

Voices from the Borderland; Re-imagining Cross-cultural Urban Theology in the Twenty-first Century

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Review by Greg Smith:

As someone who has been involved in urban mission practice, theology and networking for over thirty years I found this book a compelling read and impossible to put down. In many ways it is a masterpiece as a critical introduction to the main writers in British urban and liberation theology of recent decades. As a systematic typology of the key published sources it will be essential reading for theology students and for reflective urban ministry practitioners who are serious about doing theology in the city.

Shannahan's main thesis that theology (ies) need to be contextually rooted in the cross-cultural diversity that has emerged from recent processes of the globalised economy, of the Network society, and of identity politics is basically sound. He is right to point out that urban theologians have struggled to keep up with the pace of these changes, and that a traditional class based analysis of poverty and oppression no longer works. His attempt to engage with the social theorists and urbanologists such as Castells, Soja, Sassen and Sandercock are commendable, though he is certainly not the first to do it as his discussions of the work of writers like Chris Baker and Andrew Davey makes clear.. And his work, though academic is not armchair theory but clearly grounded in substantial experience of urban ministry in London Docklands and inner city Birmingham.

Nonetheless there are numerous points where I would take issue or raise questions with Shannahan and believe there are some significant gaps and difficulties with his approach.

1. **Evangelical contribution:** In his survey of the field of urban theology Shannahan seems to be unaware of the significant contribution of evangelicals who have reflected deeply on Scripture and mission practice in the urban context, and become convinced in consequence of God's bias to the poor/oppresed and the liberating power of Christ. There is some discussion of post evangelical theology and ecclesiology but apart from a brief reference to David Sheppard's seminal work, and some acknowledgement of some of the early black liberation theology that came out of the work of Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice, the author fails to engage with the evangelicals. While it is true that there have been few published academic theological books from this direction, the influence of thinkers and writers such as Jim Punton, Roger Dowley, Colin Marchant, Ray Bakke and Stuart Murray on a generation of urban mission practitioners is huge. There is also the methodological contribution of Neville Black, Jim Hart and their successors in the Evangelical Urban Training Project which is now known as Unlock, which has led to numerous

groups of far from academic urban Christians engaging in contextual theology and liberating reflection on the Bible.

2. **Abstract language.. Grass roots methodology;** The previous point inevitably leads on to a difficulty which many people will find with the book. It is inevitably and obviously the book of the PhD thesis, and the conceptual framework and abstract language are at times impenetrable to the general reader. Shannahan argues for interdisciplinary approaches and criticises the camp mentality of contemporary church thinking yet sometimes fails to communicate to the non specialist. I for one am still struggling towards a clear understanding of his “hermeneutic principle of liberative difference”. He does in various places discuss the role of the academic as an organic intellectual engaging with everyday social movements. However more examples of how the theologian (or church minister) actually serves as an accompanist in the theological reflections of groups at experiencing oppression at the grass roots would be welcome. His discussion of Reddie’s methodology as a practitioner (p145 ff) is helpful in this but I hope we can look forward to a practitioner’s toolkit from the author himself.
3. **Who does the theology...** Shannahan does not give us many clues about how theological thinking can move out of the academy to have impact and connections with the church and wider society. John Vincent’s challenge to a downward journey, mirroring the pattern of the Messiah’s incarnation is still relevant to any of us who start from a place of privilege, and the danger of co-option by the powerful for those who begin at the bottom is always present. The theologians he considers are predominantly white and male, which reflects social reality and privilege rather than the author’s bias. It is significant that only two or three British urban theologians of note have emerged from the Black communities (Beckford, Reddie, Bhogal) and that only one of the writers he deals with at length is female (Morisy) though Elaine Graham’s work is also referenced. It is of course a mirror image of the urban church and oppressed communities where ethnic minorities and/or women predominate numerically and tend to experience poverty, oppression and the silencing of voices.
4. **Ecclesiology:** My biggest frustration when reading this book is that the author fails to explore the nature of the church in the city. He seems to assume the presence of the church or at least the denominations as institutions, but makes few references to congregations, which are still the predominant form of church life. While in many places they are struggling and failing, in some sectors they are thriving and the only forum in which people have any engagement with spirituality or the Scriptures. It may be that an urban congregational location for theological reflection will constrain it for the most part to reformist understandings at the best, and sometimes prevent it from taking “progressive” standpoints. Of course the church is called to be and in most cases is involved with wider society, with members of the local community who form the “fringe”, with neighbours and network contacts of all sorts and with other organisations and institutions including other faith communities. There is every reason to engage such contacts in the conversation, although they may well eschew the notion of theology. The search for identity in the impersonal global network with its space of flows is often about belonging in a community and the bonding social capital that faith groups can offer. But for Christians it also involves believing, commitment and discipleship, rejecting evil, following Jesus, and for most the hope of eternal salvation (however this is interpreted --- I’m not sure if this is what

Shannahan means by existential oppression and liberation from it). However, I can't detect any signs in the book of the author's concern for evangelism, or for building up the community of the faithful, and I can't see how there can be a constituency for theology as opposed to political action without the survival and growth of congregational life with a shared religious ethos.

5. **Engagement with pop music:** I think it is the absence of much hope in the church that Shannahan turns to popular culture as a source of messages of liberation. I have to say that as someone who has almost zero interest in pop music Chapter 5 left me completely cold. I can see the value of engagement with popular culture, and would myself have been in more interesting territory if he had looked at visual art, graffiti, TV soap operas, fashion, tabloid newspapers or the blogosphere. The problem of course is that to find messages of liberative difference in such cultural forms one will have to be highly selective, and probably subjective, in weeding out the trivial and particular, and applying the hermeneutical suspicion that unmask the false consciousness promoted by the mass media under global capitalist control. There will undoubtedly be some interesting issues of general social, political and ethical significance emerging from the broad field of cultural studies. But to claim these are in any sense theological contributions seems to be going too far.

6. **Camp mentality v networking:** Shannahan several times critiques the "camp Mentality" of much thinking and practice in contemporary urban life. He takes this term from Gilroy and it seems to suggest that sub groups within society spend most of their time hiding in their silos and only talking with like minded people. There does however seem to be a contradiction here. In a world where networking using weak ties (bridging and linking social capital) is the key to personal and corporate success in economics, politics or social progress, and where numerous forms of hybridity and fluid identity are constantly emerging there appears to be a contradiction. It may be that Shannahan is particularly thinking of the camp mentality of the church, and the theological and institutional divisions within it. Clearly camp mentality does exist in the institutional churches, for example in the part strife and near schisms besetting the Anglican communion. However, from my own experience of three decades of experience in the urban churches and communities of East London and the North of England this is not the case. Indeed the urban (or perhaps inner city) church is the place where boundaries are most easily crossed and strange alliances are formed. The networking role of what has now become the Christian Coalition for Urban Mission, and of the Jesus in the City Conferences brings together Christians from Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Radical camps in a shared concern for the shalom of our cities. The list of urban theologians covered in the book are for the most part people I know personally and consider to be good friends and colleagues. They may have differences in emphasis and enjoy robust debates but for the most part there is a strong ethos of catholicity and Koinonia (to use Shannahan's terms) already in place.

7. **A theology of whiteness..:** Shannahan is right to draw attention to the problem of white identity and the unspoken assumption that white is the normal (and superior?) form of identity in urban Britain. It is the case that people rarely see whiteness or Britishness as a form of ethnicity, or sausage and mash as "ethnic" food. However, the situation is extremely complex. There are many nested forms of identity, British, English, Scots, Yorkshire or Lancashire, Scouse and so on as well as hybrid forms

linking these with each other and with various Black and Asian identities. Even the census forms have a dozen or more categories and other open ended descriptions for ethnicity. In recent years the expansion of the EU has introduced new groups such as Portuguese, Slovak and Romanian and reinforced existing white ethnic minority groups such as the Poles and Latvians. Nor can we analyse where liberation is needed without a consideration of class, gender or age. Things become more complex when religion is introduced, for while Christianity is still seen as the norm for white Britain's in terms of simple census box affiliation, it fragments into Roman Catholic and Protestant, nominal and "born again", or the aggressive white Christian Islamophobia of the English Defence League. In theological terms it is clear from Galatians 3.28 quoted by Shannahan (p.230) that the Biblical teaching is about a single new humanity in Christ. Issues of liberation or social justice only arise for the theological community when it can be shown that there are systematic discrimination or oppression against specific groups correlated with ascribed identities or labels applied by powerful others.

- 8. Nature of oppression and God's bias to the oppressed :** Shannahan has made a noble effort to move liberation theology on from a narrow focus on liberation theology as hope for the poor to a focus on liberation from multiple and complexly overlapping forms of liberation. He is right in warning us of essentialising identities as though the totality of a person's being arises from being in only one category, e.g. a woman, a muslim, a gay. What becomes difficult in a diverse and liquid society is to identify oppressions that are collective rather than personal in their impact. Where does the personal become political for victims of human trafficking, women facing domestic violence, children subjected to sexual abuse, rough sleepers trapped in their addictions to heroin or alcohol. But it was every thus. Jesus in Luke's gospel interacts and transforms the lives of people with various oppressions, women, Samaritans, political zealots, Roman soldiers prostitutes, disabled beggars, children and most significantly tax collecting collaborators. The latter such as Zaccheus had plenty of wealth, though who knows if he had an inferiority complex or was bullied as a child because of being "vertically challenged". There were also those who were oppressed by demons, however we care to interpret this form of oppression in the light of advances in the understanding of mental illness. Maybe it is still better to speak of a Messiah who comes with grace and salvation for all, who comes to bring justice and good news for the poor, and who comes to break oppression and set the captive free and who calls all who follow him (and anyone else with a conscience) to accompany him in the struggle.
- 9. Inter faith approaches..** Shannahan is right to stress the importance of the multi-faith environment and the need for engagement across faith communities in many of the urban settings of the UK. However there are some places such as Barnsley, Hull or Wigan where the numbers involved are a tiny minority. Differences in the dynamics between the plural diversity of Newham or Birmingham and the binary polarisation of the segregated former mill towns of Lancashire. Local demographics and personal networks will inevitably shape the nature of dialogue and collaboration. So much does depend on the local context. On the other hand global politics can spawn tensions between minority groups at the neighbourhood level, such as factions arising from civil war in places like Somalia, or Sri Lanka, between Hindus and Muslims from Gujerat, between Christians and Muslims from Nigeria or Pakistan. Christians can sometimes be bridge builders or peace makers in these situations

though it is hard to identify the direction of any oppressions. He is right to that the twee inter-faith dialogue of sarees and samosas does not get us very far and at the best builds friendships between willing partners with syncretistic tendencies. There is more hope in banal good neighbourly relations in multicultural streets, in the corner shop and at the gate of the local primary school. In some places now there are developing formal partnerships between faith groups in political action or social or educational projects for example with the broad based organising of London Citizens or the Burnley Building Bridges Project. While there may be common agendas which could be described as struggles for liberation it is hard to see how these can develop substantially as theology. World views and spiritualities especially beyond the Abrahamic faiths are vastly different from Christian ones. And with Muslims the Islamic understanding of taweed (Monotheism) is a huge stumbling block to Christians with a Trinitarian understanding and vice versa. In any case Islamic scholarship predominantly focuses on the interpretation of texts applied as legal regulations rather than on theology as understood by most Christian thinkers. Though I can see the value of debates and partnerships around common concerns I am not sure they can be described as liberation theology. .

10. Post religious or post secular My final quibble with the books analysis is the term post religious. To be fair Shannahan uses it mainly to describe the post church / fresh expressions spirituality and liquid theology of Ward and Lynch. However, he seems to assume that contemporary global society is post religious, despite his rejection of the hard line version of secularisation theory. If any period can be described as post religious it is surely the period of high or late modernity which emerged after the enlightenment and began to dissolve somewhere around the period of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Since then it seems better to describe our times as post secular with religion and theology taking on new political and social significance. Inevitably it is the glocalised urban world which is in the vanguard here. Across the world we see governments coming to terms with dealing with religious diversity and the persistence and growth of organised faith communities alongside individualistic spiritualities. Maybe it is the danger of the state controlling or co-opting such religious activity that constitutes the latest form of oppression from which in due course we shall all need liberating.

These caveats and critiques that form my reaction to *Voices from the Borderland* suggest just how valuable and stimulating the book appears to be. It is well worth the price (of the paperback!) and the effort of engaging with it. Thank you Chris Shannahan for a valuable contribution to the literature on urban theology.