

Richard Bohannon

Public Religion and the Urban Environment

Constructing a River Town

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Chapter 1

Urban Nature, Disaster, and Religion

The farms and prairie along the border of North Dakota and Minnesota provide a landscape that is either oppressively flat or breathtakingly open, depending on one's perspective. The roads are straight, and trees only appear as narrow windbreaks protecting farms and as tight pockets of growth surrounding the occasional farmhouse. In the midst of this thinly populated landscape lies Grand Forks, an urban outpost which, like Fargo to the south and Winnipeg to the north, sits along the serpentine lines of the Red River of the North.

In the springtime of particularly wet years, this river overflows its curving lines and spreads for miles through the surrounding countryside, turning farmland into a vast lake and threatening the small cities and towns along the river, including Grand Forks. This is what happened in the spring of 1997, when water from quickly melting snow spilled over the city's dike system, inundating the urban landscape with the city's largest recorded flood, destroying neighborhoods near the river and causing an electrical fire which burned several prominent downtown buildings. In the years following the flood, however, Grand Forks has largely been rebuilt: downtown buildings have been restored and replaced, and several neighborhoods were abandoned along the river as the city created a large park within a newly enlarged dike system.

The 1997 flood, along with the rebuilding that came after it, forms a case study for this book, which looks at how people understand the relationship between cities and their environments, and the role that religious language plays in making sense of that relationship in the public sphere. Based on responses to the flood, it shows that religious factors have indeed influenced how the relationship between nature and the city is perceived in the United States and, more specifically and more crucially, that religious narratives and images helped to reinforce a basic disposition toward the city and its environment, which in turn both influenced how the city itself was rebuilt and helped to justify the urban control of nature.

“Nature” and the “city” have most often functioned as opposites within Western culture, a dichotomy that has been reinforced (and sometimes challenged) by religious images, particularly from Christianity. Cities and natural environments, however, are both connected and continually affected by each other – urban centers are dependent on the resources provided by their hinterlands, and cities in turn affect the ecosystems to which they belong through things such as agricultural development, mining, and pollution. Grand Forks, for instance, is a river town that was originally built to take advantage of the Red River for transportation. While this utilitarian function quickly subsided, Grand Forks is still (like every city) dependent upon a global network of food and “natural” resources, and more locally relies upon agricultural commodities such as grain and sugar beets. Such connections become quite overt in natural disasters, which, by necessity, involve a dramatic rupture of nonhuman nature into human spaces where they are not welcome; muddy river water flows through the streets and living rooms. The possibility of controlling nature, in other words, is put into question.

As discussed later in this chapter, disasters do at least two other things. First, they disrupt the narratives people use to make sense of the world; often, because it is a primary way of constructing meaning out of life, religious language thus becomes prominent during and after disasters. Labeling a disaster an “act of God” is one stereotypical example of this. Second, disasters also create an environment which exaggerates existing social conditions and human-natural relationships, making them easier to discern.¹ People often do not have reason to reflect actively on the relationship between their city streets and the river; when the river has overtaken those streets, however, that relationship becomes paramount in people’s minds. Because of these things, urban natural disasters provide spaces in which religiously informed assumptions about the urban environment are most visible. The particular case of the 1997 flood in Grand Forks, along with the city’s subsequent redevelopment, provides an especially enlightening case study of how the urban environment is perceived: because (as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3) it was an *urban* natural disaster, most public responses consistently *blamed the flood on nature*, and while the flood destroyed much of the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods, the city has largely been *rebuilt* in ways that intentionally take into account the river which flows through it.

While the bulk of this book is thus comprised of an analysis of Grand Forks during and after the 1997 flood, the concern that motivates the project is in fact much broader. That is, the disaster in Grand Forks is

important because it can tell us something about US cities in general. The primary undertaking of this project is thus not to form a history or analysis of the flood, which other books have already done quite successfully (e.g., Porter 2001; Fothergill 2004), nor is it to learn lessons about disasters and effective disaster recovery, which is a much more common way of studying disasters. Rather, it is to learn something about religion, cities and nature. This book also is about “public religion,” as the title suggests, not in the more common sense of looking at the public influence of religious institutions and practitioners (e.g., Casanova 1994), but in the sense that it is concerned with religious ideas and narratives as they exist in the public sphere. The underlying questions are: first, what are some of the dominant (religious) perceptions of the city and nature in this strand of American culture? And, second, how do these images relate to the actual built infrastructures of cities, and Grand Forks in particular?

Cities and Nature

Western perceptions of the city – such as the city as ordered and civilized, or as a den of temptation and violence – emerge out of a history that is laced with religious, and, most often, Christian, influences. Richard Sennett, for instance, in *The Conscience of the Eye* (1990), finds several religious roots in the urban design of Western Europe and the US since at least St Augustine. In the case of medieval Europe, he contends that the “secular” spaces outside of large churches were “jumbled together” with streets that were “twisted and inefficient,” while the sacred space of the church was ordered and rational (12). Puritan colonies in Massachusetts strove to build a “city upon a hill,” often more as a moral platitude than a planning regime, but their instrumentalist and efficient view of the world also helped to develop the modern urban grid. And in more modern times, the French architect and urban planner Le Corbusier saw in the clean and straight lines of modernist design a faith in “structural perfection,” comparing the skyscrapers of New York to medieval cathedrals (169). European and American religious history is full of other urban images as well. Augustine, for instance, wrote of Christians as belonging to the “city of God,” though that city was heavenly, not earthly (Brown 2000), the Christian Bible ends with the creation of a heavenly New Jerusalem, and in the nineteenth-century US the city was often portrayed as a haven of sin and corruption.²

Concepts of “nature” also have a long and parallel religious tradition in the West. Nature has been seen in a variety of ways – as a book or a revelation

through which to encounter God; as a sacred part of God's creation; as a gift from God to be managed wisely, stewarded or taken care of; as a resource for human uses; and as something dangerous and in need of civilization and domestication. In many cases these perceptions of the environment are rooted in images that arise out of Christianity; at other times, they are informed by religious impulses outside of any particular religious institution, such as using nature as a moral guide or fearing Mother Nature.³

When we talk about nature or the city, we are talking about both *ideas* as well as *material worlds*. That is, we inherit and shape narratives or concepts that symbolically construct how we perceive nature or the city, but cities and their environments are also material worlds that affect how we interact with one another and think about urban or natural environments. Both of these levels are important, as the city and nature are closely related to each other, not only materially, but also symbolically. Our ideas about cities and nature are often pitted against one another – for example, cities are civilized, whereas nature is wild – but cities are also physical incorporations of nature, transformations of “first natures”⁴ into a built environment of streets, buildings and parks. The later chapters of this book, which focus on Grand Forks, for instance, will thus focus not only on how people described their city, but also on the physical infrastructure of the city itself, along with its river.

Such physical incorporations are not simply benign, however: a significant dynamic between cities and nature is the *control* of nature, especially through urban development. In the city, nature is civilized; it shifts from wild prairie to parks and asphalt, from forests into lumber. This controlling or civilizing of nature can take on multiple faces, and has been justified by multiple forms of rhetoric, including religious rhetoric. During the 1997 flood in Grand Forks, the urban-nature relationship was often portrayed as a battle of the city (with God in its side) versus nature, or of order versus chaos. Within months of the waters receding, nature became more commonly viewed as both a force whose power needs to be controlled, as well as a recreational space that complements the downtown being rebuilt. In a city where the control of the Red River is of paramount concern, this included building a dike system to contain the river, restoring ecosystems and constructing parkland, and maintaining potable water. Grand Forks is a river town not only because it is built alongside a river whose banks are full of parks, playgrounds, and fishing holes, but also because the city's existence is dependent upon confining and controlling the river.

While not always so obvious as an elaborate dike system, efforts to control our environments lie at the root of urban planning for any town or city; indeed, controlling nature is at the root of all human development, from

cooking food to building a home to protecting a place from catastrophic disaster. The implications of controlling nature thus lie at the root of this book, as not only are cities dependent on controlling their natural environments, but (as is evident in a disaster) those efforts at control also – somewhat ironically – make cities more vulnerable to widespread destruction. Both the struggle and failure to contain the flood in 1997 and the efforts simultaneously to rebuild the city and to protect it from future disasters are, at their roots, unambiguous efforts to control nature. Together, these twin efforts, which were both strongly supported by religious imagery, point to deep ambiguities concerning the environmental sustainability of controlling our environments. They also, however, call into question the common environmentalist assumption that controlling nature is necessarily destructive and unsustainable.

Methodology

These pages were written in central Minnesota, a couple of hours away from the Red River Valley. The house where I wrote many of these chapters sits a block from Red River Avenue, named after the nineteenth-century trade route that once followed the Red River on its way from Winnipeg, through Grand Forks and Fargo, and which then cut across central Minnesota on its way to Minneapolis and St Paul. I was drawn to study Grand Forks, and the devastating flood it experienced in 1997 as the Red River overflowed its banks, through meeting several people from the area. My original research intentions were much broader – previous research on religious constructions of “nature” and nature’s perceived opposite, humanity, led me to suspect that there is also something religious about how we understand the relationship between nature and that most human of spaces, the city. I set about searching for a way to ask whether that was so through the investigation of specific cases, and, if so, how. Reactions to the Grand Forks flood became an ideal case study for two reasons. First, the flood was an instance where there was a clear conflict between a city and its environment; it thus seemed reasonable that in such a context people would be talking about how the two should relate. Second, I suspected that religious language would most likely surface during such a disaster, when people, whether or not they consider themselves as being particularly religious, are searching for a way to find meaning in a world that has collapsed around them.

I took an initial trip to Grand Forks in May 2008 to see the city and to determine if the archived resources at the University of North Dakota

(UND) were extensive enough for a chapter case study within a larger project on cities, nature, and religion through the lens of disasters. The UND archives are indeed quite impressive, but what captivated (and continues to captivate) me, and convinced me to make Grand Forks the focus of what has become this book, was how the city had recovered in the eleven years that had passed since the flood.

Not only had the downtown managed to rebuild itself with some success, providing the urban basics of spaces for working, eating, and living, but the city also built an enormous greenway – essentially a long, narrow park – that travels the entire length of the Red River through town, totaling over 2000 acres. Within a ten-minute walk of downtown, for instance, one can go camping (legally), go fishing, ride a bike or ski along a trail, or walk in a meditative labyrinth. The interplays between urban and natural spaces rise to the surface in a uniquely transparent way in such a place, as Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will describe in more detail. As these chapters will also demonstrate, these developments are evidence of a great deal of concerted thought on how the city should relate to its environment, simultaneously celebrating the river while also remaining consistent with a logic found during the flood that argued for controlling nature and “keeping faith” in the city and its rebuilding.

Grand Forks, I am convinced, is a particularly instructive case study because not only was ample religious language present in responses to the flood, but the city was later rebuilt to take more fully into account its river. This allows us to ask both how the city’s relationship to its environment was perceived during and after the flood, as well as how that relationship was navigated during the rebuilding of the city and the river’s dike system.

As a way of uncovering the changing perceptions of the urban environment in the aftermath of the Grand Forks floods and the role of religion in shaping or reinforcing those perceptions, this book primarily relies upon content analysis of documents from a variety of sources, including publications by Christian organizations as well as sources, such as newspapers, not formally affiliated with any religious tradition. Unlike more common approaches to religion and disasters, such as Brand’s (1999) work on the therapeutic role of religious rhetoric in sermons during the aftermath of the Grand Forks flood, this book not only evaluates responses from religious institutions (such as churches and denominational relief agencies), but also from the broader public, with the hope of ascertaining how religious imagery related to how the flood and rebuilding were perceived on a broad scale.

From the summer of 2008 through the summer of 2010, primary data was collected from library archives,⁵ databases, and by directly contacting

organizations and denominational archives. This data was derived from several types of sources. Religious media were surveyed, including print publications and websites of religious organizations and denominations, as well as national Christian magazines, such as the *Christian Century* and *Sojourners*. The majority of this material was derived from groups with a large population in the area and who were actively involved in relief efforts (i.e., Lutherans, United Methodists, and Roman Catholics). Because national coverage of the flood was relatively contained to the first few months following the flood, coverage at this level was relatively low. All religious media catalogued in the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) Religion Database were searched, using relevant keywords. Popular, nonreligious media were also surveyed, including magazines, national and local newspapers,⁶ popular books and children's books, photo essays, and documentaries. Additional articles found in library archives or during other research were also reviewed. Again, because flood coverage was largely limited to the first few months after the disaster and because of the limited amount of coverage Grand Forks generally receives in the national media, a largely comprehensive review of this material was possible.

Several resources were available outside of the media and religious organizations. The North Dakota Museum of Art, which is located in Grand Forks on the campus of the University of North Dakota, directed an extensive oral history project, headed by Eliot Glassheim, a city council member who at the time also worked at the North Dakota Museum of Art, and Kimberly Porter, an historian at the university. This project resulted in several books (Hylden and Rueter 1998; Glassheim 1999; Porter 2001; Glassheim 2002). Separate oral histories were also conducted specific to East Grand Forks (Quam 1999) and the University of North Dakota (Orvik and Larson 1998). Because of the noncommercial nature of these projects, they were particularly valuable for my research, as they captured narratives about the flood that were recorded close to the time of the events (in contrast to interviews I conducted, described below) and were relatively independent of the media. Along with these oral histories, a selection of personal letters, children's drawings, and personal miscellanea, primarily found in the archives at the University of North Dakota, were reviewed.

Numerous government records (such as city council minutes) and documents from rebuilding organizations were also reviewed. These included organizations and commissions involved in the Grand Forks Greenway development (such as the Grand Forks Greenway Alliance) and downtown redevelopment (such as the Downtown Development Commission for the city of Grand Forks), along with proposals and recommendations

from outside planning consultants (such as the Urban Land Institute). Flood memorials, erected by local government, were also visited and photographed.

Finally, I conducted a small number of personal interviews with people involved in some aspect of the rebuilding efforts. Because over a decade had passed since the flood, interviews were not conducted as a form of primary research, but were intended to solidify my understanding of the city and help interpret the archived materials I reviewed. Eight interviews were conducted with local pastors and church leaders, community members, and local government officials (such as city council members) who were involved in the rebuilding process, including people from both sides of the river. Interviews were between one and three hours in length, and were conducted in 2009 and 2010 in Grand Forks and Fargo.

All of these materials were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, beginning by asking how the “city” and “nature” are depicted in the materials surveyed, paying particular attention to relationships between the two.⁷ The collection and analysis was conducted over several rounds; that is, materials from a variety of religious organizations at the time of the flood were collected first and then analyzed. The preliminary results from this effort then effected how later materials were reviewed.

Data was considered “religious” if it carried overt theological language, referenced faith or religious organizations or objects (such as churches or bibles), contained language that used traditional religious metaphors but without any clear attempt to convey a religious message (such as describing relief workers as “angels”), or clear references to an ultimate source that is beyond humanity (including some references to nature). Chapter 2 provides a more complex discussion of how I defined “religious” in the scope of this project. Because of the religious landscape of Grand Forks, the data was overwhelmingly – though not exclusively – Christian.

Collecting data from a multiplicity of sources allowed for a more nuanced discussion of public perceptions. Because the majority of data was found in databases and archives, this method additionally was largely unobtrusive (see Berger 1998), as compared with other methods such as surveys or participant observation. Such data is nevertheless limited by the fact that it was collected for other purposes, and it was not always possible to collect it systematically. Furthermore, it also was not without bias; within the media and local government, for instance, there was pressure to report positively on flood responses and the rebuilding effort, thus leading to complaints that problems during the recovery period were minimally reported (Rakow et al. 2003: 41). Interviews with major players involved in rebuilding efforts

helped to mediate potential gaps in the collected data, and the review of oral histories provided a counterweight to the perspectives of the media and government. The results from this primary data organize Chapters 4 and 5.

It is important to recognize, then, that while many of the narratives contained in the following chapters come from sources holding a relatively large amount of political and/or social weight, such as the media or local government, I am in no way claiming that this is *the* story (or stories) of the flood. Even though they are often skewed and inaccurate (or, perhaps, *especially* insofar as they are skewed and inaccurate), dominant stories are important because they are indeed dominant – that is, they have an effect over a large population and create or reinforce master narratives for how people make sense of the world. Katherine Fry, who has written on media responses to the 1993 Midwestern floods (2003), has thus argued that the mass media powerfully shapes our perceptions of place and nature.⁸ That other, sometimes subversive, narratives (such as found in oral histories) exist as partially *against* such master narratives not only demonstrates the arbitrariness of the stories told by those in power, but also that such dominant narratives do indeed have widespread social influence.

Why Natural Disasters?

Unlike most literature on natural disasters, and as I explained above, the main focus of this book is not on understanding the social dynamics of the disaster itself, or on analyzing the effectiveness of recovery efforts. It is, rather, on how the city and its relationship to the environment were religiously influenced or envisioned, using the disaster in Grand Forks, and the city's rebuilding afterward, as an avenue for exploring the urban-natural relationship.

Natural disasters are uniquely instructive sites for such questions. To begin with, natural disasters require some kind of human-nature interaction; implicit in the idea of a “disaster” is some kind of harm done to humans. A seasonal flood in an uninhabited area is not seen as disastrous, for instance, but simply part of how a particular ecosystem works.

Religion enters the equation in part because natural disasters have a long history of being blamed on God, or seen as a punishment from God as a result of human sins or shortcomings. This tendency has shifted in the last century, however. Whereas in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the US, for instance, natural disasters were seen as moral indictments from God

(Rozario 2007), this is only the case for a minority of people in the US today. In *Acts of God: The unnatural history of natural disaster in America* (2000), Ted Steinberg comments that “many no doubt see natural disasters as simple acts of nature, a view that reflects the increasing secularization of twentieth-century American society” (xxii).⁹ This secularization and “trend toward demoralization” was “given a boost” by the increasing role of the state and federal government in underwriting the risks involved in developing and living in risk-prone areas (ibid.). In other words, disasters ceased to be “acts of God” over which people had no control, and the resulting belief that humans *can* have control over their environments encouraged people to live in places more vulnerable to disaster. In the well-known case of New Orleans, for instance, much of the Mississippi River’s wetlands were drained and levees were erected alongside the river, greatly exacerbating the potential for catastrophic flooding (Kelman 2006).

This shift away from divine responsibility has not caused such language to be completely abandoned, however, but rather it has shifted in meaning, as Steinberg further elaborates:

It is also clear . . . the demoralization of calamity has resulted in a new set of rhetorical opportunities for those in power. *Once, the idea of invoking God in response to calamity was a strategy for eliciting moral responsibility. In the twentieth century, however, calling out God’s name amounted to abdication of moral reason.* With the religiously inclined less disposed than ever to take acts of God seriously, the opportunity has arisen over the last century for some public officials to employ God-fearing language as a way—thinly veiled though it may be—of denying their own culpability for calamity. (2000: xxii–xxiii, emphasis added)

Steinberg cites the work of sociologist Kai Erikson, whose influential work on natural disasters noted how officials of a mining company in West Virginia tried to skirt responsibility after a dam they improperly built collapsed and flooded towns downstream with mining slag. After the dam burst, an official of the mining company told a reporter that the dam was “incapable of holding the water God poured into it” (Erikson 1976: 178) – a rather irritating response in the ears of residents, as God did not build the dam or fill the reservoir with slag. In a more recent instance, Rick Perry and Tom Cole, the governor of Texas and a congressman from Oklahoma, respectively, responded to the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico by arguing that the explosion which began the spill was an act of God. Perry, for instance, remarked that the spill might be “just an act of God that

occurred . . . From time to time there are going to be things that occur that are acts of God that cannot be prevented” (Sherman 2010; see also Milbank 2010). Perry’s remarks were directed to the US Chamber of Commerce as a warning about the economic consequences of halting off-shore drilling.

The legal designation of a disaster as an “act of God” is thus not simply a quaint remnant of a society where religious language was more prevalent, but is also a way for those with material interests in developing or using high-risk land to lay the blame outside of their own actions (whether it be developers, business and industry, farmers, or the Army Corps of Engineers) and onto something that cannot be controlled.

Importantly, Steinberg sees both blaming God and blaming nature as ways of skirting responsibility (e.g., 2000: 60–1). Thus, while we hear fewer people speaking of “acts of God,” we nonetheless continue to speak of nature acting as something outside of human control. Ari Kelman (2006) for instance, has written on the aftermath of the 1927 flooding of the Mississippi near New Orleans, in which the levee was destroyed outside of the city so as to save New Orleans itself. In this instance, referring to the event as either a natural disaster or an act of God abdicated the responsibility held by the Army Corps of Engineers (who built the levee) and state and local officials.

As later chapters will make evident, Steinberg’s critique partially coalesces with responses to the Grand Forks flood. Like most cities in the US, Grand Forks was definitely guilty of poor land development practices, including building neighborhoods on low-lying land near the river. So in this basic sense – Grand Forks would not have flooded had people not built a city and named it Grand Forks – the blame placed on nature (and less commonly, God) misdirects our attention from poor development choices, as pointed to by Steinberg’s work.

Stopping with this observation, however, carries the risk of too quickly taking away power from the natural world, hubristically (and ironically) assuming that humanity can always control natural environments, or at least live harmoniously within them.¹⁰ As Chapters 4 and 5 will demonstrate, the ultimate unpredictability of nature will be a major theme in reactions to the flooding of Grand Forks. This leads to an irresolvable tension: human developments (such as cities) are based on and require the control of some part of nonhuman nature (a theme explored further in Chapters 5 and 6), and even the most modest and most ecologically responsible development (however one might define that) is still at some risk from the nonhuman world, whether it be through flood, fires, diseases, drought, or any number of other nature disasters.

Thus, directing blame for disaster on human irresponsibility, greed or ineptitude, while often quite appropriate, might itself mark an inability to admit that humans can be overwhelmed by natural forces, and that it is sometimes beyond human ability to prevent things such as natural disasters. Nature is powerful (also a theme developed in Chapter 5), and blaming events on the nonhuman world is not always only an attempt to divert responsibility away from culpable humans. Conrad Smith thus observes, based on research into media responses to several disasters, that “mismanagement is a more reassuring explanation in a society that assumes it can control its physical environment through the application of technology” (1992: 145). In Grand Forks, then, one might read flood responses that blame the disaster on nature as counter-narratives to the hubristic assumption that modern societies can control their environments.

Nonetheless, Steinberg’s focus on human culpability also makes a helpful implication, which provides another reason for studying natural disasters: disasters exaggerate social conditions.¹¹ Several researchers have found this to be the case in Grand Forks, as discussed in Chapter 3. Alice Fothergill contends that disaster research helps illuminate social relations beyond times of disaster by making them easier to see. In her study on class and gender in the Grand Forks flood, she remarks that:

women’s lives can be understood by studying a collective stress event, such as a flood, which disrupts the social order and allows us to see their experiences and perspectives more clearly. Thus, examining the nature of women’s lives in a disaster, when taken-for-granted and unquestioned arrangements are disrupted, provides an opportunity to learn how women construct and make sense of their everyday lives in both crisis and noncrisis periods. (Fothergill 2004: 27)

The circumstances of a natural disaster thus allow pre-existing social relations to come to the foreground. If we extend our understanding of social relations to include not only human-human encounters, but also human-*natural* interactions, as “actor network” theorists such as Bruno Latour (2005) would argue, we can extend Fothergill’s observation to claim that disasters allow for the relationships between people and their environments to become more visible.

Two caveats are in order before proceeding. First, in Fothergill’s work, quoted above, she is not claiming that the disaster created gender and class distinctions, but merely that such events create an environment wherein a researcher can more readily see them. These pages likewise do not