PART THREE

URBAN THINKING AND THE RELIGIOUS
‘GOD MADE THE COUNTRY, AND MAN MADE THE TOWN’: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE WESTERN (POST)SECULAR CITY

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In the First Assembly District of New York there were, in 1880, 44,000 people, seven Protestant churches, and 1,072 saloons—one hundred and fifty-three saloons for every church. These churches are open, probably, seven or eight hours a week, the saloons sixteen or more hours a day. While the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is preached from one church seven or eight hours, the gospel of death and hell is preached from each of a hundred or a hundred and fifty of these ‘synagogues of Satan’ a hundred hours.¹

For the author of these words it is evident that the city is much more endangered than the countryside by perils such as lawlessness, intemperance, liquor, immigration and superstition. The above observation on the power of the saloon against that of Protestantism was made by Josiah Strong (1847–1916), one of the founders of the Social Gospel movement, which fought the social ills of industrialization and urbanization on the basis of the Christian faith. Josiah Strong wrote these words as an introduction to a study by a fellow clergyman, Samuel Lane Loomis, on ‘modern cities and their religious problems’. Pastors were among the very first to address the relationship between social issues of urbanization, industrialization and poverty on the one hand, and the role of religion, parishes and churches on the other (Brown 2001: 18–30). In most cases the city was seen as the source of vice and of the decline of faith and participation in church rituals.

The famous line ‘God made the country, and man made the town’ summarizes nicely the reserves on behalf of many believers about the city as a place that is a danger to true faith. The line was written in 1784 by the English poet William Cowper (1731–1800), a converted evangelical. The poem, on the topic of the sofa (a subject demanded by a ‘lady, fond of blank verse’) contrasted the town and the country. Probably referring to the city of London (the ‘she’ in the poem

¹ Loomis (1887: 8).