

Review of
Shannahan, Chris. 2010. *Voices from the Borderland: Re-imagining Cross-cultural Urban Theology in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Equinox, 256.

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In *Voices from the Borderland: Re-imagining Cross-cultural Urban Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, Shannahan, who has worked as a Methodist Minister in Kingston (Jamaica), London and Birmingham (U.K.), explores contemporary British urban theology. Sowing the methodological seeds of a new “Cross-cultural Urban Theology of Liberation” (221), Shannahan tackles questions asked by marginalized citizens of Britain’s large cities of the twenty-first century.

Although this book is dedicated to urban theology and limited mostly to the exploration of British authors, it is a refreshing and inspiring read for people all over the world who are trying to figure out new ways of doing theology through the eyes of our present age. Shannahan deals with racism, migration, oppression, globalization, religions, (post-) imperialism, diversity, and hybridity, among other issues being discussed by the worldwide theological community. The fact that he chose such a broad field of issues raises the question, however, why sex and gender, war and peace, violence and reconciliation, and ecology are mentioned only sparsely throughout the book. I do not presume that these issues are of minor importance in the cities of the United Kingdom; the author owes us an explanation.

While remaining committed to the oppressed and marginalized, Shannahan explores socio-cultural and economic aspects of the “fluid complexity of contemporary urban life” (5). He draws a multifaceted picture of fragmented, fluid, and blurred realities that show the importance of postmodern, postcolonial, and diasporan methodologies. Engaging contemporary social theory, the author explicitly (though briefly) discusses the works of Saskia Sassen, Manuel Castells, Leonie Sandercock, Paul Gilroy, Andrew Giddens, and Edward Soja. While acknowledging their achievements, Shannahan criticizes their lack of interdisciplinary discussion (needed for contemporary cities), and their supposed neutrality in the face of urban oppression.

Shannahan dedicates one chapter to urban pop music as a form of self-expression for marginalized people in the inner cities. While interesting, there is little methodological connection between this chapter and the theological discussion that follows. This is a pity because Shannahan refers repeatedly to urban pop music as an example of a different existential hermeneutics and should have explored this idea for the benefit of his methodological conclusions.

In the second part, the author discusses five contemporary currents of British theology and asks how they can contribute to a new cross-cultural urban theology. Although not all of them are explicitly “urban theologies,” he explores their abilities to respond to contemporary challenges and contribute to an emerging field. Shannahan first analyzes British Liberation Theology through the works of John Vincent, Kenneth Leech, and Tim Corringe. While he acknowledges the fundamental importance of the option for the poor and situates himself “within the canon of liberation theologies” (236), Shannahan criticizes the absence of postcolonial and diasporan cultural hermeneutics and the predominance of a modernist model of liberation. Dealing with British Black Theology, primarily Robert Beckford and Anthony Reddie, Shannahan deplores the lack of global socioeconomic analyses and sociocultural discussions on racism. Despite all of that, the author

draws many useful elements from the contemporary hermeneutics in Black Theology that allow a new assessment of plural, fragmented, and hybrid cultural realities.

The next chapter deals with what he calls “Reformist Urban Theology,” which he situates mostly in mainstream Anglicanism. Whereas Shannahan dismisses pronouncements of the Church of England on the topic because of their lack of a bias to the poor and the absence of cross-cultural reference, he draws from the public theology of Chris Baker because of his integration of Homi Bhabha’s “Third Space.” While this enables Baker to integrate plural cultural experiences into a provisional and fluid panorama, Shannahan criticizes his notion of hybridity as transforming differences into new essentialisms. Andrew Davey and Laurie Green are discussed as examples of a Globalization Urban Theology that brings the global economic and social panorama within the view of theology. However, Shannahan notes that these authors need to deepen their understanding of cross-cultural and postcolonial realities.

As a fifth example of contemporary British theology, Shannahan engages the post-religious theology of Pete Ward and Gordon Lynch. While both manage to translate theology into a fluid and provisional cultural context, Shannahan remarks that they lack committed engagement with the oppressed and, instead, focus on inner-church perspectives. However, Shannahan draws upon Ward’s “Liquid Church” image because it “bears within it the seeds of an urban church which is far more radical and politically oriented than Ward appears to imagine” (205).

In the final chapter, which forms the third part of the book, Shannahan shows how these theological currents must dialogue and cooperate in order to form a new urban theology. Shannahan urges theology to acknowledge difference as normative and liberative. To achieve this, difference must be seen as dynamic and fluid, and be addressed in a dialogical and critical way. This includes the recognition of religious diversity beyond the contemporary discussion about pluralism and relativism, and an investigation on “critical Whiteness” (228). To be liberative, this hermeneutical principle must be rooted in “the divine bias to the oppressed” (227). Shannahan briefly proposes an extended and updated version of the hermeneutic circle (or spiral), and makes suggestions for a biblical hermeneutics that respects “reception theories and a reader-response model” (239). Also, he outlines the framework for a plural, inclusive, liberative, and narrative-based urban Christology.

Voices from the Borderland demonstrates how interdisciplinarity is a necessary and efficient tool for a new urban theology. While it is an important reading to anyone engaged in the task of urban theology, it will be most interesting to scholars who explore the foundations, hermeneutics, and methods of the emerging theology of this globalized century.

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