of the book” strikes me as doubtful. To be sure, they are good essays but they are not well framed by the editors. The final and most coherent section of the volume is titled the “Politics of the Sacred in Contemporary Urban Spaces,” and probably should have included the contributions by Nynås & Pessi and by Dronkers. This section provides some interesting reflections on architecture, diaspora and culture in contemporary Israel (Yacobi) and on communism, memory and monumental architecture in contemporary Ukraine. However, the standout contribution is De Boeck’s essay on Kinshasa. De Boeck’s claim is that, for the majority of its inhabitants, Kinshasa is “unfathomable” (2012, 200). Its connection to any past or future whatsoever is hidden or indecipherable, lost within the demolitions and clearances, the corruptions of politics and the ever-growing realms of darkness and witchcraft decried by the neo-Pentecostal groups. De Boeck movingly discovers, amidst the funerals of the young, a demand for a future in the face of death and a demand for meaning in the apparent face of the moral evacuation of the present (2012, 204). At the margins of the metropolis, then, emergent ritual forms present the possibility of hope amidst the rubble of secular and religious promises of redemption.

Both volumes contribute to the development, in the field of Religious Studies, of a critical interest in the city as perhaps the key site of contemporary human experience. From the very inception of social theory in the writings of Tönnies and Simmel, the city stood for contract over community and for blase indifference over authentic sociality. As much as these tropes haunt the pages of these books, their most striking contribution lies in their respective attempts to refine methods and theories for exploring the experience of the sacred and of community in a globalizing world caught in the vice of Capital.
“A rich and welcome addition to the literature which has something for anyone with a serious interest in this area of investigation.”

Professor Peggy Morgan, Mansfield College, University of Oxford

The renowned scientist Sir Alister Hardy approached the complex field of religious and spiritual experience in a similar disciplined and scientific manner in which he approached natural science. Asking people from the public to send him accounts of first-hand experiences with spiritual or religious powers he established the Religious Experience Research Centre that has remained at the forefront of the academic study of religious experiences. This book will take his work forward and show how to study religious and spiritual experiences in the 21st century.

The Study of Religious Experience shows how a range of disciplines—including anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, theology, biblical studies and history—approach the topic of religious experience, how this approach is applied and what contributions they make to the study of religious experience.